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The Yellow Qipao

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The Yellow Qipao

Leon Wang

Honors Project

Submitted to the Honors College at Bowling Green State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements to graduate with

University Honors

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Advisors: Lucas Ostrowski and Thomas Edge

Proposal

Scholars in the media have discussed the importance of representation. Ever since I was little, I had barely ever seen media specifically about people like me who were queer and Asian American. This made me think that my identities were not important in this society. There's no way that I am the only person questioning their own importance through the lack of representation in media. In my maturing perspective I am finding a need to not only seek out this representation but also help develop it for the next generation.

I am interested in creating a film about my own experiences centering around the intersectionality of race, religion, gender, and sexuality. Specifically, the film will be about the negotiations of identities surrounding queer Asian American life and the process of coming out. Scholars have always created a distinction between being queer and being Asian American without considering the way that queerness and Asian Americanness comes together as one centerpiece. By intercutting the formal and narrative elements of film I would like to creatively bridge the gap between queerness and Asian Americanness using my own personal experiences.

My research will focus on the following questions:

1. How does film represent queer Asian American experiences?
2. Why don't we see as much of queer Asian American representation as we do queer White representation?
3. There is clearly a bigger emphasis on the gay and lesbian part of the queer community and a lack of other varying identities. How can we expand the categories of queer and racial identities that we depict on screen?

In addition to filling in the lack of representation for queer Asian Americans, I am applying an autoethnographic approach to this project, examining my own relationship to the subject matter depicted in the script and film. Thus, I propose the following questions to frame this portion of my project:

1. How does a filmmaker depict their own identities and experiences on film?
2. What challenges do filmmakers face in creating films based on their lives, experiences, and/or identities?
3. How is the filmmaker affected by the process of translating their own life into art?

Lit Review

Intersectionality was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 as a means to study critical race theory. The word intersectionality “identifies how interlocking systems of power affect those who are most marginalized in society” (“Intersectionality”). It is a term important to my study of a Queer Asian American Christian background of the main character in my short film and also in myself as the director and writer of the film.

“Home” for Asian Americans is hard to pinpoint, which means that there’s no single background to pinpoint when studying Asian Americanness and their intersectionalities. In *Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies* by David L. Eng, Eng says that “Taken together, these numerous problems of home urge us to consider the intersection of queerness and diaspora—the implications of their various crossings—in Asian American studies” (Eng 32) We must consider the intersectionality of Queer Asian Americans, especially Queer Asian American Christianity, when analyzing the process of creating my film. We must note that intersectionality for Asian Americans is already not studied enough. This means that my project, revolving around several large intersections between sexuality, gender identity, ethnic identity, and religious identity, is not studied or represented enough for me to have many sources to draw from. It feels exclusionary on many levels.

Audrey Yue in *Queer Asian Cinema and Media Studies* gives historical context on the relationship of Asian countries and homosexuality, outlining the acceptability of queer media in these countries. Emphasis is put on the fact that these films are identified as “Asian” rather than by “Indian” or “Chinese” or “Japanese” specifically which can alienate the media into the “west” and the “rest” (Yue 147-148). By not emphasizing the differences in Asian identities, there is alienation of two groups instead of seeing an alliance of a bunch of subcategories of identities

working together to find common experience. This suggests that more data and studies are needed to understand the Asian and Asian American experience and the intersectionalities within the community. Assimilation or exclusion are the two options given because of the binaries of the “west” and the “other”, not allowing anyone who has a combination of intersectionalities to have resources for what is supposed to be a spectrum of identities. Not being able to fit within binaries of the “west” vs the “other” as an Asian American prompts the need of “coming out” not only pertaining to queerness but to ethnic identity as well.

An alternative way of representing the coming out process can be seen within queer Asian media in which the one coming out negotiates with the blood family instead of leaving the blood family in an act of assimilation. “Rather than a homosexual identity development model in which the speech act of coming out marks the transition of homosexual identity from confusion to clarity, this practice, characterized instead by reticence and constant negotiation, has come to distinguish one key tenet of queer Asian media studies in which narrative plots of homosexual identity disclosure are always accompanied by critical analyses that also evaluate transformations to the biological family” (Yue 148). What does biological family mean to a queer Asian American? Leave and assimilate into the “west”? Stay and negotiate with the “other”? Why are those the only choices? These two different perspectives of looking at Asian Americans have emerged that have caused much debate. One emphasizes the exilic identity to battle assimilation, “the other insists on the boundaries of the nation-state as a viable location to challenge racialized American identity and power structures” (Zhou par. 1). Zhou, like in other sources, talks about the negotiation of multiple identities as an Asian American. Later on in this source, Zhou brings up how gay Asian men are exoticised and feminised compared to gay white men because it acts out the fantasies that white men have about Asian women. It is important to

break down the phallocentrism of the white man and focus on reclaiming identities in race, sexuality, gender, culture, and decolonisation.

C. Winter Han begins Chapter 5 of *Geisha of a Different Kind* by showing how, for Asian Americans, coming out is a continuous negotiation between being queer and being Asian. The experience of the white man's coming out is not universal and the act of coming out is seen as an act of selfishness to many gay Asian American men. "Yet, for many gay Asian American men I met during my field work, being gay is a constant negotiation rather than a momentary declaration that changes one's life forever. Rather than being "out and proud all the time," gay Asian American men vacillate between being gay, being Asian, and being gay and Asian at the same time, depending on the situation" (Han 157). It is a constant struggle of identities and many queer Asian Americans prefer to identify with both being gay and Asian instead of dividing between the two. Trying to find the intersectionality between race and sexuality is messy and there's a lot of negotiation as we define what Gaysian American is.

Queerness in Asian American history often begins with the feminization and fetishization of Asian men. Since the nineteenth century, Asian (American) men have been depicted as feminine and subservient in the media. "The feminization of the Asian male in U.S. popular culture demonstrates the intersection of race and gender discourses. The Asian male immigrant was racially stereotyped in ways that placed him within a subservient or dependent gender category" (Chen 60). In media such as the film *The Ballad of Little Jo* (Maggie Greenwald Mansfield, 1993), Tinman (David Chung) is a Chinese man who was mocked and faced hostility from locals on the frontier until Jo (Suzy Amis Cameron) hires him as her cook. The way that Tinman is portrayed, both the work he has to do and the weaknesses he has as a Chinese man in the West feminizes his character. And this is just one example amongst many. On one hand, the

feminization of Asian men is occasionally talked about negatively. On the other hand, what is not mentioned is that the feminization of Asian men makes it easier to become androgynous as a queer person of Asian descent. This I have discovered from being a masculine presenting genderfluid person who passes much easier than my White genderqueer counterparts. This also goes into the way that I, as a queer Asian American, practices how I present myself in society and the way I perform. It is also based on what I look like, from the features of my face, the size and shape of my body, and the masculine or feminine way I interact with others and dress myself. In *Queer Relationality as Family: Yas Fats! Yas Femmes! Yas Asians!* by Shinsuke Eguchi & Hannah R. Long, different bodies, whether fat, femme, or Asian, are stereotyped and subjected to a certain ideal of queerness or lack thereof. One big way people stereotype who gets to seem queer or not is how a person performs. “Queerness is, in fact, imperfect in the present time. Only with such an ethic of care can we start revising possibilities of queer relationality that work on and against hegemonic, heteronormative, and homonormative paradigms of relating” (1605-1606). It is important to reimagine the possibilities of queer performativity.

Returning to the idea of representing queer Asian Americans in cinema, Xiuzhu Li starts out by admitting that the queer Asian American cinema being studied focuses on mainly the lesbian and gay aspects of the LGBTQ community and that the bisexual, trans, and other queer identities are often overlooked. Li looks at the intersections between queer theory, Asian American studies, and cinema studies not only to study the subjects in depth but to find ways to initiate change and action so that there would be more diversity in the way queer Asian American cinema is represented. “Queer is not just about gender and sexuality, but the restrictiveness of the rules governing them and their intersection with other aspects of identity” (Li 8). Li hopes that by looking at cinema through a postcolonial, deconstructional lens, that can

let us “properly understand the traumatic character of the ‘colonial experience’” (Li 8). It is also important to note that we need to queer the idea of the Asian immigrant family. Asian immigrants are allowed to be queer and have more than one identity that defines their lives. There is also a need to be able to depict Asian immigrants and Asian Americans as queer in the media to allow the world to get used to the idea of queerness and Asian Americanness being a negotiable set of identities.

Media tends to stereotype Asian men, gay men, and the concept of what is and isn't masculinity in general. Media “ridicules not only the looks but attributes, behaviors, acts, and practices of gays and Asians and reduces them to uniform and static identities” (Shimizu 1). “The solution to the problematic representation of Asian American men in the movies is not to add the phallus, which ultimately reproduces sexual heteronormativity and gender hierarchy, but to identify new criteria that dodge the crosshairs of victimization with an accounting of male power and privilege” (Shimizu 2). What is the basis of normal when we compare hypersexuality versus hyposexuality of Asian men and women? Asian American men are often forced into hyposexuality—an assignment of asexuality/effemininity/queerness, when it comes to films. This discounts a person's viability in love/romance/sex. Connected to the dismissal of Asian male sexuality in film is shame and disgrace.

Finally, the last part of the Queer Asian American Christian identity in my character deals with religion. Religion, especially Christianity, has been exclusionary since its creation. In *Controversies in Queer Theology* by Susannah Cornwall, she quotes Patrick S. Cheng in his theory that “non-white queer people of faith must deal with the racism of their churches, family, and LGBT communities as well as the homophobia of society at a large, adding another layer of exclusion and marginalization to what already comes simply by virtue of claiming a

non-heterosexual identity” (Cornwall 84). There is now representation of Queer theology as well as Asian American theology, but a lack in a bridge between the two. My goal in the exploration of this film I’ve written is to bridge the representation in media of queerness, Asian Americanness, and religion.

Methodology

Choosing a Topic:

I began with a broad sense of the idea that I wanted to create a film for my honors project. In the past, I have worked on three student independent studies in the form of film, one of them being an older student who also made a film for her honors project. Each of these independent short films were incredibly personal and drew on the experience of the director. I wanted to use my unique experience as a queer Asian American Christian as the basis for my film. I especially wanted to focus on the importance of my mom's cooking and my experience as an immigrant as my topic. This was the first outline I made:

Outline

Yan and Wen Shuang arrive at the airport.

Middle-Aged Woman picks them up.

Yan and Wen Shuang are dropped off at their apartment.

They enter their apartment, which is devoid of furniture.

Wen Shuang explores the apartment and finds a single box of coco puffs. They snack on it while they explore the rest of the place.

Three month time jump to the now furnished apartment. Yan puts two bowls of congee on the kitchen table and yells for Wen Shuang to hurry up. Wen Shuang appears and they sit to eat.

Then Wen Shuang jumps up when a car horn sounds and leaves for school with Yan calling out for him to be careful.

Two months time jump to Wen Shuang and Alex are watching TV when Yan comes over to give them a bowl of cut fruit. Yan warns them not to watch too long and the two just hums.

One month time jump to Wen Shuang coming home and asking for pizza and complaining that they are bullied for their packed lunch. Yan says she'll pack them PBJ instead. They reveal that they changed their name to Aspen. Yan is not happy about it and scolds them. They retort back that this isn't over.

Aspen finds Yan asleep in a pile of seminary homework. They put a blanket over Yan and remove a bowl of cold, half-eaten rice from the table.

Aspen is doing their homework and munching on coco puffs when they hear shouting from the other room. They peek in to hear Yan fighting with their dad. (Aspen does not want to talk to their dad because they've been abused by him. Yan doesn't want his money or support because she wants to break ties with him.)

Aspen and Yan fights about them coming out as genderfluid and pansexual.

Aspen and Alex goes out for some American food. They share their concern about their relationship with their mom. Alex listens and offers advice. ("Whenever I fight with my mom, we bake cookies together afterward. What do you like to make with your mom?")

Aspen puts on traditional chinese clothing and hangs up chinese window papers for chinese new year. They help their mom make dumplings and the two reconcile their differences. "My name is Aspen and also Wen Shuang. I am genderfluid and pansexual and I know you don't understand, but I am becoming who I want to be. Do you TRUST me?") Yan pats Aspen's cheek and gets flour over their face. ("You know I will always love you.")

When I was told by faculty that this outline is good but is too long to realize as a short film, I had to narrow down the topic for my film and the timeline within the script. I decided to focus on a single event that really changed my life as a queer Asian American Christian while

still having the topic of a mom and child relationship as a part of the story. This shortened my script by a lot and gave me a way to also narrow down my research questions. I decided to focus on the first time I came out to my mom and using that experience to create a fictional story about gender, sexuality, religion, and ethnic identity.

This was my new outline:

Aspen struggles to find what to wear to church. Yan suggests they change into a dress.

Aspen and Yan sit in church.

Aspen and Yan go to the coffee shop after church. Aspen translate the order for Yan.

Aspen explains genderfluid and pansexuality to Yan and tells her that they go by Aspen and not Wen Shuang. Yan does not understand.

Yan makes food for Aspen when she finds Aspen's phone and sees their texts.

Aspen comes home to grab their phone and Yan confronts them about finding out they had gay sex. The two fight and Aspen runs out. Yan cries.

Alec's character was added because I wanted a character with an outside perspective. Alec's character would also be someone whom my White audience can relate to, because so much of my story is based on my Asian American experience. Even though I want to represent my experience in its fullest, I also want to have a bridge between identities so that my audience can be more broad. Alec's character is also based on the idea that I also, during my coming out, had a predominantly White group of friends who were my support system and I wanted to have a character to represent that.

Research:

Because of my project being more creative than research based, I had a hard time coming up with a precise point of research for where to begin my annotated bibliography. The final result is a research based on the intersectionality of identities in my film. The research I do would reflect on the past representation of those identities, how they have been seen in media in the past and how I can use my own experience to produce a product that not only represented an intersection of these unique identities but where I can add more representation of identities not seen in media at all. What was missing and how can I truthfully represent that? I have hardly seen stories in the media of my own identities so I will have to become a pioneer in this field so that other people with similar experiences to my own will be able to see themselves represented in the future. The final research questions gave me a background to be able to research what has been done before and what I can add and improve.

Writing the Script:

The initial scene that was written before any others was the coffee shop/bubble tea shop scene. I reflected on the importance of an event I experienced with my mom, where I translated her order to a barista and non-Chinese speaking people were staring at us strangely. This made me think that not everyone has the same experience with language that I do, but knowing that there are other bilingual families, there will be others with my experience who can relate to the event. I turned this translating experience into a scene and surrounded my script around a bilingual mother/child relationship with the added difficulty of ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and gender. It became a day in the life of my characters. A simple day that turned into a life changing event.

Gathering Crew:

Once the script was written, I developed a timeline for production. The next step was to gather people for my crew. Movies are made through collaboration. There were students in my class whom I knew of with varying talents in handling film production technology. I asked people after class to collaborate with me and to tell their friends of the opportunity of being on my film crew. This was probably the easiest part of the pre-production process. The only problem I found was that people's availability changed through the year and some people had to drop out of the crew, which means I would have to search for people to fill their roles.

Casting the Film:

The last part of the pre-production process was to cast the film. I asked Rachel Jones to be my casting director because of her prior experience in casting student films and her vast connections with acting agencies. The problem we face is that our location is in the midwest, where there is a lot less diversity than coastal cities. We lack Asian American actors in the nearby area who are willing to act for free. Because of the lack of auditions for the main characters, we have moved production from Fall 2022 to Spring 2023 to give us more time to search for Asian American actors.

Conclusion

Difficulties:

My conclusion for this project, what I planned to do vs what I was able to accomplish, is that it is difficult to truthfully represent my experience in film. I had many limitations going into this filmmaking process. The first was that I am not able to financially fund my own film. I had to create fundraisers and convince people to donate. I also applied to grants that provided financial backing for my project. The second is that I have never directed and produced my own film before, so I had to learn as I go. The final block that I am still working through is casting an Asian American film in a predominantly White location. Writing the script only relied on my ability to write and recount my experience. Filming includes a whole crew of people and the need for a cast that represents the characters well. Properly representing an experience that includes a lot of minority identities narrows down who I can and can't cast. The unfortunate reality is that I do not have enough resources in Bowling Green to easily accomplish my goal. This does not mean that my project has failed, but instead gives me a good conclusion of why it is hard to represent my experience on film with the limited resources I have. It gives a precedent to what is needed to change in the film industry and in society.

Proposed Changes and Future Research:

In the future I have learned that to create a film that represents my identities, I also need to be around other people who understand and/or have lived through similar experiences. I also need to be around an area that has more resources such as Asian American actors and financial resources. I would like to propose to future film industry members that an Asian and Asian American acting collective or database would be helpful for both Asian actors to find work and

for casting directors to have a resource for finding Asian actors. I also want to encourage other Asians and Asian Americans to write and represent their experiences more in media. The more that we represent our experiences, the more that we can support each other and learn from each other.

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Appendix

The Yellow Qipao script:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qd_euk_LbdwVZw8_QVjkj5owB1QWHU7P/view?usp=sharing

Mood Board: <https://pin.it/7258OPt>