Honorary Whites:  
Representations of Asian Americans on Television

by

Cynthia Jiyin Tong  
Class of 2014

An essay submitted to the  
faculty of Wesleyan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Departmental Honors in Sociology
Asians began prominently appearing in American film and television in the early 20th century. During this time, since there were relatively few Asians in America and they were consistently perceived as foreigners and outsiders, onscreen depictions of them reflected, and often exaggerated, the limited understanding America had of Asians. As a result, several stereotypic tropes of Asians were popularized in American film in the 1920s, and later, on television when it emerged as a popular medium following World War II. During the 20th century, Asian actors were limited to playing racialized tropes. The most important of these tropes were the Yellow Peril, Asian men who are depicted as menacing, predatory, devious, and lusting after white women (Shah 2003:3); the Dragon Lady, the feminized version of Yellow Peril who is described as sneaky, mean, cunning, sexually alluring, sometimes sophisticated, and determined to seduce and corrupt white men (Shah 2003:3, Ono and Pham 2009:66); and the Charlie Chan, a character opposite of the Yellow Peril who is mysterious, benevolent, “deferential to whites, non-threatening, and reveal[ed] his ‘Asian wisdom’ in snippets of ‘fortune cookie’ dialogue” (Shah 2003:4).

Each of these tropes reflected elements of the social position of Asians in America at that time. For example, the Yellow Peril and the Dragon Lady were created in response to the fear that many Americans had of the increasing Asian population and of Asians gaining power within the Western world. Many Americans were afraid that Asian immigrants were taking jobs and land from them, and they especially disliked it when these immigrants succeeded despite dealing with harder conditions, such as more challenging land when farming (Shah 2003:3). On the
other end, the Charlie Chan character was created by author Earl Derr Biggers in a purposeful attempt to combat the Yellow Peril representation often seen during the early 20th century. While Biggers’ intentions were admirable, the character was also problematic, especially because some of his characteristics reinforced and perpetuated stereotypes, such as his inability to speak English fluently, his strong Asian accent, his generic Asian background (critics still argue about his ethnicity), and his overly subservient nature. These characteristics showed that despite some positive efforts, Asians in America were still seen by the majority of Americans as foreigners who were unable to assimilate completely.

Media representations of Asians in America during the 20th century were clearly stereotypic and it is evident that those tropes no longer exist in the same explicit form that they once did. Those stereotypic representations demonstrated that the perceptions of Asians at the time were limited, and they revealed a generally negative social climate of race relations in the early-to-mid 20th century, specifically in regards to what it meant to be Asian in America. Just as these tropes of the past told a story about the social climate and race relations in America, current representations of Asian Americans on television also bring to light the present-day social position of Asian Americans in America.

Portrayals of racial minorities on television in the 21st century can still be limiting in scope and negatively stereotyped, however, this problem is not so easily simplified. Despite the fact that we are past the era of the Dragon Lady or Charlie
Chan and that the Asian American population continues to grow in numbers, there are relatively few representations of Asian Americans as novelistic characters. Further, Asian American novelistic characters, or characters “that are privileged over the type” because of the emphasis on their individual qualities rather than stereotypical ones, are usually relegated to supporting roles rather than starring ones (Dyer 1997:13). Regardless of the small number of novelistic Asian American characters, we can still attempt to understand the current social location of Asian Americans in America by analyzing how these few novelistic characters are constructed.

Many scholars have studied media representations of Asian Americans and some even call for an intervention to create “better” representations. As a self-proclaimed Asian American myself, I am interesting in discovering how representations of Asian Americans function in relation to the emergent understandings of race and culture in America. I make no claims as to how representations could be “better,” but rather choose to analyze these representations in order to determine the current social position of Asians in America.

In this paper, I will attempt to demonstrate that a hegemonic negotiation of race and diversity in the context of Asians in America results in the offering of a

---

1 While the formal category of Asian American encompasses many different ethnicities including those of Southeast Asian, for the sake of the limitations and intentions of this paper, I am choosing to only focus on Asian Americans of East Asian descent, those that were once categorized as “Oriental.” Also, in many popular shows on television, characters of Asian descent are often given generic backgrounds based on an amalgam of different Asian American experiences. Specific appearances, experiences, and characteristics of characters of Asian descent are used as markers to denote their Asian-ness. Therefore in this paper, when I refer to Asian Americans, I mean specifically Asians in America of East Asian descent.

2 “Better” is a subjective term. In this case, I refer to the scholars who call for more comprehensive and realistic representations.
pan-ethnic Asian identity through the development and creation of prominent Asian American characters in American television. Through my analysis of three popular television shows, Glee, Grey’s Anatomy, and Hawaii Five-0, I will demonstrate how there is a subtle but present emphasis of the American-ness of these characters, which aligns them closer to the dominant group, which in this case is white America. I will also illustrate how, in emphasizing the American-ness of these characters that have recognizably Asian physical features, there must be a denial of the Asian-ness of these characters. This denial of the Asian takes form through the creation of an Asian Other, or Asian foreigner, that is used to contrast these Asian American characters in order to enable the ideal American audience to more readily accept them, and thus, also accept the “diversity” that is being offered through these shows. Finally, I will discuss the ways in which the construction of these representations reaffirm the position of Asian Americans as “honorary whites” within a new and emerging racial hierarchy.

A Brief History of Asians in America

Since the 19th century, Asians in America have gone from being considered social pariahs to becoming a fundamental part of the American fabric. While Asians (as defined by the United States Census 2010)³ only make up about 4-5% of the American population (Humes, Jones, Ramirez 2011), the people who fall within the category are becoming more present and a more integral part of the American culture than ever before.

³ The U.S. Bureau of Census defined “Asian” as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam" for the 2010 census (Humes, Jones, Ramirez 2011).
Two of the earliest groups of immigrants from Asia to America were the Chinese and the Japanese in the middle of the 19th century (Kitano & Daniels 2001:1). Koreans, on the other hand, came in three waves to America – the first “trickle” to Hawaii between 1903 and 1905, the second after the Korean War (1950 – 1953), and the third, which is still occurring today, after the passing of the Immigration Act of 1965 (Kitano and Daniels 2001:105). As with most immigrant groups arriving in America, early on, these immigrants faced strong anti-Asian sentiments from the American population because some Americans felt “threatened by difference” and worried that foreigners would steal their jobs and their livelihoods. These sentiments led to beatings, shootings, lynching, and other abuses against the early Asian immigrant populations in America (Kitano and Daniels 2001:22). Immigration legislation seemed to back these anti-foreigner sentiments. From the late 1800s until 1965, successive waves of legislation either excluded or limited the immigration of Asians (and other groups of immigrants) to America. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers, was the first significant immigration legislation, followed by additional ones limiting immigration from Asian and Middle Eastern nations. Because Japan had better relations with America than China during the late 19th century, they were not barred from immigration to the U.S. until 1924, while many other immigrant groups, including the Chinese and Koreans, were barred in 1917 (Kitano & Daniels 2001).

Unfortunately, Japanese-American relations took a turn for the worse after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the beginning of World War II. These events led
to the immediate incarceration of Japanese Americans, both American-born and foreign-born (who were now all seen as “enemy aliens”), on the West Coast in internment camps (Espiritu 1992: 22). At the same time, when the Chinese became allies of the U.S. in the war, sentiments about this group improved. They became known as “hard-working and noble,” especially in comparison to the Japanese, who were now considered the enemy (Kitano and Daniels 2001:36). However, when the Communist forces of Mao Ze-Dong were victorious in 1949 in China, and the Cold War began, images of the Chinese were further complicated. A “Red China” had led to the perceptions that there were “good” capitalist Asians and “bad” Communist ones. During this time, many Chinese who immigrated to America were students and highly trained professionals, as opposed to the lower class peasants that had immigrated before, which led to the appearance of two Chinese Americas (Kitano and Daniels 2001:42 -47).

Similarly, the third and current wave of Korean immigrants is different from the first two waves because the third wave is composed of mostly a highly educated group of Koreans who have come to America voluntarily, unlike the war orphans, war brides, and refugees from before (Kitano and Daniels 2001: 111). The educated, relatively affluent and acculturated group of Asian immigrants led to the establishment of the “model minority” stereotype, while the other uneducated, non-affluent, and more traditionally Chinese and Korean groups continued to be seen as foreigners (Kitano and Daniels 2001:47).

Over time, minor changes in legislation have reflected, to a certain extent, the complex changing sentiments about foreigners. Laws were slowly passed to
allow limited immigration into the states for Chinese wives of American citizens (1946), international refugees through the Displaced Persons Act (1948), spouses and minor children of members of the armed forces (1950), and family members of citizens through the McCarran-Walter Act (1952).

Finally, in 1965, the Immigration Act was passed in order to change the previously restrictive national quotas and exclusions to less discriminatory hemispheric ones. The removal of bars against Asian immigration led to a rapid growth in the Asian American population. In 1960, “other races,” as people were categorized at the time if they were neither white nor “negro,” were about 0.9% of the population, with Asians being about 0.04% of the total American population\textsuperscript{4} (U.S. Census 1960:164). In 1970 after the removal of the immigration quotas, the percentage of “other races” in America increased to 1.4%, with Asians being about 0.06% of the total American population\textsuperscript{5} (U.S. Census 1970:262). While all of the different ethnic populations grew, the most notable growth was in the population of Chinese immigrants, which doubled between 1960 and 1970. Currently, Asian Americans — that is, the all-encompassing term that includes Pacific Islanders, East Asians, South Asians, and Southeast Asians\textsuperscript{6} — are about 4-5% of the total American population (ten times the percentage of the population in 1960), and concentrated in metropolitan areas, in particular on the East and West Coasts (U.S. Census 2010).

\textsuperscript{4} 0.04% was calculated based on further break down of the “other races” revealed in the census to be Japanese (464,332), Chinese (237,292), Filipino (176,310), Indian (523,591) [unclear if this is American Indian or South Asian Indian], and All Other (218,087). The total population count in 1960 was 179,323,176.

\textsuperscript{5} 0.06% was calculated based on further break down of the "other races" revealed in the census to be Japanese (591,290), Chinese (435,062), Filipino (343,060), Indian (792,730) [unclear if this is American Indian or South Asian Indian], and All Other (720,520). The total population count in 1970 was 203,211,926.

\textsuperscript{6} Which are not included in my study because of the specific scope and limitations as stated before
The Asian American population continues to grow today, and according to the U.S. Census 2010, it is currently the fastest growing major race group in America.\(^7\)

**Review of Relevant Literature**

In this literature review, I examine theories about media, specifically television, as a social agent, racial formation and the social location of Asian Americans, and how media and ethnicity, specifically Asian American, intersect. In discussing theories about television, I introduce different scholars’ assessments of how television conveys its meanings and its ability to reproduce dominant ideologies. From there, I move onto theories about pan-ethnic formation and the developing hierarchy of race in America, as well as the creation and dynamics of the category of Asian American. Finally, I discuss the approach and theories of scholars who have analyzed the representations of Asian Americans on television and how I would like to examine and further this inquiry of Asian American representations on American television through the analysis in my paper.

**I: Television and The Way It Conveys Meanings**

In today’s technologically driven world, and despite the emergence of online social media, television arguably remains the “primary storyteller” in American society (Morgan, Shanahan, Signorelli 2002: 41). As the “fundamental manifestation of the mainstream of our culture,” television is a social and cultural agent that circulates the variety of meanings and pleasures it bears throughout society (Morgan et al. 2002:41; Fiske 1987:1). As consumers of media, Americans deal with the inescapable torrent of information, meanings, and imagery in different ways.

\(^7\) 46% growth from 2000 – 2010 according to the U.S. Census 2010
(Gitlin 2005). One way many people cope with this torrent is just to succumb, to submit to the media-imbibed life that currently shapes American society. In that sense, television allows people to safely encounter excitement, sadness, drama, and laughter, all of which people can easily digest within the time frame of a single episode of a television program (Gitlin 2005:14, 32 – 33).

Television conveys its meanings in part via the use of a technique called framing. Framing, the “process by which sense is made of events,” serves as a “cognitive structure” that guides an individual’s perception and interpretation of reality (Kendall 2011:8; Entman 1993:54). Entman and Rojecki suggest that culture is a set of common frames that people use to understand their social position (1993:53). The effect of framing is important to recognize because through selection and salience, the producer of a frame is able to define what is seen and what is not seen by the viewer, both of which are equally effective (1993:54). Although a producer is not always successful in conveying intention through a frame, the ability of frames to highlight one image (or part of an image) over another contributes to the transmission of meanings and ideas, including texts that more heavily support dominant ideologies, to the viewer.

While some scholars emphasize the power of framers to shape understandings, others assign more agency to viewers. In a process called “cultivation,” in which audiences subconsciously absorb this “massive flow of messages over long periods of time,” there is an “interaction of the viewer with the message,” and within this relationship, “neither the message nor the viewer is all-powerful” (Morgan et. al. 2002: 37). Although arguments have been made for
audiences having agency in the viewing of television and its images and
representations (Fiske 1987: 65), many scholars believe that representations on
television contribute to the making and understanding of viewers’ social realities
because today “viewers are born into the symbolic world and cannot avoid regular
exposure to its recurrent patterns” (Morgan et. al. 2:36; Ono, Pham 2009;
Hamamoto 1994; Tuchman 1987; Entman, Rojceki 2001). Although different
viewers are attracted to different kinds of programming, television programming as
a form appeals to its viewers in two ways — by reproducing representations
realistically in a “familiar,” comprehensible fashion and by seating its viewers in a
dominant position in relation to its frame(s) (Fiske 1987). When audiences are
confronted with images that initially come into conflict with their social
understanding of the world, mainstream programs will often present them in a way
that allows audiences to struggle through the conflict but then come to a conclusion
that is both satisfying and easily digestible.

To insure that the images are being taken in the “right” way, programs also
position the viewer in a place of dominance and omniscience, even if the viewer is
not socially located in that position in reality (Fiske 1987). This position enables the
content, and the ideology behind it, to be more readily absorbed. This temporary
social position can be successfully constructed for the viewer because society already
does so in real life (Fiske 1987). Frames filter real life in order for people to interpret
their own social world, therefore, television need only to adopt or reflect these
frames in order to contextualize what is being seen on screen (Kendall 2011). By
choosing to consume and make sense of the text presented, the viewer is being
positioned to watch through the lens of the dominant ideology and thus reproduces it just by consuming said image. As Fiske explains, “ideology and realism are inseparable” (1987: 34).

Some scholars consider this exchange between the text and its viewer to be problematic, and it is an issue that is not necessarily solved by the number of choices we may appear to have (Morgan et. al. 2002; Tuchman 1987; Entman, Rojceki 2001; Hamamoto 1994). In truth, while there are more choices of channels and programs on television than ever before and there are more ways to watch what we want, when we want (i.e. TV on the Internet), there is surprisingly little diversity in not only the ideologies that are reproduced on programs but also in the programs audiences choose to watch (Morgan et. al. 2002:45). Indeed, researchers report that the more people consistently watch television, the more likely their conceptions of the world are based on the representations they see on the screen (2002:40 – 43). By watching, audiences reproduce these dominant ideologies; in feeling satisfaction when doing so, they become more inclined to pick another program that aligns with their ideas. The programs themselves are most successful because they are polysemic, or have a multiplicity of meanings that can be culled from them (Fiske 1987:15). However, the possibility to cull diverse meanings from a single program is also a form of pseudo-diversity because mainstream programs, the ones that reach the most audiences, are still created within the framework of the dominant ideology in which some meanings are framed to be more salient than others.
II: Formation and Location of Asian Americans

Omi and Winant’s racial formation theory argues that racial categories are socially constructed through “the specific social relations and historical contexts in which they are embedded” (1986:12). Therefore, understandings of race and racial categories change over time because understandings of social relations within a nation change over time. The formation of a panethnic group, which is defined as a politico-cultural collectivity that encloses diverse peoples who are nevertheless seen as homogeneous by outsiders (Espiritu 1992:2), is a perfect example of the formation of another socially constructed racial identity. Panethnicity is both imposed and voluntary (1992:4). It is imposed because, to a certain degree, panethnic identity is created by ignorant outsiders who put diverse peoples into a single “ethnic framework.” It is voluntary because it is also a means by which groups of people with similar struggles and agendas can unite “to protect and promote their collective interests” (1992:2). With a shared understanding of racial discrimination, particularly on the arbitrary basis of “physical markers,” such as skin color, Asians of different national origins took the imposed category of “Oriental” and transformed it into the category of Asian American. By transforming and claiming this identity as their own, Asian Americans to begin using it as a way to mobilize all those with an Asian background in America for political reasons (Espiritu 1992).

The pan-movements of groups like Asian Americans and Hispanics prove that conceptions of race (and ethnicity) are ever-changing (as theorized by Omi and Winant). The transformation of Eastern European immigrants in the 20th century
from being known as foreigners to being adopted into the dominant group, or essentially becoming white, is also proof of the ever-changing nature of race. With the increase in immigration, particularly with the “new wave” of immigrants from Latin American and Asian countries that began in the 1960s, as opposed to the immigration from European countries that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th century (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), the understanding of racial boundaries in America has become complicated to the point where some scholars question whether these ever-changing “color lines” are beginning to disappear with assimilation and increased interracial marriages (Lee and Bean 2004). In questioning the changing “color lines” of race in America and in particular, where Asian Americans are placed within these “lines,” Lee and Bean come to the conclusion that boundaries are not changing at an equal speed for each racial group and that a new hierarchy of race is emerging in America (2004). What was once the white/black divide is now being seen as the white, nonblack, black hierarchy in which nonblack represents the other racial groups, specifically the most recent wave of immigrants — Asians and Latinos.

Bonilla-Silva further complicates this view by suggesting the racial hierarchy that was once white/nonwhite, has now been expanded to “white,” “honorary white,” and “collective black.” In this formulation, “white” consists of white, New Whites such as Russians and Albanians, assimilated white Latinos, some multiracials, assimilated Native Americans, and a few individual people of Asian-origin; “honorary white” consists of light-skinned Latinos, east Asian Americans, Asian Indians, Middle Eastern Americans, most multiracial people, and Filipino
Americans; and “collective black” consists of Vietnamese Americans, Hmong Americans, Laotian Americans, dark-skinned Latinos, Blacks, West Indian and African immigrants, and reservation-bound Native Americans (Bonilla-Silva 2006:932 – 933). Within this system, the middle group of “honorary whites,” which includes some Asian Americans, acts as a buffer for the race conflict and allows Americans to “begin making nationalists’ appeals (‘We are all Americans’), decry their racial pasts, and claim they are ‘beyond race’”(Bonilla-Silva 2006: 933). In fact, in Bonilla-Silva’s view, this new stratification system will help those at the top maintain their power within the social structure because of the “honorary white” buffer.

Within this hierarchy, the quantifiable success of Asian Americans in the economic and educational realms has led some to believe that racial lines are disappearing faster for Asians Americans than for other racial minorities, especially with the emergence of the “model minority” label placed on Asian Americans (Zhou 2004). A sharp turn from how Asians were once represented in the media, this “model minority” image was first introduced in the 1960s through articles in popular periodicals, like “Success of One Minority Group in the U.S.,” by the US News & World Report (Zhou 2004:31). Because of this Asian American “success,” some claim that the “model minority” is becoming white, much like the Jewish and Eastern European immigrants that came before them (Zhou 2004).

Zhou argues that these claims that Asian Americans are becoming white, based on their “model minority” status, are ultimately not true (2004: 33 - 34).

---

8 Particularly Asian Americans of East Asian descent, which is the group I am addressing specifically in this paper.
Therefore, Zhou explains that racial lines are not disappearing faster for Asian Americans, and instead the lines between whites and other races are being reinforced. By emphasizing the success of Asian Americans, it “reinforces the myth that the U.S. is devoid of racism” and that those who are lagging behind are doing so because of individual qualities rather than racialized institutional mechanisms (2004: 33). Furthermore, the label of “model minority” states within itself that Asian Americans excel within the framework of being a minority, and are inherently different than the dominant group; thus, they remain the “perpetual foreigner” (2004: 33). Bonilla-Silva, too, believes that “honorary white” is code for secondary and therefore less than white, which in turn is viewed in many places as “perpetual foreigner” as well (Bonilla-Silva 2006: 944). Ultimately, these scholars argue that, rather than eliminating the racial hierarchy in America, these myths and their social implications keep Asian Americans as well as other minorities subordinate and contribute to the emergence and development of a new and more complex racial hierarchy.

III: Asian Americans and Television

On television, there are specific ways in which the prototypes of racial minorities (and other more benign social types, like the “cool kid” or the “nerd”) are coded (Tuchman 1987; Entman, Rojceki 2001). These types on television often have a few immediately recognizable traits that connect the character to an identity (Dyer 1997:15). As Dyer explains, social types are representations of those who belong; stereotypes are attributed to those who don’t (1997:14). Stereotypes are effective because they “evoke a consensus” that is often “more apparent than the real” (Dyer
1997:14). Sometimes social types are complicated when they become racialized or are associated with race, such as the “Asian nerd.” In those cases, the social type may no longer represent someone who belongs, as Dyer suggested, rather the type may become someone who does not because of the imposition of race. These representations both reflect and construct identities at the same time.

It seems clear that representations of minorities on popular television are often stereotyped, and whether negative or positive, they contribute to society’s cultural understanding of minorities in America. Therefore, unsurprisingly, many scholars state that images of Asian Americans, like images of other minorities, in the media are problematic (Hamamoto 1994; Ono and Pham 2009; Shah 2003). Ono and Pham go so far to say that television “plays an important role in maintaining a racialized social order” (2009). In order to “solve” this problem, some scholars argue for intervention by way of independent media production and for “better” representations (Ono and Pham 2009; Hamamoto 1994); however, those are ultimately not effective resolutions because television is a world of representations, and these representations will always be problematic as long as dominant ideologies influence not only television but also the social world itself.

Previous works on the topic of Asian Americans and television, or more generally, the media, intentionally take a more historical rather than theoretical approach. In the past, many representations of Asian Americans on film or television were stereotypes, which had become part of the entertainment industry in the form of racialized tropes, like the Yellow Peril, Dragon Lady, or Charlie Chan.

---

9 Again, “better” is a subjective term. In this case, I refer to the scholars who call for more comprehensive and realistic representations.
as mentioned earlier (Shah 2003:3 - 4). In taking the historical approach, scholars have examined the history of Asians in America and how it has influenced and, to a certain degree, explained media representations of Asian Americans, including these racialized tropes (Hamamoto 1994; Shah 2003; Ono and Pham 2009). While this was a reasonable method of analysis of past stereotyped representations of Asian Americans in the media, with the evident disappearance of these 20th century tropes, I have decided to take a more theory-based approach in which I begin with different theories of racial formation and racial hierarchy in America, look at and analyze current representations of Asian Americans on American television, and then connect my observations back to the theories with which I began. Based on past studies, I am interested in discovering how the contemporary understanding of Asians in America has constructed the fictional portrayals of Asian Americans on television. Are there new portrayals (and possibly stereotypes) based on dominant perceptions of Asian Americans, like the “model minority”, “honorary white”, or maybe the “perpetual foreigner” as Zhou and Bonilla-Silva would suggest? How is the pan-Asian ethnicity perpetuated? How are Asian American characters understood in the context of television today? And finally, do representations of Asian Americans on television show a pattern that reveals the social location of Asian Americans within the racial hierarchy in America?

**Methods**

In order to explore the representation of Asian Americans on American television, I came up with a system to methodically narrow down shows to analyze. I started by looking through popular websites that rate television programming,
including Deadline.com, TV Guide’s Top 50 shows, and Nielsen Rating’s Top 25. I chose to look at popular television shows because those are the shows that are watched by the most people and therefore, may be argued to have the most impact on the cultural understandings and dynamics in the present moment. In looking at these rankings, I selected scripted programs rather than reality based ones, sports programs, or talk shows in order to look at shows with fictional characters and intentionally developed narratives. I also eliminated shows that were not renewed for the current 2013 – 2014 season because, to a certain extent, that implies that the show is no longer culturally relevant, or at least, will soon lose its timeliness. From there, I created a chart\textsuperscript{10} with basic information on twenty-five shows, including number of seasons, the network, presence of an Asian American character, and if there was an Asian American character, whether the character was main or recurring. Nine of the twenty-five were of similar format (hour-long programs) with main Asian American characters. I researched these nine shows and looked at the premises of the shows as well as the character descriptions and picked three based on specific qualities of each television show: Hawaii Five-0, a crime drama\textsuperscript{11} and the only show with more than one main Asian American character; Grey’s Anatomy, a medical drama, and the highest ranked and longest-running of the nine shows (ten seasons); and Glee, a personal drama-comedy (in contrast with the two other workplace dramas) that is considered a cultural phenomenon.

\textsuperscript{10} See Appendix for chart
\textsuperscript{11} At the time of writing, crime dramas were one of the most popular television genres. Twelve of the top 25 shows I started with are crime dramas.
Because of the limitations of time and scope of my study, I decided to study the 2012–2013 season because, at the time of the writing of this essay, it is the most recent full season. I picked three episodes from each show, the first episode that introduced the season and then two midseason episodes, ideally ones where the storyline more heavily involved the Asian American character(s). To make up for the other unwatched episodes, I read Wikipedia\textsuperscript{12} plot summaries of the episodes to gain a better understanding of the important plot points and the flow of the programs.

I watched each of the episodes several times in order to really delve into the material being presented. While watching, I considered many things for my analysis. I looked at what attributes are given to the characters, what role they play on the show, and their relationship with other characters. I also considered where the ideal viewer is positioned in order to interpret these characters and how these characters were to be understood within the context of the program. I wanted to know whether their background as persons of Asian descent were acknowledged and if so, how they were acknowledged. I considered whether tropes of the past contributed to representations in the present and whether current stereotypes and tropes like the “model minority” or the “perpetual foreigner” are visible in these characterizations.

\textsuperscript{12}I chose to read Wikipedia plot summaries rather than just use the information on the network websites because Wikipedia has the most comprehensive information about characters and episodes. Network websites generally have little information about the details of their shows since they would rather encourage a potential viewer to watch the show rather than read about it on their websites and find out spoilers.
**Brief Description of the Shows**

Before I move into the analysis of these three television shows, it is important to have a background understanding of what these three shows are, and how they function. The format of all three shows is similar in structure. Each hour-long episode follows a couple of main characters’ storylines and has an overall “theme” that usually encompasses other subplots. In *Glee*, the theme is usually as explicit as a lesson that Mr. Schue, the teacher of Glee Club, assigns. About every 8-10 minutes of an episode, someone will either burst into a song or give a pep talk to another character, both of which are almost always related to the theme or lesson. In *Grey’s Anatomy*, the plots of the different characters usually coincide with each other so that the viewer can draw parallels between the situations. Often, patients, who usually exist for one episode only because their plot lines are usually resolved within the 43 minutes of the show, are used as a mechanism to tie in the theme or to further a plot conflict between doctors. In *Hawaii Five-0*, the storyline usually is determined by the crime or mystery they are trying to solve, which, like patients’ problems in *Grey’s Anatomy*, are almost always solved within an episode. Unlike in *Glee* or *Grey’s Anatomy*, crimes in this show are not always used as moral lessons for the characters to learn. Instead, these crimes usually take the main characters one step closer to solving one of the bigger, season-long mysteries.

Although the shows are structurally similar and have “diverse” ensemble casts, each show has a different basic premise. *Glee* follows the lives of the students in the Glee Club at the fictional McKinley High School in Lima, Ohio. These students are known to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy; the Glee Club, a
singing group that competes against other high school glee clubs, functions as place for these students, where “diversity” of all kinds is accepted. The program relies on an ensemble cast of students, teachers, and parents, and represents its “diversity” through these characters. For example, there are two gay characters, one who represents the more flamboyant “gay guy”, the other who is slightly more “masculine.” There are also the classic white football players, the black female with the strong diva voice, and the sometimes-awkward Asian American girl. The show’s satirical humor lies in its “currentness,” its self-awareness, and its self-reflexive dialogue. Although the show intends to be progressive through its self-awareness, I argue that in reality, it only promotes the most popular versions of liberal ideas in its pseudo-acceptance of diversity, which includes race, sexuality, and class.

Similar to *Glee*, *Grey's Anatomy* also chronicles the fictional personal and professional lives of its ensemble cast; in this show, the characters are doctors and interns at Seattle Grace Hospital, rather than teachers and students at a high school. Though the series started out following Meredith Grey, the protagonist, and her fellow doctors as they arrived at the hospital as interns fresh out of medical school, in more recent seasons many of the original characters have now become attending physicians and fellows with interns of their own. *Grey's Anatomy* employed colorblind casting in choosing its actors and effectively ended up with what would be considered a racially diverse cast on American television. This colorblind casting method has made it appear that seemingly no effort was made to repeat a more “realistic” or typical demographic make-up of a “real” U.S. hospital, in
which there would probably be more Asian American doctors, unlike the show's one Asian American doctor, Cristina Yang.

*Hawaii Five-0* is a remake of a crime drama from the 1970s and follows a task force, the Five-0 squad (a reference to Hawaii as the 50th state admitted into the Union) as they solve crimes and fight criminals in an effort to keep their island safe. *Hawaii Five-0*'s representation of Asian Americans is unique because it is the only television show on American television at this moment in which its main cast of six is racially split with half of its characters being white and half being of Asian descent. Furthermore, many minor characters, such as cops, victims, suspects, and villains, are also of Asian descent. While some viewers may say that having Hawaii as the setting differentiates the show from the others because Hawaiian culture and history are different from that of the continental United States, the program is designed to be popular among a wide American audience, which includes all Americans, both from the mainland and from Hawaii. Therefore, the unique setting is only important insofar as the program attempts to be superficially consistent with what most people imagine Hawaii to be.

For each of these highly rated primetime television shows, the ideal audience is one that reflects the “diversity” on these programs. Given that many of these shows have racially diverse characters that appear to have upper-middle class lifestyles, I believe that the ideal viewer would be a socially liberal, middle- to upper-middle class American. However, the programs also consciously cater to those that are not of the ideal social position and offer other points of entry into the show. As Fiske explains, these polysemic programs offer many different readings of the text
(Fiske 1987:15) and allow room for the viewer to negotiate an interpretation of the text that leaves the viewer feeling satisfied. Even resistant readings, ones seemingly against the goals of the program, can be culled from them within the framework of the dominant ideology. This is because if television programs are going to be successful and appeal to many different kinds of people, possible alternative readings need to be included within the text. However, dominant ideologies are ultimately still reproduced within these popular programs, even if they are negotiated in such a way that alternative readings are accessible.

**Analysis**

Hegemony is the “process in which a ruling class—or, more likely, an alliance of class fractions—dominates subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of ideology into their common sense and everyday practice” (Gitlin 1982:240). This domination establishes the order of power through a collaborative process that “allocates a certain limited social space to tailored alternatives” (Gitlin 1982:241) so it “is not experienced as domination at all” by subordinate groups. Hegemony is malleable in its representative manifestations and is thus negotiated and renegotiated through popular culture (Gitlin 1982:241). In fact, its malleability and limited room for social alternatives give subordinate groups a false sense of inclusion within the space of popular culture. The most important aspect of hegemony in the context of popular culture is its consistent renegotiation in its collaboration between the ruling classes and the subordinate groups.

Social understandings of race, class, sexuality, and gender are constantly changing with time; as a result, popular culture must reflect those changes in order
to stay popular. Hegemonic forces renegotiate these reflections in such a way that the ruling group does not lose its dominance over subordinate groups (Gitlin 1982:241). Therefore, the unequal balance is kept between the dominant and subordinate groups that, if done right, often goes unnoticed. While in his explanation, Gitlin was referring specifically to the hegemonic negotiation of relations between upper and lower socio-economic classes, I believe that this theory of hegemonic negotiation can be extended to race relations as well.

Through my analysis of three popular television shows, Glee, Grey's Anatomy, and Hawaii Five-0, I will illustrate how representations of racial diversity, in this case Asians on American television, are negotiated in such a way that, in order for representations of subordinate racial groups to be accepted, characters of these groups must embody the qualities and attributes of those in the dominant groups, which in regards to race, are white Americans.

This negotiation of diversity manifests itself through popular American television by offering a pan-ethnic Asian identity. This vague identity category that is imposed onto these characters emphasizes the American and denies the subordinate Asian identity because, when the subordinate group is closely aligned to the dominant one, it is easier for “diversity” to be accepted in the mainstream. Finally, I argue through my analysis of these three shows that in order to deny the Asian-ness of a character, the creation of the category of the Other, that is the “foreigner” or the “outsider,” is necessary.
I: Emphasis on the American

On *Glee, Grey’s Anatomy,* and *Hawaii Five-0,* the emphasis on the American-ness, or non-Asian-ness, of the Asian American characters can be observed through their character development, which ultimately distinguishes them from the foreign Asian (which I will later go on to refer to as the Other or Asian Other) and is a way for these programs to normalize and accept diversity. In this section I will look at the development of these characters’ histories and their character traits in order to better understand how they are intended to be portrayed and understood by the ideal audience.¹³

Although Tina Cohen-Chang is a character that has appeared in every episode of *Glee* since the very beginning, very little is known about Tina’s background or family. While in *Glee* not every character’s family or background are mentioned, there have been many episodes where the family members of some of the main and secondary characters have made an appearance, including Blaine’s older brother, Puck’s mother, Santana’s grandmother, and others. This is not the case for Tina. Critics of the popular television show have mentioned over the past seasons that she is one of the most neglected characters on the show (Stack), especially given that she is credited as part of the main cast, so it is unsurprising that neither her background nor her family history remains unexplored.

¹³ As I mentioned before, the ideal viewer would be a middle- to upper-middle class American with socially left leanings. However, these programs are purposefully made accessible to viewers who are not of that exact social position. Furthermore, regardless of a viewer’s actual social position, Fiske suggests that realistic television programs aim to reproduce dominant ideologies through the consumption of these texts by positioning him or her in the social location of the ideal viewer (Fiske 1987).
Even so, there are few definable characteristics about her other than the fact that she is “that Asian girl” in Glee Club. Her role in the Glee Club, and thus the show, is not very clear at times; she is not the best friend of the protagonist (a common role for a person of color), nor the comic relief, the smart one, or that hot bitchy girl that the audience loves to hate. She rarely, if ever, interacts directly with the “cool” members of the Glee Club like the cheerleaders and football players, and until the past season where she became closer friends with Blaine, one of the gay characters, was closest only to her boyfriend, Mike Chang, the other Asian in the group. Audiences can infer from her last name that she is half Asian, probably Chinese based on the last name “Chang,” and half Jewish, based on the last name “Cohen.” When Tina or other characters refer to her background, they almost always use the racial category of “Asian” and never go beyond talking about it on a superficial level.

While her last name implies that she is mixed-race, it is her Asian background, rather than her mixed-race or Jewish background that defines her. Tina is perhaps developed this way for a few reasons. First of all, Rachel Berry, the protagonist of the show identifies herself as Jewish, and therefore, fills the slot of being the “Jewish girl” in the Glee Club. Secondly, since “diversity” is a goal of this program, there is a need for an Asian character. Tina fills the role of being the “Asian girl” because she has the visual markers of being of Asian descent, which, in the end, overwhelms other ethnic or racial possibilities for her identity, including being mixed-race. Finally, if the protagonist, Rachel, is Jewish, then referring to Tina’s possible Jewish heritage would align her closer with the protagonist, which
would defy the set-up of the character hierarchy of the program in which Rachel is the star of the show, and Tina is just a peripheral, somewhat less-developed, “main” character.

In *Grey's Anatomy*, like *Glee*, the family members only occasionally appear in episodes, and the background of the characters is usually only discussed in passing. In the show, it is mentioned once or twice that Dr. Cristina Yang is of Korean descent, but, other than those few times in the ten seasons, neither she nor her co-workers ever really refer to her ethnic background. She is never referred by her race, like being called the “Asian doctor,” but neither are any of the other characters of color. This lack of reference to race is possibly because of two reasons: one, the characters were casted through color-blind casting, therefore they were created with backgrounds that did not involve specific cultural heritage or connections (though they were assigned ethnically appropriate last names, probably to add to the realism of the program), and two, the show, in its attempt to be liberal and post-racist, tries to transcend race by being “past it” (as Bonilla-Silva says) and therefore never mentioning the issue.

Unlike Tina in *Glee*, Cristina is a distinct character. She is easy to define, has a specific role in the show, and stands on her own as a fully fleshed character. Dr. Cristina Yang is portrayed as being highly driven, rational, dry-humored, witty, blunt, and meticulous in her work. She is Dr. Meredith Grey’s best friend; though she is not usually a very emotional character, Cristina often refers to Meredith as her “person,” that is, the one person she could not live without. This relationship is mutual and can be seen in the banter and many conversations they have with each
other throughout each episode. Besides her completely relatable, possibly enviable, best-friend relationship with Meredith (a white female), the show also gives Cristina other traits that reveal her Western tendencies. For example, over the course of ten seasons, the audience also finds out that although Cristina is now atheist and believes first and foremost in science, she was raised Jewish through her stepfather because her mother converted to Judaism after her second marriage. Another “fun fact” that we learn about Cristina is that she can speak French, a language that is specifically not an Asian language.

Given the context of the show, the number of seasons it has run, and the prominent role she plays in it, Cristina is clearly a novelistic character, privileged over the two-dimensional recurring character because of the emphasis of her individual qualities rather than limiting her to stereotypic ones (Dyer 1997:13). She is more real than symbol, and since the actress playing her was cast in a colorblind process, it is clear that it is not the producers’ intention to make her the token Asian character. The fact that Cristina seems realistic rather than stereotypic makes it easier to accept her as an individual and thus all of the implications of her character as a non-Asian, Asian American.

In *Hawaii Five-0*, the three main Asian American characters, Detective Lt. Chin Ho Kelly, Officer Kono Kalahaua, and Chief Medical Examiner Max Bergman, are also portrayed with an emphasis on the “American” rather than the “Asian.” Again, as in the case of Tina Cohen-Chang from *Glee*, in examining the last names of these characters, we can discern that two of them, Chin Ho Kelly and Max
Bergman, are perhaps half non-Asian or were adopted. Further, any other reference to their background is never directly about their Asian-ness. Rather the show often refers to the Asian characters’ “Hawaiian-ness,” which in turn is usually patrioticized and at times exoticized. The program helps to normalize this by making Lt. Commander Steve McGarrett, the white male protagonist, a “native” Hawaiian. Steve uses Hawaiian lingo, calling Chin Ho "ohana” which means family in Hawaiian, knows the customs, and enjoys the culture and foods, like spam, a food known to be popular in Hawaii. His love of Hawaii and his patriotism to his country of America, are juxtaposed in a way that assures the audience that to love and be from Hawaii, a multi-racial, multi-cultural society, is to be American.

Though none of these three Asian characters speak any Asian languages, Steve, the white male, has been shown to be able to communicate in Chinese and Japanese. This contrast between Steve, as the white protagonist who can speak Chinese and Japanese, and the Asian American characters who are possibly less connected to (an overarching idea of) Asian culture, reveals the subtle need for the program to demonstrate that these Asian American characters are as American as the ideal viewer. It is okay, even cool, if Steve is able to speak Chinese and Japanese, because he has the traits of every dominant group — white, male, able-bodied, patriotic, attractive, American, etc. His ability to communicate in more languages is only a plus because it makes him more attractive, more international, and

---

14 Just an interesting side note that Tina Cohen-Chang, Max Bergman, and Cristina Yang are all developed in a way that connects them (as Asian American characters) to Jewish culture. Tina and Max both have last names that imply that they are either adopted by Jewish parents or are at least part Jewish and Cristina Yang, as mentioned before, was raised by her Jewish step-father and her Korean mother who converted to Judaism after she remarried. This is a topic outside the scope of my essay, but would be an interesting one for someone to pursue at a later date.
supposedly more connected to his multi-cultural homeland, Hawaii. There is
nothing he can’t do. However, if Max, Kono, or Chin Ho were to have the ability
speak any Asian languages, given that they already have physically Asian features, it
would call their American-ness into question. For these characters to be accepted,
especially on a show that has many Asian characters, they must be as American as
possible—they may not look exactly the same, but they are the same as white
Americans in every other way. This message is reproduced not only in Hawaii Five-
0, but also in Grey’s Anatomy and Glee.

In all three shows, it appears that the closer to “white” or “American” a
caracter is based on his or her actions, personality, and relationships, the more
accepted a character is into the dominant group; therefore the character is more
acceptable in the eyes of the ideal audience. Similarly, the more developed and
realistic a character is, the easier it is for them to be vaguely Asian — that is, they
do not have many specific attributes that connect them to being Asian. While the
background and family history of these characters could be interesting plot points
for these programs to develop, they instead choose to stay away from these
potential plot points because if these Asian American characters were to have
specific racial or ethnic backgrounds, it would make their race or ethnicity an
essential part of their identity. Instead, the characters, in most cases, are only
“definably” Asian in their physical appearance.

II: Denial of the Asian/Creation of the Other

In order for there to be a dominant group, there must be subordinate groups
by which the dominant group can be measured. Therefore, if a minority or
subordinate group is to be accepted by the dominant social group, there must always be someone else who can be the Other, that is, someone or some group that defines what it means to be part of the dominant group by having characteristics that are not associated with the dominant group. This concept is illustrated through the development of Asian American characters on American television. Although there is currently a push by minority groups for diversity in media representations, it is manifested on popular television through the terms of the dominant group. This hegemonic negotiation can only be achieved if the established order of power stays relatively the same. The dominant group must stay dominant; therefore, in the hegemonic negotiation of diversity on television, there must always be an Other.

In *Hawaii Five-0*, this divisive negotiation is seen in a literal split between the Americanized, “good” Asians and the “foreign” Asians. One can detect this split in the subtle use of the accent. *Hawaii Five-0* appears to use the Asian accent as a way to denote those who are outsiders and therefore, the Other, as opposed to those like Chin Ho, Kono, Max, and Charlie Fong (the forensics guy), who are viewed as part of the group. Their perfect American accents (along with other qualities and attributes) speak to their complete assimilation into the American culture, whether they were born in America or not. On the other hand, many characters who are criminals and victims seem to have noticeable heavy Asian accents. While this is only a pattern and not a rule and, of course, there are some exceptions to this rule—such as Kamekona, a friend and informant for the Five-0 squad—this pattern is a noticeable one and contributes to the creation of an Other to which the acceptable Asians, like those of the main cast, can be compared. This notable
distinction illustrates the emphasis on the American-ness of the Asian Americans who are accepted and are integral to the team, and, therefore, to the show\textsuperscript{15}.

Zhou (2004) argues that all Asian Americans, regardless of level of assimilation, are seen as the “perpetual foreigner,” however, the representations on \textit{Hawaii Five-0} seems to challenge Zhou’s claims. Instead, the show divides Asians from Asian Americans, the former to be understood as foreigners and the latter to be seen as “American,” and therefore “one of us”. I argue that in \textit{Hawaii Five-0}’s representation of Asians, only the marked Other is intended to be the foreign Asian, and thus the “perpetual foreigner,” or one that can never be completely assimilated into American culture and therefore can never be completely accepted by the dominant group. In contrast to the marked Other, the “acceptable” and “assimilated” Asians, like the ones on the Five-0 squad are understood to be American and as close to “white” as possible. Therefore, since the “assimilated” Asians do not visually look “white,” but are also not marked by an accent like the Asian Other, I argue that the “assimilated” Asian characters fall under the “honorary white” category that Bonilla-Silva assigns them to within his explanation of the emerging racial hierarchy in America (Bonilla-Silva 2006).

In \textit{Grey’s Anatomy}, a show that attempts to be post-racist by never mentioning race, and in \textit{Glee}, a show that identifies inclusion as its goal, the creation of an Other is less explicit. However, I would argue that it still exists.

\textsuperscript{15}It is interesting to note that while \textit{Hawaii Five-0} seems inherently progressive because it is the only television show that has more than one Asian American character in its main cast, it actually references back to historical notions of Asians in America. The split between assimilated “good” Asians and “bad” foreign Asians harkens back to Cold War perceptions that there were “good” capitalist Asians and “bad” Communist ones.
through the characterization of Dr. Cristina Yang and Tina Cohen-Chang, respectively.

In *Grey's Anatomy*, Dr. Cristina Yang seems realistic; she is not portrayed as a stereotypic Asian American and does not possess any of the characteristics of past Asian tropes. Despite this, she does exhibit some traits of the popular “model minority” stereotype. She is hard working, focused, has an “immaculate record,” and somewhat more emotionally removed than her peers. While she is not submissive to authority, is very competitive, and speaks her mind, all qualities that are not of the “model minority,” she has enough of the characteristics of a “model minority” for viewers to make that association. What’s more, the program in some ways seems to be making a value judgment on the “model minority”-like qualities she has, and portrays them as possibly negative, or at least not enough. This is evident in her following interaction with Dr. Parker, the Chief of Surgery at her new job at the Mayo Clinic (season 9, episode 1):

Dr. Parker: Come on in! Dr. Cristina Yang, of Seattle fame. Formerly of California. Sit. How did it go with Dr. Thomas?

Dr. Cristina Yang: Oh, well I’m happy to uhh take one for the team, but I’d appreciate it if you steered him in someone else’s direction.

Dr. Parker: Hmm.. I’m not sure that’s gonna work! See I’ve asked him to help you out, navigating the waters and all.

Dr. Yang: I've found the cafeteria.

Dr. Parker: Haha. It’s more than that.

Dr. Yang: *My work has been impeccable. My record here is perfect.*

Dr. Parker: Uhm.. Hmm. If all you look at is outcomes, maybe, but on our yardstick, you don’t seem to be thriving. I want you to succeed, but the fact is, we work as a team here, no one here is a superstar. Our hospital is the
superstar and our patients, they’re superstars! We pride ourselves on that. No ego, no proprietary attitudes, no competition.

Dr. Yang: Are you serious?!

Dr. Parker: We’re sensitive to all you’ve been through (last season she was in a plane crash with a couple other doctors). If you’d like to talk to someone, I’m happy to give you some names.

Dr. Yang: Dr. Parker –

Dr. Parker: Why don’t you take a few days, see the lakes, check out the mall of America, you know? Everybody says roller coasters are for their kids but adults eat it up. Go get some R&R. Have a good time. Soften up those sharp Seattle edges. Doctor’s orders.

Dr. Yang: I’m sorry is this R&R a suggestion or...

Dr. Parker: It’s mandatory, Yang. Starting now.

As one can see from this scene, Cristina, or Dr. Yang in this situation, prefers to work alone and even mentions that she is doing really well given that her “work is impeccable” and that her “record is perfect” — two quantifiable measures of success which are often attributed to the “model minority” stereotype. While individualism is not a specific quality of the “model minority,” the quantifiable measures of success that are associated with the “model minority” often have the negative side effect of competitiveness to the point of isolation, lack of collaboration, and at times even deceit. Dr. Parker appears to be commenting on that side effect when he says that, according to the Mayo Clinic’s measure of success — one that seems to be based on teamwork and the ability of a doctor to collaborate — Dr. Yang has a lot on which to improve. This standard catches Cristina by surprise because she does not use the same measures for understanding success.
While Cristina is clearly not afraid to speak her mind and is not necessarily deferent to the authority of the dominant group (represented here by white male Dr. Parker), the qualities of her measure for success are ones that are often associated with the Asian culture in America as well as the Asian culture abroad. When Dr. Parker says that there are more than quantitative forms of measurement for success, he is telling the audience and Dr. Yang that American understandings and measures are more holistic, and therefore better, than the stereotypically Asian measures of quantifiable success. In this way, this moment is a subtle push for Dr. Yang, the Asian American character, to become even more American. Eventually, she does take his advice, and her experience at Mayo Clinic with Dr. Parker and Dr. Thomas becomes a learning experience for her. By making an effort to be more of a team player and, under the tutelage of her white male superiors, learning to measure her success more holistically, the program communicates to the audience that Dr. Parker was right and, more importantly, that the American way is the right one. Thus, Cristina’s old measure of success, one of quantifiable value often associated with Asian culture in America, is a measure that is shown to be limited and undesirable.

One could say these “model minority”-like qualities become attributed to the foreign Other. As the show defines Cristina as more American than Asian through her characteristics, beliefs, and choices, it creates an invisible Asian Other who is distinct from Cristina. She is defined by what she is not, and the Other is created by that definition.
In the third season of *Glee* (2012-2013), Tina Cohen-Chang begins to find her place in school, and when the club is given the assignment of a “diva-off,” in which the club members compete to be the most “diva” of them all, she decides that she wants to win. However, this proves to be more difficult than Tina expects and she begins to doubt herself. This doubt is presented in the following dialogue between her and her current best friend, Blaine (season 3, episode 13):

*Tina gives Blaine vapo-rub for his cold.*

Blaine: Thanks, Tina, you’re so sweet.

*Cut to Tina looking dejected and leaning on the lockers.*

Blaine: What? What did I say?

Tina: I don’t want to be sweet. I want to be the girl that kicks in the door and makes demands and gets what she wants. Let’s be honest, no one thinks diva and pictures me.

Blaine: What are you talking about!? There are tons of badass Asian divas. Look at Lucy Liu, Bai Ling, B.D. Wong. [coughs and sniffles] Okay, you are coming to my house tonight and we are going to find you the right song. We are going to bring our your inner diva if it kills me.

In this dialogue between Tina and Blaine, Tina asserts that she wants to possess the same behavioral characteristics as a diva ("I don’t want to be sweet"); however, she believes that there is a visual dissonance between her own appearance and what she believes a diva looks like ("Let’s be honest, no one thinks diva and pictures me.”)

Blaine furthers the notion that people might see “diva” and “Asian” as mutually exclusive when he says that there are “tons of badass Asian divas” in reference to people being able to picture Tina and see “diva.” Interestingly enough, he must qualify his statement about divas with the descriptor of “Asian,” because apparently,

---

16 Emphasis is mine.
Asians cannot be just divas. He further qualifies this statement by giving her Asian diva role models to look up to — Lucy Liu, Bai Ling, and B.D. Wong. This statement is revealing in two ways — one, that her available role models are limited to those that look like her (and there are not very many popular Asian role models in America, apparently), and two, that the idea of "diva," which Tina defines as a "girl that kicks in the door and makes demands and gets what she wants," does not inherently include people of Asian descent.

In the end, Tina does go on to win the diva off; however, in light of the conversation that Tina has with Blaine, this win could be seen as a successful attempt at becoming more "American" by becoming more of a diva. Their conversation implies that Asians are not typically divas; because they do not typically "make demands and get what [they] want," when Tina finally begins to do so, she is breaking free from her Asian-ness. By singing a song by Madonna, a classic white American diva, to win the diva-off, Tina is boldly stating that she is just as "diva" as Madonna is, without the Asian label as a qualifier as Blaine mentions in their earlier conversation. However, this move, again, creates an invisible Asian Other, this time an Other that has attributes that Tina lacks. In this case, the Other cannot be a diva.

**III: Pan-Asian Ethnicity on Television**

In *Hawaii Five-0, Grey's Anatomy*, and *Glee*, there seems to be conscious effort to create Asian American characters that are minimally connected to their ethnic backgrounds. Instead, there is an active development of Asian American characters with attributes and qualities that align with the dominant group so that
the audience can more easily accept the “diversity” of characters that is being offered to them, while maintaining the status quo of whiteness being dominant. This manner of negotiating diversity is complex. It is achieved, in part, through the creation of a vague pan-Asian ethnic category that is imposed onto and/or developed through these Asian American characters. This negotiation is also achieved through the formation of the Asian Other, which is defined by characteristics associated with foreign Asian-ness. From the moment of casting, this pan-Asian ethnic identity is created when people of Asian descent are cast into roles based on their general Asian appearance, rather than their specific ethnic backgrounds. In programs like Glee or Hawaii Five-0, the ethnic background of a character is not even explicitly stated, perhaps in an effort to continue to perpetuate this vague, pan-ethnic Asian identity.

These programs, and others similar to them, normalize the homogenization of Asian American identity that is reproduced through television (and other mediums of popular culture) through their acceptance, and therefore the audience’s acceptance, of these characters. This generic pan-ethnic understanding of Asian Americans is reproduced through the use of realism. All the main characters in the three shows, particularly the protagonists, are portrayed as realistic; not only are these characters often portrayed as likeable and have many positive attributes, they also have explainable, and at times lovable, flaws with which diverse audiences can identify.

As supporting members of the main cast, these Asian American characters are also afforded the opportunity to be as complex and fleshed-out as the
protagonists. For example, Cristina from *Grey's Anatomy* has the role of Meredith’s best friend and often provides humor in many situations. In *Hawaii Five-0*, Detective Lt. Chin Ho Kelly is portrayed as rational, soft-spoken, physically and emotionally strong, a team player, and a hero (possibly to a fault). Officer Kono Kalahaua, a female character from the same show, is often shown to be able to keep up with the boys when fighting the bad guys, always using the same heavy weaponry and matching up against male foes. This apparent independence is enough for her to be admired by female viewers, but her scenes in a bikini (she is a pro-surfer) and demure behavior around men allow her to also be seen as feminine and sexy enough to be desired by male viewers. Even Tina Cohen-Chang from *Glee*, a character that has been consistently underdeveloped, has recently been given a storyline that made her the “champion of the losers” when she decided to plan a Sadie’s Hawkins Dance to empower her fellow females. What’s more, when the characters embody some of the traits of Asian stereotypes, such as hard work and dutifulness of the “model minority” status (as seen in *Hawaii Five-0* and *Grey's Anatomy*), they are characteristics that could be considered positive. On the contrary, when the characters embody so-called “negative” characteristics of Asian-ness or Asian stereotypes, these shows offer the characters an opportunity to “correct” or “fix” themselves, as in the case of Dr. Cristina Yang and Dr. Parker in *Grey's Anatomy*.

As Fiske (1987) suggests, the realism in television is used to perpetuate and reproduce dominant ideologies within the viewer. In *Glee, Grey's Anatomy*, and *Hawaii Five-0*, these realistic, positive characters are used to encourage viewers to
accept the pan-Asian ethnic identity being offered by these primetime programs. The move toward creating positively attributed, realistic Asian American characters is important because if these characters are likeable and relatable to diverse audiences, including Asian American viewers who often see these characters as positive representations, it makes it easier for audiences to accept these characters, and thus to accept the “diversity” that they represent. In this case, the portrayal of these characters encourages audiences to understand that the “ideal” Asian American is one that is as close to white American as possible. As a consequence, these portrayals also subtly reveal that any “Asian aspects” of these characters are foreign or Other, and are not part of the acceptable definition of “diversity.”

**Conclusion**

While much research has been done in studying media representations of Asian Americans, particularly in the development of stereotypic Asian tropes and the connection of these representations to history, none have specifically examined novelistic Asian American characters in the context of pan-ethnic Asian identity and the reproduction of this vague identity category through television. Through my essay, I analyzed representations of specific Asian American characters on the popular television shows *Glee*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Hawaii Five-0* as a means to determine the current social climate of race relations in America. In the process, I discovered that as a result of a complex hegemonic negotiation of race, a pan-ethnic Asian identity is being offered to television audiences. These three programs demonstrate the various ways in which racial diversity, specifically in regards to Asian American characters, has been negotiated. This negotiation occurs through
the acceptance and emphasis of the American qualities of these characters, such as the holistic measurements of success that Dr. Parker suggests to Dr. Yang in *Grey’s Anatomy* or even the simple use of the accent to distinguish the “good Asians” from the “foreign Asians” in *Hawaii Five-0*, and the denial of “Asian” qualities, such as inability of the Asian American characters in all three shows to speak any Asian languages.

As noted before, television as a cultural agent both reproduces and reflects the social and cultural dynamics of a society (Morgan et. al. 2002:41; Fiske 1987:1). The pan-ethnic Asian identity that is offered through *Glee*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, and *Hawaii Five-0* is an integral part of the formation of this emerging racial category of “Asian American” because, as Omi and Winant explain, film and television disseminate images of racial minorities that both reflect and shape dominant ideologies and therefore, reproduce on screen the specific social relations and understandings with which racial categories are imbedded (1994:15). Thus, this hegemonic negotiation of Asian American identity on television can be understood as a reproduction and reflection of the negotiations of the social location of Asian Americans within the current hierarchy of race in America.

In connecting my analysis of these three scripted television shows with theories about the emerging (more complex) racial hierarchy in America, I argue that the pan-ethnic Asian identity that has been imposed onto these characters puts them in the position of being “honorary whites,” a position suggested by Bonilla-Silva. This pan-ethnic Asian identity is in some ways both voluntary and imposed, just like the category of “Asian American” (Espiritu 1992).
In a hegemonic negotiation, there is often an implicit or assumed consent by the subordinate group that the results of this negotiation are acceptable to both parties. In this specific case of Asian American representations, it seems that this implicit consent may be a more active consent and therefore, a voluntary acceptance of this pan-ethnic Asian American identity, because these shows make an effort to provide “real” Asian American characters rather than stereotypic ones. In some ways, particularly in comparison to the stereotyped tropes of the 20th century, the “real” Asian American characters on television could be seen as “progress,” and as a result, it is easy to be seduced by the sheer appearance, and thus recognition, of novelistic Asian American characters on television, rather than to question it. However, the imposition of this pan-ethnicity exists and lies in the subtle push toward representing Asian Americans as “honorary whites,” which automatically places them within the context of the emerging racial hierarchy.

Relative to these shows’ white protagonists, their Asian American characters are presented as being as close to white (or white American) as they can ever be given that, visually, they look Asian. This “honorary white-ness” is evident in Dr. Cristina Yang’s position as protagonist Dr. Meredith Grey’s best friend and confidante, in Tina Cohen-Chang’s win of the “Diva-Off” giving her temporary status as equal to, if not above, the other members of the Glee Club (a status that she will lose after an episode and must win back again if she wants to stay in that social position), and in the manner in which other than their physical appearance, the Asian American characters on *Hawaii Five-O* are shown to be less Asian than
white, male, protagonist Lt. Commander Steve McGarrett, who speaks multiple Asian languages.

In some ways, it may appear as if Steve is an “honorary Asian” on the show, however, this just demonstrates the privileges Steve has as a white male protagonist that the other Asian American characters lack. Steve, a times, has the possibility of being as Asian if not more Asian than the Asian American characters on the show because it would not threaten his American-ness nor take away any of the privileges he already has as a white, able-bodied, upper-middle class male. However, while Steve can be more Asian than Chin Ho, Kono, or Max, they can never be as white or more white than he is. If, in fact, they did possess the same privileges and status that Steve has, they would also be able to speak Asian languages like Steve can, without putting their identity into question. Since this does not seem like a possibility, in the end, they can only ever achieve “honorary whiteness.”

The emergence of this “honorary white” category acts a buffer for the race conflict by allowing Americans to claim that racism is a thing of the past because now “we are all Americans,” which means that in the present, we are “beyond race” (Bonilla-Silva 2006:933). The portrayal and development of the Asian American characters on Glee, Grey’s Anatomy, and Hawaii Five-0 are clearly evidence of this “honorary white” buffer. All three shows attempt to be “beyond race” by showing interracial relationships, like Dr. Cristina Yang and white doctor Dr. Owen Hunt in Grey’s Anatomy, and either never explicitly referring to the race of its characters, as in Grey’s Anatomy and Hawaii Five-0, or only mentioning race and stereotypes ironically or as tools to teach a lesson, as in Glee. As these shows, and others like
them on primetime television, continue to reproduce the same pseudo-diverse
ideology by putting Asian Americans in this position of “honorary white,” they help
to maintain a racialized social order in which those at the top stay at the top within
this new system of stratification (Ono and Pham 2009).

While it is clear that the media has progressed away from overtly racist
portrayals like the Dragon Lady or the Charlie Chan, current representations, which
may appear to be all-inclusive and perpetuate “diversity”, actually reflect and
reinforce the current social position of Asian Americans in American society as the
“honorary white” buffer. These representations reveal that power dynamics between
dominant and subordinate groups have not changed; representations of social
diversity must still occur on the terms of the dominant groups. As a result, as long
as they are not white, Asian American characters can only be shown as close to
white as possible. In today’s media, they only have the possibility of being
“honorary white.”
Bibliography


## Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Show</th>
<th>A.A. Characters?</th>
<th>Description of Asian American Characters</th>
<th>Year On Air</th>
<th># of Seasons</th>
<th>Network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii Five-0</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>main - Kono &amp; Chin Ho, recurring - Wo Fat, Sang Min, etc</td>
<td>2010 - present</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Blood</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>2010 - present</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Family</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Lily (child, ensemble cast)</td>
<td>2009 - present</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>ABC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glee</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>main - Tina, Mike</td>
<td>2009 - present</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Fox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandal</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>recurring - Alissa (Brenda Song)</td>
<td>2012 - present</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ABC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Bang Theory</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>South Asian character</td>
<td>2007 - present</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grey's Anatomy</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>main - Cristina Yang</td>
<td>2005 - present</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>ABC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSI</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Wendy Simms? (older seasons)</td>
<td>2000 - present</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Kings, CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mentalist</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>main - Kimball Cho</td>
<td>2008 - present</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCIS</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>2003 - present</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCIS: LA</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>2009 - present</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two &amp; Half Men</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>2003 - present</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How I Met Your Mother</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>2005 - present</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Minds</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>2005 - present</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Main - Joan Watson</td>
<td>2012 - present</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikita</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Main - Nikita</td>
<td>2010 - present</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>the CW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person of Interest</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>recurring - Leon Tao (Ken Leung)</td>
<td>2011 - present</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Walking Dead</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>main - Glen Rhee (Steven Yeun)</td>
<td>2010 - present</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>AMC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castle</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>2009 - present</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>ABC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Following</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>2013 - present</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Fox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Broke Girls</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>main - Han Lee</td>
<td>2011 - present</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once Upon A Time</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>recurring - Mulan (Jamie Chung)</td>
<td>2011 - present</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ABC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>recurring S. Asian female - Padma Lahiri, recurring AA male - Satoshi Takeda (played by 2 different men in diff. season)</td>
<td>2011 - present</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>ABC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenthood</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>2010 - present</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>NBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bones</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>main - Angela (half Asian)</td>
<td>2005 - present</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Fox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grimm</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>main - Sergeant Wu</td>
<td>2011 - present</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NBC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>