Not Man Enough: Second-generation Korean-American Male Youths & Masculinity

Introduction

Korean-American male youths living in the United States, in particular second-generation immigrants, face many obstacles in the construction of their ethnic and gender identities.¹ This research project was an attempt to better understand the specific obstacle of Asian-American male stereotypes in American media and culture. First-generation immigrants are people who were born in their home countries and then emigrated, making them the “first generation” of their families in the new country. Second-generation immigrants are their children. They usually are born in the country of emigration and have grown up assimilating in varying degrees to the culture. In general, relatively little research has been done on second-generation immigrants compared to their first-generation counterparts. Even less information exists specifically on second-generation youths, defined for the purposes of this report as 18-23 years of age.

Research on second-generation Asian-American immigrants may be scarce because the population, until recently, has been relatively small. However, since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the number of first-generation immigrants and consequently, their second-generation children, has exploded in the U.S. The Asian immigrant population especially has grown and continues to expand. In 2010, 40% of all new immigrants to the United States came from Asia. According to the most recent U.S. Census, Asians number approximately 17 million or 5% of the total population. The expanded and continued growth of Asians in America

calls for more in-depth analysis of second-generation experiences as their presence becomes more and more significant.

**Literature Review of Existing Information on Emasculation of Asian Males**

Existing literature on the causes and reasoning behind American emasculation of Asian men points to many different possible sources. Institutionally, the dominant white male majority has historically benefitted and continues to benefit from imposing this “racial castration” of Asian men. In the past, Asian immigrant males were forced into domestic services and in the present, employers generally prefer their female counterparts, leaving them with no economic support for patriarchal roles in their families. Much of the literature using an institutional perspective focuses on the emasculation of immigrant Asian adult males as opposed to second-generation youth males. However, enough evidence exists to support the idea that the emasculation of their fathers contributes to feelings of emasculation in second-generation Asian male youth.

Other studies on the American emasculation of Asian men point to the historic and ongoing racist denigration of Asian culture, particularly in American media. The media visibly manifests the racial hierarchy of masculinity imposed by dominant White-American society where Asians place last as the most effeminate race. Asian males in American media fall into one or both of two contradictory categories: deviant and threatening and/or feminine and submissive. Numerous characters in television, particularly during the 20th Century, exemplify

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these stereotypes, including but not limited to: Dr. Fu Manchu, Mr. Yunioshi of Breakfast at Tiffany's, Song Liling of M. Butterfly, and etc.\textsuperscript{3} Though Asian male characters have become less offensive as American media has become more progressive in its portrayal of minorities in general, the stereotypes are still very much alive. Recent years and even months have seen small improvements with the emergence of shows and characters that better portray Asian males (i.e. Fresh Off the Boat, Dr. Ken, Glenn Rhee of The Walking Dead). However, American media is still far from providing healthy portrayals of Asian culture in general. Asserting that second-generation Asian male youth formulate their masculine identities solely through American media would be oversimplifying the issue. But research on the influence of media on race and gender identity formation particularly during developmental teenage years concludes that the depth of its influence cannot be dismissed.\textsuperscript{1} Second-generation immigrants often consume more popular media than their American counterparts as an assimilation tactic, making the influence of media stronger.\textsuperscript{1}

Just as the media visibly manifests the bottom rank of Asian males in the racial hierarchy of masculinity, it also visibly manifests the high rank of black males. Black Americans are portrayed as highly aggressive and physically strong.\textsuperscript{4} Though the racial hierarchy of masculinity does not emasculate black Americans, their stereotype as hypermasculine works against them as the dominant white majority uses it to their institutional advantage. Recent national news like the shooting of Michael Brown exemplifies how this racial hierarchy of masculinity does not benefit black males either.

Shift in Research Focus

The initial project proposal focused on small groups of Korean-American male youths who appropriated black culture due to the conclusions drawn from available literature. Appropriation of black culture as an attempt to regain lost masculinity from negative media stereotypes seemed like the most valid causal explanation. Prior to actual research, the principle investigators informally identified these appropriating groups through personal observations and conversations with other Korean-Americans. Korean-Americans from across the country, including California, Pennsylvania, Washington, Maryland, Virginia, and Washington D.C. confirmed the existence of these appropriating groups in their hometowns. The widespread existence of these Korean-American males appropriating black culture, though statistically unconfirmed, seemed to provide further evidence that they did so out of a universally imposed sense of emasculation.

However, preliminary interviews rendered the appropriation theory unfeasible for the limited scope and funding of our project. Preliminary interviews highlighted the difficulty in determining whether appropriation of black culture stemmed from feelings of emasculation or genuine affinity for it. The popularization of rap/hip-hop music starting from the late ‘90s and continuing today has made black culture more mainstream. As a result, the appropriation of black culture has become a problem not just among small groups of Korean-American males, but also among non-black American youth in general. This phenomenon has also coincided with the rise of PC (“politically correct”) culture, which further complicates the question of appropriation as reclaiming masculinity. Appropriation of black culture in these Asian males could also be interpreted as an expression of personal taste or as a reaction against PC culture. As a result, the research team concluded that too many factors needed to be explored before determining
whether these Korean-American male youths were appropriating black culture because of their feelings of emasculation. Time sensitivity and funding limited the research team’s ability to prove or disprove a cause/effect relationship between emasculation and cultural appropriation.

Instead of focusing on male youths who specifically appropriated black culture, the investigators decided to expand the subject pool to Korean-American males in general. The research team decided to limit subjects specifically to Korean-Americans as opposed to all Asian-Americans for several reasons. The principle student researcher is a Korean-American, and as such, had easier access to recruitment of other Korean-Americans, specifically in the community of Fullerton, California. For the project’s original proposal regarding cultural appropriation, intimate access to an appropriating group was vital to the research. These appropriating groups are often socially closed off to members outside of the community. The research team could not confirm any non-Korean Asian male groups who appropriated black culture in the same manner prior to project proposal. As a result of these factors, the team decided to limit subjects to those Asian-Americans specifically of Korean descent. Those of mixed Korean and other descent were also excluded because their experience as a mixed race person would differ from that of a fully Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, etc. Asian-American.

The project’s focus therefore shifted into a more in-depth study of how these second-generation individuals navigate their masculinity as well as the duality of their Asian and American cultures. Though the research team regrets the failure to investigate those appropriating groups, the project’s time and monetary limits necessitated this shift.

Methodology
A total of 20 Korean-American males with ages ranging from 19 to 22-years-old were interviewed in two locations. Half of the interviewees were recruited from Fullerton and half from Baltimore. Fullerton, California was selected originally for the appropriation theory because of its large Korean-American population. Fullerton has the highest percentage of Korean-American residents among medium-sized cities (medium defined as a population between 100,000 and 250,000). Baltimore, Maryland was selected for its geographic convenience.

Preliminary interviews were held in Fullerton during the summer of 2015 to test for any needed changes to the interview guide or recruitment strategy. As previously explained, these preliminary interviews necessitated changes in the research’s focus. In-depth interviews were then conducted one-on-one; no focus groups were held due to logistical issues and scheduling conflicts. Subjects were asked to fill out a brief survey asking about their immediate family and their personal placement or rejection of a scale from more Asian to more white. The interviewer then asked a series of questions general divided into two categories: (1) media and individually influences and (2) family and other external influences on masculinity. Interviews lasted approximately an hour and were voice recorded for later analysis.

In the future, the research team recommends focus groups as many individuals expressed a desire to continue talking about their experiences after the interviews were over. Those who did said they were eager to discuss their internal identity struggles as they had few opportunities to do so. Focus group interviews may better highlight similar experiences and ease feelings of isolation.

Analysis
The results of the interviews were much more varied than expected. All of the respondents said that the negative Asian male portrayal in American media had minimal or no effect on the development of their masculinity. Their views on external sources of influence, particularly religion, were much stronger. However, the most valuable information stemmed from their responses regarding masculinity’s role in finding a balance between American and Korean culture.

The Millenial Generation’s selective media-intake seems to have strongly influenced responses to the problem of negative Asian male stereotypes. Many of the respondents said they did not feel influenced by the media because they felt that most people, they included, saw it as inherently racist or non-representative. When initially asked whether they experienced negative Asian male portrayal in American media, many would respond that they didn’t watch television and therefore wouldn’t know. With the rise of the Internet, most Americans, and especially Millenials of the subjects’ age group, choose which media outlets to engage with. For Asian-American males, this seems to mean avoiding, whether on purpose or not, any media outlets that portray negative Asian male stereotypes. This selective media-intake therefore inadvertently limits the negative influence of those stereotypes. However, this is not to say that those negative stereotypes do not exist in American media and culture. All of the respondents described the negative stereotype of Asian males in nearly identical terms: “nerdy, submissive, quiet, socially awkward/anti-social, unfashionable, physically weak, skinny.” The unified response of these separate interviews indicates a collective understanding of the stereotype imposed on Asian males in America.

When asked about familial influences on masculinity, the subjects responded more or less predictably. Respondents who identified themselves as more Americanized said they developed
their masculinity in part by the example and direct verbal advice of their fathers. On the other
hand, respondents who identified as more Korean said their fathers’ influence was teaching
masculine requirements primarily through example, rather than by direct verbal advice. This
phenomenon reflects the difference between American and Korean fatherly parenting styles.

When asked about external influences on masculinity, the subjects from Fullerton differed
greatly from Baltimore recruits. Many of the Fullerton interviewees described feeling greatly
influenced both directly by their religious views and also by male religious authorities. The
following quote illustrates this sense of influence:

“I would say I learn a lot about what it takes to be a man from being a Christian. Like for
example, Jesus teaches compassion toward others, so it teaches me that part of being a man is
supporting my friends when they’re going through a break-up or any other bad stuff.”

The subject went on to describe other traits similar to compassion like asking for help and being
honest. Many of the traits that religious interviewees described were considered traditionally
feminine. Asking for help under traditionalist ideals would be considered feminine as it shows
vulnerability. For these religious respondents, Christianity served as an authority allowing them
to develop mutually beneficial traits like compassion that would be otherwise considered
unmanly. Often their male pastors helped to ease this acceptance and development of “feminine”
traits into desirable Christian and masculine ones.

Of the 10 Fullerton interviewees, 8 described this religious influence on their masculinity.
The research team decided that the high number of religious respondents necessitated another set
of non-religious subjects for comparison. Rather than select for religion, the team chose to recruit
from a different location across the country in search of non-religious subjects and subjects who had not grown up in a primarily Korean-American area. The high number of Korean-Americans in Fullerton made subjects easier to recruit. But many of them also expressed feeling less racism and struggling less to balance their Korean and American identities. The research team believes that because those subjects grew up in an area surrounded by other Korean-Americans, they did not feel like outsiders who needed to balance their family culture with their societal culture. Thus, the need for non-religious subjects who had not grown up in a primarily Korean-American location presented itself.

The discussion surrounding the balance between Korean and American culture was much more varied among Baltimore respondents. Subjects self-identifying as more Americanized struggled less with balancing their Korean and American cultures than those who self-identified more in the middle or as more Korean. For these “white-washed” Korean-Americans, masculinity development was not hindered by stereotype threat as they already felt accepted by American society. Subjects who felt more Korean described acting more traditionally masculine in response to the threat of being categorized as the negative Asian male stereotype of being “nerdy, submissive, and weak.” However, subjects self-identifying as more Americanized also felt more excluded and judged by other Asians, both male and female. Many described feeling judged as “fake” or “lazy” for failing to speak Korean or assimilate to Korean culture.

Further research on self-identification would illuminate intersectional issues like masculinity. With the dearth of existing literature on second-generation immigrants, it is difficult to parse out causal influences on masculinity without assuming racial identities.