

“This is How I Fight”: The Evolution of Masculinity within
Contemporary Depictions of Asian American Men

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English

I. Introduction

“When I choose to see the good side of things, it is strategic and necessary. It’s how I’ve learned to survive through everything. I know you see yourself as a fighter, well I see myself as a fighter. This is how I fight,” Waymond Wong, played by Ke Huy Quan, challenges masculine stereotypes in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). What does it mean to be a man in a contemporary America? What about the added implications of an Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) man in modern America? A “model minority?” According to popular films — such as *Sixteen Candles* and *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* — to be an AAPI man means to be weak, creepy, and socially inept. While Jackie Chan and the spike of Kung Fu films in America tried to counter this emasculation, it resulted in an unprogressive and hypermasculine persona. Within recent depictions of AAPI characters and actors, the awkward and “beta” stereotype has transformed into sensitive yet strong men with complex characteristics beyond race. In *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video*, Peter Feng explains the importance of depictions of identity in film, “movies are often perceived as historical representations. Because there is no identity between movies and reality — that is, movies only refer to reality, they do not correspond to it — it follows that there is no reality between movies and history” (3). If there is a discontinuous representation of reality, history will be misrepresented as well. In this paper, I will examine the progressive evolution of AAPI masculinity within contemporary mass American media focusing specifically on: Jin Lee, portrayed by John Cho, in Kogonada’s 2017

film *Columbus*; Little Dog in Ocean Vuong's 2019 novel *on earth we're briefly gorgeous*; and Waymond Wang, portrayed by Ke Huy Quan, in the Daniels' 2022 film, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*.

II. Contextualizing Masculinity within Asian Americans

Within contemporary mass media, film and literature are often how we define cultures and identities beyond personal accounts. They are how we contextualize the past and are able to frame the world around the time it is written, which is why it is important to have accurate representations of cultures and identities when they are depicted. Unfortunately, for Asian American men and women this has not been the case. In Andrew Kung's "Desexualization of Asian American Men," he explains:

Asian American men, however, have never fit this mold [of being physically well built, outgoing, charismatic, and liked by everyone]. Unlike Asian American women, who have long been fetishized in the West, we have been desexualized ever since the first Chinese communities immigrated to the US. As a way of minimizing the threat posed by Chinese men — who were often portrayed as stealing white Americans' jobs and women — Asians were characterized as passive, effeminate and weak. (CNN)

Asian American's have been depicted as paradoxical in terms of their representations. Bolstered by films such as *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), AAPI women are often hypersexualized and fetishized. In contrast, AAPI men have also been depicted as "passive, effeminate, and weak" particularly seen in the problematic depictions in Mickey Rooney's yellowface depiction of I.Y. Yunoioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) as an irascible and offensive caricature landlord and in Gedde Watanabe's depiction of a stereotypical Chinese exchange student who is always preluded with the sound of a gong in *Sixteen Candles* (1984).

Peter Feng explains the importance of accurate depictions of identity in *Identities in Motion* because it often defines what it means to be *American*:

Asian American Cinematic identity emerges from the citation of cinematic texts in Asian American movies. Identities are not found in “motion pictures”: rather, identities move *away from* cited movies: identities are put “in motion” by movies. Identity emerges from the friction between cited cinematic texts and the AAPI movies that incorporate them, which is to say that identity is produced by the friction between movies that arrest identity (essentialism) and the AAPI movies that construct identity. (4)

Projected stereotypes of AAPIs are often a reminder, not only of the expected assimilation of many immigrants, but also the potential for social consequence when they are not fully incorporated into the so-called “melting pot.” Movies and books, while providing a vantage point for history and the world surrounding the time, are often inadequate renderings of identity and reality. By looking at three contemporary and essential AAPI texts, we can track different masculinities that may not fit the muscular fabric of toxic American masculinity, but rather masculinities that fit the sensitive, reserved, yet strong AAPI men that are often under looked.

III. *Columbus* (2017) and Masculinity Beyond Race

The first example of a progressive male Asian American character I will be analyzing is in Kogonada’s 2017 film, *Columbus* starring John Cho as Jin. After Jin’s famous architect father falls into a coma in the architecturally acclaimed city of Columbus, Indiana, Jin is called back from his job as a translator in South Korea, to take care of the family’s affairs. While in Columbus, Jin meets Casey — played by Haley Lu Richardson — who works at the library and is enamored with the local architecture. Despite offers to study architecture further in Connecticut, she is hesitant to leave her hometown due to her mother who is a recovering drug addict. Jin and

Casey form a platonic relationship built on their mutual unsteady relationships with their parents. The film follows the two as Casey gives Jin an architectural tour of Columbus while they discuss their childhoods and how they coped with their respective parental traumas.

Despite not speaking to his father in years, Jin is tasked to care and make decisions for his dying father. In one of the few scenes in which Jin's Korean heritage is discussed is when the two are smoking and admiring the surrounding nature, he is asked if his father will be able to recover enough, just to get on a plane back to his *patria*. Jin morbidly says that he hopes not. He discusses the formalities and traditions that he must follow if the situation were in Korea: "I'd be expected to be there when he died. To express sorrow in the most dramatic fashion. There's this belief that if you're not there when a family member dies, you're not adequately grieving, your spirit will roam aimlessly and become a *kaekkw*, a ghost." In an interview with *The Daily Beast*, John Cho explained the role of race within the film:

As a man grappling with tumultuous feelings about his dad, his Korean-American heritage, and the tension between individual desire and familial/cultural obligation... I treat race as a natural — yet far from defining — aspect of a complex identity. It's really about seeing [AAPIs] as full-fledged human beings, rather than some function in a narrative, or the sidekick, or the extraneous character in another person's story. We have agency, and souls, and desires.

Cho was not only excited to be a part of a beautifully shot film, but to be a part of a film that represents his heritage not as his only defining aspect, but as just *a* part of him. It is a film that frames issues that plague everyday men. Cho explains in his interview with *Time* that he was never truly able to witness people on screen that looked like him that were not either sidekicks or a means of comedy, "I didn't want to contribute to that library of iconography... despite

yourself, you believe what the screen tells you about yourself.” He often refused auditions in which he would be the butt of jokes just because of the way he looks. On being a Korean American in such a white-centered field, Cho recognizes the added obstacles he has to hurdle to act in movies that he is proud to work on. Despite a spike in roles for actors of color in many action and blockbuster films, Cho expressed his hesitation, “What’s most important is expressing ourselves, not necessarily getting chosen... Is it important for me to express my own culture, or to be a cultureless character in a fictional America that exists only in movies?” Within Columbus, Cho is able to walk that tight line of expressing his culture without it taking the forefront of his character.

While still being an important part of his development and eventual decision to continue caring for this dying father, Jin’s masculinity is not defined by his Korean heritage. Rather, he is defined by his compassion which he displays for Casey and his father, his angst on growing up with a distant father, and his willingness to put the needs of others before himself. Instead of his Korean heritage being in the forefront of his development, it is floating above it.

IV. *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* and Queer Masculinities

The next text I will look at is Ocean Vuong’s 2019 epistolary novel *on earth we’re briefly gorgeous*. The coming-of-age novel is written as a semi-autobiographical letter from a Vietnamese American to his illiterate mother who immigrated to the US. The letter’s speaker, the protagonist known as “Little Dog,” nonconsecutively recalls his mother and grandmother’s journey from Vietnam to Hartford, Connecticut along with his own journey of queerness. He bounces between the stories of: his grandmother, Lan’s, life in Vietnam and meeting a white soldier who would marry and have Rose, Little Dog’s mother; Rose’s abusive relationship with her estranged husband and her struggles to provide for her family at a nail salon; and Little Dog’s first

relationship with a boy named Trevor. Throughout, Little Dog's attachment to both Lan and Rose is anchored in language, or the lack thereof; in exchange for plucking the greys out of Lan's hair, she would tell Little Dog stories of her past, but with both Lan and Rose being mostly illiterate, Little Dog is tasked in being their interpreter and promises to never leave them without words. Throughout this epistle, Little Dog is attempting to use language as a bridge between him and his illiterate mother, but evidently fails to communicate his love to both Lan and Rose.

Little Dog's masculinity takes different forms throughout the entire novel all stemmed from violence. After being bullied by other boys at school, he is scolded by his mother, "You have to be a real boy and be strong. You have to step up or they'll keep going. You have a bellyful of English" (26). With his relationship with Trevor, he is exposed to a shameful display of toxic hypermasculinity. At first, their intimacy is not quite "real," as he explains that "The first time we fucked, we didn't fuck at all" (113). Christina Slopek explains the paradox in "Queer Masculinities and Bottomhood":

Although Little Dog and Trevor have not yet transgressed anal boundaries, they and their abject-centered intimacy have already, and perhaps more importantly straddled conceptual ones: having sex which deviates from what heteronormativity considers "normal" intercourse both in terms of gender relations and of what counts as sex as they break up normative boundaries surrounding sex and prove them to be malleable, porous. (749)

She explains that because their intimacy is not quite what would be considered "sex" in a heteronormative standpoint, but still acts as a veil before they decide to fully penetrate the boundary defining queerness. After they have "real" sex for the first time, Little Dog expresses the shame that Trevor must have felt, and that it was his fault:

He breathed hard above me. Trevor being who he was, raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity, I feared for what would come. It was my fault. I had tainted him with my faggotry, the filthiness of our act exposed by my body's failure to contain itself. (203)

Little Dog, who expects the abuse due to Rose, is ready for any sort of wrath that may come from Trevor. Instead, Trevor's response is "oddly tender" (204) and tells him not to worry. Within this Slopek explains that Little Dog embraces bottomhood by "countering the heteronormative vision of sex as power exerted by a dominant person — a man — over a submissive one — a woman — Little Dog is submissive but just as well shapes the dynamics between the two boys" (751). When he first meets Trevor, he explains that he wanted to "know him through and through, by [his] very hate. Because that's what you give anyone who sees you. I thought. You take hatred head-on, and you cross it, like a bridge, to face them, to enter them" (97). Little Dog expecting hatred does not quite get love in response, but rather an intimate tenderness veiled in toxicity and Trevor's opioid addiction which he would eventually overdose and lead to his demise.

Throughout this violence within his abuse from Rose, Lan's tumultuous tales to the States, and Little Dog's relationship with Trevor, Little Dog recognizes the beauty that it has led to:

Yes, there was a war. Yes, we came from its epicenter. In that war, a woman gifted herself a new name — Lan — in that naming claimed herself beautiful, then made that beauty into something worth keeping. From that, a daughter was born, and from that daughter, a son.

All this time I told myself we were born from a war — but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty.

Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence — but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it (231).

As Little Dog concludes his letter — grown up with his husband Paul — he writes, “Because the sunset, like survival, exists only on the verge of its own disappearing. To be gorgeous, you must first be seen, but to be seen also allows you to be hunted” (238). Little Dog’s queer masculinities are not weak or submissive, but his sensitivities and compassion helped him to survive.

V. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* and compassionate masculinity

The final example of a shifting depiction of Asian American masculinities is within Ke Huy Quan’s depiction of Waymond Wang in The Daniels’ 2022 film, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Quan’s journey to the role was not as straightforward as his white counterparts. As a child, he acted as Indiana Jones’s sidekick, Short Round, in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) and as Data in the 1985 childhood adventure film *Goonies*. For a few years after, he bounced around different shows before realizing that there were very few roles for Asian American men in Hollywood. While still working in films as stunt coordinators and assistant directors, he never found his way back in front of a camera until *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. In an interview with *GQ*, Quan explained his struggles as an Asian child actor:

But when I started pursuing it, there were just not a lot of opportunities for me. It was extremely difficult for an Asian actor at that time... It's very difficult for many, but I think it's a hundred times—a thousand times—more difficult when you are an Asian actor. I found myself at a crossroads at a very early age. Do I want to continue down a path where I just didn't see many opportunities for myself? Or do I want to go down a path, an unknown path, where I really don't know what I want to do? And I struggled for a long, long time. And at the same time, I was just hoping that phone would ring with an amazing offer to be in a

movie like *Indiana Jones* or *The Goonies*, or a great role for an Asian actor, and it never came. I was so dispirited and disheartened.

Hollywood often only provided Asian actors as the butt of jokes, or tokenized characters in which their heritage represents their entire character. While *Everything Everywhere All At Once* is a deeply Asian American film (*Washington Post*), the characters are, again, not defined by their Chinese heritage, rather their heritages are added obstacles for the issues that are already at the forefront of this family affair.

The genre-bending science fiction film centers around Waymond's wife, Evelyn — played by Michelle Yeoh — and his daughter Joy/Jobu Tupaki — portrayed by Stephanie Hsu, as they try to save their family's laundromat business from being seized by the IRS. In a separate universe, known as the alpha-verse, where Evelyn was able to create technology to jump between different universes and access skills and memories that they did not quite have, Joy — renamed to Jobu Tupaki — was pushed too far in training and becomes a threat to not only the alpha-verse, but the multiverse as a whole. As Evelyn and Waymond get ready for their audit appointment — in the 616 dimension — they are interrupted by Alpha Waymond and an epic fight ensues throughout the IRS office as Jobu Tupaki tries to defeat Evelyn. 616 Evelyn begins to “verse jump” and learn more about the different dimensions, different lives, and different skills she has had in different dimensions. The complex story then introduces countless different versions of Evelyn: one where she never went to America with Waymond and becomes a famous singer; another where she is a famous actress and kung fu master; one where people have hot dogs for fingers; and even a slightly different universe where a fight never ensues in the office, and they are just driving home from the office. Within these separate universes, Waymond is only present in two. In the movie star universe, Waymond is a successful businessman in

America and came to support Evelyn's new movie premier. The other in which he is constantly present in, is the slightly varied timeline in which he asked Evelyn for a divorce.

As the fights ensue, Joy's nihilistic intentions become clearer to Evelyn. Evelyn's mind splits after too much jumping between different dimensions and is able to experience every version of herself, all at once, without the need to verse jump. Joy then reveals that since she has experienced everything, she is looking for a way out, a way to finally die — by putting *everything* into a bagel: “hopes and dreams, old report cards, every breed of dog, every ad on Craigslist, sesame, poppy, onion, salt. And it collapsed in on itself.” By getting sucked into the blackhole of the literal “everything” bagel, she can finally die without experiencing every version of herself and is hoping Evelyn will come with her. Evelyn then spends time exploring the other verses with Joy before agreeing to allow everything, including themselves, to be sucked into the bagel of death.

Unknowing to any of these timelines, Waymond lacks a traditional arc of other sensitive men in films. He does not have an outburst of anger like Stephen Root in the climax of *Dodgeball* or have a typical “man-up” moment like Peter Parker in *Spiderman*. Instead, he continuously holds his compassionate persona throughout the entire film, even in the most difficult of times, and in every timeline. After Evelyn goes on a nihilistic outburst in the laundromat in the second timeline, Waymond is able to talk to the IRS worker and extend their tax deadline, so their laundromat is not immediately seized. In the emotional climax following an intense fight scene in the 616 timeline where Jobu is about to enter the bagel with Evelyn, and a panic attack during the movie premier of Evelyn's movie star timeline, 616 Waymond and business Waymond's monologues are cut back and forth:

BUSINESS WAYMOND. You think I'm weak don't you? All of those years ago when we first fell in love, your father would say I was too sweet for my own good. Maybe he was right....

616 WAYMOND. Please, can we please stop fighting?

BUSINESS WAYMOND. You tell me that it's a cruel world, and we're all running around in circles. I know that. I've been on this earth just as many days as you.

616 WAYMOND. I know you're all fighting because you're scared and confused. I'm confused too. All day, I don't know what the heck is going on. But somehow this feels like it's all my fault.

BUSINESS WAYMOND: When I choose to see the good side of things, I'm not being naïve. It is strategic and necessary. It's how I've learned to survive through everything.

616 WAYMOND. I don't know. The only thing I do know is that we have to be kind. Please. Be kind, especially when we don't know what is going on.

BUSINESS WAYMOND. I know you see yourself as a fighter. Well, I see myself as one too. This is how I fight.

Waymond does not need an arc because he is already strong in who he is, he does not require any more strength, even if Alpha-Waymond was disappointed by its weak physical vessel.

Waymond's kindness — while being seen as a weakness to many of the people around him — is his strength. His ability to see the good in others inspires Evelyn to fight with kindness by verse-jumping and resolving issues for Jobu's henchmen without the need for violence. Evelyn realizes that the universe gave her someone that was kind, patient, and forgiving to make up for the compassion which she often lacks. When Joy tries to just leave via the bagel by herself, she is held back by Evelyn and anchored by Waymond.

Waymond, in all shown universes — aside the Alpha-Waymond — is a goofy, aw-shucks, somber, and romantic man who does not display any set of Jackie Chan-like hypermasculinity. In every universe that Waymond is present, his strength and compassion is built off of the love he displays for the strong women that surround him. His masculinity is rooted within his kindness and compassion for the world and its people, but more especially toward his wife and daughter.

Everything Everywhere All At Once has gone on to become the most awarded film of all time by winning seven awards in the 2023 Academy Awards including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actress (Yeoh), and Best Supporting Actor (Quan).

VI. Conclusion

In Dr. Michael Kimmel’s sociology course on masculinity studies at Stony Brook University, he prefaced his class asking two questions. The first, “What does it mean to be a *good* man?” Perplexed by the question, Dr. Kimmel explained that if his students were at a funeral and the eulogy described the deceased as a “good man,” what would he look like? The responses were based on compassion: caring, putting others needs before themselves, and honest. The second question he asked was “what makes a *real* man?” Unsurprisingly, the answers differed: taking authority, taking risks, and suppressing any kind of weakness” (New York Times). Within these two questions of masculinity are often where many men find themselves in between.

While the rise of Kung Fu and Jackie Chan often depicted these fanciful “real men” contrasted with the desexualization of many AAPI men, neither were accurate depictions of identity or culture. Despite the popular depictions of the Asian “beta,” these contemporary texts challenge that notion with sensitive, yet strong men with complex characteristics beyond their race; these three masculinities are not defined by their race or submissiveness. Rather, within

these three texts, each of these three men's strengths are rooted within their own kindness and compassion along with the strong women that surround them. While none of these characters would be considered "fighters" or "real men" by most, they all strive and achieve the accolade of being a "good man" and provide an accurate representational framework for masculinity within AAPI men.

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