

*WHITE WASHED OUT: ASIAN AMERICAN
REPRESENTATION IN MEDIA*

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Abstract

Since the Oscars first began in 1929, less than one percent of annual Academy Award nominations have included Asian Americans. Within the one percent, they have only become notably recognized for their contributions as the tokenized character – a product of Westernized racism and discrimination – while white actors are chosen to fulfill lead Asian roles in an act of “Yellowface”. Using a three-pronged research model of statistical, historical, and psycho-sociolinguistic analyses, this study examines the societal implications of misrepresentation within the media and its affects over minority and race relations throughout the United States. Using information from the United States census and summary statistics over the demographic compositions of the Oscars, disaggregated data is used in conjunction with a historical breakdown of Asian American chronicles and documented immigrant studies. Hour-long interviews were also conducted with volunteers to inspect the negative repercussions of the model minority myth and dissect the role that media plays in cultivating implicit bias against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in current generations. Overall, the study discovered how underrepresentation negatively correlates with the self-esteems of Asian American individuals. The lack of accurate representation within the media significantly debilitates the confidence and self-image of Asian Americans, which contributes to long-term disadvantages during their academic lives and when pursuing careers within the Humanities and Arts. These findings suggest that misrepresentation of minorities within the media fuels systemic racism and perpetuates normalized notions built on stereotypes and falsely imposed identities of Asian Americans. Furthermore, the research reveals the relationship between the marginalization of the Asian American and Pacific Islander population, the internalization of racism within individuals, and political affiliation across generations. Lastly, the research delves into the mechanism of social media and how it has been used as a vehicle for reform, especially amongst the youth. This study sheds light on the racial discourse within the United States, investigating the layered complexities of interracial and intraracial relationships within community groups. The overall findings uncover the intersection between the technological digital age, the millennial generation’s tendency for revolution, and the emotional role of empathy, shame, and introspection.

Background

I. Introduction

While the United States often receives recognition over its expansion as a powerful force within international affairs, its institutional structure of authority, and its reservoir of liberal democracy, the nation's status as a foundation for cultural pluralism stands vital and integral for its continued growth and sustainability. Through the intersection between civil society and the ethnic mosaic of citizens, the racial discourse within the nation serves as a nexus of development and social awareness. The arrival of the Mayflower in New England on November 11th, 1620 served as a beacon of hope for new settlers and immigrant families. Withstanding the colonization and European exploitation committed, the United States became a canvas for new experiences to be blanketed by potential, glory, struggle, violence, and vision.

Motivated by numerous political, economic, and cultural forces, many Asians immigrated to the United States during the mid-19th century in the midst of the Gold Rush of 1849. As waves of immigration continued, the longstanding history of racism towards Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities grew – waves of racial epithets during American wartimes built on the foundational hostility and promoted antagonistic marginalization of minority groups. The accumulation of discrimination facilitated AAPIs' tendency to avoid assimilation out of fear, ultimately rejecting absorption into white culture and leaving populations of AAPI divergent from the narrative of white America. Over the decades, the institutional problem evolved into one overwhelmed with stereotypes, emotional violence, and aggression.

Today, the digital age has seamlessly integrated itself into modern America. Social media has become a medium for revolutionary change; it provided the stimulus needed to initiate social reform and raise cultural awareness. Through the immediate connections that are created, technological platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook allow people to share ideas and promote their self-expression amongst diverse communities of thought and opinion. It allows humanity to empathize, to educate, and to explore the different dimensions of identity, perspective, and intersectionality. The plight of AAPI communities has become highly characterized by social media campaigns, the power of storytelling in documentary films, and advocacy law. Movements such as #StarringJohnCho, #StarringConstanceWu, #thisis2016, and #IAMAsianAmerican have intertwined with immigration reform policy, segments on the Daily Show, and creative projects in order to delve into the sophistications of race in America.

II. Research Question

“How does popular media’s representation of Asian people influence perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of AAPI within the United States?”

Through a cross-examination of race, political affiliation, and age, this study observes how the media influences not only the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of other people about AAPI, but about how AAPI define themselves. Media and cinematic forces – generalized as Hollywood – plays a significant role in shaping an interpretation of American society. Being recognized as a quintessential part of American spirit and luxury, watching television has gained tremendous cultural capital. Popular media’s ability to sway and impact people’s thinking and insights functions as a prominent, but subtle aspect of life. By utilizing sociolinguistic manipulations of language and communication, media representation maintains the power to drastically bias one’s psychological tendencies.

Although one’s racial, ethnic, and national identity plays a significant role in their perspective on society, their hometown and home country also serve as spheres of influence. While there is a tendency to generalize and stereotype people based on their physical appearance, this study unravels the narratives of numerous individuals in order to thoroughly understand how much of a factor one’s environment and surroundings play in their personal growth and ideology. Going beyond behavioral sociopsychology, the research also offers an opportunity to reject the imposition of identity factors onto others.

Furthermore, the intersection of political affiliation and age – and the nuances shelled within the two – play a strategic role in describing one’s level of awareness and understanding of race politics and its integration within everyday life. This study zones in on the millennial generation, examining how reinforced impressions may hold during a time of self-growth, self-development, and exploration of individuality.

While the realm of cinema originally functioned as a medium of entertainment, the inevitable politicization of popular media and popular culture ultimately socializes racism and discrimination on a foundational level, setting the stage for the perpetuation of stereotypes and implicit bias within American race relations.

Research Methodology

I. *Defining Key Terminology*

a. Common Terms [within the discipline]

- i. Yellowface – the process in which white actors accumulate the roles of Asian/Asian American characters on television shows and movies; highlights the misrepresentation of AAPI by prioritizing and placing more social and economic capital on lives and contributions of white people
- ii. Model Minority Myth – the “positive” stereotype in which societal norms see AAPI as a model for other minority groups; plays into the monolithic conceptualization of Asians as characterized as submissive, obedient, and excessively academically oriented
- iii. Whitewashed – the phenomenon in which a person of color/non-white person fully integrate into white culture and strips themselves of any non-white cultural affiliations; commonly used to describe individuals who do not fall into their racial identity, but abide by social norms, trends, and tendencies of white communities
- iv. Twinkie – the metaphor which states that whitewashed Asian people are yellow-skinned on the outside [their physical appearance], but white on the inside [their mannerisms/personality], similar to the composition and physicality of the sugary pastry
- v. ABC – an acronym that stands for “American Born Chinese,” often used to distinguish Chinese Americans from both immigrants and Americans (which falls under the presumption that white people are the only true Americans)

b. Vague Terms

- i. Nationality – the relationship between an individual and the nation that they consider themselves to be affiliated with
- ii. Ethnicity – the identification of an individual based on similar cultural lifestyles/norms and common heritage
 ex) A person who was born and raised in Malaysia, but under the influence of traditional Chinese norms, may consider themselves to have a Malaysian nationality, but a Chinese ethnicity.
 *Note: both terms have incredibly loose and variable definitions indicative of context, culture, and personal schemas – many people consider them to be interchangeable; however, it is mainly argued to have a subtle difference, but one can have their nationality and ethnicity be the same.

II. *Analysis Modeling*

This study was conducted in three main components, each functioning as a complement to the others. In addition, each component will offer a new perspective in approaching the notion of AAPI representation in popular media.

The statistical analysis will provide detailed, quantitative data through demographic studies and cross-cultural population comparisons, census evaluation, Oscar/the Academy breakdown, and personalized classification through self-identified measures.

The historical analysis will provide a chronological examination on the narrative of Asian Americans. Through a deconstruction of Asian America, this study will focus on the different immigration policies, racial epithets, and movements that have ushered America into the twenty-first century. Sociolinguistic breakdowns of slurs will be documented as a way to explain the phenomenon of invisibility for AAPI communities, ultimately investigating the race relations that have dominated the nation today.

The interviews will provide a humanistic and intimate approach towards personifying the issues that plague not only AAPI communities, but numerous minority groups and persons of color. Dialogue on racial awareness for AAPI cannot exist without dialogue on racial awareness for other marginalized groups. By listening to the narratives and cultivated social discourse on the matters of racism, sexism, immigration, politics, the public can empathize, instigating moments of reflection and introspection.

I. Introduction

The rise of television and film has drastically interwoven into the American lifestyle, and as popular culture converges with the political atmosphere of the United States, it functions as a tool for expression and reform. With televisions becoming more and more of a staple household item and movie theater outings becoming a quintessential American social scene, the Oscars and the Academy has become an institution with incredible reach. Attracting millions of watchers every year, the awards ceremony celebrates the most notable and influential films, actors, directors, and so forth. However, rather than functioning as an objective and representative group of voters, the Oscars suffers from tremendous racial skew and bias. With an overall group of 6,028 Academy Award voters, approximately 94% of the voters are white, with a median age of 49 years old¹. While the president of the Academy, Cheryl Boone Isaacs, is currently pushing for diversity in membership, which can be seen through the removal of the quota system that limited new inductees, efforts are plateauing and endorsements for people of color are at a stalemate.

II. Statistical Analysis

Due to the overwhelming majority of white members, Oscar nominations explicitly reflected ethnic partialities. All throughout the 20th century, 95% of Oscar nominations were directed at white actors, thus over-representing the white population within the United States. According to the 2010 census, white people make up approximately 75.1% of the population, whereas Asian Americans make up 3.6% of the population². However, only 1.4% of lead movie characters – and 2% of cable scripted roles and 4% of broadcast scripted roles – in film were given to Asian American actors³. Similarly, other racial minorities in the United States fall victim towards the same lack of representation.

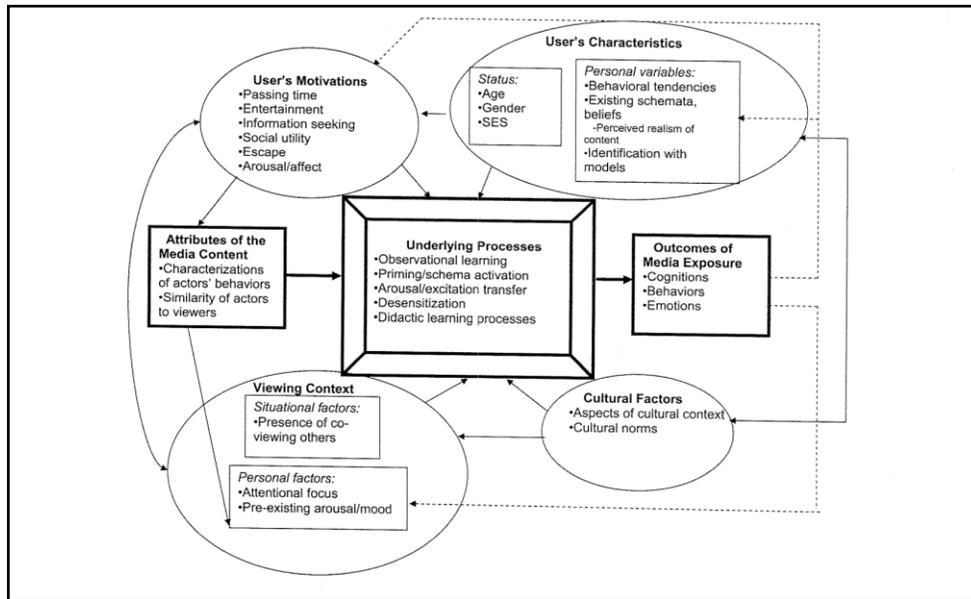
[Copyrighted image removed. Please visit this link to view: <http://econ.st/1PHG1wL>]

¹ "Film and Race: How Racially Skewed Are the Oscars? | The Economist." The Economist. 2016. Accessed December 12, 2016. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2016/01/film-and-race>.

² Infoplease. Accessed December 12, 2016. <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0762156.html>.

³ "Asian-American Actors Are Fighting for Visibility. They Will Not Be Ignored." New York Times. 2016. Accessed December 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/movies/asian-american-actors-are-fighting-for-visibility-they-will-not-be-ignored.html?_r=0

The process of media socialization



While the lack of representation poses an objective problem itself, the misrepresentation that exists within the small percentage of minority actors serves as a dominant

obstacle in proper socialization. With 51% of youth reporting that their television is on most of the day, popular culture easily becomes a sphere of influence, as “the social-cognitive psychological processes of observational learning, priming, desensitization, and so on, [...] occur when behavior is observed,” such as through the television programs and movies that children spend their days watching⁴. Ultimately, television primes associative networks of ideas, which integrate multiple concepts of racism and judgment together. Through the socialization of media, children can link an external stimulus with an inherently related response, such as the indexical nature of a gun with aggression; however, the external stimulus can also be conditioned to connote an inherently neutral response “that has become linked in the past to certain beliefs or behaviors”⁵. With such classical conditioning, certain emotions can become associated with specific stimuli only after a few exposures, which ultimately dictates the behavior and social interactions that children have throughout their lifetime. While some roles have transcended stereotypes, such as John Cho in *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* and George Takei in the first *Star Trek* installments, the pigeon-holed roles of the math prodigy or gas station owners continue with prominence in Hollywood. And as children grow older and proceed by digesting popular media, the “scripts become more complex, abstract, and automatic as children’s social-cognitive schemas about the world around them become more elaborated”⁶. Therefore, children who have seen the implicit racism that has been ingrained within cartoons, television shows, and movies, will normalize the discrimination and further promote the ideologies put forth by white culture.

⁴“Media and Youth Socialization | Underlying Processes and Moderators of Effects” Accessed December 2016.

http://www.rcgd.isr.umich.edu/aggr/articles/Huesmann/2006.Dubow_et_al.Media&YouthSocialization.inHandbkofSocialization.pdf

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

III. Historical Analysis

However, media socialization originates from the beginning of Asian American history. As a process that has been institutionally and systematically ingrained into society, the media manipulates the form of expression in order to politicize the medium of entertainment, ultimately interweaving biased messages to promote certain ideologies. Ever since the first three hundred and twenty-five Chinese forty-niners arrived in California during 1849, the Asian population has been actively growing throughout the United States⁷. Even within the last decade, the Asian population in the United States increased from 10.2 million in 2000 to 14.7 million in 2010, a growth rate four times faster than that of the total U.S. population.⁸ During their time within the United States, Asian immigrants are often perceived as hardworking, persistent, and efficient. However, the positive stereotypes that are frequently imposed on individuals have origins in extreme degradation and hostility. While Asian Americans are now pressured by the implicit pressure of being model minorities, the generations before suffered the brute force of systemic violence, overwhelming alienation, and discrimination via slurs and epithets. Ultimately, Asian Americans were and continue to be a target of America's cultural anxieties.

Beginning in the mid-19th century, many Asians immigrated to the United States, motivated by a number of political, economic, and cultural forces. Most influential was the Gold Rush of 1849, which presented them with the opportunity to maximize their wealth and improve their financial standing. Devastated by the Taiping Rebellion, a radically political and religious movement that drastically weakened the Qing Dynasty, many Chinese citizens were left impoverished and penniless. Captivated by the allure of fortune, many traveled to the United States to find work and generate enough income to return to China and support their families⁹. Within the first twenty-seven years, the Chinese population in the United States increased from 54 to 151,000¹⁰. News of the Gold Rush continued to spread at a steady pace, both internationally and nationally. However, by the time miners from the East Coast arrived at the California gold mines, the richness of the surfaces was thoroughly exhausted by the Chinese communities that had immigrated into the country earlier. Subjected to the American laborers' disappointment and dissatisfaction, the Chinese immigrants soon became targets for anti-foreigner persecution.

⁷ Lee, Erika. *The Making of Asian America: A History*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015.

⁸ Hoeffel, Elizabeth H., Sonya Rastogi, Myoung Ouk Kim, and Hasan Shahid. "The Asian Population: 2010." 2010 Census Briefs. March 2012. <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-11.pdf>.

⁹ Norton, Henry Kittredge. "The Chinese." Gold Rush and Anti-Chinese Race Hatred - 1849. Accessed May 02, 2016. <http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist6/chinhate.html>.

¹⁰ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Taiping Rebellion." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Accessed May 02, 2016. <http://www.britannica.com/event/Taiping-Rebellion>.

The general feeling of intolerance solidified under the Foreign Miners Tax Law of 1850, legislation that required foreign miners to pay a monthly fee of twenty dollars in order to keep their mining license¹¹. In addition, Asian immigrants faced extreme social repercussions, as they were forced to work in older mines, accept lower wages, and experience racial violence from the Caucasian majority¹². Over time, the term *coolie* was developed to describe an unskilled Asian immigrant. Its etymology is believed to have stemmed from the Hindi and Telugu word for day-laborer and the Urdu word for slave, *kuli*¹³. The words were integrated into everyday American lexicon, as the white majority generalized the Asian population into one that could be monolithically expressed by already-existing cultural slurs. Quickly, the word became expressive of Asian Americans “as laborers in servitude, contracts, peonage, [and] even as slaves [...] employed by both politicians and laborers,” ostracizing and alienating Asian immigrants even further¹⁴. In the California Supreme Court case, *People v. Hall* (1854), the Court ruled that *coolies* were “a race of people whom nature has marked as inferior, and who are incapable of progress or intellectual development beyond a certain point, as their history has shown; differing in language, opinions, color, and physical conformation; between whom and ourselves nature has placed an impassable difference”. Such degradation and discrimination culminated in 1862, as *coolie* was officially adopted by California legislature through the passing of the Anti-Coolie Act. Implemented as a way to fight the *coolie* trade and hinder the flow of Asians into the United States, the Act banned the transportation of Asians unless they had a certificate signed by a consular official¹⁵. Instigated by pressure from majority populations of threatened miners and politicians, the Act characterized Asian people as “coolies, a degraded race of godless opium addicts, prostitutes, and gamblers,” portraying them as maladies of the Western culture¹⁶.

Similarly, in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, an Indian Sikh man filed for naturalization within the United States under the Naturalization Act of 1906, which states that “free white persons [and] aliens of African nativity and persons of African descent” are able to become United States citizens. However, because of his skin color and ethnic identification as a high caste Hindu, he was ultimately denied citizenship, setting the stage for the underrepresentation of South Asians within the larger narrative of Asian American activism.

¹¹ California State Library. “Foreign Miners Tax Documents, 1850-1867.” Online Archive of California. Accessed May 02, 2016. <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/search?style=oac4;Institution>.

¹² “California “Anti-Coolie” Act of 1862.” Encyclopedia.com. Accessed May 02, 2016. <http://www.encyclopedia.com/article-1G2-2688400036/california-anti-coolie-act.html>.

¹³ A History Of Indentured Labor Gives ‘Coolie’ Its Sting.” NPR. Accessed May 02, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/11/25/247166284/a-history-of-indentured-labor-gives-coolie-its-sting>.

¹⁴ Murphy, Erin L. “Prelude to Imperialism”: Whiteness and Chinese Exclusion in the Reimagining of the United States.” *Journal of Historical Sociology / Historical Sociol* 18, no. 4 (2005): 457-90. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6443.2005.00264.x.

¹⁵ Vong, Jimmy. “1862 Anti-Coolie Law.” U.S. Immigration Legislation. Accessed May 02, 2016. http://library.uwb.edu/static/USImmigration/1862_anti_coolie_law.html.

¹⁶ K azin, Michael, Rebecca Edwards, and Adam Rothman. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History*. Vol. II. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Over the years, the media became increasingly aware and cognizant of the Asian American presence, and newspapers and other mediums of media utilized their influence to perpetuate discriminatory epithets towards AAPI populations. With the proposal for a transcontinental railroad approved, by 1865, Central Pacific began hiring Chinese men as a way to compensate for their labor shortage. By 1868, 80% of the Central Pacific workforce were Chinese men, and the remaining 20% of laborers were Irishmen who felt threatened by the work ethic, punctuality, and diligence of their Chinese counterparts¹⁷. In general, the Chinese community was tremendously invested in their work because they wanted to generate money and return to their homes. Because they could commonly reference China as the Celestial Empire – directly translated from the phrase 天朝(tian chao) – many Americans misinterpreted their language and assumed they were identifying themselves as divine beings¹⁸. The first citation of the term was expressed in Soule, Gihon, and Nisbet's *Annals of San Francisco*, in which they stated that “those who have mingled familiarly with celestials have commonly felt before long an uncontrollable sort of loathing against them,” thus claiming that the animosity towards Asian was inevitable because of some inherent bias against the cultural population¹⁹.

Discrimination swiftly escalated to violence and extreme antagonism, which can be seen through the 1885-1889 Anti-Chinese riots, during which Chinese communities were aggressively harassed and targeted throughout California, Oregon, Nevada, Alaska, Colorado, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Washington, resulting in millions of dollars' worth of property damages, numerous deaths, and expulsions from the country²⁰. Even along the East Coast, many riots were instigated because cigar manufacturers exploited the ethnic antagonism in order to combat strikes in New York City. As journalism and coverage began to shift towards the racial animosity in the United States, newspapers began documenting the conflict. *The New York Labor Standard* published headlines declaring how “even CHINAMEN have asserted their manhood in this strike and have risen to the dignity of American trade unionists”²¹. By emphasizing the word Chinamen and false documenting their obedience, larger corporations were able to manipulate their upset employees into coming back to work, solely based on pride and the need to prove that they are better than Asian workers.

Just as how there was a shift from gold mining to railroads in the 19th century, the 20th century introduced a similar transition between industries, in which workers focused their energies on the promising businesses involved with fish canneries. In 1903, Edmund A. Smith patented and manufactured an automated salmon cleaning machine fifty-five

¹⁷ PBS. "Workers of the Central Pacific Railroad." American Experience. Accessed May 02, 2016.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/tcrr-cprp/>.

¹⁸ "Celestial." Merriam-Webster. Accessed May 03, 2016. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/celestial>.

¹⁹ Green, Jonathon. *Green's Dictionary of Slang*. London: Chambers, 2010.

²⁰ Harpweek. "The Anti-Chinese Hysteria of 1885-1886." The Anti-Chinese Hysteria of 1885-1886. Accessed May 03, 2016.

<http://immigrants.harpweek.com/ChineseAmericans/2KeyIssues/TheAntiChineseHysteria.htm>.

²¹ Chang, Iris. *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History*. New York: Viking, 2003.

times faster than the average human worker. Living in Seattle at the time, Smith was exposed to numerous Asian populations, as most workers in the Northwest were Asian immigrants. His constant exposure to their work ethic and first-hand accounts of their productivity inspired him to name the machine Iron Chink, drawing a clear parallel between the 110-fish per minute rate of the machine and the impressive speeds at which Asian immigrants worked²². The use of the racial slur, *chink*, continued through popular media, as Thomas Burke's "The Chink and the Child" was published as part of his collection of stories in *Limehouse Nights* (1916).

*"But not there were those that ran to Battling at his training quarters across the river, with the news that his child had gone with a Chink – a yellow man. And Battling was angry, he discovered parental rights. He discovered indignation. A yellow man after his kid! He'd learn him. Battling did not like men who were not born in the same great country as himself. Particularly he disliked yellow men. His birth and education in Shadwell had taught him that of all creeping things that creep upon the earth the most insidious is the Oriental in the West. And a yellow man and a child."*²³

Later adapted into *Broken Blossoms* or *The Yellow Man and the Girl*, a screenplay by American film director D.W. Griffith, the story portrays common xenophobic anxieties through the interactions between Battling Burrows and Cheng Huan. Capturing the anti-Chinese sentiments of the time, Burke attributes to the Chinese protagonist opium addiction and whorehouses, highlighting the stereotypes that many people held of the Chinese²⁴. Battling's extreme focus on Huan's physical differences, specifically the color of his skin, represents the general conception many Americans had of Asian immigrants, judging them purely on their outward appearance.

Throughout World War I, concerns regarding Asian immigration continued, and numerous novels were published in attempt to raise awareness of its threat on American values. Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany coined the phrase, "Yellow Peril," epitomizing the theory that Asian immigrants would inevitably and tragically corrupt the United States²⁵. And while the steadily increasing Chinese labor force continued to instigate high levels of aggression, Japan's expansionism and focus on refining and strengthening their military during World War I provoked various fears about the Japanese collective²⁶. Due to the increase in anti-Asian prejudice, several legal decisions were passed. Similar to the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was passed in 1882 under the Chester A. Arthur administration, the

²² History Link. "Automated Salmon Cleaning Machine Developed in Seattle in 1903." The Free Online Encyclopedia of Washington State History. Accessed May 03, 2016. http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&File_Id=2109.

²³ Burke, Thomas. *Limehouse Nights*. New York: R.M. McBride & Company, 1917.

²⁴ *Broken Blossoms (Tinted Print); or the Yellow Man and the Girl*. Directed by D.W. Griffith. United States, 1919. Film.

²⁵ Lee, Erika. "The "Yellow Peril" and Asian Exclusion in the Americas." *Pacific Historical Review* 76, no. 4 (2007): 537-62. doi:10.1525/phr.2007.76.4.537.

²⁶ Dickinson, Frederick R. *War and National Reinvention: Japan in the Great War, 1914-1919*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999.

Immigration Act of 1917 added to the list of people who were banned, including a section known as the Asiatic Barred Zone prohibiting people from regions in Asia and the Pacific Islands immigrating to the United States²⁷. Furthermore, in 1924, the National Origins Quota specified the ineligibility of Japanese people for naturalization, legislation that was taken to the Supreme Court in *Takao Ozawa v. United States* (1922). Takao Ozawa, a Japanese-American man, filed for citizenship under the Naturalization Act of 1906 as a “free white person,” to which a unanimous Court held that “the words ‘white person’ were meant to indicate only a person of what is popularly known as the Caucasian race”²⁸. Such court decisions then set the foundation for the Immigration Act of 1924, which banned all immigration from Asian and sparked a new and more vigorous wave of anti-Japanese judgment²⁹.

Japanese discrimination peaked drastically during World War II as the United States fought against the Axis Powers. Specifically, the Japanese coordinated attack at Pearl Harbor sparked an overwhelming amount of animosity towards the Japanese populations living in America, catalyzing extreme hate propaganda throughout the United States. Not only were they accused of working against the United States, but the Japanese immigrants were completely shunned and vilified by the majority communities. Both the terms *Jap*, a shortening of the word “Japanese,” and *nip* because common slurs to derogatorily condemn Japanese people.



²⁷ Tucker, Davis, and Jessi Creller. "1917 Immigration Act." U.S. Immigration Legislation. Accessed May 03, 2016. http://library.uwb.edu/static/USimmigration/1917_immigration_act.html.

²⁸ Ozawa v. United States. Densho Encyclopedia. Accessed May 03, 2016. http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Ozawa_v._United_States/.

²⁹ "The Immigration Act of 1924." The Johnson-Reed Act - 1921-1936 - Milestones - Office of the Historian. Accessed May 03, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act>.

Derived from the Japanese name for Japan, *nip* was first used in *TIME Magazine* on January 5th, 1942 to describe three Japanese pilots³⁰. The slur quickly diffused into everyday conversation, causing people of all ages to frequently use the term. Converging with the rise of television and cartoons, the term became rapidly integrated into the entertainment industry. Warner Brothers produced an episode of the Bugs Bunny cartoon using the word, thus incorporating the racial slurs into the lives of numerous children, culturally ingraining the racism into them from an early developmental age³¹. However, the dehumanization and distrust was not just limited towards Japanese populations, but towards all Asian immigrant communities. In numerous popular television and entertainment series, Asians were demonized and caricatured as the villains, further perpetuating the societal messages of Yellow Peril. Famous examples include Marvel's Yellow Claw and Mandarin Doctor Who's Celestial Toymaker, and Fu Manchu, the fictional character introduced by British author Sax Rohmer, which has become an archetype of foreign evil geniuses³². The acceptance of Asian antagonists encapsulated the hostility that the general public held towards many immigrants and further normalized the intolerance towards Asians in the United States.

Anti-American sentiment prevailed even as World War II drew to a close, with racist attitudes shifting focus from the Japanese to the Koreans. Starting in 1950, the Korean War triggered tremendous amounts of racial slurs against Asians, primarily through the use of the term *gook*, which is said to have come from poor translations and misinterpretations of Asian languages, such as the Korean words *guk* meaning "country" and *miguk* meaning "America". The term was rapidly integrated into everyday vocabulary, and the headlines became littered with references³³. A 1950 San Francisco headline read, "HILLS ARE LOUSY WITH GOOKS," while *Life's* December 1951 issue includes an article titled "A Marine Tells What Korea Is Really Like," in which the author consistently references enemy soldiers using racial epithets, detailing how "... jet black shadows through the tree which move, creep and jump from side to side just like a gook"³⁴.

The popularity of *gook* continued well into the Vietnam War, revealing how Americans at the time did not differentiate between the different Asian countries; instead, they generalized all Asians into one classification and expanded all the slurs to be applicable to any community. In a 1969 report, "The GI's and the Gooks," war correspondent Robert Kaiser exclaimed that "the only good gook, [...] said again and again on U.S. bases throughout Vietnamese, is a dead gook"³⁵. The continual hatred of Asians manifested itself in other slurs, such as *Charlie*, a shorthand of *Victor Charlie*, which was a

³⁰ Hughes, Geoffrey. *An Encyclopedia of Swearing: The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language, and Ethnic Slurs in the English-speaking World*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006.

³¹ Schlesinger, Leon, writer. "Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips." Warner Brothers.

³² "Fu Manchu Series." The Fu Manchu Stories. Accessed May 03, 2016. <https://www.goodreads.com/series/54318-fu-manchu>.

³³ Roediger, David. "Gook: The Short History of an Americanism." *Gook: The Short History of an Americanism*. 1992. Accessed May 03, 2016. <http://www.davidroediger.org/articles/gook-the-short-history-of-americanism.html>.

³⁴ *Ibid*

³⁵ *Ibid*

radio code designed for Viet Cong³⁶. This wartime vernacular used to identify communist guerrillas soon became adopted by the general masses, and Asian people – specifically Vietnamese enemy soldier – became branded by another racial slur. Another common racist term is *zipperhead*, first documented in Elaine Shepard’s *The Doom Pussy*, in which the Special Forces camp was instructed to “get these zipperheads off the runway”³⁷. Specifically, the term was a product of war brutality and violence, as United States soldiers stated that Vietnamese enemies looked as if they were unzipping after being shot in the head with an automatic weapon; other interpretations drew upon the parallel of how the tread marks left on the bodies of Vietnamese soldiers looked like zippers³⁸.

IV. Contemporary Racism

Since the 20th century, discrimination towards AAPI communities has evolved drastically. While epithets such as gook and Charlie are no longer in common use, new terms and new manifestations of racism have been cultivated. Wartime language has long been abandoned and instead replaced with terminology that speaks to the stereotype of a “model minority,” defined as the minority group with the most success and highest degree of socioeconomic achievement³⁹. Seen predominantly in television shows and movies,

Asian roles are frequently characterized as academic-oriented and career-seeking individuals, usually attributed by their work

| | Less Than High School | College Degree | Advanced Degree | High Skill Occupation | Married, Spouse Present | Homeowner | Median Personal Income | Median Family Income | Living in Poverty | Public Assistance |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------|------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Whites | 15.3 | 25.3 | 3.0 | 21.4 | 64.5 | 78.2 | \$23,640 | \$48,500 | 9.4 | 1.3 |
| Blacks | 29.1 | 13.6 | 1.2 | 12.3 | 38.0 | 54.4 | \$16,300 | \$33,300 | 24.9 | 4.5 |
| Latinos/Hispanics | 48.5 | 9.9 | 1.6 | 9.6 | 56.3 | 52.4 | \$14,400 | \$36,000 | 21.4 | 3.5 |
| Native American Indians | 27.4 | 10.8 | 0.9 | 11.9 | 50.2 | 64.2 | \$14,500 | \$32,240 | 25.1 | 6.1 |
| Asian Americans | 19.5 | 42.9 | 6.5 | 34.6 | 74.9 | 68.2 | \$20,200 | \$59,000 | 11.5 | 2.2 |

Socioeconomic breakdown of different races within the U.S.

ethnic, their shyness, and their push to succeed. Annabelle⁴⁰, a Chinese American, documents her self-growth by transcending the Asian American stereotype and focusing more on her mental health, as “mental health, being an incredibly taboo subject in Asian culture, often takes a backseat towards tangible accomplishments”⁴¹. She emphasizes the prioritization that many Asian American children have imposed on them, explaining how academic and career-oriented success “serves as the most explicit and obvious form of success and pride

³⁶ PBS. "The Language of War." American Experience. Accessed May 03, 2016. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/trenches/language.html>.

³⁷ Shepard, Elaine. *The Doom Pussy*. New York: The Trident Press, 1967.

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ "Statistics Don't Lie . . . Do They?" The Model Minority Image : Asian-Nation. Accessed May 03, 2016. <http://www.asian-nation.org/model-minority.shtml>.

⁴⁰ Names of all interviewees have been changed

⁴¹ "AAPI Representation." Interview by author. November 28th, 2016.

for immigrant parents,” detailing how the American Dream is passed down throughout generations of Asian families⁴². While growing up, Annabelle spent most of her childhood taking tutoring classes and getting ahead in her academics until she started to notice a general apathy taking over her personality; when she starting seeking counseling, her parents refused to let her continue, “disregarding [her] behavior as teenage angst and [...] therapy would just cut into her studying time”⁴³. In response, Annabelle sought “Asian American celebrities with similar problems because [her] parents were often receptive towards blatant examples, only to find minimal information or representation of the Asian American community”⁴⁴. In numerous communities, Asian Americans are commonly identified as most willing to assimilate and appropriate to Western norms; therefore, Asians are modernly classified as *Twinkies* and *bananas*, as to mean that Asian people are yellow on the outside and white on the inside, ultimately assuming that Asians hold an inner desire to be accepted as part of the white collective. Jeffrey, a Vietnamese American who grew up in Alabama, spoke of his “false identity as a Christian boy,” that he carried with himself throughout middle school⁴⁵. He grew up in an atheist household, but living in the Bible Belt left him questioning whether or not he should be actively religious. As a result, he crafted an alter persona: a church-going, conservative boy. He mentions his “lack of Asian friends,” which left him trying to conform towards the white culture that was so rampant in Alabama⁴⁶. His push to become more white caused him to internalize racism, in which he started following the narrow-minded ideologies of many around him – when he watched movies with Asian roles depicted as the wise Confucius or the kung-fu ninja, he found them “way funnier than upsetting,” until college, where he suffered the psychological impacts of other people being discriminatory towards him⁴⁷. Moving from the microcosm of suburbia to a much larger city, many of his new friends would “judge [him] for not wanting to be an engineer and joke whenever [he] asked for help in [his] computer science courses,” leaving him with an identity crisis that “is only made worse by the lack of representation people see in movies because people now use the stereotypes they see in films as a basis for reality”⁴⁸.

For example, the institution of Hollywood will oftentimes promote the white savior complex, subtly reinforcing the notion that only white bodies are able to save an oppressed minority, ultimately emphasizing how “people of color can escape their predicament of marginalization through the guidance and agency of a lone white actors”⁴⁹. By polarizing the white population from the persons of color, Hollywood ultimately promotes the idea

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Cammarota, Julio. “Blindsided by the Avatar: White Saviors and Allies Out of Hollywood and in Education.” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*. 21 Jun 2011. Accessed December 2016. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10714413.2011.585287>

that minority groups are unable to protect themselves physically or mentally; however, the white savior complex does not diminish the marginalization and prejudice dealt towards ostracized communities. Rather so, it preserves the concept of false generosity, which functions as an “attempt to soften the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed”⁵⁰. While falsely representing people of color as helpless and without the capacity to survive, the act of saving people of color further affirms the ideology of white superiority, disseminating a false narrative which states how people of color lack the initiative to make historical impacts. Even within American history, Abraham Lincoln is remembered to be at the forefront of the anti-slavery movement. Frequently noted in reference to the Emancipation Proclamation, his glory and recognition as a white male dominates, “eclips[ing] the real efforts of myriad African Americans who resisted and fought against their bondage”⁵¹. The origins of the white savior complex are deeply rooted within white privilege. With the American education system being taught through an exceptionally Eurocentric perspective, history sets the precedent and socializes specific ideologies within children from a very young age. During the drafting of the Constitution, “slavery, patriarchy, and industrial capitalism were inscribing forces surrounding their discourse of freedom ... [so] humanity meant male, white, and propertied”⁵².

Ultimately, the white savior complex thrives due to the market power of white males, as their social, cultural, and economic capital “supersedes the importance of people of color struggling to gain collective rights.”⁵³. Hollywood thus proves how generating a profit and fueling the white-male dominated market should be prioritized above the push for fundamental human rights and the fight for equality. Such neoliberal logic stands at the base of corporate culture, which flourishes as inequalities are managed and dominant majority populations can maintain their power and status with American society. Rather than “addressing oppressive structures elide the possibility of recognizing social injustices and the need for collective action to secure rights and opportunities,” the institution of Hollywood gravitates towards the white savior as a way to encourage an individualistic approach towards sustaining human agency. Naomi, a Chinese-Hmong American, talks about how damaging the narrative of white saviors are as she outlines the “dangers of accepting white hero bias and the idea that only white guys can save the day”⁵⁴. She notes how movies do not necessarily “focus on any kind of bridging between races, but instead sheds light on how America profits from seeing [...] white superiority perpetuated in their everyday lives”⁵⁵. She condemns Hollywood for its disregard for awareness over racial equality, using *The Great Wall* as a prime example.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ “AAPI Representation.” Interview by author. November 28th, 2016.

⁵⁵ Ibid

Scheduled to be released in 2017, *The Great Wall* details a fictional story in which the Great Wall of China was described to be built in order protect the nation from a monstrous beast. Set during ancient China, the film centralizes around Matt Damon – a white actor recognized for his roles in *Good Will Hunting*, *The Martian*, and the *Jason Bourne* trilogy – and his supremacy and ability to save China from their downfall. Rather than highlighting the complexities of Chinese society and the historical contexts during the culturally rich Qin dynasty, the movie sways away from the homogenous unit of China and stresses the only option for survival: a white man. Naomi critiques Damon's role in the movie, as "white men were not historically seen as friendly or superior in ancient China to begin with"⁵⁶. Plot-wise and socially, she views the movie as flawed and as another example of misrepresentation that will contribute to implicit biases. Similar messages are

perpetuated through *The Blind Side*, which juxtaposes a privileged white woman with a quasi-emotionally handicapped person of color. Rather than demonstrating the willpower of Michael Oher, a young black football player, as he faces socioeconomic hindrances, such as lack of affordable housing, education, and employment, the movie describes Michael's strength and diligence as derivative of Leigh Anne Tuohy, the white mother who took Michael into her home. By viewing the growth and perseverance of people of color as resultant and collinear of white people, Hollywood continues to contribute to the racial discourse, stating that people of color are incapable of success without the contributions and actions of white people. In Hollywood film *Avatar*, the plot follows Jake Sully, a white male marine, as he travels to the indigenous people of the moon Pandora. As the movie continues, it becomes obvious that only him, as the white savior, can lead a resistance that saves the moon from colonizers. On Pandora, the natives epitomize the spirituality and beauty behind nature, so they "resemble elegant,



On *The Great Wall*: We have to stop perpetuating the racist myth that a only white man can save the world. It's not based in actual fact. Our heroes don't look like Matt Damon. They look like Malala. Ghandi. Mandela. Your big sister when she stood up for you to those bullies that one time. Money is the lamest excuse in the history of being human. So is blaming the Chinese investors. (POC's choices can be based on unconscious bias too) Remember it's not about blaming individuals, which will only lead to soothing their lame "b-but I had good intentions! but...money!" microaggressive excuses. Rather, it's about pointing out the repeatedly implied racist notion that white people are superior to POC and that POC need salvation from our own color via white strength. When you consistently make movies like this, you ARE saying that. YOU ARE. Yes, YOU ARE. YES YOU ARE. Yes dude, you fucking ARE. Whether you intend to or not. We don't need salvation. We like our color and our culture and our own strengths and our own stories. (if we don't, we should) We don't need you to save us from anything. And we're rrrreally starting to get sick of you telling us, explicitly or implicitly, that we do. Think only a huge movie star can sell a movie? That that has NEVER been a total guarantee. Why not TRY to be better? If white actors are forgiven for having a box office failure once in a while, why can't a POC sometimes have one? And how COOL would it be if you were the movie that took the "risk" to make a POC as your hero, and you sold the shit out of it?! The whole community would be celebrating!! If nothing else, you'd get some mad respect (which is WAY more valuable than money) So MAKE that choice. I know that overcoming your own bias and doing something differently takes balls....Well don't you WANT balls? Look. I know there are lotsa POC who honestly don't care. Who think I'M being crazy. Well excuse me for caring about the images that little girls see, and what that implies to them about their limitations or possibilities. If you know a kid, you should care too. Because we WERE those kids. Why do you think it was so nice to see a nerdy white kid have a girl fall in love with him? Because you WERE that nerdy white kid who felt unloved. And seeing pictures of it in Hollywood's stories made it feel possible. That's why it moved you, that's why it was a great story. Hollywood is supposed to be about making great stories. So make them.

Constance Wu, popular Asian American television star, in response to Matt Damon's role in *The Great Wall*

⁵⁶ Ibid

graceful animals more than competent human agents"⁵⁷. Their status without human agency then leaves them with no other choice but to follow the leadership of the savior. While *Avatar* details a fictional scenario, the ultimate message analogizes the politically-divided topic of immigration, colonization, and imperialism, so while the movie parades innocently as entertainment, its ultimate message specifies the seemingly violent confrontation and conflict that exists between different cultures. However, rather than pointing towards diplomacy or effective and productive foreign affairs, the movie critiques the minority population and establishes a narrative of white superiority.

Similarly, the concept of whitewashing Asian roles leave many members of the AAPI community feeling inherently worth less in comparison towards white members of the community. Functioning as the practice of erasure of people of color in film roles – such can be manifested through either the replacement of a minority actor or the replacement of a minority character. In the movie *21*, which is based on Ben Mezrich's "Bringing Down the House," the main character tells the true story of the MIT Blackjack Team during the 1990s. In the movie adaptation, Jim Sturgess plays Jeff Ma, Kevin Spacey plays John Chang, and Jacob Pitts plays Mike Aponte. Numerous defenders of the casting decision state that Hollywood needs to hire big-name actors in order to generate a larger profit. Natalie, a third generation Indian-American, explains how "such logic just reinforces the idea that Asian people do not have social, economic, or cultural capital in America," and she further pursues the concept of whitewashing as a form of direct racism⁵⁸. When popular director M. Night Shyamalan was questioned about his casting decision in *The Last Airbender*, which whitewashed an entire Asian and Inuit inspired world, he responded saying, "When we [are] casting [...] I don't care who walks through my door, whoever is best for the part ...", ultimately normalizing the bias in the entertainment industry⁵⁹. Natalie rejects Shyamalan's protestation and deems it as an act of discrimination because "as more and more white bodies are being placed higher than people of color, more people of color are realizing that they are not valued the same in American society"⁶⁰. She goes on to pinpoint how the act of Yellowface expresses the same prejudiced message as whitewashing because it just goes to show "how Asian people are not even good enough to play Asian characters," despite them having a much more thorough understanding of the Asian culture and background that the role entails⁶¹.

Multiple Twitter movements have sparked in response towards the continuous misrepresentation and lack of accurate representation of Asian Americans. #StarringJohnCho is a "social movement that literally shows [...] what it would look like if

⁵⁷ Cammarota, Julio. "Blindsided by the Avatar: White Saviors and Allies Out of Hollywood and in Education." Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies. 21 Jun 2011. Accessed December 2016. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10714413.2011.585287>

⁵⁸ "AAPI Representation." Interview by author. November 28th, 2016.

⁵⁹ Lowrey, William. "People Painted Over: Whitewashing of Minority Actors in Recent Film." Accessed December 2016. https://www.palmbeachstate.edu/honors/Documents/people_painted_over_whitewashing_of_minority_actors_in_recent_film_and%20television.pdf

⁶⁰ "AAPI Representation." Interview by author. November 28th, 2016.

⁶¹ Ibid

today's Hollywood blockbusters cast an Asian-American actor – specifically, John Cho – as their leading man”⁶². Almost immediately, the hashtag gained popularity on Twitter as more and more people around the world began Photoshopping Asian American actors as the lead role in famous movies. As a sister movement, #StarringConstanceWu was created in efforts to depict an Asian American female as the lead role in movies as well. Social media thus became an essential tool for social reform, as individuals across the world were able to connect and unite under the same push for racial awareness and equality. Cole, a Japanese American, speaks of how “Twitter became more than just a place to retweet funny and entertaining content, but a platform to really speak [his] mind on important matters”⁶³. In response to the 2016 elections, Cole utilized Twitter to express his liberal perspective over political matters, in which he was attacked by numerous opposing political minds. In one of the arguments, Cole was told to “go back to studying math and science instead of trying [his] hand at international affairs,” leaving him discouraged in his interests and, ultimately, his major⁶⁴. He links the stereotypes back to the lack of representation for Asian people, stating that because the world does not “literally see Asian people in the arts and media – such as being actors in movies and television shows – people continue with some convoluted perception that Asians are only good at math and science and engineering”⁶⁵. Similar stereotyping and discrimination can be seen through the social media movement #thisis2016, which was sparked by Michael Luo of the *New York Times*, who wrote an open letter to a racist woman who told his family to return to China. As the race relations within the United States proceed to become more nuanced and complex and the mediums for expression become more accessible and popular throughout American society, communities are beginning to speak up.

V. Discussion

As David Roediger states, “The stark dehumanization of enemies in such a line reminds us that racism is not only a way to motivate fighters in wars of aggression but also that militarism has helped foster racism”⁶⁶. The continual perception of stereotypes further promotes self-indignation among Asian American populations, normalizes the hatred and discrimination, and subtly teaches society that their racist remarks and ideologies will heed no consequences. From the Gold Rush of 1849 to the present day, Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have been the targets for extreme racism and systemic aggressions. Popular culture and popular media serve as strong influences of socialization, as they have the capacity to integrate stereotypes and convoluted representations of groups of people

⁶² “Starring John Cho.” Accessed December 2016. starringjohncho.com

⁶³ Interview

⁶⁴ Interview

⁶⁵ Interview

⁶⁶ Roediger, David. “Gook: The Short History of an Americanism.” *Gook: The Short History of an Americanism*. 1992. Accessed May 03, 2016. <http://www.davidroediger.org/articles/gook-the-short-history-of-americanism.html>.

into the final product. By continuing acts of whitewashing, Yellowface, and reinforcing the model minority myth, the media serves as a reservoir of prejudice.

Thus, there is a strong need for more awareness on an educational level. The integration of critical media literacy into education would ultimately allow children, from an early age, to “cultivate skills in analyzing media codes and conventions,” which fosters a better understanding of “racial prejudices and privileges, as a part of an encoded social logic of racist expression and exclusion”⁶⁷. As children deconstruct the stereotypes and the racism that is ingrained into the entertainment industry, the cyclical nature of discrimination can be disrupted, and the socialization of media will not have such drastic affects in perpetuating narrow-minded ideologies. In addition, further research needs to be done on Southeast Asian populations, as the narrative for Asian American activism is often focused on East Asians.

⁶⁷ Cammarota, Julio. “Blindsided by the Avatar: White Saviors and Allies Out of Hollywood and in Education.” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*. 21 Jun 2011. Accessed December 2016. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10714413.2011.585287>

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