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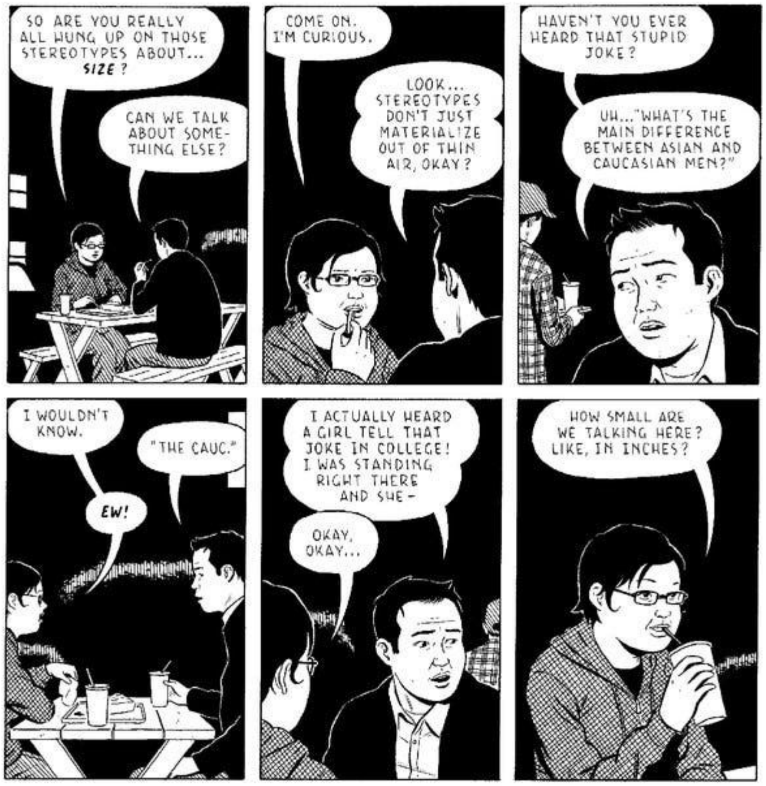
The Comedians Challenging Stereotypes About Asian-American Masculinity

A new generation that includes Joel Kim Booster and Bowen Yang is redefining old notions — while reminding us how much further the culture has to go.


SO ARE YOU REALLY ALL HUNG UP ON THOSE STEREOTYPES ABOUT... SIZE?
CAN WE TALK ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE?
COME ON. I'M CURIOUS.
LOOK... STEREOTYPES DON'T JUST MATERIALIZE OUT OF THIN AIR, OKAY?
HAVEN'T YOU EVER HEARD THAT STUPID JOKE?
UH..."WHAT'S THE MAIN DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ASIAN AND CAUCASIAN MEN?"
I WOULDN'T KNOW.
"THE CAUC."
EW!
I ACTUALLY HEARD A GIRL TELL THAT JOKE IN COLLEGE! I WAS STANDING RIGHT THERE AND SHE-
OKAY, OKAY...
HOW SMALL ARE WE TALKING HERE? LIKE, IN INCHES?

By Thessaly La Force

Several artists have examined the complexities of Asian-American masculinity. The cartoonist Adrian Tomine's 2007 graphic novel, "Shortcomings" (an excerpt of which is pictured above), explores his own desire surrounding race.CreditCreditFrom "Shortcomings," © Adrian Tomine, image courtesy of Drawn & Quarterly

NOT THAT LONG AGO, my family, which includes my mother and her two siblings — all three of whom are Chinese — went to a comedy show at a well-known nightclub in Manhattan. My aunt and uncle, who live in Long Island, had gone there on an early date decades ago. My mom and her sister were visiting from out of town. The sets weren't much longer than 10 to 15 minutes, and there must have been four or maybe five comedians in total. None of them were of Asian descent, and yet almost immediately, the Asian jokes started: Asians are bad drivers. Asian men are undesirable. Asian men have small penises. Asian women are good in bed because they're small and docile. My discomfort was palpable. I was disappointed in what I was witnessing, in the laughter I was hearing around us, but I also wasn't surprised.

There is an accepted kind of humor when it comes to talking about Asian-Americans — it's a humor comfortable with its own ignorance, like the bully in the schoolyard who pounces on perceived weaknesses and kicks up dirt for a laugh. These types of jokes often concern Asian men's masculinity, or lack thereof — or the Asian man's helplessness in life, his neediness, his foolishness, his greed, his feminine demeanor and physicality. He is depicted as lecherous but harmless, silly and creepy. These jokes echo two of the most pernicious stereotypes of Asian men ever to appear onscreen in Western culture, even if today they are largely undiscussed: the detective Charlie Chan, who appeared in a series of films from the 1920s to '80s, who was neutered and servile; and Fu Manchu, an archetypal evil mastermind whose sinister and predatory behavior was depicted in novels and media for much of the last century. The larger cultural consequences are significant. A recent NPR "Invisibilia" podcast featuring Yowei Shaw explored the real-life rejection Asian-American men experience today. Shaw cites a 2013 study that reported on online heterosexual dating patterns in the 20 largest American cities: When Asians initiated contact, white men replied to Asian women while white women rarely replied to Asian men. (And when white men reached out to Asian women, Asian women tended to respond to white men over men of their own race.) Shaw interviewed a young Asian-American man who spoke, anonymously, of his sexual alienation as a teenager. He described his experience talking to girls as so: "'Disdain' is the word that I've come to use to describe this over time. They just viewed me with disdain. They were like, 'Why are you even talking to me? Like, is this a joke?'"

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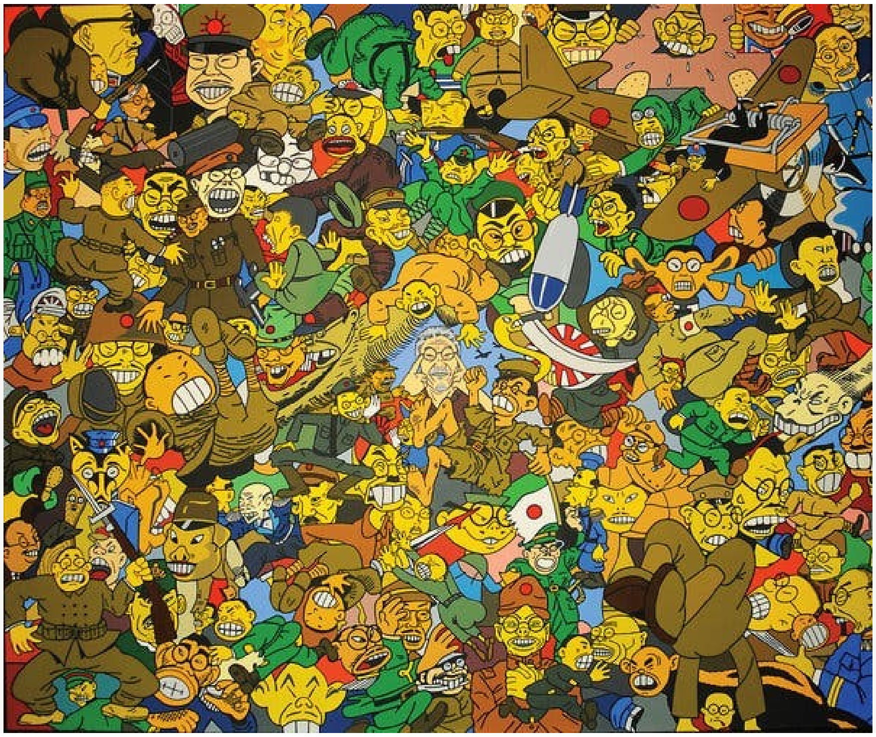
There's a joke that the comedian Joel Kim Booster, 31, tells that goes like this: "I'm terrible at math. I don't know karate. My dick is *huge*." Booster is Korean-American and gay. He is handsome, with a square jaw and broad shoulders, and he emanates a sharp self-awareness. His comedic style is vulgar but vulnerable, less shockingly transgressive than plainly open about who he is. Adopted by a white evangelical Christian family in Plainfield, Ill., and home-schooled until he was 16, Booster was one of the thousands of South Korean babies flown to American families for adoption in the 1980s — "the GrubHub of babies," as he put it on an episode of "Conan" in 2016. He says his parents discovered he was gay by reading his journal when he was a teenager: "At that point in my life, it wasn't an introspective 'thoughts and dreams' kind of journal," he says, "but more of a BuzzFeed list of guys' dicks I was sucking. It was clickbait for my parents." He likes to joke he knew he was gay before he figured out he was Asian.

Booster is charismatic, full of swagger and sensitivity, and his presence reverberates. When I began watching his sets, I couldn't quite define *what* I was enjoying until I realized how rare it was to watch an Asian-American man be himself — appealingly ribald, unapologetically complicated — in front of an audience. But as a half Chinese-American woman, I also found myself reluctant to articulate what Booster represented to me: Here, in America, where Asian-American men are rarely represented in popular culture — and almost never as people who are shown as having desire, whose strength is innate, whose silence is withholding — here was someone right in front of me who contradicted this perceived lack of masculinity. There may now be Henry Golding, who played the self-possessed heir to a Singapore fortune in 2018's "Crazy Rich Asians," or the hunky "Asian Bae" (also known as Andrew) in Issa Rae's HBO show "Insecure," but for the most part, Asian-American men are left out, avoided or emasculated onscreen. Though Asian-American women face equally vexing problems when it comes to representation, our own sexuality — however problematically portrayed, however exoticized — is, for better or worse, accepted. When Asian-American men's sexuality is granted, it is the exception to the rule.

Editors' Picks



Image

Roger Shimomura's "Yellow Terror" (2008). Shimomura has used the style of *Ukiyo-e* woodblock prints to depict grotesque stereotypes about Asian men and their sexuality. (Shimomura also works with comic book characters and other pop culture references). In an interview from 2000, Shimomura said: "I'm what someone once called that stick in the eye: Don't forget, don't forget."CreditRoger Shimomura, "Yellow Terror," 2008, acrylic on canvas, Christy & Bill Gautreaux Collection, Kansas City, Mo.

But if Asian-American men have typically been reduced to nothing more than a joke, then today they are beginning to be seen as possessing their own sexuality — gay or straight, it doesn't really matter, actually — that points to more inclusive ideas of masculinity. This inclusiveness, however, has its own limitations: Asian-American men in entertainment remain largely confined to the realm of comedy, which has always been Hollywood's unofficial back door for marginalized performers. Comedy remains a way for the othered — whether that be women, queer people, trans people, plus-size people, people of color or anyone else outside orthodox ideas of beauty and success — to force their face into the consciousness of a world all too happy to ignore them. Humor remains one of the few ways one can reclaim one's humanity as a performer, to take the worst that can be said and turn it on its head. It offers an opportunity to tell the kinds of stories that are difficult to say too earnestly — to say out loud what doesn't always make sense, because degradation rarely does. To make the world look at you.

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Yet there persists a long historical narrative that explains how the idea of the Asian-American man as both sexually limp and rapacious came to be. This stereotype is almost exclusively centered around East and Southeast Asian men, in part because the immigration laws against Chinese people (and later Japanese people, and other Asians) from the last two centuries continue to contribute to today's notions of Asian male masculinity. Beginning in 1875, legislation was passed barring unmarried Chinese women from entering the United States, leaving half a generation of Chinese immigrant men unable to create families (further restrictions were later applied to all Chinese immigrants, continuing into the 20th century, but by 1910, Chinese women made up only 9.7 percent of Chinese immigrants entering the country). Additionally, many Chinese male immigrants in the 19th and early 20th century took up women's work, such as laundry and domestic services, as a means to be economically and linguistically self-sufficient. From the perspective of the entertainment industry, this stereotype about Asian men supersedes all others, bolstered by the "model minority" trope as a new wave of Asian immigrants entered the country after racial quotas were abolished in 1965.

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The beauty of representation, however, is that one person can never speak for all. And so, the fight for representation is a consistent and stubborn push against being defined by how Hollywood perceives us — we are not white, nor are we black; we are never seen as we are, we are always invisible. And this push, this resistance, is what makes the jokes of someone like Booster, delivered from his perspective as a transnational adoptee and gay man, feel at once both obvious and very surprising.

UNTIL VERY RECENTLY, the character of Long Duk Dong in John Hughes's 1984 movie "Sixteen Candles" was a kind of stock figure who stood in for our culture's perception of the Asian man in America. He was an exchange student of ambiguous origin living with the white Baker family. We first meet Dong, who is played by the Japanese-American actor Gedde Watanabe, after he hangs his head over a bunk bed in front of Samantha, played by Molly Ringwald. "What's happen'n, hot stuff?" he asks her, in a thick, placeless accent. A gong sounds. Ringwald's face registers disgust. Later, in another scene, Dong is facedown in the grass, still intoxicated from a party the night before. He looks up at his American host family: "Ohh, no more yanky my wanky! The Donger need food!"

Laughter ends, but it can be hard to shake whatever false truths are bound to a joke. When the comedian and actor Ken Jeongjumped out of a car naked in the 2009 comedy film "The Hangover," his flaccid penis got a laugh. Jeong later defended the scene, saying in an interview that it was his suggestion, his decision and his penis. But weren't they — weren't we — laughing at his expense? Did it not reinforce what we as a culture are taught to think of Asian men generally?

The heart of comedy is the element of surprise, the way a joke can weave around a room, tell the sympathetic story of someone's life and then suddenly turn and slap you in the face. The deftness of a comedian lies in his ability to judge the severity of the joke's transgression — of knowing when and where to cross the line. A good joke can end a quarrel; a bad joke can get someone kicked out of the party. A *great* joke, however, is inseparable from its ability to subvert, to say the unspoken or unspeakable. When we laugh at the joke, we laugh despite the discomfort. We laugh knowing we've just witnessed a taboo dash across the room like a streaker on a soccer field. Comedy gives us permission to let an unspoken thought free.

When I speak to Booster about his humor, I perceive that he feels a sense of responsibility — if not to carry the oppressive, overwhelming burden of representation, then to question the foundation upon which certain stereotypes are built, stereotypes that he has employed in his own routines. He tells me that as his career grew, he started performing more and more to predominantly Asian audiences. His jokes began to change. He says, "I used to have jokes that talked about how it's funny that I'm adopted and yet I'm still a bad driver. It must be genetic." When I looked up his older clips, I could see that Booster was already pulling apart the joke — separating his personal incompetence behind the wheel of a car from the stereotype of bad Asian drivers. Here he is in 2017: "But actually, you guys, that might have more to do with being gay and sleeping with men than it has to do with being Asian. Something about being lied to my entire life about what six inches look like — now my depth perception is *[expletive]*." The audience laughs uproariously.

A great joke is inseparable from its ability to subvert, to say the unspoken or unspeakable.

"I *am* a bad driver," Booster tells me. "That's not me making that up." But it didn't sit well with him to perpetuate a tired stereotype. "Every time I get honked at by a person, it comes from a real place of turmoil. My brain is like, 'I'm confirming a stereotype right now for a person.' And that is a weight white people don't have to carry around."

The actor and comedian Jimmy O. Yang, who plays the mercenary Chinese app developer Jian-Yang in the HBO series "Silicon Valley," says that comedy was where he found a sense of belonging as an immigrant from Hong Kong. Humor allowed him to access a deeper sense of self-awareness, and telling jokes allowed him to find people who were trying to translate their experiences as he did: "In stand-up, honing material gets more specific and more truthful. In the very beginning, it's just about me jerking off, right? Then it became about me being Asian — very broad, dumb jokes. Stereotypes that were not specific to me." But Yang soon began to subvert the jokes, to question assumptions about his identity and his experiences. "When I was growing up," he tells me, "I was super stereotypical. I played the violin. I was pretty damn good at math. I played Ping-Pong competitively, all that stuff. But those things weren't stereotypes when I was growing up, because I grew up in Hong Kong. Everybody was Asian. That's just what everybody did." I bring up a bit I had seen from one of Yang's sets from 2014 that evoked clichés of Asian masculinity. In it, he jokes about how, when he goes to the beach, he gets mistaken for a girl from behind. Then he embellishes it: "And from the front, I look like a hot Asian chick!" Yang acknowledges that it was self-deprecating. He adds: "But at the same time, how does me looking like an Asian chick matter? Am I really making a comment on Asian masculinity, or am I making a comment on how society views Asian people?"

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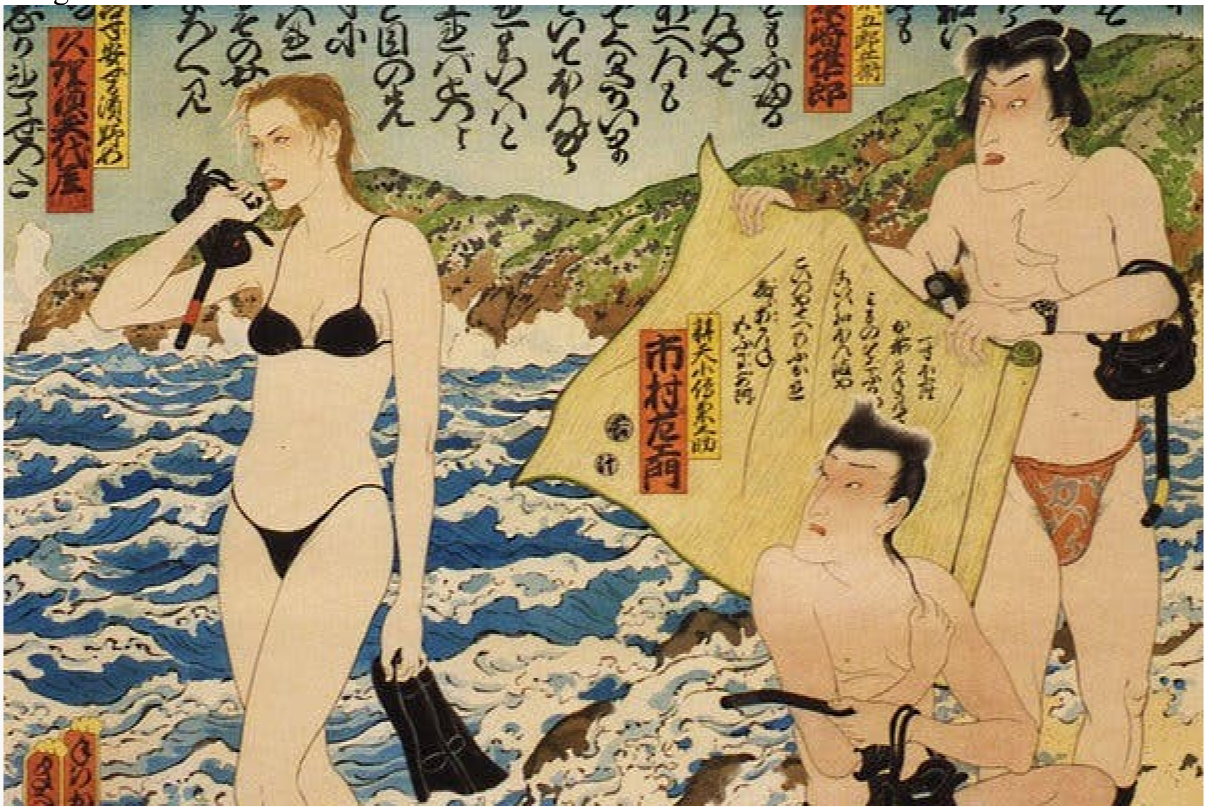
This is a negotiation comedians of color from all kinds of backgrounds have to make, and it isn't one that's become easier. In 2005, Dave Chappelle famously quit his eponymous Comedy Central show and walked away from a reported $50-million contract. He described the exact moment he knew a line had been crossed: During a taping of a scene in which he played a magical pixie, in blackface, who embodied all of the worst stereotypes about black people, Chappelle heard an audience member, a white man, laugh too loud and for too long. "When he laughed, it made me uncomfortable," Chappelle told Time later that year. "As a matter of fact, that was the last thing I shot before I told myself I gotta take *[expletive]* time out after this. Because my head almost exploded."

Image



Masami Teraoka's "Christine at Hanauma Bay" (1992), from his "New Wave" series.CreditMasami Teraoka, "New Wave Series/Christine at Hanauma Bay," 1992.

IT IS ONLY in the past three years or so that Hollywood has started to view people of Asian descent differently. We have become, in just the last year alone, a commodity. There's the "Saturday Night Live" writer Bowen Yang, who lip-syncs to Cardi B on his Twitter account, @bowenyang, and whose podcast, "Las Culturistas," with fellow comedian Matt Rogers, has a cult following. There's Jason Kim and Greta Lee, who are developing an HBO series called "KTown" about a kingpin family in Los Angeles's Koreatown, and Randall Park and Ali Wong's recent Netflix romantic comedy "Always Be My Maybe," and Ronny Chieng's 2017 Australian television series "International Student" and Sheng Wang's soulful stand-up tour. Collectively, they offer some real hope of overcoming the idea that Asian-Americans' place in film and television is merely a comedic one. Alan Yang, who got his start as a writer and producer on "Parks and Recreation" and as a co-creator of "Master of None," is preparing his feature-length film debut called "Tigertail," a multigenerational family drama starring John Cho.

And their approach to making comedy has changed as well. The jokes address the same stereotypes — bad driving, small stature — but now they're at the expense of the stereotype, rather than at the comic delivering them. Take Ali Wong describing her marriage in her 2016 Netflix comedy special "Baby Cobra": "I think my husband and I have a huge unspoken understanding between each other, because he's half Filipino and half Japanese and I'm half Chinese and half Vietnamese. So, we're both half fancy Asian … and half jungle Asian. … The fancy Asians are the Chinese, the Japanese. They get to do fancy things like host Olympics. Jungle Asians host diseases." Or take Maya Erskine in her Hulu show "Pen15" with Anna Konkle; Erskine is Japanese-American and portrays a moment when her character is cast as Scary Spice in a re-creation of a Spice Girls video because, she is, as one of the popular girls says, "like, tan." She imitates submissive stereotypes for a laugh until her older brother — a crush-worthy authority figure as well as, at times, the show's conscience — points out she's engaging in racist behavior. It's a funny performance, and yet both Erskine's character and the audience are allowed to build an awareness of what is unacceptable.

The stories these comedians tell and the way they tell them will have wider repercussions for the representation of Asian-Americans on film and television, though it's crucial to understand how persistent these stereotypes really are. In 1994, Margaret Chowas the first Asian-American to have her own prime-time network sitcom: "All-American Girl." It lasted only one season, and even Cho admits it was something of an artistic failure. "I didn't realize I was actually the star of the show," Cho says, "and I was so scared." After watching Cho's more recent stand-up, which is explicitly sexual and frank about her body (she has a bit I like where she pulls down her pants and jiggles her tattoo-covered butt at the audience), I have wondered if Cho was too ahead of her time. The film “The Joy Luck Club” had come out the year before “All-American Girl,” and it had been filled with scenes of families eating traditional Chinese food, of a white man clobbering a prawn with a pair of chopsticks, of old Chinese ladies playing mah-jongg. In her show, Cho, who was 25 at the time, played a version of herself as the rebellious daughter of a traditional Korean family based in San Francisco. She wore heavy black eyeliner and she dated white boys; everything about it, despite the compromises Cho feels she made, defied what was expected of an Asian-American family on the screen. There wasn’t another all-Asian network show until “Fresh Off the Boat” in 2015, more than 20 years later, and that show, about to air its sixth season, remains the only network show to carry that distinction.

That night in the comedy club with my family, I watched my mother and her siblings. They weren’t laughing, but nor, as far as I could tell, were they that upset. They are by nature nice people — but being an immigrant, I suspect, makes you accommodate what you might not have otherwise. To confront a problem proves you don’t understand, that you missed the point, that you didn’t get a joke when everyone else did. My aunt and her brother ordered another round of club sodas, obeying the two-drink minimum. We politely clapped and then we all went home. Later, I understood that the indignity I felt was not a mark on me: Bad humor is merely tedious, an experience to endure and then forget. But good comedy — *true* comedy — is, at its core, deeply relatable. It makes us wait for that moment where what we knew to be true feels like an epiphany, where we recognize something in ourselves that had never been articulated before. We laugh at ourselves because we hope that the other person will understand, but also because there’s no way to speak to the anger and sadness and rage that is there and will always be there. We laugh in order to let it go.

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