That Wasn't Your Line - *Shut up!*

by Maddy Cummins

Roles. Actors and actresses audition for them, television shows have set stereotypical male or female leads, with accompanying outward appearances and a highly predictable arsenal of backstories and generic lines. Even in our everyday lives, we live out a prescribed role in society, fulfilling certain standards, actions and appearances to "fit in" to life on the daily. However, what are these already preconceived sets of roles, and as a society is it possible to not follow this invisible script given to us? Charles Yu, author of *Interior Chinatown,* takes a look into the film industry, Hollywood stereotypes of Asians and how filling the roles society has created for certain individuals or groups is entirely detrimental to everyone involved. Each component of the "system" is corrupt–whether that be the writers, casting crew, directors, actors or consumer audience.

Every individual has their own persona, which in Latin translates roughly to "mask used by actor" or "role or character". This quite literally means we each play a certain role, behave in a certain way according to where we are, or who our "audience" is. Erving Goffman, who was a Canadian-American Sociologist, wrote that, "The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die" in his 1956 book *The Preservation of Self in Everyday Life*. He continues on with, "it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited" (Goffman).

Goffman coined many of the relevant terminology related to dramaturgy, which is a sociological perspective on identity, and a form of interaction between the actor (or communicator) and audience via the roles they take part in. "Within the walls of a social establishment we find a team of performers who cooperate to present to an audience a given definition of the situation" (Goffman). This particular situation would be the setting of Yu's novel, and the establishment would be the film industry. However, it goes much deeper than

that, as throughout the novel Willis grapples with his own sense of self, how he relates to the world around him, and his discoveries of what life provides him–both the struggles and opportunities.

Charles Yu, who wrote the 2020 National Book Award Winner, *Interior Chinatown,* tells the story of Willis Wu, who is an aspiring actor. “I started to get interested in this world, and exploring the world. Because the view from the bottom looks different from the view where the leads are standing.” Yu says on *The Daily Show,* talking about what inspired his new book, and why he picked the stereotypical background Asian character as his main protagonist. In the beginning of the novel, Wu is merely said “Generic Asian Man”, which is exactly as the title suggests: the background, generic Asian character often seen in the corner of the movie screen as a “Delivery Guy” or even “Guy Who Runs in and Gets Kicked in the Face”. Both of which are on Wu’s repertoire of roles he has played and perfected in the past. The problem with the film industry is clearly visible–almost blatantly so–with the limited and heavily stereotyped roles offered to Asian actors. However, it is not as apparent to Willis Wu, as he actively strives towards landing his dream role and, in turn, becoming respected and revered as “Kung Fu Guy”.

Arguing that it is solely the film industry’s fault for exacerbating certain stereotypes, and profiting over them, would be quite ill-informed. While it is true that Hollywood and the media at large are to blame for perpetuating stereotypes by broadcasting them to a large audience, they are not the only ones taking part in this problem. The actors are, as well. As seen in Yu’s *Interior Chinatown*, Willis Wu’s sole ambition for his future is to become Kung Fu Guy, which is the highest honor for Asian-American actors. Or so everyone is made to believe.

Willis Wu’s father held onto the same aspiration of becoming the great Kung Fu Guy, and once he obtained this role there was not any tangible difference in the way others, or society, treated him. He was still an actor filling a role, an individual with only Kung Fu Guy as his greatest accomplishment. As readers, we don’t even learn his name until the very end of the novel, he is only known by his titular role up until that point. And

yet, everyone feeds into this idea that becoming Kung Fu Guy, or filling in this or that role will make them automatically successful. Respected. Adored. The only ones who are able to see that there is more to life than being Kung Fu Guy were Willis' mother and later on, Karen. "Just promise me something, okay?" Willis' mother says. "Don't grow up to be Kung Fu Guy." Willis responds with "Oh. Then what should I be?" "Be more" (Interior Chinatown).

What is this "more" that Willis' mother talks about? There can not possibly be something more–greater, even–than the prestigious Kung Fu Guy. Right? Apparently that sentiment is wrong, because there is more. It is almost impossible, however, to view life differently when one is fed this sole idea of success, of obtaining this sense of perfection according to someone else's standards.

Success isn't a solve-all solution to the problems at hand. We see that play out in the novel quite tragically, where Allen Chen's storyline highlights the detrimental effects of subjecting ourselves to fill these roles and recite our lines in the name of being successful. When Willis comes home one day, he discovers that his friend Allen is "in the hospital. Someone beat him unconscious. Called him a jap.....'This is for Pearl Harbor'" (Interior Chinatown). The ironic thing is that Allen is from Taiwan, not Japan. Willis and his friends come to the realization that they will always be the same in other's eyes: an "Asian Man." It does not matter their nationality, if they are Taiwanese, or Korean, or Vietnamese, immigrants or not. The names they are called are interchangeable.

In the article *What Is the Model Minority Myth,* Blackburn writes about her own experiences dealing with being stereotyped as a young student, and not receiving help because she was Asian–and because of that, according to an instructor, should be earning top grades. "Buried under these stereotypes, the message is clear: Asian Americans are all the same—and all different from other Americans. On one hand, Asian Americans are often perceived as having assimilated better than other minority groups. On the other hand, Asian Americans are seen as having some foreign quality that renders them perpetual outsiders" (Blackburn).

In spite of being violently assaulted, Allen Chen "climbs the ladder of academia, then industry, as he turns out to be the best and brightest of them all" (Interior Chinatown). Chen not only earns his doctorate at MIT, he also gets married and has both a daughter and son. However, due to the nasty concussion he obtained from the beating, Allen still suffers headaches, and will for the entirety of his life. Which, unfortunately, is cut short. After he is granted a patent at the age of fifty-one, and later dozens more, it opens the door to a newly financially stable and successful life. He has a beautiful family, and has been granted this once in a lifetime opportunity of success. However, Chen's immigration privileges have been revoked, and he can no longer travel back to his home country Taiwan. "He does not feel at ease in the United States. Taiwan is not home anymore" (Interior Chinatown). Allen finds himself gravitating towards Chinatown, where he is "treated as a local celebrity", one who leads a successful life and has thus been rewarded greatly. However, just seven short years later, he overdoses on sleeping pills. The pressures of trying to be successful, coupled with filling in a pre-existing role in life ultimately suffocates him. Allen ends up trapping himself in his own role, with no way out but death.

Unfortunately, his daughter Christine has an oddly similar path to that of her father's. Following instep with Chen's intelligence and drive, Christine graduates from Stanford, and barely two weeks later sustains a head injury from a beer bottle thrown from "a car moving at close to forty miles per hour" (Interior Chinatown). Eleven stitches now adorn her scalp. She also will suffer from headaches for the rest of her life, just as her father did. It is a cycle, a horrible cycle. Even when striving to be the best one can be, earning a college degree and becoming celebrated or revered is not success. At least, not in the ways success should be. Why should both father and daughter suffer in the ways that they did? They were being model citizens–the "Striving Immigrant" types–so why should their success cost them so much?

Turning back to Willis and his pursuit of his dream role, he miraculously ends up in *Black and White*, the major television series in the novel, as Special Guest Star. There he meets Karen Lee, and falls in love with

her instantaneously. Karen is characterized as “Ethnically Ambiguous Character Number One”, and Willis thinks it must be nice not being identified solely by ethnicity. “‘Seems like it would be easier to be one thing.’” Karen says. “‘I’m one thing. An Asian Man. And that’s all I am. Trust me, it’s better to be you than me.

“‘I have to talk with an accent because no one can process what the hell to do with me. I’ve got the consciousness of a contemporary American. And the face of a Chinese farmer of five thousand years ago’”(Interior Chinatown). Willis brings up a good point here, addressing the stereotype of how Asians stereotypically speak in film or how they are represented in the media. He is just your average American, who grew up on Nintendo as did other children his age. However, since he looks a certain way–due to historical and societal depictions of Asian men–people don’t know what to do when Willis speaks in pristine American English. It is not Willis’ fault, nor is it that entirely of the people talking with him. “‘No one really wants to hire you,’ he says. ‘It’s your accent.’” A recruiter tells Willis as he finishes an interview. “‘I don’t have an accent.’ Wu replies. ‘Exactly. It’s weird’” (Interior Chinatown). And thus Willis learns how to do an accent, and lands a job only he could–Young Asian Man.

If it were not for the continually perpetuated stereotypes that media and film portray, then the general public wouldn't be dumbstruck when someone of Asian descent speaks without an accent. There are also immigrants or travelers who come to the U.S. who don’t speak fluent English, and truly do have an accent. It is difficult yet not, “because here's the thing.” Arthur Chu writes in *Breaking Out the Broken English,* “Nearly every Chinese immigrant I've met does, in fact, ‘talk like that,’ because it's almost impossible not to have a thick accent when your first language is as fundamentally phonetically different from English as Mandarin or Cantonese is. But it's equally true that every single Chinese-American kid born here I've met emphatically does *not* ‘talk like that’” (Chu).

Karen, however, has never had to deal with playing into any one stereotype, as she can play into any one ethnicity that benefits the film she is casted in. Perhaps this is why she has a greater sense of this “more” that

Willis' mother talks of. She gives Willis this whole new confidence–shows him different things. "'Will? What are you doing?'" Karen asks. "'Being in love with you.' 'No, you're not. You're falling in love.' 'Same thing.' 'Not the same thing,' she says. 'Falling in love is a story'" (Interior Chinatown).

Finally, after years of struggling with life and attempting to land the best role, Will gains confidence. "Now you have Karen. You start doing better.....You climb the ladder again"(Interior Chinatown). However, this newfound success he experiences in his work life pulls Willis away from Karen, and they both are seeing each other less and less, until every day becomes once a week, and once a week becomes twice a month. One day, amidst Willis' continual kung fu practicing and endless auditions for better roles, Karen announces that she is pregnant. "'You're not happy?' 'Of course I'm happy.....It's just, I can't see myself that way. I'm a Special Guest Star. I'm doing better than I ever have, but I still don't make enough to support a family'" (Interior Chinatown). Karen tells Willis that he is ruining the moment. Willis takes a breath to recompose himself and proposes to her. It is not how it is supposed to go, it is not movie-perfect. It is not the correct order of events, to have a child before marriage, before a stable career. But that is not Willis and Karen's story.

Typically when dealing with romance in film, there is a clear storyline that is followed, depending on the type of romance. It is incredibly predictable, as well, from the sappy love scenes to the worn-out scripted lines. In life, we all have this set idea of how our partner will come along, we think up these small romantic gestures in bookstores or coffee shops or in the rain, and yet not one of those moments–if any–truly occurs how we imagine them to. The preconceived notion of what roles to play–whether that be who pays for the date, who proposes, how long it takes from being friends to a couple to being married–are nowhere near how film or television shows or novels portray them. Perhaps that is what makes life so compelling, as it's unpredictable. Yet, perhaps that is the very reason we subscribe to these stereotypes in film and novels, as subconsciously that is how the scene "should" play out. Each individual follows a script when it comes to relationships, whether that be a casual friendship to a lifelong partner. It is safe. Comfortable. It does not make life complex and messy.

However, in spite of the fact that Willis and Karen's love story is solely unique to them does not disqualify the hardships they also face as a couple. As Wu continues to practice his kung fu, along with auditioning for better roles, this effort to search for more is pushing away both Karen and their young daughter, Phoebe. Thus poses the question: is it worth the loss to become the best success possible? And what happens when this success is reached? As he continues to work toward his life-long ambition, Willis not only loses his support system, but also himself along the way. He sells bits and pieces of his identity–his genuine one–as he conforms more and more to this stereotype of Kung Fu Guy. The role doesn't even have a name to accompany the actor, to make the character more of a character. Just a plain, simple, generic title. All for the supposed prestige the actor will receive? Not one person genuinely cares about the actor or character, just the "cool Asian shit" that they're doing.

Roles. Turns out, everyday individuals have one–from bus drivers to cashiers, ranchers to astrophysicists. However, each role seems to come with a predetermined script, and to deviate from that script seems daunting. Improvising life could lead to catastrophic ends. Right? However, as seen in Yu's novel, feeding into these pre-existing roles and reading from the script of everyday life can be more detrimental than helpful. Especially when pertaining to Asians in American film, these roles do not just perpetuate stereotypes on screen and media–but in our daily lives, as well.

Works Cited

Blackburn, Sarah-Soonling. "What Is the Model Minority Myth?" *Learning for Justice*, 21 Mar. 2019, https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/what-is-the-model-minority-myth.

Chu, Arthur. "Breaking out the Broken English." *NPR*, NPR, 31 July 2014, https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/07/31/336380977/breaking-out-the-broken-english.

Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Penguin Books, 1990.

The Daily Show. *Charles Yu - Tackling on-Screen Asian Representation with "Interior Chinatown"* | *The Daily Show*. Youtube, 3 Feb. 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0afVYOb4kA.

Yu, Charles. *Interior Chinatown: A Novel*. Vintage Books, 2020.