The Interior

by Tabitha Barowsky

Art has always showcased what was going on in the world. From cave paintings telling the stories of people fighting off different animals to 60-second videos of the newest dance trends, they have always captured a specific point in time. There becomes a distinction however between art that captures and art that imitates. If the story being told is true, then the art has captured the truth, but if the story being told is fictional, then perhaps the art has imitated the truth. But what happens when a fictional story is also true? What happens when the story is so close to the truth, it could easily be confused for fact? Many modern day works of fiction walk this line. Telling real stories through fictional characters creates a genre of fiction that not only teaches audiences but inspires a sort of self-reflection that could not have otherwise been reached. In Charles Yu's 2020 novel *Interior Chinatown*, readers follow the life of Willis Wu as he works his way up the acting ladder from background actor to special guest star. Through his adventure, Yu makes a well written commentary on how Asian Americans fill, not only the film screen, but the American screen. Other works, such as *The Walking Dead, Front Desk* and *Fairview*, also make comments towards how minority groups fill up the stage. By examining how the idea, or rather myth, of the model minority and how it is used within these works, one could see how it has affected its characters and the larger discussion as a whole, ultimately showing just how much art has come to imitate real life.

Charles Yu graduated from University of California, Berkeley with a degree in molecular and cell biology and a minor in creative writing in 1997 (Brice). Along with being a screenwriter for TV and film, he has also authored a couple books (Brice). Growing up, Yu only ever saw "background Asians", characters that delivered food and didn't talk (Brown). In an interview

with PBS Newshour, Yu says, “If you grow up never seeing a version of yourself…what does it do to the consciousness…to never see a certain kind of person on television? How does that distort reality?” (Brown). He is able to answer his own question by saying, “It creates this alternate version of reality…reinforc[ing] this idea that these Asians are not part of the main story of America. In fact, they aren’t really Americans, because, when we see them, they’re often cast as foreigners” (Brown). By leaving these half baked, if even put into the oven, characters for viewers to digest, they are left hungry, whether they know it or not. If audiences are always starved, the smallest bit of representation will feed their hunger. So in an attempt to fix this, Yu wrote another book.

Interior Chinatown was published in 2020 and follows Generic Asian Man, Willis Wu as he strives to graduate from Delivery Man to Kung Fu Guy on the fictional tv show, “Black and White,” a Law and Order inspired cop show. Throughout the book, readers see not only Wu, but all of the characters transform into different versions of themselves, more aware of what is going on. Yu wanted to tell the story of the character who is usually “way in the back” and “pretty much out of focus”, he tells Trevor Noah, “because the view from the bottom looks different than…where the leads are standing” (The Daily Show). Beyond that, readers learn about where Wu lives, and about his parents, and about his wife and daughter, turning barely a character into the main focus of the piece. Readers see Wu sacrifice everything for the 30-seconds of fame he has dreamed of his whole life, completely losing himself in the process. The book is able to spark a lot of good discussion points, as the story acts as a mirror for how society acts. As the characters become self aware, they begin to see that there is more beyond seeing their name in the credits. All of the Asian characters, unless deliberately left without, have a name, have a full personality and have a purpose within the work.

Other media isn't always able to, or simply chooses not to, cast Asian American characters in these dynamic, positive roles. Charles Yu recalls that, growing up, "[Martial artists were] one of the few universally positive role models that an Asian American kid…had. There were no real actors or professional athletes or other public figures in the [mainstream media]" (Brice). Not being able to see characters viewers can see themselves in can have extremely negative effects on their well-being. Nonexistent portrayals inadvertently put a lot of pressure on the infrequent portrayals to be good, because if that is all people are going to see, they need to be created well, even though the infrequent portrayals often have Asian Americans as offensive and stereotypical characters (Brice). In *Interior Chinatown*, the character Kung Fu Guy "is the [character] that's reserved for the special guest star every season or so, who is really good at martial arts and gets to be cool" (Brice). In order to get there, Wu must continually play characters that are either simply there to fill space or full of stereotypes and are frankly just incorrect depictions of Asian Americans.

Much has been done to improve the presence of Asian American characters, especially males, however not as much has been done in regard to how they are presented. Glenn Rhee in AMC's *The Walking Dead* is a "heroic vision of Asian American masculinity rarely before seen on television" however this is mainly due to the series focusing on restructuring social and racial relations in a post apocalyptic world (Ho). Navigating a zombie apocalypse, the ensemble cast moves from place to place trying to survive. Although he was a fan favorite, most of Glenn's success within the show can be explained through his character's model minority qualities, Helen K. Ho explains in her article, "The Model Minority in the Zombie Apocalypse: Asian-American Manhood on AMC's *The Walking Dead*" (Ho). The "model minority" idea is often used as a way to explain the successfulness of Asian Americans, success that can be attributed to "cultural

traits, values, attitudes and structural forces" rather than just themselves (Chen). They exhibit "purpose, patience, endurance, cunning, fanaticism, and group loyalty" as well as being "diligent, disciplines, possessed of strong family values, respectful of authority, thrifty, moral, self-sufficient, and committed to education" and as "exceptional yet not part of the mainstream" (Ho).

Glenn's model minority traits are turned into masculine traits, turning him into a more dynamic character, as he embodies the characteristics of a white man (Ho). But this growth actually, in the end, makes him one of the most dynamic characters of the ensemble (Ho). Within the show, the CDC and main character, Rick, have a survival plan, one that Glenn is extremely helpful with due to his model minority characteristics (Ho). He "helps to illuminate some of the limitations of white leadership and masculinity", his "unwavering loyalty, other-directedness and craftiness" allows Glenn to fill "the leadership gaps that Rick's flaws create", and he "refuse[s] to accept the dominance of white masculinity and the masculine hierarchy it supports" unlike the only other minority character, a Black man named T-Dog (Ho).

In her conclusion, Ho reflects on the model minority stereotype. She believes that the concept of a model minority cannot even exist in an environment like this, as it "must dissolve as the qualities of white masculinity become[s] untenable in the post apocalypse…without the overarching structure of white patriarchy" (Ho). Glenn is able to transform into a hero, "a human survivor unlimited by the structure of white patriarchy," with desirable characteristics anyone could have (Ho). Without watching the show, based on Ho's explanation and discussion, it is easy to see how Glenn's character was able to grow beyond the confines of a model minority character. However, it is important to note that many characters are not given this change, so by doing so, *The Walking Dead* has opened up a whole new area of discussion for its viewers.

Also in his interviews, Charles Yu speaks a little bit about his experiences as a father and how that has shaped how he wanted to write *Interior Chinatown*. “I'm a dad and my kids are old enough that we watch stories together. I had made peace with…watching Asians on the side. But now, they're old enough that I have to turn and explain to them,” he recalls in his interview with Trevor Noah (The Daily Show). In *Interior Chinatown*, viewers see Willis Wu turn into a dad, dropping his dream role of Kung Fu Guy. “When that happens, he realizes he has been overlooking the real, most important role in his life: being a father to his daughter. So, he drops everything to begin to build a relationship with his 5-year-old daughter, Phoebe” (Brice). It becomes a “coming-of-age story”, one that presents the “larger consciousness of being in a system and understanding that there can be a trade-off, in that in order to succeed, he’s got to sort of reinforce the system itself” (Brice). Overall, the depiction of Willis and Phoebe are quite positive within the book. Children are an interesting character within a story to present the idea of the model minority, however many stories still choose to go this route.

In Shih-Wen Sue Chen and Sin Wen Lau’s article “Good Chinese Girls and the Model Minority: Race, Education, and Community in *Girl in Translation* and *Front Desk*”, they discuss how the idea of the model minority is able to manifest itself within two books with children as the main characters. This is often seen in the *guai* characters. *Guai* is an “ambivalent cultural concept with a capacity to reinforce conformity to certain behavioral standards while opening up the possibility of negotiating these boundaries,” and a *guai child* specifically is one “who excels in school and who is [obedient] and [sensible]” (Chen). Sue Chen and Lau go on to explain that “children who embody these core behavioral virtues are thought to be *guai* because they accept authority, conform to accepted norms of behavior, are expected to become useful members of society and understand the importance of maintaining the prevailing social order” (Chen).

Through more discussion, they ultimately come to the conclusion that *guai* children are a "critical cultural logic that Chinese immigrant children deploy in order to not only survive, but thrive in mainstream American society" (Chen).

A large part of the importance of this article is its explanation of the different works it is centered around. One of them is *Front Desk*, a 2018 book that focuses on Mia Tang, a young girl who struggles with being interested in English and not interested in math, and wondering if that would be allowed if she "had blond hair and blue eyes" (Chen). Within the book, Mia's mother even encourages her to feed into the model minority narrative by getting better at math and giving up on English because she can't "be as good as the white kids in their language" (Chen). By her mother reinforcing these beliefs, Mia is pushed further underneath the crushing heel of societal expectations. This shows how even children are expected to follow the model minority myth. But this book also shows how the model minority can negatively affect other groups of people. In the Daily Show interview, Trevor Noah talks about how *Interior Chinatown* talks about how "some people have argued though that Asians have it good though, because they go, like, "Oh, at least Asian people have "the model minority thing to them, so they're seen as less threatening and they're given more opportunities" (The Daily Show). But Charles Yu believes instead that "the model minority is just sort of the age-old strategy of divide and conquer. And holding one group up justifies holding a group apart" (The Daily Show). While Asian Americans are usually viewed in a positive light through the idea of a model minority, this is often also used to imply the "short-comings" of other groups of people, such as African Americans (Chen). "The model minority myth has conscripted Asian Americans into the conservative war to protect White Privileges from Black encroachment" (Chen). This is a huge problem because then it creates competition and resentment between racial groups (Chen). In order to paint Asian

Americans as the model minority, *Front Desk* places African Americans in an underachieving role (Chen).

When asked about why he chose to write *Interior Chinatown* as a script, Charles Yu jokes that it was because he "already had the software" (The Daily Show). But in reality, there's more to it. "Stories…resonate with people…and…I wanted to tell the story that way also because of…what the story's about," he goes on to tell Trevor Noah (The Daily Show). In his interview with UC Berkeley, he also adds that "There's the convention, when you're writing a script for TV or film, of either interior or exterior. It's called the slug line. It tells production, do we shoot this inside or outside, which has a lot of difference for timing, sunlight, elements, that sort of thing," but "it turned out to be one of those things where it was a metaphor, a way into a lot of things that were interesting. I wanted to tell a story about the interior life of this character, Willis Wu" (Brice).

Many other works of art have found their own way through this narrative, one of which being Jackie Sibblies Drury's 2019 play *Fairview*. Written in three acts, it follows the middle class, African American Frasier family as they prepare for their grandmother's birthday, told as if the play were a 70s sitcom (Pope). However, everything seems to be going wrong. The first act is full of the wrong silverware, underprepared carrots, a faulty radio, and a brother who might not even make it into town (Pope). The second act is a reenactment of the first, but instead of the same dialogue from the previous act, the radio has completely taken over sound for the scene (Pope). In his article, "Contemporary African-American Drama at Visuality's Limits," Kyle C. Frisina claims that *Fairview* "addresses blackness constituted by the white gaze, shining a spotlight on the disturbing machinations of that gaze while calling into question whether black subjectivity can be rendered visible, on its own terms, in mainstream theatre" (Frisina). The

opening act "invites a slow-blooming curiosity about the significance of the characters' blackness for audience members tapping into their own socially constructed understandings of race" (Frisina). There are also hints of racial stereotypes, however it is not yet clear if that is a work of the writing or an unconscious notion made by viewers (Frisina). When the second act replays the first, audience members watch as the four original Black character's dialogue is overtaken by four offstage White characters, all filling in the white archetypes of "the virtue-signaling woman who thinks herself more woke than she is (Suze), the sensational gay friend (Mack), the blunt European (Bets), and the bro (Jimbo)" (Frisina). Frisina claims that "if *Fairview*'s first act draws careful attention to the act of looking at blackness, the second act suggests that whiteness doesn't need to be seen for its effects to be felt" (Frisina). In the final act, however, the plot continues as the white actors are 'invited' onto stage, playing the missing characters from the first act as black caricatures of themselves. Towards the end, Keisha steps through the fourth wall of the play, inviting the white audience to "come on up here" (Frisina).

Forms of racial mimicry and stereotyping have plagued American theatre for the longest time, affecting and defining diverse groups of people into singular types (Breaux). *Fairview* targets "the institutionalized system of white supremacy and its stranglehold on representations of blackness in US popular culture," claims Shane Breaux in his article, "Seeking a Fairer View: Smashing Theatrical Mirrors in Contemporary Black Drama" (Breaux). It also "mirrors the realism of American family drama only to expose…racial distortions, shatter…conventions and stretch the limits of what theatre can do to affect society…challeng[ing] the conventions of US drama" (Breaux). One important aspect of the set to point out is the mirror. The mirror represents "their own reflections and how they appear to their family, and eventually, to *white* audiences" (Breaux). At the end of the third act, Keisha comes to see that everything she thinks she knows is

really just based on stories told by white people and walks through the mirror and begins talking directly to the audience (Breaux). As she invites "the folks who call themselves white" onto the stage, Breaux explains that "the disparity in audience demographics…[becomes] impossible to ignore" (Breaux). "The biggest impact Fairview makes beyond the breaking of convention is how it serves as a performative rehearsal for me and for the other white spectators for life beyond the theatre, to make room and to listen, and to consider other perspectives in order to seek a more complete and fairer view of the world" (Breaux).

Through all of these examples, one can see how the media is slowly starting to acknowledge these harmful stereotypes and expectations, but it isn't enough. Charles Yu says that "[Interior Chinatown] is really a book about roles and how we play them. And sometimes they are fundamental to who we are…but also how roles can often be very limiting or reductive and, sort of, the people underneath those" (Brice). By examining how the idea, or rather myth, of the model minority and how it is used within these works, one could see how it has affected its characters and the larger discussion as a whole, ultimately showing just how much art has come to imitate real life. These roles that people are expected to play, both on screen and in real life, has come to show how harmful these expectations are for people. To wrap up his interview with UC Berkeley, Charles Yu shares this last piece of information, "I hope that people can see that, in one way or another, all the characters in this book are wearing a mask and a costume, to some extent, and it doesn't fit them perfectly. And we, hopefully, see the ways in which the person underneath peeks out. In those moments, when the mask slips and you talk out of character or, you know, you're lying on the ground talking to your kid, delirious with sleep deprivation, those moments of real connection can come about. More than anything, I hope it entertains people and makes them feel or think something that surprises them" (Brice).

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