

WP2: What contribution does your chosen object make to our understanding of ourselves (culturally, socially, politically, aesthetically), and why should we pay attention to it?

For many Asian American, including myself, we grew up not seeing many, oftentimes zero, Asian stars on television. I vividly remember watching predominantly white casts in popular movies and TV shows navigate the horrors of high school or fight off evil villains threatening to overtake planet Earth and feeling disconnected from the entire plot. My Asian American friends and I were so desperate and eager to see ourselves represented on the big screen that we would scour celebrities' biographies on wikipedia and thefamouspeople.com to find if any actresses or actors had Asian heritages. Phoebe Cates from the classic coming-of-age film *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*? Yes! Tobey Maguire? No. It wasn't until a few years ago when *Crazy Rich Asians* debuted in our cinemas, I realized that Asian Americans are gaining traction in the entertainment industry and we are slowly but surely getting the pop culture representation that we have always hoped for. For many, however, Asian representation in the film industry really came to light when cinematic superhouse, Marvel, announced the making of *ShangChi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* which finally gave the Asian community the superhero that we craved and deserved.

The main character, ShangChi, portrayed by Chinese-Canadian actor Simu Liu fuses the familiarity of Asian upbringing and culture with the eye-popping spectacle of Hollywood's incomparable storytelling abilities. Going by the western name "Shaun", ShangChi was depicted as a friendly and smiley parking valet who worked with his best

friend, Katy, also portrayed by an Asian-American actress Nora “Awkafina” Lum. Katy, known for her loud and over-the-top personality, always draws attention to the duo to which Shaun expresses his discomfort and pleads with his best friend to be more quiet. Shaun’s wish of not drawing attention to himself is an embodiment of the rules that many of our Asian parents imposed on us - “the nail that sticks out gets hammered down”. This proverb taught to us by our Asian parents stems from their negative experiences of being part of a minority group in a predominantly white society. To them, someone who draws attention to themselves for being different is subjected to condemnation, reprimanded for their difference, and even worse - attacked. As a result, many of our Asian parents, including my own, stress the importance of conformity. Our elders encourage us to adopt cultural camouflage and to avoid putting ourselves in vulnerable situations in which we are subjected to racial targeting and attacks as they had to endure themselves when they first moved to a foreign country. For example, my mom has always told me to stay in areas with a significant Asian population so appearance-wise, I can blend into a crowd. This is one of the reasons why my parents decided to move to San Francisco, California when they first immigrated to the United States. In my daily life, my mom always leaves messages of advice and warning for me to not draw attention to myself when I go out with my friends in downtown Los Angeles in fear of unprovoked attacks. Since the rise of anti-Asian violence in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, my parents have become more nervous and protective in their parenting. As a result, the saying “the nail that sticks out gets hammered down” has become ever more present in my life and in the lives of my Asian-American peers.

When the meek and mild Shaun tossed aside his mundane persona, “Shaun”, and stepped unabashedly onto our screens as ShangChi, a deadly martial artist trained by his

father to become an assassin, a larger-than-life staggering presence filled our vision in a way that only superheroes can. The unveiling of Shaun's true identity, ShangChi, personifies those of us who broke free of our internalized racism and realized our true potential.

Internalized racism often goes unnoticed as Asian Americans progress through their professional industries. Outside of stereotypical career aspects such as doctors, computer scientists, and lawyers, many Asian Americans pursuing other fields have limited their true potential without even realizing that they are doing so. For example, Asian American performers have come to expect that they would only be casted for secondary roles. Take Sandra Oh, a Canadian actress of South Korean descent. Known for starring roles in *Grey's Anatomy* and *Killer Eve*, Oh told the New York Times that when she was cast for a role in the thriller drama *Killer Eve*, she expected herself to only play a supporting character such as an office receptionist or a doctor. After finding out that she was casted for Eve, the lead character whose name the series is named after, Oh realized just how deep the internalized racism within her had become. When being casted for a role, Oh could not see herself playing the lead character. Instead, she involuntarily limits herself to supporting or recurring roles which hinders her full potential as an actress. Even though ShangChi isn't the first Asian main lead or protagonist to hit our screens, His dramatic arrival as the first big-budget, widely-covered Marvel superhero makes him an ubiquitous and omnipotent character. The pervasively innovative and talented storytelling powers of Marvel has brought in an era where superheroes can be found on every electronic device. From our palm-sized phone screens to the blinding digital billboards of Time Square in New York City, superheroes are visible to every demographic in our society. The widely anticipated arrival of ShangChi into our lives and fantasy is a catalyst to a new era of Asian heroes such as Gemma Chan as Sersi

in the show *Eternals* and Iman Vellani, an actress of Pakistani origin, as Ms Marvel in the miniseries of the same name, *Ms Marvel*. Rather than having a repeat of young aspiring asian actors and actresses lose sight of their true potential and settling for secondary roles, the castings of Simu Liu, Sandra Oh, Gemma Chan, Iman Vellani, and others opens the door for the next generation of Asian Americans to see themselves in the center of Hollywood.

Through the writing of the plot, soundtrack, costume design, and fighting styles depicted in the film, ShangChi is changing what it means to show cultural representation on the big screen. When Marvel announced that they will be releasing a new superhero of Asian descent, there were high expectations and speculations about how Marvel will execute its portrayal of Asian culture, motifs, and themes within the film. Most importantly, people were excited for the fighting scenes which differed from previous battle scenes that Marvel has done with other superheroes. Overall, Marvel did a brilliant job of fusing traditional Chinese martial arts, Kung Fu, with Hollywood's brilliant and innovative computer-generated imagery (CGI) technology. During the making of the film, Destin Daniel Cretton, the director of ShangChi who is also of Asian descent, worked closely with Kung Fu masters to showcase an understanding and authenticity of Kung Fu on the big screen. Besides Kung Fu, Marvel also incorporates weapons of Chinese heritage such as tiger head hooks and bo staffs, both of which are traditionally used in Kung Fu. Another culturally significant aspect of the movie was the incorporation of traditional Chinese colors in the wardrobe of the characters. The antagonist in the movie, Wenwu, wore mostly black which is a color that symbolizes evil and destruction in Chinese culture. During his adolescent years, ShangChi wore black since he was being trained by his father to become an assassin. However, by the end of the movie, ShangChi wore a red Kung Fu styled suit embellished with gold details. In Chinese culture,

red is a color of luck, vitality, and happiness. ShangChi's transition from wearing black at the beginning of the film to red at the end exhibits his growth as a dynamic character. The incorporation of Chinese motifs in a Marvel film brings Chinese culture and heritage to its wide audience base, giving us the representation and awareness that we always lacked on the big screen.

While the movie *ShangChi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* paved the way for Asian representation and awareness during the heightened era of anti-Asian hate in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the backstory of this film is entangled in stereotypical tropes that Asian Americans still face to this day such as "kung fu master", "yellow peril", among others. In the original comics, ShangChi's father, Fu Manchu, was a villain determined to achieve world domination. Created by novelist Sax Rohmer and debuted in 1915, Rohmer's first description of Fu Manchu was "the yellow peril incarnate in one man". "Yellow peril" is a racially motivated metaphor that feeds into the anti-Asian propaganda that led to the introduction of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which prohibited Chinese laborers from entering the United States due to a fear that these laborers will steal jobs from White Americans. Chinese people were seen as devious, greedy, and culturally inferior to White Americans and were therefore portrayed by politicians and the press as a threat to the United States. The sinister nature of Fu Manchu and his desire to conquer the world embodied the anti-Asian narratives of the time. Even though the filmmakers tried to erase Fu Manchu's history by transforming him into Wenwu, a powerful warlord who set everything aside to marry the woman he loves as well as a grieving and vengeful widow after the murder of his wife, ShangChi's mother. However, Wenwu's nickname in the movie, the Mandarin, is still a cause of discomfort and friction amongst the Asian American community. In addition, the

film seemingly still follows a boilerplate assumption that martial arts and themes such honor and filial piety must be included in an Asian-centric film. The stereotypes that plague Asian characters and Asian-centric movies range from relatively mild assumptions that Asians have good grades to the dangerous sexualization of Asian women. All of these beliefs can have a devastating effect on the Asian community. Conversations and debate surrounding the fetishization of Asian women were reignited after Robert Aaron Long shot and killed eight people, including six Asian women, in an Atlanta spa in 2021. Long claimed that he viewed the Asian women working in spas as “temptations” and “must be eliminated”. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the United States saw a rise in anti-Asian hate crimes and violence. Asian Americans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders quickly saw themselves as the scapegoats of the pandemic and became unfortunate victims of bigotry, ignorance, and xenophobia. Even though anti-Asian violence and rhetoric continues to haunt many of us today, our movies and TV shows have the power to mitigate some of the hate the Asian community faces. By creating more well-rounded Asian characters and casting more Asian actors and actresses, Hollywood has the potential to change the anti-Asian narratives that have always been present in U.S. history and has recently gained new momentum in light of the pandemic.

Although Asian actors and actresses on the big screen still have a long way to go before reaching parity with their non-Asian co-stars, the Asian community has begun to take notable steps in Hollywood. In the face of anti-Asian hate and violence, the positive depiction of Asian culture and its people in one of the biggest and most anticipated movies of 2021 and in Marvel’s history makes ShangChi a hero not just on the screen but also for all Asians living as minorities in foreign countries.