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The First Asian Man: The Story Behind the Jeremy Lin Story

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By Yong Chen

There are good reasons why Jeremy Lin deserves the extensive news coverage he has received recently: a Harvard grad playing in the NBA, he had an indispensible role in the Knicks' 9-2 run before losing to Miami on February 23, averaging 23.9 points and 9.2 assists in 11 games. Yet the extraordinary "Linsanity" displayed by the mass media seems to suggest that what makes Lin's story so notable is what it says about perceptions of Asian masculinity. In Lin, the media has finally found an Asian man.

This is not an entirely incredible read of the overwhelming public reaction to Jeremy Lin. For decades, American society has refused to see Asian men in masculine terms. This is in spite of the fact that there have been many Asian men in America since the Gold Rush, when Chinese 49'ers established the first extensive Asian communities in the New World. In fact, for a long time the Chinese population in this country was predominantly male, as the Chinese Exclusion Acts made it difficult for men but nearly impossible for women to come to the United States from China between 1882 and 1943. Anti-Chinese prejudice has also historically made the presence of Chinese men invisible in American society. They have been feminized and relegated to jobs that were deemed fit only for women, such as in restaurants and laundry shops. The message was clear: Chinese men were not man enough for other kinds of jobs.

In reality, however, the Chinese *had* performed "masculine" jobs in areas like mining, manufacturing, and building the railroads before being driven into the service sector. But for many years, this fact was erased from American history books and the collective memory. For example, Chinese workers, a major force in building the first transcontinental railroad, were present at the celebration of its completion in 1869 at Promontory Summit, Utah. But looking at arguably the most famous photograph of the event by A. J. Russell, as generations of Americans have done, you will not find a single Chinese face.

In its portrayals of Chinese men, the media has persistently focused on their roles as laundrymen and waiters. Therefore, the expression "no tickee no washee" (and its variations) had become a popular slur by the early 1930s and is listed in Archer Taylor's *The Proverbs* of 1931 (p. 31). Nineteenth-century audiences watching performances of Bret Harte's *Two Men of Sandy Bar* heard lines of pidgin English like this from a Chinese laundry man named Hop Sing: "Me plentee washee shirtee" (Act 2, Scene 2).

While the hand laundry business has disappeared, association of Chinese men with Chinese food has remained ever-present, as we can see in films like Clint Eastwood's *Absolute Power* (click the link to the clip "Movie Stereotype of Asian Male"). And it has developed into such a folkloric experience of many Chinese Americans that it becomes material for comedians like

Byron Yee, who told a joke about being mistaken by the father of his white date for a Chinese food delivery boy in his native Oklahoma City.

In Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *China Men*, the character of Tang Ao dramatized and symbolized the feminization of Chinese immigrant men: He was fed women's food, and his cheeks and lips were painted red (*China Men*, 4-5). Such feminization is an experience that others have dubbed as the emasculation of Asian men that can be clearly seen in Hollywood films.

For some, like Bret Harte, who was more sympathetic to the Chinese than most of his contemporaries, these stereotypes were intended primarily as entertainment. Chinese Americans are seriously concerned about stereotypes not because they cannot take jokes but because they understand the harm and hostility negative images bring.

Over the years, I have asked students to identify the famous Chinese men they can think of. Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee were usually the first and only names that came up. This is because in American consciousness and history textbooks, Chinese men are still largely banished to obscurity or even non-existence. In documents from the past, the waiters and laundrymen are invariably either nameless or have generic names like John Chinaman. When they do have a particular name, it is usually something like Dr. Fu Manchu or the Mysterious Mr. Wong, which symbolized sexual deviance or evil in Hollywood films. And ignored by Hollywood until the late twentieth century, Asian men did not even get to play such Asian roles. Indeed, after Sessue Hayakawa, no Asian men played leadings roles in Hollywood films for a long time.

Largely because of such stereotypes, Asian men have long struggled to be accepted in American society. In spite of the tremendous progress that has been made in social equality, especially in the post-Civil Rights Movement decades, Asian men have remained one of the least desirable groups, romantically speaking. Long after the end of anti-miscegenation laws and the 1922 Cable Act, under which a white woman would lose her citizenship upon marriage to an Asian immigrant man, it remained taboo for white women to have romantic relationships with Asian men. As Eugene Wong notes in his 1978 book, the American film industry allowed interracial relationships between Asian women and white men but not between white women and Asian men. This preference of Asian women over Asian men is also found in the selection of anchors by many TV stations across the nation. Asian men are often not the preferred partners for Asian American women, which is because, as Steven Okazaki, producer of the documentary *American Sons*, notes, while "Asian women are sexualized; men are desexualized and neutered." In an article published in *Asian Week* in 2000, Joyce Nishioka reported that "The most recent statistics from the 1990 Census show that Asian American women are almost twice as likely to outmarry than Asian American men. In California, 7.7 percent of the males were married to whites, compared to 16.2 percent of the women." In a 2009 study based on a sample of 5,810 Yahoo! heterosexual internet dating profiles, Carol L. Glasser and her co-authors find that "desexualized" Asian men feel "less desired" than their non-Asian counterparts. Besides romantic relationships, people have also reported difficulties that Asian men encounter in other areas: workplace, college admissions, the military, etc. All these suggest that as far as public perceptions are concerned, there have been Asian males, but there is no real or worthy "man" among them.

For all of these reasons, sports is the last place where we would expect an Asian man to rise to enormous success and recognition. It just does not fit the feminized and weak image of Asian men. Quite often, in ways not entirely dissimilar to how it has erased memories of Chinese railroad workers, society tends to forget the presence of pioneer Asian America men like Wat Misaka, the first Asian and non-white man to play in what is now the National Basketball Association, and Dat Nguyen, a former star of the Dallas Cowboys. Clearly, if Jeremy Lin's achievements announce the arrival of a real Asian man in American consciousness and in mass media, he did not do it alone but as a team player together with other Asian men, such as Michael Chang, who became the youngest tennis player to win a Grand Slam title at the French Open in 1989 at the age of 17. What helps to make Lin's story so unforgettable—at least for the time being—is that he plays an "all-American" sport at a time when such sports have become an enormously important part of American life. It is also a time when being Asian or Chinese is no longer associated with backwardness, weakness, and inferiority.

Still, old stereotypes of desexualized Asian men linger in comments made by people like the sports journalist Jason Whitlock, whose sophomoric and unfunny remarks following Lin's 38-points, 7-assists, 4-rebounds and 2-steals performance against the Lakers on February 10 do not even match the level of decency of a two-year-old. But I see the media attention, in either good or not-so-good taste, as a positive sign that the media and the society at large appear to be ready for a masculine Asian man. This probably explains why many major news outlets pounced on the story that Kim Kardashian, the beautiful and famous reality television personality and model, had expressed a desire to date Jeremy Lin. What a difference a few hoops make! Is this the end of the invisible, desexualized, and undesirable Asian man?

Jeremy, enjoy the ride and the journey, man, whether it is measured in inches or miles!

Further Reading:

Chiung Hwang Chen, "Feminization of Asian (American) Men in the U.S. Mass Media: An Analysis of The Ballad of Little Jo." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 20:2 (1996): 57-71.
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Sean-Shong Hwang, Rogelio Saenz, and Benigno E. Aguirre, "Structural and Assimilationist Explanations of Asian American Intermarriage," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 59:3 (1997): 758-772.
Wolfgang Mieder, "No Tickee, No Washee." *Western Folklore* 55:1 (Winter 1996): 1-40.
Joyce Nishioka, "A Threatened Manhood? Exploring the Myth of the Angry Asian Male," *Asian Week* 21:23 (2000).
Eugene Wong, *On Visual Media Racism: Asians in the American Motion Pictures* (New York: Arno Press, 1978).
The Slanted Screen: Asian Men in Film and Television.
Steven Okazaki, producer of the documentary *American Sons*, part 1, part 2.

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