

DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS: QUALITIES THAT FORM ASIAN AMERICAN  
MUSIC WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF POPULAR MEDIA

Thesis

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## Contents

Overview.....	4
Purpose.....	5
Approach.....	9
I. History.....	10
“Asian American Childhood” Poem.....	21
II. Asian American Music.....	23
III. Asian American Music in Activism.....	31
IV. Intersectionality of Asian American Music.....	38
V. Findings and Looking Forward.....	42
Acknowledgements.....	46
Bibliography.....	48
Books.....	48
Magazine Articles.....	48
Internet Sources.....	50
Songs/Albums.....	51

## Overview

The Asian American Movement began in the 1960s, bringing together Asians of different ethnicities and promoting solidarity with all people of color. We begin to see a rise in consciousness in Asian American art, poetry, music and other sources expressing the newfound resilience and determination to being Asian American. We can trace the creation of “Asian American music” to a time of need for a voice in response to the anti-Vietnam War movements and post WWII events in the 1960s, and a stand towards a definition of identity and against fear. In 1987, one of the key moments in Asian American music was the creation of the Asian Improv Records in San Francisco, the AIR, by Jon Jang and Francis Wong. This became a place where a race disenfranchised by the media could come together, collaborate, create, record, release, and be in a safe community of like-minded individuals. The Asian American diaspora intersected strongly with the African American diaspora, where African American jazz and Asian American jazz brought together a combination of people and cultures. Music of the Asian American diaspora flourished throughout the 1960s to the early 2000s, during a period when discrimination was much more apparent and the “model minority” label was not fixed yet. In an interview from 1999, Fred Ho, a scholar, musician, and Asian American activist explained the purpose of Asian American jazz and what it represented:

I do maintain that the Asian American-ness of an artistic work lies in more than content, and is rooted and linked to cultural traditions and forms. Along with expressing aspects of the “Asian American experience,” the music itself would draw from or reflect aspects of traditional Asian music influences. Yo-Yo Ma is a cellist who happens to be Chinese and Asian American, not a Chinese/Asian American musician. ... While Asian American music may very well be cross-cultural, we in the “Asian American jazz” movement saw as the focus of our music and cultural work to help catalyze Asian American consciousness about our oppression and need to struggle for liberation. The

very identity and term “Asian American” in our sobriquet “Asian American jazz or music” is a political signifier.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to realize that two decades later, the cultivation of Asian American music is still needed today – within a society that disassociates with the color of Asian, and the power that stands with identity and uplifting voices. Asian American music is a genre that is a mixture of experiences and culture that defines the term “Asian American,” and takes a creative approach on history and traditions to encourage and uplift Asian Americans.

This thesis presents my research into what defines Asian American music in popular media and the role Asian Americans have in pop culture. First, I trace the history of the musical intersections between the Asian American diaspora and the African American diaspora – influencing the creation of two new genres of music, Asian American jazz and Asian American hip-hop. Next, I present and consider the experiences and thoughts of present-day Asian American artists involved in creating popular music. Lastly, I talk about the music created through political activism that responds to discrimination and the marginalization of Asian American communities.

## **Purpose**

Asian Americans are constantly defined by our “oriental” physical appearance and the assumed culture we belong in. Seeing an Asian American person, many people, including other Asians/Asian Americans, immediately assume a country of origin that may or may not be entirely tied to the person’s raised culture. Asians began immigrating to the United

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Ho, “Beyond Asian American Jazz,” *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol. 7 (1999), <<https://aaww.org/beyond-asian-american-jazz-fred-ho/>> (10 December 2018).

States during the early 1800s. Thus, for some families, there could be up to five or even more, generations of an (Asian) American culture. The diaspora of Asian Americans encompasses a reaction of experiences against discrimination and xenophobia, whose art was never truly a choice but derived from the need and desire for individuality, equality, and acceptance. The present-day Asian American community is divided due to some believing that Asian Americans are not discriminated against anymore, and others who desire more activism and pursuit against constant racism. With the acceptance of a few Asian Americans, many believe that our entirety as a group is accepted and granted equity in a White dominant society. The “model minority” refers to a demographic group whose members are perceived to achieve a higher degree of socioeconomic success than the population average.<sup>2</sup> Historian Madeline Y. Hsu explains:

As a model minority, Asian immigrants serve to rebuke less successful communities of color for their lack of attainment, which is attributed to obstructive cultural values rather than the successful “Asian” emphasis on family solidarity, hard work, and education. ... Even as the law increased Asian admissions while imposing preferences for employment skills and education, it numerically capped for the first time immigration within the Americas, which magnified the illegal immigration problem in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

The history of Asian immigration shows the traits that give way to acceptance, where an expectancy of highly educated and hardworking Asians can benefit the country, and therefore show favor in admitting more Asians rather than other races. However, as we are seeing in spring 2020, the perception of the “model minority” group can quickly shift

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<sup>2</sup> The Practice, “The Model Minority Myth,” *Asian Americans in the Law*, November/December 2018, < <https://thepractice.law.harvard.edu/article/the-model-minority-myth/>> (4 April 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 236-37.

from acceptance to racism. The anti-Asian rhetoric relating to the coronavirus (COVID-19) reveals the innate racism in American society. Physically, Asian Americans will always be people of color, and if racism is present at all, then Asian Americans are already affected.

Asian American music is needed today, music that is a voice of freedom for others, a push for acceptance, and an art that can claim a cultural identity rooted in the history and experiences of Asian Americans. Matthew Lee explains:

But for Asian Americans, there is an extra source of irony. Here we see the contrast between the two most common Asian American stereotypes. In some instances, we are wielded as a “model minority” against other groups, particularly other people of color; in others, we are cast as “perpetual foreigners” who pose a threat to stability and order. These dually harmful, racist and pervasive stereotypes – of Asian Americans as both the “model minority” and the “yellow peril” – shape the narrative of how we can place these hostilities that consistently emerge during moments like the current outbreak in context.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, reactions to the coronavirus have shed light onto both stereotypes of Asians in American society. Hsu explains the “yellow peril:”

The rising economic and political clout of China, along with regular occurrences of corporate and military espionage and hacking, exacerbate entrenched, barely subcutaneous anxieties that Chinese remain perpetual foreigners in our midst ready to attack and betray America when beckoned by China.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Lee, “Coronavirus fears show how ‘model minority’ Asian Americans become the ‘yellow peril,’” *NBC News THINK*, 9 March 2020, <[https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/coronavirus-fears-show-how-model-minority-asian-americans-become-yellow-ncna1151671?fbclid=IwAR32lnCkErDINWPwsqmF1DJY1mtV1py5fBCFXAD4PuNdbExPl\\_dMKg0iz-I](https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/coronavirus-fears-show-how-model-minority-asian-americans-become-yellow-ncna1151671?fbclid=IwAR32lnCkErDINWPwsqmF1DJY1mtV1py5fBCFXAD4PuNdbExPl_dMKg0iz-I)> (14 March 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Hsu, *The Good Immigrants*, 243.

This assumption of threat is not only placed on Chinese Americans, but all Asian Americans, given the panethnic realities of being Asian in America.<sup>6</sup> As soon as COVID-19 was hypothesized to have begun in China, many people spread rumors that all Asians (and Asian Americans) were to blame on contracting the virus and infecting others. Due to fear and ignorance, people choose not to entertain the possibility that any race or ethnicity could have contracted the virus on their own. President Donald Trump gives an example of this extraordinary ignorance by posting on Twitter about COVID-19 and labeling it as a “Chinese virus:”

I always treated the Chinese virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the “borders” from China—against the wishes of almost all. Many lives were saved. ... We were very prepared ... I’ll tell you how prepared I was: I called for a ban from people coming in from China long before anybody thought it was [appropriate]. I believe they called me a racist because I did that ... They called me racist and other words because I did that, because I went so early.<sup>7</sup>

Many people share the same views as President Trump, and this reflects directly as the “yellow peril” metaphor. Two opposing stereotypes define an entire race of people, projecting conflicting ideas onto a race that should be coming together and uplifting one another, instead of finding comfort in like-minded “model minorities” and joining the hierarchy of race discrimination. Asian American art represents the current diaspora, collectively joining Asian American experiences and not further separating into more levels of disparity. It is important today that it brings together Asian Americans to express lives that are persevering, succeeding, struggling, and paving a way for future generations in the United States.

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<sup>6</sup> David Lopez and Yen Espiritu, “Panethnicity in the United States: A theoretical framework,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 13 (1990): 198-224.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Trump, Twitter Post, 18 March 2020, 4:46 AM, <<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1240243188708839424>> (20 April 2020).



## **Approach**

Part of my approach to this subject involves qualitative research, and used this method in order to respectfully talk about a wide range of ethnic groups of people under the umbrella term “Asian,” culminating in a range of answers that define Asian American music in popular media. The qualitative approach is a collection of data through interviews and conversations with people who identify as a musician who is Asian American and/or creating Asian American music within the popular music genre, this includes Sarah Bernadette (or Sarah Bernadette Matsushima), Xuhao, Elise Go, Kathy Zhao, and myself. These discussions encompass questions about growing up Asian in America, realizations of being a person of color, experiences of discrimination, thoughts on the need for Asian American activism, process and approaches to creating music, and defining together what Asian American music is. The project acknowledges and continues the research from current and past scholars, that includes, Oliver Wang, Deborah Wong, Diane C. Fujino, and Fred Ho, whose data and findings on various aspects within Asian American culture have helped to shape the field of Asian American music studies. To me, this process allows the research to be done collaboratively with people who are actually creating intentional Asian American music, making the project more meaningful and a group learning experience that brings people collectively together. My goal in continuing this collaboration beyond this qualitative project is in creating a collective with the musicians interviewed – ongoingly discussing, creating, collaborating, supporting, and holding space for Asian American music.

## I. History

Asians began immigrating to the United States during the 1830s, contracted as cheap laborers in search of work during the 1850s California Gold Rush. As the first Asian Americans began to emerge from the growing Asian population, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first law that prohibited immigration of an entire race.<sup>8</sup> Thus began the years of fearing discrimination and deportation. Amnesty for immigrants under false names was not granted until the 1950s and still many feared being deported and kept their false names throughout their whole lives. It was not until the 1960s that Asians began collectively fighting for their civil rights and inclusion, particularly in response to the Black Power and anti-Vietnam War movements.<sup>9</sup> Yuji Ichioka, one of the first people to use the term “Asian American,” along with Richard Aoki who served in the Black Panther Party, helped found the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) in 1968.<sup>10</sup> During this time, we also see more widespread protests and advocacy for African American rights and the need for individualism and expression, resulting in the forming of the AACM in Chicago, a group “founded by, led by, and created for African American artists.”<sup>11</sup> In response to the growing Asian American community, activism, and identity, Jon Jang and Francis Wong also saw a need for individualism and expression. We begin

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<sup>8</sup> J. Thomas Scharf, “The Farce of the Chinese Exclusion Laws,” *Article on Chinese exclusion in the North American Review*, Vol. 166, Issue 494 (2016), <[http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/dispatch\\_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=4055](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/dispatch_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=4055)> (3 November 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Daryl Joji Maeda, “The Asian American Movement” (Jun 2016), <<http://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-21>> (3 November 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Nic Paget-Clarke, “A Conversation with Jon Jang and Francis Wong,” 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Asian Improv, *In Motion Magazine* (February 1998), <<http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/jjfw1.html>> (10 November 2018).

seeing the rise of Asian American artists – Jon Jang recording with George Sams, Lewis Jordan, Mark Izu, Baird Miller, and Anthony Brown in 1982;<sup>12</sup> Fred Ho forming Monkey Orchestra in 1980 and the Afro Asian Music Ensemble in 1982 and releasing two LPs; Glenn Horiuchi recording with Francis Wong, Taiji Miyagawa, Leon Alexander, M’Chaka Uba, and Ayanna Hobson in 1988;<sup>13</sup> Mark Izu touring internationally alongside Lewis Jordan through 1987-1988; Miya Masaoka combining the *koto* with flutist James Newton and percussionist Frank Holder; Jeff Song, Jason Kao Hwang, and many more. Many of these artists collaborated with African American musicians and those who were a part of the growing AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) in Chicago. With the Asian American Consciousness Movement, the drive for inclusion, and the rising achievements among Asian Americans in literature, cinema, and graphic arts, we see the beginning of the Asian Improv Movement.

The Asian Improv Movement consists predominantly of artists that are second generation American-born and more frequently identify as American born Asian individuals. I state it in this way because being second generation, they are exposed more to American culture and traditions, but many of them keep Asian traditions passed down through relatives. They speak the language they were raised in, typically an Asian language, but are expected to speak English in schools, work, find a career, and everyday life things outside of home. As Asian artists in America they are exposed to popular music in the States and develop an affinity towards hip-hop, jazz, blues, soul, etc., which

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<sup>12</sup> Jon Jang, *Jang*, RPM Records, <<https://www.discogs.com/Jon-Jang-Jang/release/4820530>> 1982, LP.

<sup>13</sup> Glenn Horiuchi, *Next Step*, Asian Improv Records, <<https://www.discogs.com/Glenn-Horiuchi-Next-Step/release/3749422>> 1988, LP.

undoubtedly all stem from African American roots. The Asian Improv Movement consists of Asian American artists who strongly resonate with the emotions, traditions, and the need for music as a voice of hope, as it was for African Americans during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. As composer-pianist Vijay Iyer explains in his release of *Architextures* CD:<sup>14</sup>

The music in this collection has emerged from my ongoing efforts to document my life experiences. It depicts what I have learned as a member of the post-colonial, multicultural South Asian diaspora, as a person of color peering in critically from the margins of American mainstream culture, and as a human with a body, a mind, memories, emotions, and spiritual aspirations. As I am a member of the growing community of first- and second-generation Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Afghans, Nepalis, and Sri Lankans in North America, my music should be received as a real outcome of this diverse community. I function not as its official representative, but merely as a single voice – one among millions.<sup>15</sup>

The Asian Improv Movement was where people of color collectively came together to support communities suffering from discrimination, and this culminated in artists of many colors and backgrounds playing, performing, recording, and improvising with one another.

The San Francisco Bay Area was the up and coming place for Asian Americans coming together, and where the Asian artist scene expanded and prospered. Jazz was booming in San Francisco, started as early as the 1890s, being called “the Harlem of the West,” into the 1960s. Clubs were frequently visited by Miles Davis, Dexter Gordon, Dizzy Gillespie, Billie Holiday, and Ella Fitzgerald who were all seen performing in the

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<sup>14</sup> Vijay Iyer, *Architextures*, Asian Improv Records, <<https://www.discogs.com/Vijay-Iyer-Architextures/release/5990207>> 1988, CD.

<sup>15</sup> Dave Kaufman, “The Asian Improv: Adventures in Cross Cultural Synthesis,” *Perfect Sound Forever* music magazine (August 1998), <<http://www.furious.com/perfect/asianimprov.html>> (10 November 2018).

city. The Fillmore was a popular busy music district, which in the 1980s was the very place for the new beginning of the San Francisco Jazz Festival. It was no wonder that Asian Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area had an affinity with the African American diaspora. But jazz was also the music of the time, which attracted a diversity of people who flocked to the scene, where the music spoke of freedom and liberation, and a place where inclusion was possible and the people felt united. It was in this city that Asian American jazz artists collaborated with famous African American artists, with Jon Jang and Francis Wong being the primary leaders in this collaborative movement. Francis Wong's first composition released in the 1990s was a tribute to Melvin Truss, an unarmed 17-year-old African American boy shot by a San Jose police officer in 1985, taking inspirations from Coltrane, Mingus, and his own experiences with death, and music as an expression of release.<sup>16</sup> In this track he recorded alongside Jon Jang, Eddie Moore, and James Lewis. This same quartet played a number of Jon Jang's compositions – *Jang* and *Are You Chinese or Charlie Chan*, but struggled trying to find willing recording companies and taking years for anything to finally release. It was the African American artists that taught Jon Jang and Francis Wong about the importance of expression, identity, and pursuing an independent space to create music. African Americans in the 1960s began starting their own record labels in order to have full control of their own produced music. This inspired Jon Jang and Francis Wong to create a record label for Asian American artists and to have a place that inspired expression,

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew Gilbert, "Celebrating 30 Years of Challenging Music from Asian Improv," *KQED* (May 2017), <<https://www.kqed.org/arts/13214017/celebrating-30-years-of-challenging-music-from-asian-improv>> (10 December 2018); Nic Paget-Clarke, "A Conversation with Jon Jang and Francis Wong," <<http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/jjfw1.html>> (10 November 2018).

identity, and a space to create and be creative. Jon Jang explains his purpose of the Asian Improv: “creating the work, producing it yourself, and trying to have some independence. We didn’t really have a choice because we were excluded and disenfranchised...so we collaborated together to form Asian Improv.”<sup>17</sup> In 1987 they co-founded the AIR, the Asian Improv Records, and released their first record, *The Ballad or the Bullet?*<sup>18</sup> (Another Black Lives Matter work) by the same quartet, Jang, Wong, Moore, and Lewis, and in 1988 they created the Asian Improv Arts. The AIR and the AIA worked hand in hand and Jang explained their goals:

So going back to the success of Asian Improv Records and Asian Improv Arts, let me put it this way: the goal of Asian Improv Records and AIA was never to promote those as (an) organizational record company. The goal was to help develop artists. They’re one in the same. AIA is served as a presenter of music and most recently supporting multi-disciplinary arts. ... Francis and I are both Chinese and we’ve dealt with crisis, we’ve dealt with disasters, we’ve had to cut back a little bit but that’s part of the cycle. During the 90’s we were given opportunities and now we have to create our opportunities.<sup>19</sup>

He says this eloquently as the AIR and the AIA is to create opportunities for Asian artists, unite them, and uplift Asian Americans and people of color.

By the 1990s Asian American jazz transitioned into Asian American hip-hop, naturally also stemming from the liberating qualities of Black American cultural influences. We have Fresh Kid Ice, a member of rap group, 2 Live Crew (formed in 1984), being the first Asian rapper who broke ground for all rappers, pushing limits on

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Paget-Clarke.

<sup>18</sup> Jon Jang And The 4 In One Quartet, *The Ballad Or The Bullet*, Asian Improv Records, < <https://www.discogs.com/Jon-Jang-And-The-4-In-One-Quartet-The-Ballad-Or-The-Bullet/release/2605499>> 1987, LP.

<sup>19</sup> Dmae Roberts, “Jon Jang, Jazz Pianist, Interview,” *Crossing East Archive* (December 2005), <<http://www.crossingeast.org/crossingeastarchive/2017/03/27/jon-jang-interview/>> (12 December 2018).

sexually explicit material and openly embracing being Asian, calling himself “Chinaman.”<sup>20</sup> In 1995, Key Kool (Kikuo Nishi) and Rhettmatic (Nazereth Nirza), released an LP, *Kozmonautz*, which included, “Reconcentrated,” a track that talks about the relocation of Japanese Americans into internment camps during WWII.<sup>21</sup> Following this inspiration, one of the first prominent Asian American hip-hop groups is Mountain Brothers (formed in 1994), paving the way for Asian American representation in popular culture. In an interview with Scott Jung, a former member of the Mountain Brothers and now producer, CHOPS:

The process of getting signed, and then dealing with our label, did have hurdles due to us being Asian. An A&R for a well-known record label (that we were promised a deal with) suggested we wear “karate suits” and hit gongs onstage. The best thing we did to get attention from labels was to send our demos in with a note saying, “You might notice we didn’t include a picture. If you dig the music, we’ll gladly send you some. If you don’t, pictures don’t matter.”<sup>22</sup>

He explains that in order to be seen as equals in the music industry, he first had to be not judged for his appearance but strictly for his music. This was necessary during the time especially having aspirations to enter an industry that wanted to be heard by all types of people, popular or not. However, in response to record labels not interested in or not knowing how to market Asian American musicians, we also see a rise in the popularity of independent labels, following suit with the internet and social media becoming a large

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<sup>20</sup> Zachary Schwartz, “Remembering Fresh Kid Ice, a Pioneering Asian Rapper,” *noisey Music by VICE* magazine (14 July 2017), <[https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/wj84aw/remembering-fresh-kid-ice-a-pioneering-asian-rapper](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/wj84aw/remembering-fresh-kid-ice-a-pioneering-asian-rapper)> (4 April 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Key-Kool & Rhettmatic, *Kosmonautz*, Up Above Records, <<https://www.discogs.com/Key-Kool-Rhettmatic-Kozmonautz/release/2054911>> 1995, CD.

<sup>22</sup> Sameer Ro, “3 Questions for Scott ‘CHOPS’ Jung, Asian-American Hip-Hop Ceiling-Breaker,” *COLORLINES* (13 November 2015), <<https://www.colorlines.com/articles/3-questions-scott-chops-jung-asian-american-hip-hop-ceiling-breaker>> (4 April 2020).

factor in popular music. In 1999 Mountain Brothers self-released an album, *Self: Volume 1*<sup>23</sup> and in 2003, *Triple Crown*.<sup>24</sup> With self-expression being more accessible, a rising Asian American freestyle rapper by the name of MC Jin released his first recorded single in 2003, “Learn Chinese,” a controversial track at the time. In an interview with Kat Chow on NPR, Loren Kajikawa, an ethnomusicologist at the University of Oregon, says:

The producers of "Learn Chinese" were probably trying to play on Jin's "sonic otherness," making his apparent foreignness seem interesting while trying — but failing — to defy the same stereotypes he was calling on. "As a whole, it starts off promising, because he's trying to push back on these stereotypes and subvert them ... But what he ends up giving you in place is this kind of Chinatown make-over of a gangster-rap video, which doesn't really challenge the kind of conventions or norms in hip hop, which is fine if you're not trying to do that, but I think he was."<sup>25</sup>

Jin was seen as an artist ready to break through for Asian American representation, however, “Learn Chinese,” brings MC Jin’s rap career to a pause as the audience responded with mixed reviews. It proved unsuccessful in the U.S. Billboard charts, resulting in pushing Jin to realize the faults in his release:<sup>26</sup>

With 'Learn Chinese' while I was in the studio with 'Clef and the whole Ruff Ryders environment, I think the intentions were there. The intentions were pure, but the execution may have been where there was a miscalculation, even if you talk about visually, the video, running around and doing karate kicks and sliding on the floor and all that extra stuff.

At the time, like I said in the verse, I'm in my early 20s, I'm just having a ball. I'm enjoying it. Whereas now I look back on it, I'm like, 'Wow, that was such a

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<sup>23</sup> Mountain Brothers, *Self: Volume 1*, <<https://www.discogs.com/Mountain-Brothers-Self-Volume-1/master/76971>> 1998, CD.

<sup>24</sup> Oliver Wang, “Mountain Brothers: Winning Voices,” *AAWW* (16 July 2012), <<https://aaww.org/mountain-brothers-winning-voices/>> (4 April 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Kat Chow, “Rapper Jin Tries To Stretch His ’15 Minutes’ Of Fame,” *NPR CODE SWITCH* (4 March 2015), <<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/03/04/388688942/-there-too-early-rapper-jin-returns-with-weight-off-his-shoulders>> (4 April 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Traci G. Lee, “The Rise, Fall, and Rise Again of MC Jin,” *NBC NEWS* (9 April 2015), <<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/return-mc-jin-n324236>> (4 April 2020).



great opportunity to make a statement and this is the statement that you made Jin?<sup>27</sup>

Ten years later, in 2014, MC Jin came back with a release titled, “Chinese New Year,”<sup>28</sup> a track that talks of his experiences being Chinese American and reflecting humbly on his very first unsuccessful publicized track, “Learn Chinese:”

While we on the topic / I got something to reveal / Can I be real though / I mean really real / Cause at one point / Yo I was losin’ sleep / Thinkin’ bout the first song / That I ever released / Lookin’ back it was a / Lesson in my eyes / And if you never heard of it / Hey that’s just / A blessin’ in disguise / Learn Chinese dropped / Things never been the same / Credibility gone / Charge it to the game / Truly though seemed like a / Scene straight outta movie / I was in the studio / With 1/3 of The Fugees / It’d be a understatement / To say I was excited / So when Clef said that’s it / I ain’t hesitate to write it / I was barely 21 / But that’s not an excuse / I got on my own two feet / And walked into that booth / To make y’all proud / That’s all I’m tryin’ to do here / Cause for me / Everyday is Chinese New Year<sup>29</sup>

The song uses a sampled instrument sounding like the *erhu* (Two string Chinese bowed instrument) and throughout his rap he brings in Cantonese words that emphasize his upbringing. With the use of words and narratives being utilized in rap, it made sense that Asian Americans would be captivated by freestyling and a world that allowed any material and story to be used. Like Asian American jazz, it became a place for freedom of speech, solidarity, and the importance of skill and talent over image.

Reaching the peak in popular music, in 2001, the first Asian American group to reach Billboard Number 1, called Far East Movement, was created, a band comprised of

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<sup>27</sup> Chow, “Rapper Jin Tries To Stretch His ‘15 Minutes’ Of Fame,” <<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/03/04/388688942/-there-too-early-rapper-jin-returns-with-weight-off-his-shoulders>> (4 April 2020).

<sup>28</sup> MC Jin, “Chinese New Year,” The Great Company Records, <<https://music.apple.com/us/album/chinese-new-year-single/915275069>> 2014, Single.

<sup>29</sup> MC Jin, “Chinese New Year,” *Genius* Lyrics <<https://genius.com/Mc-jin-chinese-new-year-lyrics>> (4 April 2020).

Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Korean) Americans. In order to hide their ethnicity, they were originally named Emcees Anonymous and, under that name, they released a track titled “Far East Movement,” that talked about their Asian cultural upbringing in Koreatown, LA. They realized the production of the track itself was terrible, but it did reflect their pride in and truth of their identity, therefore changing their brand and name to Far East Movement.<sup>30</sup>

With the rise in Asian American representation, we begin seeing more space and possibilities for political statements and activism in order to bring together Asian Americans. Oliver Wang, a Professor of Sociology at California State University, Long Beach, writes:

Model Minority emerges at a fascinating point in the evolution of Asian Americans, hip-hop and pop culture. Jin brought battle-tested cred. Koreatown’s Far East Movement has recently demonstrated commercial viability. There’s also the general bum-rush of social media by the likes of Hawaii’s Ryan Higa and the UC San Diego-founded Wong Fu Productions. Model Minority triangulates itself within all this, describing itself on Facebook as “The Wong Fu of rap. The Asia-centric dead prez. The 2010 Mountain Brothers. The activist Far East Movement.”<sup>31</sup>

In 2011, “Grandmaster” (Jason Chu), “English” (Andrew Fung), and “D-One” (David Fung), came together with their comedy and musical skills, creating a group called Model Minority. Their first and only release is an 18-track mixtape called, *Model Minority Report*, comprising of comedic Asian American parodies of popular hip-hop tracks,

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<sup>30</sup> EDM Identity Staff, “FEATURED INTERVIEW: FAR EAST MOVEMENT,” *EDM Identity* (14 November 2016), <<https://edmidentity.com/2016/11/14/featured-interview-far-east-movement/>> (5 April 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Oliver Wang, “Model Minority: Three Chinese Americans shuttle between racially colored humor and politics,” *Los Angeles Times* (22 March 2011), <[https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/music\\_blog/2011/03/model-minority-three-chinese-americans-shuttle-between-racially-colored-humor-and-politics.html](https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/music_blog/2011/03/model-minority-three-chinese-americans-shuttle-between-racially-colored-humor-and-politics.html)> (5 April 2020).

original rap, a language mixture of Chinese and English, and growing up as a minority finding rap and hip-hop.<sup>32</sup>

Later in that year, Dumbfoundead, an up and coming rapper, released his first album, *DFD*, filled with conscious lyrics and narratives about his life experiences, and naturally bringing up Asian American cultural references in a very personal conversational way.<sup>33</sup> In that album he talks about growing up in Koreatown, needing hungover *pho*, looking like a koi fish, green bottle soju, and bits and pieces that represent an Asian American story without needing to explicitly say it. Soon after, we see Awkwafina releasing a rap song, “My Vag,” going viral on YouTube as an Asian American female talking explicitly and comedically about her vagina, and similarly to Dumbfoundead, hints at her Asian American upbringing.<sup>34</sup> In 2014, Awkwafina began working on a documentary highlighting Asian American rappers, and in 2016, it premiered, answering questions on the difficulties of being Asian American and breaking into the hip-hop scene. Film producer Salima Koroma and Jaeki Cho find four rappers to focus on, one of them being Dumbfoundead:<sup>35</sup>

Koroma fixates on a quartet of rising stars, the most successful being Jonathan “Dumbfoundead” Park, a native of L.A.’s Koreatown who’s made a name for

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<sup>32</sup> Model Minority, *The Model Minority Report*, <<https://www.datpiff.com/Model-Minority-The-Model-Minority-Report-mixtape.191009.html>> 2011, Mixtape; Kent A. Ono and Alison Yeh Chang, “Asian American ‘Hipster’ Rhetoric: The Digital Media Rhetoric of the Fung Brothers,” *enculturation* (18 December 2018), <<http://enculturation.net/asian-american-hipster-rhetoric>> (5 April 2020).

<sup>33</sup> Dumbfoundead, *DFD*, <<https://music.apple.com/us/album/dfd/474370842?ign-gact=3&ls=1>> 2011, Album/CD.

<sup>34</sup> Awkwafina, “My Vag,” Restless Records, <<https://www.discogs.com/de/Awkwafina-My-Vag/release/9752328>> 2012, Single.

<sup>35</sup> Margaret Nickens, “Awkwafina, Fierce and Funny (and Asian-American), Takes on Hip-Hop,” *Ms. magazine* (11 June 2014), <<https://msmagazine.com/2014/06/11/awkwafinas-fierce-and-funny-and-asian-american-take-on-hip-hop/>> (5 April 2020).

himself in the battle-rap arena, where cleverly constructed insults are prized above all else. Nonetheless, despite his renown in that field as well as regular tours, Dumbfoundead remains on the outside looking in, and his frustration at record companies' confusion about (or disinterest in trying to figure out how to) market him to a wide audience is, according to him, symptomatic of a 21st-century America devoid of the sorts of sexy, tough, macho Asian-American male personas he's cultivating.<sup>36</sup>

The documentary touches on the stereotypes surrounding the sexuality of Asian Americans (the nonsexual appeal of men and exoticized women), the troubles of entering an industry where authenticity is judged by the color of your skin, and ways to depart from clichés of how Asian people are generally viewed. All of these topics are still very relevant, and Asian American music, representation, narratives, and solidarity are still needed today.

Many Asian Americans do not know the history of Asian American music, the inspirations of Asian American jazz, the freedom of Asian American improvisation, the power in Asian American hip-hop, let alone the history of Asian immigrant labor and the exclusion acted upon millions of people. Discrimination against and exclusion of Asian Americans has never faded, and this has come to light (as discussed above) through some of the responses to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. It is important today that Asian Americans promote solidarity and activism, through which redefining the Asian American diaspora is imperative. A culture that is especially apparent in the creation of Asian American popular music, which involves using intentionality and consciousness to express Asian American history, experiences, cultures, and identities, that are accessible within the popular culture media and geared towards the Asian American community.

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<sup>36</sup> Nick Schager, "Film Review: 'Bad Rap,'" *Variety* magazine (22 April 2016), <<https://variety.com/2016/film/festivals/bad-rap-film-review-1201758938/>> (5 April 2020).

I remember loud cackling laughter  
as I drank the bitter herbal drink  
that improves the health of my skin and hair.

Bursting sounds of recorded Cantonese  
Lingering over conversations of Chinglish  
A mixture of karaoke and the thoughts in my head.

Running around over plastic carpets  
With a cup of milk and condensed sweetness mingling together  
I touch my back pocket and make sure my Pokémon cards are still there.

When did I stop saying, “Jo tau la,”  
Was it when I first realized I was not American?  
Or was it the moment I was embarrassed of the stares at our oriental words  
Coupled with the clothes you brought back from China.

I thought I was ashamed, but it was more that your thoughts and emotions  
Must have carried into my own genes and characteristics  
Because we both stood there, frozen  
Counting all the eyes from strangers we would never look like.

Why is it that we never talked about it?  
Sometimes I wish you gave me the talk  
Not the one that the privileged can speak about the birds and the bees  
But the one that warned me of the sneers, assumptions, and slow over enunciated words.

In that American mirror, all I saw was a transformation of the word Asian changed over time  
Yellow  
Chinese  
Oriental  
Asia  
Where are you really from?  
What’s your real name?  
Do I have to visit China?  
Am I supposed to know the city my great grandma grew up in?  
I’ve only been to Hong Kong once.  
I was 4 maybe 5, I don’t remember much.  
My legal name is Matthew Ka Git Wong  
Usually only seen as a middle initial K.  
I’ve lived in the outer sunset of San Francisco my entire life.  
Thank you I do speak conversational Cantonese well  
Sorry I don’t know mandarin I can’t help you.  
I can’t help  
I apologize  
Is it my fault?

At the beginning of each interview, I read this poem, titled, “Asian American Childhood,” which I wrote specifically for this project. The purpose was to set the stage for the conversations we were about to have and approach this meeting time as a place for vulnerability, healing, and an open discussion of our experiences and beliefs. I grew up learning Cantonese as my first language and an unconscious belief at a young age that being Chinese was a bad difference. Much of my negativity came from the lack of role models in everyday news and entertainment, and it was not until becoming older that I realized I sought the representation to be validated in belonging to America. In, “Between the Notes: Finding Asian America in Popular Music,” Oliver Wang explains how Asian American music is a form that allows people to establish their narratives on living in America:

The term Asian American music is needed to provide a theoretical and historical point of reference so that we can contrast and compare diverse musical works of Asian Americans, examine their musical creativity and artistry, and understand their expressions for living in America as individuals and as members of ethnic groups.<sup>37</sup>

The creation of the term “Asian American music” gives representation to the experiences of living as Asians in America, and as such, shows that it is not a lonely story, but a reiterative process that collectively joins similar life experiences together. There are only a few Asian American musicians compared to the White centric whole of America’s entertainment industry, but those few individuals pave the way for Asian Americans to know they are not alone.

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<sup>37</sup> Oliver Wang, “Between the Notes: Finding Asian America in Popular Music,” in *Asian American Music*, of *American Music*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (University of Illinois Press, 2001). 442.

## II. Asian American Music

Representation plays a large role in influencing aspirations and encourage a wider range of dreams and possibilities. Asian American communities lack role models in artistic fields and in response, many Asian Americans do not seek artistic career paths and they relinquish artistic goals at a young age. In my interview with Sarah Bernadette (full name Sarah Bernadette Matsushima), she brought up the stagnancy of Asian American culture:

It does feel like, that there are a lot of artists who piggyback off of black culture, people have obviously done that for a while. But it [the music] kind of goes into appropriation and to even play devil's advocate, it is also because they [Asian Americans] don't have another choice, they are kind of stuck. They feel they're obviously not white, and they ask themselves but what else am I supposed to do, or what else am I supposed to look for, for influences.

Sarah Bernadette raises a large point that no one leads the Asian American arts towards a direction that is strictly Asian American, and questions where to begin and look towards. Black music comes from experiences and history, and with Asian Americans finding an affinity towards Black music, Asian American music should also come from their own experiences and history. Sarah Bernadette's own experiences come from her multiracial identity, Japanese and White American, and both cultures tie into her identity and play a role in her own music making. She is a singer songwriter performing a range of pop, jazz, chamber, and classical repertoire, having received her Bachelor of Music degree from Berklee College of Music. She is a part of and has co-founded multiple vocal groups and currently resides in Boston, Massachusetts.<sup>38</sup> In 2018, Sarah Bernadette released an EP titled, *Sakura*<sup>39</sup> which she discussed in the interview:

I think part of it is where people's intent comes from, if part of their music is wanting to showcase their part of their identity, then yea, I think it's whatever

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<sup>38</sup> Sarah Bernadette, "about," <<https://www.sarahbernadettemusic.com/about>> (20 April 2020).

<sup>39</sup> Idem, *Sakura*, <<https://music.apple.com/us/album/sakura-ep/1422573997>> 2018, EP.

they want. For me personally, I had an EP called *Sakura*, and I don't speak Japanese, and the album itself does not specifically pertain to my identity, but I wanted the EP to have some kind of tie to it. ... But the whole concept behind the EP, so *Sakura* is the meaning for cherry blossoms, and cherry blossoms are very culturally significant in Japan. Their symbolism has to do with the fleeting beauty of life, because they only bloom for a few days and then they die. Even though they're very beautiful, they're very short lived. That really resonated because, I think I'm someone who takes things very seriously and I overthink things a lot, and it's such a big thing as my roots for me as a person. I was really nervous about releasing the EP, "officially" too, so – it's okay, life is short, and it's beautiful, live your life and be happy.

For Sarah Bernadette, *Sakura* is a direct reference to her culture and experiences as an Asian American: self-identifying as having a Japanese background, but also her own personal narrative and relation to the temporary blooming of cherry blossom trees.

Intentions are important in creating Asian American music, since it is derived from a desire to express personal relatedness to being Asian in America. Oliver Wang brings up A Grain of Sand, a group that released an album in 1972 that talked about the panethnic Asian American experience and the movement during that time:<sup>40</sup>

Consider their song, "We Are the Children": We are the children of the migrant worker / we are the children of the internment camp / sons and daughter of the railroad workers / who leave their stamp on Amerika / Sing a song for ourselves / what do you have to lose? / sing a song for ourselves / we got the right to choose.

... A Grain of Sand unites them under the pronoun "we," making the heritage of one the heritage of all. This shared history allows Asian Americans to one day "leave their stamp on Amerika" as not just an American, but as an international union of Third World peoples. Moreover, by saying "we got the right to choose," they point out how panethnicity is created through construction and involvement versus being a "natural" state of identity formation.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Chris Kano Iijima, Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto, 'Charlie' Chin, *A Grain Sand: Music For The Struggle By Asians In America*, Paredon Records, <<https://www.discogs.com/Chris-Kando-Iijima-Joanne-Nobuko-Miyamoto-Charlie-Chin-A-Grain-Of-Sand-Music-For-The-Struggle-By-Asi/release/6021271>> 1973, LP.

<sup>41</sup> Wang, "Between the Notes," 451.



Asian Americans have to set their intentionality when creating something that represents their identity in order to reclaim a culture as their own. The “natural” state of identity referred by Oliver Wang is the assumptions, labels, and images placed by White supremacist societies. But having a clear intentionality towards an Asian American experience, gives the discriminated person power in their identity against their colonizers. That choosing allows the music and creation to be served into a purpose of directly labeling it as an Asian American specific experience, to which Asian Americans can personally relate to. Oliver Wang explains, with reference to Jamez (aka James Chang):

Drawing from his own personal narrative, Jamez feels like his discovery of Korean music better enabled him to explore the nuances of his identity. He shares, “in the past, I had always tried to be somebody else (black, white, Latino, etc.) because I never felt comfortable speaking in Korean. I spoke other people’s experiences, listened to other peoples’ dialects. Learning about Korean music was like learning my native tongue, albeit musically.” ... “So many of us are influenced by Western standards of beauty, speech and music. I want to expose Asian Americans to their rich legacy of music. Our beat of life.”<sup>42</sup>

Jamez uses his Korean American culture to approach his music, however, he has also found an opportunity to use music as a way to discover more of his Korean background and heritage, departing away from the American point of view. Language, for many, is a very direct relation to culture; slang is developed from current events within the country; and words are never directly translatable due to different cultural meanings and purposes. Oliver Wang continues, “He [Jamez] perceives culture in a more global perspective and his hip-hop is the bridge between traditional Korea and Koreans raised in America.”

Music alone is different depending on where you are in the world, even today the mixture of Western and Eastern techniques in popular music is fairly unexplored and

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 460.

experimental. Popular music within the country tells you what is accepted, wanted, and desired by society. Xuhao finds his own passion in creating popular music and discovering Eastern sounds and melding them with Western techniques. Xuhao is a second generation Chinese American, born in Boston, Massachusetts, and raised with a strong connection to Chinese culture, attending Chinese school and speaking Mandarin. He graduated from Eastman School of Music where he studied jazz, and is now writing his own music, while studying and researching Chinese music techniques. In my conversation with Xuhao, he said:

And I think because as a result of our music, not being in Asian lyrics but being in English, we don't have the advantage. I think a lot of the defining aspects will be transferred instead to the instrumentals – to the vocabulary, the use of scales, sound structures, dynamics, approaches, philosophy, or whatever else in that specific culture.

Xuhao has been constantly wondering what the hybridity of Asian and American sound is. He explores the use of *guqin* (Chinese plucked instrument belonging to the zither family) techniques and sounds, and he finds inspiration in what he considers his own Chinese American music. In the recordings he provided prior to the interview, which contained a mixture of covers and originals,<sup>43</sup> I could hear his guitar sliding and bending, and recreating a similar sound to the *guqin* and *erhu* (Chinese two string bowed instrument). Xuhao has found Western Rock music to be a solution in which his inspiration of the combination of Chinese and American sounds can flourish. The pentatonic scale is found in both Chinese and Western Rock songs and helps the two genres mesh together. Xuhao's musical practice includes intentionally listening to

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<sup>43</sup> Xuhao, "Uploads," [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4olHkes1e4M4qoUwu6wHdg?fbclid=IwAR0tXsyEYOX9UBLbJCh73bZESghuG\\_SKQ58lzdi7VE356EzUbk7A1M5wCz4](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4olHkes1e4M4qoUwu6wHdg?fbclid=IwAR0tXsyEYOX9UBLbJCh73bZESghuG_SKQ58lzdi7VE356EzUbk7A1M5wCz4) (10 April 2020).

Chinese songs and other bands that have been incorporating the combination of Chinese and Western Rock techniques. He talked about the use of a classic Japanese song as the backbone of “Sakura Sakura” by The Slants, and an Indian American musician incorporating sounds and techniques from India in “Flower” by Soundgarden.<sup>44</sup> The result of his constant listening has intuitively given his guitar playing a more Chinese influenced sound.<sup>45</sup>

Fred Ho, a leading musician combining Asian musical forms with African American jazz began experimenting with this new sound in the 1970s. Diane C. Fujino, a Professor of Asian American Studies at UC Santa Barbara, discusses Fred Ho’s philosophies, inspirations, and music:

Ho joined, IWK [I Wor Kuen] took the position that “Asian American art and culture necessitates a link to traditional Asian cultural forms.” This directive ... motivated Ho to begin an intensive study of the folk traditions of Asian American culture. He notes:

... Such a tradition includes the first immigrant cultural forms: Cantonese opera, the woodfishhead chants, the talk-story traditions, the folk ballads and syllabic verses of the Chinese immigrant laborers, the Japanese American female plantation labor songs (*hole hole bushi*), the Angel Island poetry, the Filipino randalia and folk ballads of the manongs (Filipino immigrant bachelor workers), the Japanese American *tanka* (syllabic verse) poetry, etc.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The Slants, *Slanted Eyes, Slanted Hearts*, <<https://music.apple.com/us/album/sakura-sakura/286528859>> 2007, Album/CD; Soundgarden, *Ultramega OK*, Sub Pop Records, <<https://music.apple.com/us/album/ultramega-ok-expanded-reissue/1188051263>> 1988, Album/CD.

<sup>45</sup> Anthony White, “Premiere: Haishen new Single ‘Beluga’,” *Floated* magazine (2 April 2020), <<https://www.floatedmag.com/single-post/2020/04/02/Premiere-Haishen-new-single-Beluga?fbclid=IwAR0DKLyLg6bykyATTTrF0YQt1d19TYSzyZ6h5EHUgPa517QVKaal sX-cxnZQ>> (22 April 2020).

<sup>46</sup> Diane C. Fujino, “‘Return to the Source’: Fred Ho’s Music and Politics in the Asian American Movement and Beyond,” in *Yellow Power, Yellow Soul: The Radical Art of Fred Ho*, eds Roger N. Buckley and Tamara Roberts (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 108.

Fred Ho and Xuhao are both taking musical techniques from their heritage and incorporating them into a hybridity of Eastern and Western techniques. Xuhao approaches this belief on creating Chinese American music through understanding the traditions and techniques of all types of Chinese music. Similarly, Fred Ho finds it necessary that creating Asian American music is only through the combination of forms derived from the early Asian American diaspora (songs created through immigrant dispersion and poetry/musical forms derived from homelands) and the freeing qualities described in African American jazz. These immigrant cultural forms are created through narratives that needed to be expressed during times of oppression and maintaining a sense of identity within a foreign country. Angel Island poetry was found in carvings on the walls in the Immigration Station during the detainment of Asian (mainly Chinese) immigrants while the Chinese Exclusion Act persisted.<sup>47</sup> Cantonese opera within San Francisco and New York Chinatown was used for resistance, the working-class culture, and the holding on of Chinese traditions.<sup>48</sup>

Narratives, information, and experiences play a role in creating Asian American music. Elise Go's narrative directly relates to her Taiwanese heritage. She is a singer songwriter born and raised in San Francisco, and currently resides in Los Angeles, California, writing, performing, and producing her own pop and jazz infused music.<sup>49</sup> Her artistry strongly incorporates Mandarin, singing covers of Chinese songs, translating English songs into Mandarin renditions, and her own network throughout both Taiwan

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<sup>47</sup> Lai, Mark Him, Genny Lim, and Judy Young, "Island Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940," (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), <[http://www.cetel.org/angel\\_poetry.html](http://www.cetel.org/angel_poetry.html)> (10 April 2020).

<sup>48</sup> Fujino, "Return to the Source," 102.

<sup>49</sup> Elise Go, "Artist Website," <<https://www.elisegomusic.com/>> (22 April 2020).

and China.<sup>50</sup> Elise Go talks about her own pursuits in becoming an Asian American musician:

I think that's something I want to work towards and use my platform to basically inspire other fellow Asian Americans. That we can be whoever we want to be, we don't have to be in a box. But I think, let's be real, you ask people who Yo Yo Ma is, they know who he is. You ask people who Fred Ho is – I didn't even know who he is. So, there is a gap, and I think there's a middle ground you can reach, where you do have to, in order for you to relate to everybody. Because not everyone is going to relate to extremely specific parts of the Asian American experience. So, I think to bridge that gap, is slowly educating people through art or slowly sharing your experiences. Establishing your background and where you're coming from, I think that's already a step in the right direction.

So in the music I write, in this rap that I wrote, I don't talk about exactly being Asian, I say stuff like, "I want to make my mom proud of me, she taught me to work hard for the things that I want," and I think that's something all immigrants – all children of immigrants, can relate to. Their parents came to the U.S. for a better life, they worked really, really hard to provide for us, and for us to grow up here in the United States. That's really inspiring to me and makes me want to work harder to represent myself, to represent my struggle or the way I am.

She describes a narrative that is relatable to all immigrants – where we are all generations derived from immigration. That is a narrative that will always be true. In my conversation with Elise Go, we could relate to our own Asian American experiences in the hardworking attitudes from our parents and the pride we want our parents to have in our success. We discussed being unsure about defining Asian American culture, but we agreed that our musical narratives on Asian American virtues can immediately relate to our values on family, food, and traditions.

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<sup>50</sup> Elise Go, “狼 — 張礎安 Elise Go (Super Star 我要當歌手 7/26/2015),” <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVPVZE5bfCY&fbclid=IwAR0XIqopM5JL5IghAFX8sqZNNQz5vzcTNCscquyyFgfO04gOysBRrhsVtE>> (20 April 2020).

An artist's decisions and intentions towards specific lyrics, techniques, instruments, and physical appearance all can individually or collectively play a role in labeling an Asian American musician. But another side is the creation of Asian American music due to the responses of political and social change. This is seen especially within events that push Asian Americans to reestablish their identities in belonging to America, separating themselves from White American privileged ideals as people of color, protests on equity, or an opposition against oppressors towards a direction in liberation. In these instances, Asian American music is a necessity in order to be heard and results in a different form of Asian America music. Fred Ho in "Wicked Theory Naked Practice," says:

Unlike the "avant-garde" of a colonialist Western Europe or white North American culture, which isn't necessarily politically progressive or transgressive, and may indeed reinforce privilege, promote solipsism and self-indulgence, oppose social responsibility and consciousness, and elevate "art for art's sake," the "avant-garde" of oppressed peoples' cultures generally tends to fuel liberation, challenge cultural dominance and hegemony (usually of the oppressor, colonial traditions and forms), and promote rebellion, struggle, dissidence, disturbance, militancy, and opposition to the mainstream and the status quo.<sup>51</sup>

He talks about the differences of Asian American music and traditional concert Western European, U.S., or White culture approaches on art, and the importance of an activation of activism when creating art from an oppressed people's perspective.

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<sup>51</sup> Fred Ho, *Wicked Theory Naked Practice: A Fred Ho Reader*, Ed. Diane C. Fujino, new ed. (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 195.

### III. Asian American Music in Activism

Addressing the need for cultural liberation is a form of activism – questioning oppressors, reclaiming histories, redefining cultures, and fighting collectively as a community for answers. In this fight for equality and acceptance we see in history that art is one form that combines culture, heritage, and liberation into active protests and a call to arms.

Asian American music encompasses two different forms, one that is intentional in talking about an Asian American experience and still wanting to be accepted by all of society (I will call this mainstream), and the other that focuses on liberating Asian Americans from an oppressor’s perspective and creating music specifically for Asian Americans (more as activism).

Elise Go questions the exotic assumptions of others on her being and looking Asian and is constantly pushing her own narrative, finding what it means to be Asian in America:

I think about branding every single day of my life, how I want to portray myself as an artist. And I’m constantly like, that is not the route I want to take. I’m not going to have chopsticks in my hair, I’m not going to have *Cheongsam* [traditional Chinese female dress]. Like we are already in a box, we’re in a tiny box, and we don’t need to make the box even smaller for ourselves.

The box mentioned by Elise Go is the stereotypes Asian Americans both unconsciously and consciously live by. Some stereotypes are simply facts and unavoidable, a hardworking Asian, the “typical” computer science education, or even the consumption of strange foreign foods. The (negative) tiny box lies in the “otherness” exoticizations, the assumed femininity of Asian men (thus resulting in the need to prove their masculinity), the assumptions of an Asian foreigner rather than a natural born citizen, or the submissiveness and pushover personalities of all Asians. Musician branding for Asian Americans expressing their culture in their musicality, physical appearance, and

biography, is constantly a political act. This is due to the fact that branding lies in realizing the stereotypes and deciding to represent those as culture or deny them outright. Asian American music can be mainstream nonpolitical acts, but the history of Asian American music is derived from activism and the need to express a narrative. Xuhao found his own form of activism in discovering his approach towards his Asian American musical identity:

The idea that the two. That'd be American and the Asian were incompatible, and that was a way to sort of keep them [Asian Americans] mentally in check. Now, I don't believe that the two aspects are incompatible. I think we are oftentimes made to believe so, made to believe that these aspects are incompatible, but that's due to, in my opinion, racism and Orientalism – things that we get hammered in, at an early age. But I think that there is a sort of duality going on. And to be tying back to what it means to be Asian American, there's a duality that you almost kind of have to juggle, but it's a duality that's very fluid and flowing around in a vessel of whatever shape – you take your pick. Mine is a sphere, but sometimes, this duality settles in like a snapshot that is unified in a very fine beauty, and as Asian American creatives, part of our struggle is as much as an inner struggle, as it is an outer struggle. To unite all those elements that we've been taught and to unite them into a perfect snapshot within our creations. I think that might be my duty as an Asian American creative as an Asian American musician.

Xuhao's journey in discovering his own Asian American artistry has led to the confrontations of his identity relating to growing up in America, and also the formations of culture clashing together. When we are younger, we have a stronger desire to be accepted, and within that process is confronting an identity struggle of what we want others to see. However, this struggle is both an outward appearance and an introspective decision affecting everyday thoughts, decision making, and the approaches towards creating. In his own struggle, Xuhao defines his own Asian Americanness in music as the duality of both his Asian culture and his American culture – equal half spheres that form into his identity. This may not be the activism of protesting, but I believe embracing and



making intentional conscious music relating to culture, history, and a fight for one's own heritage, is a form of protest activism in itself. Art has always been a place of activism – responding to social political changes, and music is a direct creation of the voice, speaking, singing, and rapping all say something.

Amilcar Cabral, from “Return to the Source,” contains a speech about the necessity for cultural activism in order to have true liberation:

A people who free themselves from foreign domination will be free culturally only if, without complexes and without underestimating the importance of positive accretions from the oppressor and other cultures, they return to the upward paths of their own culture, which is nourished by the living reality of its environment, and which negates both harmful influences and any kind of subjection to foreign culture. Thus, it may be seen that if imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture.<sup>52</sup>

In this context is a speech in commemoration to the life of a partnering liberation leader, Dr. Eduardo Mondlane. His speech talks about how cultural oppression occurs during colonialism, where conquering countries assert their dominance and take away the cultures of natives. Amilcar Cabral was a leader who fought for the importance of indigenous culture in national liberation movements. Within Asian American activism, the dominance is seen by White Western ideals asserting over “foreign” and native cultures. Diane C. Fujino takes this speech and further explains Fred Ho's approach on Asian American activism and the need for its own liberation:

No colonizing force or oppressor can successfully dominate without destroying the culture of the oppressed peoples. Maintaining one's culture, turning back toward one's cultural heritage, or re-creating a liberatory culture (because as Cabral emphasizes, no culture is fixed or flawless) in the face of colonialism is thus a revolutionary act. This process is what Cabral refers to as “return to the source.” Rooted in Cabral, Ho asserts, “Oppressed people don't begin to fight their oppression until they resist the identity and historical image their

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<sup>52</sup> Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source*, Ed. Africa Information Service (New York and London: Monthly Review Press 1973), 43.

oppressor makes of them.” ... Music, as one form of cultural expression, is an important medium for resisting the oppressor’s symbolism and for decolonizing one’s mind.<sup>53</sup>

Xuhao defines that his own Asian American culture is the hybridity of combining his Chinese heritage and his American upbringing. Similarly, within “Return to the Source”: Fred Ho’s *Music and Politics in the Asian American Movement and Beyond*, Diane C. Fujino talks about Fred Ho’s philosophy and touches on the point of questioning an identity that may be an image placed by the oppressor and therefore needing to reclaim heritage while reestablishing one’s culture. Within Asian American music, following these approaches, is the quest to realizing one’s culture not placed by the oppressor, but defined by one’s self or one’s cultural community. The realizations lead to music with narratives speaking about this reclaimed culture, usage of musical techniques pertaining to one’s heritage, or any means that represent an approach that questions the colonizer and leads into their own Asian American liberation. Oliver Wang brings up Asian American activism during the Asian American Movement in the 1970s:

This open window of social opportunity is what the Asian American Movement was able to create by using cultural identity as one of its underlying motives. Historian William Wei reports:

Whereas Asian American activists have had little difficulty in accepting the need to refute stereotypes and reclaim history [in order to develop] an authentic Asian American identity ... they also realized the need to create an Asian American culture to give form and substance to that identity.

Wei notes that one of the major questions lying behind movement politics was the question of “who are we?” and that it was the work of cultural producers who helped provide answers to that question. ... According to Wei, these artists took it upon themselves to serve as “cultural ambassadors’ and bear the burden of speaking for their people.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Fujino, “Return to the Source,” 99.

<sup>54</sup> Wang, “Between the Notes,” 450.

Asian American musician activists pave the way and find answers in the “who are we,” simultaneously becoming “cultural ambassadors” and creating music intended for communities of Asian Americans. These ambassadors are musicians that find the conscious and unconscious needs of Asian Americans and are responding to current day events and questions pertaining to Asian American communities.

In recent events, activism can be in response to the racism caused by the reactions to COVID-19, the stereotypes placed on Asian Americans, and even the misrepresentation within history education and the entertainment industry.<sup>55</sup> In my interviews, I asked Asian American identifying individuals when they realized they were Asian American. The epiphany of seeing and feeling their own Asian American identity was usually triggered through negative experiences. The realizations happened during younger ages and they often talked about how they had received microaggressions (not knowing about this word until much older) that led to negative thoughts of being different or abnormal. Kathy Zhao relays her own discovery of being Asian American:

I grew up in a pretty White community when I was in grade school. And I always knew, but when you're a kid you don't notice it as much, and other kids don't notice it as much, because everyone is so innocent and carefree. There will only be occasional things, like, why is your hair black? Why do you speak Chinese at home? Why do you eat rice for lunch?

So those were things I would ask my mom. Mom, why do we eat rice and the other kids don't? Or why is my hair black and everyone else is brown or blond? So, I always knew there was that difference, I think that was the beginning of, “Oh, it's because my family is from China.” And that's how I would explain it to my friends who were first graders.

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<sup>55</sup> Ellen Lee, “WHY ARE ASIAN AMERICANS MISSING FROM OUR TEXTBOOKS?” *Public Standard* (14 June 2017), <<https://psmag.com/news/why-are-asian-americans-missing-from-our-textbooks>> (10 April 2020).

The simple comments and questions seem quite innocent and express genuine curiosity, but what happens for the receiver (especially a young receiver) is an entire questioning of identity, belonging, and looking into the mirror to only see differences rather than similarities. Kathy Zhao uplifts and advocates for Asian Americans within the consciousness of her own work. She co-founded Princeton University's first Asian American theater company, East West, and explores the history of Asian Americans within a play she co-produced called, "Charles Francis Chan Jr.'s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery," for her senior thesis.<sup>56</sup> Kathy Zhao currently works in New York City and is writing her own songs while collaborating with other Asian Americans.

Asian American music through activism not only seeks to comfort Asian Americans in not being alone, but it uplifts qualities, confronts stereotypes, and empowers the Asian American to speak up about their own feelings and negative experiences. Karen Lee from Unaffiliated Press talks about Maryland native, Uzuhan, an up and coming hip-hop artist who released his first single in 2010:<sup>57</sup>

Having experienced first-hand the injustices and misunderstandings that come from being marginalized – take a listen to Cleaner's Kid, where he [Uzuhan] raps about life as an immigrant in rigorous blue-collar work – Uzuhan strives to be a voice for the lesser heard. He's doing so by creating music in a genre that some might say is oxymoronic – Christian Hip-Hop.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Event Overview, "Charles Francis Chan Jr.'s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery," Princeton University's *Lewis Center for the Arts* (10 February 2017), <<https://arts.princeton.edu/events/charles-francis-chan-jr-s-exotic-oriental-murder-mystery/2017-02-10/>> (23 April 2020).

<sup>57</sup> Uzuhan, *Flight I*, <<https://music.apple.com/us/album/uzutrap-feat-yetti-paints/1470426998>> 2017, Album (total of three installments).

<sup>58</sup> Karen Lee, "Uzuhan: Redefining Contemporary Hip-Hop, One Rhyme at a Time," *Unaffiliated Press* (19 March 2018), <<https://www.unaffiliatedpress.ca/article/2018/3/19/uzuhan-redefining-the-contemporary-hip-hop-scene-one-rhyme-at-a-time>> (12 April 2020).

In his song, “Uzutrap,” released in 2017, he talks about the stereotypes that people place onto him and other Asians. Within his rap music, he confronts them, questioning and hoping that people should know better:

I’m stepping the ground. I’m counting my blessings / Aggressively pushing the boundaries all for my family / Came to this land. A dream in my hand / All of that changed when life decided to switch up my plans / Tell me now. How did we get so low? / Tell me now. How did we get so bruised? / Tell me now. How could they be so rude? / Swear I’mma lose my cool. I won’t be made as a fool now.

Hmmm Ching Chang Chong? / I’ll keep it trilly / Some of you sounding real silly / All of your “HOOWAH, HIYA” got me like really? / I’m guessing that it’s my mistake / For thinking that people can do better (do better) / Knew better? (you better chill) / I refuse to be your Jet Li / I refuse to be your Jackie Chan / Keep on yapping off like that / Keep on yapping all that jazz / A man can only take so much / When you keep on stomping, jumping on his back (crack) / I’m not a ninja (shing) Hey, I don’t do kung fu (kungfu) / But if you’re pushing me over the edge / Might see these knuckles do some / Crouching tiger hidden dragon / Get you feeling like Aladdin / Introduce you to a whole new world / Go ahead and see what happens / But... I’m not the violent type / Real loud cuz I’m not the silent type / I don’t fit the 9 to 5. Don’t try to put me in a category / I’m that 고기 조림 [*gogi jolim*] eating full time rapper / That your papa hates and gets mama worried / Not your ordinary: doctor, lawyer, and accountant / You know I’m an allegory / Maybe more like a unicorn! / Life of faith, I trust You, Lord<sup>59</sup>

Uzuhan accuses the oppressors and their stereotypes placed onto Asians, invites other Asian Americans by his questions on “How did we get so low? ... How did we get so bruised? ... How could they be so rude?”, and throughout his lyrics Asian Americans can relate to the experiences and feel supported, uplifted, and pushed to protest and object the labels placed onto them. Uzuhan creates in an uncommon genre of Christian Hip-Hop, utilizing his faith, his identity as a person of color, a minority, and his Korean upbringing to his own musical expression. Like many Asian Americans, our identity as our race is

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<sup>59</sup> Uzuhan, “Uzutrap,” *Genius* Lyrics, <<https://genius.com/Uzuhan-uzutrap-lyrics>> (12 April 2020).

not our only label, but is one of many, including our gender, sexuality, religion, trauma, physical and mental health, and the many more social and political identities created through discrimination that make up our intersectionality.

#### **IV. Intersectionality of Asian American Music**

In my own process of defining my Asian American musicianship, intersectionality has played a role in creating music meaningful to myself and for communities. As I create music, I constantly use my experiences with mental illnesses, being a part of the LGBTQ community, my religious upbringing, Chinese cultural traditions, physicality as an Asian man, being raised in America as a person of color, and traumatic experiences that make up my identity that it is today. I was born and raised in San Francisco, California, and attended Berklee College of Music in Boston for my undergraduate studies. For my senior capstone project, I showcased an installation about raising the awareness on the global LGBTQ community, featuring several people, a multitude of languages (English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Spanish, and Russian), and a video headlining the news and histories that happened all around the world. Now living in the Bay Area, I am seeking to create pieces within the Asian American genre for Asian American communities and incorporate all my different experiences into pieces that speak for and to others.

In order to redefine my Asian American culture, I had to unpack the stereotypes and racism that Asian Americans experience, and determine what characteristics make up my own Asian American identity. This process includes my own discovering and learning what Asian American music means to me:

As I'm learning the *erhu* [two string bowed musical instrument originated from China, also known as the Chinese violin], I am motivated to learn it,

continuously practice every day, and sound good because I don't want to be a failure at it. Especially having it so tied to my culture and identity. If I fail at the instrument, I'm in a sense, failing at my own Asian Americanness. And that's exactly how I feel towards making Asian American music, I can't fail because it's so important. I go around asking my non-musician or non-artist friends, "What is Asian American music? Is there such a thing?" And rarely do people say, "Yes, I know Asian American music, it's so and so, and that person, and oh that other person recording and doing so well." It's because no one is in the mainstream. I create Asian American music for the community, me failing and giving up and creating music for the sake of creating music, is counterintuitive and letting down my entire community. I don't think of it as pressure, no, I think of it more as motivation and a drive to reach a goal where we know what the Asian American culture is, the experience, the history, and we know where we're heading and who's leading us, as Asian Americans, in that direction.

When I create music, I cannot make music for the sake of making music, everything I do or think about expressing relates to my identity and the personal labels that define me.

Kathy Zhao talks about her own importance on her Asian American experience:

As an Asian American, everything that you produce is derived from your experiences, at least it's been that way for me. Because of my experiences as an Asian American, everything I produce is related to that experience and that identity.

When I asked Kathy Zhao if she labeled herself as an Asian American musician, she explains her own preference on identifying herself as Asian American rather than Chinese American:

Yeah, I definitely label myself as Asian American, I am Chinese American, but I usually tell people I'm Asian American, because I think I identify more with Asian American than I do with Chinese American. Because once you're in the U.S. it's [turned into] this Pan-Asian identity that feels stronger and more cohesive than the Chinese American identity. I do identify as Chinese American, but I feel that Asian American is more encompassing, and has a stronger sense of identity. I also think that sometimes the Asian community, less so in American, but I feel my [immigrant] parent's generation is more split into their national identities and what countries they came from, so they identify more as Chinese or Chinese American. But I actually do think it's a benefit that all Asian Americans have one cohesive identity [as Asian American].

Asian American is an umbrella identity encompassing a multitude of ethnic backgrounds. To choose the broad label of Asian American is a decision towards making alliances, a choice to acknowledge the discrimination placed onto an entire group of multiple races within the Asian American label. The choice to identify as Asian American rather than the specific ethnicity (Chinese American) gives recognition to the historical struggle of racism towards Asia America as a whole. The panethnic identity combines the experiences of Asian Americans and empowers small communities into one larger collective. Music is a combination of storytelling narratives, expressing culture, and revealing identities. Sarah Bernadette's intersectionality lies in her different cultures, her queer identity, and her gender:

Only in the same way that I label myself as a female musician or a queer musician. Yes [I am an Asian American musician], but not necessarily a part of going into my music making. But I do have notes and song ideas on my phone from random moments, and I do have intentions on writing a song about my identity and background. I have brainstormed about how I would want to do that, and how people's expectation or the ideas of, "being enough" or whatever, so it's something I think will happen. But, yes. I don't know if it is a thing that is constantly influencing my music, but it could, just like how any of my experiences could. It might be different for me, just because I don't have to always be thinking about it, because I am white passing, I don't know, I can't speak for other artists, but it's just how I feel.

These multiple identities all help define Sarah Bernadette, and in doing so, they constantly play a role in her narrative and music making.

Although I mentioned these two forms – Asian American music in the mainstream, and the other in activism, the two cross into each other very often because of intersectionality. Our different labels, cultures, and experiences that set us apart from the heteronormative White male identity come together with our Asian American backgrounds when defining our identity. Asian American is only one of our many defining characteristics, and it is our intersectionality that creates a variety of narratives,



both as activism and mainstream. As a musician I am constantly thinking about new creations towards something that needs to be said or heard:

Intersectionality is interesting, because it's all these things that we HAVE to label ourselves and be okay with, all because society as a whole does not accept those labels as the "norm." This consciousness of understanding discrimination, or the acceptance of our differences, gives us something to talk about that others can't. I mean to attach meaning into something I create, gives it so much more power. My identity will always, always, always, be a part of me, society will definitely not let me forget that. So, why not embrace it, twist it around, and empower others that they are not alone, that, that feeling, of coming out to traditional Chinese immigrant parents that were raised in a very Christian setting, along with fears of depression and anxiety building up, that feeling is not just me, and my goal for my music is to reach one person, each time, it's to uplift and comfort and help, at least one person.

My own discovery of the importance of intersectionality can easily lend to both the mainstream and activism of Asian American music. Xuhao brings up that when creating Asian American music, our other identities will play a role in our creative process:

You know, if you're taking from your own traditions, your own home countries. Your countries of Europe, ancestral countries, and you're fusing it with whatever, with music that you can find here in the West that speaks to you. The results that come out will be vastly different. But I think, and I encourage that, at the end of the day it will still be tied together, unified by our collective experiences as the Asian [American] diaspora and connected with that sort of approach.

With the intentions of creating music relating to the Asian American experiences, comes the natural instinctive approach to include our other narratives, and resulting in the beauty of the creation of a variety of unique music under the overarching theme of the Asian American genre.

## **V. Findings and Looking Forward**

Asian American history is important to acknowledge and know in order to step forward into reclaiming our identity and redefining our culture. The Asian American diaspora contributes largely towards the creation of Asian American music. A culture cultivated and changed through discrimination, assumed stereotypes, displacement, marginalization, and the specific narrative of what it means to be Asian in America. Through my discussions with Sarah Bernadette, Xuhao, Elise Go, and Kathy Zhao, we have learned that there is no clear official definition of Asian American music. Within these conversations we concluded that Asian American music can be generalized into two overarching categories – one that is in pursuit of the mainstream and acceptance by wider public audiences, and the second is in activism and created for goals of questioning oppressor's assumptions and empowering the Asian American community. However, because of intersectionality and the many identities we label ourselves that is not within the White heteronormative male spectrum, it is not limited to only these two categories. Asian American music is the intentionality of talking about Asian American specific experiences that promote cultural liberation and is created towards the purpose of reaching out to Asian American communities.

The Asian American genre encompasses music that is created with cultural narratives, history, the combination of Western and Eastern techniques, language, traditions, and of course, experiences specific to Asian Americans. Through the readings of scholars and musicians, Oliver Wang, Deborah Wong, Diane C. Fujino, and Fred Ho, I have learned that it is important as people of color who are marginalized to have a purpose in creating the art that we create. As minorities within a White dominant society,

Asian American publicized media is very underrepresented and scarce. Therefore, when Asian Americans are accepted into popular culture, they represent a lot for the Asian American population. Through my research it was difficult to admit but being Asian American does not make your music Asian American, I believe intentionality as mentioned before, plays a large role in classifying something as Asian American music. The image we give can uplift others and give representation and role models to many, but that is different than purposely creating about a personal Asian American experience.

The desire and audience for Asian American music is definitely there, as Kathy Zhao explains through the results of sold out nights for her Asian American play:

It's called, "Charles Francis Chan Jr.'s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery" [by Lloyd Suh]. It's a play within a play, an Agatha Christie murder mystery. It was also about building this Asian American identity, the characters are fictionalized, but it's based off of real people, who were working in this Asian American identity movement in the 60s. It was a play that featured an all Asian American cast, and we sold a lot of tickets. Pretty much all the Asian Americans came and saw the show, we sold out three out of five shows, and the theater [Princeton University's Lewis Center for the Arts] realized there was a market that they didn't know was there before. That Asian Americans came out to see Asian American identity, and after that, every year we'll have a play about Asian Americans, at least one, since it gets so much attention. So that was something that I think is a lot bigger nowadays where you see Asian American stories on its own and in entertainment, and companies are starting to realize there is a market, there's an audience for it. The biggest lesson I learned is that there is a market for Asian American stories.

Asians have been in the United States for a long time now, and I find myself and many others asking, what is our Asian American culture? We as a community need to deconstruct the stereotypes placed on Asian Americans and redefine ourselves into our Asian American culture and identity. Together we have to collaboratively agree on our own terms what characteristics represent us as a community, and what assumptions are incorrect and negatively impacting us. The need for Asian American stories is there, but

it is not fully realized due to the displacement of Asian Americans because of the “model minority” label. We as a community are unfortunately separated by the approvals of White American society, and the Americanness we have to show in order to validate we are Americans. Asian American music is one form that can express our cultural narrative and simultaneously gather Asian Americans as one community. Oliver Wang and Deborah Wong talk about how the music we listen to immediately plays a large role into our culture:

Deborah Wong has already started to push for thinking on this topic, writing, “Asking what music an Asian American listens to is a way into considering how and why Asian Americans make choices about identity, pleasure, and location, not least because very little public culture is Asian American.”<sup>60</sup>

As Wong says, “very little public culture is Asian American,” so what is created is equally as important as the influences we surround ourselves with. Wang continues:

As noted, many of the artists discussed thus far have generally struggled in order to gain any kind of visibility ... consumption becomes a crucial site to look at how consumerism is an act of identity formation just as much as cultural production. Almost as if in dialogue with Wong, Joseph Lam takes the matter of consumption one step further:

“Asian American includes all musics they use to express themselves. The ethnic identity of the composer who created the music or the historical origin of the styles and genres offer no foolproof tests of what is and is not Asian American music. The tests are in the ways Asian American meanings are constructed and negotiated by composers, performers, and audiences within specific contexts of sponsorship, mass media, recognition, and other musical and social forces.”

... Lam opens up the idea of culture – not just music – to include the actions of not just producers but consumers as well. Culture thus becomes more meaningful than just a one-way delivery of products and artifacts (films, books, songs) and suggests that there is a constant exchange of meanings between those who create art and those who consume it.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Wang, “Between the Notes,” 461.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 461-62.

As Asian Americans it is crucial that we seek Asian American music, and luckily, there are a few in the forefront of creating music within this genre. As Asian American musicians creating Asian American music, we have to create with the purpose of reaching other Asian Americans, it is not only a personal experience, but created towards and for Asian American communities and audiences.

Looking forward, Asian American music is and always has been, a collaborative experience. My own goal for my research is to gather like-minded Asian American musicians and listeners into one larger collective that discusses and defines what Asian American culture is through Asian American music. Within this collaborative experience are the combined thoughts of both producers and consumers. Oliver Wang says:

Lam's open-ended treatise on Asian American music allows for an involvement of players that isn't simply generous but radically changes how they – as both a community and also as individual agents – help constitute their own cultural forms and practices.<sup>62</sup>

As Asian American musicians defining Asian American music, as both listeners and producers, it is imperative to work together, be a part of communities with people of color, have constant conversations on these important topics, and raise awareness while gathering the community as a whole.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

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