Future Ready Voices: Gen Z

"When Hollywood Falls Short: How Asian Creators Are Rewriting Their Own Stories"

Asian American Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Heritage Month
By Sasha Parrish

While there are greater opportunities for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in film and television today, many of said opportunities are generated by their own communities. Where Hollywood falls short, Asian American's are often having to create opportunities for themselves that explore Asian characters beyond gimmicks and stereotypes.

As a child, there weren't many Asian Americans in my school or neighborhood, so most of my experience with Asian culture came through food or on screen. At the time, there was very little Asian American representation or stories being told in film and television and even fewer roles for Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders. Most of these roles were secondary with a few notable exceptions including the *Karate Kid* films, *Rush Hour, Wendy Wu: Homecoming Warrior, Mulan, Lilo & Stitch*, and *Avatar: the Last Airbender*. Most of these examples focused on martial arts and the animated films and series were often voiced by majority white actors.

As I grew older these roles began to expand and diversify as color blind casting grew to be more popular. There were more Asian American characters with stories that did not solely revolve around fighting and who held iconic leading roles. Still, many orientalist stereotypes persisted (tiger moms, subservient love interests, exaggerated accents, anthropomorphized Asian animals, etc.) as the diversity on screen is not always followed up by inclusion in writer's rooms. The character's backgrounds were often unexplored or represented without care. Every once in a while, a complex leading character would come about creating breakout roles for many Asian actors. Still, they were often treated as a one off and few opportunities appeared afterwords. Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* was a rousing success but lead actor, Dev Patel, was very vocal about struggling to find work afterwards outside of stereotypical parts like "taxi drivers, geeks, and terrorists". I don't recall seeing any Pacific Islanders in a live-action leading role until Dwayne 'the Rock' Johnson began to transition into acting.

It wasn't until I began to develop an interest in global Asian media, through recommendations from friends, that I became exposed to a breadth of complex stories and characters centering Asians. A 2024 study done by McKinsey & Company in collaboration with Gold House found that in film, AAPI representation has increased from 3% in 2002 to almost 20% in 2022, but 17% is from films produced outside the US, while 3% is from US-produced films, with a similar trend in TV. The study also found that that despite the increase of content from the US and abroad featuring AAPI characters and storylines, more than two-thirds of AAPI consumers are dissatisfied with the level of authenticity of their on-screen representation. In the West, Asian actors often have to create the roles they want to see themselves in. Actress, writer, and comedienne Mindy Kaling, for example, is responsible for many of the prominent roles in Hollywood for South Asian women (ex. *The Mindy Project*, *Never Have I Ever*, and *Sex Lives of College Girls*).

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Over the past decade many great strides have been made in terms of representation. Asian Americans can be seen on screen as love interests and ingénues (Simone Ashley and Yerin Ha as leading ladies in Netflix's Bridgerton), complicated secret agents (Sandra Oh as Eve Polastri on AMC's *Killing Eve*), superheroes (Simu Liu as Marvel's *Shang Chi*), industry titans (Ken Leung's morally dubious Eric Tao on HBO's *Industry*), and more. Award shows have begun to take Asian stories more seriously with films and series like *Beef, Everything Everywhere All at Once,* and *K-Pop Demon Hunters* gaining critical acclaim. While critical acclaim is not the end all be all of quality, it is evidence that a market for Asian American stories exists in the West and a lack of investment in these stories is a missed opportunity for billions in revenue.

In 2018, *Crazy Rich Asians* grossed $130 Million in the US & Canada and $230 million globally. The film's success proved that there was a profitable market for Asian led live action films (something only minority led films and series seem to have to do, by the way). A 2023 McKinsey survey found that half of AAPI consumers would be willing to spend more money and time on film and TV if their experiences were represented more authentically. This is especially relevant as further research found that "Asian American consumers earn approximately 30 percent more in annual income, on average, compared with their peers of other races… And they spend even less of their income on film and television—approximately 0.4 percent compared with about 0.9 percent for White and Black consumers". The study highlights how the continued lack of representation for actors and Asian stories only works against Hollywood's financial interest.

As we have often seen, representation and inclusion only help further business. The stories and the talent are available, and America is ready to dive in!