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STYLE & CULTURE

Sex and the Asian man

Stereotypes that they are less than masculine have had lingering effects. But athletes, movie stars and even porn are revealing a desired image.

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Wanting to know what the mostly Asian American class considered desirable, professor Darrell Hamamoto asked: What posters are on your bedroom walls? After an uncomfortable silence, Hamamoto got the names he expected — celebrities such as Brad Pitt. There wasn't an Asian among them, which reinforced what he has long believed: that clichés and stereotypes about Asian men have rendered them sexual afterthoughts.

"You aren't creating your own images," the 50-year-old Japanese American told the UC Davis class. "Make your own movies. You have to take it into your own hands." Like Hamamoto, hundreds of Asian American men are writing books and poems and creating websites in hopes of redefining themselves by combating the enduring notion that they are sub-masculine. Many are offended that Asian men are projected as power players when it comes to intellectual intercourse but bystanders in the world of romance.

"Racist myths and assumptions about smaller stature ... smaller eyes — and less sexual and erotic drive — have stymied the development and acceptance of Asian American men as full erotic beings," writes novelist and UCLA professor Russell Leong in the foreword of "On a Bed of Rice," a collection of Asian American erotic literature.

Internet forums for Asians are saturated with discussion groups with titles such as "Raise Your Hand if You Love Asian Men!!" A thread on http://www.modelminority.com titled "When the Asian Guy Tries Too Hard" discusses the difficulty some Asian American men have attracting non-Asians — often considered a successful sign of crossover appeal. It registered 1,089 hits in two weeks.

Phil Yu, 25, a Korean American, was so angered by misconceptions about Asian Americans that he created a website, http://www.angryasianmen.com, which he says receives 50,000 hits a month.

A recent uproar on Yu's site erupted when Details magazine published a pictorial in its April issue titled "Asian or Gay?" Yu quickly rallied his readers by saying, "It seriously pulls out every offensive, stereotypical Asian pop culture reference imaginable, objectifying and exoticizing Asian men into a sexual stereotype."

A mid-January posting read: "Bad week for Asian men on reality TV ... on the latest edition of 'The Bachelorette,' Andy [Chang] got eliminated right away.... But honestly, what did you expect? Like she was going to choose the lone, token Asian guy out of that bunch?"
Days after he was booted, Chang said he was disappointed he was the only bachelor that didn't get a one-on-one meeting with Meredith Phillips, the ABC show's bachelorette. After he was eliminated, he wondered what effect his ethnicity had.

"After the fact, I think it worked against me," said Chang, who beat out thousands of applicants to be on the series.

Chang, a Chinese American dentist based in a Dallas suburb, says he's the antithesis of the socially inept Asian typecast.

The 5-foot-11 bachelor with the athletic build was in a fraternity and never had much problem finding dates. But since he appeared on the show, the 33-year-old said meeting women has been even easier. This, despite once being told by a new patient that she thought he would look like Mr. Miyagi from "The Karate Kid."

"I may have a dental degree," he said. "Does that mean I have to look like a nerd?"

**The direct approach**

Hamamoto has even taken the advice he gave his students, albeit in a more controversial manner. He financed a pornographic movie titled "Skin on Skin," starring a Korean American actor.

"I wanted people to look at this Asian American and say, 'He's great, he's performing, he's bright, he's beautiful,' " he said. "I wanted to take the lowest road possible. Something basic. Raw."

Ultimately, Hamamoto said he wants to show the world that Asians are sexually complex and that assumptions about nerddiness are unjust. He plans to launch a porn company that he believes would empower Asian Americans. Criticism that he has cheapened his cause by using pornography does not bother him, he said. The risqué endeavor is also a scholarly exercise, which includes the "Masters of the Pillow" documentary on the making of "Skin on Skin." The film, with commentary from Asian American filmmakers, academics and playwrights, was shown at the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival in March and the Visual Communications Filmfest in Los Angeles on May 1.

Late last year, word of Hamamoto's project led to spoofs on Comedy Central's "The Daily Show," which aired a mock news story about the dearth of Asian men in pornography, and NBC's "Tonight Show," which showed a skit featuring Godzilla with his groin blacked out breaking up an all-Asian bedroom romp.

**Feeling the stereotype**

The stereotypes have a clear emotional effect on Asian American men, said William Liu, an assistant professor of counseling psychology at the University of Iowa.

Those who live in predominantly non-Asian communities begin to loathe the appearance and develop ideals of beauty that value blond hair and blue eyes. Some court non-Asian women exclusively as a sign of status because "they're able to overcome stereotypes and cultural prohibitions," Liu said.

Asian American men lack the success Asian American women have had in interracial relationships. It's a sensitive fact complicated by the belief by many in the community that society objectifies Asian females as hyper-sexual Suzy Wongs. The 2000 Census shows that Asian American women are more than twice as likely to be involved in an interracial marriage than their male counterparts.

For poet Beau Sia, growing up in predominantly white Oklahoma City was alienating. Romantic opportunities in high school did not exist. With pent-up frustration, it wasn't until he left for New York University as a teenager that he began to develop his forceful poetry delivery. There, he soon learned what it was like to bask in female attention. His prose, which sometimes touches on myths about Asian men, is regularly performed in Def Poetry Jam's shows on HBO and live shows nationally.

"It's taken years working and performing around the country to help me understand that I'm not bad looking," said the 27-year-old with angular features and stylish hair. "Growing up in Oklahoma, it was hard when what was [considered] attractive, pretty or handsome weren't people who looked like me."

The roots of Asian male stereotypes date back 200 years, historians say, when immigrants started arriving in the U.S. en
masse as cheap labor. For decades, they encountered a barrage of discrimination that prevented them from owning property or marrying outside their race. Some were barred from heavy industry, so men took on traditionally feminine enterprises like laundry and cooking.

By 1882, Chinese immigrants were prohibited from entering the U.S., stranding those stateside without brides. Subsequently, a "bachelor society" emerged. Wars with Japan, Korea and Vietnam helped demonize Asian men further and gave Americans license to ridicule them, historians say.

"The emasculation of the Asian male has a very long history," said Henry Yu, an associate professor at UCLA's Center for Asian American Studies.

Many Asian Americans are still horrified by older images such as writer Sax Rohmer's books about the sinister Dr. Fu Manchu and Mickey Rooney's buck-toothed Mr. Yunioshi from "Breakfast at Tiffany's," perhaps the character Asian Americans most commonly identify as a racist icon of an earlier Hollywood.

Some of a younger generation cringe at the sight of the nerdish Long Duk Dong from the 1984 teen classic "Sixteen Candles."

A second look

But there are indications that Asian American men may be acquiring more appeal.

American-born Asians are out-marrying more than older generations. Popular culture and sports have introduced more Asian male faces, such as basketball player Yao Ming, baseball player Kazuo Matsui and the actors from the edgy teen movie "Better Luck Tomorrow," which received mainstream distribution from MTV Films. The acclaimed Australian film "Japanese Story" centers on an affair between a white woman and a Japanese man.

Hunky Korean American actor Will Yun Lee, 28, turns down martial arts roles because he feels they perpetuate a passionless warrior image. He would rather be a leading man.

"As an Asian American male, it's tough being thought of as any romantic love interest" in a movie, said Lee, voted by People magazine as one of 2002's 50 most beautiful people.

"When I first started out five, six years ago, a lot of auditions for Asians had to do with technical computer guys. And at some point it started switching to the villain or the mafia guy," Lee said.

His latest appearance, in the motorcycle-themed action flick "Torque," was described in The Times as "stereotype-smashing," though Lee said he simply plays who he is: "A regular guy who grew up in America listening to Metallica like everyone else."

Another actor who gave Asian American men something to cheer about was Bruce Lee, but ultimately he did little to advance their romantic value, many say. Even today, Asian American men complain that action heroes such as Chow Yun Fat and Jackie Chan rarely get the girl.

As Leong, the author and UCLA professor put it: "Asian men can kick butt, but they can't have a kiss."

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