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Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity

EAST ASIANS

WHO WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

Those with an ethnic background or ancestry from the countries and territories of China, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan. This region, its population, and the diaspora reflect a number of different ethnicities, cultures, religions, and languages. Mongolia, in particular, reflects many cultural differences from the other East Asian countries and is sometimes considered a Central or North Asian country.

NOTE: Many stereotypes of East Asians have historically impacted depictions of *all* Asians across other regions and cultures. Find factsheets for other Asian Pacific communities (Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, South Asians, and Southeast Asians) at *WriteInclusion.org/factsheets*.

HERE'S WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Hollywood consistently depicts East Asians with racist and sexist tropes and paints them as "perpetual foreigners," exoticized outsiders who either don't belong and/or who pose a threat to the U.S. These kinds of depictions fuel xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric and violence against East Asians. The COVID-19 pandemic has dangerously exacerbated this behavior, leading to over 6,000 hate incidents against Asians in America in the last year. The othering of East Asians, who started immigrating to the U.S. in significant numbers in the mid-19th century, also ignores their many roles and contributions to U.S. history, culture, and society.

OVERREPRESENTED STORIES & HARMFUL STEREOTYPES

- **Perpetual Foreigner:** East Asian characters who can never assimilate to U.S. society (e.g., learning English), pose a threat to Western culture (e.g., Yellow Peril*), and/or are anti-U.S. villains (e.g., spies, here to "steal" jobs).

- **The Token:** Sidekicks to white protagonists, in over-depicted jobs (e.g., restaurant owner, laundry clerk), or, worse, silent props (e.g., in the background, no dialogue). They lack storylines and are often portrayed as nonspecific "Asians."

- **Butt of Jokes:** Characters used as punchlines for racist jokes (e.g., heavy accents used to otherize, bad drivers, nerds), or others being racist toward them for "comedy" (e.g., impressions, butchering names) without correction or scrutiny.

- **Model Minority Myth*:** Stories that paint East Asians as silent, hardworking, and passive but ultimately successful, deferring to white characters or systems of white supremacy, even if it's to their own detriment. This upholds the dangerous model minority myth and whitewashes identity and experience.

- **"Exotic" Women:** Hypersexualized and fetishized women, depicted as domineering (e.g., Dragon Lady*) or subservient (e.g., sex worker, obedient wife). These portrayals objectify East Asian women, putting them in danger of real-world violence.

- **Emasculated Men:** Men portrayed as weak and romantically undesirable for not fitting into heteronormative, Eurocentric beauty ideals. This fuels harassment against East Asian men, especially queer men.

- **Honor:** Characters driven only by bringing prestige to their families (e.g., kids with tiger parents), "saving face," and honoring collective goals over individual goals. These limited portrayals can create a culture of shame among East Asians.

- **Martial Arts:** Characters portrayed as unathletic unless they do martial arts. These depictions are usually appropriative, ignore culturally distinct practices, and erase East Asians from other sports/hobbies (and wrongly assume they all know martial arts).

THINGS WE'D LIKE TO SEE MORE OF

- **Reframed POV:** East Asian protagonists (e.g., heroes, desirable romantic leads) driving their own storylines, not silent props serving other characters' stories.

- **Cultural/Ethnic Specificity:** Stories and characters that represent specific East Asian cultures, families, customs, and behaviors (e.g., Japanese, Taiwanese, Mongolian) and aren't painted with a vague "Asian" brush (e.g., gongs, dragons, Confucianism).

- **Varied Experiences:** Nuanced East Asian characters of all kinds (e.g., LGBTQIA+, disabled, mixed-race, older, adopted) whose identities and socioeconomic status affect their beliefs and behaviors. Go beyond typical Chinese, Japanese, and Korean stories, especially to portray underrepresented ethnic groups (e.g., Ainu, Zhuang, Uyghur, indigenous Taiwanese people). Show characters in various jobs and community roles (e.g., teachers, artists, politicians).

- **Joy:** Joyful, carefree, and hopeful stories about East Asians (e.g., positive relationships between family, friends, partners; in community with one another and other cultural groups; kids just being kids).

- **Debunking the Myth:** Characters and stories that break the model minority myth (e.g, activists, slackers, characters with mental health storylines). Show East Asians calling out anti-Asian racism and in solidarity with other ethnicities.

- **The American Experience:** Examine East Asian American culture and history *as* U.S. culture and history (e.g., role in Transcontinental Railroad, Chinese Exclusion Act*, Japanese American incarceration*). Show how these worlds blend across pop culture, religion, spirituality, etc. Explore the different and similar experiences between U.S. citizens and immigrants, sometimes within one family, across generations.

- **Diversity in Language:** Languages that reflect characters' cultural backgrounds to varying degrees and levels of fluency (e.g., not all Korean people speak Korean well or at all). Some East Asians are multilingual, while others speak only one language.

*Denotes a term in the glossary

➡ In 2016, only 4.3% of series regulars on TV were played by Asian American and Pacific Islander actors. Of these characters, 28% were Chinese, 15% were Korean, and 9% were Japanese.

➡ There are a variety of East Asian languages. Some of the more common ones include: Mandarin, Tibetan, and English in China; Mongolian and Russian in Mongolia; Korean and English in Korea; Japanese in Japan; Mandarin, Taiwanese, and Hakka dialects in Taiwan; Cantonese in Hong Kong and Macau.

➡ East Asians practice a number of religions, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Animism, Daoism, Islam, Hinduism, and Shinto.

➡ As of 2019, there were 27,000 Mongolians in the U.S., with a majority living in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and D.C.

➡ From March 2020-April 2021 in the U.S., there were 6,603 racist attacks against Asians (especially East Asian and Southeast Asian communities, who were scapegoated for COVID-19), mostly against women. 65% of these incidents included verbal harassment, and 12.6% included physical assault.

ONLINE REFERENCES & RESOURCES:

- *AAPI Data*
- AAPIs on TV: *"Tokens on the Small Screen"*
- *Asia Society*
- Bias Busters: *"East Asian Cultures"*
- Densho: *"Japanese American WWII Incarceration: The Core Story"*
- Humanity in Action USA: *"'Yellow Peril' in the Age of COVID-19"*
- Japanese American Citizens League: *"An Unnoticed Struggle: A Concise History of Asian American Civil Rights Issues"*
- Nielsen: *"What You See Isn't What You Get: The Role of Media in Anti-Asian Racism"*
- Pew Research Center: *"Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population"*
- Rewire: *"How the Chinese Exclusion Act Still Impacts the U.S. Today"*
- *Stop AAPI Hate*
- Variety: *"How Anti-Asian Hate Crimes Echo Hollywood's Failings"*

GLOSSARY

Chinese Exclusion Act: A U.S. federal law passed in 1882 that prohibited Chinese laborers from entering the U.S. Fueled by anti-Chinese hate in California (where Chinese migrants were working as miners), the Act lasted 10 years. However, it wasn't until 1943, when the U.S. and China were allies in WWII, that Chinese immigration resumed. It's the first law to prevent all members of a specific ethnic or national group from immigrating to the U.S.

Dragon Lady: A stereotype of East Asian and Southeast Asian women that depicts them as strong, deceitful, domineering, and sexually alluring.

Japanese American Incarceration: In response to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor during WWII, the forced relocation and imprisonment of about 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry – including 8,000 American citizens – into concentration camps by the U.S. federal government. (This action is often referred to as "internment," a term that shouldn't be used as it ignores the illegality and immorality of what happened.)

Model Minority: Refers to the idea that some underrepresented groups in the U.S., especially Asian Americans, are perceived to have certain "positive" traits (e.g., industrious, politically undisruptive, intelligent, inoffensive). This myth erases differences among individuals, while also driving a racial wedge between Asians and other underrepresented groups in the U.S.

Yellow Peril: A racist fear in Western countries and cultures that East Asians, particularly of Chinese descent, will invade their lands and disrupt white Western values, power, and culture. While often dismissed as 19th-century history, racist anti-Asian fears, microaggressions, and violence persist and have been revitalized during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Please visit our Expanded Glossary for in-depth definitions of the above terms and definitions of additional terms: **Asian American, the Butterfly, Confucianism, geisha, Hong Kong, Macau, othering, Page Act of 1875,** *and* **tiger parenting**.

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A list of the most up-to-date contact information for all of our partner organizations can be found on our website:
WriteInclusion.org/factsheets

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