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Asian American Masculinity: Subverting Stereotypes in Shawn Wong's
American Knees

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Déclaration d'originalité de la recherche et engagement envers les règles d'intégrité scientifique

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Asian American Masculinity: Subverting Stereotypes in Shawn Wong's *American Knees*

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Signature de l'étudiant(e)

Dedication

I dedicate this work to: My dearest parents who surrounded me with great care to reach my objectives

in this life

My dear brothers Naim and Abd Errahman

Mrs. Hafsa Naima for her help

And lastly my two best friends Lamis and Hiba who made these past 5 years unforgettable

Thank you all.

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Abstract

Asian American masculinity is a multifaceted and ever-evolving concept that reflects the diverse experiences and identities of Asian American men in contemporary society. These men have long endured negative race-gender stereotypes and sexual racism, such as being perceived as emasculated, effeminate, unattractive, less manly, and unathletic. These stereotypes have sociohistorical roots in the discrimination and marginalization faced by Asian immigrants and their descendants in the United States. Over time, Asian American writers have played a crucial role in challenging and subverting these stereotypes and prejudices. Through their literary works, they offer more nuanced and authentic representations of Asian American experiences, including Asian American masculinity. One of the most prominent authors who have actively fought against these stereotypes is Shawn Wong, especially with his novel *American Knees*. This dissertation aims to explore how Wong confronts and redefines these stereotypes, ultimately contributing to a more diverse and inclusive understanding of the Asian American experience. To address the research questions, this study incorporates the use of sociocultural and masculinity theories. By applying these theoretical frameworks, the study reveals that Asian American masculinity is socially constructed, shaped by cultural and societal expectations and influenced by individual experiences and identities. The findings of this research demonstrate the significance of challenging stereotypes and prejudices, as well as the importance of creating more inclusive and accurate portrayals of Asian American masculinity. Through the analysis of Wong's novel, this study sheds light on the complexities of Asian American identity and offers insights into the construction and representation of Asian American masculinity in contemporary society.

Keywords: Masculinity, stereotypes, Asian American, men, sociocultural theory, masculinity theory.

Résumé

La masculinité asiatique américaine est un concept complexe et en constante évolution qui reflète les expériences et les identités diverses des hommes asiatiques américains dans la société contemporaine. Ces hommes ont depuis longtemps subi des stéréotypes raciaux-genre négatifs et du racisme sexuel, tels que l'idée qu'ils sont émasculés, efféminés, peu attirants, moins virils et peu athlétiques. Ces stéréotypes trouvent leurs racines historiques dans la discrimination et la marginalisation vécues par les immigrants asiatiques et leurs descendants aux États-Unis. Au fil du temps, les écrivains asiatiques américains ont joué un rôle crucial dans la remise en question et la subversion de ces stéréotypes et préjugés. À travers leurs œuvres littéraires, ils proposent des représentations plus nuancées et authentiques des expériences asiatiques américaines, y compris de la masculinité asiatique américaine. Shawn Wong est l'un de ces auteurs qui s'est activement opposé à ces stéréotypes dans son roman *American Knees*. Cette thèse vise à explorer comment Wong confronte et redéfinit ces stéréotypes, contribuant ainsi à une compréhension plus diversifiée et inclusive de l'expérience asiatique américaine. Pour répondre aux questions de recherche, cette étude intègre l'utilisation de théories socioculturelles et de la masculinité. En appliquant ces cadres théoriques, l'étude révèle que la masculinité asiatique américaine est socialement construite, façonnée par les attentes culturelles et sociétales et influencée par les expériences et identités individuelles. Les résultats de cette recherche démontrent l'importance de remettre en question les stéréotypes et les préjugés, ainsi que l'importance de créer des représentations plus inclusives et précises de la masculinité asiatique américaine. À travers l'analyse du roman de Wong, cette étude met en lumière les complexités de l'identité asiatique américaine et offre des perspectives sur la construction et la représentation de la masculinité asiatique américaine dans la société contemporaine. **Mots clés** : masculinité, stéréotypes, asiatique américain, hommes, théorie socioculturelle, théorie de la masculinité.

ملخص

الرجولة الأمريكية الآسيوية هي مفهوم معقد ومتطور يعكس تجارب وهويات الرجال الآسيويين الأمريكيين في المجتمع المعاصر. لقد تعرض هؤلاء الرجال لفترة طويلة لصور نمطية سلبية تتعلق بالعرق والجنس، مثل اعتبارهم أنثويين، غير جذابين، غير رجوليين وغير رياضيين. تأتي هذه الصور النمطية من خلفيتها التاريخية في التمييز والتهميش الذي يواجهه المهاجرون الآسيويون وأحفادهم في الولايات المتحدة على مر الزمن، لعب الكتاب الآسيويون الأمريكيون دورًا حاسمًا في تحدي وتغيير هذه الصور النمطية والتعاملات. من خلال أعمالهم الأدبية، يقدمون تصورات أكثر تعقيدًا وأصالاً لتجارب الآسيويين الأمريكيين، بما في ذلك الرجولة الآسيوية الأمريكية. شون وونغ هو أحد الكتاب الذين قاتلوا بنشاط ضد هذه الصور النمطية في روايته "أمريكان نيز". تهدف هذه الأطروحة إلى استكشاف كيفية مواجهة وإعادة تعريف وونغ لهذه الصور النمطية، مما يساهم في فهم أكثر تنوعًا وشمولًا للتجربة الآسيوية الأمريكية. للتعامل مع أسئلة البحث، تستخدم هذه الدراسة نظريات الثقافة الاجتماعية والرجولة. من خلال تطبيق هذه الأطر النظرية، تكشف الدراسة أن الرجولة الآسيوية الأمريكية هي بنية اجتماعية مبنية، مشكوك فيها بالتوقعات الثقافية والاجتماعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الرجولة، الصور النمطية، الأمريكيون ذوو الأصول الآسيوية، الرجال، نظرية الثقافة الاجتماعية، نظرية الرجولة.

Table of contents

Dedication.....	I
Acknowledgments.....	II
Abstract in English	III
Abstract in French	IV
Abstract in Arabic	V
Tables of Contents	VI
General Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Theoretical and Sociohistorical Background of Asian American Masculinity.....	5
1- Introduction	5
2- What is Masculinity?.....	6
3- Sociology of Masculinity	6
4- Social/Cultural Construction of masculinities	8
5- Asian American Masculinity	9
6- Asian American Masculinity in Literature and Cinema	13
7- Masculinity Theory And Sociocultural Theory	17
a- Masculinity	
Theory.....	17
a.1- Hegemonic Masculinity	18
b.2- Masculinity Theory Through Psychoanalytical Lens.....	20
b- Sociocultural Theory	20
8- Conclusion	21
Works Cited	23
Chapter Two: Asian American Men Through the American Lens.....	27

1- Introduction.....	27
2- Identity Crisis.....	28
3- The Model Minority	34
4- Masculinity and Mainstream Media	37
5- Conclusion.....	41
Works Cited.....	42
Chapter Three: Redefining Stereotypes in <i>American Knees</i>.....	44
1- Introduction	44
2- Asian American Counter Narrative.....	45
3- Hegemonic Masculinity	48
4- Conclusion.....	57
Works Cited	58
General Conclusion.....	60
Bibliography	63

General Introduction

Masculinity has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry, provoking discussions on power, identity, and societal expectations. It encompasses a wide range of beliefs, behaviors, and norms that define what it means to be a man within a particular cultural and historical context. The study of masculinity seeks to examine how these constructs shape and influence the experiences of men and their relationships with others. One intriguing aspect of masculinity is how it is experienced by different ethnic and cultural groups, such as Asian Americans.

Within the context of Asian American masculinity, the exploration becomes even more complex. Asian American men have experienced a unique intersection of cultural expectations, racial stereotypes, and the pressures of assimilation into American society. They are often confronted with a dual challenge of conforming to traditional values associated with their Asian heritage while also confronting the expectations of masculinity prevalent in mainstream American culture.

Asian American men have historically faced stereotypes that depict them as emasculated, weak, or socially awkward. These stereotypes have deep roots in historical events, such as discriminatory immigration policies and the emasculation of Asian men in media portrayals. These negative portrayals have had a lasting impact on Asian American men's self-perception, social interactions, and opportunities for representation.

However, it is important to recognize that Asian American masculinity is not a monolithic entity. It encompasses a diverse range of experiences, identities, and expressions. Some Asian American men challenge and redefine these stereotypes, asserting their agency

and individuality. They navigate the complex terrain of their cultural heritage, negotiating between traditional values and contemporary notions of masculinity.

To understand the nuances and complexities of Asian American masculinity, it is crucial to examine literature and artistic expressions that capture these experiences. One such work is *American Knees* by Shawn Wong, which provides a rich narrative exploring the multifaceted dimensions of Asian American masculinity. Through the protagonist Raymond Ding's journey, the novel offers insights into the challenges, conflicts, and resilience of Asian American men as they confront cultural expectations, familial responsibilities, and personal desires.

By examining *American Knees*, this study aims to deepen our understanding of masculinity in the Asian American context, and to highlight the diverse narratives and lived experiences of Asian American men. It seeks to foster a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of masculinity, promote dialogue around identity, and contribute to the broader discourse on representation, cultural heritage, and the complexities of Asian American experiences.

Hence, throughout our study we try to answer the following questions:

- What is Masculinity?
- Is Masculinity socially constructed?
- How does Shawn Wong redefine Asian American stereotypes through the main character Raymond?
- What are the challenges that Asian American men--who struggle to identify as either Chinese or American or both-- encounter in their lives?

Shawn Wong's novel *American Knees* is often regarded as a significant exploration of masculinity. The book delves into its complexities shedding light on the challenges, expectations, and experiences faced by Asian American men. By delving into the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and identity negotiation, Wong offers an alternative portrayal of masculinity that challenges stereotypes and confronts cultural expectations.

This dissertation adopts sociocultural and masculinity theories framework to examine the complex dynamics of masculinity within the context of the study. The sociocultural perspective emphasizes the influence of social and cultural factors on the construction and performance of masculinity, acknowledging that masculinity is not an inherent trait but a socially constructed concept shaped by societal norms, expectations, and power dynamics. By employing this perspective, the dissertation aims to unravel the intricate interplay between cultural influences, societal expectations, and individual experiences in shaping the understanding and expression of masculinity among the subjects of the study. The masculinity theory is adapted through psychoanalytic perspectives; it further contributes to the analysis by providing a lens to explore how gender norms, ideologies, and power structures shape the behaviors, attitudes, and identities of individuals, particularly in relation to their masculine identities. By utilizing these theoretical frameworks, the dissertation seeks to provide a comprehensive and insightful examination of masculinity within the specific context of the research subject.

Many researchers have conducted detailed studies about the issues that were raised in the novel. In her work "Art, Spirituality, and the Ethic of Care: Alternative Masculinities in Chinese American Literature," King-Kok Cheung delves into the realm of Chinese American literature to examine the portrayal of non-traditional forms of masculinity. The study explores the interconnections of art, spirituality, and the ethic of care, shedding light on how these elements intersect within the Chinese American cultural context. By analyzing the works of

authors such as Shawn Wong, Li-Young Lee, and Russell C. Leong, the author unveils the nuanced representations of Chinese American masculinity and its dynamics within American society. In addition, Yen Ling Shek's work on "Asian American Masculinity: A Review of the Literature" offers valuable insights and contributions to the understanding of Asian American masculinity. By conducting a comprehensive review of existing literature, Shek provides a comprehensive analysis of the various dimensions, experiences, and challenges faced by Asian American men in relation to their masculinity. The work sheds light on the historical and cultural factors that have shaped Asian American masculinity and examines the stereotypes, expectations, and pressures faced by this group within American society. Shek's review also highlights the intersectionality of Asian American masculinity, considering factors such as race, ethnicity, immigration status, and socioeconomic background. Through this work, readers gain a deeper understanding of the nuanced experiences and identities of Asian American men and the ways in which they define and negotiate their masculinities in a complex sociocultural context. Moreover, Shek's work delves into various literary works that contribute to a deeper understanding of Asian American masculinity such as *Poetry* by Li-Young Lee and *The Country of Dreams and Dust* by Russell C. Leong. By examining these literary works, he sheds light on the experiences and challenges faced by Asian American men in relation to their masculinity. This exploration of literature provides valuable insights into the cultural, social, and historical dimensions of Asian American masculinity, allowing readers to gain a more nuanced perspective on the subject. In so doing, Shek expands the discourse on Asian American masculinity and enriches the understanding of its complexities and significance in contemporary society. Along the same lines, this dissertation, which is on Shawn Wong's novel *American Knees* provides another layer of understanding to the exploration of Asian American masculinity. By analyzing Wong's literary work, we delve into the personal and cultural experiences of the protagonist and how they shape his

perception of masculinity as an Asian American man. The novel delves into themes of identity, love, and family, highlighting the complexities and challenges faced by Asian American men in navigating their cultural heritage and societal expectations. By incorporating Wong's novel into the broader discussion on Asian American masculinity, this research expands the literary discourse and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of this topic. Ultimately, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of Asian American men, fostering greater empathy and appreciation for their diverse journeys of self-discovery and identity formation.

This dissertation is comprised of three chapters, each serving a distinct purpose. The first chapter provides a theoretical framework and socio-historical background, setting the foundation for the subsequent chapters. It explores the concept of masculinity and introduces the extensive history of stereotypes associated with Asian American men. The second chapter delves deeper into the prominent stereotypes that Asian American men encounter, offering a comprehensive analysis. The final chapter aims to challenge these stereotypes and traditional perceptions of Chinese men, focusing on their efforts to establish a cohesive identity within American society.

This study lays the foundation for future investigations about this topic as it concerns with the representation of Asian American men and their portrayal according to Shawn.

Chapter One: Theoretical and Sociohistorical Background of Asian American Masculinity.

I. Introduction :

Masculinity, as a social construct, encompasses a wide range of characteristics, expectations, and behaviors that are associated with being male in a particular culture or society. Throughout history, masculinity has been shaped by various factors, including cultural norms, societal expectations, and historical contexts. One intriguing aspect of masculinity is how it is experienced by different ethnic and cultural groups, such as Asian Americans. Asian American masculinity is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that is influenced by both Asian cultural traditions and the unique experiences of Asian Americans living in the United States

The primary aim of this chapter is to offer readers a comprehensive understanding of masculinity, with specific emphasis on Asian American masculinity. It begins by providing a succinct overview of masculinity, encompassing its definition, the sociological aspects associated with masculinity, and the social and cultural factors that contribute to the construction of various masculinities. Moreover, it delves into the historical context of Asian American masculinity, shedding light on the existing literature and cinematic works that have explored masculinity. The chapter also directs its focus towards the experiences and circumstances faced by Asian American men, examining how their masculinity is shaped and expressed. Lastly, the chapter engages in a discussion of the theoretical frameworks employed in this study, incorporating the exploration of masculinity theory through psychoanalytic lens and the application of socio-cultural theory.

II. What is Masculinity?

Masculinity can be described as a set of behaviors, language, and practices that are culturally and socially associated with males, and are defined in opposition to femininity. This means that masculinity exists both as a positive identity for men, and as a negative identity that separates them from the "Other" (femininity) (Whitehead and Berrett 15). It is important to note that masculinity is not solely determined by genetic or biological factors, as cultural and social influences also play a significant role in shaping male behaviors (Clatterbaugh 10).

All societies possess cultural accounts of gender, but the term 'masculinity' is not universally present, but the way it is conceived by societies differs from one culture to another. In modern times, the term implies that a person's behavior is a result of their inherent nature. If a person is considered un-masculine, he/she is expected to display different behaviors such as being peaceful instead of violent, conciliatory instead of dominant, and uninterested in sexual conquests. This concept is based on the belief in individual differences and personal agency, which emerged during the early-modern European era due to the growth of colonial empires and capitalist economic relations. However, masculinity is also inherently relational, as it exists in contrast to femininity. A culture that does not view women and men as having polarized character types does not possess the concept of masculinity as understood in modern European/American cultures (Connell 26). The focus on to historical specificity and historical change illustrates the social construction of masculinity, the multiplicity of ways in which masculinities can be enacted or lived and the existence and potential of change (Alsop et al 182).

I.Sociology of Masculinity:

The sociology of masculinity concerns the critical study of men, their behaviors, practices, values and perspectives as opposed to femininity. As such the sociology of masculinity is informed by, and locates itself within, feminist theories. Writers within the genre are understood to be personally/politically aligned with feminist agendas and to have a desire for gender justice.

The critical writings of men and masculinity which constitute the sociology of masculinity seek to highlight the ways in which men's powers come to be differentiated, naturalized and embedded across all cultures, political borders and organizational networks.

The sociology of masculinity has gone through three major theoretical waves since the 1950s, which have reflected changes in feminist theories. The first wave focused on the difficulties men face in conforming to traditional expectations and the masculine ideology. This was called 'male' gender role discrepancy, and it was identified by Joseph Pleck in 1995. The second wave emerged in the 1980s, and it aimed to emphasize the importance of male power in dominant expressions of masculinity, rather than the negative effects of patriarchy on men (Whitehead and Barrett 17). The third wave of the sociology of masculinity is heavily influenced by feminist post-structuralism and post-modern theories. This wave focuses on the validation of theory through the dominant discursive practices of self, and how men's sense of identity work is linked to gender power and resistance. This approach emphasizes the ways in which social constructions of masculinity are fluid and constantly changing, and how they intersect with other identities and power dynamics in society.

In recent years, the field of sociology has shown a growing interest in examining the roles and experiences of men within broader societal structures. This trend within the sociology of gender and sexuality has resulted in greater attention being paid to the study of men and masculinity in relation to gender relations- that is, the social patterns of interactions

between men and women. Sociologists, like Anthony Giddens are interested to grasp how male identities are constructed and what impact socially prescribed roles have on men's behavior(609) .In *Gender and Power and Masculinities*, Raewyn Connell sets forth one of the most complete theoretical accounts of gender. His approach has been particularly influential in sociology because he has integrated the concepts of patriarchy and masculinity into an overarching theory of gender relations.

II.Social/cultural Construction of Masculinities:

Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in field studies conducted in industrialized nations, accompanied by the emergence of new theoretical frameworks. While a definitive paradigm has not yet been established for this evolving body of work, several recurring themes have emerged. These include the examination of masculinity's construction in everyday life, the recognition of the influence of economic and institutional structures, the significance of variations among different forms of masculinity, and an understanding of gender as a contradictory and dynamic concept (Connell 35). The book *Hockey Night in Canada* by Richard Gruneau and David Whitson provides a detailed exploration of how business and political interests shaped the highly masculinized realm of professional ice hockey. This analysis highlights the construction of masculinity within the realm of sports and underscores the significance of the institutional context in influencing gender norms and expectations (98). Michael Messner emphasizes that when boys start playing competitive sports they are not just learning a game, they are entering an organized institution (33). The formation of masculinity is influenced by economic circumstances and the structure of organizations, even at the most personal level. Mike Donaldson, in his work *Times of Our Lives*, notes that engaging in physically demanding labor, such as in factories and mines, can result in the literal wearing down of workers' bodies. This physical wear and tear is seen as a testament to the toughness of both the work and the worker, serving as a

means to demonstrate masculinity (Connell 36). Cynthia Cockburn highlights the political nature of constructing masculinity and the significance of change within masculinity. While acknowledging the existence of multiple masculinities and the presence of contradictions, there is a general consensus among researchers that the social construction of masculinities is a systematic and structured process (Connell 38).

However, the authors David Morgan, Eve Sedgwick, John MacInnes , and Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne all agree that masculinities is socially and historically, not biologically, constructed. Morgan proposes a viewpoint that suggests masculinity (and femininity) should be understood primarily based on actions and behaviors rather than inherent qualities. According to this perspective, if gender is culturally constructed, then both women and men have the ability to engage with and embody masculinity as a "cultural space" characterized by specific sets of behaviors. In this understanding, "the masculine" and "the feminine" encompass a spectrum of culturally defined traits and attributes that can be attributed to individuals of any gender (Beynon 200).

III.Asian American Masculinity :

Asian American men possess unique histories and experiences when it comes to masculinity. When examining gender role conflict, which focuses on the detrimental effects of predefined gender roles on individuals (O'Neil et al. 336), it is essential to recognize that Asian American men navigate both White hegemonic masculinity within the United States and the challenges associated with their racialized minority status. Similar to other racial minorities, Asian American men encounter gender role conflict in relation to and in interaction with their racial identity.

Asian Americans, as a community and political identity, encompass more than 57 different ethnic groups (Hune 14). The presence of Asian Americans in the United States can

be traced back to the 1700s, with the arrival of Filipino mariners in the area that is now Louisiana. However, it was during the mid-1800s, when Asian Americans started immigrating to the United States in significant numbers, that this group began to receive notable attention both in terms of governmental legislation and media representations. (Takaki 114).

The first large wave of Asian immigration to the United States occurred in the mid-1800s with the arrival of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, and Indian laborers. The influx of Asian laborers consisted primarily of men who came for the California Gold Rush, worked on Hawaiian plantations, and worked in the South following the abolition of slavery (21).

Over the years following the first wave, the United States government passed legislation that limited and, at times, restricted the immigration of Asian women (Espiritu 17). Yen Le Espiritu noted that the policies and legislation, such as the Page Law in 1875, were often driven by economics, such as the fact that Asian men without families would offer the least costs to employers and be more transient, thus meeting labor needs. According to Ronald Takaki, the original intent of the Page Law was to prohibit Chinese prostitutes from entering the United States. However, the enforcement of the law was extended so extensively that it resulted in Chinese wives being prevented from entering the country as well. In addition, the 1917 Immigration Act prevented Asian Indian men with wives from bringing them to the United States (5). With limited opportunities for Asian men to create families with Asian women, politicians realized that Asian men might want to intermarry with White women, and therefore anti-miscegenation laws were created to revoke citizenship of any White woman who out married (Chua and Fujino 391). Asian men encountered institutionalized forms of oppression through the implementation of anti-immigration laws and anti-miscegenation laws, which had the effect of restricting the expansion of their

families (Ancheta 82). Along with institutional barriers, cultural forms of oppression soon emerged (Okihiro 62).

Espiritu described all the images of Asian American men “as alternatively inferior, threatening, or praiseworthy” (87). Racist portrayals merged notions of gender and sexuality, resulting in Asian American men being depicted as simultaneously hypermasculine and effeminate. An example of the hypermasculine image was the Yellow Peril stereotype, which portrayed Asian men as a menacing and dangerous force. The Yellow Peril image aligned with conventional notions of masculinity's aggressiveness, although it veered into an extreme level of aggression, thereby becoming hypermasculine. In the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor bombing, anti-Japanese propaganda proliferated across the United States, fueled by media dissemination, martial law enforcement in Hawaii, and the internment of Japanese Americans on the mainland. This propaganda campaign, combined with the enduring perception of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners, contributed to the perception that they had questionable loyalties to the United States and an inherent inability to fully assimilate (110). Throughout the years, the targeted group associated with the concept of the Yellow Peril has shifted, with the focus transitioning from the Japanese to the Chinese and then to the Vietnamese. These shifts were influenced by various factors, including global economic conditions and political situations (Takaki 192), and more recently it shifted to the South Asian community. The threat included possible miscegenation, military action, foreign business competition, and terrorism.

To discourage interracial relationships and the mixing of races, prevalent imagery portrayed Asian men as sexually deviant, asexual, effeminate, or enticing White women into opium dens (Chan and Espiritu 112). The image of Asian Americans as exotic and foreign was further promoted by the growing popularity of mysticism in the early 1900s with the influx of South Asians looking to profit from offering “Eastern wisdom” to the Hollywood

elite. Asian men faced additional emasculation through restricted employment prospects that predominantly involved "feminine" occupations like laundry, housekeeping, cooking, and, as a result, often led to work in the restaurant industry (Takaki 193).

Despite Asians making significant contributions to the labor force and agriculture, nativists—individuals opposed to the interests of immigrants—perceived Asians as threats. This perception resulted in campaigns aimed at restricting immigration from Asian countries (Shek 381). Legislation aimed at restricting immigration from specific regions encompassed various acts. These included the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which exclusively targeted Chinese immigration. The Gentleman's Agreement of 1907, on the other hand, applied to Japanese immigrants. Additionally, the Barred Zone Act of 1917 restricted immigrants from a triangular region, comprising South Asians and Polynesians, among others (Ancheta 26). The success of these campaigns relied heavily on inflammatory and stereotypical images of Asian ethnic groups.

The second large immigration wave occurred following the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act (Hune 13). The 1965 Immigration Act brought about a reduction in restrictions on family reunification and promoted the entry of skilled professionals from Asian countries. This resulted in a significant shift from the predominantly low-wage labor force of the 1800s. As Asian professionals began to immigrate to the United States, the 1970s witnessed the emergence of the model minority myth, a stereotype that encompassed the entire Asian American population (Suzuki 23). The rationale of the myth was that the Confucian work ethic of Asian Americans contributed to their success in the United States. The model minority stereotype is a social phenomenon that portrays Asian Americans as high-achieving, hardworking, and successful in various areas such as education, careers, and income.

IV. Asian American Masculinity in Literature and Cinema:

Some of the existing literature on Asian American masculinity focused on White perspectives of Asian American men, Asian American masculinity as effeminate and asexual while at the same time patriarchal and domineering (Chan 6). These contradictory and competing portrayals of Asian American men not only perpetuate cultural and institutional racism, but also hinder their self-identity development. These conflicting images can lead Asian American men to define themselves in reaction to societal expectations, rather than developing their self-image from within.

Throughout history, white men in the United States have consistently experienced a privileged status that men of color have been denied. Lisa Lowe highlights that Chinese American men, for example, were historically marginalized and confined to a subordinate "feminine" position:

The legal framework of defining citizenship has played a role in racializing and assigning gender to Asian Americans. Historically, American citizenship was initially limited to white males until 1870. African American men were granted the possibility of naturalization in 1870, but Asian men still faced barriers to citizenship until the repeal acts of 1943-1952. Initially, the concept of "masculinity" was closely tied to being white and a citizen. In contrast, Chinese immigrant masculinity was socially and institutionally differentiated from that of Anglo- and Euro-American "white" citizens. (11)

In addition, laws were enacted that prohibited interracial marriage and prevented Chinese laborers wives from immigrating. Consequently, the vast majority of Chinese

immigrants, around 90 percent, were men who were unable to establish families in the U.S. They were forced to live in Chinatown communities, where they could not father a subsequent generation. Following the gold rush in California and the completion of the transcontinental railroad, Chinese men faced employment discrimination and were largely relegated to jobs such as restaurant cooks, laundry workers, waiters, or houseboys. These jobs were traditionally considered "feminine."

These historical circumstances have contributed to the formation of negative stereotypes about Asian men in American popular culture, which has been a source of frustration and discontent among Asian Americans for quite some time. According to Richard Fung, in Hollywood cinema Asian men "have been consigned to be one of two categories: the egghead/wimp, or ... master/ninja/samurai. He is sometimes dangerous, sometimes friendly, but almost always characterized by a desexualized Zen asceticism" (148). Renee Tajima also notes that not only American cinema has a noticeable lack of representation of love relationships between Asian women and Asian men but "Asian men usually have problems with interracial affairs too—quite often they are cast as rapists or love-struck losers" (312). In the past, the portrayal of Asian American men in popular media was often limited to stereotypes such as Fu Manchu, a cunning Chinese criminal, or Charlie Chan, an inscrutable, obsequious, and asexual detective. Even today, Asian American men are often viewed through the lens of the "model minority" stereotype, which may portray them as intelligent computer scientists or engineers, skilled martial artists, but not as original thinkers, charismatic political leaders, or glamorous TV anchors or movie stars.

The efforts to overcome the stereotypes generated by this long history of "emasculatation" and to redefine Asian American manhood have been significant concerns since the beginning of Asian American literary studies. In the introduction to *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, one of the earliest and the most influential anthologies,

the editors observe: “The white stereotype of the acceptable and unacceptable Asian is utterly without manhood. Good or bad, the stereotypical Asian is nothing as a man. At worst, the Asian-American is contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity” (30). They argued that the limited presence of Asian American men in literature can be attributed to both the scarcity of Asian American writers during that time and the absence of a well-established and acknowledged concept of Asian-American manhood (38).

In *The Big Aiiieeeee!* which is a sequel to *Aiiieeeee!*, the editors aim to redefine Asian American masculinity by promoting an "Asian heroic tradition". They do this by celebrating the martial heroes depicted in classical Chinese and Japanese epics, and implicitly suggesting that contemporary Asians should emulate these heroes. In an earlier essay titled “Of Men and Men: Reconstructing Chinese American Masculinity,” King-Kok Cheung sought to demonstrate, through analyzing the work of Frank Chin, Gus Lee, Norman Wong, and David Wong Louie, that the Chinese American male writers have either inverted racist stereotypes by creating pugnacious heroes or internalized the stereotypes by reproducing lovelorn losers. He contended that “ from both cultural nationalist and feminist standpoints a quest for Chinese American manhood should allow us to engender an alternative cast rather than simply clone Western heroes” (264).

Over the last decade, there have been several Asian American writers who have sought to redefine Asian American masculinity through their works, such as: Shawn Wong’s *American Knees*, Li-Young Lee’s *The Winged Seed*, and Russell Leong’s *Phoenix Eyes*.

Shawn Wong’s *American Knees* subverts traditional Chinese patriarchy, challenges American myths about Asian men, and portrays the struggles of a Chinese American man in defining his masculinity in the face of both Chinese filial obligations and American

stereotypes. Through his protagonist, Wong overturns American stereotypes about Asian men. Raymond Ding the main character often measures himself against both the ideal Chinese son and the ideal American minority—only to deconstruct the ideal.

Li-Young Lee's *The Winged Seed* is a memoir about the narrator's father—Ba (Chinese vocative for father). According to the editors of *Aiiieeee!* "A constant theme in Asian-American literature . . . is the failure of Asian-American manhood to express itself in its simplest form: fathers and sons. . . . The perpetuation of self-contempt between father and son is an underlying current in virtually every Asian-American work" (46-47). The work explores Lee's journey towards understanding his identity and masculinity as an Asian American. Lee grapples with questions of masculinity, particularly in relation to his father, who had a patriarchal upbringing in China. Through his writing, Lee explores the complexities of masculinity within the context of his cultural and familial background, and his experiences as an immigrant in America.

Russell Leong's *Phoenix Eyes*, explores alternative forms of masculinity and challenges traditional notions of what it means to be a man. The story's protagonist is a gay Chinese American man who is navigating both his cultural identity and his sexuality in a society that often marginalizes both. Through his character Terence, Leong critiques the dominant discourse surrounding masculinity and offers a new perspective on what it means to be a man. The story is a powerful example of how Asian American literature can challenge and subvert normative ideas about gender and sexuality.

The three literary works discussed successfully challenge patriarchal norms and stereotypes about Asian men, while also exploring the complex factors that shape masculinity. In Li-Young Lee's *The Winged Seed*, the narrator critiques traditional patriarchal values, despite his reverence for his father. Meanwhile, both Raymond in

American Knees and Terence in *Phoenix Eyes* resist societal pressure to marry and have children, with Terence specifically challenging the idea of compulsory heterosexuality. Raymond and Terence also present a different portrayal of Asian male sexuality, as they are depicted as attractive and desirable to a diverse range of partners, which challenges the limited and distorted representations of Asian men in Hollywood films.

V. Masculinity Theory and, Sociocultural Theory:

a- Masculinity Theory:

Masculinity theory, also known as masculinity studies or men's studies, are an interdisciplinary field of academic inquiry that focuses on the study of masculinity as a social and cultural phenomenon. The academic discourse around masculinity has gained significance and influence in gender studies in recent times.

The word masculinity is derived from the Middle English masculine and Latin *masulinus*, which means 'male', 'of masculine gender', or 'male person'. It was used in these contexts since the late fourteenth-century. Later on, from the seventeenth century onwards it was further began to be used as 'appropriate' qualities of the male sex such as 'powerfulness', 'physicality', 'manliness' and 'virility' which have been extended in referring to traits or characteristics traditionally thought of suitable for men and showing maleness, manliness or manhood (Hearn 390). Accordingly, in traditional views, masculinity is often linked to qualities such as dominance, aggression, assertiveness, self-assurance, and male roles like being the head of the household and the breadwinner (Boonzaier and Rey 1020). Although such traits were treated as the constituents of an idealized version of masculinity, there was no absolute and concrete definition or standard of what is being meant by men and what standards are to be followed by men to be treated as real masculine. Until today, the notion regarding masculinity has always been subject to change and varies within

and across cultures, social groupings and classes. There is nothing like modern masculinity or a set of determined standard of masculinity (Whitehead 16), and what is being meant by masculine is likely to vary among various racial, ethnic, religious groups, social classes, age groups as well as among people with different sexual orientation and by geographical region (Fischer and Good 372).

The definitions of masculinity are continually evolving, and their implications are constantly being tested. Once proven, they are then reevaluated and questioned, requiring further validation (Kaufman 122). Based on this aspect Connell states that “Masculinity is in no way a fixed entity embedded only in body or personality traits of individuals, it is rather accomplished in social action and differs according to gender relations in a particular social and cultural setting” (835).

While an increasing amount of research on masculinity has become accessible, the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the term persists to this day. The Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell’s theory of masculinity is the most influential theory in the field of men and masculinities. Along with its enormous impact on the field of gender studies, it has also been taken up across a wide range of other disciplines.

a.1- Hegemonic Masculinity:

In his work, *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics*, Connell Introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity . The idea of different forms of masculinities was central as well as crucial to an understanding of how patriarchal social order works (183). He argues that there are different forms of masculinities, but one form is culturally esteemed above all other (Hegemonic Masculinity). By using this term, he has developed a process of arranging masculinities (McCormack 37).Specifically speaking; Connell rejects the conceptual singularity of masculinity and views masculinity as

masculinities. His hegemonic masculinity is largely symbolic, legitimate and ideal type of masculinity within the different types of masculinities. As Richard Howson explains: “This typical and lawful form of masculinity emerges and develops within a particular socio-cultural milieu and acts as a benchmark, which all men must follow in maintaining their gender order”(3).

Hegemonic masculinity is indubitably the normative pattern of masculinity and nurturing of this kind of masculinity is the most dignified way of being a man (Connell and Messerschmidt832). The concept is clearly the most popular and influential element of Connell’s theory of masculinity, yet it has also attracted the most criticism as many researchers argue against it.

a.2- Masculinity Theory Through Psychoanalytic Lens:

Examining masculinity through a psychoanalytic lens involves exploring the psychological dimensions and processes that contribute to the formation and expression of masculine identities. Psychoanalytic theories, pioneered by Sigmund Freud and expanded upon by subsequent scholars, delve into the unconscious mind and the interplay of various psychological factors in shaping individual behavior and identity. Psychoanalytic approaches examine the influence of early childhood experiences, particularly the relationships with parents and caregivers, in shaping masculine identity. This includes exploring the dynamics of identification and the ways in which individuals internalize and replicate gendered behaviors and roles modeled by their same-sex parent or significant others (Flanagan 64). By utilizing a psychoanalytic lens, researchers can gain insights into the unconscious processes and internal conflicts that contribute to the construction of masculinity. This approach helps to uncover the underlying motivations, anxieties, and desires that shape how individuals perceive themselves and relate to others in relation to their gender identity.

b- Sociocultural Theory:

The sociocultural theory of learning and teaching is widely recognized in fields of educational psychology and instructional technology. The focus of this theory is on the role social interaction and culture play in the development of higher-order thinking skills. Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and the founder of sociocultural theory, believed that human development and learning originate in social and cultural interaction. In other words, the ways people interact with others and the culture in which they live shape their mental abilities (99).

Sociocultural theory is considered primarily a developmental theory. It focuses on change in behavior over time, specifically on changes that occur as individuals mature from infancy, to childhood, to adolescence, and finally to adulthood (Reiber 13). The theory attempts to explain unseen processes of development of thought, of language, and of higher-order thinking skills with implications to education in general and is especially valued in the field of applied linguistics. The theory's focus on a developing child is the reason for referring to a child or children when discussing theoretical underpinnings throughout the text.

Sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of social interactions in development of cooperative dialogues between children and more knowledgeable members of society. Children learn the culture of their community (ways of thinking and behaving) through these interactions. Vygotsky believed that human activities take place in cultural settings and cannot be understood apart from these setting (Cole and Gajdamaschko 195). One of his key ideas was that our specific mental structures and processes can be traced to our interactions with others. These social interactions are more than simple influences on cognitive development – they actually create our cognitive structures and thinking processes.

VI. Conclusion:

To conclude this chapter, masculinity is a complex social construct that is shaped by a variety of factors, including cultural norms, societal expectations, and historical contexts. Asian American masculinity is a particularly intriguing aspect of masculinity, as it is influenced by both Asian cultural traditions and the unique experiences of Asian Americans living in the United States. The interplay of these factors can result in a multifaceted and evolving understanding of masculinity for Asian American men, as they navigate their identities within the context of both their Asian heritage and their American environment. Recognizing and understanding the nuances of Asian American masculinity can contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender and identity in society. It is important to approach the topic of masculinity with cultural sensitivity and open-mindedness, recognizing that diverse experiences and perspectives exist within any cultural or ethnic group. Therefore, In the next chapter we attempt to explain the different stereotypes that faces Asian American men in the American society as they are portrayed In Shawn Wong's' Novel *American Knees*.

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Chapter Two: Asian American Men through the American Lens

I. Introduction:

Asian American masculinity is a complex topic whose connotation depends on various factors, including cultural norms, historical contexts, and societal expectations. In the United States, Asian American men have often been stereotyped as being weak, passive, and effeminate, which has led to a sense of emasculation and invisibility in mainstream society. Many brilliant writers, such as Shawn Wong, have fought stereotypes by highlighting the diversity and complexity of the Asian American experience through their works and explored the diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and identities within the Asian American community.

In this context, it is worth highlighting that Wong has established himself as a vocal proponent of Asian American literature and the representation of Asian American experiences, encompassing various aspects of masculinity, within popular culture. Although he may not have specifically championed Asian American masculinity as an isolated subject, his efforts have consistently aimed at fostering inclusive and multi-faceted depictions of Asian Americans, which naturally encompass the exploration of Asian American masculinity. Wong's work *American Knees* serves as a compelling illustration of his commitment to portraying diverse and nuanced perspectives of Asian American men.

American Knees is a novel that follows the life of Raymond Ding, a second-generation Chinese American struggling with his cultural identity. Raymond's failed marriage leads him to pursue independence, which conflicts with his sense of duty as a traditional Chinese son. He enters a passionate relationship with Aurora Crane, a photojournalist who faces stereotypes as an Asian-American woman. However, their relationship falters as Aurora becomes frustrated with Raymond's internal struggle between his Chinese and American

identities, mirroring her own identity challenges. The novel explores themes of cultural duality, personal identity, and the complexities faced by Asian Americans in society.

Asian American men confront a multitude of challenges and stereotypes that emanate from both Asian and American cultural contexts. Within American society, they often face the stereotype of being emasculated, portrayed as sexually unappealing, and lacking in physical strength. Simultaneously, they are also subjected to the hypermasculine stereotype, depicted as aggressive and prone to violence. These distorted representations, perpetuated through media and cultural narratives, create a skewed and limiting perception of Asian American masculinity. In contrast, Asian cultural values, such as filial piety and collectivism, can shape the expectations placed upon Asian American men. The emphasis on family loyalty and respect can lead to the perception that they are submissive and deferential, lacking in individual agency and independence. These cultural expectations sometimes clash with the ideals of assertiveness and self-determination valued in American society. Furthermore, the historical and socio-political context of Asian immigration to the United States has also influenced the construction of Asian American masculinity. Experiences such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and the internment of Japanese Americans have contributed to the marginalization and stigmatization of Asian American men, reinforcing stereotypes and limiting opportunities for social and economic advancement.

To better understand these stereotypes, it is important to examine the diverse experiences and perspectives of Asian American men. Hence, this chapter examines the intersectionality of race, culture, and gender in order to unravel the complexities of Asian American masculinity and promote a more nuanced and inclusive understanding.

II. Identity Crisis :

Raymond Ding, the main Character, reminisces about being teased by his peers during their time in the school playground: “ ‘what are you—Chinese, Japanese, or American Knees?’ they’d chant, slanting the corners of their eyes up and down, displaying a bucktoothed smile, and pointing at their knees. When Raymond, not liking any of the choices, didn’t answer, they’d say, ‘Then you must be dirty knees’” (12).

The title of the book highlights the history of Asian Americans being the target of racial insults in the United States. However, the phrase “American Knees”, which combines the words "American" and "Chinese," also symbolizes Raymond's ambiguous identity. He finds it challenging to comply with traditional Chinese values while being too Americanized, and at the same time, he cannot entirely assimilate into the mainstream American culture because of his Asian heritage.

As an employee of the Affirmative Action office at a college in San Francisco, Raymond finds it challenging to fulfill the expectations of being a dutiful son in accordance with Chinese customs. At the start of the novel, Raymond is in the midst of finalizing his divorce from his Chinese wife, Darleen. This situation prompts him to engage in an internal dialogue where he grapples with traditional Chinese beliefs. These include the social stigma associated with divorce, the taboo against marrying someone from a different race, and the expectation for male descendants to have children to continue the family lineage. Upon seeing his father, Woodrow (or Wood, as his friends call him), Raymond is conscious of an “ominous unspoken thought” that goes through both their minds: “Raymond would never again marry a Chinese woman and would thus be the first in his thin branch of the family tree not to be married to a Chinese. He was already the first to divorce” (23). Although Chinese patriarchy is typically associated with male advantage, Wong illustrates how it also places a distinct weight on male successors, specifically the eldest son of the family, “The first son in a Chinese family has certain duties to family as well as to himself, and over time the

performance of these filial obligations is a test of patience and tolerance against personal ambition” (32). In the essay “Dr Freud and the Course of History”, Raewyn Connell had developed an argument that the tools of psychoanalysis, especially the concept of repression, can be used to illuminate how the adult personality is formed by pressures to conform with society, principally by the way in which such pressures are experienced by the young child in the family context (9). This is primarily shown in Chinese culture (Asian culture in general but Chinese specifically based on the novel). The first son holds a special position within the family and is expected to fulfill specific duties and responsibilities. These obligations stem from Confucian principles and the importance placed on maintaining family harmony and continuity. This explains Raymond’s need in the beginning of the novel to fit in his wife Darleen’s traditional Chinese family.

Darleen, on the other hand, is free from such obligations: “She understood that the power in the family rested on the shoulders of the men. This wasn’t the legendary and oppressive Chinese patriarchy at work; it was freedom and the luxury of choice for Darleen” (17). Although Wong uses humor to depict sexism here in the story, he also highlights the inconsistencies within Chinese patriarchy. Specifically, he draws attention to how the traditional system can harm even those it is meant to benefit.

Moreover, by portraying Raymond's admiration for Wood, Wong challenges the typical norms of masculinity in both Chinese and American cultures. Wood's actions defy the standard image of the stoic and unyielding Chinese father, as he requests his son to sleep with him for two nights following his wife's funeral: “There’s too much space there” (28). Raymond considers the voicing of this request—the father reaching out to his son for solace and intimacy—to be “the bravest thing his father had ever done” (28), thereby redefining manly courage. The character of Raymond introduces a new perspective on the ideal father figure, which involves relinquishing control, unlike Darleen’s father—the typical Chinese

patriarch who dictates the lives of all his sons and sons-in-law—Wood gives Raymond “his place in the family by not telling him, by not asking, by not saying what was in his heart. It was the manly way of doing things. This was how Raymond became a man” (31). Raymond's relationship with his father, Wood, challenges the traditional idea of a paternal figure who is always in control. Wood's willingness to relinquish his authority and allow Raymond to make his own decisions shows a different kind of fatherly ideal- one that involves trust, respect, and support for his son's autonomy. Through Wood's example, Raymond realizes that being a good father does not necessarily mean being in charge all the time or imposing one's will on their children. Instead, it involves being able to let go and trust their children to make their own choices. This idea challenges the patriarchal norms that define the father as the head of the household and ultimate decision-maker. It redefines the paternal ideal to include a more collaborative and respectful relationship between fathers and their children.

Sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of interactions in the development of cooperative dialogues between children and more knowledgeable members of society. Children learn the culture of their community (ways of thinking and behaving) through these interactions. As Vygotsky explains, human activities take place in cultural settings and cannot be understood apart from these settings (Cole and Gajdamaschko 195). When examining Chinese traditions –such as the ones introduced in the novel- through a sociocultural lens, several key aspects come into play. Chinese traditions are deeply rooted in a collectivist culture, where the emphasis is on the well-being and harmony of the group rather than individualistic pursuits. Confucianism, for example, has greatly influenced Chinese society, emphasizing hierarchical relationships, filial piety, and respect for authority as Xinzhong Yao explains:

Confucian morality revolves around family relationships, especially around the relationship between parents and children, between elder and younger brothers,

and between husband and wife. In these relationships, the primary emphasis is put on fulfilling responsibilities to each other with a sincere and conscientious heart. (24)

These cultural values shape social interactions, family dynamics, and the expectations placed on individuals.

Cultural tools and artifacts are also significant in shaping behavior. Chinese traditions involve various cultural tools such as rituals, customs, and symbols that play a significant role in socialization processes. For instance, Chinese New Year celebrations, the practice of ancestor worship, or the observance of specific customs during important life events all contribute to the transmission of cultural values and the maintenance of Chinese traditions. When Raymond and Aurora were talking about her portfolio, the later asked: “Do you see my photo credit in the paper?”-Raymond nodded, ‘I liked the one of that little Chinese girl posing with her grandfather and the new Miss Chinatown at the Chinese New Year’s parade’. I think the caption read, ‘Three generations celebrate the new year’ ” (207). Additionally, language and communication play a crucial role in cultural transmission. Chinese traditions are often embedded in language and symbols, which shape the ways in which individuals think, communicate, and interact. Language carries cultural meanings, and specific terms and expressions reflect Chinese beliefs, values, and social norms as Muhammed Asif and Majid Ali explain in their article “International Journal of Research Chinese Traditions Folk Art, Festivals and Symbolism”:

The Chinese language influenced the development of symbolism. Chinese is a tonal language, therefore, depending on how a word is pronounced it could mean several different things. For example, the words for good fortune and bat are pronounced the same way although they are written with different characters. As a result, bats symbolize happiness and good luck in China. When five bats are seen together, they

are said to represent the five blessings: health, long life, wealth, love of goodness, and death by natural cause (3).

Significantly, Raymond explains that “he didn’t know what his Chinese name was, the name his grandmother had called him in a language he forgot a year after he started public school” (23), referring to his subversion from the Chinese culture and being more Americanized.

Moreover, the role of social interactions and learning in cultural development is greatly emphasized. Chinese traditions are passed down through generations via intergenerational relationships, where older family members play a significant role in transmitting cultural knowledge and values to younger generations. These interactions and cultural practices create a sense of continuity and shared identity within the Chinese community. A good example is Raymond’s father Woodrow, who respected and obeyed his father and the generational traditions. He was “built like Edward G. Robinson, short, compact, and powerful. Even though Wood wasn’t born in China and had never been there, he had inherited a traditional sense of what it meant to be Chinese, as if a generation’s separation from the homeland had intensified and magnified the will of his parents to make him learn traditional Chinese behavior” (37). Consequently, all that survived by the next generation was “respect for family, getting a good education, getting a good job, writing thank you cards for gifts, and knowing what to do at funerals” (37).

In addition to the challenges Raymond faces in fitting into Chinese traditions and societal expectations, Asian American men often encounter difficulties when trying to find their place within American society. Stereotypes and cultural biases contribute to this struggle.

Asian American men fall into two extreme and inaccurate portrayals: hypermasculine or effeminate. These stereotypes can create additional challenges for Asian American men as

they strive to meet societal expectations and try to establish their identity. The hypermasculine stereotype suggests that Asian American men are savages with no respect to anyone. This stereotype undermines their self-confidence and can lead to exclusion or marginalization in certain spaces that prioritize traditional masculine ideals. Brenda, Aurora's best friend, never liked Raymond and consistently viewed him through the lens of this hypermasculine stereotype, "I told Brenda about it. She thought you were a pervert" (72). She has this point of view on all Asian men in general, "I'm not a racist, Ro. I'm not saying all white women are ugly when they're with Asian men. You know what I mean. It's the Asian guy so desperate to smack up skin-to-skin with a white girl he picks anyone who'll have him" (97). On the other hand, the effeminate stereotype portrays Asian American men as passive, submissive, or lacking in masculinity. This stereotype not only perpetuates harmful generalizations but also invalidates their individuality and diverse range of experiences. Raymond frequently finds himself being perceived through the stereotype of being effeminate and lacking sexual presence. Due to this stereotype, men may not feel threatened by his presence, particularly when he is accompanied by women. Men often assume that he is alone or simply passing by; dismissing the possibility of him actually being in a romantic relationship with the women he interacts with. He describes:

Men at airports and in hotels would come right up to Gretchen as if Raymond wasn't there and start talking with her or offer to help her with her bags. They assumed Raymond was (a) not with her; (b) a business partner; (c) an employee of the hotel; (d) a driver delivering her to the airport, and/or (e) someone named Hop Sing. Get back to the kitchen. Those who didn't approach her would stare at her, openly flirt with her, or say something crude, and Raymond would either have to pretend he didn't hear them or have Gretchen restrain him. Gretchen had tried to mollify Raymond by saying that men did that sort of thing to her all the time. She

didn't go to war over their ignorance; why should Raymond? "I'm no threat to them," he once said to her. (112)

In addition to these primary stereotypes, it is important to acknowledge that Asian American men also face a range of other stereotypes that stem from racist views. These stereotypes perpetuate harmful generalizations and further contribute to the marginalization and discrimination they may experience. Raymond talks about his numerous encounters with racism:

"Whenever I board an airplane and proceed down the jetway, I notice numerous individuals passing by the flight attendant without any interruption. However, when it's my turn, she stops me and asks to see my boarding pass. I often wonder why this happens. Could it be because she finds me attractive and wishes to engage in small talk? Perhaps she assumes I'll be seated in first class and wants to extend a warm greeting? But no, the truth is that she likely assumes I may have difficulty reading or speaking English, and she wants to ensure I'm boarding the correct plane. It seems she perceives me as incapable of matching flight numbers or understanding the process. These days, I've made it a habit to approach them directly and initiate a conversation by saying, 'Hello there! How are you today? I hope our flight will be absolutely fantastic!'" (105).

III. The Model Minority:

Throughout the story, Raymond frequently compares himself to the ideal Chinese son and the ideal American minority, only to expose the flaws in these ideals. His racy seduction of a red-haired wine rep is juxtaposed, for instance, against his putative "image". Raymond was "a good Chinese boy who never cut class . . . never tore up a parking ticket, didn't burn

his draft card” (18). We later learn that Raymond’s early semblance to the generalized “good boy” Chinese stereotype is a result of his mistreatment during the Vietnam War, when he was called a “gook”. All Raymond could remember of the war is “the fear he’d felt when the sergeant had called him a ‘gook.’ That, and the desire he’d brought back from his few months in the army to be anonymous in the world. There was safety in being Asian American at home in America. We work hard. We keep quiet. I am the model minority” (59).

According to King-Kok Chueng, “the model minority is merely the flip side of a gook: the solution to being treated as enemy alien is to be a member of a docile and invisible minority. Both the laudatory and the derogatory epithets unman the Asian American male” (267).

The portrayal of Asian American men in the media, particularly through the “model minority” stereotype that emerged in the mid-1960s, contributed to the perpetuation of feminization and emasculation. This stereotype depicted Asian men as intelligent, industrious, obedient, and self-sufficient individuals, but simultaneously portrayed them as lacking in sexual desirability. With respect to everyday life, such as dating/marriage/family, it is this model minority racialization of East Asian American men (or those who resemble them) that has held sway ever since. At times, it exists alongside, or gets eclipsed by, the hypermasculinization of them as racialized sexual, economic, military, virus threats, such as with respect to international tensions and war. But when it comes to dating and marriage, the desexualized model minority caricature has had the most impact (Robnett and Feliciano 201).

Peter Chua and Dune Fujino argued that Asian American masculinity needed to be considered using social representation theory, which is counter to seeing gender and masculinity as a purely internal and individual process. They also argued that “Asian American masculinity was socially constructed around ‘model minority’ maleness and not in terms of the dominant construction of masculinity” (396).

The model minority stereotype has led to the portrayal of Asian-Americans as “reserved, quiet, diligent and studious” as Tony Mok Explains. Although it may appear superficially positive, the stereotype carries underlying negative implications for Asian-Americans, portraying them as nerdy, submissive, and socially awkward. Furthermore, it is often utilized to discredit protests against racial inequality. Particularly for men, this stereotype fails to capture the image of a charismatic and masculine American icon. (195).

Research indicates that individuals who defy the stereotype of passivity and assertiveness face negative consequences. A study conducted in Canada revealed that participants held prescriptive stereotypes of East Asians as “non-dominant”, which meant that when East Asians displayed dominant behavior contrary to this stereotype, such as taking charge or asserting themselves, they were more likely to be disliked by their white co-workers. In comparison, dominant behavior exhibited by white co-workers was more readily tolerated (Berdahl and Min 201). In essence, the study highlighted that when East Asians deviate from the perceived stereotype of passivity, they are met with resistance and potential prejudice from others. This finding underscores the challenges faced by individuals who attempt to counter stereotypes and assert their own agency, particularly within a work environment where dominant behavior may be expected or valued.

Raymond is in a predicament where he has to decide between two unfavorable options. He can either choose to go against traditional Chinese and American societal norms and be an outcast, facing hatred and rejection from both communities. Alternatively, he can conform to these norms and become invisible and insignificant, leading a life of marginalization and conformity. Ultimately, both options result in Raymond being marginalized and excluded in some way. This is summed up perfectly by the statement: “When Asian American men are economically and politically subordinate, they are seen as feminine and incapable of living up to Western definitions of masculinity; when they

struggle against odds to secure limited social space for themselves... they are immediately regarded as “bastardized” males whose criminal libido has to be controlled” (Ling 317).

IV. Masculinity and Mainstream Media :

The influence of mass media representation on Asian American masculinity is significant, as various researches have shown that changing portrayals of Asian American men in the media over two decades have had a noticeable impact on Asian men. While it is important to acknowledge that there is not a direct and absolute correlation between media constructions and individual beliefs, we shouldn't underestimate individuals' agency in challenging dominant representations as well, it is undeniable that the media has historically established the parameters for how Asians and Asian Americans are portrayed through the pervasive presence of media discourses and images (Ono and Pham 209) (e.g., the “yellow peril” and the “model minority”).

Media imagery plays a significant role in shaping our understanding and awareness of racial stereotypes. It is not a passive process where these stereotypes are injected into our consciousness, but rather the media actively contributes to our familiarity with them. For instance, in his study of Chinese American masculinities, Chan refers to this relationship as the “dialectical link between popular culture and individual male identity formations” (11–12). Helen Ho also observed that while Asian Americans are presently contending “yellow peril” discourses (and as seen in Covid-19 racism), popular cultural depictions of Asian American men on primetime television and films have also favorably enhanced and complicated the image of Asian-descent men. During a conversation with her friend Brenda, Aurora sheds light on Jimmy Chan's prominence as a journalist, ““He actually writes some good editorials. His most recent one was an attack on racist depictions of Asian men on television and in the movies. He pointed out how Chinese men rarely get to play real men’.

‘They rule by proverb, not brawn.’ ‘Yes. Of course, most of the time, Chinese men have been played by white actors in yellowface, with latex-slanted eyes’ ”(102).

American popular culture is notoriously male-centered. For Asian Americans, however, the situation appears to be reversed, which may be yet another reflection of the power of the dominant culture. As Peter Feng states, novelist Amy Tan has a larger readership compared to novelist Shawn Wong. Additionally, comedian/actor Margaret Cho had the opportunity to star in a network television series, whereas Russell Wong had to accept a role in the syndicated show *Vanishing Son*. Moreover, Asian American women are often chosen as anchorwomen for local news broadcasts nationwide, while Asian American men tend to hold less prominent positions as field reporters (27). Aurora and her friend Brenda were appalled by this fact arguing that :

‘Our acceptance is as much a product of stereotype as the Asian man’s ostracism as an unmanly wimp. The media exploit our sexuality. Name a middle-aged Asian American actress. You can’t.’

- ‘It’s not my fault; it’s our culture. There aren’t any older white-haired white women news reporters either. You have to be blond and young, while the men can be shriveled up and nearing retirement; in them it’s called integrity, media confidence, and experience.’

- ‘Speaking of Connie,’ Aurora added, ‘there aren’t any Asian male anchors on television news. Why?’

- ‘They’re not believable spokesmen? They’re shifty and sneaky? You can’t see their eyes when they smile?’

- ‘Be serious.’

- 'Okay, Aurora. Are we supposed to change the world for our men? What do you want me to do about a culture that says Asian women are beautiful and acceptable and Asian men aren't?'" (107).

The dialogue above highlights a prevalent issue regarding the representation of Asian American men in the media, particularly in positions of authority such as news anchors. The absence of Asian male anchors raises questions about the underlying biases and stereotypes that perpetuate this exclusion. The notion that Asian men are deemed untrustworthy or lacking credibility due to perceived shifty or sneaky qualities reflects deep-seated prejudices. The focus on physical attributes, such as not being able to see their eyes when they smile, further perpetuates the stereotype of Asian men as mysterious or inscrutable. These biases contribute to the underrepresentation of Asian American men in influential roles, reinforcing a limited and skewed narrative of diversity and inclusion.

In the American popular imagination, Asian women are depicted as ultrafeminine sexual objects for white men, and that sexual formula leaves Asian men literally out of the picture. This is a recurrent theme in Hollywood and it is discussed in the novel as well. For example, Brenda Aurora's Half Japanese friend, "was tall, long-legged, short-waisted, and had large breasts" (103). It is explained that Brenda as well as other Asian women are seen as a love interest by white men and sometimes black men, in contrast to Asian men who don't stand a chance with White women.

While both the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes are associated with Asian Americans of both genders, there are noticeable disparities in media portrayals. Specifically, Asian-American men tend to be depicted as socially awkward and meek, characteristics that are often deemed unappealing in the context of American romantic ideals (Sung 67). On the other hand women are typically depicted as servile, beautiful and delicate (Sue and Kitano 173). Although this exoticization isn't necessarily positive, it is notable for

its alignment with traditionally desirable feminine qualities, in contrast to male stereotypes that fall short of assertive Western masculinity and attractiveness. According to Pamela Hamamoto, it is argued that minority women are perceived as less threatening to the established order, making it comparatively easier for them to be accepted by white society in contrast to their male counterparts. Perhaps for these reasons, it has been found that Asian-American men are significantly more aware of racism than Asian-American women (Kohatsu 92).

The demeaning narrative surrounding Asian American men persists even in the 21st century, perpetuated by repetitive depictions on screens that reinforce harmful stereotypes. These portrayals often cast Asian-American men as socially awkward nerds, passive sidekicks, or caricatured restaurant owners with unintelligible accents. These restrictive and limiting stereotypes have consistently marginalized Asian-American men, denying them their masculinity and relegating them to comedic tropes. The underrepresentation and limited portrayal of Asian-American men as attractive leading characters or viable romantic options is a recurring phenomenon, contributing to the perpetuation of their exclusion and the erasure of their diverse identities and experiences. In fact, an analysis of the 100 top-grossing films of 2013 found that Asian male characters were least likely to be in romantic relationships (28%) as compared to black men (68%), white men (58%) and Hispanic men (57%)—a dramatic gap (Smith et al. 7). Wong portrayed this clearly through his novel. Aurora had several lovers throughout the years, mostly white men. She explained that never in those years she was attracted to an Asian man; she didn't like them and was deep into the stereotypes, until she met Raymond.

V. Conclusion:

Asian American men face a multitude of challenges and stereotypes that originate from both American society and their own Chinese heritage. The prevailing stereotypes

often portray them as either sexually unappealing and weak or hypermasculine and violent, perpetuated by media and popular culture. These biased and harmful depictions create an inaccurate and limiting view of Asian American men. Furthermore, traditional Chinese cultural values, such as filial piety, can reinforce the perception of Asian American men as docile and subservient. This clashes with American societal norms that value assertiveness and independence. However, it is crucial to recognize that many Asian American men have defied these expectations, achieving success and breaking free from traditional constraints.

As seen previously, through the novel Wong tries to shed light on these issues in his novel *American Knees*. Addressing these stereotypes and challenges requires a shift in societal perceptions and a more inclusive representation of Asian American men. By recognizing their diversity, accomplishments, and individual experiences, we can challenge the narrow stereotypes that have been imposed on them and promote a more accurate and respectful understanding of Asian American masculinity. Embracing and celebrating the complexity of Asian American identities can foster greater appreciation, acceptance, and empowerment for Asian American men within both American society and their own cultural heritage.

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Chapter Three: Redefining Stereotypes in *American Knees*

I. Introduction :

Asian Americans face a myriad of challenges, including the burden of stereotypes that impose rigid and conflicting expectations on their identity. One such struggle revolves around perceptions of masculinity, as Asian American men are often subjected to opposing stereotypes of hypermasculinity and effeminacy. These stereotypes limit their ability to authentically express themselves and can have detrimental effects on their self-esteem and well-being. Moreover, Asian Americans must navigate the delicate balance of preserving their cultural traditions while assimilating into American society. This duality often leads to internal conflicts and a constant negotiation of their cultural identity. The work of Shawn Wong, *American Knees*, offer a compelling exploration of these challenges. Wong fearlessly challenges and defies the stereotypes that confine Asian American masculinity, presenting nuanced and complex portrayals of Asian American men. Through his narratives, Wong delves deep into the personal journeys and struggles of his characters, shedding light on the internal conflicts, external pressures, and societal expectations they face. By humanizing their experiences, Wong's work encourages a more inclusive understanding of the intricate layers of identity, culture, and masculinity within the Asian American community. In doing so, he contributes to a broader movement that empowers Asian Americans and challenges the perpetuation of stereotypes. Through the lens of Wong's characters, readers are invited to reflect on their own preconceptions and biases, fostering empathy and appreciation for the diverse experiences and challenges faced by Asian American men. Hence, this chapter seeks to analyze Wong's redefinition of Asian American masculinity in *American Knees*, and to consider how his work can contribute to a more accurate representation of Asian American experiences in literature and popular culture.

II. Asian American Counter Narrative:

Despite living in a globalized world that embraces a diversity of cultures and races, stereotypes still persist in modern society. Among the persistent and contrasting stereotypes about Asian American men are those that portray them as sexually inadequate and weak, both physically and emotionally, and burdened by their familial responsibilities, or as hyper masculine brutes.

Raymond engages in a two-year courtship and affair with Aurora Crane, a woman of an Irish heritage. This challenges the common stereotype of Asian men as sexually unappealing to other races, as Kelly Chong and Nadia Kim explain: “Men who are, or resemble, East Asian American men have been the object of unflattering stereotypes throughout the American history, rendering them the least desirable romantic partners, straight or gay”(2). Wong also showcases the media's portrayal of Asian Americans as having a preference for partners outside their own race by depicting Raymond's relationship with Aurora. Being handsome, witty, articulate, and sexy, Raymond bears no resemblance to America's “stereotypical wimpy Asian nerd” (103). On first seeing him at a party, Aurora—who has herself soaked up the stereotype—“searched for the most typically Chinese feature about him, but couldn't find the usual landmarks: cheap haircut with greasy bangs falling across the eyebrows, squarish gold-rimmed glasses, askew because there's no bridge to hold them up, baggy-butt polyester pants” (36). Aurora's expectations of Raymond's appearance align with the typical American view of Asian American men as unattractive and outdated in fashion, highlighting how societal stereotypes can shape perceptions of individuals.

Raymond's sexual allure extends beyond physicality as he embraces a creative approach to intimacy. Through his use of storytelling, patience, and tenderness, he skillfully satisfies his partner's desires, thereby challenging the prevalent stereotype that portrays Asian American men as effeminate and lacking in sexual prowess. By demonstrating his sexual proficiency and ability to please his partner, Raymond defies conventional expectations of

Asian American masculinity and presents a more nuanced and multifaceted representation of Asian American men's sexuality. Aurora reflects on how Raymond compares to previous lovers when “She thought about how some men kissed like they had learned to kiss by watching James Bond movies and fishing shows on television, coming at her with their mouths open... Raymond preferred to take turns kissing... His hands applied no pressure on her bare skin” (82). This quote highlights an intriguing perspective as it challenges the notion of stereotypes by reversing racial roles and emphasizes the subjective nature of masculinity. It showcases the rejection of predefined expectations and demonstrates that masculinity is not a fixed concept but rather a fluid and individual experience. By defying conventional norms and embracing alternative approaches to intimacy, it showcases the complexity and diversity of masculinity beyond rigid stereotypes. While Asian American men are often subjected to the binary stereotypes of either hyper-masculinity or perceived as lacking masculinity altogether, this particular scenario presents a contrasting perspective. In this context, the white men that Aurora encounters are portrayed as brutish and unappealing, while Raymond's sensitivity and attentiveness are depicted as attractive and sexually appealing. This portrayal challenges the preconceived notions of masculinity by highlighting that qualities such as sensitivity and empathy can be equally desirable and reinforces one's masculinity. It serves as a powerful counter-narrative to the limited and stereotypical views of Asian American masculinity, emphasizing the diverse range of expressions and experiences within this identity.

Another notion in the novel is when Raymond and his friend Jimmy examine the stereotypes of Chinese men in the book *Chinese Girls in Bondage* (apparently a title made up by Shawn Wong), Jimmy concludes jokingly that it is “better to be evil and Chinky than sexless and obsequious” (150). Jimmy's assertion make it clear that emasculating Asian American men by the general public is far more offensive than describing them, as the book

does, as men who “sold their women into slavery and prostitution, bound their feet, laughed in their faces with yellow, opium-stained teeth, [and] probed their bodies with long, dirty fingernails. The Chinamen never bathed and had big liquid yellow eyes bulging out of pockmarked greasy faces... The oily Chinks ate rats and cats” (139). Jimmy contends that despite the pervasive negative portrayal of Asian Americans in society, they are at least granted the acknowledgment of possessing sexual desire and masculinity, which affords them a semblance of recognition and parity with white men. This perspective challenges the prevalent stereotypes that often strip Asian American men of their agency and reduce them to emasculated or asexual beings. By acknowledging their inherent sexuality and masculinity, Jimmy highlights the importance of validating and affirming diverse expressions of identity within the Asian American community. This stance asserts the right to be seen as fully realized individuals, capable of experiencing and expressing their desires and asserting their equality in relation to other racial and ethnic groups.

Moreover, the stereotype of the effeminate Asian American male is often associated with an assumed inability to excel in sports. In mainstream American society, sports hold significant value as a means of showcasing masculinity, as they are seen as a modern-day platform for demonstrating strength and prowess, akin to that of a warrior. This stereotype suggests that Asian American men are not capable of meeting the masculine expectations associated with athletic achievements. Therefore, it is surprising that Raymond breaks away from the effeminate stereotype once more, when, in response to Betty, Raymond’s date, about a possible event taking place the next week, Raymond replies, “I play basketball on Tuesday nights” (157). Basketball, often viewed as a highly masculine pursuit, is generally not associated with Asian Americans, as evidenced by the underrepresentation of Asian players at the college and professional levels. Instead, they are often stereotyped as studious “nerds” who prioritize academics and career over athletic pursuits, which can lead to them

being deemed less attractive or desirable in mainstream American society. Darleen's roommate "convinced Darleen that the Asian guys in the public administration program were less nerdy than the ones in the business school" (13). This shows that Asian American men, like Raymond, who distance themselves from the negative stereotypes of their demographic are more successful with women, thus enhancing their masculinity.

III. Hegemonic Masculinity:

In previous scholarly works, the exploration of masculinity was expanded to include considerations of race, incorporating Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinities. According to Connell, masculinity becomes hegemonic when it serves to uphold gender dominance in conjunction with intersecting forms of inequality. While it is unlikely that any individual can fully embody hegemonic masculinity, Connell asserts that many men are incentivized to endorse these ideals and receive rewards for their compliance. This perspective highlights the widespread motivation among men to adhere to and reinforce dominant notions of masculinity, thereby perpetuating existing power structures and inequalities (183-85). Hegemonic masculinity can be likened to what Audre Lorde refers to as the "mythical norm," a standard against which all others are measured. However, Connell emphasizes that hegemonic masculinity is not a rigid set of fixed traits, but rather a "currently accepted strategy" (77). This concept recognizes that the characteristics and behaviors associated with hegemonic masculinity may evolve and vary over time, reflecting the changing dynamics of power and societal expectations. It acknowledges that the specific attributes and practices deemed as dominant and desirable within a given cultural context can shift, while the overarching goal of upholding gender hierarchy and reinforcing existing power structures remains constant. In addition to that, masculinities are inherently hegemonic as they are continuously shaped in relation to both subordinate forms of masculinity and women (Cheng 183). Raymond Ding challenges the concept of hegemonic masculinity through his actions

and relationships. He engages in open and honest communication with his partner Aurora, emphasizing emotional connection and intimacy rather than conforming to traditional notions of masculinity that prioritize physical dominance. He actively listens to Aurora's desires and needs, demonstrating a willingness to prioritize her pleasure and satisfaction.

Several studies on Asian American masculinity have examined the portrayal of Asian American men through the lens of white perspectives. These studies have shed light on the complex and contradictory stereotypes that Asian American men encounter. On one hand, Asian American masculinity is often depicted as effeminate and asexual, perpetuating the notion of emasculation. On the other hand, there is also a tendency to portray Asian American masculinity as patriarchal and domineering, reinforcing stereotypes of exoticism and hypermasculinity. These findings highlight the nuanced and multifaceted nature of how Asian American masculinity is perceived and constructed within broader societal contexts (Chan 6). These contradictory and competing portrayals of Asian American men not only perpetuate cultural and institutional racism, but also hinder their self-identity development. These conflicting images can lead Asian American men to define themselves in reaction to societal expectations, rather than developing their self-image from within.

In Cheng's studies on masculinities in organizations, college students had to select among their classmates people who would serve as leaders for group projects and what values they needed to possess. He found that all the leadership values students were looking for were based on hegemonic masculinity. What naturally followed was the selection of mostly White men to be group leaders followed by White women who emulated masculine behaviors. Of all the racial and gender groups, Asian American men were the least likely to be chosen for leadership positions within their class. Students cited meritocracy to rationalize their decisions. However, when Cheng analyzed all the selected leaders based on merit alone, the Asian American men were more qualified than the students who were selected. Raymond's

experience is an example of this marginalization, as he faces the challenge of breaking down the stereotypes that cast Asian American men as weak, effeminate, and unattractive. Despite his academic and emotional qualifications, Raymond is still marginalized by white men, who continue to uphold hegemonic masculinity as the ideal form of masculinity. Cheng also found that Asian American men were characterized as having a mixture of masculine and feminine traits according to their peers. He postulated that Asian cultural values, such as humility and communalism, were feminized and challenged the appropriateness of traits in hegemonic masculinity such as confidence, individualism, and competition (177-200).

Another study conducted by Jachinson Chan found that Asian American male students preferred to be a part of the hegemonic masculinity rather than aligning themselves with other oppressed groups because of the patriarchal rewards set up in such a system. In his book *Chinese American Masculinities From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee*, he explores the alternative to hegemonic masculinity—one that was already constructed for the students through portrayals of Chinese American men. J. Chan examines the popular images of Chinese American men, finding that archetypal images of being effeminate yet also kung fu master were used to relegate Chinese American men to a lower social status than other groups. While highlighting the problematic nature in seeing Chinese American men as emasculated, J. Chan argues for a new construct of masculinity that was informed by a pro-feminist perspective. He challenges the patriarchy, fear of feminization, and homophobic characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and calls upon Asian American men to take risks in creating alternative models of masculinity. J. Chan perceptively notes that “when White American men are used by popular culture as standard bearers of masculinity, Asian Americans are forced to accept the racial hierarchy embedded in the discourse of American manhood. In effect, Asian American men are given a false choice: either we emulate White American notions of masculinity or accept the fact that we are not men” (156).

Significantly, when Raymond and his friend Jimmy had a conversation on the book *Chinese Girls in Bondage*, which depicts Asian men as ugly monsters who ultimately attack white women, Jimmy prefers this depiction, asking Raymond, “Isn’t it better to be evil and Chinky than sexless and obsequious?” (140). In Jimmy's viewpoint, embracing one's ethnicity and defying societal expectations, even if it means being perceived as "evil" or different, is seen as preferable to embodying the sexless and subservient image often associated with Asian masculinity. This statement implies a desire for Asian men to reclaim their agency, challenge stereotypes, and assert their own identity and sexuality, even if it goes against the societal norms or expectations placed upon them. In other words, by posing this question to Raymond, Jimmy suggests that it is better to resist the stereotypes and embrace one's authentic self, even if it means facing prejudice and being labeled as "other," rather than conforming to societal expectations and sacrificing one's individuality and sexual expression.

This notion ties in with the concept of a “hegemonic bargain,” which is a strategy a man uses when he trades on the advantages conferred by his race, gender, sexuality, class, accent, and/or generational status to achieve “unblushing” manhood (Chen 600). Throughout the novel, Raymond continually breaks away from or defies traditional Asian American male stereotypes to elevate him and leave parts of his culture behind. In essence, he is reclaiming his sense of manhood by rejecting the societal expectations and stereotypes associated with his background. This dichotomy between the “good” silent Asian American man and the repulsive Asian American barbarian is not a new or fictional concept; rather, Wong is drawing on a rich history rooted in the factual existence of these two polar views on Asian American masculinity. These competing stereotypes became mainstream in the nineteenth century with American journalists, cartoonists, novelists, and playwrights who represented Chinese American men as both “docile pets and nefarious invaders; potential citizens and unassimilable aliens; effeminate, queue-wearing eunuchs and threateningly masculine,

minotaur-like lotharios” (F. Cheung 293). The derogatory reference to Asian American men as "pets" is particularly offensive due to the connotations associated with the term. When someone is referred to as a "pet," it implies notions of loyalty, obedience, and being easily controlled. This dehumanizing label positions Asian American men as inferior to humans and even slaves, suggesting that it is acceptable to treat them as less than human. The use of such terminology perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces the notion that these men are objects to be controlled and manipulated (293). The coexistence of the brutish and effeminate stereotypes associated with Asian American men is indeed intriguing. One potential factor contributing to the formation of these stereotypes could be the historical and cultural interactions between the East and West. The traditional relationship between these two regions may have influenced the construction of contrasting images, depicting Asian American men as either aggressive and hypermasculine or as delicate and effeminate. The dynamics of power, cultural exchange, and misrepresentation between East and West have likely played a role in shaping these stereotypes, which persist to varying degrees in contemporary society. In Jinqi Ling’s “Identity Crisis and Gender Politics: Re-appropriating Asian American Masculinity” appears the quote: “The West thinks of itself as masculine – big guns, big industry, big money – so the East is feminine – weak, delicate, poor ... but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom – the feminine mystique. Her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes. The West believes the East, deep down, wants to be dominated – because a woman can’t think for herself” (315).

As such, the perpetuation of stereotypes that portray Asian Americans as lacking masculinity can be attributed to a history of oppression and racism against the East by the West. Although these stereotypes may have diminished over time, the protagonist, Raymond, still confronts the enduring impact of these deep-rooted attitudes within American society.

Raymond must navigate the lingering remnants of these stereotypes and assert his own sense of masculinity and self-control in a manner that is personal and distinct to him.

These stereotypes find their origins in historical events, notably the enactment of legislation that imposed strict limitations on the immigration of Asian women and the 1917 Immigration Act, which created obstacles for Asian men in bringing their wives to the United States. In light of these circumstances, policymakers acknowledged the possibility that Asian American men, faced with limited options for Asian partners, might form relationships with white women. To counteract this perceived threat, anti-miscegenation laws were introduced, stripping white women who married Asian American men of their citizenship. These discriminatory actions reflect a systematic effort to control and limit interracial relationships involving Asian American men (Shek 380). In an attempt to safeguard white women, white men and the media propagated negative portrayals of Asians, depicting them as sexually deviant, asexual, or effeminate. These portrayals aimed to diminish their desirability in the eyes of white women. By perpetuating these stereotypes, they sought to reinforce racial boundaries and discourage interracial relationships between white women and Asian men. This is ironic, because, as Ling writes, “Asian men are often viewed collectively in the West as lacking sexual rigor, [but] they are not infrequently seen... as having the potential to threaten white people sexually” (314). This shows the absurdity of the effeminate stereotype; White men perpetuate the stereotype that Asian American men lack sexuality, yet simultaneously fear that they might attract their women, effectively contradicting their own argument.

In an article entitled “Contemporary Asian American Men’s Issues” published in 1998, J. W. Chan found that when the dominant form of masculinity was being critiqued, the Asian American men felt attacked. They saw the situation more as “politics of inclusion to a hegemonic normative hetero-masculinity rather than a politics of alliance with women and

gay and lesbian groups” (165). He, however, proposed an ambisexual model of masculinity that was non patriarchal, pro feminist, and promoted gender equality and an “ambivalence towards socially determined definitions of masculinity” (166). In *American Knees*, Wong examines how Asian American men navigate and negotiate their identities within the framework of hegemonic masculinity. Raymond confronts the expectations and stereotypes associated with Asian men that often present conflicting ideal of masculinity. Raymond's experiences challenge and subvert the traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity. He resists conforming to the prescribed roles and expectations placed upon him as an Asian American man. Instead, he embraces his own individuality, defying stereotypes and societal pressures. For example, he is portrayed as a romantic, soft and understanding lover on contrary to the hegemonic male who's expected to be strong and controlling significant other. Aurora describes Raymond as “You're the only boyfriend I've ever had who uses the word 'romantic.' It was romantic, Raymond. Our fantasies were on the same plane. I thought you had the will and the desire to make me happy” (73).

Peter Chua and Diane Fujino, in their study of college-age men entitled *Negotiating New Asian-American Masculinities: Attitudes and Gender Expectations*, found that there were differences in how U.S.-born Asian men, immigrant Asian men, and White men perceived masculinity. White male students were the only group who saw themselves as sexually exciting, physically attractive, outgoing, and social. On the other hand, U.S.-born Asian men had a broader concept of masculinity that included domestic tasks, showing a more expanded notion of masculinity. Immigrant Asian men had the least distinct characteristics associated with masculinity, indicating a greater variation in their perception of masculinity. Unlike White men who had a strong negative association between masculinity and feminine characteristics, both U.S.-born and immigrant Asian men did not show a significant association between masculine and feminine traits (403). In one particular instance

at the airport, some individuals(white men) mistakenly perceive Raymond as a luggage man and make assumptions about his relationship with his white girlfriend :“Men at airports and in hotels would come right up to Gretchen as if Raymond weren’t there and start talking with her or offer to help her with her bags. They assumed Raymond was (a) not with her; (b) a business partner; (c) an employee of the hotel; (d) a driver delivering her to the airport, and/or (e) someone named Hop Sing”(107).

This incident reflects the racial prejudices and stereotypes prevalent in society, where Asian men are often subjected to emasculating stereotypes and diminished in terms of their desirability as romantic partners. The assumption that an Asian man would not be able to attract or be with a white woman is rooted in stereotypes that portray Asian men as unattractive, sexually inferior, or lacking in masculinity.

Given these alienating stereotypes and palpable disadvantages within social, professional and romantic spheres, it is important to understand the strategies that Asian-American men employ as they grapple to survive in a world that prizes hegemonic masculinity, yet excludes them from its definition. Chinese-American men engaged in ‘hegemonic bargaining’: subjects traded behaviors such as athleticism, assertiveness, ‘frat-boy-like behaviors’ (Nemeto 83), and sentiments of ‘feeling white’ inside, in exchange for an ‘elevation of their manhood’ and less marginalized masculinities (Chen 600). Yet, these bargains are hegemonic, for in adhering to the prevailing ideals, the men reinforce a worldview by which they ‘regard themselves as incomplete and inadequate’ (604). This insight exposes the paradox Asian-American men face as they negotiate their identities as men: they must either copy the white masculine norm or ‘accept the fact we are not men’ (Chan 94).

Raymond's character acts as a bridge between the two opposing stereotypes of Asian American masculinity while also challenging their validity. He incorporates elements of the

"model minority" stereotype often associated with Asian Americans, but he also defies it by engaging in behaviors that are considered more unconventional or "barbaric." By depicting Raymond's pursuit of romantic relationships and his departure from traditional cultural values, the novel portrays Asian American masculinity as a complex and varied spectrum rather than adhering to one extreme or the other. This perspective highlights the individuality and uniqueness of all men, regardless of ethnicity, emphasizing that they exist on a continuum between stereotypical chauvinistic behavior and effeminate characteristics. With Raymond's conformity to a "good boy" Asian American stereotype, and the overwhelming belief that Asian American men lack sexuality, it is surprising that Raymond negates this stereotype by being the most sought-after and sexually adept character in the book. While Raymond's sex life with Darleen is never touched on, it becomes clear that he holds sexual power over others when he seduces and beds a wine rep in the beginning of the novel.

IV. Conclusion :

Asian Americans seem to be caught in a trap; no matter what they do, they are looked down upon by society. This is summed up perfectly by Ling's previously mentioned statement, "When Asian American men are economically and politically subordinate, they are seen as feminine and incapable of living up to Western definitions of masculinity; when they struggle against odds to secure limited social space for themselves... they are immediately regarded as "bastardized" males whose criminal libido has to be controlled" (317). It becomes clear after studying historical facts that these stereotypes surrounding Asian American men emerge directly out of racist beliefs, and the two competing versions of the masculinity stereotype serve to confuse Asian American men to the point that their development of their own masculinities is in part a response to the images of Asian Americans depicted in the media.

Raymond's character can be seen as a bridge between the two opposing stereotypes surrounding Asian American men, while simultaneously rejecting their validity. He defies the notion of Asian American men as emasculated or devoid of sexuality by embracing his own desires and engaging in intimate relationships. At the same time, he challenges the stereotype of hypermasculinity by demonstrating qualities such as sensitivity, tenderness, and emotional depth. Raymond's character embodies a nuanced and complex understanding of masculinity, breaking free from the confines of narrow stereotypes and presenting a more multifaceted and authentic portrayal.

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General Conclusion

Shawn Wong's *American Knees* received critical acclaim upon its release and has been widely recognized as an important contribution to Asian American literature. The novel's exploration of Asian American identity, cultural expectations, and the complexities of relationships resonated with readers and critics alike. The novel was praised for its nuanced portrayal of the Asian American experience, particularly in challenging stereotypes and shedding light on the struggles faced by Asian American men. Shawn Wong's writing was lauded for its depth, introspection, and thought-provoking themes. *American Knees* was a finalist for the 1996 Pen/Faulkner Award for Fiction, further highlighting its literary merit and impact. The novel's success helped solidify Wong's reputation as a prominent voice in Asian American literature.

The aim of this dissertation is to expand our understanding of masculinity within the Asian American context, challenge and debunk stereotypes, and highlight the diverse narratives and real-life experiences of Asian American men. The first chapter acknowledges that masculinity is a dynamic and multifaceted concept shaped by cultural norms, societal expectations, and historical contexts. It recognizes that Asian American masculinity emerges from the intersection of Asian cultural traditions and the experiences of Asian Americans in the United States, resulting in a complex understanding of masculinity.

Chapter two explores the complex social landscape faced by Asian American individuals, as portrayed in Shawn Wong's novel. It delves into the negative stereotypes and unfair expectations that Asian American men often confront, which are deeply rooted in racist beliefs. These stereotypes significantly contribute to the challenges and complexities they encounter in developing their own sense of masculinity. Additionally, the influence of

Chinese traditions adds another layer of cultural context to their experiences, shaping their perspectives on identity and masculinity.

In chapter three, Wong takes on the task of redefining the stereotypes commonly associated with Asian American men. By challenging these stereotypes, he aims to provide a fresh perspective and a more accurate representation of the experiences and identities of Asian American men. Wong seeks to dismantle the limited and harmful portrayals that perpetuate misconceptions and hinder the recognition of the diversity and complexity within the Asian American male community. Through alternative narratives and the exploration of Raymond as a main character, Wong aims to contribute to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of this marginalized group.

To sum up, this dissertation seeks to deepen our understanding of Asian American masculinity, confront stereotypes, and highlight the multifaceted experiences and identities of Asian American men within the context of their cultural heritage and the American society they inhabit.

The portrayal of the male characters in the novel was widely recognized for its depth, complexity, and authenticity. The novel defies the stereotypes and limited portrayals of Asian American men that have often been perpetuated in mainstream media and literature. Instead, Wong presents multifaceted male characters with their own unique experiences, desires, and struggles. These characters challenge the notion that Asian American men are solely defined by traditional stereotypes such as being submissive, emasculated, or lacking in agency. After analyzing the novel, one can establish that Wong has offered a new radical representation of Asian American men. Through the protagonist, Ray, and other male characters in the novel, Wong delves into the complexities of Asian American masculinity. He explores their desires, relationships, cultural conflicts, and their efforts to navigate their identity within a

multicultural society. This nuanced portrayal allows readers to gain a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences and perspectives of Asian American men.

The representation of Asian American men in *American Knees* has been considered groundbreaking and empowering. It has contributed to the broader movement of challenging stereotypes and promoting diverse and authentic portrayals of Asian American experiences in literature and media.

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