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GRADUATION PAPER

**‘FRESH OFF THE BOAT’ AND THE MODEL
MINORITY THESIS: A FOUCAULDIAN
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

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**‘FRESH OFF THE BOAT’ VÀ ĐỊNH KIẾN VỀ
THIỆU SỐ GƯƠNG MẪU: MỘT NGHIÊN CỨU
DIỄN NGÔN THEO FOUCAULT**

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ABSTRACT

This graduation paper, consisting of six chapters, studies the historical conditions for the intelligibility of the thesis and how the ABC primetime sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* facilitates the model minority thesis. Adopting Foucault's theory of discourse analysis, it regards the model minority thesis' historical conditions as a network of meanings and power relations that render the thesis intelligible to many people in a context. As the recent years have witnessed an increase in Asian American representation in mainstream American media, the research seeks to discover possible changes happening in the system of narratives on Asian Americans. Central to the study is the attempt to identify the power relations among different subjects produced by the model minority discourse, which are characterized by the term 'power networks'. The research's findings reveal that the perceived economic success of Asian Americans is rationalized by mainstream media through the introduction of the model minority thesis into the discourse on Asian Americans, which highlights and commends characteristics of strong work ethics, excellent academic prowess, and superior upward mobility, among others. How *Fresh Off the Boat* manifests the model minority thesis is featured extensively through the three power networks: the black-white paradigm, the power network of a stereotypical Asian American family, and the power relations established by patriarchy and racial stereotype-based humor in American sitcoms. The series' depiction of the model minority image appears to have employed a more humane approach as opposed to the oversimplified, caricatured representation of Asian Americans in the past.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Table of contents.....	iii
Key to abbreviations.....	v
CHAPTER 1.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background of the Study.....	1
Thesis Intention and Importance.....	3
Theoretical Perspective.....	4
Mode of Inquiry.....	6
Preview of Chapters.....	6
CHAPTER 2.....	8
ASIAN AMERICANS AND THE MODEL MINORITY DISCOURSE.....	8
The United States as an Immigrant Country.....	8
The Asian American Success Story.....	9
The Model Minority Thesis as an Explanation for Success.....	11
The Emergence of Model Minority Thesis.....	11
Changes in the System of Rules.....	12
CHAPTER 3.....	14
AMERICAN TELEVISION: THE BLACK-WHITE PARADIGM & TYPICAL ASIAN AMERICAN FAMILY.....	14
Television and the Black-white Paradigm.....	14
The Role of Television in Shaping Racial Minorities Representation.....	14
The Black-white Paradigm.....	15
Model Minority Image & Typical Asian American Family.....	19
Asian American Stereotypes & the Dominance of the Model Minority Image.....	19
(Stereo)typical Asian American Family: Backbone of the Model Minority Discourse.....	21
CHAPTER 4.....	23
THE ROLE OF SITCOM IN PERPETUATING RACIAL & GENDER STEREOTYPES.....	23
Racial Stereotypes & Humor in Sitcoms.....	23
Patriarchy in Sitcom.....	24
The Correlation between Patriarchy and Whiteness.....	28
CHAPTER 5.....	30
CASE STUDY & ANALYSIS: ‘FRESH OFF THE BOAT’.....	30
<i>FOB</i> : Premise & Characters.....	30
Power Networks of the Model Minority Discourse in <i>FOB</i>	31

The Black-white Paradigm.....	31
Power Network of a Stereotypical Asian American Family in <i>FOB</i>	33
Sitcom Form: the Two Power Networks.....	39
How <i>FOB</i> is Different.....	42
CHAPTER 6	44
CONCLUSION.....	44
REFERENCES	46

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

FOB Fresh Off the Boat

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces my interest in the model minority thesis, presents an overview of the history of the issue in American media, articulates my research problems and questions, explicates the theoretical perspective of my study, describes my mode of inquiry, and previews the chapters.

Background of the Study

To begin with, I have always been fascinated by the idea of America. My journey of learning the English language—the one subject that remains my specialization ever since middle school, has been one that is closely accompanied by the tales of the American Dream. To learn English I watched movies that are permeated with images of an alluring, prosperous American society where success is granted to anyone adhering to the core American values of hard work, initiative, and determination. It was not until I enrolled in the *Topics in American Studies: Disadvantaged Peoples of the U.S.* course in my third year of undergraduate study, however, that my understanding of the American Dream became more realistic. Albeit modest, the knowledge I acquired from this course helped me become aware of an uncommonly discussed topic that is the rigid struggles that different marginalized groups in the U.S. have to endure in order to achieve a piece of the American Dream, among which I personally find Asian Americans' most intriguing: while other ethnic minorities such as African, Latino/a, and Native Americans are constantly narrated to experience extreme hardships and discrimination, Asian American groups are offered the label 'model minority' as an indication of their exemplary achievements upon settlement into the Promised Land.

The model minority thesis is a notion born into and perpetuated by media, thus has urged me to explore the history of this thesis along the development of American media: First, before the era of new media, despite a rapid increase in demographics, Americans of Asian descent have remained underrepresented and ranked the least likely among ethnic minority groups to be cast as lead roles in mainstream television (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Kim & Kell, 2015). Then, in the 1960s the model minority image emerged as a prominent

characterization and has since become the most pervasive stereotype to be utilized by mainstream media to depict Asian Americans. Specifically, they began to be portrayed as highly ambitious and academically intelligent individuals who set an example as the ‘superior’ minority in order for other ethnic groups like African, Latino/a, and Native Americans to follow. As a result of decades of such repeated portrayal, audience members grow accustomed to the constructed identity of Asian Americans, which in turn creates a tremendous challenge for any filmmaker who aspires to break out of the status quo that Hollywood generated.

The climate, however, changed as technology evolved and modern media platforms like YouTube came to existence in 2006. The way this new digital outlet functions has completely renovated how content is presented to viewers: in lieu of being restricted to a fixed range of options, viewers are now granted utmost freedom to choose whichever content that is to their liking. Simultaneously, videomakers are entitled to equal chances of publicizing their works to the mass while being in full control of the content they wish to feature—this is a totally different dynamic compared to conventional media where narratives are meticulously scrutinized and filtered by a creative team before being officially produced. This system of democracy is deemed instrumental in helping Asian American personalities achieve success on YouTube, with examples of Ryan Higa, Timothy Delaghetto, or Michelle Phan—internet icons of respectively Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese ancestry gathering millions of subscribers for each of their channels (Takahashi, 2011). On this new platform they are able to broadcast themselves on a much wider spectrum—from fashion bloggers, make-up artists, comedians, to dancers, singers, rappers, and so forth—as opposed to the one-size-fits-all image of a socially awkward math genius that is constructed by traditional media. Fortunately, this rising popularity of Asian Americans on YouTube has helped to strengthen Asian American visibility among public audiences (Hao, 2016), which can be seen in the production of *Master of None*—the Netflix series starring an Indian American as the lead role, or *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Doctor Ken*—the first sitcoms in twenty years to feature Asian American protagonists on primetime television.

Although overall representations have increased, there certainly exist multiple challenges in the way Asian American sitcoms have to deal with ethnic stereotypes typically

found in this genre. I argue that there are three main hurdles needed to be conquered in order for any Asian American-specific show to succeed in contemporary mainstream network TV: First, stereotypes ought to be utilized in a way that does not over-simplify the nuanced, complex experience of Asian groups—this is a mistake that propelled the only show of this kind to fail in the past. Second, since Asian representations are, in the grand scheme of things, still scarce, the storyline bears the overwhelming expectation of reflecting as many Asian American families as possible. Third, the sitcom should manage to do both of the above while still ensure that it can appeal to a wide range of audience that is not exclusive to Asian Americans; it goes without saying that this is for the sake of commercial profit.

Among the Asian American sitcoms now on air, *Fresh Off the Boat* has particularly caught my attention due to its emphasized specificity in narrating the Asian American experience. This is the first primetime sitcom in 20 years that centers its plot on an all-Asian American family while simultaneously features racial slurs such as “chink” in its pilot episode. What’s more, the way the host broadcast network—ABC—employs a board of executive producers as people of color also promises to provide insightful input for the storyline. Specifically, Nahnatchka Khan, of Iranian descent and Melvin Mar, of Chinese descent are both second-generation immigrants who could share personal experiences similar to that of the characters in the sitcom. Eddie Huang—author of the memoir on which *Fresh Off the Boat* is based, was also directly involved in the production of the show and even provided voice-overs as the main narrator for the first season. All of these factors add up to make *Fresh Off the Boat* a rich and unique site of discourse that, in my opinion, would best help to reveal how present-day Asian American representation is being performed through the model minority stereotype/thesis.

Thesis Intention and Importance

In this study, the model minority thesis refers to a stereotypical image of Asian Americans as academically outstanding and/or economically thriving individuals who represent the validity of the American Dream. This study considers the model minority thesis as inseparable from the model minority discourse. While the model minority thesis is a system of thought about American Americans, this thesis manifests concretely in historical conditions rather than existing as an abstract and eternal entity. The model minority discourse refers to real life practices of the model minority thesis. My project sets out to

explore *Fresh Off the Boat* as a specific performance of the model minority discourse. In order to do so, my task is also to examine the history of the model minority discourse in the U.S. To my knowledge, although to date there have been several scholarly works that study how *Fresh Off the Boat* represents Asian Americans through certain rhetorical techniques (Yeh, 2016), there has not been any research that locates the series in broad historical conditions of the model minority discourse. Indeed, I am not interested in *Fresh Off the Boat* per se but in how it performs the model minority discourse. My attempt to describe the historical conditions that allow for the emergence and intelligibility of the model minority thesis is no less significant.

To be specific, this research, titled '*Fresh Off the Boat*' and the model minority thesis: A Foucauldian discourse analysis, primarily aims at addressing the following questions:

1. What are the historical conditions that have given rise to the model minority discourse on Asian Americans and its intelligibility?

2. How does the model minority discourse manifest in the sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat*? Specifically:

What are the different power networks established in the sitcom? What are their features?

I believe that my answers to these questions from a Foucauldian perspective, which I will elucidate in the next section of this chapter, would become a helpful lesson of critical media literacy and a new reference in the scholarly literature on Asian Americans.

Theoretical Perspective

Without doubt, my research problems and questions are shaped by a Foucauldian perspective. My whole thesis could be seen as a Foucauldian discourse analysis.

In alignment with Foucault, 'discourse' entails two basic interrelated senses, "a statement or a group of statements that, within a certain historical context, are understandable to a person or group of persons" and "a single system of analyzable rules and transformations that govern these statements" (Phung, 2016, p. 2). A discourse is a system of thought that is put into language. Indeed, while discourse primarily refers to the sayable, it is the sayable about people and things, including objects of furniture, architecture, motion picture, etc., those that are recognizable to us. Thus, the objects of discourse studies are not

limited to verbal statements. *Fresh Off the Boat*, a motion picture, is relevant to my study of the model minority discourse since it exhibits a system of thought characteristic of the model minority discourse. To put it in another way, the material arrangement of the series corresponds to a system of statements about Asian Americans. A Foucauldian discourse analysis involves the study of the historical conditions that altogether contribute to rendering a pattern of statements intelligible within a certain context. Instead of focusing on the linguistic features of statements, a Foucauldian discourse analysis examines the history of a particular system of thought.

The model minority thesis and its concrete manifestations qualify as a discourse because they are understandable to many people. The thesis consists of particular statements about Asian American groups that have been perpetuated and widely received throughout the history of American racial representation in media. From a Foucauldian perspective, the intelligibility of the thesis is governed by a network of meanings that is also its historical conditions. In this study, historical conditions refer not only to events but also networks of meanings. For example, without discourses about race in American society, the model minority thesis would be impossible/incomprehensible. Thus, the discourses about race in American society are part of the historical conditions that have made the model minority thesis possible/intelligible. As an event, the model minority discourse emerged specifically in the U.S. in 1960s. The recent years have witnessed changes in the climate of representing Asian Americans in American media. I assume that there have been certain alterations occurring in the system of model minority narratives.

Furthermore, adopting a Foucauldian approach means a commitment to attend to the power relations among different subjects produced by a discourse. A subject is what is summoned by a discourse (Fendler, 2010). The model minority discourse summons the subjects of American Asians, race, gender, family, success, etc. In other words, it constructs a whole world of power relations, which offers us conditions to understand ourselves and others. This study employs the term ‘power network’ to characterize the model minority discourse. A network of power is also a network of meanings.

Since *Fresh Off the Boat* is the focus of my study, I acknowledge that the major limitation of this thesis is that it does not investigate the audiovisual features of the series to bring into view the correspondence between the visible and the sayable. The main cast of the

series consists of actors and actresses who are Asian Americans in real life; how they act in specific situations generate thoughts/statements about Asian Americans in a straightforward manner. I assume that I have the capacity to interpret *Fresh Off the Boat* into a system of thought. My interpretation is subject to discussion and disagreement; I do not aim to produce the best understanding of *Fresh Off the Boat* and the model minority discourse. These assumptions are compatible with Foucauldian epistemology, which holds that knowledge is contextual and there are multiple truths.

In summary, to study the model minority discourse in *Fresh Off the Boat* in line with the Foucauldian tradition of scholarship, I examine the broad historical conditions that have given rise to how the show could be seen as a manifestation of the model minority thesis as well as the specificities of how the show establishes power networks to feature an Asian American experience.

Mode of Inquiry

This graduation thesis is a humanities oriented study. It does not follow established steps of scientific research methodologies. My mode of inquiry is as familiar as the process of critical reading and writing that people engage in to produce essays. Guided by my research interest and theoretical perspective, I study and synthesize relevant literature to construct the stories and themes that shed light on the model minority discourse in American media, its historical contexts, contents, and forms. I make use of my understanding of the discursive conditions of the model minority thesis to analyze *Fresh Off the Boat*. The limitations of what I can do will be specified in the last chapter of this thesis.

Preview of Chapters

The study consists of six chapters through which I investigate the historical conditions for the intelligibility of the model minority thesis as well as how the sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* that facilitate the thesis.

Specifically, the first chapter articulates my research interest and background knowledge of the model minority thesis, and informs the theoretical perspective and mode of inquiry of my research. It also introduces the three main questions I seek to answer upon completion of the research. Chapter 2 recounts a dominant history of Asian Americans—according to which Asian Americans are a minority group that has succeeded economically through hard work; I maintain that this version of history makes the model minority thesis

intelligible. In Chapter 3, I examine two power networks considered as crucial components of the grid of meanings upon which the model minority thesis makes sense: the black-white binary model in racial representation and the power network of a typical Asian American family on American television. Chapter 4 explores patriarchy and humor—characteristic of sitcom form, which constitutes a network of power that enables the model minority discourse to function in the sample sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat*. Chapter 5 focuses on analyzing how the show demonstrates the three networks of power mentioned in two previous chapters, unraveling how the show makes specific contributions to the model minority discourse. Finally, Chapter 6 synthesizes the main findings in previous chapters, specifically with regard to providing more articulate answers to the three research questions posed in the first chapter, and brings into view the limitations of the study.

CHAPTER 2

ASIAN AMERICANS AND THE MODEL MINORITY DISCOURSE

This chapter introduces the historical conditions that have led to the emergence and popularity of the model minority discourse in narratives about Asian Americans. It recounts the master history of Asian Americans told in mainstream American history books and scholarly publications. I argue that this version of history is part of the formation of the model minority discourse. The chapter also discusses the changes in the way the discourse manifests across different historical periods by reviewing relevant scholarly publications in the time frame from the 1980s to 2000s.

The United States as an Immigrant Country

In 1776, the United States of America declared its independence as a sovereign nation embracing the core values of individual freedom, self-reliance, and equality of opportunity, among others. The Founding Fathers, British colonial settlers who fled their homeland in Europe to break free of the governmental control exercised in a formal aristocrat society, established the new nation that affirms “all men are created equal” and entitles the power to govern in the hands of the people. Such emphasis on freedom and equality has, throughout the course of history, continued to be the reason that attracts generations of immigrants from numerous corners of the world to the U.S. (Nguyen et al., 2013), which has collectively given rise to the nature of multiculturalism and ethnic diversity in the nation.

Owing to their longstanding history of settlements, European immigrants remain the majority group in American demographics which accounts for approximately 70 percent of the total population (Hixson, Hepler, & Kim, 2012). It is because of their established heritage that European groups, compared to ethnic minorities, are assumed to confront less hardship in terms of strategic adaptation upon their arrival to the New Land. On the contrary, as newcomers, minority groups like African, Hispanic, or Asian Americans—despite sharing distinctive contact situations, have all been presented with discrimination and hostility of some sort. For example, African Americans, as descendants of enslaved Africans, experienced a period of institutionalized racial segregation under the Jim Crow

laws existing from 1896 to 1964. The controversy associated with this critical era of American history is a contentious subject of debate and scrutiny to many even until today. In comparison with African Americans, however, Asian Americans are often depicted to be the ‘superior’ ethnic minority that represents a completely different experience of immigrants in the United States: affluent, successful, and assimilated.

The Asian American Success Story

Asian Americans is an ethnically diverse group which includes, but is not limited to, the earliest settlers Chinese and Japanese, newcomers from South East Asia such as Vietnam or the Philippines, as well as groups from Korea or India. These sub-groups arrived in the U.S. in vastly different conditions and thus could not be generalized and presented in any single, definite Asian American experience. I present below a truncated review of the distinct contact situations among different Asian groups, which I think would facilitate our understanding of the model minority discourse introduced in the next section.

The earliest Asian groups to set foot in America in substantial number were Chinese and Japanese, both of whom were believed to flee their home countries and come to the New Land in hope of getting a piece of the American Dream. Ever since their arrival, like most of the other ethnic minority groups, Chinese and Japanese Americans were faced with antipathy and discrimination from the mainstream society dominated by Caucasians. In 1871, violent protests started to take to the streets of Los Angeles in which “several hundred whites shot, hanged, and stabbed 19 Chinese to death” (Healey, 2013), then in 1882 the anti-Chinese sentiment was institutionalized as the anti-Chinese Exclusion Act became a legitimate law banning all immigrants from China. This was among the most notorious policies directly targeted at Americans of Chinese descent; it took the media by storm and created national rage across the country. Similarly, in 1920 the U.S. government decided to bar immigration from Japan completely as an effort to prevent rigid competition in job opportunities.

Later prominent Asian groups to arrive in the U.S. were Indian, Korean, Vietnamese, and Filipino. Each respective group arrived in extremely different contact situations. Indians—citizens of the second most populous country in the world, were mostly members of the elite, educated group whose main purpose was to seek occupational opportunities abroad as a result of the lack of economic development in their home country. They were

also able to use English as a result of the long period under the British colonization; this is a distinct feature that differentiates Indians from other ethnic groups of Asian Americans. Koreans also made their way to America with a somewhat similar purpose. Although Korean immigrants first made their appearance as early as in the beginning of twentieth century to help fill the void in the job market left by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, their number only started to witness rapid growth until the 1970s. These more recent groups “consist mostly of families and include many highly educated people” (Healey, 2013), meaning they arrived with more resources and were much better prepared. On the contrary, Vietnamese groups mostly comprised political refugees and arrived with virtually nothing in their hands. They belonged to the impoverished and uneducated segment of the society, making it extra difficult to adjust to the challenging new life. In a separate context, Filipino Americans was a diverse group with a ‘bipolar’ educational and occupational profile. The first generations of immigrants were often poor and competed in the low-wage labor market while their descendants have been professionals employed largely in the health and medical fields.

Despite the stark differences in their initial contact situations, all Asian groups were thought to have established a relatively firm stand in the American society after some time of settling in their new life (Healey, 2013). This was partially thanks to the fact that the native-born generations, who achieved an American citizenship status, were much more acculturated in comparison with their parents and obtained adequate resources to fight for their rights. What’s more, it is often believed that the native-born generations, who had travelled half way across the world in hope of having a better life, brought with them traditional values that placed great emphasis on education, hard work, and integrity. In exercising these virtues these early Asian settlers established their own ethnic enclaves as mini-communities coexisting within the bigger society in order to open self-run businesses, as well as to exchange resources with one another as a strategy to cope with discrimination from the white-dominated environment. The native-born children, engrained with the ethical traits, also performed exceptionally well in school with an expectation to achieve social mobility in the future. Owing to such accomplishments, the Asian groups started to gain recognition from their counterparts—dominant white group and minorities alike, which soon gave rise to the thesis of model minority as a discourse on Asian Americans.

The Model Minority Thesis as an Explanation for Success

The Emergence of Model Minority Thesis

Intrigued by the apparent success of Asian groups, mainstream American media undertook the unsolicited mission to find a justification for the phenomenon. As a result, the phrase ‘model minority’ made its first appearance in a *New York Times Magazine* article in January 1966 as a plaudit of “the efforts of Japanese Americans in their successful struggle to enter the mainstream of American life” (Petersen, cited in Osajima, 2005). Subsequently, a *U.S. News and World* report on the success of Chinese Americans also utilized the term as the overarching concept to denote qualities such as diligence, morality, and thrift of Chinese Americans—deemed the fundamental factors in helping this group to conquer discrimination and achieve upward mobility in the American society. According to Wong and Halgin (2006), the model minority image presents Asian Americans as “restaurant or convenience store owners who arrived in the U.S. with no money and worked long hours to finally own a piece of the American dream” (p. 38), or as academically accomplished students who express superior prowess in scientific fields and outperform most of their peers in school. For the first time since their arrival, public perceptions on Asian Americans were displayed in a seemingly favorable light, refuting all the past racial discrimination incidences in history. Notably, the phrase model minority not only endorses the admirable attributes of Asian Americans but also suggests the idea that other ethnic minority groups in the U.S. such as Africans and Hispanics should take Asians as an example to emulate.

The positive image, though bearing a certain degree of truth, seemed to be just the tip of the iceberg. One should be reminded that this new Asian American identity emerged amidst a specifically racially-sensitive era in American history when the Civil Rights Movement was triggering intense debates around racial politics and challenging the Jim Crow system of racial segregation against African Americans. The notion of model minority perpetuated by popular media in this historical context carried political implications that could act as the confutation to claims of a racist America. In this regard, Yamada (1981) and Osajima (2005) arrived at the same conclusion that the model minority stereotype did in fact disguise structural inequalities experienced by ethnic minority groups in this period, and further illustrated a distorted image of a fair American society where everyone, irrespective of their skin color, is granted the same rights and opportunities to ‘make it’ in the New Land.

Changes in the Systems of Rules

In the 1980s, representations revolving around the notion of model minority continued to pop up in major popular press publications. However, its approach to narrate the Asian American success story witnessed noticeable changes. First, various articles acknowledged the dynamic nature of the Asian American population in the sense that it was expanding (Bell, 1985; Barringer, 1990). As the 1965 Immigration Act made Asians become the fastest growing minority in the country, the Asian American demographics was broadened to include Korean, Vietnamese, and other foreign-born Asians, rather than only Japanese and Chinese (Gardner, Robey, & Smith, 1985). Furthermore, the negative by-products of the model minority thesis were given much more emphasis, as opposed to the single glamorous image that was traditionally introduced to the mass. Substantial conversations were initiated to discuss the parental pressures that Asian American students had to endure as an effect of the model minority stereotype. Lee (1994) points out that the label brings Asian American students the burden of conforming to their parents' expectations and demonstrating extraordinary academic ability. Additionally, it is usually criticized for the way it narrows the Asian American identity into pan-ethnicity—that is, instead of being viewed as an ethnically diverse group consisting of different backgrounds, Asian American immigrants, especially those belonging to the second generation onwards, tend to feel that their unique cultural heritage is neglected (Park, 2008). Regardless of their original ethnic background as, for instance, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, or Vietnamese, Asian Americans are usually classified by a one-size-fits-all label which makes it a challenging experience for Asian American individuals—especially the youths—to construct and claim a self identity when interacting with the large, multi-racial social world outside of their ethnicity. What's more, the qualitative research conducted by Wong et al. (1998, p. 113) even confirmed that model minority is a myth, as findings of the study revealed Asian American students' actual grades in school “did not differ from those of other racial/ethnic groups.” Likewise, Min (2004) also points out that “although Asian Americans have higher levels of attainment overall, they do not receive equal rewards for their educational investments” (p. 335). In other words, their success in school does not necessarily translate to improved earnings or higher level of career ladder later in their occupation; such disclosures signify the fact that the model minority thesis was indeed masking the real

picture of the racial climate in the U.S. in this period. These more in-depth investigations displayed “a greater recognition of the complexities and critiques associated with the model minority thesis” (Osajima, 2005), which served to present a more diverse, comprehensive picture of the situation.

To confirm the direct relationship between media exposure and personal opinion, Zhang (2010) conducted a research on 169 undergraduate student viewers and found that their perceptions and judgments about Asian Americans are in fact aligned with the media representations of “nerds who are intelligent, hard-working, and technologically talented, but clumsy and lacking appropriate social and communication skills” (p. 32). The acknowledged stereotypes also dictate the way people choose to interact with Asians. The impression that Americans of Asian descent possess poor language and social skills is proved to lead to potential peer exclusion, making Asian Americans to be the group that is most likely to be left out in the socialization process. The research also points out that the general public appears to receive the stereotypes in an uncritical way, accepting them as a social reality which consequently lessens the possibility of initiating friendship with Asian Americans. Such reaction further hinders understanding between them and other ethnic groups, making it increasingly difficult to create harmonized and sympathetic relationships among different races.

CHAPTER 3

AMERICAN TELEVISION: THE BLACK-WHITE PARADIGM & TYPICAL ASIAN AMERICAN FAMILY

In this chapter, I discuss two stable networks of power that have been brought into common sense through American television: the eminent black-white binary model in racial representation and the established network of power relations among family members in the portrayal of Asian Americans. This chapter provides readers with a background crucial for understanding my analysis of *Fresh Off the Boat* in Chapter 5. It is also my argument that these two stable power networks are important components of the grid of meanings upon which the model minority thesis makes sense.

Television and the Black-white Paradigm

The Role of Television in Shaping Racial Minorities Representation

Television is a visual platform that bears distinctive advantages in shaping racial representation because racial discourse and biological features are inextricably linked to each other in the process of facilitating identities on media (Alcoff, 2006, p.). As audiences observe the perpetuated patterns of racial representation, a constructed image of race is gradually formed in their mindset, which, to a certain extent, dictates the manner with which they choose to view ethnicities in real-life encounters (Alcoff, 2006, p.). In general, American television has offered systems of portrayals that have helped formulate identities for ethnic minority groups. Ever since the pioneer American TV station broadcast its first program nearly ninety years ago, coverage has predominantly focused on representation of the majority Caucasian population while ethnic minorities have been given relatively modest spotlight compared to this group (Huston et al., 1992; Berry, 1980; Calvert et al., 1997; Greenberg & Collette, 1997). Such limited inclusion is believed to convey children and youth “the relative lack of power and importance” of minority peoples in the larger American society (Graves, 1999). To look closely at the roles distribution in American television shows of the 1980s, Africans constituted 8% of major and minor roles, Hispanics made up 3.5%, while Asians were at 2.5%, and Native Americans less than 1% of television characters (Berry, 1988). In cases when the minorities were present, it is likely that their portrayals are based off of stereotypic images that oversimplify their characteristics. As a

general trend, educational and children's programs tend to offer more diversity than prime time television shows (William & Cox, 1995; Calvert et al., 1997).

Substantial scholar research has been conducted to examine the popular images of ethnic minorities perpetuated by different television artifacts as well as the potential effects that these images have on viewers' perception of the groups. First, in terms of prime time television roles, African Americans rank first in the likelihood to be featured, but their Latino/a, Asian and Native American counterparts suffer virtual invisibility (Lichter et al., 1994; Wilson & Gutierrez, 1995; Greenberg & Collette, 1997). Hispanics have limited national prime time roles, and Asians are mostly given supporting roles (Wilson & Gutierrez, 1995). Native Americans are virtually absent or restricted to historical westerns (Geiogamah & Pavel, 1993). Next, in the realm of advertising, those associated with children's programming tend to include more diverse participants than does advertising directed at adults (Greenberg & Brand, 1993; Bang & Reece, 2003). Minorities are also rarely cast as the sole endorser of any product (Turow, 1997; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). Although African and Latino/a American men are more frequently portrayed as respected or independent, and women "less overtly exploited as sex objects than white women", both groups receive little to no room for experiencing reciprocal romance or domestic complacency onscreen, a motif characteristically found in television commercials (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). The same study recorded a lack of representation of Asian Americans, suggesting that "while different audiences receive slightly different images, most commercial advertising continues to perpetuate narrow stereotypes, thus contributing to subtle forms of prejudice" (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000).

In sum, it does not seem that American television has been investing much effort into shaping the identity of racial minority groups. Perpetuated stereotypes, rather than well thought-out systems of characterization, persist in representations for the sake of convenience.

The Black-white Paradigm

"Paradigms of race shape our understanding of race and our definition of racial problems. The most pervasive and powerful paradigm of race in the United States is the black-white binary paradigm" (Perea, 1997). The black-white paradigm refers to the notion that racial discourse in America predominantly revolves around only two groups: the black

and the white. It became a widely utilized term during discussions of racial tensions back in the 1960s when African Americans constituted ninety six percent of the minority population; however, as the U.S. demographics unceasingly underwent changes, especially with the boom in the number of Asian immigrants in the latter half of the twentieth century, this bipolar model of race has become a subject of frequent scrutiny among scholars of color (Kim, 1999).

The use of a black-white paradigm of race, though helps to “truncate history for the sake of telling a linear story of progress” (Perea, 1997, p. 127), obviously has limitations. By neglecting the important history of civil rights narratives surrounding Latino/a, Asian, and Native Americans, this black-white binary renders the racial complexities experienced by these groups invisible (Kim, 1999; Luna, 2003; Castagno, 2005). In his analysis of the debates on the black-white paradigm, Alcoff (2003) summarizes that there are four major arguments criticizing this type of classification. First, because they are automatically perceived in relation with either the black or white end of the spectrum, non-black minorities become deprived of the chance to name and describe their own identity. Second, the two-fold concept further reinforces the historical marginalization of Latino/a and Asian American groups in the discourse of racial politics and racism in America. Specifically, to reduce the situation of these two groups “simply in terms of their *de jure* and *de facto* treatment as nonwhites” (Alcoff, 2003, p. 17) and to classify them as either black or white in “whatever opportune classification presents itself in the context” (Alcoff, 2006, p. 250) mean that the black-white paradigm virtually dismisses the significance of discriminative events against Latino/a and Asian peoples in American history. Third, through the emphasis on white and non-white relations, the binary proves that it has failed to address the complicated reality within different communities of color as well as the various forms of racism. Lastly, the black-white paradigm has constructed a distorted racial image of an American society where “a very large white majority confronts a relatively small black minority, which has the effect of reinforcing the sense of inevitability to white domination” (Alcoff, 2003, p. 17).

It is such potent focus on white dominance in the black-white paradigm that plays a crucial role in interpreting the model minority myth among Asian Americans. Emerged as a discourse produced by white Americans in order to reverse discrimination and claim

superiority of Asian Americans over Blacks and Latino/as, the model minority discourse places Asian Americans somewhat in the middle of the black-white paradigm upon comparing “their proximity to white conservative values and economic success” (Kim, 1999, p. 2397). The fact that Asian Americans are identified according to their sole compatibility with ‘white traits’, irrespective of what those really are, confirms the condition of dominance and subordination that the black-white paradigm has created. The subordinated position of Asian Americans in this context, however, is made more obfuscating than that of other minorities, for the model minority puts them in a circumstance where they can be easily manipulated for the benefit of the dominant group. Worse still, it can “cause a blindness or amnesia among Asian Americans about discrimination they themselves face” (Kim, 1999, p. 2399).

To take a step back and look again at the history of discourses surrounding race, one can observe that a tremendous amount of literature has been dedicated to analyze the racial imagery of various groups ranging from African to Latino/a Americans, yet there seems to be a marked shortage of such studies performed on images of white people. Indeed, “to say that one is interested in race has come to mean that one is interested in any racial imagery other than that of white people” even though the evident fact proves that race politics is not exclusive to non-white groups, nor is the representation of non-white people the sole representation that matters in racial discourse (Dyer, 1997). The failure to acknowledge white culture as part of the racial climate renders whiteness as a human norm and thus, as a natural consequence, entitles white peoples “the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity” (Dyer, 1997). Here it can be deduced one more time that whiteness, despite its ostensible invisibility in racial imagery, functions as a dominant entity in race discourse and prominent reinforcement of the black-white paradigm (Alcoff, 2006).

“Whiteness does not exist at the biological level. It is a cultural construct, yet whiteness defines us and limits us” (Foster, 2003, p. 2). Whiteness defines us through the way it manufactures a social hierarchy of power preserved and perpetuated by popular media. To introduce a classic case of racial social ordering, Ono and Pham (2009) mention the model minority image to depict how media representations situate Asian Americans as a “minority”—meaning secondary to the dominant white demographic—yet seemingly above other ethnic communities like African, Latino/a, and Native Americans. As remarked in

Chapter 2, the model minority image is not a discourse designed, controlled, and maintained by Asian Americans but rather one that is created and radiated by mainstream media. In other words, it is a conspicuous example showing how media “play a significant role in establishing a racial order within a social hierarchy of power” (Ono & Pham, 2009). It is also in playing this crucial role that American popular media—especially television—adopts whiteness to limit audience’s understanding of the big racial picture. Foster (2003, p. 2) claims “Whiteness lacks an original, yet it is performed and performed in myriad ways, so much so that it seems ‘natural’ to most.” As a result, the image of white families portrayed on mainstream television becomes what viewers perceive to be ‘the norm’, a common motif recognized as closely relatable to our normal, everyday lives. With their typical storytelling plot focused on family settings, many sitcoms choose to utilize the experiences of white families as their core narratives, and the repeated use of these formulas gradually contribute to make white family situations “realistic performances” in the eyes of audience (Yeh, 2016). This media racial hegemony can be seen in the commercial success of the hit TV sitcom *The Cosby Show* when representation of a middle-class African American family is regarded by viewers as ‘just normal’ because it conforms to “the everyday, generic world of white television” (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). Should the show feature the common realities of the African American experience such as educational hardships or organized street gangs, it would perhaps be less likely to witness such a positive reception. Likewise, the way *The Mummy Returns* presents the story of the protagonists—a heterosexual white couple “with their equally white blond son”—embarking on an epic adventure alongside a black sidekick reinforces the image of blacks solely being background characters to highlight the experience of the main white nuclear family. *The Mummy Returns* is only one example among an enormous array of Hollywood films which employ “a formula that makes white American viewers feel comfortable” (Foster, 2003, p. 7). Narratives of race, be it white or non-white, are now displayed in the form of white experiences and communication patterns (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995).

To summarize, through American television, the black-white paradigm renders whiteness as normalcy in popular culture. It establishes a network of power which places Asian Americans in a position subordinate to the dominant white community but still seemingly higher than that of other ethnic minorities like African, Hispanic, or Native

American groups. This network of power plays a crucial role in validating the model minority discourse as a legitimate component of the bigger racial discourse in American society.

Model Minority Image & Typical Asian American Family

Asian American Stereotypes & the Dominance of the Model Minority Image

Throughout the history of Asian American representation on television, the two most prominent trends include the concept of miscegenation and the emergence of the model minority image. The former refers to the events of Asian characters being played by white actors, with their skin and hair darkened, and their eyes taped back to achieve ‘the Yellowface look’. The main reason behind such depiction lies in the fact that American film industry strictly rejected on-screen interracial love scenes, after the national Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America established the Motion Picture Production Code—a set of rigorous rules generated to control and censor television content (Katz, 1994; Paik, 1971). As regards the model minority image, the way television renders this concept slightly differs from other media facets in that it emphasizes the similarity between Asian Americans and Caucasian Americans. To show that Asians have ‘made it’, television show producers paint them as having more ‘all-American’ characteristics—this means speaking the language, having their food preferences and clothing styles more in line with the modern, ‘Americanized’ standards (Mok, 1998).

The majority of academic studies on portrayals of Asian Americans have found more evidence of the model minority stereotype in print media than in television. Such imbalance is very possibly due to the longer existence of printing compared to its audio-visual counterpart. Furthermore, in light of the matter, a number of scholars suggest a need to extend content analysis to television advertising—a channel that has higher likelihood to contain exemplary illustrations of a specific social group and, at the same time, affects and reflects public perceptions more profoundly than print does (Pollay & Gallagher, 1990). According to the 1994 Statistical Abstract of the United States, television has particular impact because the average American reportedly “watches 30 hours of programming a week” (Taylor & Stern, 1997), which is especially heavy during prime time of 8 p.m. to 11 p.m.

Consistent with the image perpetuated by print media, in one study to investigate white consumers' attitudes toward Asian models (Cohen, 1992) and two others to analyze the frequency and nature of Asian-American representation (Schmid & Bowen, 1995; Taylor & Lee, 1994), the collective results disclose that Asian Americans are commonly depicted as "technically competent, hard-working, self-disciplined, serious, and well-assimilated". Moreover, the pattern of portrayals in television advertisements seems to have a lot in common with print version, when Asian Americans are often illustrated in relation with work ethic, but can hardly be found in domestic, everyday life contexts. Asian actors also have the lowest possibility to be cast for major roles (Taylor & Stern, 1997).

Prior to *Fresh Off the Boat*, the first and only sitcom in American television history to assign an all-Asian cast to be protagonists was the 1994 ABC's TV series *All-American Girl*. It features a Korean American family and focuses its main plot around the rebellious teenage daughter Margaret Cho—whose name is borrowed from the author of the original comedy material upon which the sitcom is based. Although expected to be a groundbreaking Asian American debut show, *All-American Girl* received unfavorable reviews and had to be cancelled after only one season of broadcast. The fundamental reason leading to this failure is considered to be the sitcom's overambitious goal of targeting viewers from all demographics without 'doing their homework' about those who are being presented (Park, 2014). Among other controversies, none of the members in the sitcom being able to speak Korean naturally despite being a family of Korean descent, family members using personal insults to attack each other as a source for humor, and the overall unauthentic presentation of Korean culture are the main criticisms coming from Korean American audience, making it difficult for them to identify with the show (Price, 1994; Cassinelli, 2008).

What is more, in *All-American Girl*, Margaret Kim's 'all-Americanness' is depicted in opposition to the characteristics of her brother, Stuart, who is portrayed using the model minority image stereotypical of Asian Americans. To be specific, the brother figure here plays the role of a doctor, a 'mama's boy'—the perfect moral standard in the family who upholds the traditional Asian values while simultaneously achieves upward socioeconomic mobility in the mainstream American society. Whereas Margaret's mother is commonly showcased to be in conflict with her rebellious, Americanized daughter, she takes great pride in Stuart's 'good-natured' personality and obedience to his family's expectations. The pilot

episode of the sitcom even clearly manifests the contrasting relationship between Americanness and the model minority image, when Margaret defends her boyfriend by exclaiming: “I’ve got news for you, Mom. I’m American, Eric’s American... *even* Stuart’s American!” Through such depiction it can be seen that *All-American Girl* enacts the model minority thesis as a narrative that negates the American identity of the character—or, in a broader sense, rather than using the notion to display recognition of Asian Americans, the show takes advantage of it to obscure the racist premise on which narratives are constructed and performed throughout.

(Stereo)typical Asian American Family: Backbone of the Model Minority Discourse

While the propositions of the model minority thesis could be understood in contexts other than the family, they usually manifest in a family context. On American television, especially in the genre of sitcom, which typically employs a family structure to base its plot on, the dynamics among different characters are usually showcased through their interactions in family scenes. Moreover, the power relations between members in a stereotypical Asian American family as depicted on television correspond to those that are described in other media. It has been most convenient to identify the propositions of the model minority thesis by observing the power network that functions within a typical Asian American family. This section describes that power network, which I argue is the essential component of the model minority discourse. With a thorough grasp of this network, one would be able to understand the patterns of characterization that work simultaneously to construct the model minority image in the sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat*.

Specifically, there are three most common interrelated themes, corresponding to three main sub-networks of power that constitute the power network of a stereotypical Asian American family. First, there is a marked emphasis on academic excellence among school-aged youths as a result of the traditional Confucian values practiced by the majority of Asian families (Chou, 2008). To foster such success, parents are thought to be the driving force—placing tremendous expectations on children to excel academically, in hope that the achievements would secure the next generation of economic stability and social mobility in their future jobs (Scheider & Lee, 1990; Goyette & Xie, 1999). In terms of career orientation, there is also a biased attitude amongst parents towards high-ranked technical occupations such as doctors, lawyers, and engineers, as opposed to a climate of indifference

in arts-related fields that are deemed frivolous and unrealistic (Kao, 1995; Goyette & Xie, 2003). It can be seen that in this manifestation, the power relations between parents and children in a family works in a way that designates parents as the dominant authorities who impose significant influences on the subordinate that is the children. The focus on educational excellence also sometimes puts children of Asian American households in the mentality of constant academic competition, which creates a relationship of rivalry among the youths.

The second characteristic of the model minority thesis is the idea that Asian groups are representative of the American Dream—they prove that the Promised Land would in fact grant prosperity to anyone with strong work ethic and determination. In this regard, first-generation Asian American immigrants are often depicted as successful technical workers or managers of small businesses whose level of economic mobility is superior to that of other ethnic minorities and comparable to that of the dominant white population (Goyette & Xie, 2003; McGowan & Lindgren, 2006). Lastly, as a direct consequence of their economic accomplishment, Asian Americans are believed to be an exemplary case of successful assimilation into the mainstream community—living in the suburbs and harmoniously interacting with whites, once again legitimating the ideals of the American Dream (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006). In these two demonstrations there exists a power relation between the stereotypical model minority family and the outside world that they interact with on a daily basis: Asian Americans are put on a pedestal when measured against other ethnic minorities but are regarded to be on a par with the dominant white groups.

To observe how *Fresh Off the Boat* facilitates the model minority myth, in Chapter 5 I will conduct detailed analyses basing on the three major themes and discuss how the series' representation reinforces and/or challenges the three structures of power relations that operate inside this eminent stereotype targeted at Asian Americans.

CHAPTER 4

THE ROLE OF SITCOM IN PERPETUATING RACIAL & GENDER STEREOTYPES

Since sitcom is a form of television, it is possible to integrate this chapter into the previous one. However, I make it separate to highlight the role of sitcom in perpetuating racial and gender stereotypes. Chapter 4 is devoted to discussing how sitcom practices patriarchal ideology and utilizes racial stereotypes as a means to elicit humor.

The racial stereotypes mentioned in the chapter might be related to the black-white paradigm, and patriarchy could be seen as an aspect of a typical Asian American family. The power networks discussed in the present chapter and those in the previous chapter are overlapping and intricately linked. In fact, this is one of the main characteristics of networks. My narratives in this chapter underscore that race and gender are ineluctably intertwined and prepare for my analysis of how *Fresh Off the Boat* treats the model minority stereotypes in its production of humor in Chapter 5.

Racial Stereotypes & Humor in Sitcoms

Ever since situation comedy made its debut on mainstream television during the 1950s with *Mary Kay and Johnny* and the landmark series *I Love Lucy*, the genre has become “the bread and butter of prime-time television”; in fact, compared to other forms of TV shows, sitcoms cost less to produce yet were far more sellable as reruns (Butsch, 2005). The success experienced by sitcoms is believed to be directly linked with the way they portray inferior statuses associated with society’s long-standing stereotypes of women, blacks, and other minorities: since the public has already been familiarized with these stereotypical images, the recurring character types embodying them become norms to viewers, on which writers and producers can depend to establish patterns of humor without having to give much explanation (Bowes, 1990; Butsch, 2005; King, 2002). Such strategy is particularly effective in a short form of drama like sitcom as the typical duration of an individual episode remains at only about twenty five minutes. Regarding the approach with which sitcoms treat racial stereotypes, King (2002) maintains that comedic portrayals of race—that is, exaggerated representations of racial characteristics, “can be identified as a parody of the stereotype and a strategy of subversion, thereby opening up the possibility of

critiquing the racial norm and rejecting prejudice.” Whether *Fresh Off the Boat* reinforces racial stereotypes in this same manner will be investigated in more details in the next chapter.

In the attempt to examine potential effects of racially stereotype-based jokes in sitcoms on audiences’ perception of ethnic minorities, academic scholars often find it challenging to differentiate social commentary and satire from “the ideological reproduction of racial stereotypes in comedy” (Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006). Put differently, to claim “whether viewers laugh *at* stereotyped minority figures or *with* them” (Bowes, 1990; Hall, 1990) proves a virtually impossible task. However, more critical theorists claim that minority actors who take on roles having stereotypical traits associated with their own race stand a great chance of leaving a harmful impact on the climate of representation within their ethnic group. Specifically, the light-hearted, self-deprecating portrayal could gradually translate to the naturalization of racial difference which discourages audiences from critically engaging with racial discourses presented on mainstream media (Feuer, 1992, p. 145; Hall, 1997).

Patriarchy in Sitcom

In his in-depth analysis of the prominent trends dominating over three hundred series aired throughout the first five decades of sitcom history, Butsch (2005) concludes that there is a tendency to restrict the appearance of ethnic minority and women to roles equated with ‘the fool’ in the storyline—that is, the subordinate character who participates in the show’s narratives with the central purpose of producing humor. By contrast, representation gives spotlight to the white middle class, particularly middle class men, to emphasize their masculinity and dominance within the domestic sphere. The fact that this style of representation persists all through its span in prime-time television history and is capable of attracting a growing number of audiences proves sitcoms are “preeminent examples of dominant culture, steadily presented to the largest population over the longest time” (Butsch, 2005). To put it another way, Mills (2004) explains that sitcom is able to earn recognition from the mass due to its conservative nature as well as dismissal of honest representations of race, class, or gender conflict within a larger social context. This is done by the employment of a system of patriarchal ideologies prevalent in society, as can be seen through the way sitcoms typically “render women only as comic objects peripheral to the production of

humor” (Mills, 2004). To foster a more in-depth understanding of this subject, I will discuss below the prominent narratives that manifest patriarchy during the course of sitcom history.

In her analysis of the spousal dynamics between each married couple of the sitcoms *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (1950 – 1958) and *I Love Lucy* (1951 – 1957), Mellencamp (1986) discovers that both shows utilize the naive housewife image as the primary source to elicit laughter from audience. Both of the wives in the two shows are confined to a private domestic setting and act as “both the subject and the object of comedy in the narrative” (Yeh, 2016). Specifically, in *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, Gracie is routinely portrayed in scenarios which involve her causing a trouble of some kind due to a misunderstanding or nonsensical mistake, after which George—as the perfect, affluent Beverly Hills-based husband figure—steps in to intervene and saves the day with his sharp-wittedness. In *I Love Lucy*, the dominant narratives surrounding six years of this sitcom comprises Lucy’s repeated failures to achieve her dream of becoming a show performer, all of which are attributable to the fact that “she was held, often gratefully, to domesticity” (Mellencamp, 1986). Despite this, a typical scene in the sitcom would often showcase Lucy singing, turning, and twirling—albeit stereotypically in a kitchen—with so much passion and skill that it would normally turn out to upstage all the other performers in the act. Nonetheless, such depiction implies the reality that no matter how adept she is, Lucy would always just be a household performer—entertaining us the viewers rather than real-life audience like a ‘true’ public artist. Furthermore, although Lucy’s displeasure of marriage life’s monotonousness is expressed on the show, for example through her conversation with best friend Ethel that goes “It isn’t funny, Ethel, it’s tragic,” the rest of the series goes on to paint a picture of a happy and colorful married life between Lucy and her husband Ricky, when the episodes typically end on scenes of the couple either looking dearly in each other’s eyes or hugging and kissing passionately after finishing a musical number. It can be seen that in both *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* and *I Love Lucy*, the husband retains a patriarchal position that reduces the role of the female lead to solely comical; however, in the latter sitcom, the dynamic is a bit different in that Lucy can actually sometimes upstage Ricky as a comedian, and screen time during performances can at times be given more to Lucy and Ethel rather than Ricky. This is believed to be made possible because of the ethnic background the husband possesses—being originally Hispanic and having “a Cuban accent”

that is regularly mocked by the white, ‘all-American’ partner Lucy, Ricky is at a disadvantage on the racial scale compared to George—the “joker or wielder of authoritatively funny speech” (Mellencamp, 1986). Put differently, the dominant racist ideology as a cultural element in social system makes the female resistance to patriarchy more palatable “by viewing the persona of color as inferior” (Yeh, 2016, p. 15).

Descendants of the aforementioned sitcoms, in one way or another, also contribute to stimulate patriarchy through its form. Hanke (1998) examined *Home Improvement* (1991 – 1999) and *Coach* (1989 – 1997), two of the most popular series in the 1990s to see how the masculinity discourse is reinforced and challenged. Specifically, *Home Improvement* seems to install the concept of ‘the New Man’ within the patriarchal model—that is, to align with the historical change in the post-World War II American men image when corporate work began to gain power in the occupational market, masculinity renewed its function in the home setting by encouraging men to “take up power tools and outdoor barbecues” (Hanke, 1998). Along with the emergence of the second-wave feminism, by the 1990s, domestic gendered roles no longer assigned two stereotypically separate sets of duties to each sex, at least for members of the white, professional middle class. This is why Tim Taylor—protagonist, breadwinner of the family in *Home Improvement*, begins to “preserve a place for men within the home[...] by valorizing ‘men’s talk’ about their wives, tools, home repair, and other joys of domestic manhood” (Hanke, 1998). In spite of this apparent improvement in representation, Tim Taylor still demonstrates common characteristics of a patriarchal ideology through his ridicules of his wife’s friend Karen’s feminist critiques against patriarchy. Simultaneously, Jill Taylor—Tim’s wife, who is still stereotypically seen working in the kitchen or living room as a full-time housewife, though sometimes throws heavy jokes about her husband, “does not include naming and attacking aspects of patriarchy” in her comic persona (Hanke, 1998). As with *Coach*, the sitcom is similar to *Home Improvement* in the sense that it also adopts ‘the New Man’ image to make the lead male character more culturally appropriate with history context. In particular, Hayden Fox, a middle-aged, divorced, college-football-team-coach-aspired man is depicted to be an involved father for his daughter who can actually give her helpful advice about marriage—unlike the mother, and who is adequately aware of the ‘great change’ in gender roles driven by the liberal feminist movement. Regardless, Hayden proves to represent traditional

elements of masculinity as he himself claims to be “a man in back of his time”, expressing his sheer disliking for ex-wife Christine as well as jealousy and repudiation towards Judy—the women’s basketball coach who has defeated him in the domain of college sports. In sum, both *Home Improvement* and *Coach* show a reconstruction of masculinity in the domestic or private sphere of everyday life, yet *Coach* still maintains the representation of a conventional male in the professional or public sphere by situating Hayden Fox in the dominant setting of a sports known for its violence and aggression that embodies hegemonic masculinity such as football (Real, 1977; Katz, 1995, cited in Hanke, 1998).

So far a general trend can be observed in the progression of sitcom form facilitating patriarchal ideology: since both belong to the larger gender discourse, representations of patriarchy must inevitably go in line with the development of feminist movements in history. Hence, it should not come as a surprise that there are slight differences in the way patriarchy is manifested in modern sitcoms compared to those of the last century. In this regard, Walsh, Fursich, and Jefferson (2008) performed a textual analysis of *The King of Queens* (1998-2007) and *According to Jim* (2001-2007) on the grounds that both sitcoms employ a mismatched heterosexual married couple as lead roles in the climate of post-feminism: while the wife is depicted as intellectual and attractive, the husband is usually immature and unappealing in looks. The study’s result once more confirms the dominance of sitcom form when it reveals that the sitcom version of ‘beauty and the beast’ typically resolves the conflict between the beauty (personifying feminism) and the beast (personifying patriarchy) by propelling the female protagonist to “acquiesce to the ‘natural’ force of patriarchy” (Walsh, Fursich, & Jefferson, 2008). In a more recent study examining interactions between fictional spouses to determine the extent of gender power imbalance, Kimbro (2013), by means of critical discourse analysis, performed a detailed investigation into three major sitcoms broadcast during prime time hours: *How I Met Your Mother* (2005 – 2014), *Rules of Engagement* (2007 – 2013), and *Modern Family* (2009 – on-going). The researcher found that the romantic couples in these series execute the same patterns of behavior that “both depend on and reinforce patriarchal stereotypes,” as well as “serve only to maintain the power imbalance that supports male privilege rather than increasing female power and encouraging egalitarian relationships” (Kimbro, 2013).

The Correlation between Patriarchy and Whiteness

In media representation, “race and gender are ineluctably intertwined” (Dyer, 1997). For sitcom form continues to regulate representations of the patriarchal social system on television, it is important to look into its facilitation of racial narratives as well. As introduced, in *I Love Lucy* Ricky’s patriarchy is susceptible to resistance from Lucy due to his ‘lower’ racial status (Mellencamp, 1986), which “demonstrates how social systems such as patriarchy subvert progressive representations of race” (Yeh, 2016, p. 16). Taking into account the preeminence of whiteness in media discourse that has been analyzed in the previous chapter, this subversion is evidently of no non sequitur. So long as whites remain to be omnipresent in representation and authoritative of media, politics, and education, they will claim the right to speak for the human race and imagery of whiteness will stay regarded as norm. In other words, white people would be depicted not as whites but “as people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualized and abled” (Dyer, 1997). Glenn (2012) concurs with this statement and maintains that patriarchy must always be comprehended in conjunction with whiteness for it is the default standard of normalcy that prevails in narratives and signifies social privilege. It is upon this benchmark that statuses of non-white groups are measured. For instance, the black family members in two sitcoms *Diff’rent Strokes* and *Webster*, as opposed to adopting a black narrative, perform behaviors that are equated with white masculine norms owing to their upper class standing and lifestyles (Glenn, 2012). It can be seen that narratives like these “have been shaped by social systems as reinforced through sitcom form” (Yeh, 2016).

In recent years a ‘revolution’ has been witnessed in the diversity of the major American broadcast networks’ shows: instead of employing conventional all-white lead roles, approximately 30 percent of the series featured “a mostly non-white cast” or “non-white actors as co-leads” (Deggans, 2015). Especially in the case of ABC—considered “the only broadcast network that still makes hit family comedies” (Lynch, 2016), the sitcom form adopted by this Disney-owned company seems to differ from the conservative nature that has been described above: not only has ABC created prime time shows with the protagonists being those of ethnic minority background, they have simultaneously included production teams that encompass people of color. According to Paul Lee, ABC’s former president, the key to their success despite breaking the status quo lies in this inclusion of “authentic

voices,” for this broadcast network believes only creators with the real-lived experiences that truly resonate with the storyline can portray it under the most genuine light (Lynch, 2016). As I delve into *Fresh Off the Boat* as one of the racially diverse shows by ABC in the next chapter, the way sitcom form functions and how differently it is facilitated in the episodes will be discussed in accordance with representations of the model minority image to explore how these structures have managed to enter and remain in mainstream media’s discourse.

To summarize, in this chapter I have explored the characteristics of patriarchy and racial stereotype-based humor prominent in sitcom narratives. The former incorporates a bilateral network of power where males are considered superior to their female counterparts; the latter also implies a power relation between sitcom representation and viewers through the way racial jokes influence audiences’ perception of ethnic minorities. Both these networks of power will be discussed in relation to the performance of the model minority discourse in the sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5
FRESH OFF THE BOAT'S PERFORMANCE OF THE MODEL MINORITY
DISCOURSE

In this chapter, I describe how *Fresh Off the Boat (FOB)* performs the model minority discourse by analyzing the sitcom's first season. My analytical framework features the power networks discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4: the black-white paradigm, and the power network of a stereotypical Asian American family on American television, and the power relations established by patriarchy and racial stereotype-based humor in the history of American sitcoms. Based on the findings and relevant references in my previous chapters, I will draw out the most significant points that, in my opinion, make *FOB* different from its precedents in performing the model minority discourse. My analysis of *FOB* is not to come up with a comprehensive description of the truths about its first season. To demonstrate how the show performs the discourse, I only discuss selectively prominent scenes.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, my analysis of *FOB* is to make explicit how it constructs a world of power relations, which has significant implications for how we see ourselves and others. In other words, the analysis teaches a lesson of critical media literacy. In line with Foucauldian scholarship, to be critical of media is to understand the systems of thought and power relations they construct for us to navigate our life. Critical understanding of a particular work involves understanding the social context that makes it possible. At the same time, it is also important to see the specificities that allow it to participate in and contribute to an existing discourse.

***FOB*: Premise & Characters**

FOB is loosely inspired by the life of chef and food personality Eddie Huang and his book *Fresh Off the Boat: A Memoir*. It tells the story of a Taiwanese American family who go through different experiences to settle down in the white-dominated suburbs of Orlando, Florida after moving from Chinatown in Washington, D.C. to run their established Western steakhouse named Cattleman's Ranch. The first season of the sitcom is narrated by the voice of real-life Eddie Huang, and most situations happening in the 13 episodes are depicted through the viewpoint of this character. The Huang family consists of six members: Eddie

Huang (played by Hudson Yang), his brothers Emery and Evan Huang (Forrest Wheeler and Ian Chen), his parents Louis and Jessica Huang (Randall Park and Constance Wu), and his grandmother, Grandma Huang (Lucille Soong). The family's closest neighbors are the age-mismatched white couple Marvin and Honey (Ray Wise and Chelsey Crisp).

Power Networks of the Model Minority Discourse in *FOB*

The Black-white Paradigm

FOB narrates the Huang family's Asian American experience through the use of the black-white paradigm eminent in racial discourse but manages to do so in a way that helps to raise critical awareness of the authenticity of the Asian American experience. Regarding the former, Eddie Huang, whose perspective functions as the main lens through which the story is told, establishes a clear association with the hip-hop sub-culture originating from the African American community. In the series, Eddie is depicted as a major hip-hop fan rooting for the Notorious B.I.G, 2Pac, LBC Crew and demonstrating his embrace of the music genre by wearing loose, baggy clothing with "shirts that have black men on them" and utilizing hip-hop slangs like "son", "fly", or "dope" in his speech attire. In this regard, author Eddie Huang explained his choice of affiliating with black culture as a way to comprehend the racial scene in America and to construct his own identity as a second-generation Asian American immigrant in an interview with Hot97 Radio Station (2016):

The thing for me is that I didn't see any Asian representation in the media, television, or in the neighborhood. We were the only Asian family in that neighborhood, and so I started to just gravitate towards black culture and blackness because I was like, this is how I can understand being a minority in America. Black community is the one that's speaking out; they're creating a foundation, they're paving the way for us to understand race and identity for everyone (all immigrants), and hip-hop was the anthem. For anyone that was the outcast, different, trying to understand their place and role in America, you listen to hip-hop. (Huang, 2016)

Real-life Eddie's disclosure is in accordance with the notion that black culture is somewhat representative of the status of all ethnic minorities in America (Chan, 2013; Lee, 2015). This is indeed the flaw of the black-white paradigm that Perea (1997) pointed out: because the binary model reduces racial discourse in America to only black and white and in these two extremes the 'black' pole speaks for all collective minority groups in America,

Asians, Latinos/as, and Native Americans are automatically denied the opportunity to claim their own identity. In another interview with TIME magazine (cited in Koroma, 2015), author Eddie Huang verbalized his criticism regarding the prevalence of the binary concept:

The two things people always make fun of me for is “You’re fat” and “You think you’re black.” [...] It’s very strange in America that if you’re interested in certain things, you’re immediately branded black or white, but what is it to be Asian? [...] When brothers in Harlem like kung-fu, it’s never like “Oh, you think you’re Chinese?”, but it’s like “No, you like kung-fu.” (Huang, 2015)

The double standard exemplifies another pitfall of the black-white paradigm in that it obscures racial discrimination, particularly through the way this binary regards whiteness as a normalcy while simultaneously deprives minority groups of the freedom to declare their self-identified individuality. From Eddie’s anecdote of his real-lived experiences it can be seen that the black-white binary utilized in *FOB* indeed reflects a valid, on-going mentality happening in contemporary American society that propels primetime television sitcoms like *FOB* to conform to the status quo should they wish to make the storyline relatable to a wider range of viewers.

Along with black culture, a white script is also featured in *FOB* as part of the characterization: Positioned in contrast with Eddie’s affiliation of black culture, the other members of the Huangs are depicted with characteristics commonly associated with whiteness. In the opening scene of the pilot episode when the whole family are driving to the new home in Orlando, Evan—Eddie’s smallest brother, along with Louis and Jessica are shown singing along to “I saw the sign” by Ace of Base and “Something to talk about” by Bonnie Raitt. Upon their arrival to the new white-dominated neighborhood, narratives also focus on describing how each member adjusts to the white-dominated area: Eddie, being the black sheep of the family, encounters much difficulty to fit in with the community while his brother Emery gets invited to a white friend’s birthday party and has a white girlfriend within the first week. At the same time Jessica is faced with the struggle to socialize with the white women despite not being a fan of rollerblading or sharing the same lifestyle with her new neighbors. By utilizing characteristics of a typical white experience, it can be seen that “Eddie’s family is able to portray a sense of normalcy because they reflect a family life that viewers have seen on other sitcoms, namely one consistent with white families” (Yeh, 2016.

p. 24). Together with the feature of a black script, this white script further helps *FOB* to attract a wide range of audience and remain its popularity in contemporary mainstream media.

Despite this not-so-minimal inclusion of the eminent black and white script to foster familiarity among viewers' reception, I believe *FOB* has fulfilled its promise of narrating the Asian American storyline through the perspective of an Asian American. Moreover, the fact that this sitcom features a black script basing on the real-life experience of author Eddie Huang—not out of the mere popularity of the black-white paradigm—is worth noted. The effect is a sense of authenticity. Randall Park, cast as Louis in the show, shared in an interview that he also relates to young Eddie's outsider status through his association with hip-hop music as a kid growing up in the late 80s: "It [Hip-hop] was popular, but my friends were not as deep into it as me. [...] I loved it, I knew everything about it, I listened to everything I could get my hands on" (cited in Grierson, 2015). As it introduces a black script through the lens of an Asian person, the show in fact raises an awareness of the lack of Asian representation in media and critically portrays the struggles of Asian Americans to define their own identity in a world where black and white are the only two colors ever recognized.

Power Network of a Stereotypical Asian American Family in *FOB*

A focus on academic performance. Asian Americans' emphasis on academic excellence can be deemed the most pervasive feature of the model minority stereotype. In this characterization, parents usually act as the dominant figure to pressure their children to outperform peers in school as well as equate academic success with high-paying technical occupations in the future. As for the children, the engrained mindset often leads to their competitiveness in academic achievement and neglect of social skills development.

First, traces of parental pressure to succeed academically can be abundantly found in the portrayal of the mother figure—Jessica Huang. In the opening scene of episode two "Home Sweet Home-school", in the parents meeting where the principal is warning everyone of a dangerous criminal who is handing out disguised drugs to children, Jessica raises her hand and asks a totally irrelevant question: "*When do report cards come out?*" Setting aside the comic value of the situation, that Jessica is more concerned with her sons' grades than a serious crime happening in the neighborhood proves how the show facilitates

the model minority script as a way to narrate the Asian American experience. In the same episode, upon receiving Eddie's latest report card with straight A's results, to Eddie's surprise his mother not only refuses to acknowledge his accomplishment but even proceeds to complain to the principal that "*school is too easy.*" Jessica's reactions go in line with the high expectations of a typical Asian parent adhering to the model minority thesis—the one where academic excellence is prioritized as the most important factor in one's educational process. Furthermore, since Eddie's middle school does not offer any academic afterschool program, Jessica voluntarily becomes her sons' home-school teacher to assign them extra homework outside of the official curriculum. Her actions are definite examples of how Asian American parents impose extraordinarily high standards on their children and constantly highlight the significance of academic merits in helping them achieve financial success and social mobility in the future. In episode one, Jessica gives a matter-of-factly response to Eddie's question of why school needs to start on a Wednesday: "*You need to go to school so you can go to college so you can make lots of money.*" As her sons are bound to leave for school, Jessica also tells them to "*be polite, respectful, and don't make waves.*" Jessica's expectations for the young boys reflect much of traditional Chinese values, especially the central role of academic and financial success in one's overall well-being as person.

Second, the way Jessica plans out the future for her sons also reflects the way Asian American parents (stereo)typically encourage their offspring to choose high-paying, technical jobs in the future. Specifically in episode twelve "Dribbling Tiger, Bounce Pass Dragon," when given the duty of directing Emery and Evan's school play, Jessica immediately displays unwillingness to cooperate because she deems extracurricular activities utterly unnecessary for the development of the kids. Observing the initial dry run of the plot, she cannot help but shows her discontentment: "*My husband and I moved to this country to give our kids a better life, not this nonsense.*" She then comes up with the idea of rewriting the script so that it would be meaningful enough to teach the children "*life lessons so they'd be successful.*" The dialogues of the school play, after Jessica's editing work, become serious conversations about her perceived values of jobs in the real world. She specifically writes: "*Acting? What's that?*" to which the reply is "*Something that doesn't require preparation or hard work*". Her son Emery is then given the line "*I'm studying to be*

a doctor, so I can make my parents proud,” when Evan proudly claims *“and I’m prepping for the bar exam so I can become a lawyer and have a stable income and health insurance.”* Clearly, Jessica is making efforts to instill in her sons the mindset that only traditional occupations are worth pursuing, while creative, arts-related ones are too risky to take up. This exemplar depicts how *FOB* facilitates a common script in the model minority discourse: as a strategic adaptation plan, Asian American parents have the tendency to encourage their children to pursue careers that have higher rates of Asian American representation and generate superior average earnings compared to other occupations. Throughout the near end of the episode, after Emery and Evan learn that their family restaurant’s waitress is actually a job-seeking actress, the boys realize the reality behind Jessica’s words and assert *“We don’t want to be in the play anymore because it’s a waste of time. We want to focus on our future and not end up in the gutter.”*

Finally, the way *FOB* characterizes Emery and Evan—Eddie’s younger siblings—is highly reflective of the model minority script. In contrast to Eddie who plays the role of the family’s black sheep, the two brothers are depicted as extremely disciplined, obedient, and school-oriented. In episode two, the two are shown happily running to their mother in order to show off their report cards of the semester, anticipating a praise for their hard work and more-than-satisfactory results. During the voluntary after-school program that Jessica self-organizes, both Evan and Emery comply strictly without any resistance, whereas Eddie continuously shows signs of defiance and refuses to complete the assigned tasks. Despite this clash, it seems that *FOB* is careful enough not to portray its characters under a one-dimensional perspective when Emery, the middle one among the three siblings, is depicted to *“blend in like a chameleon”* and effortlessly socializes with his new friends in the neighborhood while still maintains the image of a ‘mama’s boy.’

According to Zhang (2010) and McGowan and Lindgren (2006), the model minority label is usually affiliated with images of an un-cool, socially incompetent brainiac who struggles to establish friendship with their counterparts; however, the characterization of Emery in the sitcom proves how the show has, to a certain extent, done its research in order to avoid the pitfall of over-generalizing narratives told in the plot, contributing to depict a more well-rounded and diverse picture of the Asian American experience. Some might argue that Emery’s portrayal as a cool character is only to serve as an attention-grabbing

factor, making *FOB* a more appealing show to watch for the pure sake of entertainment. While I do not deny that this is a possibility, the fact that *FOB* does not resort to describing Emery by a ‘perceived’ conventional image of a cool American youngster like what *All-American Girl* did with Margaret Kim—rebellious, loud, and somewhat disrespectful towards adults—means that there is actual effort being invested in the creation of an interesting Asian American character who does not ignore the traditional values that associate with the ethnic group that he belongs in.

Economic success. The narration of the Huangs’ journey to establish their new western steakhouse in Florida is typical of an Asian American success story in that it highlights the parents’ priority of the family’s collective success over every other personal business. For example, in episode three “The Shunning,” both of the parents—Jessica and Louis—are depicted to always value their family business as the first concern over any other matter. In this episode, the block party represents the golden opportunity for the family to network with people in the neighborhood and promotes the restaurant. When Louis finds out that Jessica has made friends with Honey—the alleged home-wrecker that ruined her husband’s first marriage, he warns Jessica that this friendship might have a negative effect on their restaurant’s business because all the neighborhood women hold Honey in contempt. Having an internal conflict, Jessica ultimately decides to favor the sake of her whole family: “[...] *You are right. It is not worth risking the future of the restaurant for somebody who I’ve just met because our number one priority should be the restaurant succeeding.*” In the block party, however, after seeing Honey being the only one to genuinely enjoy the Chinese stinky tofu that she has carefully prepared, Jessica is moved by the action and realizes that she does not have to pretend to blend in with the other women in the neighborhood and turn a cold shoulder to Honey just because the family’s business is at stake. At this point, Jessica publicly announces to dedicate a solo karaoke number to Honey in honor of their friendship. In showcasing her raw talent in singing, Jessica naturally attracts the attendees’ attention, after which Louis could conveniently hand out the brochures by promoting that she sometimes performs at the restaurant. It can be seen that at the end of the episode, Louis and Jessica could still find a way to spread Cattleman’s Ranch’s reputation a little farther yet manage to do so in a heartfelt, moralistic way.

The importance of work ethic highlighted in FOB is also typical of Asian Americans' success story. In episode six "Fajita Man", when Eddie asks his parents for money to buy the new Shaq Fu video game, Louis makes sure to take advantage of the situation to teach his oldest son a lesson about the meaning of hard work. Louis begins by telling the story of how his own father was already working at age eleven to set an example for his son, suggesting that Eddie should come work at the Cattleman's in order to earn money to buy what he needs. On top of that, in Eddie's first day working at the restaurant, Louis assigns him the most difficult task of all: delivering fajitas, a stemming hot meal that requires patience and precision from the waiter when serving to customers. As Eddie complains about this challenging job, Louis then reminds his son that "*It's my job as your father to make sure my boys understand the meaning of hard work.*" Eddie, determined to collect enough money for the trendy new video game, has already mastered his serving skills by the end of the week. Better still, he could perform tricks while serving with confident attitudes that highly impress the customers; therefore, Eddie anticipates not only praise but a bonus in paycheck from the father. Unfortunately for him, however, Louis has higher standards than that: "*Hard work isn't just about showing up, it's also about doing a good job.*" Noticing that he may have been a little too harsh on Eddie, in the end, Louis loosens up a little and gives Eddie the rest of the amount he needs to buy Shaq Fu. To Louis's surprise, nonetheless, Eddie comes back working in the restaurant after realizing that what he did was morally wrong and that he should listen to what Louis has taught him: "*I don't want a handout. I wanna earn it myself.*"

Finally, Asian Americans' yearning for economic success is, in my opinion, most explicitly depicted in episode seven "Showdown at the Golden Saddle" thanks to its focal attention to the Huangs' fearless sacrifices for the sake of their American Dream. In this episode, a hidden truth is revealed to viewers: the Huangs' Cattleman's Ranch Steakhouse is a knock-off version of the famous Golden Saddle franchise in Orlando. After keeping it a secret from the whole family for a while, Louis finally confesses to his wife that because he could not afford to pay for the franchise fee, he resorted to stealing the restaurant's confidential operation manual and made some alterations in order to create their own version of the 'wild West' steakhouse. Through Eddie's narration at the beginning: "*When it came to providing for his family, he [Louis] would do whatever it took,*" viewers are introduced to

the model minority script in the way that it emphasizes the strong drive for success that Asian Americans have upon setting foot into the Promised Land (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006). The episode also sheds light on a rather sensitive topic that involves white hostility towards the economic achievements of the Asian American community—when the Golden Saddle’s owner expresses his anger towards Cattleman’s success, Louis is puzzled at the fact that the man still holds a grudge towards his small family business: “*Your restaurant is busy, you own ten franchises. You’re doing great,*” to which the man replies “*And you are doing well, which I don’t like.*” Though not presented thoroughly, this scene depicts a sense of rivalry representative of dominant white culture as a sentiment that opposes the economic success experienced by Asian groups. Through such portrayal, *FOB* informs viewers of both the positive and the not-so-bright side of the Asian American success story as opposed to the stereotypical, one-dimensional depiction.

Assimilation into dominant white culture. The Huangs’ case is indeed a typical example of an Asian American success story—the one which equates the core value of the model minority thesis with successful strategic assimilation plans into the bigger mainstream community. In the last episode of season one “So Chineez”, the Huangs appear to have settled well into Orlando: Eddie becomes the school’s student council president, Cattleman’s Ranch attracts an increasing number of customers, Jessica is on good terms with all the neighborhood women and her real estate skills appear to improve tremendously. When the family gets invited to join the North Orlando Country Club, Jessica is ecstatic and regards the invitation as “*the ultimate symbol of success.*” In their conversation with the friendly white neighbors Marvin and Honey about establishing membership in the club, Jessica finds it amazing that her family could actually be the first Asian American members, but what amazes her even more is how the white couple responds to her realization: “*Oh, I didn’t even think of that, you know sometimes I forget you guys are Chinese. [...] You guys are just like regular old Americans to us.*” In other words, because Marvin and Louis could find many similarities with the Huangs’ lifestyle, they think of the couple as no different from the white majority in the neighborhood; as a result, Marvin consistently persuades Louis to come play at the tennis court and network with new people to help him expand the steakhouse to a second branch. Presented with a valuable opportunity, the two parents once again display totally different reactions. On the one hand, Louis is gradually convinced that

claiming membership in the local Country Club would help the restaurant establish several business ties within the area, thus reduces the costs of import ingredients while simultaneously bolsters Cattleman's Ranch's reputation. On the other, Jessica confronts great fears of the family losing touch with their cultural roots, especially in terms of patriotic attitudes towards their homeland of China and appreciation of Mandarin—the country's native tongue. Once she becomes aware of the potential 'threat,' Jessica goes to great lengths to change the family's daily routine in order to erase any sign of white culture, from dressing in full traditional Chinese clothing, cooking traditional Chinese meals, to sending the three brothers to a Chinese Learning Center two hours away from their house. Despite all this, at the end of the episode, she confesses to Louis:

I like it, okay? I like all of it. "Melrose Place", rollerblading, Mac and cheese. [...] But I hate that I like it, I hate that I'm too weak to give it up. I keep telling the boys to hold on to their identity, but I can't even do it myself. They have me, Louis, I'm just a chipwich-eating American couch lady.

Jessica's confession opens up a discussion about how Asian Americans tend to have to negotiate their identity when trying to assimilate into the dominant culture and at the same time embracing their cultural heritage. On the tip of the iceberg, outsiders would normally only see that Asian Americans could find their way to blend in impressively better than their African or Latino/a counterparts, hence the model minority discourse. However, what is not commonly talked about is the internal struggle of self-identity that takes place in each individual when they make efforts to balance the two entities. In this regard, *FOB* has once again illustrated a more intimate, humanized version of the model minority image.

Sitcom Form: the Two Power Networks

To maintain its success in mainstream media when featuring an Asian American script, *FOB* has adopted two of the most prominently established power networks in sitcom form: a perpetuation of patriarchal ideology as a norm in society and race-specific stereotypes as a source of humor. In the series, despite being portrayed as a bumbling character, Louis is seen as the ultimate decision-maker: he is the one who decides to move out the entire family from their ethnic enclave in Washington D.C. to seek a new life in the 'wild West' of Florida. Being the breadwinner of a family of six, Louis nurtures the idea of opening his own restaurant so that they no longer have to work for Jessica's brother's

business; every detail of the Cattleman's Ranch Steakhouse, from location, setting, staff, to development strategies is also determined by him. Such depiction of the husband as the leader goes in line with Mellencamp's (1986) observation of a quintessential family model in sitcoms. Furthermore, even though Jessica plays the role of the 'tiger mom' and rather aggressive wife, she is confined in the domestic setting as a stay-at-home mother in the first half of the season, whereas Louis is still the one in charge of governing the atmosphere and attitudes among all family members. For example, at the end of the pilot episode where all the family gathers in the parking lot of Eddie's school, as Jessica expresses her worries of living in Florida where they have to struggle financially and Eddie faces racial discrimination, Louis reassures his wife by explaining that the hardships would in fact help to make their sons grow stronger, and that he wants "more than okay" for his family. Obviously the husband still takes the initiative while the wife figure acts as a supportive sidekick for the well-being of the collective family. Through this characterization, it can be deduced that *FOB* facilitates stereotypical gendered roles by reinforcing patriarchal dominance as a prominent discourse. In the same scene discussed above, Jessica and Louis settle the discussion with a kiss, which I believe is another manifestation of how sitcom form of patriarchy dominates narratives in the series. Specifically, although verbal and physical display of affection, especially in public, is deemed untypical of Asian culture (Broome, 2014; Chung, 2016; Phan, 2016), it is still featured as an element of the family sitcom form.

Throughout the show, it can be seen that *FOB* employs a generous amount of racial stereotype-based humor, particularly through the way Eddie's mother Jessica Huang embodies virtually all of the characteristics of a typical Asian parent following the model minority image. In this regard, that Jessica is depicted as a 'tiger mom,' especially in episode two "Home Sweet Home-school," receives particularly negative responses from some groups of audience for claims of over-saturated stereotypical representation (Ferguson, 2015; Hanlin, 2016). Tiger mom—a neologism derived from Amy Chua's novel "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother," refers to a "disciplinarian, academically rigorous method of childrearing" (Hanlin, 2016). To defend her role, in an interview with Jezebel actress Constance Wu—playing Jessica in the series, maintains that stereotypes are not necessarily always negative, and that neglecting stereotypes—specifically in this case, the 'tiger mom'

traits that are affiliated with her character, could be counterproductive in that it prevents the narratives from doing justice to the Jessica Huang who is a real living woman in Orlando. Discussing his childhood memory in school with “Real Time with Bill Maher” talk show (2015), Eddie Huang himself also claimed:

If I didn’t do well in algebra, she [my mom]’s like “You’re letting down 5000 years of history,” and she’s like “You have disappointed me eight life times,” and I’m like “Why eight?” and she’s like “I feel like I’ve been reincarnated eight times and you’ve let me down for all eight times.” (Huang, 2015)

It can be observed that Constance Wu and the creative team have in fact treated their portrayal of the character Jessica Huang with integrity, and that the image of a tiger mom does reflect the real sentiment that Eddie was attached with as he grew up with his unapologetic, bold mother. In this sense, the use of an Asian American-specific stereotype not only does not make the sitcom racist but testifies the commitment of the production team to stay as close to the truth as possible despite potential backlash for their choice of representation. What’s more, while it is clear that *FOB* pokes fun at the tiger mom trope to elicit humor, the show simultaneously demonstrates a respectful attitude towards its depiction of the character Jessica Huang in the way that it “draws from the inherent humor that comes from culture clashes, but it never makes cultural difference the butt of the joke” (Hanlin, 2016). To put it another way, the fact that the sitcom introduces cultural differences as a potent explanation behind Jessica’s parenting method and leaves it as such rather than attempting to produce humor out of attacking it proves how strategic the show facilitates the model minority script to its advantage without coming off as offensive.

Some argue that the tiger mom persona might have been exaggeratedly utilized in *FOB* in order to create context for viewers who are unfamiliar of Asian culture, which falls in line with the conventional purpose of sitcom’s race-based jokes as a tactic to appeal to audiences as well as elicit humor (Casey et al., 2002; Wilson, Gutiérrez, & Chao, 2003). This fact begs a question worth considering: who is the intended audience for this show? While there has not been any official statement coming from ABC or *FOB*’s executive producers about the show’s specific target audience, it appears that the dominant white community and ethnic minority groups—especially Asian Americans—react to the sitcom’s stereotypical portrayals in two completely contrasting manners. In particular, reportedly

there have been numerous criticisms coming from Caucasian viewers claiming that the characterization is caricatured, racist even (Philip, 2014; Ferguson, 2015; Wong, 2015); on the other hand, Asian Americans—the ethnic group whose stereotypical representation is being treated as the main source of humor, mostly offer favorable reviews (Ferguson, 2015; Lui, 2015; Nguyen, 2015). In fact, many Americans of Chinese/Taiwanese ancestry claim they could relate to Eddie and his brothers on a personal level when seeing the boys being forced to attend classes at the Chinese Learning Center—a common experience for any Chinese/Taiwanese American child growing up in the 1990s (Nguyen, 2015). In my perspective, the fact that *FOB*'s facilitation of the model minority stereotype could trigger such conflicting responses from whites and Asian Americans reveals the inherent system of racism in the U.S. where a certain number of people belonging in the dominant white population feel entitled to make decisions on behalf of everyone even on subjects that are not directly related to their race.

How *FOB* is Different

The analysis conducted above exposes that the model minority script is exhaustively incorporated in the first season of *FOB*. By adopting three networks of power, namely the black-white paradigm, the power network of a stereotypical Asian American family, and the power relations established by concepts of patriarchy and racial stereotype-based humor in sitcom form, the family members of the Huangs manifest an array of characteristics typical of the model minority stereotype. Despite such extensive inclusion of a system of Asian American stereotypes, however, it seems that *FOB* does not fall into the pitfall of making their characters excessively exotic, foreign, or caricatured like how traditional American TV shows have been treating Asian American characters (Berteaux, 2016). To closely observe how *FOB* has performed differently, one should be reminded of the way *All-American Girl* featured the model minority thesis in the 1994 sitcom: Margaret's brother Stuart—the supposed embodiment of the model minority image—was portrayed as a geeky doctor who, despite being an adult, complies to all of the rules set forth by his strict, demanding Asian mother. As mentioned in Chapter 3, this character is also positioned in utmost contrast with Margaret's 'all-Americanness,' which reinforces the racist premise that completely rejects the American identity of Asian ethnic peoples. By a different approach, *FOB* incorporates an abundance of the model minority traits while still manages to create a certain degree of

depth to the characters. For example, in episode six, as Jessica's overpowering manipulation of the school play's script is pointed out by Louis, the two parents finally settle to keep the original not-very-logical plot so that their sons can just have fun while being on stage. In this scene, Louis becomes the reasonable spouse that convinces his wife to be more understanding of the difference between theirs and their sons' generation: "*Oh, we never had the chance [to get involved in extracurricular activities], Jessica, but isn't that why we work so hard, to give them the opportunity to do things that we couldn't do?*" This conversation helps to humanize both characters in a way that *All-American Girl* could/did not do. Similarly, in episode three, after realizing all the drama that she has caused for alienating Honey in front of the neighborhood women, Jessica finally settles to pay tribute to her genuine friendship over the family's business. Even in the most controversial episode "Home Sweet Home-school," Jessica is depicted to be a loving and responsible mother and wife who would sacrifice her job to take care of the children and at the same time help her husband to run the restaurant. By portraying their characters, especially Jessica Huang, in a humane light while still features the model minority thesis, *FOB* proves that the facilitation of an ethnic stereotype would, in some cases, mean neither good nor bad. The traits of model minority in this sitcom can simply be observed as a part of the character's identity. This kind of representation contributes to make a character more appealing to watch as it would be able to serve the interest of a wider range of viewers without affording to come off as offensive.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

In this graduation paper I have examined the broad historical conditions that have given rise to how the sitcom *FOB* could be seen as a manifestation of the model minority thesis. Specifically, I have studied a network of meanings that have altogether rendered the model minority thesis intelligible in today's media context: the emergence of the model minority thesis as an explanation for the Asian American success story, its changes throughout different historical periods, its close-knit correlation with the black-white paradigm as a dominant discourse in racial narratives, the depiction of a typical Asian American family on television, the presence of patriarchy and the use of racial stereotype-based jokes for the production of humor in the sitcom genre. In studying this network of meanings I have also discovered the specificities of how *FOB* established power networks to feature an Asian American experience: the show does in fact incorporate a wealth of power relations constructed by the model minority discourse through the way it characterizes the family members of the Huangs. The parents Louis and Jessica, as first-generation Asian American immigrants, embody many of the traditional values of Chinese culture such as perseverance and strong work ethics. By different means of parenting, the duo aspires to pass the cultural heritage onto their native-born children and constantly emphasizes the importance of social mobility in their future career; at the same time, all three of the siblings appear to conform to the stereotypical image of academically excellent Asian American students. The family's relationship with their neighbors also shows signs of assimilation into the dominant white environment which is typical of an Asian American success story. Adopting the model minority stereotype as a source of eliciting humor, however, *FOB* does not portray its characters in ways that ridicule their personality traits. Rather, the Huang family members are depicted to be loving, admirable figures that are as human as any other happy family in America. This approach of facilitating the model minority thesis renders *FOB* a fresh perspective for prospective sitcoms in the future to learn from and narrate their own version of an Asian American experience in order to diversify the representation of Asian Americans in media.

Without doubt, my study embodies many limitations. I think it is important to notice that this thesis, as a result of thousands of particularities, only presents a way of describing

network powers in the model minority discourse and *FOB*. It is certainly not the best way. While I do not think not being the best version necessarily represents a weakness, I believe that my readers have their own perceptions of how my study contributes or fails to contribute to their understanding of the model minority discourse, which I cannot anticipate clearly. I have also set certain boundaries for my research. For example, this research does not aim to study *FOB*'s use of audiovisual features. Neither does it aim to study *FOB* as a holistic case. I did not count how many scenes of the series speak the model minority thesis. I did not interview the producers or viewers. Further studies might do what I have not done. Or they might pose the same questions, follow the same perspective and mode of inquiry, and simply produce a different narrative.

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