ON "NOT ASIAN ENOUGH"
TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF ALL-AMERICAN GIRL

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ABSTRACT

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The first Asian American situation comedy, *All-American Girl* (1994), has encountered much controversy and many compliments from viewers in both the Asian American community and the mainstream audience. The main controversy is whether the show promotes similar stereotypes as other Asian American representations from the past. Guided by Joanne R. Gilbert’s theory of marginality and Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson’s ethnic humor theory, this thesis intends to testify that *All-American Girl* presents a marginal Korean American family in America with combined inspirations from the Asian and Asian American community. The show depicts more cultural conflicts than social and/or class conflicts. Rather than demonstrating aggressive ethnic humor as anticipated, *All-American Girl* displays images of the “model minority.” Yet, *All-American Girl* adds diversity to the network by projecting a family image of Asian Americans for the first time on television shows.
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INTRODUCTION

On March 20, 1995, the Los Angeles Times issued an article written by Gary Jacobs, creator and executive producer of ABC’s situation comedy All-American Girl. In his article, “In Defense of All-American Girl,” Jacobs responds to the criticism claiming that the show does not “accurately portray the Korean American experience.” He comments that it is “one of the most frequently voiced criticisms and one of the most infuriating” (Jacobs). Jacobs further argues that it is a stereotype to imply there should be an “absolute and all-encompassing Korean American experience” (Jacobs). Jacobs’s defense is a counterargument to an earlier critique written by Los Angeles Times staff writer K. Connie Kang. According to her, All-American Girl is “another example of Hollywood’s ignorance and indifference when it comes to depicting an ethnic group about which it knows so little” (Kang).

The two completely opposite opinions on the same show initiate many questions about All-American Girl, the first Asian American situation comedy on a major network. What is All-American Girl about? Why does the show provoke so many criticisms of the Asian American stereotypes? What are the Asian American stereotypes in the show of a Korean American family? How did the mainstream and the Asian American viewers interpret the show when it was first on air? How is ethnic humor portrayed in ethnic comedies in America? Last but most importantly, is All-American Girl authentic or another stereotypical demonstration of Asian Americans?

All-American Girl was one of ABC’s prime-time six new series in 1994. This show features a Korean American family in the genre of situation comedy. The story is based on the autobiography of Margaret Cho, a female Korean American stand-up comedian. ABC summarized the show as “a young Korean-American woman trying to build a career while living with her parents in a traditional Korean home” (Jacobs). Many Asian Americans, whose images
have been mostly invisible and marginalized in mainstream television programs, were excited to see a television situation comedy representing one of their community members, Korean Americans, when the network announced the series. A viewer, Susie J. Lee, recalled her whole family watching the first episode together and taking the show as a sign of recognition of American “multiethnic population” (Kang).

*All-American Girl* added diversity to the network by projecting a family image of the Asian Americans for the first time on television shows. Though the story is about a Korean American family, the cast consists of many Asian American actors and actresses, not specifically Korean Americans. It is a phenomenon to see many Asian faces in a single sitcom. However, the show was not as successful as the producers expected. Mainstream viewers did not find the show funny or interesting; meanwhile, it received much backlash from the Asian American community, who commented negatively on the representations in the show.

Choosing *All-American Girl* as the subject of thesis research, I intend to testify that *All-American Girl* loses its way in demonstrating ethnic humor and cultural conflicts. The uneven balance between the two makes the show neither authentic to the Asian American community nor familiar to mainstream viewers. Ethnic humor in *All-American Girl* is presented through comedic generational conflicts between Margaret Kim and her parents. Cultural conflicts between American culture and the mixture of Asian cultures are camouflaged by generational conflicts in the show. Representing the second generation and more assimilated Korean Americans, Margaret Kim is the spokesperson of American culture. Her parents and her Grandma, on the other hand, are depicted as more traditional and conservative Korean Americans. Their values and beliefs are still rooted in Korean or part of Asian cultures and they maintain more Korean traditions in the family than their children do. Nevertheless, cultural
conflicts in the show imply that Korean values, and by association Asian values, in America are unusual, old-fashioned, and marginalized.

Joanne R. Gilbert’s theory on marginality is a fundamental tool for analyzing *All-American Girl* as an ethnic sitcom to present the marginalized Asian American family in the mainstream American culture. Gilbert clearly states that being in a minority group is different from being marginalized. She explains that minority deals with the issues of population, whereas marginality “encompasses issues of power and control that are ideologically based” (5). Gilbert also stresses that “margins shift as the ‘center’ shifts” (7). It implies that marginality is interchangeable in the relationship between dominant culture and marginalized culture. In the case of *All-American Girl*, Korean Americans are the minority in the United States due to their proportion of the U.S. population. Most Korean Americans have inherited Korean culture and consider it to be the dominant culture in their homes. However, to most Americans, Korean culture is marginalized because it is foreign and less familiar.

As the role of Korean culture shifts from being dominant inside Korean American homes and being marginalized outside them, it is crucial to discuss Gilbert’s arguments of being an insider and an outsider of marginalized groups. When Gilbert quotes sociologist Everett Stonequist’s definition of marginalization, she elaborates that “marginalized individuals are afforded a unique perspective—a combination of ‘the knowledge and insider with the critical attitude of the outsider’” (qtd. in Gilbert 4). When many Asian American viewers criticize *All-American Girl*, they position themselves as insiders within Asian American cultures.

More negative comments about the show arose from the Asian American communities than from mainstream viewers. The criticisms focused on two issues. First, members of the Asian American community criticized the show for presenting mixture of various Asian cultures in one
show, not specifically Korean American culture. For example, Feng Shui, Chinese interior arrangement, is not from Korean culture (Kim). Second, some of the cast are not of Korean heritage (Jacob). Despite the fact that *All-American Girl* is about a Korean American family, the actors and actresses are from different Asian American groups, including Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Korean Americans. Therefore, Korean American viewers claimed that the show does not authentically depict an immigrant Korean American family (Kang). Such criticisms can only come from the insiders of the Asian American community because they are able to distinguish the differences between Asian American cultures.

On the other hand, most American viewers, outsiders to Asian American culture, comment that the show is “not Asian enough” (*All-American Girl*). Their definition of “Asianness” coheres with stereotypes of Asian Americans in films and television. The contrast between the stereotypes they have had in mind and portrayals in the show confuse them. They still expect *All-American Girl* to present different lifestyles from “regular Americans.” To these viewers, the characters of *All-America Girl* are not “Asian enough” because they speak English with no accent and eat food without chopsticks.

In Chapter One, I will discuss marginality, stereotypes, and mixed representations of Asian Americans on television. By presenting various and opposite opinions of *All-American Girl* from both insiders and outsiders of the Asian American community, I will argue that cultural assimilations between Korean Americans and Asian Americans, which occur both in Asia and America, greatly influence how viewers interpret the meaning of “Asianness” in the show.

In Chapter Two, specific episodes of *All-American Girl* will be disassembled and discussed. I will focus on textual analysis of three major characters: Margaret Kim, Grandma Yung-Hee, and Father Benny Kim. The analysis starts with Margaret Kim who represents the second generation
of an Asian American immigrant family. She and Amy, another young female Asian American in the show, recycle two stereotypical representations of Asians or Asian American females of the past, the “Dragon Lady” and the “Lotus Blossom Baby” (Tajima 309).

Likewise, both young and middle-aged male characters in *All-American Girl* reinforce the stereotype of the “model minority” to the viewers which was initiated in the 1950s. Margaret’s father Benny, his friends, and Margaret’s Korean American boyfriend, have respectable careers, and value traditional culture and take responsibilities for their families. Their positive images contrast sharply with the images of armed Korean merchants during the Los Angeles Riots in 1992. Both Margaret and her father symbolize assimilated Asian Americans.

Grandma Yung-Hee, on the other hand, is a character who unites the old tradition and new culture. Her promotion of Korean or Asian cultures at home combining with her assimilation to American culture creates many comedic moments in the show. Grandma Yung-Hee enhances the images of aged Asian American females which have been the least represented Asian American subset on television. Margaret, Benny, Grandma and other family members form a lovely Asian American family for the first time to American viewers.

*All-American Girl*, as an ethnic sitcom, portrays a more assimilated Asian American family than a culturally isolated one on television. However, its demonstration of family values primarily appeals to mainstream Americans. It continues the mainstream television philosophy of white superiority over other ethnic groups. For example, Margaret’s family only has white neighbors and friends. They have no interactions with other ethnic groups. The drawbacks and problems of the stories suggest that the plot and character development of *All-American Girl* may have had great potential if it had not been cancelled.
In conclusion, though *All-American Girl* was a short-lived ethnic comedy, it paved the way for many Asian Americans in the entertainment industry to present more realistic or relevant aspects of the Asian American community. Yet ethnic comedies still face the challenge of portraying non-stereotypical images. It is essential to present rather objective images of Asian Americans in the media for new generations who need to have a positive role model of their ethnicity. The viewers from the Asian American community desire more writers or producers within the community to help project more objective images from their first-hand life experience. However, many Asian American professionals in the entertainment industry have more contemporary perspectives of presenting Asian American images. They believe that there is no need to emphasize their ethnic heritage when they tell the stories; their stories are part of American stories.
CHAPTER ONE
MARGINALTY, STEREOTYPES, AND MIXED REPRESENTATIONS OF ASIAN AMERICANS ON TELEVISION

The marginality of Asian Americans connects tightly with their identity of being minorities in the United States though Joanne Gilbert clearly states that being in a minority group is different from being marginalized. Asian Americans are the minority because they made up of 4% of U.S. population estimates in 2007. They are marginal in the mainstream American culture largely because of their persistent foreignness. The foreignness refers to the phenomenon through which Asian Americans have been identified as the other group of people who are fundamentally different from mainstream Americans (Tuan 5). Asian Americans, regardless whether they were born in the States or have lived here many generations, will never be embraced as mainstream Americans thus hardly receive the attention they deserve.

Asian Americans often have the experience of being identified as Asians and being asked where they are from. The author of *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites: the Asian Ethnic Experience Today*, Mia Tuan, interviews many Asian Americans. Carol Wong, one of the respondents, states “A double standard was operating. While white ethnics are free to discard their ethnic links and merge with the American mainstream after the first generation, Asian ethnics do not have this option; the assumption of foreignness stubbornly clings to them despite generational status” (138).

Tuan also elaborates that her respondents are often asked the question of “Where are you from?” which really means “What is your ancestral homeland?” An answer like “San Jose” or “Los Angeles” usually fails to satisfy whoever is asking. Such a localized answer typically results in the response, “No. Where are you really from?” (141). Some Tuan’s interviewees
answer directly; others decide to play an “ethnic game” with their interrogator until the person
gives up or “refine their query” (141). Dani Murayama, one of Tuan’s respondents, had such an
experience,

A lot of times people will come up to me, and ask me where I’m from, and I’ll
answer Los Angeles, and they’ll look at me really strange [laugh]. But that’s
where I’m from, and then they’ll say, “No, no, no. Where were you from?”
And I’ll say Los Angeles. And then they’ll ask where my parents were born,
and I’ll tell them the United States. And then they’ll ask me where my
grandparents were born, and I’ll tell them the United States [laugh]. (141)

Tuan reveals that “the insistence on the part of their interrogators to get to the truth, to find
out where Dani is really from depics that “they are not satisfied with the response provide
because they believe that [Dani] has to come from some place other than this country” (141). In
Asian American Experiences in the United States: Oral Histories of First to Fourth Generation
Americans from China, the Philippines, Japan, India, the Pacific Islands, Vietnam and
Cambodia by Joann Faung Jean Lee, Charles Ryu shares a similar experience in his essay “1.5
Generation”,

I think one of the manifestations in our language behavior of racism is the
question “where are you from?” People always ask me that. I always say, “I’m
from Los Angeles.” And then they have to decide if I was born here and grew
up somewhere else with my family or if I was born elsewhere, and grew up in
L.A. Then they ask, “What is your nationality?” Nationality is a legal status,
and I say I am an American citizen. Then they really get frustrated and they
ask whether I was born in Korea or not. I say “Yes, I was born in Korea.” and they feel at home. Once they’ve made me an outsider, they feel at home. (52)

From Dani’s and Charles’s real life experience, it is easy to see how mainstream Americans use stereotypes to assume that Asians or Asian Americans were from elsewhere. Darrell Y. Hamamoto states that “the social construction of Asian American ‘otherness’ is the precondition for their cultural marginalization, political impotence, and psychic alienation from mainstream American life” (5). Doobo Shim also states that “Even after 150 years of an Asian American presence on U.S. soil, on TV they are still portrayed as “Foreigners” who speak Pidgin English, preserve only their ‘old traditions,’ and refuse to assimilate into American culture” (400). Both “otherness” and “foreigners” indicate that Asian Americans are a marginal ethnic group in America.

The representations of Asian Americans on television reflect their marginality because they have been under-represented for a long time. Many scholars have researched minority representations on both network and non-network primetime programs. The results resemble each other. Jack Glascock examines gender and minority roles on non-traditional network primetime programming and concludes that Asians make up of 2.3% in a total of 556 characters coded (94). Similarly, Nancy Signorielli conducts research on minority representations in prime time programs between 2000 and 2008. She compares the distribution of characters by race or ethnic group and gender with 2007 U.S. population estimates to see the difference between proportions. The result shows that Asians make up 1% of the television sample, compared to 4% of the U.S. population (327). In addition, she concludes that “Asians are also not relegated to mostly or all minority programming; they typically are found in programs with racially mixed castes” (333). Another important result shows from Signorielli’s research “that primetime
programming is less diverse at the end of the first decade of the 21st century than it is at the beginning” (333). *All-American Girl* is proof of Signorielli’s research findings. The show was produced in 1994. Since then, no single Asian American situation comedy has been made.

The marginality of Asian Americans is also reflected in the false representations or stereotypes of Asians or Asian Americans. *All-American Girl* is an ethnic situation comedy that presents Asian American life in the U.S. However, through American television history, ethnic comedies on television have been a sensitive genre to discuss for they are often criticized as a tool to reinforce the stereotypes of ethnic groups.

In “Racial and Ethnic Humor”, Joseph Dorinson and Joseph Boskin define stereotypes as “a highly developed type of image that may have their origin in an aspect of social reality but that are often embellished and extended to include other features of a predetermined or expected attitude” (165). In addition, they mention what Gordon W. Allport notes, “some stereotypes were totally unsupported by facts; others developed from a sharpening and overgeneralization of facts” (165). Similarly, Jason Mittell explains stereotypes as “selected elements” about some members of a cultural group. The stereotype diminishes other aspects of the group to a set of characteristics and does not allow any diversity within the group itself (309). Stereotypes are the collective summaries of certain groups and the dominant culture often has the right to categorize other groups (309). American mainstream culture has stereotyped other cultural and ethnic groups by projecting collective and inaccurate images in the media.

Mittell suggests that “television’s representations of racial and ethnic minorities are often motivated by noble intentions to break down barriers and fight stereotypes” (329). He further explains that
The system still reinforces the ultimate gap between a dominant position of whiteness and other subordinate groups. Almost all television programs represent a dominant ideology of white identity and norms --- non-white characters are seen as either assimilating within those norms, thus giving up their own unique identity, or segregating themselves from whites, and often reinforcing stereotypes in the process. (329)

With the similar discussion, Danielle Russell states that stereotypes are from the perspective of the dominant culture and serve as tools of dominant culture. She elaborates that “all stereotypes come from ideology; it is, logically, in the interest of the dominant group to enforce stereotype” (16). In the same vein, Mittell stresses that “media images help reinforce stereotypes in viewers’ minds, furthering negative assumptions about subordinate groups for outsiders and belittling people’s identities” (309). In the case of Asian Americans, Darrell Y. Hamamoto states that “most viewers have always enjoyed seeing Asian-Americans as subordinate. White people perceive us as a colonized and foreign people, and the TV audience has that image reinforced every day without fail” (Frutkin).

Accordingly, due to the nature of stereotypes, ethnic or cultural groups often feel offended because stereotypes ignore individuality and often promote more negative aspects of the groups with the public. However, not all the stereotypes of ethnic or minority groups are negative. Being the “model minority”, the term first coined in the 1950s, is a positive stereotype for Asian Americans. Nevertheless Asian Americans are also regarded as “puppets by racial politics” (Shim 393). The notion of renaming Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, and Asian Indians as the “model minority” is used against African and Latino
As a marginal and powerless ethnic group in America, Asian Americans have received both positive and negative stereotypes. Neither of them demonstrates accurate images of Asian Americans to mainstream Americans. Yet the TV viewers have been influenced and continued to judge Asian Americans by these stereotypes. Thus, projecting more realistic and rational images
of Asian Americans on television can help eliminate the ramifications of the stereotypes. *All-American Girl* is intended to establish new images of Asian Americans in the comedy genre.

Yet, the intention of *All-American Girl* fails when it receives contrasting feedback. Some critics compliment the show as a new door opening the way to the diversity of American television productions. However, other critics dislike the show because they believe that the show falls into the old trap again and plays with the stereotypes of Asian Americans. Also, divided opinions sway between the pitfalls of the show and positive impacts brought to the Asian American community.

Guy Aoki, head of the Media Action Network for Asian Americans is among the critics who praised *All-American Girl*. His organization has worked hard to monitor the Asian American images in the media. It has denounced the images of Asian Americans in the films “Rising Sun” and “Falling Down” (Braxton). Prior to the broadcast of *All-American Girl* premiere, his organization among other Asian American groups, such as the Asian American players Guide, scrutinized the pilot, read the scripts and attended tapings (Braxton). They were concerned *All-American Girl* “might feature racial stereotypes that had long plagued the portrayal of blacks and other minorities on television” (Braxton). After examining the show, they commented that *All-American Girl* was long overdue for the mainstream audience, and that the series would help shatter stereotypes about Asians. Aoki commented that they were optimistic about what they had seen and appreciated that the show tried to post positive images of Asian Americans (Braxton).

Jusak Yang Bernhard and Paul G. Bern Jr., members of the Asian American players Guide, openly supported the show and were engaged in a postcard/letter-writing campaign to persuade ABC to renew the program for a second season. They recognized the importance of pioneering
efforts of the individuals like Margaret Cho and all those involved with *All-American Girl*. They also stressed that due to Hollywood’s shortsightedness, negative feedback of the show would push Hollywood to dismiss Asian Americans from the airwaves for a long time. If the show were off the air, the Asian American community would take a giant step backward (Braxton).

The compliments concentrate on the positive impacts which *All-American Girl* has brought to Asian American representations on television. Compared to the images of the past, such as Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, characters who were villains, asexual bachelors, or gang members (Shim 388), the characters in *All-American Girl* present more realistic and fair portrayals of Asian Americans on television.

However, *Los Angeles Times* staff writer Connie Kang held the opposite opinion. She stated that the show is not convincing with its characters and family dynamics. A Korean American film buff, who had lived in Los Angeles since 1927, told her that the show is a “hokey make-believe family,” and he suggested that they would have had a better show if they had spent a week with a real Korean American family. K.W. Lee, a Korean American commentator and an observer of Korean American life for four decades, told Kang that the show insults Korean Americans’ sensibilities and intelligence. He stated that “if this is the only way for Korean Americans to become visible on TV, they were better off remaining invisible.” Kang also illustrates that

> While the program purported to depict a Korean immigrant family, it did so with a mishmash of ethnicities. Korean phrases and words were so mauled that they were unintelligible to native speakers. Older members of the family—except the father—spoke English with concocted Asian accents, stilted and very un-Korean. Food, clothing and home décor were a
hodgepodge of what non-Asians might perceive to be generically Asian.

Most unconvincing were the characters and family dynamics. (Kang)

A senior at Calabasas High School, Karen Kim, writes to the Los Angeles Times, that she has a problem with the way the “so-called traditional Korean family” is depicted. She says that no Korean daughter—“no matter how Americanized she was” would speak to her mother as disrespectfully as Cho’s characters does. She also points out that some cultural traditions in the show are inaccurate and are from Chinese culture, such as a jade necklace passed through generations of the family and Feng Shui (Chinese interior arrangement).

Negative feedback for All-American Girl focused on one of the biggest stereotypes of Asian Americans; Asians and Asian Americans are alike and they have no distinctions between different sub-ethnic groups. According to Teresa Mok, Mass media portrayals often fail to differentiate between Asians and Asian Americans. Further, they often do not differentiate between specific Asian ethnic groups (194). Such a view lent support to the perceived homogeneity of Asian Americans; for example, they are all the same (194).

Asian Americans are a large ethnic group consisting of more than 28 subgroups (Ishii-Kuntz 274). Each subgroup has its own general characteristics and people from Asian cultures may slightly distinguish their differences. The relationship between Asian Americans and Korean Americans can refer to the famous metaphor for a multicultural community, a salad bowl. Different subgroups of Asian Americans in the community are like lettuce, tomatoes, and croutons in a big bowl. Each vegetable has its flavor, yet it tastes the best after they are tossed together. However, each should be identified individually as what it is. That means lettuce is lettuce. It should look and taste like lettuce. It is wrong or unacceptable if it looks like cabbage.
and tastes like spinach. They are similar as leafy vegetables but they are different. So it is with different subgroups of Asian Americans.

Masako Ishii-Kuntz in his “Diversity within the Asian American Families” clearly states that the term “Asian Americans” applies to members who have been classified as a single group because of their common ethnic origins in Asia, similar physical appearance, and similar cultural values (274). He also elaborates that

The classification of a multitude of groups under the single rubric of Asian Americans masks important differences among and within groups. Asian Americans are culturally and experientially diverse; they differ in immigration experiences, occupational skills, cultural values and beliefs, religion, primary language, income, education, average age, and ethnic identity.(274)

Ishii-Kuntz discusses important facts of the Asian American community. First of all, they belong to one ethnic group since they all originated from Asia. Second, they are different from each other and are eager to be recognized individually. The ignorance of the diversified Asian American community has irritated the members of the subgroups. They claimed that mixed representations of Asian Americans in All-American Girl reinforce the similarities and mislead the viewers. Although Korean Americans are a part of the Asian American community, they need to be recognized as individual and different ethnic groups rather than an indistinguishable category of Asian Americans. The subgroups of Asian Americans have double expectations for their representations on television; to be visible and to be identified as specific ethnic groups.

The homogeneity of Asian Americans leads to misidentifications of Asians, Asian Americans, and the subgroups within Asian Americans. Asian-looking characters projected on most
television shows seldom identify which particular subgroups of Asian Americans they are from. Still today, many viewers may be confused about specific ethnic identities of Asian Americans.

The stereotypes of Asian Americans have influenced mainstream viewers since early images of Asians first appeared in the media. Asian females are often portrayed as either the “Dragon Lady” or the “Lotus Blossom Baby,” the characteristics of exotic, mysterious, or submissive and naïve stereotypes of Asian women (Tajima 309). Mainstream viewers might generalize these images as Asians or Asian Americans. In All-American Girl however, only Asian female stereotypes partially are repeated. The villainous male images of Asian Americans have been replaced by more updated stereotypes of the “model minority,” and the images of the Asian American families had just appeared, so there were no past comparisons.

The stereotypes of the “model minority” project more assimilated images of Asian Americans. Iiyama and Kitano suggests that “the more Americanized and assimilated they are, the less negative their portrayal” (154). Teresa Mok elaborates that

> The real message is that the more Asians look and act Asian, the less acceptable they are and the more likely they will be portrayed as villains---as Asian ways are seen as evil. The more “White” Asians look and act, the more acceptable they are and the more positive their portrayal---as Western civilization is seen as good. (194)

Mainstream viewers commented that All-American Girl is not “Asian enough” based on its positive images of Asian Americans. The characters in All-American Girl do not resemble what they had seen in the past, such as Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu. The feedback from the mainstream viewers is so important that the network immediately responded. As Margaret Cho mentions in her DVD commentary on All-American Girl, the response included the hiring of an
Asian consultant to help performers to speak English with the proper accent and practice oriental
customs in the show (All-American Girl).

It is impossible to satisfy all viewers at the same time especially when ethnic or cultural
groups are involved. Yet the production staff has to balance stereotypes to reality. All-American
Girl provides such a great opportunity to promote Asian or Korean American cultures, to be
more specific. However, Asian or Korean American cultures have not lived in a vacuum
isolating them from American culture. The demonstration of their assimilation to American
mainstream culture should be a part of their portrayals. The requirement of “Asianness” in the
show is to push Asian Americans back where they were from and to ask them to maintain old
traditions from their home countries.

Sorting the compliments and controversy of All-American Girl, I realize that it is important
to define the show from an ethnic perspective. Is it an Asian American situation comedy based
on a Korean American family story? Or is it a Korean American situation comedy with the cast
from various Asian American backgrounds? The clarification of its definition is difficult but
necessary.

I define All-American Girl as an Asian American situation comedy due to its main plots, its
cast, its assimilated Asian culture, and its influence on the whole Asian American community.
As mentioned before, All-American Girl is based on and inspired by Margaret Cho’s personal
story. Many plots are relatively faithful to the lifestyle of a Korean American family. For
example, the family runs a retail business. 30% of Korean Americans run small retail businesses
in the United States (Huah and Kim 104). Three generations live in the same house. Many
Korean American families have more than one generation living under the same roof (122).
However, the life experiences of Korean American families cannot be identical to each other. If it is impossible for Korean Americans to resemble each other’s lifestyles completely, the stories of *All-American Girl* should not be read as the only representation of the Korean American community. Elaine H. Kim and Eui-Young Yu, the editors of *East to America: Korean American Life Stories*, state that the purpose of their work is to “demonstrate how Korean American lives are linked but at the same time are multiple, layered, and non-equivalent” (xvii). They clearly state that “The Korean American community is diverse and heterogeneous” (xx), and that

Korean American experiences cannot be read as stories about fitting into one place or the other. But because they are often able to view cultures alternately as if through different pairs of eyes, Korean Americans can suggest new ways of thinking about America and different ways of being American. (xxii)

*As All-American Girl* cannot reflect the entire Korean American community, it would be harsh to require the cast to be 100% Korean Americans. As Jacobs argues in his defense of the show, the cast of a popular Asian American fiction film, *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) is not 100% Chinese Americans either. It is too critical and unrealistic to require the whole cast to be Korean Americans. What really matters is whether the cast presents the characters properly or not. The actress Amy Hill, who is half Japanese and half Filipino, recalled how she was popular and welcomed by the Korean American community because of her performance (*All-American Girl*), it is clear that the real ethnic status of the cast should not have been obstacles for the viewers to accept the characters and the show; thus, it is the cast that makes the characters alive and identifiable. Qualified actors should be able to portray any characters. The inquiry was just not necessary and demeaned the existing cast of *All-American Girl*. 
The cast of *All-American Girl* is also a miniature reflection of the Asian American community in the United States. Different members of subgroups from the community cooperate on the set as if they were a real family. Some fundamental values both from Asian culture and assimilated American culture shared within the Asian American community tie the cast together. For example, Confucianism has been well received among the Asian American community regardless of their specific origins in Asia. Although Korean Americans can be identified as one well-known subgroup of the Asian American community, Korean culture and values are influenced by Chinese Confucianism. As a matter of fact, Confucianism is rooted in many Asian cultures. When Luke I. Kim and Grace S. Kim, the authors of “Searching for and Defining a Korean American Identity in a Multicultural Society,” explain the influence of Confucianism in Asian countries, they state that

Asian cultural values derive from the 3000-year tradition of Confucius’s teachings. Confucian teachings stress work ethic (will rather than natural talent); life-long self-cultivation (emphasis on higher learning and scholarship and respect for teachers); respect for elders and ancestors (importance of family lineage); priority of the interest of the family, group, and collective welfare over the interest of the individual member; and respect for and conformity to the hierarchical structure and order of the society and family.

(123)

Through the same vein, Ailee Moon and Young I. Song, in “Ethnic Identities Reflected in Value Orientation of Two Generations of Korean American Women,” emphasize that “ethnic identity is a person’s sense of self as a member of an ethnic group; its correlation is the corresponding value system of that group” (139). They further elaborate what Rotheram-Borus
state, “ethnic identity can indicate the kind of role model one is likely to follow and the types of values one will endorse. The process of developing and maintaining values is strongly influenced by ethnic and cultural factors, especially in immigrant communities” (139). Moon and Song elaborate that

For the Korean American woman, one of the strongest cultural influences is Confucianism, the ultimate guide to social roles and relations in Asian society. Although not as literally adhered to as in the past, the Confucian doctrine is abound in the Korean family, especially in the aspects of filial piety and obedience, the importance of the family as the main unit of socialization, hierarchical relations, and patriarchal dominants. (139)

What Kim, Moon, and Song discuss proves that Confucianism has been important to Korean American and other Asian American communities. However, an important fact of Confucianism is that it originated from ancient China. It has been adopted and respected by people from many Asian countries throughout history. That is to say, cultures in many Asian countries have already assimilated Confucianism in one way or another. Therefore, it is impossible to detach Korean culture from Asian cultures.

If Korean culture cannot be separated from Asian cultures because of the assimilation of Chinese Confucianism thousands of years ago, assimilation into American culture after the Koreans immigrated to the United States has strengthened the connections between Korean American culture and Asian American cultures. Korean Americans’ religious beliefs are an example of assimilation. According to Kim and Yu, many Korean Americans consider their ethnic community organizations essential to their immediate “psychic and material survival” (xxi). Although many Korean immigrants were Christians before they moved to the United
States, Christians churches, most of them Protestant, have become the most important organization for Koreans in the United States (xxi). For many Korean Americans, church is the principal place for making friends; forming support networks; and exchanging information about jobs, business opportunities, social service programs, and schooling for children” (xxi). Going to church helps Korean immigrants adapt to American culture rapidly. In *All-American Girl*, the Kim family also has a strong tie to their church, which helps American viewers who are Christians identify that aspect of the Korean American lifestyle in the United States.

There are various means of assimilation for immigrants to adjust to new culture. The mixed representation of Asian American cultures in *All-American Girl* is not a pitfall of the show. Rather, it is the reality and an ideal condition of the Asian American community. Similar cultural background and the process of assimilation already toss their original Asian cultures and American culture together. They do not have to be separated from each other.

However, as more Americans have recognized cultural diversity in the United States, television programs should have an obligation to promote individual subgroup cultures of Asian Americans. It will take effort and time to achieve. Patience and support from the Asian American community is vital. Therefore Korean American viewers that were are not completely satisfied with the production of *All-American Girl*, should not have knocked it down with a hard blow.
CHAPTER TWO
ETHNIC HUMOR AND CULTURAL CONFLICTS IN *ALL-AMERICAN GIRL*

When Joanne Gilbert discusses the relationship between dominant culture and marginal culture, she argues that “margins shift as the ‘center’ shifts” (7). This implies that marginality is interchangeable between the center and margins. For example, Korean culture may be marginal in mainstream American culture, but it becomes dominant when the center is located in an Asian American family as the one in *All-American Girl*. However, people from marginal cultures understand their marginality through representations of their groups in the dominant culture. Thus, Korean Americans might not realize their dominant Korean culture is actually marginal culture in America until they encounter difficulty finding representations of themselves in mass media.

Discussing minority representations on television, Karen E. Riggs, the author of *Mature Audiences: Television in the Lives of Elders*, elaborates that

The television representations that members of minority groups have faced and the coping strategies they have relied on as a result are anchored in the ignoble history of the West’s overwhelming tendency to marginalize non-dominant people in its popular culture. Responses of those so marginalized have come forth faithfully, although objecting voices have been comparatively faint when measured against the blare of mainstream representations. (126)

Marginalized and non-dominant groups respond differently to stereotypes, such as permissive acceptance or aggressive protests. Danielle Russell suggests that marginalized groups can use humor to challenge stereotypes that function as a tool of dominant culture, to manipulate or
believable them (16). She also comments that “comedy can help to subvert these stereotypes and highlight the power dynamics lurking behind them” (16).

Many ethnic groups have initiated ethnic humor to overthrow stereotypes. When Joseph Dorinson and Joseph Boskin discuss African American and Jewish humor, they state that “ethnic humor serves to bind their groups with the strands of communal laughter, cathartic release, and retaliation against oppressors. For the host society or power elite, this kind of humor also provides a triple A option, to wit; aggression (slurs), avoidance (caste consciousness), and acceptance (pluralism)” (183). They further elaborate that “if ethnic jokes are mini-rebellions against authority, they also constitute a device for social control---sometimes to impede, sometimes to accelerate, absorption in the host society. In this process, humor resonates within and among groups to sound a consensus” (183). Even though *All-American Girl* is an ethnic situation comedy, its ethnic humor is not as aggressive as African American and Jewish humor. The characters in *All-American Girl* encounter more cultural conflicts between dominant and marginal cultures than racial or class conflicts. Margaret Kim, Grandma Yung-Hee, and father Benny Kim are the three characters in different generations of the Kim family. Their conflicts and struggles construct the main plots of the show.

**Margaret Kim: A Rebellious Second-Generation of Asian Americans**

Margaret Kim is a rebellious, Americanized daughter who challenges Korean traditional culture and promotes American values at home. She refuses to be a submissive daughter who follows her parents’ demand to marry a Korean American. It seems that Margaret Kim is a new image of a young Korean American female, compared to other stereotypical Asian female images in the past. However, she is depicted as a typical young American female with an Asian
face. She is attracted to white men and prefers an easy job with no responsibilities. Her love-hate relationship with her mother was nothing new in the 1990s after the successful film *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) portrayed similar situations.

Margaret’s Choice of Her Dates

Major topics for conflicts between Margaret and her mother are her dates and her future marriage. Most Asian American parents are concerned about these issues for their adult children (Pang 128). The Kim family is no exception. It is not a surprise when the viewers see Margaret’s mother favoring Korean young men for her future son-in-law. According to Gin Yong Pang, who studies intraethnic, interracial, and interethnic marriages among Korean American women, it is not surprising that 75% (fifteen out of twenty) of his interviewees feel their parents would strongly to somewhat strongly disapprove of intermarriage, that is marrying outside of the Korean ethnic group, since today’s Korean American community is largely made of immigrants. The other 25% feel their parents would somewhat approve but only under certain conditions and circumstances (129). Pang indicates that the majority of the parents prefer first Korean/Korean Americans, then Asian Americans, Whites, and then other racial groups, like Mexicans, and finally African Americans (130). Therefore, Asian American parents’ preference for Korean Americans or Asian Americans for their children’s dates is not simply a stereotype of an Asian American family. It is reality.

However, this realistic issue portrayed in *All-American Girl* is problematic. All Margaret’s dates are white except for one Korean American. In the episode “Submission: Impossible”, she only dates the Korean American under her parents’ pressure but their relationship soon ends. In the 17 episodes of the season, Margaret dates white men of various occupations, ranging from
college professor to pirated DVD seller. Her love interests in the show actually recycle the stereotype of Asian American women in the media, that is, Asian women are only attracted to white men who are supposed to be superior to Asian American men. In addition, her response to her Korean American date satirizes the values of the traditional Asian American men.

In “Submission: Impossible”, Margaret’s Korean American date is an ideal son-in-law for her parents. He has everything that a “good” husband should have: a good family background (Koreans), high-levels of education and a respected career. Ironically, those qualities do not appeal to Margaret. The end of the relationship is caused by her boyfriend who values Korean traditional culture (dominant culture in Korean American families). He voices how a “good” Korean girl should behave, such as wearing more conservative dress, being gentle, speaking Korean fluently, and enjoying Korean folk arts. Apparently, to be such a good Korean girl, Margaret would have to pretend to be someone she is not to please her Korean boyfriend. Margaret chooses to end the relationship instead of feigning these values.

Margaret’s choice differs from her parents’ wishes but eventually satisfies the mainstream viewers. The message of that particular episode implies that Korean culture and its values as marginal culture in America should be abandoned. An Americanized young lady, like Margaret, should not surrender to old-world values. It also reflects what Joseph Dorinson and Joseph Boskin argue, “While [stereotypes] usually directed against the powerless--- the politically ineffective and economically deprived --- the humor stereotype has also been employed against upwardly mobile minority groups” (165). Although Margaret’s Korean American boyfriend is the model minority, he is doomed to fail in front of Margaret and the American mainstream viewers. This failure recycles the belief that American values are superior to other marginal cultures.
Margaret is not the only one who encounters difficulty dating traditional Korean American men in the show. Amy, the Korean fiancée of Margaret’s brother (Stuart), also vows to redesign her obedient personality and refuses to let Stuart take the lead in “Redesigning Women.” Amy’s changes are dramatic. Before she meets Margaret, Amy is the perfect Korean girlfriend every traditional Korean man dreams of. According to Mrs. Kim, Margaret’s mother, Amy cares about her education, family and the Korean community. She and Stuart share upscale hobbies, such as chamber music, foreign films, and Jazz concerts. In addition, she starts her conversation with “Stuart and I…” every time she speaks. Yet after she has a girls’ night out with Margaret and her friends, she comes out of her shell. Amy demands to make decisions with Stuart and insists that her opinions should matter. In addition, American club culture corrupts her and she converts to a “clubber” with a leather vest and miniskirt in a snap. In the end of that episode, Stuart changes for Amy.

Superficially, these two episodes interweave the issues of Margaret’s love interests and Amy’s independence. On a deeper level, these episodes examine mimic American culture and body images. First, both American upper-class culture and Korean traditional values are the targets of the parody. These episodes are another thinly-veiled way to satirize upwardly mobile Korean Americans as copy cats of American upper-class. The plots imply that Amy and Stuart might not be truly interested in these upscale hobbies. Combining these episodes clarifies that both traditional Korean culture and mimicked American upper-class culture would not appeal to the new generation of Americanized Korean Americans.

Margaret as a Recycled Stereotype of the “Dragon Lady”
Stereotypical portrayals of Asian or Asian American women repeat themselves in the characters of Margaret and Amy. According to Japanese American filmmaker Renee E. Tajima, the “Dragon Lady” and the “Lotus Blossom Baby” have been the stereotypes of Asian or Asian American women over the sixty-year history of Asian women’s representations in U.S. cinema (309). The “Lotus Blossom Baby” reflects a submissive and naive stereotype of Asian women. The “Dragon Lady,” on the other hand, presents Asian females as evil villainesses and vamps. In *All-American Girl*, Margaret shares some characteristics of the “Dragon Lady,” such as being independent, “inscrutable and exotic” (Mok 189). Amy initially represents the “Lotus Blossom baby,” who is passive and “whose only desire is to selflessly cater to the whim of men” (189).

Both the “Dragon Lady” and the “Lotus Blossom Baby” serve as objects to be looked at. Laura Mulvey discusses in her famous essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” that

> Women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they could be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle… she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.

Mainstream film neatly combines spectacle and narrative (22).

Then Mulvey further states that the women displayed have functioned on two levels: “as exotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with the shift tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (22). In *All-American Girl*, Margaret often wears tight miniskirts. Comparatively, Amy wears floral, knee-length dresses before she transitions from being a traditional Korean woman. Amy’s liberation is first visible when she dresses in an outrageous leather vest and miniskirts. The styles of Margaret and Amy are unified to display sexuality in young Asian American females.
Compared to their styles, the appearance of Ruthie and Gloria, Margaret’s close friends at the Shopping Mall, intend to highlight Margaret and Amy as exotic and sexual objects in the show. Ruthie and Gloria often wear less attractive outfits in the show. The contrast between their costumes dramatically works against the Oriental appearance of Asian and Asian American women. It marks the differences between Eastern and Western aesthetic standards. In Christina Klein’s summary of Edward Said’s groundbreaking work *Orientalism*, she evaluates “Orientalism” as a pervasive Western discourse which emphasizes an ideology of difference. *Orientalism* emphasizes that “there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them,’ each quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident” (231). Western domination is key to Orientalism. It defines the East in a subordinate position through a series of oppositions from the West. Compared to the East, the West is “rational, progressive, adult, and masculine;” the East, in turn, is “irrational, backward-looking, childish, and feminine” (231). According to Klein, “this binary logic constructs the East as an inferior racial Other to the West, and legitimated European imperialism by over-determining the idea of Western superiority” (231).

However, in *All-American Girl*, Western superiority does not work for western females. Ruthie and Gloria are goofy side-kicks for Margaret. The friendship between Margaret and them implies that Margaret is a typical American girl. At the same time, this suggests that Margaret, the “Dragon Lady” and Amy, the “Lotus Blossom Baby” are more attractive to White males because their ethnic identities label them as foreign and oriental. What is essential about their sexuality on display is that it comes with the burden of their racial identities. Both Margaret and Amy are objects to be looked at for the spectators of *All-American Girl*. Fortunately, both Margaret and Amy are not mindless objects. They have ambitions in life, especially Margaret.
Margaret’s Career Choice vs. Her Parents’ Dream

Besides refusing to take advice from her parents about her dates, Margaret’s decision to give up on law school in “Exile on Market Street” is another form of disobedience against her family. Pursuing a creative career would better suit Margaret’s free and artistic spirit. However, going to law school would be a safe choice for her and her family. She is afraid of failing in her own dream to be an artist. Margaret’s chaotic and final decision to abandon law school implies that she is free to make a choice in America about her own future. This freedom of choice is what millions of immigrants pursued when they moved to America. This freedom characterizes American spirit. But it stands in opposition of what her Korean parents want --- security. Being an artist would be unrealistic for surviving in America. Yet once again, Margaret sides for American values and her parents respect, her decision though most Asian parents will reluctant to do so back in their own countries. In most situations, parents would demand that their children take their advice and abandon unrealistic ideas. Parents are confident about their choices for their children.

Elaine H. Kim and Eui-Young Yu have different perspectives on the relationships between immigrants and their children who are born in America. They state that

Those who think that Korean immigrant families are fraught with “East-West conflicts” of the kind described in the ABC-TV sitcom about a Korean American family, All-American Girl, might be surprised to find in the stories that follow how energetically Korean American children strive to understand and how deeply they love and appreciate their immigrant parents (xix).

Kim and Yu also indicate that many of the immigrants’ children recognize their parents’ sacrifices and are willing to display their gratitude (xix). Yet, in All-American Girl, such
gratitude from the second generation of immigrants is missing; instead there are more compromises from their immigrant parents who frequently defer to freedom of choice. Kim and Yu also state that displacement helps shape experiences of and attitudes toward America for Korean immigrant parents. They would respect their children’s decisions like most mainstream American parents do in movies and television shows, which are the main source for them to learn about American values.

Generational relationships and conflicts are universal topics for family comedies. In an ethnic comedy like *All-American Girl*, cultural conflicts add ethnic flavors but are cliché at the same time. Margaret’s decisions regarding her personal life and career reflect that the second generation of immigrants will lead different life-styles from their parents. Both the parents and their children learn the lessons of freedom, individuality, and respect in America. The marginal cultures like Asian or Korean cultures would be less important in their lives as they continued living in America.

Grandma Yung-Hee: Liaison between Asian Cultures and American Culture

Margaret’s close relationship with her grandmother balances the uneven contrast between American culture and Asian American cultures. It demonstrates that two distinguished cultures could coexist harmoniously under the same roof and learn mutual values from each other. Not only is Grandma Yung-Hee a symbol of traditional Asian culture with a touch of assimilated American mainstream culture, but she also is a spokesperson for the least represented and marginalized group in American television, aged Asian females. Grandma Yung-Hee’s position in the family, like that of a Grandmother in most American household, is not dominant but valuable.
As a member of the least represented social group in the media, Grandma Yung-Hee is able to create endearing, tolerant, and humorous images of that particular group. She speaks English with a strong Asian accent, and she is keen on Oriental values, and partially assimilates to American mainstream culture. Her character eases the tension of stereotypes and celebrates cultural diversity.

Grandma Yung-Hee as a Marginal Character in a Marginal Group

Aged female Asian Americans are a powerless group in mainstream American culture. They have been marginalized in many ways. First, their ethnic identities label them as the minority. Being in the minority group, their gender identity pushes them to the ends because most Asian cultures are male-dominated. On top of that, they are differentiated by their ages compared to their young counterparts. Physically and ideologically, aged female Asian Americans are abandoned by the groups above. As Joanne Gilbert defines, “marginalized individuals have become ‘modern strangers’ because they lack of ‘membership’ in the dominant culture due to gender, class, race, sexual orientation, or other characteristics” (153). In the case of aged female Asian Americans, they are excluded by many layers of cultural groups. Presenting the marginalized, least-represented group will create challenges because they are mostly invisible and ignored in both the mainstream culture and their own community.

Karen E. Riggs states that “cultural stereotypes about the elderly depicted a passive group that was either too tired or too inconsequential to engage in meaningful acts” (1). In her research, she observes that older characters as vital individuals are rarely highlighted in television’s history programs (8). According to her,
The list of unproductive stereotyping was voluminous, especially in comedies. It includes such characters as Walter Brennan’s daft Grandpa McCoy *The Real McCoys*; Irene Ryan’s superstitious, manipulative Granny Clampett *The Beverly Hillbillies*; Redd Foxx’s selfish, irrational Fred Sanford *Sanford and Son*; Abe Vigoda’s perpetually constipated Detective Fish *Barney Miller*; and Alice Ghostley’s oversexed, confused Bernice *Designing Women*. (8)

Riggs further elaborates that “presentation of an elderly Asian woman on network entertainment television is a rarity” (129). She also suggested that one of the most significant resources for reception was marginality. Old age, combined with other oppressed positions, works to exaggerate marginality, and this is where it becomes difficult to talk generally and routinely of people’s interactions with mass culture (129).

A few images of aged Asian American women that do exist share the characteristics of small, quiet, nervous, polite, and alienated characters in America, and more importantly, they all have accents. In the past, language incompetence was regarded as a negative stereotype for ethnic groups, especially when dialect comedy originally started as a feature of radio sitcoms in the early 1920s.

Dialect has been an indicator of ethnic comedy for a long time. When David Marc discusses *The Goldbergs* and *Amos ’n’ Andy*, the earliest television shows converted from the radio sitcoms in the 1920s, he stresses that both shows used ethnic dialect, “a source of popular humor traceable in American culture to the nineteenth-century minstrel and vaudeville stages” (Dalton and Linder 17). *The Goldbergs* was well-received for “the thick Jewish accents of the program’s immigrant-generation characters provided much of the show’s humor” (17). Yet the “farfetched malapropisms” and the level of stupidity in *Amos ’n’ Andy* were criticized as racist (17).
Although the shows were popular when they were on radio, they did not survive long on television. Their short-lived history as television sitcoms indicates that dialect performance, easily identified with ethnic groups and stereotypes, can be a source of backlash for the shows. Marc elaborates that “the exaggerated accents and malapropisms of radio comedy may have become more embarrassing than funny to a significant segment of the early television-viewing audience, which was located almost exclusively in large metropolitan areas.” (19)

Still, Grandma Yung-Hee’s dialect performance arrived at the perfect time to celebrate American multiculturalism in the 1990s. Diversity was embraced and society was more tolerant of minorities. Her character and accompanying accents are believable and purposeful because she arrives in the United States after her son’s family immigrates. It would be impossible for aged adults to erase their accents and to speak flawless English. Grandma Yung-Hee speaks understandable yet grammatically incorrect English, sometimes mixing a few Korean words or phrases. For example, when Grandma Yung-Hee spells her Korean name to the Pizza delivery service in Korean-English, she says, “my name is Yung-Hee. Yung starts with ‘Y’, like yeoboseyo, (which means Hello in Korean)”(All-American Girl). These acts make Grandma Yung-Hee popular because of her accent and broken English. The interactions with family members or other associates in the show depict her as an adorable Grandma with an Asian accent and an Asian culture promoter at the same time.

Grandma Yung-Hee also resembles a Grandma in every American household. She is protective, and a source of wisdom to the family members. As a Har Me Ni (Grandma in Korean) and a representative of the old generation in the family, Grandma Yung-Hee gets along with her granddaughter Margaret. Grandma Yung-Hee is always supportive of Margaret’s decisions. In “Exile on Market Street,” she confronts the police officer when Margaret is in trouble. More
importantly, she helps Margaret realize what she really wants to do in her life. In “Malpractice in San Francisco,” she insists that Margaret would be a suitable person to talk to Stuart, who makes mistakes at the hospital and wants to quit. She believes that Margaret would talk the sense into Stuart and Margaret does not disappoint her.

Grandma Yung-Hee’s Assimilation to American Culture

Other than being a supportive Grandma at home, Grandma Yung-Hee’s indulgence of American television programs is her way of assimilating to American culture. Watching TV is the major routine for Grandma Yung-Hee in the show. She can name many major television shows such as *Baywatch*, *Larry King’s Show*, and she is a huge fan of Oprah Winfrey. Being couch potato is the universal stereotype of old people around the world.

Learning phrases and expressions from television programs, Grandma Yung-Hee’s punch lines are associated with American popular culture as well. She would shout “in your face” while watching NBA with her grandson. She replies “don’t cry for me, South Korea” when she is no longer in “Seoul Daddies” barber-shop quartet because she tries to control the other members. She hates to lose, which is a characteristics of American culture as well. She tries out different English names so people do not mispronounce her name. Furthermore, her assimilation to American is also reflected in her attitude toward love.

In “Yung at Heart”, Grandma Yung-Hee is in love with Sammy Young, an old Korean American who has a golf-course in Florida. However, Grandma Yung-Hee is in the dilemma of being with her love or leaving her family behind. Meanwhile, not knowing much about Sammy Young, the Kim family, especially Benny Kim, worries about the romance between his mother
and a stranger. Benny’s worry is no exception because it is an obligation for the oldest son in the family to take care of a widowed old parent in Asian culture.

Remarriage of aged people is not encouraged in Asian cultures because it will imply the family’s incapability of taking care of the elders. A widowed parent getting married will bring shame to the family. However, Grandma Yung-Hee, as an old generation from an Asian country, does not show much concern about the family’s reputation if she marries Sammy. Apparently, marriage between older people is not a moral issue in the United States. Or is it Grandma’s desertion of old-fashioned Asian values? She is more concerned if Sammy Young loves her for herself, a classic value of American culture. Assured that Sammy is in love with her and wants to spend the rest of his life with her, she is as happy as a teenager. But she has to make the tough decision of whether to leave her family, and in the end, she decides to stay.

Although Grandma Yung-Hee is assimilated into American culture in many ways, she is tied to her old Korean traditions more than anyone else in the family. She is a perfect character to introduce more Asian culture and spices the show with Asian ingredients. Grandma Yung-Hee believes in Feng-Shui, the Chinese system for arranging objects inside a building in order to make people feel comfortable and happy (Oxford 742). She changes the furniture around in order to bring good luck to the family. She insists on ordering a donkey for her grandson Stuart’s upcoming wedding. It is an old tradition for Korean bride to ride on a donkey to get married. Grandma Yung-Hee thinks her unusual pet, a cricket, has more dignity than a dog, which kisses up to its master. As the promoter of Asian culture, Grandma Yung-Hee successfully blends two different cultures together with her witty and open attitudes. As a representative of an old generation of the family, Grandma Yung-Hee endures less pressure than her son Benny Kim, who demonstrates the latest stereotype of Asian Americans, the “model minority.”
2.3 Benny Kim: the “Model Minority” Living between Asian Cultures and American Culture

Benny is a humble, hard-working, and generous man. He comes to the States to pursue a better life and future for his family, like millions of immigrants have done. More importantly, Benny Kim shatters the negative images of Korean American merchants which most American viewers had in their minds during the Los Angeles Riot in 1994. According to Guy Aoki, head of the Media Action Network for Asian Americans, most viewers will visualize Korean grocers shooting people randomly on the top of the roof when they think of Korean Americans in small business. However, in All-American Girl, Benny is a kind and regular gentleman next door, helping the neighbor’s little daughter with her school project and buying bargain price pastry from his White bakery neighbor. Racial conflicts never appear as a problem in his life. Instead, Benny worries more about how his children can preserve more Korean culture in their life.

Benny and his wife live in the dilemma of not accepting American culture completely and being afraid of losing traditional culture if they do not keep the customs strictly. He is supportive of his daughter’s career choice yet conservative about his mother’s remarriage. Traditional Asian culture, especially Confucianism, has influenced him more than everything else in his life.

Benny takes care of three generations together by his small family bookstore. His family experience depicts Confucianism’s practice in Asian culture. According to Masako Ishii-Kuntz, Asian Americans share a unique cultural heritage rooted in Confucianism. The prevalence of three-generational households among many Asian American populations can be seen as a manifestation of the important Confucianistic concept of filial piety (276). She further explains that compared with European Americans, Asian Americans, in general tended to live closer to, feel more obligated to, provided more financial aid to, and interact more frequently with their
parents. Many younger Asian American adults are expected to live with their families until they marry, elderly parents tend to live with family members rather than in nursing homes, and family members of all age levels were typical integrated into family activities (281). In addition, she indicates that compared to Japanese and Chinese Americans, “the filial obligations of Korean American adult children have a significant, positive effect on their emotional support for their elderly parents” (282). Ishii-Kuntz also finds that adult children who live close to their elderly parents and report a higher level of filial obligation are much more likely to provide financial assistance to their parents than are children who live farther away from and feel little obligation to their parents (282).

As a middle-aged immigrant man, Benny carries these responsibilities without complaint. I Young Song, editor of *Korean American Women: from Tradition to Modern Feminism* points out that in the Korean family, strong family traditions and the influence of Confucianism might be seen as a shield to prevent the potential for disrespect. In actuality, overworked adult children in the Korean immigrant community do not have time to provide much needed emotional, social, and financial support to their elderly parents (203). Ishii-Kuntz also indicates that many Asian American fathers feel obligated to be the leaders and the principal disciplinarians in the families because of their responsibilities for providing for the economic well-being of their families. Therefore, many fathers are usually seen as stern, distant, and less approachable than mothers (276). However, this stereotype and reality of Asian fathers does not apply to Benny’s life in *All-American Girl*. Benny prioritizes his family and his community and stresses the importance of family togetherness. He initiates family parties on weekends and keeps the traditions of going out with family friends. What he has done for his family and community proves his model minority values of a responsible family man to the viewers.
As a representation of a model minority, Benny not only keeps Asian values of filial piety in his family, he is also assimilated into American culture. He is active with his “Seoul Daddies” barber-shop quartet. He understands the essence of the American Dream when a large chain bookstore tries to buy his store. Although Margaret’s economics theory from her class halts his dream coming true, he does not complain and goes back to his hard-working routine. His endurance implies the strength of the “model minority” and their unspoken pain underneath.

The concept of a “model minority” originated in January 1966. According to Keith Osajima, William Peterson wrote a *New York Times Magazine* article to compliment the efforts of Japanese Americans in their successful struggle to enter the mainstream of American life. In December of that same year, the *U.S. News and World Report* also published a story praising Chinese Americans for their significant achievements and admired Chinatowns as “bastions of peace and prosperity” (166). Both articles praise the Chinese and the Japanese Americans for their ability to overcome years of racial discrimination (166). Osajima further explains that Asian achievement confirmed that the United States was indeed the land of opportunity. It defined success in narrow, materialistic terms. The movement of Asians into the mainstream of American life affirmed the ideal that America was an open society, willing to accept and incorporate those minorities and immigrants who were willing to assimilate. Perhaps most importantly, the thesis upheld a fundamental meritocratic belief that America was a fair society. Asian Americans had made it because America judged and rewarded people, not by the color of their skin, but on the basis of their qualifications, skills, attitudes, and behavior. (167)
However, Chiung Hwang Chen, the author of “‘Outwhiting the Whites’: an Examination of the Persistence of the Asian American Model Minority Discourse”, states that news magazine journalists writing about Asian Americans in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, “seemed unaware that they were creating and repeating a stereotype. Their efforts strengthened the model minority stereotype. But by the 1980s and 1990s journalists knew that this stereotype existed” (148). Chen also stresses that “many people thought it was harmful, despite its seemingly positive nature. Some journalists choose to perpetuate the stereotype; after all, it seems to compliment Asian Americans, and it apparently coincides with some facts. Others agree with the critique of the stereotype, however, and pointed out how the stereotype fooled people” (148).

Through the same lenses, Stacey J. Lee in her newly-published second edition of “Unraveling the ‘Model Minority’ Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youth” proves that positive stereotypes put Asian Americans in a dilemma as the “model minority”. Lee states that she has encountered a great deal of resistance from both non-Asians and Asians who insist that the stereotype is both accurate and positive (8). Lee’s study demonstrates the problematic nature of the stereotype. She stresses that “the ‘model minority’ stereotype silences claims of racial inequality and hides the problems faced by some Asian Americans” (8).

Chiung Hwang Chen suggests that the positive stereotype remains close to the negative “Yellow Peril” stereotype; “Both appeal to a racist fear that Asians might illegitimately take power within America” (152). The fear becomes reality when the images of Korean small business merchants roaming with their guns on the roof appeared on television in 1994. These images are still fresh to American mainstream viewers and are the bombs shattering the myth of the “model minority” which mainstream culture managed to project over 20 years. The
accumulations of misunderstanding and hatred between different racial minorities eventually burst out and are contradicted with the myth of the “model minority”.

*All-American Girl* aired after the Los Angeles Riots. Benny does not seem to have any problems with being a model minority and he urges his son Stuart to continue keeping up with the uplifting spirit of immigrants. His expectations for Stuart resemble many other parents of Asian Americans who hope their children will live better than they did. These parents emphasize education and diligence in their family. They remain silent about the difficulties and inequality they have experienced. As the first Asian American situation comedy, *All-American Girl* also mutes for the claims of racial inequality and the problems of the “model minority”.

The male representations in *All-American Girl* carry a mission of erasing negative images of Asian Americans or Korean Americans after the Los Angeles Riots. Benny, Stuart, Sammy Young (Grandma’s date), and Raymond (Margaret’s Korean American date) are all optimistic and remain faithful to traditional Asian values. If these positive images are meant to make mainstream viewers believe that the negative influence of the Los Angeles Riot is over, they also waste opportunities to reveal realistic interactions between different minority groups and to solve the problems among them as well.

Examining closely the episodes of *All-American Girl*, cultural conflicts in the show are revealed more than social and class conflicts. For example, Margaret does not date any African American men or anyone whose social status is lower than middle class. *All-American Girl* demonstrates how the Kim family reacts to Margaret’s dates, but does not reveal any responses from her white boyfriend’s family. Probably none of the relationships ever go that far. It does not present any discrimination or injustice that Asian Americans have experienced, not even in a humorous way to satirize.
*All-American Girl* somehow prepares mainstream American viewers for the future demonstration of Asian cultures or Asian American cultures in America. With increased cultural awareness, mainstream viewers experience the initial stage of creating minority television programs for the networks. Without the basic knowledge of ethnic minorities, they will have a difficult time comprehending the stories and cultural elements within. The significance of the Kim family and their Asian American friends in *All-American Girl* is that they create visible images of the Asian American community. Although the characters and the stories are plain and not fully developed, future creators of Asian American situation comedies or other comedic forms can craft many versions of the Kim family to develop authentic Asian American humor like the success of black and Jewish humor.
CONCLUSION

*All-American Girl* was a milestone for Asian Americans to view their representation on television with a new perspective in the 1990s. As an ethnic situation comedy, the show invites mainstream viewers into the living room of an Asian American family whose stories relate to both American culture and Asian cultures. It creatively combines cultural conflicts with family conflicts and solves the problems within 23 minutes. With all the effort of the production and the Asian American performers in the show, it manages to project new images of Asian Americans, such as the “model minority”, but repeats the Asian American stereotypes of the past as well. Although *All-American Girl* was a short-lived ethnic situation comedy, it deserves compliments, for it paved the way to enrich the diversity on American television.

Asian cultures or Asian American culture, as part of the diversified display on the networks ended soon after *All-American Girl* was cancelled in 1995. The failure of *All-American Girl* poses questions for the future of Asian American representation on television. How can the representations relate more to the reality? Is the “model minority” the only option for Asian American images to remain “positive”? What are new directions for Asian American representation? Five years later, subversive images of Asian Americans appear on Fox, a non-traditional network which often challenges the boundaries of television production. In 2000, FOX’s comedy show MADtv presented the sketch comedy show called *Average Asian.*

If *All-American Girl* functions as a puppet manipulated by a less edgy network to simply present stereotypes of Asian Americans without satirizing them at all, the production of *Average Asian* does the opposite. *Average Asian* innovatively targets the stereotypes of Asian Americans which mainstream Americans often assume. Instead of presenting stereotypes like *All-American Girl* does, *Average Asian* examines them from Asian Americans’ perspective. Haidiki, as an
“average Asian” who is not close to the “model minority” in every aspect, demonstrates the dilemma or struggles of living with stereotypes. It situates the character Haidiki in social situations that most Asian Americans are familiar with, such as being stereotyped as dog-eaters and excelling at arts. These situations often involve interactions between mainstream Americans and Asian Americans. Haidiki’s white friends, reflect how mainstream Americans use stereotypes to make assumptions about Asian Americans. For example, they presume Haidiki as a computer genius and ask him to repair their computers, and they doubt Haidiki’s capability of driving a car. *Average Asian* is a satire of the arrogance of mainstream Americans.

The humor in *Average Asian* fits the last stage of Lawrence Mintz’s four developmental stages. According to Mintz, “the first [stage] features critical humor which targets the outgroup; the second [stage], self-deprecatory humor; the third [stage], realism; and the fourth reverses stage one as the oppressed minority gains revenge in assaulting the majority culture” (167). *Average Asian* satirizes mainstream Americans’ ignorance of Asians and Asian American cultures. The sketches adopt the tool of humor to subvert stereotypes that Asians and Asian Americans have passively accepted. The scenarios presented in the sketches are typical Asians or Asian American stereotypes, such as all Asians eat dogs, are good at playing music, or even are familiar with traditional herbal treatments. The dilemmas presented in *Average Asian* imply that Asian Americans cannot separate themselves from the stereotypes implied in the sketches.

Though *All-American Girl* and *Average Asian* are different genres, their narratives are engaged with the stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans. *All-American Girl* does not confront or satirize the mainstream American culture as *Average Asian* does in its sketches. As a situation comedy aired in a major network, *All-American Girl* faced more restrictions than *Average Asian*. A decade later, increased awareness of cultural diversity in America helped
foster the creation of *Average Asian*. However, since *All-American Girl* and *Average Asian* present the stories of Asian Americans whose population is comparatively small in America, the future development of Asian American television representation largely depends on marketing strategies from the major networks and writers from the Asian American community.

According to Doobo Shim, “the foremost goal of the media is simply to make a profit by reaching as large an audience as possible. When networks buy television programs or movies from Hollywood producers, they decide whether to underwrite these projects based on their marketability, “as to ensure a sizable share of the audience” (361). Shim further explains that “the sponsors [of the programs or shows] favor not only the largest but also the most desirable audience---the young and affluent. By this mechanism, the media alienate and neglect the less desirable audiences---the old, the poor, and ethnic minorities such as Asian Americans” (361). In the same vein, Alan James Frutkin also stresses that “creating a hit series on network television means attracting an audience that remains predominantly white, and historically the networks appear to have operated under the assumption that white viewers relate best to white characters” (Frutkin). A story of an Asian American family will not be in the best interests of white viewers. It will be equally difficult to create a program just for Asian American viewers. The former president of NBC West Coast, Scott Sassa, tells Frutkin that in order to “develop a certain level of authenticity, you would want to have minorities that are reflective of those locales, both in principal and in supporting roles, but the real issue is, we have to make a show that’s as commercial as possible” (Frutkin). Frutkin states that according to Nielsen Media Research, Asian-Americans only constitute 3% of the television-viewing population; “they don’t carry much numerical clout” (Frutkin).
As a matter of fact, *All-American Girl* had a successful rating at the very beginning. It was reported that it captured the No.5 rating in September 1994 “because of in large part, its top-rated lead-in, ‘Home Improvement’” (Southgate). But the ratings of *All-American Girl* quickly dropped to the mid 30’s when it moved to its regular Wednesday time slot (Southgate). Yet, Gary Jacobs, the creator of *All-American Girl*, mentions that, more than 20 million people watched *All-American Girl* every week when the show is on air (Jacobs). If the Asian American viewers who are 3% of television viewers can enjoy shows barely consisting of any of their representations, the rest of the viewers should be able to accept shows that present cultural diversity in America. Thus, the core issue will be the quality of the show and the authenticity of Asian American representations in the show.

One vital fact that affects Asian American representation on television is the limited numbers of the Asian American professionals who have worked in the entertainment industry. According to Doobo Shim, the absence or limited influence of Asian Americans producers and writers is partly responsible for the perpetuation of Asian stereotypes. He suggests that changes to Asian stereotypes and underrepresentation should come from the involvement of the Asian American community (404).

Yet *All-American Girl* had the Asian American writers. The purpose of their involvement was quite different from what critics anticipated. Elizabeth Wong, one of the writers shares her input in the show with the *Los Angeles Times* staff writer, Greg Braxton. She states that *All-American Girl* is not a show that deals with politics: “It is an 8:30 show that deals with family dynamics. That’s what we’re interested in … If we focus on telling good stories, that’s the most important thing” (Braxton). Her comments reflect a career expectation that some professionals from the Asian American community have. On one hand, they have already assimilated
themselves into American culture for many generations; on the other hand, they cannot fulfill the Asian American community’s expectation that they present Asian cultures that they have some connection to but are no longer fully familiar with.

However, Asian American writers or professionals can share their experiences as Asian Americans through their work and demonstrate how that experience has evolved as part of the American experience. They are responsible for presenting better stories and performances to break the barriers and misunderstandings of a variety of the viewers. USA Cable’s president, Stephen Chao, who is Chinese American, comments on *All-American Girl*,

> It was a good idea. I don’t think it was done as well as it could have been. If the cards had played themselves out differently, and if the writing had been more solid, I don’t think there was anything that prevented Margaret Cho from becoming as big as Seinfeld. (Frutkin)

It is true that *All-American Girl* has so much potential in story-writing and character development. As time progresses, the quality of writing that presents the reality of Asian Americans has improved. The existence of *Average Asian* is an example of such progress and it is significant to see ethnic humor being used effectively. Therefore, the development of Asian American representations will have a rather positive future.

Research on *All-American Girl* has helped me understand the struggles over Asian American representation in mainstream media. As an Asian, my interpretation of these struggles and problems is limited due to my ethnic background. I, as a Chinese, perceive the show in a less objective way, especially in interpreting Cho’s identity as an Asian American.

Cho talks about the reactions to *All American Girl* from the Asian American community and how she is “uncool” about the responses (37). Her frustration really comes from her self-identity.
and the burden she carries for the whole community, which she hardly identifies with. She is American and she identifies closely as an Asian American. Her experience with racism outrages her because she positions herself as American and she should not be treated as someone from other country. In other words, she might be happier to present an American girl with Asian face, which she cannot change, rather than Asian Americans or Asians. She is not happy about the network being culturally conscious and wanting the show to be more “Asian” (38).

Yet, when I watch All-American Girl, I search for the “Asianness”. How can it be called as Asian American sitcom without any display of Asian heritage or tradition? Cho states her entire life is never lived that way, as the show presents (38). Yet, at the beginning of the research, I naively believed that All-American Girl is a show which demonstrates how an Asian American family survives and struggles with American culture and Asian cultures, especially when the show is based on Margaret’s autobiography. Now, it is much clear to me that the show is inspired by collaboration with combined Asian American family stories. To project the visibility of the Asian American community is the main achievement of the show.

In conclusion, I will end my thesis with a quotation from, Karen K. Narasaki, president of the Asian Pacific American Media Coalition: “We are not asking that every series have only Asian-Americans, or even that every series have an Asian American on its full-time cast. We are just asking for TV to more fully reflect the reality that America is today” (Frutkin). That is to increase visibility with accurate portrayals. More or less, All-American Girl makes Karen K. Narasaki wish come true and increases awareness of the Asian American community in American television. Although the representation of Asian Americans in All-American Girl is not perfect, the show was surely a pioneer, to make 3% population of Americans as visible and ordinary as other Americans.
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