

"The Summer I Turned Pretty" and Its Lack of Asian American Identity

Why bother making a character biracial, only to ignore her culture?



K-CULTURE WITH JAE-HA KIM

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Amazon MGM Studios

Belly (Lola Tung) flanked by brothers Conrad (Christopher Briney) and Jeremiah (Gavin Casalegno) | Courtesy: Prime Video

If you read my reviews of “To All the Boys: Always and Forever” (2021) and “The Summer I Turned Pretty” (2022), you’ll know that I’m not a huge fan of the film and TV adaptations of Jenny Han’s YA books. I loved the female leads, who were the best parts of the franchises.

To be fair, as someone whose teenage days are decades in the past, I am not the demographic these kinds of projects covet.

That said, a good high school-adjacent show can have universal appeal, regardless of gender or age. I'm thinking of some Korean shows that I've loved ("All of Us are Dead," "Extraordinary You," "Study Group," "Twenty-Five Twenty-One," "The Glory," "Our Blues"), which incorporate drama, romance and, in some instances, zombies.

Honestly? I related more to the zombies in "All of Us are Dead" than I did with Belly and her skeezy love triangle with a *pair of brothers* (ew) in "The Summer I Turned Pretty" trilogy. (But more on that later.)

I wasn't born when the very white Mickey Rooney was cast as the bucktoothed Japanese character, Mr. Yunioshi, in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Or when Swedish American actor Warner Oland played the Chinese detective Charlie Chan. Or when Russian American actor Yul Brynner played the King of Siam in *The King and I*. But I remember watching them later on TV with my family. We didn't have discussions about how inappropriate these shows/films were because in a weird way, we were just happy to see characters who were made to look a teensy bit like us on TV.

When "Kung Fu" premiered in 1972, the very white David Carradine was cast as a peaceful martial arts expert who fought bad guys every week. Bruce Lee had created the concept for the show with himself in mind to play the kickass (literally!) Shaolin priest, according to his widow, Linda Lee Cadwell. But depending on who you believe, he wasn't cast because the white men who ran the studios didn't think Americans — particularly white Americans — would accept a Chinese American man as a leading man in Hollywood. (Lee was born in Seattle.)

While you could make arguments that Lee may have been *too* Chinese to star in an American show, consider what Daniel Dae Kim recently said.



Kim has been acting for more than 30 years on hit shows like “Lost” and “Hawaii Five-O.” But he was never cast as the *lead* actor until this year’s spy thriller “Butterfly.” He is blessed with cheekbones that could slice cheese, is a superb actor, and — perhaps even more importantly to racists who don’t view people with accents as *real* ‘Mericans — Kim speaks flawless English with no discernable accent.

“We’re really not at a place where we can cast aside the idea that racial identity doesn’t matter.” —Dr. Jaki Yi

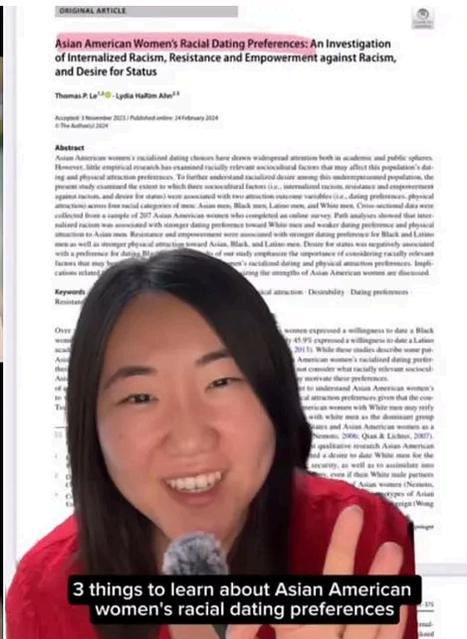
While Hollywood has a problem casting Asian actors in starring roles, it takes a *hehe* approach to *inclusivity* by casting white actors to play characters who are part Asian.

I give you, Emma Stone.



Emma Stone portraying multi racial Allison Ng in *Aloha* | Courtesy: Columbia Pictures

In 2015, Cameron Crowe cast her to play Allison Ng in his film *Aloha*. The character was meant to be half Swedish, and half Chinese Hawaiian. Emma is a superb actress, but even she can't act her way into an ethnicity that is foreign to her.



A few days ago, Dr. Jaki Yi's reel showed up on my Instagram feed, where she talked about the differences in the way Korean American identity is portrayed in the *To All*

the *Boys* films and “The Summer I Turned Pretty” trilogy.

In the reel, Dr. Yi said:

[Author] Jenny Han made Belly [half] Korean [in ‘The Summer I Turned Pretty’], and yet ignored her Asian American racial and ethnic identity. In psychological terms, we might say that Belly is in the conformity or pre-encounter stage of her racial identity development. This is when individuals seek self definition and self esteem from white people and feel no loyalty or obligation to people of color.

Whereas Lara Jean [in the To All The Boys films] could be argued to be in later stages of racial identity development, such as immersion or integrative status. Like Belly, Lara Jean’s mother is Korean, but has since passed away, but we still get these scenes of her trying to connect with her Korean heritage, engaging in cultural traditions, wearing hanbok, doing sebae [or deep bowing to elders on the first day of the Korean lunar new year]. And in the third movie, there’s a beautiful montage of them going to Seoul for the first time, which is a real canon event for Korean Americans.

Recently, I had the opportunity to talk with Dr. Yi — who is an assistant psychology professor at the University of Washington Bothell, specializing in Asian American psychology — in a Zoom video call. The following is our conversation, which has been edited for clarity and length.

Having the female lead characters in “The Summer I Turned Pretty” series and the *To All The Boys* films be Asian American is fantastic. But at the same time, there’s just something a little off about the characters that didn’t sit well with me. Some people have said that Asian Americans should just feel grateful to be represented at all, and I absolutely do not feel that way. I used to when I was a child, when there was almost no representation. And that’s actually a bit depressing to think about. In your generation, as you were saying, you saw really negative, stereotypical representation that really did skew in a more negative kind of light. And then as a millennial, my generation got *Crazy Rich Asians*, which felt like the first of anything where we got really big Asian and Asian American representation.

And Gen Z has K-dramas they’re growing up with, too.

Yes, and *KPop Demon Hunters*, too. It’s so beautiful to see how much representation has

expanded. And yet, I don't think we're even close to a place where we can be in colorblind casting.

Right. Some people say that since Belly was white in the book, it's OK that none of her love interests are Asian.

Every character is a human being and at the core, race shouldn't matter and people shouldn't see race anymore. That's often times the narrative of what U.S. society wants us to believe — that we're in a post racial kind of world. But we're clearly not. Racial disparities absolutely exist. A lot of my research is focused on ways that racism is perpetuated against Asian Americans, as well as *within* Asian Americans themselves. And so we're really not at a place where we can cast aside the idea that racial identity doesn't matter.



Peter (Noah Centineo) and Lara Jean (Lana Condor) | (Courtesy: Netflix)

Belly and Lara Jean are both played by Asian American actresses Lola Tung and Lana Condor, respectively. They're both so pretty and very talented. Both characters are supposed to be half Korean. Lola is Swedish and Chinese. Lana is Vietnamese. I have no issue with these actors playing Korean roles. But I kept wondering why they

had to be half Korean instead of just Korean. Did they have to be half so they could have white relatives that would make them more palatable to a white audience?

I felt that if you were going to make them multiracial, then why not explore that identity development? In TSITP, there were so many interesting dynamics that they could have tied to what it's like to be multiracial, and have an Asian mother who might have been raised in a different kind of cultural value system than Belly was. They could have explored that conflict. That's where the show fell short for me. She wasn't Korean in the books. They specifically made her half Korean in the show. But they didn't really explore her identity.

And Belly's mother, Laurel, (played by Jackie Chung) was presented as kind of an ugly duckling who had been the *pretty girl's* best friend, which I think is relatable for a lot of Asian American girls. Lauren is just as pretty, or even prettier in my eyes, than her bestie Susannah (Rachel Blanchard). I guess Laurel never had a summer where she was lauded for turning pretty.

It would've been interesting to explore, right? What's it like to be the one multiracial friend in a white friend group? This beach place, Cousins, seemed very white dominant and very rich — like old money. What was it like to be part of that space as a person of color? Maybe the discrimination that would likely occur in those spaces, or the microaggressions that would likely occur in those spaces as a person of color... that would have been meaningful to explore.



Laurel (played by Jackie Chung) and her BFF Susannah (Rachel Blanchard) |
Courtesy: Prime Video

I know it's primarily a show about a girl and a boy. Make that two boys. But I just found it strange that Belly is in the whitest place in the world and never is subjected to being called a *chink*, or being asked if her family eats dog meat. They referenced anti-Asian racism just once, I think, when Belly's brother, Steven, was working at the country club. He had to decide whether he was going to let a racial stereotype about Asians slide and keep his job, or call it out and get fired. And like most of us, he stayed quiet. Granted, he was still a kid who needed money for college.

It's a survival strategy. It seems so subtle, and yet it's death by 1,000 cuts. It's something that's a daily subtle reminder that you are different and you don't belong. There's a lot of research showing that the psychological toll that these racial microaggressions take on people of color — and then added on top of that, being multi-racial — and having this feeling of not belonging to any group. You're ostracized from people of color, but you're also not white enough. It's kind of like all those intersections coming into play.

Can you give an example of that?

Belly goes to Paris. When you go to Paris alone as an Asian woman, they're bound to be microaggressions, or questions about your cultural background. I was so curious what would happen to Belly in Paris. Would there be some experiences that would really shape her racial identity? But again, it just wasn't explored. And as a viewer, and as someone who was invested in Korean representation, I wanted to see that. But it's interesting to see that so many people didn't really care. I guess a lot of people didn't find that it was necessary. I've seen the argument, "Why can't we just have a story about a girl falling in love?"

When Jenny Han wrote these books, it was a different time and it wasn't easy for Asian American authors to get their stories published. I absolutely believe that she got, or would have gotten, pushback for making the main character ethnically Asian. But when her books were adapted for the movies and TV, it was a different era. I always thought it was strange that neither Lara Jean or Belly had a significant Asian love interest, even if he wasn't the one who would end up being her *happily ever after*. And I wrote about this previously in *Teen Vogue*, but one of the boys Belly liked in the book was part Asian, but in the series, they cast a non Asian actor for the part. You can't say no one today is interested in Asian male leads when the popularity of K-dramas and K-pop is right there to prove otherwise.

Right? Because as you were mentioning before, Asian men are often stereotyped and portrayed to be unattractive or desexualized, emasculated. We've seen improvement and growth on that front [but] those stereotypes still are rampant and kind of embedded in our society, versus the way that Asian women are often hypersexualized and seen as desirable.

Yeah, in one of the *To All the Boys* movies, it was gross that Lara Jean and her sister made her boyfriend, Peter, watch *Sixteen Candles* with them. They briefly address the inappropriateness of Long Duk Dong, but they gloss over that hideous character and fixate on the dreamy boy in high school (portrayed by Michael Schoeffling) being so hot — which he really was — that they have to watch this film.

Yeah, that was not good. This goes back to the research that shows that Asian men are still emasculated and not fitting into the western beauty standards. If Hollywood is so concerned about casting the most beautiful person, and beauty is shaped by our racialized world, then they're going to pick features that multi racial Asians tend to have. But multi racial people face pushback and that's a real problem, because they receive conflicting messages about who they belong to, when they really belong to both worlds [or more].



Lola Tung played Isabelle, who was cringely nicknamed Belly (ew) | Courtesy: Prime Video

What did you enjoy about Belly's storyline, especially in this final season?

I don't know how you felt about it, but she seemed so lost in life. She didn't really know her identity. She wasn't like the perfect person at all. She wasn't this exceptional character that we too often see with Asian characters. I actually loved that about her, that she was lost. But again, I wish that her identity in how she shows up in different spaces had been considered and addressed. She's a regular American teen, but given her multi racial Asian and white background, I wish that those cultural differences with her mom especially had been included more.

They threw a bone, where Belly or Steven referred to their grandmother as *halmoni* and told their guests to take off their shoes in the house. But that's really the only reference to her being Korean as well as American. They addressed it in the most superficial way, because if you want to get into it, do you know what else is a Korean thing? *Not* ricocheting between two brothers.

[Laughs]

Thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me. It probably doesn't sound like it, but I did like this third season of TSITP.

[Laughs] You're welcome! Thank you for this conversation.

** If I have any facts incorrect, please do reach out and I will fix them (and attribute it to you, unless you don't want to be mentioned). But if you simply disagree with what I've written, I can live with that and hope that you can, too. Cheers!*

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