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*Haunted*

Video

To be a racially marginalized figure in America is to be subject to abject horrors. I am Asian American: I know these horrors well. I see how these horrors have torn apart families with racist immigration laws. I see how the Yellow Peril and Model Minority Myth desecrate the image of my people. To grapple with these horrors on a daily basis is exhausting. Even more tiring is to reckon with these terrors while simultaneously fighting an internal battle. From the American side, we are told to forfeit our culture, our race, and assimilate into whiteness; while our Asian sides shame us for this assimilation in a country when we are given few other choices. This dichotomy of identity and racial tension fueled the creation of my piece *Haunted*, a narrative horror film focused on May Chen, a mixed-race Asian American haunted by her Asian identity while trying to find her place in white society. I find horror to be one of the most effective genres to convey the horrors I know sadly permeate many aspects of existing as an Asian American. I hoped to invoke the same feelings of fear, dread, panic associated with all the atrocities of existing in a white supremacist world. This film was a labor of love and an opportunity for me to strengthen my directing, editing, and writing skills. I wrote a script I thought embodied a facet of the horrors of Asian America; I used sound and video editing to create suspense, and filmed using angles and perspectives that I thought would be frightening. The color-grading being dull and cool-toned was intended to reflect the dread and lifelessness that May experiences, jaded by a racialized world. I hope this film uses the negative emotions evoked to drive the viewers into action. At my core, I believe a better world is possible. But to achieve that, we must act. And if my movie about race could utilize the emotions evoked by the horror of the film to create even a tiny bit more cognisance around race, my art will have fulfilled a great purpose.

# The Yellow Perils: Exploring Asian American Horror



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*Writer's Note: Asian America, and all of the negative experiences associated with it, is a ripe topic for conversation in the media. Horror, a medium that can be used to evoke similar feelings of fear and terror as tied to being a racial minority in a White Supremacist state, is an effective genre to not only convey the horrors of the Asian American experience, but also utilize fear to push the world into action.*

## **I. Introduction**

The Asian American experience is one characterized by many as a story of success. Aliens once seen as threats to the Western world turned into model minorities; the high-achieving, high-earning, quiet and respectful race. But there is not only a dark past for the treatment of Asians by America: it is also very present in our present day. There is an intrinsic horror associated with the idea of Asian America, the very term originating from a need to unite the pan-Asian diaspora in America to fight against the oppression Asian Americans experienced. With the horrors Asian America has and continues to face, Asian Americans have turned to art. And it is no surprise that one genre utilized by Asian Americans trying to reckon with and communicate these horrors has been that very genre: horror.

Asian American horror is a deeply powerful genre, defined as horror media created by Asian Americans with the intent to discuss, ruminate on, and express the horrors tied to Asian America that cannot be shaken. Books like *Severance* by Ling Ma and movies like *Umma* (2022) by Iris Shim utilize the genre of horror to and impart deeply impactful messages and emotions onto the audience. The power in this genre lies behind its ability to replicate the fear and horrors of being Asian American to a wider audience, create resonance with Asian Americans, and create a more racially cognisant world.

## II. The Horrors of Asian America

Asian American horror is tied to Asian America as a concept, separate from singular nationality and ethnic identities. Asian Americans were not always a self-racialized group: instead of being seen by one umbrella term, they often identified themselves by individual nationalities and ethnicities, such as Chinese, Cambodian, etc (Saito, 77) upon first mass immigration in the 1850s. Those from the Asian continent were designated as ‘orientals’ or “asiatic”; the possibility of their identity being even partially American was not considered. This was, until 1968, when Japanese American student Yuji Ichioka and Chinese American student Emma Gee started the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) at University of California Berkeley, coining the term ‘Asian American’. The AAPA was created out of a need for Asian liberation, nationally and worldwide, and joined forces with other organizations led by racial minorities. The plaque commemorating the AAPA at Berkeley described it as having “fought to repeal the McCarran Internal Security Act authorizing emergency detention and deportation of alleged “subversives”...strengthened the international Third World Liberation Movement through their active support of the Black Panther Party, the Occupation of Alcatraz by Native Americans and other “anti-imperialist” struggles worldwide.” (Berkeley Historical Plaque Project). The creation of the term ‘Asian American’ is rooted in the need for Asian liberation in a racially unjust country, and the collective term used to group together Asian diaspora members in America would not exist without historic oppression. The Asian American identity in itself is an act of defiance, and the awful conditions that called for that defiance make the identity one that is marker centered in the horrors of American racism.

Many significant moments that led to a need for pan-Asian solidarity and unity are moments of great injustice and oppression, specifically, a racial ‘othering’ and fear towards

‘aliens’. From the Chinese exclusion act and Japanese internment camps, to modern day anti-Asian hate crime surges post-COVID, the root cause of these issues was a difference from American that was a threat, a peril, a monstrosity. The leading perceptions of Asian Americans historically has been the ‘Yellow Peril’ and the ‘Model Minority Myth’. Yellow Peril stems from the perceived danger of Asian countries and peoples to the Western world and way of living. Asians, under the yellow peril, can be characterized as “apes, lesser men, primitives, children, madmen, and beings who possessed special powers” (Dower, 5). The West uses this fear of the East to justify racist and xenophobic policies. Intrinsic to the Yellow Peril is an element of the supernatural, the terror associated with the mythical “superpowers” Asians could have. One of the key players attributing to horror of the Asian American experience is rooted in the horrifying, fictitious chance of powers in the Asian American, proving that horror is innate to the identity of the Asian American in Western culture. Foreignness becomes a tool of the Western world to paint Asians as the most threatening figure possible. These preconceptions of foreignness or othering of the Asian American are then used to justify racist laws and regulations that keep Asians out and continually other them, creating an isolated Asian American experience fraught with fear and terror.

Not only does “foreignness” hurt Asian Americans with othering, but also utilizes the Model Minority Myth to paint Asian Americans as different, but able to succeed in spite of that. The concept of the “Model Minority” gained traction from an article written in 1966 comparing Japanese and Black Americans, setting Black Americans as the “lazier”, “weaker”, and/or “worse” of the two. As the original author of the article said, “by any criterion of good citizenship that we choose, the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including native-born white. They have established this remarkable record, moreover, by

their own almost totally unaided effort. Every attempt to hamper their progress resulted only in enhancing their determination to succeed” (Petersen, 180). The core of the Model Minority Myth is an inherent foreignness. Asians are not whites, that is definitely true in the eyes of America. Yet, they have been able to succeed like and even beyond whites. This alienation cements the separation from Asian Americans and true Americans, playing off of the yellow peril, and fueling more distrust and hatred of Asian American identity from the Western world. This not only adds, but becomes the basis of the horrors Asian Americans face.

The Yellow Peril is a unique racialization connected to foreign identity. As Natsu Taylor Saito said in her paper *“Functions of Foreignness in the Construction of Asian American Legal Identity”*, “by characterizing those of Asian descent as “foreigners,” dominant society is able to sleep freely from the model minority to the yellow peril label...historically enabl[ing] those of Asian descent to be used as cheap labor and as a mask to hide real issues of discrimination against Asian Americans and other minorities. Presently “foreignness” serves to reinforce racial hierarchy in the US” (Saito, 71). The Yellow Peril concept is rooted in fear of the Asian American, and alongside the Model Minority Myth, is thrown back to Asian Americans in attempts to dehumanize, alienate, and exploit Asian Americans while imposing racial oppression upon other racial minorities in America. The Model Minority myth subjects Asian Americans to becoming tools of white supremacy, drones created to keep up anti-Black sentiment in America. Realization of this role and the inability to break free from it is a horror within itself. These two perceptions are continually working in tandem with one another to keep up the horrors of Asian America through depictions of them as threats and dangers, while simultaneously being able to hide under the covert disguise of complimentary perceptions of the Model Minority Myth.

### III. (Postmodern) Horror and Culture:

Shortly after the Walter–McCarran Act outlawed Asian-exclusionist immigration laws (1952) and the concept of the model minority came to light (1966), the postmodern period of film began, according to Isabel Pinedo. The birth of postmodern horror aligning with major Asian American “integration” into American society is no coincidence, as it marks a large cultural shift in our country, not only for Asian Americans, but for all minorities as the Civil and LGBTQ+ Rights movements gained traction. Postmodern work, unlike modern work which values logic, order, and reason, rejects all semblance or existence of a finite truth, represents an embrace of a lack of stability and reason, narratively and in technique. Films such as *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) that subvert and blend genres, chronological time, and symbols mark the postmodern age of film.

In Pinedo’s work “*Recreational Terror: Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film*”, she claims postmodern horror came to fruition after a multitude of stressors on collective culture, many of which relate to Asian (American) existence, such as the Hiroshima bombing and the Vietnam War (Pinedo, 18). In Pinedo’s own words, “The boundaries between living and dead, normal and abnormal, human and alien, and good and evil are blurred and sometimes indistinguishable. And, in contrast to the classical horror film, the postmodern film locates the horror in the contemporary everyday world” (Pinedo, 20). Because the postmodern horror film sets the horror in our current here-and-now, it allows for more exploration of the horrors already intrinsic to our world. Postmodern horror as a genre can serve as a vehicle to stress the issues, lack of logic, and the blurred lines of our modern day culture. The fear-inducing lack of narrative closure mirrors the lack of closure minorities and victims of systemic oppression face to this day, emulating the fear many minorities face, especially in America.

#### **IV. Asian American Horror as a Genre:**

[Postmodern] horror is a lucrative genre for racially cognisant media, utilizing the fear created by the media to parallel fear and horror built into racial minority existence. Asian American created horror media can often be lumped in with Asian horror media, but like how Asian American identity is separate from Asian identity or singular diaspora identity, Asian American horror often exists for different purposes than Asian horror; it can highlight cultural horror and phenomena associated with being a racial minority, a detail often not expressed by Asian horror, whose filmmakers, being the racial majority, have often not experienced the horrors of racial oppression in the same ways Asian Americans have. The genre of racial horror can explore ideas of Asian America, and can utilize horror to increase resonance with the Asian American experience. Feelings of fear, terror, and other negative emotions mirror the Asian American experience's struggles, bringing attention to the abject horrors in the experiences of Asian Americans.

#### **V. Ling Ma's *Severance*:**

One example of Asian American made horror with the intent of expressing racial themes is *Severance* by Ling Ma, a 2018 novel about a Chinese virus that shuts down the world and turns people into functional zombies; and Candace, a Chinese American corporate office worker, must navigate this new world. *Severance* is a novel that takes into account American corporate identity with racial identity, creating a conversation about the intersection of capitalism and race.

Asian Americans, praised for their work ethic and ability to generate wealth, become a monolith under the model of capitalism that values nothing more than one's ability to exponentially accumulate capital. They become worker bees, unimportant unless useful to the



system, and that use is often simply dedication to capitalism (generated by war and communist unrest in home countries). Because of experiences in homeland Asian countries with dangerous, genocidal, and harmful regimes labeled as communist, there is a level of anti-Communist sentiment found in Asian American communities, specifically recent Asian immigrants who fled communist regimes that targeted their wealth and capital (EIN Presswire). This anti-communist sentiment allows for pro-capitalism, happy, smiling Asian Americans to work tirelessly for the American capitalist system, especially considering how many Chinese Americans were targets of the American government's anti-communist propaganda efforts. Betty Lee Sung recounts her work for the United States' production of this propaganda in Ellen D. Wu's "*America's Chinese*": *Anti-Communism, Citizenship, and Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War*". Wu says that "with the "loss" of China to Mao Tse-tung in 1949, the State Department turned its attention to ethnic Chinese...*Chinese Activities* [radio show] highlighted the accomplishments of individual Chinese Americans, drawing attention to racial minorities' prospects for achievement in the United States as well as affirming their membership in the nation" (Wu, 397-398). When taken into account how the Model Minority image was pushed on Asian Americans as hardworking and high-earning, alongside the propaganda fed to these communities rewarding their dedication to American capitalism, the identity of the Asian American becomes reduced to what they bring to the economy.

Ling Ma explores this dynamic of capitalism's destruction of identity, specifically in Asian Americans and their families. On Candace's mother's deathbed, her dementia-ridden mother announces to her "[your father] wanted a better life for you, and it is only possible in America. You are the only child. You must do better or just as well as him...make use of yourself, she finally said. No matter what, we just want you to be of use" (Ma, 190). Even in her

last moments when she is unable to function properly, the only thoughts on Candace's mother's mind, the thoughts embedded into her, are of her daughter being successful. This success is measured by her mother in capitalist terms, being useful and making money, as this same sentiment was said earlier by her father in her childhood, "how do you think we send money back to your family?...Candace can really make something of herself" (Ma, 43). These two ideas of success and monetary gain become intrinsically tied in Candace's family's minds, and their connection to their homeland is what fuels this. Money, success, and being Chinese (which in American culture, turns into being Asian), Americans all become one.

When money, capital, and all the systems fall down in Candace's world, she faces true zombies and drones; the sickness pervading their world turns people into creatures of habit, with no consciousness and only the ability to repeat daily routines mindlessly. However, Candace, in many ways, was like this even before the sickness. Early in her life, before her corporate job, she was unemployed, and since not making any money, directionless and useless. She would "wander through lower Manhattan, wearing my mother's eighties Contempo Casuals dresses, looking to get picked up by anyone, whomever" (Ma, 34). It didn't matter to her what happened in her life, because she self admittedly had no purpose. When the sickness came, she returned to a lawless life and must reckon with the meaningless of her identity. Candace's story is one of the horrors of not only being Asian American, but also the horrors of existing under capitalism, especially as a racial minority subjected to the Model Minority Myth. When capitalism stripped her identity, it also stripped her of direction and a conscious mind, turning her into not just a character in a terrifying world, but also, the subject of horror.

## VI. Iris Shim's *Umma* (2022):

*Umma* (2022) is a ghost story about a Korean American woman haunted by her mother. Like *Severance*, it explores familial relationships in Asian American culture, but with a much stronger focus on ideas of being “haunted” by them. As Kathleen Brogan says in her paper “*American Stories of Cultural Haunting: Tales of Heirs and Ethnographers*”, ghosts embody “the need to identify and revise the cultural past...They are also extraordinarily useful literary metaphors in the larger process of ethnic invention and revision” (Brogan, 163). Here, Brogan is referring to usages of ghosts in African American media, but there is an application of Black ghost story frameworks to Asian American experiences. Despite the inherent and widespread differences and nuances between Asian and Black American experiences, both communities are haunted by America’s racist past and present.

When in *Umma* (2022), Amanda is confronted with the ashes of her abusive, dead mother, she remembers her abusive childhood and how she fled not only her mother, but her entire culture as a result. When Western concepts of the Model Minority demand excellence from Asian Americans, overbearing, strict, and abusive parenting becomes normalized within our communities (Lau, 1262). As said in “*Parent-to-Child Aggression Among Asian American Parents: Culture, Context, and Vulnerability*” by Anna Lau, “Families are subject to a variety of stressors in adjusting to the environmental demands of immigration itself” (Lau, 1262), the stressors on Asian American families include not only racial stressors, but stress of immigration itself. When the Model Minority Myth and unique racial and immigration stressors are combined with isolation from other American communities created by Yellow Peril mentality, Asian American children can feel the need to support their parents, sometimes immigrants with rudimentary English skills, economically and mentally, despite abuse.

Stories like *Umma* (2022) are thus created, giving light to Asian Americans that are ‘haunted’ by their parents, symbols of a tormented world they exist in. Despite Amanda’s separation from her mother, she still feels the responsibility and guilt for ‘abandoning’ her, seen metaphorically through the haunting and possession of Amanda by her mother’s ashes. *Umma* (2022) represents not only the dark history of Asian Americans, but interpersonal implications of the history’s horrors, specifically as it manifests in mother/daughter relationships. The treatment of Asian Americans directly leads to the destruction of and stress on the Asian American familial structure.

## **VII. Conclusion:**

Horror media like *Severance* and *Umma* become outlets for Asian American expression of pain and fear, emotions created by white supremacy in America. Asian American horror, although undervalued as a genre, can bring light to many nuances in the Asian American experience that often go unnoticed and purposefully ignored. *Severance* plays on the intersection of Asian America and capitalism- *Umma* (2022) with interpersonal abuse. Horror media created around the oppression and struggles Asian Americans face can invoke the feelings and experiences undergone by Asian Americans, but the fear induced can be fueled into action and drive cognisance around racial oppression and all of its intersections. This media not only exists as entertainment, but a political tool of radicalization as well. In a world stricken by rampant racial inequality and systemic oppression, we need media like Asian American horror to unrelentingly remind us of the atrocities in our world, and that we cannot stop fighting them.

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