(Mis)representations of Asian Americans in Storybird: A Bird's Eye View

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Abstract

This paper explores the misrepresentation of Asian Americans in Storybird, an online platform where users publish creative writing. Through a qualitative analysis of five stories featuring Asian characters, the study identifies recurring stereotypes, such as cultural conservatism, physical biases, and societal pressures. These misrepresentations often reduce complex identities into cultural caricatures, perpetuating misleading perceptions of Asian Americans. By shedding light on these biases, the paper advocates for increased cultural sensitivity and the promotion of more nuanced portrayals. Recommendations include engaging Asian American creators and promoting media literacy among young writers to challenge existing stereotypes and foster more inclusive content.

Keywords: Asian Americans, Storybird, biases, influencing factor

1. Introduction

The question explored in this research is "How has the portrayal of the Asian American community in Storybird publications evolved and how accurately do these publications depict Asian American realities." It addresses misrepresentation (both willful and innocent) within the online media source Storybird. The research can shed light on trends, biases, and the evolution of said misrepresentation. Fostering accurate and inclusive media portrayal promotes cultural awareness and it challenges stereotypes that may be perpetuated in writing. As of 2022, there are roughly 19 million Asian immigrants in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2024). In 2023, California had roughly 6 million Asian Americans, which makes up about 15% of California's population (Milan & Labh, 2023).

This research is timely for a variety of reasons: First, it systematically addresses misrepresentation (willful & innocent portrayals) within media sources like Storybird. Beyond their focus on the Asian experience, the analyses in the paper advance understanding of inclusive media portrayals, cultural awareness, and stereotypes that are perpetuated in writing. Second, this is a time when many youth struggle with identity issues. At San Mateo High School, for instance, all juniors must read *Joy Luck Club* — a book from different mothers' and daughters' points of view about different struggles they deal with and everyday activities they encounter. The school also teaches different

cultural issues raised in history classes. Both aim to promote cultural literacy and combat prejudice. The focus of my study would promote racial understanding. In addition, racial equity and social justice (e.g., Black Lives Matter & Free Palestine) highlight the need for correct media representation in shaping public discourse. Increasing the diversity of audience members and contributors on platforms like Storybird grows expectations for culturally relevant and authentic content.

As an Asian-American, I bring a uniquely forceful voice to these analyses. I was born in California with 1st generation Asian parents born in China, grew up there, and immigrated to the United States after graduating college. For my childhood, I lived in a mostly white neighborhood and went to a mostly white elementary and middle school. When I entered high school, there were more people of color, and I learned more about different cultures and social classes from my friends and peers. I also connected with other Asian Americans at my church who were around the same age as me; their parents were also 1st generation immigrants from China. I enjoy creative writing in my free time and one aspect of my writing is the difficulties with my parents and having different cultures and views on the world.

2. Literature Review

As I researched and read about existing articles, I found some that analyzed misrepresentations of Asians. One paper titled *Desperately Seeking Asia: A Survey of Theatre History Textbooks* by Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei concludes that although several current and some outdated textbooks incorporate Asian theater, the "Eurocentric bias" continues to thrive in American academics. However recent attempts to include Asian materials are sometimes "misinformed or misguided," resulting in the continuing marginalization of Asian and other non-Western materials (Sorgenfrei, 1997).

Another journal article was similar to the paper above titled *A Forgotten Minority? A Content Analysis of Asian Pacific Americans in Introductory American Government Textbooks* written by Okiyoshi Takeda. The article examines how Asian Pacific Americans faced a unique history of discrimination and stereotyping, and it concludes that textbooks don't fully cover their history and contributions to US politics (Takeda, 2015). To change the lack of coverage, the article

constructs recommendations, including the option to invite scholars on Asian-Pacific American politics to serve as text reviewers (Takeda, 2015).

Tiffany Besana, Dalal Katsiaficas, and Aerika Brittian Loyd's article *Asian American Media Representation: A Film Analysis and Implications for Identity Development* explores how portrayals of Asian Americans in U.S. films still reinforce, rather than resist, stereotypes. For instance, characters are often depicted as tech-savvy sidekicks or hyper-academic individuals, limiting their roles to one-dimensional archetypes. These misrepresentations persist in well-known films, where Asian characters are portrayed through reductive, stereotype-driven lenses. Besana and her colleagues discuss the broader implications of such portrayals for identity development, particularly how they can shape Asian Americans' self-perception and societal expectations (Besana et al., 2019). They conclude by offering recommendations for future research and strategies to address these harmful depictions (Besana et al., 2019).

Chyng Sun, Rachael Liberman, and others published an article titled *Shifting Receptions: Asian American Stereotypes and the Exploration of Comprehensive Media Literacy* talking about how the study found that while college students across racial groups criticized media representations of Asian Americans, they accepted the media's profit-driven motives, which perpetuate stereotypes. The research suggests that despite the availability of alternative images on social media, only Asian Americans seek them out, highlighting the need for a comprehensive media literacy approach that addresses both corporate influences and alternative media systems (Sun et al., 2015).

Leaning more toward the literary aspect, *Editors' Introduction: Critical Perspectives on Asian American Children's Literature* by Dolores de Manuel and Rocío G. Davis highlights the marginalization and erasure of early Asian American writers, such as Sui Sin Far and Dhan Gopal Mukerji, despite their contributions over a century ago. It emphasizes that Asian American children's literature should be seen as a complex, nuanced effort to assert visibility and engage with cultural marginalization, challenging the predominantly monocultural landscape of American literature (Manuel & Davis, 2006).

Some common themes between those articles and papers are the marginalization of Asian Americans, the perpetuation of stereotypes, and misrepresentation. Stereotyping — an unfair and untrue belief that many people have about others with a particular characteristic (Merriam-Webster) — may lead to misrepresentation of people's races, beliefs, and values if they're assumed and never addressed (Pillati, 2021). A few articles and journals highlight the importance of increasing visibility and ensuring accurate representation of Asians and Asian Americans.

While the other journal articles and papers mention stereotypes of Asian Americans, they either look in textbooks or the media. I touch upon Storybird, where anyone can create an account and publish their writing, and how the website is less commonly known than what the papers cover above. I also categorize the different stereotypes and see which one is the most prevalent. According to the Storybird website, they have more than 9 million users in more than 100 countries. So why do misrepresentations still occur on a platform with such diverse writers?

3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling

Before initiating my search on Storybird, I designed a systematic approach to identify and categorize bias in Asian American representation. This method allowed for a structured examination of both anticipated and unanticipated biases. The process involved the following steps:

1) **Defining Bias Categories:** I first categorized biases into three broad areas:

   • **Occupational Stereotyping:** I noted how Asian Americans are often limited to roles such as doctors, lawyers, or STEM professionals. This focus on occupational bias provided insights into how societal roles are shaped by media depictions.

   • **Derogatory Language & Cultural Stereotypes:** Offensive language or depictions, such as mockery of Asian culture, including references to eating animals or links to COVID-19, were identified as harmful representations.

   • **"Model Minority" Myth:** This category looked for the portrayal of Asians as a homogenous group, emphasizing academic success or compliance while downplaying the diversity within the Asian American experience. By actively searching for content that enforced the model minority stereotype, I could highlight narratives that ignored intra-group diversity and reinforced the myth that Asian Americans do not face significant discrimination.

2) **Search Strategy on Storybird:** Using the Storybird platform, I employed a keyword-based search method. I chose culturally significant keywords, such as "Asian," "India," and "Japan," to explore stories and artworks that might contain cultural references or biases. This approach ensured randomness and variety in the stories I selected.

   • For **longform stories**, I selected one based on the title and cover from each search to minimize personal bias in selection.

   • For **artwork-based searches**, I sought longform stories that utilized **artwork** tagged with "Asian." This visual link helped uncover potential biases in both text and imagery.

3) **Story Selection and Analysis:** The five stories I selected — *The One and Only*, *Asian*, *Serina L Chinese-American*, *Indian Monsoon*, and *Japanese* — were reviewed through the lens of the bias categories I had established. As I analyzed each story, I uncovered not only the biases I had anticipated but also unexpected ones, such as the lack of nuanced cultural representation and the tendency to portray Asian characters in reductive ways.

4) **Debriefing with Friends:** Furthermore, I debriefed with a group of peers who offered diverse perspectives on my findings. These discussions provided valuable reflections on my methodology, adding an extra layer of validation to the biases I identified. By engaging others in this process, I ensured that my conclusions were informed by a broader range of perceptions, not just my own.

This approach helped ensure that my findings were both comprehensive and reflective of the range of potential biases in Storybird's stories, while incorporating external viewpoints to refine and validate my analysis.

3.2 Summary of Stories

The Only and Only by PantherLover180 is about a female Asian character named Li Chang who is forced to marry a man by her strict mother. Her mother tells her how she'll be happy when Li Chang marries, and Li Chang just wants to respect her.

Asian by Iverla is about a girl named Dorian who lives in Europe and attends a European school. She gets mocked a lot by her classmates and left out because of her race. When a white guy from Asia is new at her school, things change.

Serina L Chinese-American by Hidden_Dreams is about a girl named Serina L who moved to the United States when she was young and has trouble fitting in with her classmates because of her race and how she acts because of her culture.

Indian Monsoon by flholland1 is about a girl named Ava-May who visits India for 4 months because her father needs to go to work. However, having grown up in America, she is unused to the culture and tries to adapt.

Japanese by kawaiigirl2006 is about a girl named Shea who was born in the US but has Japanese roots. When the government issues a rule saying that everyone with Japanese heritage is evacuated, Shea's friend Rebecca tries to help.

4. Results

Table 1. Qualitative Review of Stereotypes in Storybird

Entry #	Chapter	Page	Paragraph	Offending Text	Type of Bias	Bias Category	Why the Bias is Problematic
The Only and Only by PantherLover180 (no focus country)							
1	1	1	6	"Honor of her family name."	model minority Cultural conservatism	cultural	setting expectations that Asians must follow their families over what they think for themselves
2	1	1	11	"She pushed for Li to be an obedient woman."	model minority Cultural conservatism	cultural	not having any own opinions & just following someone's commands
3	1	1	12	"To bring your family honor, you must have respect and you must know your place as a woman."	model minority	cultural/social	demeaning MC as a puppet, only to please others to make family proud, pressure
4	1	1	15	"As Li was told, she would never talk back to people, men in particular, to ensure her mother's happiness; even if she disagreed with the idea."	model minority	cultural/social	falling under that pressure & never speaking up for herself
Asian by Iverla (no focus country)							
5	1	1	1	"When being Asian, you have limited options to decide what to do with your world, well that's what I think	?	social	society dictates that Asians don't have the same opportunities as other ppl

				anyways."			
6	1	1	5	"Ignoring the chants of my so called nickname Nerd Girl."	derogatory names	social	setting expectation/reality that Asians only focuses on studying
7	1	1	8	"Have fun living in this school where you'll feel like living as a ghost while all the English people shine like the gods."	sidekick/side character	social	being compared with the majority race group & feeling less important
Serina L Chinese-American by Hidden_Dreams (focus country: China)							
8	1	1	2	"Everyone laughed at my Qipao and they mocked my little knowledge of English."	offensive language	cultural	making fun of culture & being new
9	2	2	1	"No wonder she has such small eyes."	offensive language/reference to stereotypical physical features	physical	associating a place with certain looks, ignoring diversity even in a community
India Monsoon by flholland1 (focus country: India)							
10	1	1	1	"I knew a bit about India that it is hot there are jungles and elephants that's all."	offensive language	cultural	making fun of culture & stereotyping by simplifying the country
11	1	1	1	"All Indians looked the same a dark complexion and sairis or raggish clothes on."	offensive language	cultural	ignoring diversity between Indians & generalizing them
Japanese. by kawaiigirl2006 (focus country: Japan)							
12	2	2	1	"All and any with Japanese origins will be evacuated."	offensive language	cultural/ec onomic	generalizing people of Japanese heritage even tho born in America is considered American citizen

The table presents a qualitative review of stereotypes found in Storybird across different books, focusing on physical, cultural, social, and economic biases. The identified biases are primarily cultural and social, reflecting both offensive language and reductive portrayals of Asian characters.

1) **Cultural Bias**: Entries from *The One and*

Only, *Serina L Chinese-American*, *Indian Monsoon*, and *Japanese* demonstrate recurring cultural stereotypes. In *The One and Only*, phrases like "honor of her family name" and "obedient woman" perpetuate the model minority stereotype, suggesting that Asian women are expected to be submissive and prioritize family honor over individual desires. These portrayals reflect cultural conservatism, where characters, especially women, are depicted as lacking agency and being pressured to conform to societal or familial expectations. The book *Serina L Chinese-American* includes comments such as "Everyone laughed at my Qipao" and "mocked my little knowledge of English," which mock Asian culture and highlight the alienation of new immigrants. Similarly, *Indian Monsoon* simplifies Indian culture, associating the country only with jungles, elephants, and stereotypical depictions of clothing, thereby ignoring the rich diversity within the culture.

2) **Physical Bias**: Only one entry, in *Serina L Chinese-American*, touches on physical bias, specifically referencing stereotypical physical traits such as "small eyes."

3) **Social Bias**: Social bias is prevalent in *The One and Only* and *Asian*. In *The One and Only*, statements like "never talk back to people, men in particular" suggest that the main character feels pressured into silence and compliance, reinforcing stereotypes of Asian women as passive. In *Asian*, derogatory comments like "Nerd Girl" and the idea of being treated as a "ghost" compared to English students reflect societal biases that Asians are academically driven but socially insignificant.

4) **Economic Bias**: Only *Japanese* reflects economic bias, particularly with the line "All and any with Japanese origins will be evacuated," referencing the generalization of Japanese heritage during World War II. This portrays Japanese Americans as outsiders, disregarding their citizenship and contributions to society.

5. Discussion

When I asked my Asian-American friend (who introduced me to Storybird) about stereotypes associated with Asians, she identified common themes such as being nerdy, having strict parents, and getting good grades. Similarly, my male friend, born in China and moved to the U.S., mentioned nerdy Asians with high family expectations and a focus on STEM fields. These observations align with the stereotypes reflected in Storybird, where characters are often reduced to cultural and social caricatures.

While some stereotypes in Storybird touch on "bookish" traits, most focus on mocking Asian culture. These cultural stereotypes overshadow individual character traits, reducing them to exaggerated mannerisms or customs. This not only flattens the characters' complexity but also reinforces narrow and misleading views of Asian culture, fostering misunderstanding.

For example, *The One and Only* repeatedly frames Asian characters as submissive, particularly women, who are depicted as bound to their family's honor and expected to obey without question. In *Serina L Chinese-American*, the mocking of traditional clothing like the Qipao and the protagonist's limited English ability illustrate how Asian cultural practices and immigrant experiences are trivialized.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides insights into the different stereotypes of Asian Americans in Storybird, there are limitations to consider. First, the analysis was based on just five stories, which may not represent the extensive range of works available on the platform. This small sample size could limit the generalizability of the findings and fail to capture the full spectrum of biases present. The choice of stories relied on keywords like "Asian," "India," and "Japan," which may have excluded other relevant works featuring more nuanced representations of Asian Americans. This could skew the results towards more overt examples of bias. This study primarily focused on East and South Asian representations. It did not explore portrayals of other Asian subgroups, such as Southeast Asians or Pacific Islanders, which may present different stereotypes.

Future studies can include a larger analysis and a more diverse selection of Storybird stories. By including works from various genres and cultural backgrounds, researchers could gain a comprehensive understanding of Asian American representations on the platform. Additionally, a comparative analysis of portrayals of different minority groups could reveal whether Asian Americans face unique

misrepresentations or if similar trends exist across other marginalized communities, offering a broader perspective on Storybird's inclusivity.

Investigating how portrayals of Asian Americans have evolved over time could also shed light on whether the platform's content is becoming more inclusive and culturally aware. A longitudinal approach could reveal shifts in societal attitudes and the effectiveness of advocacy efforts for better representation.

5.2 Practical Implications

Platforms like Storybird should engage with Asian American writers, artists, and community members to co-create content. Collaborations can help ensure that stories reflect genuine cultural practices and nuances, thereby minimizing the risk of perpetuating stereotypes. Moreover, workshops or training sessions for Storybird users, particularly young writers, can raise awareness about the impact of stereotypes and the importance of cultural sensitivity in storytelling. These sessions can provide guidance on avoiding reductive portrayals and encourage a more thoughtful approach to character development.

Encouraging users, particularly young readers and writers, to provide feedback on their experiences with the content on Storybird can be invaluable. Understanding their perspectives can help identify areas for improvement and guide the creation of stories that resonate more authentically with diverse audiences.

6. Conclusion

The stereotypes found in Storybird stories often persist because they are deeply embedded in societal perceptions, particularly around culture. Rather than offering nuanced depictions, these stories tend to simplify and generalize Asian identities, focusing on cultural traits rather than individual complexity. The recurring themes of submissiveness, family pressure, and academic obsession reflect broader cultural stereotypes of Asians in general, rather than the specific experiences of Asian Americans.

These misrepresentations likely arise from a lack of understanding or familiarity with the diversity within Asian cultures. As these biases are culturally ingrained, they surface in creative works that rely on generalizations rather than authentic portrayals. Addressing this issue requires platforms like Storybird to actively encourage culturally sensitive storytelling,

fostering more accurate and inclusive depictions of Asian American identities.

While the study is based on a small selection of stories, it underscores the importance of expanding research to capture a wider range of perspectives and experiences. Platforms like Storybird have the potential to shape perceptions, especially among young audiences, making it crucial to address these portrayals thoughtfully.

To promote authentic representation, Storybird could benefit from collaborations with Asian American creators and provide resources that encourage culturally sensitive storytelling. By doing so, it can help foster more diverse, inclusive narratives that reflect the complexity of Asian American experiences.

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