

## Welcome to Chinatown: A Musical Analysis of the Lack of Asian Representation in Theater

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### Abstract:

Asian American representation in theater has been exceedingly low in the past number of years, even with the overall rise of minority representation. Musicals that depict the experiences of minority groups have also been growing in popularity, including ones that depict the specific experience of Asian and Asian American individuals and communities. Still, however, the proportion of Asian American representation across performance spaces is lacking. With this research project, I hope to further understand the reasons for the low rates of Asian American performers and compose my own original musical work, with the intention of providing increased representation and a unique perspective of Asian Americans.

## Introduction

Minority representation in musical theater has visibly increased over the last few decades. With shows prominently representing various minority groups, based on race, gender, religion, or sexual identity, the realm of musical theater has seen major growth in equality. As of 2016, 35% of all roles on New York city stages (36% of roles on Broadway) were filled by minority actors. African American and Latinx performers saw a 4-6% increase in landing these roles, jumping from 17% to 23% and 3% to 7%, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Despite the increase in works that represent the broad spectrum of minority groups worldwide, one can still struggle to find roles that display and highlight the performance of Asians or Asian-Americans, with Asian American performers witnessing a decline in hiring by 5%, dropping to about 4% of roles across New York city stages.<sup>2</sup> With this research, I hope to help further understand the impetus behind why Asians/Asian-Americans are underrepresented in theater, as well as contribute my own musical work that will provide further representation of Asians and Asian-Americans.

## Related Work and Motivation

The work of Lin-Manuel Miranda is the prime motivation behind this research project. His shows *In The Heights* and *Hamilton* both feature casts that are made up primarily of people of color. *In the Heights* was based on Miranda's own personal experience, with him writing about the community within which he was raised.<sup>3</sup> His work pushed the boundaries of what theater could represent and display; he helped to create a significant market for the stories of

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<sup>1</sup> Pun Bandhu and Julienne H. Kim. "Ethnic Representation on New York City Stages." *The Asian American Performance Coalition*, January 2018. [http://www.aapacnyc.org/uploads/1/1/9/4/11949532/aapac\\_2015-2016\\_10year\\_report.pdf](http://www.aapacnyc.org/uploads/1/1/9/4/11949532/aapac_2015-2016_10year_report.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Bandhu, "Ethnic Representation."

<sup>3</sup> "Great Performances: In the Heights – Chasing Broadway Dreams," PBS, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://youtu.be/GUgcOVFhfXM>.

underrepresented communities. He also began writing *In the Heights* when he was a sophomore in college. I would like to follow this path and compose my own musical work. As a part of my music major, I am pursuing a contemporary composition concentration. I also have a strong desire to encapsulate my unique experience as an Asian American. Musical theater is such a unique medium with which to tell stories, and it allows me to incorporate these two aspects of myself into a project like this.

Furthermore, there are already a fantastic collection of Asian/Asian-American work that I would like to contribute to and draw from. Tony-award winning playwright David Henry Hwang, in conjunction with Jeanine Tesori, recently premiered an adaptation of *Soft Power*, which they call a “Play with a Musical”, which is a powerful work that is partially autobiographical in nature, features an almost full Asian-American cast, and depicts the US from an Asian perspective. Hwang has also published many works over the last few decades including *M. Butterfly*, *Yellow Face*, and *Flower Drum Song*, all of which serve as strong Asian representation. However, a large portion of the motivation behind my project is to build the collection of appropriate Asian representation. Some other works, like *Miss Saigon*, for instance, took hold as a popular Asian musical, but much conflict has arisen with its popularity, regarding its blatant white saviorism, historic racism and stereotyping.<sup>4</sup> I would like to depart from this ideal and create something that tells a more representative and holistic story of the Asian American experience.

A number of scholarly works have been written about Asian representation in theater that also have influenced my preliminary research. Two articles in particular were written by Arnab

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy Yu, “What’s Wrong with Miss Saigon?” University of Wisconsin – Madison, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://asianamerican.wisc.edu/2019/03/27/whats-wrong-with-miss-saigon/>.

Banerji, an LMU faculty member. One analyzes how Hwang's *Soft Power* is an adaptation of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I* that offers a different portrayal of twenty-first century politics and critiques the contemporary attitudes of Asian Americans.<sup>5</sup> The other investigates the resilience of Japanese American communities in Los Angeles, incorporating the messages of *Allegiance*, another popular Asian musical about Japanese internment during World War II.<sup>6</sup> There are many other articles and books that also seek to understand the lack of Asian representation in theater that I can pull from to bolster my composition. Many of these works would help shape the direction of my writing and allow me to more appropriately represent the people displayed in the musical.

## **Methodology**

This project intends to understand the lack of Asian representation in musical theater and compose a work of musical theater that captures a portion of the Asian-American experience. It will begin by viewing and reading existing works of musical theater that represent the experiences of Asian and Asian American communities. The purpose of this will be to construct a knowledge base from which to build a new work with a unique perspective of the Asian-American experience. This new musical theater work would have multiple objectives: to offer more representation for Asian Americans in theater and illuminate the complexities of music composition, both in general and for musical theater, specifically.

I would begin this project by meeting with my research mentor and doing individual research on the currently existing musical theater works that feature Asians and Asian-

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<sup>5</sup> Arnab Banerji, "Soft Power: Hwang and Tesori's reappropriation of *The King and I* in representing twenty-first century diplomacy and the dystopic reality of contemporary America," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 13, no. 3 (2019): 269-282.

<sup>6</sup> Arnab Banerji, "From Heart Mountain, Wyoming, to the Heart of Little Tokyo," *Boom California*, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://boomcalifornia.com/2019/02/18/from-heart-mountain-wyoming-to-the-heart-of-little-tokyo/>.

Americans. This would involve reading the original scripts, adapted books, and articles analyzing the nature of the Asian representation within the realm of musical theater. Listening to the soundtracks of relevant musicals would also be a crucial part of the initial research, as it helps construct a more complete experience of each work. I would be able to see what previous playwrights have addressed to work as both a base to build my own story on and as inspiration for certain themes. For example, *Soft Power* references the distinction between Eastern and Western cultural traditions and *Allegiance* addresses historical implications of racism. From these two works, I could include characters across multiple generations of Asian-Americans or themes like intersectionality, racism, family dynamics, etc.

Following the stage of individual research, I will conduct remote interviews with Asian-American peers and scholars. These interviews would be primarily function as character research, meant to understand a more holistic view of the Asian-American experience. This way, the related scenes and songs written into the musical would be a more accurate representation of said experience. Interviews would be conducted, if possible, in person, but remotely, if necessary, either via direct messaging or conference calls. For my interviews with professionals in the field, I would primarily ask about their experiences with the lack of representation in theater and how they managed to find their paths in the world. For my interviews with my peers, I would ask about how their status as Asian-American individuals, and as first-/second-generation immigrants, affects their day-to-day experiences. The qualitative data I receive from the interviews would then be molded into specific themes. These themes would then provide a framework for the scenes that comprise my overall narrative.

My ultimate goal would be to create an ethno-drama, or an ethnography presented through a dramatic medium, that comprises the themes derived from my interviews and presents

a grander narrative about the experiences of a younger generation of Asian-Americans. The writing and composing phase of this project would last from the conclusion of the research stage until the end of the entire research program, and would be done in conjunction with my research mentor and a musical composition professor to create work of the highest quality I am able to create.

### **Expected Results**

The deliverables that can be expected from this research project would include a number of scenes and songs that would belong to my original musical based on the experience of Asian-Americans. These works would be arranged into a general script, outlining as much of the plot as possible. Furthermore, I would also attempt to record and mix as many demo tracks of the songs that I compose for this project in order to have a more established overall work. These tracks would accompany the development of the script and both the demo tracks and the rough script would also be presentable.

**Budget**

\$50 - Funds to allow access to various source materials

\$400 - Necessary recording equipment for creating demo tracks without access to LMU facilities

\$250 – Audio compilation/production software for preparing demo tracks

\$550 – Hardware upgrade for processing demo tracks\*

\$150 - Interviewee compensation

Total - \$1400

\*Because this research must be done remotely, I unfortunately have to ask for a larger grant than I am comfortable with, as I do not have the technological means to attempt a project of this scale without LMU equipment. If the totality of this grant causes too much strain with regards to budgeting, I will definitely understand.

**Timeline**

May 18 – May 22: Meetings with faculty mentor, brainstorming and establishing a basic foundation for individual research

May 23 – June 5: Individual research phase, gathering and reading related articles and books, listening to soundtrack recordings, interviewing experts and relevant figures in the field

June 6 – June 20: Draft research paper on the basis of gathered research

June 21 – TBD: Write and compose scenes and songs for the musical component of the research project (will extend throughout summer and into the semester)

July 6 – July 10: Finish assembling final pieces of research; Finalize research paper

## Works Cited

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