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# SUBTLE ASIAN WOMXN

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Communication  
May, 2019

Faculty Adviser: Dr. David Coon

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors,  
University of Washington, Tacoma

Approved:

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Date

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Date

## subtle asian womxn

My involvement with the Global Honors Program culminates with a senior capstone project for T GH 496 Experiential Learning in Global Honors. Over the course of spring quarter, I had the opportunity to produce a documentary film, under the supervision of my faculty advisor, Dr. David Coon, to fulfill the requirements to graduate with a minor in Global Engagement and earn the full distinction from the program. My film actively engages with the intersection of the historical representations of Asian womxn and their lived experiences with dating. As of Wednesday, May 1, 2019, I have been able to interview 14 Asian womxn from around the world for the purpose of this project. My research question is: “How does xenophobia, racism, and sexism influence the public perception of Asian womxn<sup>1</sup> and how they experience romantic relationships?” The film title I have selected is “subtle asian<sup>2</sup> womxn.”

### **Global Relevance and Interdependency**

My journey with global citizenship for this project was catalyzed by the assumption that the most overt discrimination would stem from Asian womxn’s experiences on dating applications, and with in-person and/or online dating. What better way to gauge how Asian womxn experience xenophobia, racism, and sexism, than observing romantic relationships? In my opinion, romantic relationships are universal sites for observation. Moreover, I connect my interests in media and ethnic studies, with an emphasis on gender and sexuality, to elucidate the tangible effects of global media’s influence on shaping the attitudes of people around the world and creating stereotypes of Asian womxn. I collected personal testimonies from my interview subjects with the goal of creating a collective voice through my documentary film of Asian womxn’s perspectives from around the world that reflect a spectrum of different ethnicities, nationalities, and gender identities, to engage in a discourse about Asian womxn representation.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

As a filmmaker, I feel the ethical responsibility to most accurately present the experiences of Asian womxn through this project. Thus, I have to acknowledge my male perspective coming into this project. My intent with this film is not to speak on behalf of all Asian womxn but to create the platform for them to speak for themselves. Thus, my goal is to simply amplify their voices through film editing and crafting interview questions that cover three main points: (1) Confront the historical public perceptions of Asian womxn, (2) gather dating testimonials from Asian womxn, and (3) inquire how Asian womxn see themselves. These three main points are articulated solely by Asian womxn as Asian womxn are, in my opinion, the most credible experts about themselves.

### **Diversity**

My inclusion of Asian womxn in my film gave me the responsibility to consider ethnicity, nationality, and gender identity to most accurately present the experiences of Asian womxn, and to not limit my project to that of cisgender, East Asian womxn. Thus, my goal has been to actively recruit more South Asian and transgender interview subjects. As this is an on-going project, there is room for improvement in regard to the goal for diversity. Moreover, my goal is to expand my project beyond the United States. I have been successful in conducting one interview with an individual from the United Kingdom and scheduling one interview with an individual from Australia. However, I have been lacking interview subjects from Canada and Asian countries.

In any case, my consciousness and consideration of ethnicity, nationality, and gender identity gestures to the success I have had with my documentary since I took advantage of the genre's use of lower third graphics<sup>3</sup> to signify my careful attention to emphasizing diversity as my tactic for representing the experiences of Asian womxn authentically. When a new interview subject is introduced, a lower third graphic with name, ethnicity, and location (title, affiliation, and/or pronouns, if applicable) appears on screen as demonstrated in Figure 1. In addition to in-person, on-camera interviews, I chose to expand my project to individuals outside the state of Washington where I live by recording video calls using Google Hangout, as demonstrated in Figure 2.

## **Results**

### **Summary of Fieldwork**

For the purpose of my eight-minute presentation at the Annual Global Engagement Conference, I will provide a short excerpt from my film-in-progress that would not exceed half of the presentation. Since the documentary film is driven by the voices of Asian womxn, I believe it is of great importance to include quotations<sup>4</sup> from the interview subjects with my filmmaker's commentary. Again, my work is organized into three intersecting sections that include: (1) how society sees Asian womxn, (2) how the public perception of Asian womxn might influence Asian womxn's dating experiences, and (3) broad self-reflection as a method of reframing how Asian womxn are seen. Using the expertise of Asian womxn to confront the historical (mis)representations and negative dating experiences, by and large, results in reframing Asian womxn, as demonstrated by the following testimonials in each intersecting section.

## **Section 1: Historical Representation**

First, I ask questions surrounding how society might view Asian womxn. For example, one interview subject, Tracey, Figure 3, says, “I think...Hollywood in general...using Asian womxn in films, they tend to hypersexualize us” (T. Khuc, personal communication, April 26, 2019). A film clip I play right before my inclusion of her statement is from Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). In this particular scene, a Vietnamese prostitute is seen approaching a group of American soldiers during the Vietnam War with a promiscuous demeanor.

During the Vietnam War, Vietnamese womxn were portrayed in the press as submissive bodies meant to be sexually dominated, with the American military promoting prostitution services by Vietnamese womxn for the pleasure of its soldiers (Stur, 2011). Moreover, there were instances of sexual violence enacted on Vietnamese womxn by American soldiers, i.e. My Lai Massacre<sup>5</sup> and Winter Soldier Investigation<sup>6</sup> (Stur, 2011). Almost all of my interview subjects reaffirmed that they are often seen as “exotic.” Media representation, even as early as the Vietnam War, had real-world consequences.

## **Section 2: Dating Experiences**

After discussing the public perception of Asian womxn with the interview subjects, I ask how these representations might affect dating experiences for Asian womxn. Another interview subject, Angel, Figure 2, says, “yellow [fever] is absolutely tragic...it’s like saying you want to date someone just because of their physical appearance, and you don’t care about who they are as a person...like they’re your trophy or something, and I think that’s pretty awful” (A. Li, personal communication, April 12, 2019). “Yellow fever” is defined as the racial fetishism for Asian womxn by non-Asian men, especially white men.

This obsession with Asian womxn makes visible that Orientalism, the western, Eurocentric lens that has distorted the public perception of eastern culture, especially that of Asia (Said, 1978), has created contemporary conflicts for Asian womxn in dating culture. What is evident throughout the interviews is that the submissive and exotic perception of Asian womxn has framed them in the eyes of men as the most desired, hyperfeminine womxn. Thus, it becomes clear that dating experiences have often been hostile, toxic spaces for Asian womxn, with the common experiences of harassment that womxn often face, with the added burden of xenophobia and racism being of Asian-descent.

### **Section 3: Asian Womxn**

Lastly, I ask how Asian womxn see themselves in contrast to the historical (mis)representations. Man, Figure 4, says, “I think the Asian womxn [is] smart, independent, hardworker...loyal” (M. Van, personal communication, April 16, 2019). Her sentiments contrast the historical stereotypes of Asian womxn as submissive. Tracey says, “Oh, we are not submissive, at all...I’m a very aggressive person...if I’m in a relationship, I wear the pants in the relationship, so you will not find me submissive, just saying” (T. Khuc, personal communication, April 26, 2019). Her response directly goes against “yellow fever” and all the negative factors that surround the dating experiences of Asian womxn.

Andrea, Figure 1, the founder of the Facebook group, subtle asian dating, concludes the film excerpt, saying, “Oftentimes...I am soft, I am gentle but I’m also very hard and I’m very...strict and very rough too and it’s the fact that...both of those things are seen as exclusive I think is frustrating to realize, that we’re not all the same, we have our own traits, we have our own identities, we’re all people too” (A. Chen, personal communication, April 10, 2019).

## Conclusion

My work is not yet complete. I still have interviews to conduct as I continue to work on this documentary film beyond my graduation from the University of Washington Tacoma. My overarching goal is to be truly inclusive of all Asian womxn, and future actions I could take with the production of this film is to recruit more South Asian womxn and queer womxn from Canada and countries in Asia. So far, my film is predominantly comprised of Asian-Americans, which points to the early stage I am currently at with my progress on this film. However, what I have been able to achieve is this reorientation of Asian womxn by identifying the stark juxtaposition of how society views Asian womxn and how they see themselves. Historically, Asian womxn are dehumanized with labels such as “submissive, docile, weak, easy.” Today, based on my interview subjects’ testimonials, they are empowered with labels such as “independent, resilient, strong.”

To refer back to the title of my film, “subtle asian womxn,” “subtle asian” is a reference to two Facebook groups that received recent popularity based on their centering of the experiences of the Asian diaspora, particularly the groups, subtle asian traits, and subtle asian dating. However, “subtle” signifies more than social media. It gestures to the intricacies of Asian womxn, that they are not to be simply defined by traditional ethnic and gender stereotypes that have been placed on them but should be granted their full humanity by being free of xenophobic, racist, and sexist labels. To conclude, a message I would like to leave is that there is more to Asian womxn than what has been depicted in films. I would like to dedicate my work to Asian womxn around the world as my contribution to empower Asian womxn by making visible their experiences through documentary filmmaking, by prioritizing their voices above all else.

## References

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- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Stur, H. M. (2011). *Beyond combat: Women and gender in the Vietnam war era* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> This is a term that removes the connotation of masculine dependence, and is inclusive of transgender womxn and womxn of color.

<sup>2</sup> This is lowercase as a reference to the two popular Asian-centered Facebook groups, subtle asian traits, and subtle asian dating.

<sup>3</sup> Identification text of an individual's name, title, location, and affiliation for non-fiction media such as television news and documentaries.

<sup>4</sup> Answers from the interview subjects are presented verbatim, with the use of ellipses to omit filler, superfluous words, and indistinguishable speech. Brackets are used to insert additional words for clarity.

<sup>5</sup> On March 16, 1968, American soldiers killed over 300 Vietnamese hamlet residents, including raping the Vietnamese womxn living in the hamlet.

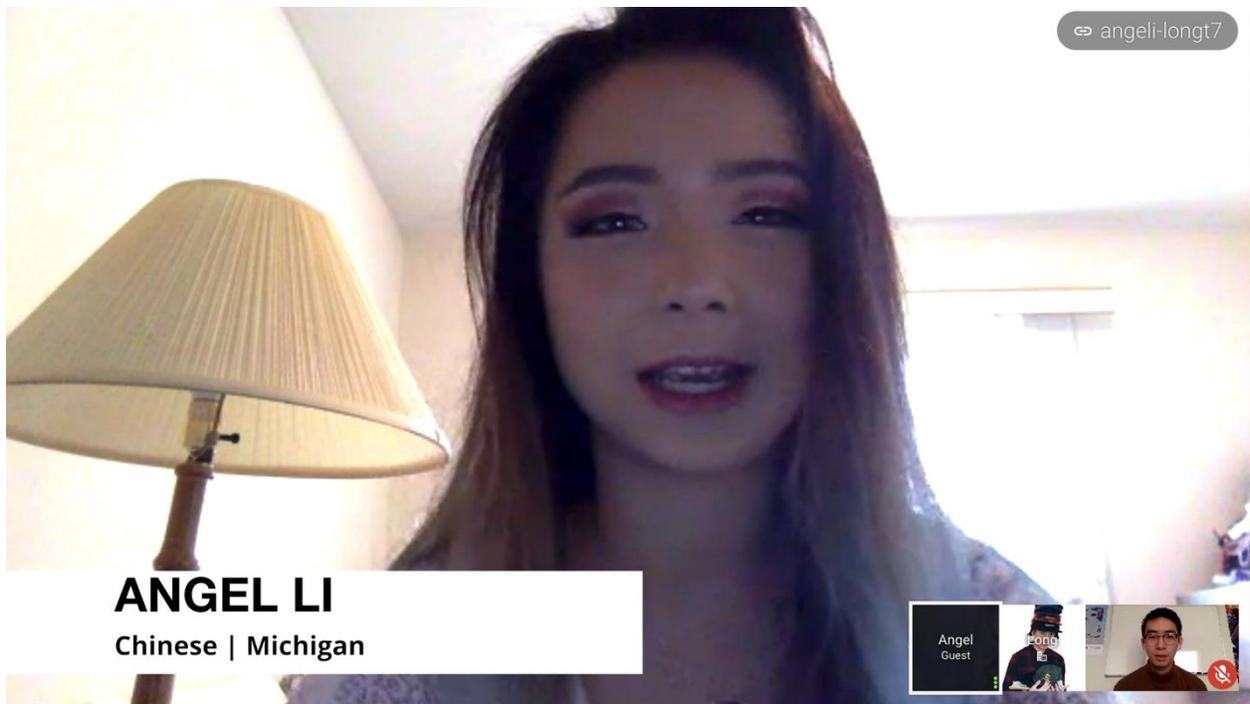
<sup>6</sup> In 1972, Vietnam War veterans provided personal testimonies regarding American soldiers committing sexual violence on Vietnamese womxn.

## Figures

**HELLA CHEN**

Founder of subtle asian dating  
Burmese/Chinese | Washington

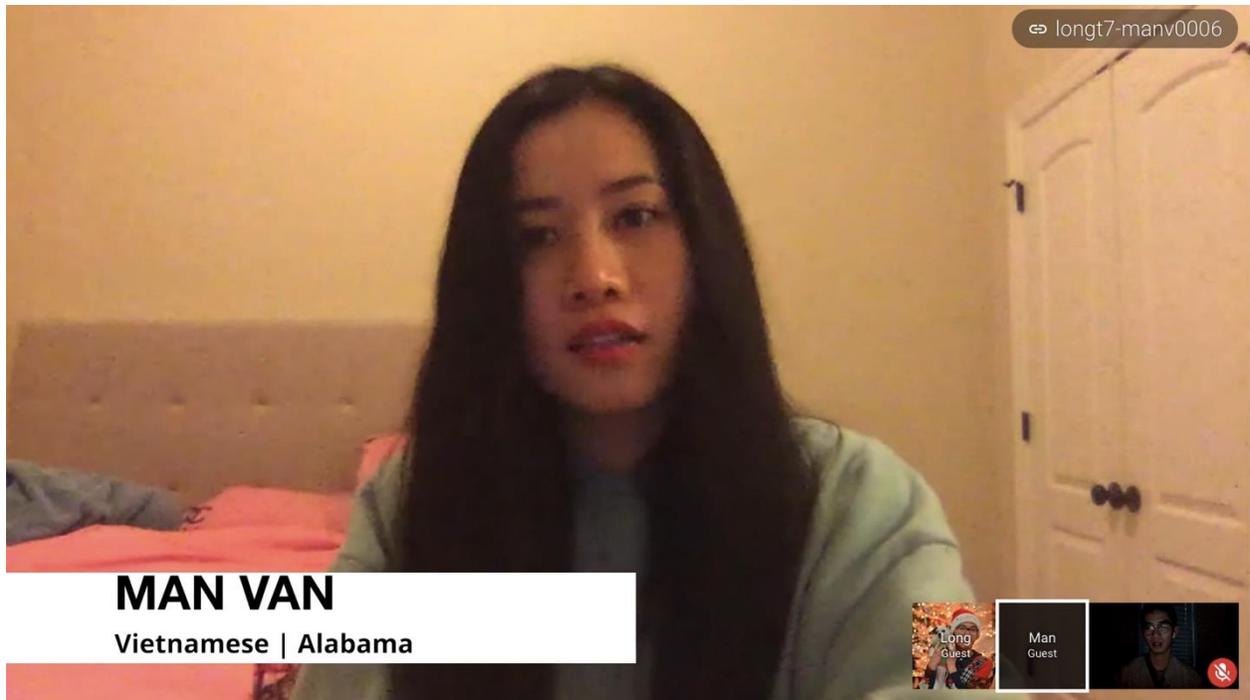
*Figure 1.* Screenshot from documentary film of in-person interview. Reprinted from “subtle asian womxn,” by L. Tran, 2019, Renton, WA. In *YouTube*, Retrieved May 16, 2019, from <https://youtu.be/9VBbQoSbctk>. Copyright 2019 by Long Tran. Reprinted with permission.



*Figure 2.* Screenshot from documentary film of video call interview. Reprinted from “subtle asian womxn,” by L. Tran, 2019, Renton, WA. In *YouTube*, Retrieved May 16, 2019, from <https://youtu.be/9VBbQoSbctk>. Copyright 2019 by Long Tran. Reprinted with permission.



*Figure 3.* Screenshot from documentary film of in-person interview. Reprinted from “subtle asian womxn,” by L. Tran, 2019, Renton, WA. In *YouTube*, Retrieved May 16, 2019, from <https://youtu.be/9VBbQoSbctk>. Copyright 2019 by Long Tran. Reprinted with permission.



*Figure 4.* Screenshot from documentary film of video call interview. Reprinted from “subtle asian womxn,” by L. Tran, 2019, Renton, WA. In *YouTube*, Retrieved May 16, 2019, from <https://youtu.be/9VBbQoSbctk>. Copyright 2019 by Long Tran. Reprinted with permission.