Uncovering The Voice of Asian American Youth in Young Adult Novels --Korean American Experiences

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Erik H. Erikson, throughout his long and distinguished academic career in development psychology, dedicated a significant amount of writing to the stage of adolescence and to the concept of young adulthood. He introduced the terms “identity crisis” and “identity confusion” to describe “a necessary turning point, a crucial moment”\(^1\) when young people in the later school years underwent “the physiological revolution of their genital maturation and the uncertainty of the adult roles ahead.”\(^2\) According to Erikson, adolescing is “a process of increasing differentiation” as “individual grows aware of a widening circle of other significant to him.”\(^3\) At this period youngsters face many issues concerning their relationship with friends, parents, and other adults and tends to be “preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are.”\(^4\) At the same, an adolescent starts to be extremely attentive to his/her self-identities, in particular his/her gender and racial roles. Erikson even went further to point out that

Young people can be remarkably clannish, and cruel in their exclusion of all those who are ‘different,’ in skin color or cultural background, in tastes and gifts, and often in such petty aspects of dress and gesture as have been temporarily selected as the signs of an in-grouper or out-grouper…Adolescents not only help one another temporarily through such discomfort by forming cliques and stereotyping themselves, their ideals, and their enemies; they also insistently test each other’s capacity for sustaining loyalties in the midst of inevitable conflicts of values.\(^5\)

Giving adolescents an unstable and stormy image, Erikson played a pivotal role in raising Americans’ awareness and keen interest in this particular life stage.

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\(^1\) Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, p. 16.  
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 128.  
\(^3\) Ibid., p. 23.  
\(^4\) Ibid., p. 128.  
\(^5\) Ibid., p. 132.
Erikson published his works about young adulthood in the mid-20th century, yet America’s infatuation with the young adulthood continues and even expands in the 21st century. One of Erikson’s continuing legacies is the tremendous popularity of young adult movies in this country. Films featuring stories of adolescents constantly top the list of best-selling films in America, including some of the most commercially successful titles released in the new millennium — *The Hunger Games* (2012), the *Twilight* Series (2008-2012), *She’s the Man* (2006), *A Cinderella Story* (2004), *Mean Girls* (2004), *The Princess Diaries* (2001), to name a few. These hit young adult films not only rendered the young actors enormous fame, wealth, and power but also provided an important medium for the young audience to negotiate their own lived experiences.

Research studies in a variety of fields have provided significant findings showing teen films are influential in guiding the young audience to make sense of their life and the contemporary world. For example, Morawitz and Mastro’s study takes *Mean Girls*, which starred Lindsey Lohan, as a representative blockbuster teen film in which female lead characters are portrayed as “tyrannical, bullying and devoted to a ruthless caste system.” Such kind of gender portrayal has been rooted at stereotyping beliefs about female friendships and more unfavorable attitudes toward women in general. Intriguing, the study shows that the researched female viewers are more cautious than the male viewers about the negative portrayal. They value their personal experiences of female friendship rather than media portrayal and “the more viewers enjoy this genre of film, the less likely they are to report negative beliefs about female

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6 Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz & Dana E. Mastro, “Mean Girls? The Influence of Gender Portrayals in Teen Movies On Emerging Adults’ Gender-Based Attitudes And Beliefs,” p. 132.
friendships.” The stereotyping representation of young girls actually invites this group of audience to question the stereotype. Likewise, Timothy Shary stated that although the genre routinely makes youth appear stupid and irresponsible, teen films demonstrate “young people confronting issues about race, religion, body image, romance, drugs, family, friendships, sex, sexual preference and crime, and they explore these issues with a mature attitude while still allowing their characters to explore their youth.” Contrary to common concerns about the bad models of youth featured in teen films, the genre is more focused on how young protagonists encounter serious issues and deal with them properly. Always ending stories with solutions and promising future, teen films offer a platform for young people to make sense of their lived experiences and mull over stereotyping ideas surrounding them.

Unfortunately, the ways in which most young American viewers could find useful and hopeful lessons to reflect their real experiences from popular teen films are not a privilege that Asian American teenagers can have. The forefront reason is that Asian Americans seldom play significant roles in popular teen films. Like the whole systematically unrepresented or misrepresented Asian American population in the mainstream media, in teen films Asian American teenagers are either absent or relegated to minor and background roles that are lacking of quality and depth. Teen megahits like A Cinderella Story (2004) and The Princess Diaries (2001) have stories set in high schools of Los Angeles and San Francisco, where Asian Americans make up a considerable proportion of the population. Yet, the films were made without including any Asian American teen characters. Even if they are included, Asian American teen characters are relegated to minor or background roles, such as Justin Chon in Twilight, who have little opportunity to tell stories from their perspectives. The audience never

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7 Ibid., p. 142.
8 Timothy Shary, Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen, p. 110.
receives sufficient information to learn their thoughts and is thus unlikely to be sympathetic with these characters. Moreover, Asian American characters are often embedded with stereotypes regarding their race and ethnicity. For example, in *Mean Girls*, Trang Pak and Sun Jin Dinh, two Vietnamese girls, are always walking together and gossiping in an indistinguishable foreign language. It turns out that both of them have slept with Coach Carr, a white and unattractive sports teacher. Unlike the lead character played by Lindsey Lohan, who in the end reflects her own aggressive behavior, reconciles with people she had hurt, and breaks the stereotypes about white and beautiful *mean* girls, Trang Pak and Sun Jin Dinh never get a chance to address stereotyping messages applied to their Asian American identity.

The omnipresent stereotyping representations of Asian Americans in teen films have a substantial depressing impact on Asian American teen viewers. Unlike the young and white female viewers of *Mean Girls* (as discussed in Morawitz and Mastro’s study) who are able to question the negative portrayal of young girls, Asian American teen viewers seem to be more vulnerable to stereotyping representations against them. Sara Lee indicated that the negative stereotypes in media have real consequences in the partner preferences among Asian women. The character of Long Dok Gong in *Sixteen Candles*, an eerily comic Asian exchange student speaking heavily accented English and lusting after white American girls, makes one of the film’s Korean American young female viewers “subscribe to the dominant stereotypes of Asian men as socially awkward and sexually undesirable.”9 Again, it should be acknowledged that characters like Long Dok Dong, who is but one among many marginal caricature roles played by Asian Americans, are not meant to cause sympathy from the audience.

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9 Sara S. Lee, “Marriage Dilemmas”, p. 295.
The invisibility and false representations of Asian Americans in popular teen films are just a small part of issues regarding the repressed Asian American youth culture. Despite of the thriving youth culture in America, one would be surprised to see how few cultural practices are relevant to Asian American youth experiences. Min Zhou and Jennifer Lee, asking “is there such a thing as Asian American youth culture?”, noted that “Asian American youth do not fit into any of the popular images typically associated with youth culture or subcultures” because they have long been “neglected or at best homogenized into a social group widely celebrated as the ‘model minority’ while derogatively stereotyped as ‘nerds’ or ‘geeks’.”¹⁰ For instance, who can forget “those Asian American whiz kids” on the cover of Time Magazine?¹¹ Similarly, Shirley Jennifer Lim stated that Asian American youth culture was not meant to exist because the early Asian immigrant population was predominantly male and migrant workers and they “were not intended to have the leisure time in which to form their own youth culture.”¹² Lim, however, is one of the few scholars who tried to uncover the little-known Asian American youth culture. One of her findings is how Asian American communities held high-profile beauty pageants and used female beauty as a strategy to “circumvent racialized standards of beauty that castigated non-European American women as ugly and subhuman.”¹³ These Asian girls were expected to give perfect performances following the mainstream American standard of beauty and then help humanize Asian Americans. Here, Asian American youth fell into the category of Asian American nationalism as their existence was primarily meant to be a counter-hegemonic force against racism. Such framing of Asian American youth was not without problems, as Lim’s research

¹² Shirley Jennifer Lim, “Asian American Youth Culture”, p. 211.
included cases in which some girls involuntarily entered the pageants due to family pressure and some girls simply refused to participate in such kind of cultural practices.\textsuperscript{14}

The example of Asian American beauty pageants signifies two conflictive issues of Asian American youth culture. On the one hand, aligned with the whole Asian America, Asian American youth encounter external forces from the mainstream America, such as racism and racial stereotypes. On the other hand, youth culture is expected to show exuberant vitality, creativity, and rebellion against adult authority. Many popular youth subcultures, such as hip-hop, hippies, punks, extreme sports, etc., attempt to use youthful power to challenge gerontocracy. Asian American youth, due to their subaltern position in the current racial geopolitics, faces stronger oppression from adults as they are required to bolster Asian American nationalism to resist racism. Such kind of internal conflicts within the Asian America are often ignored or considered less pressing issues compared to racism against Asian Americans, which has never ceased to occur since day one.

Having summarized the dilemma of Asian American youth culture, I want to use Lisa Lowe’s idea of “strategic essentialism” to foreground the basic premise of my paper. Lowe’s argument is that while maintaining a salient Asian American identity is necessarily important, we need to look at internal conflicts (such as gender and class) within this racial/ethnic group(s), because “acknowledging class and gender differences among Asian Americans does not weaken us as a group”\textsuperscript{15}; instead, these differences represent greater political opportunity for the Asian America. I believe it is necessary to put Asian American youth at an independent subject position separated from the Asian America and examine youth as part of the internal conflicts within this

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 192.
\textsuperscript{15} Lisa Lowe, “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity”, p. 32.
racial minority. Only by doing so can we identify the authentic experiences of Asian American youth population.

This paper operates on an assumption that popular young adult literature and culture reflect young people’s ideas and fantasies, guide them to engage with issues of identities, and form their own worldview. I step further to argue that for Asian American YA readers, YA novels are a more reliable medium to reflect their experiences. First, contrary to teen films, the industry of young adult literature has a tradition of embracing multiculturalism and recognizing race as an important consideration. In 1965, the education-writer Nancy Larrick surveyed the 5,206 young adult titles published between 1962-1964 and found that only 6.7 percent had references to blacks. This all-white world of young adult field was heavily criticized by librarians, reviewers, and educators. The industry was quick to address the problem and made changes. By the late 1960s, black authors were among winners of notable young adult literature awards. In the mid-1970s, Laurence Yep began to introduce his Chinese-American experiences to his young adult readers. Jeanne Wakatsuki, Lensey Namioka, and Yoshiko Uchida followed the path of Yep to reveal the diverse experiences of Asian people to American readers. In 2002, Korean American young adult writer An Na won the Printz award (hosted by American Library Association) for *A Step from Heaven* (2002). In 2007, the same award was given to Gene Luen Yang, a Chinese American, for *American Born Chinese* (2006). Compared to teen films, the presence of Asian Americans in young adult literature is greater in terms of both scope and dimension.

Secondly, in recent years young adult fiction celebrates a spirit of being critical and responsive to various issues in real life. The industry underwent a temporary recession in the

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16 Michael Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, p. 44.
17 Ibid., p. 78.
1980s and then a remarkable period of revival in the 1990s, when a new genre of young adult fiction emerged. Unlike the problem novels which dominated early young adult literature (J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* as the most well-known example) and rendered teens an amoral, irrational, and hormone-crazed picture, the new genre features strong, mature, and responsible teen protagonists, whose youthful innocence operates as a pungent criticism of the corrupted world controlled by adults. Such kind of “newly hard-edged and gritty fiction of realism” has been well-received by young readers. One teen reader vividly explained why she loves this new genre of young adult fiction:

> reading ‘bleak books’ helps us to realize what kinds of problems actual teens have. They broaden our outlook and help us become less apathetic about the world’s problems. Until we live in a world where no problems exist, where adults always behave responsibly, and where there are always happy endings, adults must learn to accept that some of the books we read will describe the harsh realities of life.\(^\text{18}\)

In sum, the theme of intergenerational conflicts becomes increasingly popular among young readers, who by reading the stories realize that their world is chaotic not because of their faults, but because of adults’ irresponsible behavior.

Considering the above reasons, I affirm that young adult literature is an effective medium to communicate Asian American youth experiences. In this paper, I analyze how Asian American adolescent experiences are portrayed in these two young adult novels, Marie G. Lee’s *Necessary Roughness* (1996) and An Na’s *Wait for Me* (2006). I explore the theme of intergenerational conflicts and put a special focus on how the novel unearths the voice of the main characters. Both novels have Asian American teenagers as the first person narrators. Nevertheless, they often remain silent when interacting with their authoritarian parents. It should

\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., p.67.
be noted that both novels are written by Korean American authors and have Korean American protagonists. Their experiences, however, are never exclusively Korean. Korean Americans are one of the largest communities of Asian Americans and have gone through similar histories and social issues faced by all Asian American pan-ethnic groups. In addition, Korean society is heavily influenced by Confucianism, which emphasizes respect for authority, devotion to parents, emotional restraint, and the importance of education. The traditional Korean Confucian culture and authoritarian parenting are likely to make children have depressive symptoms. Connected to them, the repressed voice of the Korean American teenage characters in these two novels provide a fitting example of the issue of intergenerational conflicts common in Asian American immigrant families.

**Chan and Abogee in Necessary Roughness**

*Necessary Roughness* was written by Marie G. Lee, a second-generation Korean American who grew up in the 70s in a small town of Minnesota. The novel presents the story of Chan Jun Kim, a Korean American high-school student. Kim is also the narrator of the story. When the story begins, Chan, Abogee (“father” in Korean), Oma (“mom”) and his twin sister, Young, are moving from Los Angeles to Minnesota, an abrupt decision made by Chan’s father without notifying his family in advance. Chan is angry with Apogee’s decision because moving away from LA means he has to give up everything he had—his friends, his girlfriend, and most importantly, his soccer team. Chan and Young are never informed of why such a big decision was made because in most Korean families children are supposed to obey their fathers no matter what. Nevertheless, Chan and Young secretly find out that their parents have to close their family-run grocery store and move to Minnesota because Bong, Abogee’s brother, is in serious

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19 Van Campen & Russell, p. 2.  
20 Kim & Cain, p. 105.
financial trouble and had convinced Abogee to help him. Abogee, without getting consent from
his family, kept loaning all the money to Bong until he and his family are penniless and are now
forced to leave. Throughout the story, Chan makes it clear that it is irresponsible Uncle Bong and
unreasonable Abogee who get the whole family into the mess. This awareness makes Chan very
critical of his arbitrary father.

The troubled father-and-son relationship between Abogee and Chan is revealed earlier in
the book. Chan admits that “Abogee and I could start World War III all by ourselves.” 21 It is,
according to Chan, because Abogee has very false expectations for his son. Abogee wishes Chan
can perform better at his study and know “what his abogee wants before he says anything.”22
Chan, however, is never an academic student but a tremendous soccer player. In fact, Chan
enjoys his high school life in LA thanks to his soccer team. Chan has a strong sense of
belongingness for the team and he plays soccer with friends of different race and ethnicity.
Playing soccer enables Chan to assimilate into the racially and culturally diverse milieu of
California. Yet such effort is rejected by Abogee, who thinks his son is corrupted by American
culture and believes that Chan would be a docile and much better son if they are in Korea.

When the Kim family moves to Iron River, Chan finds that no one is playing soccer in
this small town of Minnesota. In his new school, he is amazed to find that all the students are all
white and blond except for him and Young. Once again, Chan’s athletism helps him assimilate
into the new environment when he is invited by Mikko to play football. Mikko Ripanen, the first
friend Chan makes in Iron River high school, is of Finnish descent and son of principal. In spite
of his upper-class background and his popularity in school, Mikko remains very friendly and
generous to Chan and Young. With Mikko’s help, Chan joins in the school’s football team,

21 Necessary Roughness, p. 3.
22 Ibid., p. 3.
which is highly adored by the whole community, and falls in love with football and then his new
school life. This time, noticing how football enables his son to adapt to the new environment, a
deed that he struggles to achieve, Abogee’s hostile attitude toward sport seems to soften as he
does not stop Chan from attending football games.

Silence dominates most of the communication between Chan and Abogee. Both the
father and son use silence to vent their anger on each other. As a Korean father, Abogee tends to
suppress rather than express his thoughts. He expects Chan to obey him without asking and
negotiating. For example, when Abogee forbids Chan to play football, he curtly commands Chan
to go home right after school instead of discussing the discord with the son:

Oh. I believe Abogee was telling me I couldn’t play football. He does this thing where
he drops hints, punches in a code, mutates and mutilates words until he can tell me no
without having to say no to my face. Occasionally he makes O-Ma do his dirty work,
like the time I wanted a mountain bike for my birthday, but mostly he does the job
himself, leaving me flapping like a fish pulled up on a dock, trying to figure out
exactly what he means.
I let the silence stretch out, thinner and thinner. Tell me no if you mean no, I was
thinking. Tell me to my fact and give me a chance to argue my point. (67)

The result of the difficult communication is Chan always has to guess his father’s intention from
those hints, codes, mutated and mutilated words, and all that is unsaid. What resents Chan more
is he does not even get a chance to reason with his father. Clearly, the way that Abogee uses
silence to enforce his authority only makes Chan more rebellious and worsens the father-and-son
relationship. At the same time, Chan is equally silent to his father. Instead of revealing his anger
at this father, Chan remains silent to show his defiance and disobedience. Even more, silence
represents Chan’s insistence on having his way:

this time I wasn’t going to give in. I wasn’t going to panic and say ‘Okay, Abogee, I’ll
quit football and work in the store’ just because I was afraid he’d sulk.
I knew Abogee was testing me, like in those fairy tales where if I chose the right
answer, I’d be rewarded with riches and kingdoms. …if not, I’d fall through a trapdoor
into a pit of alligators.
If he didn’t have the balls to ask me to quit football *out loud*, I wasn’t going to answer, either. (76)

Here, Chan uses silence to cope with Abogee’s silence. He knows Abogee is not going to say no out loud, so he continues playing football. This passage highlights a significant moment when Chan makes the decision to play football regardless of Abogee’s disapproval. It is also the time when Chan realizes how much football means to him. What his father thinks no longer matters to him and will never stop him from doing what he is really interested in.

Because Chan is the first-person narrator of the story, the whole novel can be seen as a product of Chan’s silence. The majority of the narration is made up with his subjective observations of his family. Although these observations are critical, especially on Abogee, they are not totally unsympathetic. Chan clearly know the difficult circumstance his parents face day in and day out as Asian American immigrants. In this scenario, silence is not meant to criticize but is employed to bear with the hardship with the parents. For instance, when the family just moves to Iron River, unable to find a decent place to live and having no clues how to start a new life in this strange town, Chan realizes that “maybe O-Ma and Abogee did not have everything under control, that maybe they didn’t know what to do any more than Young and I did.”23 Chan knows his parents are vulnerable and lacking of sufficient skills to assimilate into the new environment, but he does not blame them. He remains silent and supports the family as much as he can. Being a racial minority in America, many Asian immigrants face enormous pressure and challenges, which often heighten the tension within family. Such kind of experience tends to force the children become more mature, responsible, and sympathetic with their parents. This is why Chan, while being upset at Abogee’s arbitrariness, never hesitates to take care of the

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family’s grocery store despite of his busy schedule of school and football practice. Although he is just a high school student, he is wise and mature enough to form a dependable and comprehensive account of his experiences as an Asian American teenager.

**Mina and UhMma in *Wait For Me***

Unlike Chan, who is able to use silence to show his defiance, Mina is much more subdued to her authoritarian mother. Mina, a 17-year-old Korean American girl, is the main character of An Na’s *Wait for Me*. An Na was born in Korea and grew up in San Francisco. Immigrating with her parents to America in an early age, An Na is very aware of the feelings of yearning, shame, frustration, and helplessness that come with trying to negotiate a foreign culture. All her young adult novels address how the difficult process of assimilation takes a heavy toll on teenage children. 24 *Wait for Me*, for instance, centers on Mina’s inability to step out of Uhmma’s control to pursue her individual wishes.

Mina’s parents, Apa and Uhmma run a dry cleaning store. Because the business has been slow for the last few years, Mina’s family struggles financially and does not have money to hire employees. The result is Mina, the older sister and the only healthy child, spends all her time after school to take care of the store. Mina’s sister, Suna, is hearing-impaired and thus receives little attention from Uhmma, who puts all her hope on the older daughter. Uhmma sets high standard for Mina’s academic performance and insists that Mina must get into Harvard. Since Mina’s family cannot afford sending her to attend the expensive summer preparation class, Uhmma forces Mina to seek tutoring assistance from Jonathan, who is son of the venerable Kim family and just admitted into Stanford. In the opening chapters of the novel, we notice that Mina tries all her best to avoid seeing Jonathan. She rarely succeeds due to Uhmma’s insistence. As

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24 “Interview with Young Adult Author An Na”, the *Cynthia Leitich Smith* website.
the story proceeds, we learn that Mina is actually not good at study. To cope with Uhmma’s high expectations, Mina forges grades to cheat her mother with Jonathan’s help, which only deteriorates her relationship with Jonathan as he accusing her of using him. The story also discloses that Mina is daughter of Uhmma and her pre-marital lover, not of Apa. Mina’s life is thus tangled in a web of lies, secrets, struggles, and a bad relationship.

Throughout the story, Mina remains the victim of Uhmma’s ill temper, constant nagging, and unrealistic expectations. She appears to be both physically and mentally worn out, having no time to relax and no ability to utter her opinions. While Mina is able to find ways to resist Jonathan’s sexual harassment, she is defenseless to Uhmma’s demanding requests. Like a prisoner in her family, Mina is chained and voiceless.

Mina’s narrative is often flowing, switching the scenes back and forth from her imaginative world and the reality. The following passage exemplifies Mina’s flowing narrative when she expresses her wish to escape from her family to live alone:

A river. A river that I could skate away on. Just keep skating and never look back. I wish I had a river. That song saved me over and over again. When I thought there was no way out. When I felt disgusted in myself. That song would take me to another place. Until I had something of a plan. All I needed was money. The money that I paid myself from the register was for the start-up costs. For an apartment and food. Just until I could find a job. 25

Another narrative trend used by An Na to imply Mina’s voicelessness is the lack of quotation marks to frame Mina and Uhmma’s words as shown in the below passage:

Uhmma paused in midslurp of her stew. Mina, Uhmma said. Mina, are you listening to me? Yes, Uhmma, I said and buried my head deeper into my bowl of je-geh. Then what did I just ask you to do? … What did I just say, Uhmma asked again.

25 Wait for Me, p. 37.
I stared at Uhmma sideways. Directed my answer to her mole. I do not remember. You were not listening, Uhmma said, leaning forward. “Whatever,” I mumbled under my breath. Do I have to remind you how much I have had to sacrifice? Uhmma asked over her bowl, her words and the steam mingling into a fiery breath. All of it for you! Everything I do is for your benefit and your treat me as though I were some maid. …

Here, the lack of quotation asks readers pause to think which sentence is said and which sentence is descriptive. The boundary is at times unclear. In fact, throughout the book Uhmma’s words, including her lengthy abuse on Mina, are not framed in quotation marks. This design indicates that Mina has internalized Uhmma’s remark, which becomes integral part of Mina’s narrative, so Mina is not able to tell her own voice from Uhmma’s. Uhmma’s voice becomes Mina’s voice. A large part of Mina’s consciousness is intervened by Uhmma’s expectation, and the real Mina remains silent.

Being a silent and quiet teenage girl, Mina is highly aware of other people’s voices. She is especially sensitive to her sister’s voice. As Suna receives little attention from Uhmma, the burden of taking care of the young and hearing-impaired sister falls on Mina. Mina takes Suna with her all the time and everywhere, including her secret dates with Ysrael, her Hispanic lover. As a result, Suna becomes an unbreakable responsibility to Mina. After the final confrontation with Uhmma, Mina runs out of the door to escape. But she decides to turn back to her family because she suddenly thinks of Suna’s voice and how Suna would cry and beg her to stay. Voices of her mother, father, and especially her young sister surge on Mina’s mind. The voices are so overwhelming that Mina stops running, turns around, and gives up her wish to pursue a career in music with Ysrael. At this moment, she can only hear others’ voices rather than her own. The tangled web of family responsibility not only keeps her from pursuing her love and dream but also deprives her from paying attention to her own ideas and feelings.

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26 Ibid., p. 41.
Displaying the story from Mina’s flowing narrative, *Wait for Me* reveals a traumatic experience of an Asian American teenage girl who is nearly crashed down by her manipulative and ill-tempered mother. The novel thus reveals a bleak picture of how difficult life circumstances faced by a lower-class Asian American immigrant family not only impose great pressure on adults but also silence the teenage children.

**Conclusion**

“America seems to convey something to kids that Chinese culture doesn’t.” –Amy Chou

If we attempt to understand Asian American teenagers from the mainstream media, we are likely to associate them with stereotypes that have been ascribed to Asian Americans. If we choose to look at them from the perspective of Asian American adults, especially their parents, we would probably view them as a group of rebellious and ungrateful kids. Yet, if we can try to listen to the voices of Asian American youth, we would realize that they face tremendous pressure from within and outside the Asian America. Being an Asian American teenager means one has to carefully compromise between his cultural heritage and what America conveys to them. It takes tremendous courage, insight, patience, and resilience from Asian American teenagers to bridge gaps between different cultures. It is an accomplishment worth noticing and celebrating. Unfortunately, the mainstream media tend to silence their voice.

In this paper, I uncover the voice Asian American youth analyze two young adult novels to look for the voices of Asian American teenagers. Both *Necessary Roughness* and *Wait for Me* successfully feature representations of Asian American youth that jump out of the stereotyping views of Asian Americans as well as the framework of Asian American nationalism.

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conflicts within the Asian American population are distinct issues addressed in the novels. I especially focus on the theme of intergenerational conflicts between parents and teenage children, discussing how children tend to remain silent as a way to cope with their authoritarian parents. My selected texts demonstrate a picture in which Asian American teenagers are at times more mature and responsible than their parents. They display a high degree of flexibility and resilience in negotiating their identity as Asian American teenagers, being self-sacrificing for their family and brave to explore their individuality and the world outside of their culture. I expect to see such aspect of Asian American teen experiences has more exposure in the mainstream media for people to listen to the voices of Asian American youth.

References

**Primary sources**


**Secondary sources**


