

“I don’t want being Asian Canadian to be the only thing they know about me”: On being an Asian Canadian Filmmaker

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Note: Citations are highlighted in yellow.

[MUSIC PLAYS]

Kaitlyn (00:07): Stories hold power. Power to shape, to heal, to bring us together. Stories hold power. We’ve seen the power of story in the recent Asian representation onscreen. In emergence of films like *Minari* (2020), *The Farewell* (2019), and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). Through these stories, we’ve seen ourselves reflected on screen for the first times. Our families, our communities, our humanity. The ways that we live in the “in between.” Stories hold power. The question is...what type of stories do we want to tell?

[MUSIC FADES]

Kaitlyn (00:54): Hi everyone! My name is Kaitlyn Lee. I am a second-generation Chinese Canadian filmmaker and I will be your host for today’s podcast. This semester, I had the opportunity to take ACAM 320B, a course which focused on health within in Asian Canadian communities. For me, this course provoked me to reflect on my own experiences growing up in the “in-between” of my Asian and Canadian identities – thinking about how my unique positioning as a second-generation Chinese Canadian has impacted my mental health and identity formation. By extension, it has also made me think about my experiences in the indie filmmaking scene as an Asian Canadian woman...*How does my Asianness impact the stories I tell? In what ways do I feel pressure to perform my Asian identity? How does filmmaking help me process my complicated intergenerational trauma?*

Kaitlyn (01:53): To explore some of these questions around Asian representation, mental health, “in-betweenness,” and being an Asian Canadian in the film scene, I’ve brought on very special guest: Cathy Huynh. Cathy is an emerging Vietnamese-Canadian filmmaker based in Vancouver, British Columbia. She’s recent graduate from SFU’s School of Contemporary Arts and has worked on a range of projects as a writer/director/producer (Huynh par. 1). Her film *Caleidoscope* is currently playing on CineAsian films and her SFU thesis film *Adrift* (2022) was an official selection for London Lift-off Film Festival, Local Sightings and Whistler Film Festival (Huynh par. 1). I’ve had the pleasure of working with Cathy on a number of different projects, and to call her one of my good friends. I hope you enjo.y

[TRANSITION SOUND]

Kaitlyn (2:48): So Cathy, welcome to the podcast.

Cathy (2:51): Thank you for having me.

Kaitlyn (2:53): Thanks for being here. So we're gonna start with a little introductory question. Tell me a little bit about how you got into filmmaking and the types of films that you like to make.

Cathy (3:06): Yeah, for sure. So I am a Vietnamese Canadian filmmaker based here in Vancouver. I got into filmmaking...I'd say like, the idea of being one probably first came to me in high school. Cause growing up I had really loved watching movies and TV and, you know, I loved entertainment and that was like my shtick in terms of like, you know, personalities you'd have or be known for in school. Like that was my thing and people knew me because I loved it.

Cathy (3:41): I feel like I'm really really early in the stages of my career, but at the moment, or at least what I have made...um, a lot of it has related back to my identity as a young Asian Canadian woman. And just what I've lived through, period. Um, I think, you know, a lot of them, a lot of those, the stuff that I make has to do with...like that clash between being like Asian and Canadian, and not knowing how to necessarily reconcile that. Um, I think, you know...that stuff has never been at the forefront of my work. Like I'm not interested in, you know, making that everything about me, but it [her Asianness] obviously like informs who I am and because my characters are usually reflections of what I've been through, they also inform what the characters go through. But they're never really like, usually the central conflict.

Kaitlyn (4:45): Maybe since you talked a little bit about Asianness, we can kind of talk about that first. So, on the topic of like identity clash and being Asian enough, I think for a lot of multiracial and multicultural individuals, there can often be this feeling of being an imposter. And like...there was a certain term that we learned in class this semester that was called “identity denial” (Cheung “Class 5: Multiracial Identity”). And I thought it was really cool cause it kind of gave a term to something that I've always experienced growing up. And it's basically like, yeah, feeling like an imposter in your own community and kind of like feeling rejected on both sides of your multicultural identity. So like, your heritage culture and the kind of more like dominant western culture. And research shows that a lot of children of immigrants often aim to find some sort of like bicultural middle between their heritage culture and the like North American culture (Nguyen 510). And this like cultural “in-between” is a place where a lot of us second-generation Asian Canadians sit in. So my question for you is...as a second generation Asian Canadian, do you ever feel like you aren't “Asian-enough” to tell or represent Asian stories? And how does

your positioning between Canadian and Vietnamese culture inform the stories you gravitate towards telling?

Cathy (6:38): Um, yeah. I mean, the short answer is yes – in terms of not feeling like I can tell Asian stories. That was the question, right – if I felt Asian-enough to tell Asian stories? Yeah. And this is a really tricky question because, I think when we talk about Asian stories, we kind of have to also think ethically about this. Because as great as it is that, you know, we're standing as like a collective, especially in the face of like Asian representation as a movement...we also need to acknowledge that even within Asia, there are tons of like different cultures and cultural specificities and nuances. You know, like my experiences a Vietnamese Canadian is different maybe than someone who's like Chinese Canadian, or Japanese Canadian, or Indian Canadian. Like even within that there are a lot of nuances.

Cathy (7:37): And then also on the front of telling stories about my own culture as a Vietnamese Canadian person...that's where things get really tricky for me. Because I feel like it could, in my mind, I'm like that also could be me taking advantage of something that I have not experienced. Because I'm a Vietnamese Canadian person. I'm not a fully Vietnamese person.

Kaitlyn (8:10): Cathy's remarks reflects the complexities that exist in navigating a multicultural identity and the nuanced divides that exist within diasporic communities. Adding on to this notion of telling Asian stories in her specific positionality as a Vietnamese Canadian, Cathy had the following to say about the pressures to tell certain stories because of her Asian identity:

Cathy (8:32): I don't really feel like further, you know, contributing to this idea that like, as an Asian filmmaker, I have to only tell Asian stories, because white filmmakers don't have to do that. And it's like, and I kind of talked about this like luxury that they have in terms of being able to start off with like a blank canvas and they can kind of like paint anything on that canvas. You know, they have that freedom. But for us, especially as like women of colour filmmakers, I think there's like certain expectations for what our work is going to be about and also expectations for what the quality of our work will be. And...you know, we're trying to get rid of that. And so I feel like, it's a long way there...but those are things that just kind of make me, I guess, hesitant to say the least.

Kaitlyn (9:28): Yeah, I think that really kind of bleeds into something else that I wanted to talk about, which was the pitching aspect of making films. Because I think a lot of people outside of filmmaking don't really understand like, sometimes how that sort of structural element of race comes into play in the film industry.

Kaitlyn (9:53): And yeah, so for our listeners who don't know...pitching is basically the process in which filmmakers, kind of, try to pitch or sell their ideas in order to get them produced. And

this happens at all levels of filmmaking. So like, if you wanna pitch to like a large production company, you'll have to do that. Or to receive a grant or to be part of like a film competition. And it's an entirely different skill from filmmaking itself. It requires you to make your idea... seem sellable to these like greater powers who are gonna give you money and seem important to be made. So I guess my question for you would be, how does like "Asianness" come into the pitching process? And do you feel a need to perform your Asianness in order to get funding or opportunities?

Cathy (11:05): Um, yeah, again, very deep topic. Because I think the act of pitching, if I'm being totally honest, is completely contradictory to filmmaking. Because, you know, it's like making art is not about, you know, making, I mean for some people. You know, I guess at the core of it, it's like you're not trying to make something profitable or sellable. You're just trying to express yourself, right? Honestly and realistically. Whereas pitching is very much about like crafting a certain image, crafting what you say. You know, making it appealing and adjusting it so that it is appealing to whomever you're pitching to. And in some cases that's to white folks.

Cathy (11:48): But, um, yeah, that's something that I kind of have to deal with as a filmmaker and how I move forward is like, pitching is integral for I think a lot of grants and such things. But, but it, um...I definitely don't love it, you know? Because it feels like I have to play up a version of myself and play up a certain part of my identity that I don't want to be my whole identity too. Like, I don't want being Asian Canadian to be the only thing that people know about me. That would suck, like truly, truly suck, you know? And yet, when you're telling Asian Canadian stories, that's often the spotlight for obvious reasons. So it's very... it's a dilemma I think for a lot of us as Asian Canadian filmmakers. It's like, you don't want it to be the only thing that people know us for, but when we tell Asian Canadian stories, it's the thing that we have to pitch. So it's something to kind of like think through.

Kaitlyn (12:45): Cathy's answers about how Asianness shows up in her work reflects the tensions that exist for Asian creators from the second-gen. Internally, there can be feelings of being an "imposter" in telling Asian stories because of our biculturalness and identity denial. And yet, many of us have the desire to incorporate these parts of our identity in our work. Additionally, there are also external pressures to play into our cultural identities to get opportunities. Together, this reveal the complex factors related to our "Asianness" that shape the stories we end up telling.

[TRANSITION SOUND]

Kaitlyn (13:26): Next, Cathy and I talked about using film as a platform for catharsis and mental health support. One thing that came up in class and readings this semester was the importance of social support, specifically from friends and family, as a protective factor for mental health

(Cheung “Class 17: Mental Health”; Poon et al. 58). And yet, in Asian immigrant households stigma surrounding mental health can act as a barrier for a lot of young people in speaking about their struggles in their daily lives and reaching out to their social networks for support (Cheung “Class 17: Mental Health”; Virdee par. 4-11).

Kaitlyn (13:59): In light of this context, one way that we can think about the role of filmmaking is as a platform for creating a space for emotional release, validation, and community-building. Scholars have brought up questions about the use of art as a form of catharsis – thinking about using it as a form of empathy and healing (Kearney). For me, I wondered how catharsis achieved through film may potentially be helpful in achieving a form of emotional support for Asian young people, especially in a context where mental health is stigmatized. I asked Cathy how she’s experienced catharsis through watching films with Asian representation:

Cathy (14:38): Um, I really like this question. Um, I think...I have definitely gotten a lot of catharsis in terms of watching other films. Uh, and that's part of what made me want to get into film too. Because I think...you know, maybe like when we were kids, there wasn't obviously necessarily as much like Asian representation, especially. Definitely not in like the full force that it is now. But as we got older and we started seeing more Asian stories and just literally more Asian people on the screen, I think it's very cathartic because, in any kind of well-written piece, I feel like the characters in some ways become your friends...

Cathy (15:34): And so I think in the case of like when those characters are in the middle of a piece that's, you know, based on Asian culture, Asian representation...then it's even more visceral because it's so similar to what you've lived through and they feel close to you. Um, I'm trying to think of like, the last thing that I watched. Like watching *The Farewell* was a very cathartic experience for me because it really felt that “in-betweenness” was being reflected back at me. That idea of not being like fully Asian, or Canadian enough. I mean in that case it was Asian American, but you know, very similar. And I actually feel like it's cathartic to watch people, how do I say this? Like when people...are also sitting in that in-between, you're seeing those people also sit in that in-between... like you feel so seen because you're like, “oh man, this struggle, this dilemma that I have...is not just me.”

Kaitlyn (16:47): Cathy also talked about how she approaches catharsis in her own work:

Cathy (16:54): And then in my own work, I feel like trying to bask in kind of all the complicated emotions, or like trying to bask in everything that I was unsure about. You know, for me, I'm big on like, you know...young Asian people...like we...it's okay for us to be unsure and uncertain of what our future looks like. You know, because it's crazy to...to be a human being and living and trying to get through life. And I guess in some ways maybe trying to kind of beat that model minority myth of having to do everything to perfection and having your whole life

figured out. Whereas like, I guess my films try to combat that, you know, the fact that...we are unsure, we are uncertain, we don't know what's going on, and that's okay. And I feel like I try to put that on the screen and hopefully like, you know, my hope is that it would just...it's not gonna solve any problems, but the fact that maybe someone will watch it and think like, "Oh man, like I am as uncertain as they are and that's okay." Like I feel like that in and of itself would be a pretty big win for me because I know how much I would've appreciated seeing something on screen where, you know, it was reminding me that the unpredictability of everything is okay. You know, it's not within your control. So, I think anytime...I just try to make films that like maybe try to reassure me and others, hopefully, and I find that cathartic. Yeah.

Kaitlyn (18:38): Yeah. Something about like seeing yourself reflected in the characters, but then also seeing them like do things and like live through life. I think it make life seem less scary for a lot of us. But I think there's also that side of it that like, it allows you to connect with other people who maybe have like...a similar experience. I know with like *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), there's a lot of discourse happening both like online or like in person with audiences that...I guess give a sense of maybe imagined community that like, "oh, I'm not alone. Like there are a lot of other people who feel the same way." And so kind of in that, at least there's a sense of like "I'm not as isolated maybe as I thought I was in my experience."

Cathy (19:46): Yeah, totally. You know, I think that's probably one of the best things about the outcome of Asian representation in film is like the community that it's brought together and how like we've become a support system for each other. You know, it's like really about...especially when you're like an emerging filmmaker...it's like you have to champion each other, root for each other, support each other because, you know, because if you do that for other people, they'll reciprocate it. That's really like the kind of relationship that makes Asian representation flourish. Otherwise, you know, if you weren't standing like in solidarity... you know, it just wouldn't work.

Kaitlyn (20:28): Making and watching films can act as a form of catharsis – which can be especially important in the context of the mental health of Asian young people. Seeing ourselves on-screen shows us that we're not alone in our struggles and can hopefully encourage us to seek out other individuals within our diasporic communities – beginning to start those discourses around mental health.

[TRANSITION SOUND]

Kaitlyn (20:53): Cathy and I ended our conversation talking about the model minority myth and her experiences with external pressures based on expectations surrounding her Asianness. As a refresher, the Model Minority Myth places Asian people in a position where they are seen as an "exemplary" minority group who has succeeded through simply "working-hard" and being

“exceedingly smart” (Padgett et al. 223). This sort of conception is problematic for a number of reasons including in perpetuating anti-blackness and anti-Indigenous racism (Chiu; Yi and Todd). But it can also be harmful to the Asian community – particularly for young Asian people. Research shows that the model minority myth negatively impacts the well-being and mental health of Asian people – and has a particularly disparaging impact on members of the second-generation whose high competence being associated with poorer mental health (Padgett et al. 229). I asked Cathy to share about her experiences with the model minority myth as an Asian Canadian filmmaker:

Cathy (21:59): Um, so in terms of my relationship to the model minority myth, I think...I think my own worst perpetrator of that is like me, myself, towards myself. I think I've used it, probably, subconsciously. Like I never thought to myself, I've never thought to myself like “model minority myth, I need to be like ‘this’ kind of outstanding.” But I think I've subconsciously used it as a justification for negatively impacting my mental health or physical health.

You know, like, this idea of like perseverance or really pushing through. And how, you know, cause I consider my parents very...they're very persevering people. And so I feel like I've used that as a way to like justify like putting myself through really like negative mental or physical experiences. Like, oh, you know, “they've gotten through so much, like, I can get through this. I shouldn't be complaining.” So I think that that is how it's mostly manifested all throughout my life...like, you know, not feeling like I could ever complain. Or...yeah, not feeling like I'd ever complain about what I'm going through negatively, because of my “Asianness.” You know, I think that's really kind of like the root of it.

Kaitlyn (23:32): Well, I feel like what you were talking about in terms of your parents, like yeah, seeing their example, I think that's something that is really important. Cause it's not only this like, I guess overt “thing” of like our parents telling us like, “oh, you need to be this way.” But it's kind of like seeing them on survival mode...a lot. And like seeing how much they sacrifice for us, that it's kind of like...it's something that we put on ourselves because that's a model that we've seen.

Cathy (24:09): Yeah. And I think, and this is really sad because we're kind of just doing it to ourselves. Not that it's not, you know, not that our parents don't play a part in it. But I know for me, like my parents, again, like have not, have not ever imposed too much. And I feel very grateful for that. But the byproduct of that is me imposing a lot on myself (laughs), which is not good either. Um, so, yeah, I think what that results in is like having these unrealistic expectations for yourself and feeling like...there is no breaking point for you. But everybody has a breaking point mentally and physically, right? So I feel like, you know, that for me has been the hardest

part is like accepting the fact that maybe I can't be outstanding or the best because those are not like attainable things. Like it's like reaching for things that are not real, like, you know?

Cathy (25:19): Um, so, yeah...and you know, it really is just like that byproduct of having a good career, financial stability, all that jazz, that is also contradictory to the filmmaking lifestyle that is so unpredictable. And, you know, there are ups and downs. And especially if you're like a freelancer? That's even more predictability. So it's just like...the model minority myth completely clashes against the artistic life style. And and then so it's like, because I know that, I'm trying to be the best “quote unquote” filmmaker that I can...to try and compensate for the fact that I can't, you know, be “that kind” of model minority. If that makes sense.

[TRANSITION SOUND]

Kaitlyn (26:10): My conversation with Cathy highlighted how navigating storytelling and art as an second-generation Asian Canadian can bring up a lot of pressures and expectations. Expectations about what to write as an Asian person or an Asian woman; expectations around how “Asian” we should be; how hard we should be working, what level of success we should be attaining. These intersections of our identities impact how we experience the world, and what is expected of us. From society, from grant committees, from our families, from ourselves. These expectations, in some ways, place limits on what we are able to create and impact how we see ourselves – placing us into a box.

Kaitlyn (27:00): We can also understand film and representation as being really important in allowing us to heal, to be seen, and to create community especially in cultural contexts where talking about mental health can be stigmatized. Circling back to the question: “what type of stories do we want to tell as Asian Canadians?” I think for us, our next steps are trying to move past these limits and expectations that are placed on us because of our identity markers, to able to tell stories beyond our Asianness as Asian filmmakers. I'll end the podcast with this quote from Cathy which poignantly captures the hope that we share for the future of Asian representation:

Cathy (27:45): I don't know, I feel like just the important thing is just the idea that as an Asian filmmaker, like my whole identity isn't being based around the fact that I'm Asian. And I feel like that's something we're still striving towards. You know, there's one thing to make being Asian the focus of the story and then another is like, being Asian informs the story and the characters. I think my identity is wonderful and despite all its hardships and burdens, it has informed how I move through the world. But I don't want it to...just..you know...fill up all of who I am. Like I think I have a lot to offer beyond just that, as a filmmaker especially. So I would hope that just like, that we get to that point one day. That's really just my hope and my goal as an Asian Canadian filmmaker...is to reach that point. We're working towards it, but I think that'll be the day when we really have that freedom.

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