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"The (In)Visible Man": Renegotiating Asian American Masculinities in the 21st Century

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Keywords

(in)visibilities, men and masculinities studies, Asian American studies, genders and sexualities studies, intersectionality

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_Abstract

The (In)Visible Man film is an artistic extension of my ongoing doctoral project: "Submission Is Power: Remasculinization in Contemporary Asian American Literature." Through a blend of abstract dance and fragmented diaristic dialogues, the film explores the complex struggles faced by Asian American men, whose masculinities have long been obscured by historical stereotypes that render them effeminate and submissive. It also visually captures Asian American men's process of resistance to make visible and redefine their gender identities, challenging the pervasive invisibility of their masculinities. The film poses critical questions about certain aspects of the Asian American male identity such as power dynamics, body image, queerness and sexualities, as well as the relationship between masculinities and nature. Through an intersectional lens, the film delves into the intricate intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and power within Asian American masculinities, calling for a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics and cultural identities.

Watch the full film online here: https://www.on-culture.org/journal/perspectives/the-invisible-man/

1_Context

The experiences of Asian American[1] masculinities throughout US history should attract attention from artists and scholars. From 1875 to 1965, a series of exclusion policies and legislation enacted by the US government, which limited the immigration of Asian women into the US and prohibited miscegenation between Asian American men and White[2] women, led to the celibacy of Asian American men en masse.[3] The image of these men doing 'feminized' jobs in laundromats, restaurants, or service sectors created the stereotypes of Asian American men as effeminate, submissive, asexual, or even hypersexual.[4] In American cultural products of the 19th and 20th centuries, Asian American men were either portrayed as supervillains like Dr. Fu Manchu, who lacked heterosexuality but posed great danger to White women, or effeminate subjects in movies such as *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) or *Sixteen Candles* (1984), the sitcom series *The Simpsons* (premiered 1989), the play *M. Butterfly* (premiered 1988), or the novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1993).[5] All these features developed into emasculated stereotypes of Asian American masculinities and gave birth to remasculinization movements in Asian American literature. Pioneering this were the masculinist cultural

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2022.1501

projects in the late 1960s and 1970s helmed by Asian American male authors, such as Frank Chin, Jeffrey P. Chan, Gus Lee, and others, who called for a radical reconstruction of Asian American masculinities in art and literature (even though the projects are now viewed as androcentric and nationalistic).[6]

The 21st century has witnessed notable changes in representations of Asian American masculinities in cultural products. With increasing economic and cultural exchanges between (East) Asia[7] and the US, contemporary literary approaches to Asian American masculinities now choose to embrace intersectionality and substantially deviate from masculine norms. Features once marked as masculine shortcomings such as 'bottomhood', or being 'effeminate' or 'submissive,' and are now turned into a new power, challenging boundaries and dimensions of masculine ideals. Critically acclaimed and commercially successful films such as *Searching* (2018), *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), and *Past Lives* (2023), and literary works by authors like Julia Otsuka, David Chang, Ocean Vuong, Ken Liu, John Yau, etc. have helped to bring Asian American narratives into the mainstream, and shift perceptions towards Asian American masculinities. Recent empirical research also reveals that Asian American men are increasingly perceived as more "desirable romantic partners" in the US, as "soft" masculinities are now met with more favorable attitudes.[8]

All these changes suggest a growing interest in Asian American masculinities within both popular culture and academia, underscoring the timeliness of more comprehensive studies in this area. In the 21st century, as Masculinity Studies and Asian American Studies have evolved into significant academic fields, it is increasingly essential to conduct interdisciplinary research and artistic projects that explore dimensions of Asian American masculinities, to help shed light on how contemporary writers and artists challenge and subvert stereotypes and redefine masculinities.

2_*The (In)Visible Man* Film

The (In)Visible Man film (original: *The Eco-Man*)[9] is an artistic extension of my ongoing dissertation project "Submission Is Power: Remasculinization in Contemporary Asian American Literature." The film examines the intricate challenges encountered by Asian American men, whose masculinities have often been distorted by historical stereotypes portraying them as effeminate and submissive in American

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2022.1501

society. Using an intersectional lens of race, gender, sexuality, and power, the film showcases Asian American men's journey to resist these stereotypes, striving to make visible and redefine their masculinities. The film challenges viewers' assumptions about 'soft' masculinities and demands more nuanced perspectives on gender dynamics, cultural identities, and the various forms that masculinity can take.

Fig. 1: The (In)Visible Man behind the scenes, © Đỗ Thảo Nhi

I wrote and directed The (In)Visible Man via Zoom, and the film was produced by the team at TN's Language Room10 in Vietnam. It premiered at the Opening Workshop of the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) in Rauischholzhausen, Germany, on October 31, 2024, and is scheduled to be shown in an upcoming workshop about Gender Studies organized by TN's Language Room in Huế City, Vietnam, in the summer of 2025.

3_(In)Visible Masculinities and (In)Visible Body

Following the historical trajectory of Asian America more broadly, *The (In)Visible Man* delves into enduring struggles faced by Asian American men. The film abstractly traces Asian American masculine experiences, starting with Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese immigration in the 19th century to the US, continuing with waves of Indian and Southeast Asian immigration in the 20th century, and extending into our time.[11] Since the majority of early Asian immigrants to the US came from China, Taiwan, and Japan, the portrayal of the Asian American man in media and literature is

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2022.1501

predominantly associated with the image of an East Asian man, which contributes to the issue of Asian pan-ethnicity within Asian America.[12] In the film, the Asian American man, played by actor Phan Đình Lộc, is portrayed as constantly grappling with his masculinities, attempting to pursue some masculine ideals that are perpetually out of reach. The highlighted lines of dialogue "to look like *them*, to be like *them*" echo with R.W. Connell's concept of *hegemonic masculinities*, which refers to the domination of certain forms of masculinities over other masculinities and femininities. Hegemonic masculinities symbolize masculine ideals and legitimate gender hierarchies.[13] However, Connell, along with later scholars like Kelly H. Chong and Nadia Y. Kim, also assert that hegemonic masculinities do not comprise "a fixed set of traits, but a 'currently accepted strategy,' specific to a particular time and place, and alterable."[14] In the dialogues, the word 'them' does not refer to any particular form of masculinity within US society; instead, it interrogates the (im)possibility and ambiguities surrounding masculine ideals. To borrow Connell's words, these ideals embody "the current most honored way of being a man,"[15] but one is left to question whether any man can truly achieve them.

Fig. 2: The Asian American man tries to mimic masculine ideals, © Đỗ Thảo Nhi

Despite these ambiguities, the Asian American man is seen to negotiate his *power* by 'moving' his masculinities as close as possible to masculine ideals via cultural practices. In the case of US society, this indicates White heterosexual masculinities

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(even though it's unclear if heterosexual White men can achieve masculine ideals): "to *look like* them, to *be like* them." By mimicking his White counterparts' behavior and values, the Asian American man seeks to make visible his masculinities, even at the expense of exercising power over other forms of subordinate masculinities and femininities, thus creating sub-hegemonic hierarchies within the dynamics of Asian American masculinities.

The film draws inspiration from the literary works of Frank Chin, who was notably outspoken about the remasculinization of Asian American literature in the 1960s. However, Chin's approach to reasserting Asian American masculinity has been widely criticized as a "path of violence," as well as for its fixation on "the White gaze," which in turn marginalizes gay Asian American men and women.[16] In his effort to remasculinize the Asian American man, Chin shaped his characters with such traits of toxic masculinity—indulgence in sex, alcohol, materialistic consumption, aggression, and seeking domination—as were often assumed to be essential for a White heterosexual man in the US society.[17] In the 21st century, struggles faced by Asian American men, as well as problems in constructing Asian American masculinities, continue to resurface in contemporary literature by authors like Charles Yu, David Chang, Hua Hsu, Ocean Vuong, and others. From this vantage point, *The (In)Visible Man* portrays the Asian American man torn between expressing his own masculinities and conforming to traits considered desirable in US society, such as growing a mustache, flexing muscles, and engaging in stereotypically masculine behaviors like drinking alcohol and joining gangs. This internal conflict is pictured in the lines: "What's wrong with my body?/Muscle-flexing/Mustache-growing/Spitting and drinking and hanging out with the real men?/But I am still way too soft," highlighting the Asian American man's deep insecurity about his body.

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Fig. 3: The Asian American man ponders over his body image, © Đỗ Thảo Nhi

By picturing the Asian American man questioning the validity of his own body, the film aligns with David L. Eng's Racial Castration theories. Eng argues that, within the context of the US cultural imaginary, the Asian American man has been both materially and psychically feminized, symbolically viewed as castrated with an *invisible* penis.[18] Other contemporary scholars like Alexander Wong and Joel Yu have also followed this point and criticized media portrayals of Asian American men as "nerds," "perpetual foreigners," "short," "small-penised," "hairless-bodied wimps," who lack Euro-centric aesthetics and exhibit generally negative body images.[19]

In the film, the Asian American man strives to break free from the stereotypes but finds himself unable to escape the weight of history or his own identity. He is then thrown into confusion and frustration with himself. His mental state forces him into a vicious circle of constantly self-evaluating his masculinities. Through the visual portrayal of the mental struggles of the Asian American man regarding his body image, the film invites the viewer to reflect on and engage in broader conversations about the politics of the Asian American masculine body.

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Fig. 4: The Asian American man questions his masculinities, © Đỗ Thảo Nhi

4_Bottomhood and Queer Asian American Masculinities

Another key aspect that *The (In)Visible Man* seeks to address is the politics of Asian American queer manhood. Drawing on recent studies by Tan Hoang Nguyen on bottomhood,[20] the film adopts the perspective of a 'bottom' to explore and challenge stereotypes surrounding 'soft' masculinities, particularly those linked to passive sex roles and perceived subordination to the dominant 'top' in queer relationships.

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2022.1501

Fig. 5: "And on one fresh morning/his hand touched mine/every time I kiss him/I feel so alive," © Đỗ Thảo Nhi

This segment of the film moves the viewer's gaze away from heteronormativity to question and subvert the widespread assumption in Western gay sub-culture that Asian-looking men have a propensity for the bottom position in gay sex.[21] In the film, the Asian American man is seen to be tortured between his feelings toward his love interests ("and on one fresh morning/his hand touched mine/every time I kiss him/I feel so alive") and the emasculated stereotypes he has to face ("but when I was under him, I felt like I had ruined myself"). Such lines are closely tied to the complex power dynamics rooted in the top-bottom dichotomy, where an Asian-looking man is often stereotyped as occupying the submissive, bottom role and consequently possessing less power in a sexual relationship. Tan Hoang Nguyen emphasizes that this top-bottom binary is far more multifaceted, involving continuous negotiations of power between two parties, with neither position achieving complete power and control.[22] The dialogue in the film also conveys the Asian American queer man's frustration over his love and desire. He finds it impossible to love someone without bearing the weight of power hierarchy and the bottom stereotypes. Driven by this anger, he yearns for power and the subversion of the stereotypes. In relinquishing control over his masculinities, allowing it to be 'ruined,' the Asian American queer man gains the power to control the desire of his partner. Through his powerlessness, vulnerability, and emasculation, he asserts power over the top, ultimately positioning himself as the dominant.

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2022.1501

Seen in this light, *The (In)Visible Man* invites the viewer to engage in a queering process, reassessing and redefining the top-bottom binary as well as turning our gaze to a broader perspective on masculine power dynamics within the US context, with the intersections of sexuality, gender, and race. The US immigration history has emasculated Asian American masculine subjects, especially queer masculinities, and placed them in the role of the imaginary bottom. This particular historical context has shaped the ways Asian American men are publicly perceived and categorized, reducing them to passive, submissive figures not only in the sexual but also social spheres. An Asian man living in the US is expected to play certain roles. He should not be a dominant. He must not be a top. If he has a romantic or sexual relationship with a man of another race, he is assumed to play the role of a bottom and be submissive to the top.

By constructing the bottomhood of the Asian American man as both vulnerable and powerful, *The (In)Visible Man* aims to shatter these stereotypes and the traditional binary of power, showing how vulnerability can coexist with strength, and how submission can be an act of defiance rather than one of defeat. In addition, it displays how race, gender, and sexuality can intersect to shape the roles one is expected to play—and also how these roles can be subverted and transformed to create new possibilities for self-expression and empowerment. Through his bottomhood and submission, the Asian American man reclaims his power and re-asserts his masculinities, thus offering the viewer a new understanding of dominance and submission, and power dynamics. This opens up space for the reinvention of masculine identities and desires, as well as new constructions of queer masculinities.

5_From "Rice/Soy Boy" to the Asian (American) Eco-Man?

I frame this section with a question mark to signal that it remains open for discussion and novel perspectives for the film. As noted in some studies about eco-masculinities, the US literary tradition has long positioned patriarchal power over nature as a national goal, with the image of an American man (usually White) conquering the 'virgin' land and establishing himself as the master of nature.[23] In contemporary contexts, scholars are calling for the rejection of this "frontier" image[24] of American masculinities and instead embracing the ecological approach when studying the relationship between men and nature[25]. With a different immigration history, Asian American masculinities did not occupy the same 'conquering' role nor share the same masculine values with

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2022.1501

their White counterparts, and therefore can serve as a vantage point from which to study a new form of eco-masculinities: *the Asian (American) Eco-Man*.[26]

In *The (In)Visible Man*, I chose to explore one particular aspect of the Asian (American) Eco-Man: the relationship between men, masculinities, and the consumption of animal products. In their 2018 research, Iselin Gambert and Tobias Linné indicate that the consumption of products such as milk has become a symbol of racial and masculine purity, "connecting pseudo-science claims about milk, lactose tolerance, race, and masculinity,"[27] and that drinking milk "reinforces notions of white superiority and idealized visions of masculinity."[28] Their study then explores the "rice boy" and "soy boy" stereotypes, which refer to masculine forms that have a connection with a plant-based diet (e.g.: consuming significant amounts of rice or soybeans) and are deemed to be "effeminate" and "weak." These portrayals are often linked to Asian or non-White cultures, where rice or soya beans play a significant part in men's daily diets. The term "soy boy" can also derive from the widespread unscientific belief that drinking soy milk or consuming soya-based food can result in the reduction of testosterone in a male-gendered body,[29] thus feminizing men and negatively affecting masculinities. Therefore, soy milk, in contrast to 'real' milk, represents emasculation and the failure of manhood. In the 2010s, the #SoyBoy was a popular hashtag on Twitter (now X) and some other social platforms, with men following veganism raising voices to reclaim their masculinities, demanding for reframing of masculinities in digital politics.[30]

In an empirical study on the relationship between masculinities and veganism conducted in 2023, Kadri Aavik highlights that studying men's veganism can open up conversations about "the potential of humanity's transition to more sustainable and ethical ways of eating and relating to other animals."[31] *The (In)Visible Man* takes up this stance to interrogate the links between men, masculinities, and food consumption. Can a man maintain his masculinity if he chooses not to kill animals or eat meat? Is it possible for him to coexist with nature on equal terms while still embodying masculine ideals? Can he be regarded as a valid masculine subject if he rejects dominance and control over other masculine subjects, femininities, and the non-human world?

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Fig. 6: "Can I be a man without eating meat?," © Đỗ Thảo Nhi

These questions are interconnected with some global issues that we are dealing with in the 21st century, such as climate change, racial discrimination, and gender inequalities. Deriving from a non-conquering historical background, the Asian (American) eco-man disrupts the image of a master of nature and forms a focal point to foster conversations about sustainability and masculinities. How can masculinities be practiced without exploiting the non-human world? How can men embody masculinities without inflicting damage upon the planet, others, and themselves? Can men from diverse cultures and backgrounds collaboratively engage with ecological issues and collectively redefine their masculinities? All of this leads to perhaps one of the most important questions of our time: *what does it mean to be a man in this world?*

Fig. 7: "To be a man in this world," © Đỗ Thảo Nhi

_Endnotes

1 As of 2021, The Associated Press no longer hyphenates Asian American or any of its derivatives: Jessica Jacolbe, "On Hyphens and Racial Indicators," *JSTOR Daily*, August 14, 2019, <https://daily.jstor.org/on-hyphens-and-racial-indicators/>.

2 "Capitalizing Black and White: Grammatical Justice and Equity MacArthur Foundation," accessed March 4, 2025, <https://www.macfound.org/press/perspectives/capitalizing-black-and-white-grammatical-justice-and-equity>.

3 Huping Ling and Allan Austin, *Asian American History and Culture: An Encyclopedia*, vol. 1–2 (New York: Routledge, 2010).

4 Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1993).

5 Yen Ling Shek, "Asian American Masculinity: A Review of Literature," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 14, no. 3 (2006): 379–391.

6 Ana Sau-ling C. Wong and Jeffrey Santa, "Gender and Sexuality in Asian American Literature," *Signs* 25, no. 1 (1999): 171–226.

7 Due to the immigration history of Asian America, the earliest waves of Asian immigrants coming to the US primarily came from East Asian countries, such as China, Taiwan, and Japan. As a result, representations of Asian American masculinities have been predominantly portrayed with East Asian traits. This has contributed to the issue of pan-ethnicity within Asian America, which I address in another section of this article. I place 'East' in brackets here to highlight this issue, ensuring that readers do not conflate the entire Asian continent with the specific historical context of economic and cultural exchanges between 'Asia' and the US.

8 Kelly H. Chong and Nadia Y. Kim, "'The Model Man': Shifting Perceptions of Asian American Masculinity and the Renegotiation of a Racial Hierarchy of Desire," *Men and Masculinities* 25, no. 5 (2021). Doi: 10.1177/1097184X211043563.

[9] The original title *The Eco-Man* refers to the concept of eco-Asian American masculinities, an aspect I am researching in my dissertation. After discussion, my team and I decided to revise the title to *The (In)Visible Man*, as it more effectively aligns with my current research findings and the "In_Visibilities" issue of *On_Culture*.

[10] TN's Language Room is a non-profit English-language literary salon based in Hue City, Vietnam that I founded in 2023.

[11] Ling and Austin, *Asian American History and Culture*.

[12] Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

[13] R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[14] Chong and Kim, "'The Model Man': Shifting Perceptions of Asian American Masculinity and the Renegotiation of a Racial Hierarchy of Desire," 3.

[15] R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 832.

[16] Wenying Xu, *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 38.

[17] Xu, *Eating Identities*, 37–38.

[18] David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

[19] Alexander Lu Wong and Joel Yu, "Stressful Experiences of Masculinity Among US-Born and Immigrant Asian American Men," *Gender and Society* 27, no. 3 (2013): 345–371.

[20] Tan Hoang Nguyen, *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual* Representation (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

[21] Nguyen, *A View from the Bottom*, x.

[22] Nguyen, *A View from the Bottom*.

[23] Rubén Cenamor and Stefan L. Brandt, eds., *Ecomasculinities: Negotiating Male Gender Identity in U.S. Fiction* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2019).

[24] Stefan L. Brandt, "The Wild Ones: Ecomasculinities in the American Literary Imagination," in *Ecomasculinities: Negotiating Male Gender Identity in the US*, eds. Rubén Cenamor and Stefan L. Brandt (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2019), 1–30.

[25] Cenamor and Brandt, *Ecomasculinities*, vii–xvii.

[26] I put 'American' in brackets because this part can also be linked with Asian masculinities outside the US context.

[27] Iselin Gambert and Tobias Linné, "From Rice Eaters to Soy Boys: Race, Gender, and Tropes of 'Plant Food Masculinity,'" *Animal Studies Journal* 7, no. 2 (2018): 129.

[28] Gambert and Linné, "From Rice Eaters to Soy Boys," 160.

[29] Jessica Migala, "Is Soy Really Bad for Men? Here's What the Science Says," *Hone Health* (blog), April 25, 2023, <https://honehealth.com/edge/is-soy-bad-for-men/>.

[30] Gambert and Linné, "From Rice Eaters to Soy Boys."

[31] Kadri Aavik, *Contesting Anthropocentric Masculinities through Veganism: Lived Experiences of Vegan Man* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).