
MALWARE

A MALware Technical Report
The Media Archaeology Lab
University of Colorado at Boulder
1320 Grandview Avenue
Boulder, CO 80302
<http://mediaarchaeologylab.com>

TECHNICAL REPORT

Asian Erasure

Océane Andreis & Dan Liu

& Grace Wilson

University of Colorado at Boulder

Abstract

Asian Erasure showcases the often offensive portrayals of Asian communities in western media and Asian trailblazers who have long been challenging these portrayals through work in-front and behind the scenes. The project focused on gathering information about movies that have misrepresented the AAPI community and the second one was to gather individuals who are part of the AAPI community as well as the media industry. The data was manually cleaned and formatted to be displayed via a website. The website was designed through multiple Figma iterations and then followed by using Next.js and github to deploy it. Asian Erasure is a culmination of passion, data collection/ cleaning, design, and coding.

About the Authors

Océane is a passionate and driven individual striving to maximize the impact that coding has for societies, desiring to work with nonprofit organizations in developing tools to assist in solving social issues.

Grace believes in the power of cultural myths and changing perceptions through hands-on experiences.

She also believes history can teach us a great deal, if we learn to look critically.

Dan is passionate about empathizing with others to learn their side of the story. Believing that good designers should embrace diverse cultures and needs, she endeavors to utilize her programming and design skills to introduce practical and customized solutions.

Collection of Data

Asian Erasure

How do you demonstrate an absence? In the history of film representations of Asian people in the United States and England we have seen a variety of distortions and omissions. The common categories we noticed were:

- "Yellowface": when a non-Asian person plays as an Asian character.
- Stereotypes: Forcing Asian actors to play racist, xenophobic stereotypes in order to be paid as actors.
- Rewriting: turning characters that were Asian in another media-form into non-Asian characters or changing characters from one Asian culture to

another (E.G. a Korean character in a book is now played by an actor from India).

Together, these tactics are incredibly common in western cinema, to the point where there may be more appearances of white actors playing Asian people than Asian actors playing Asian people, though given the massive number of films and limited documentation of yellowface, this is difficult to prove.

Process:

To collect data on these forms of Asian erasure:

- To start, I largely pulled from different open-source lists from Wikipedia:
 - Examples of yellowface
 - Portrayal of East Asians in American film and theater
- I then used [Film-Affinity](#) to gather posters and film synopses for the films.
- I stored the posters on Flickr,
- I claimed fair-use critique as the purpose for the Flickr collection. Here is an example of the language that I used to claim fair use critique (not court-tested or lawyer approved!):

"A compilation of Fu Manchu film posters from 1923 to 1981. All posters remain the property of their respective copyright holders. This work is a fair use comparison of Fu Manchu representations through the years which would not be possible without the images. It is of cultural and critical importance and is not being used for the same purpose as the original creation of the posters for the promotion of the films."

- I then used the Northwestern University Knight Lab's timeline feature to portray them on our website.
 - This is a great timeline tool because it requires no code to build, only basic knowledge of excel and it is fairly well documented.
 - In addition, edits made to the google sheet will be automatically updated on the website, which allows further refinement over time.
 - It is also used by multiple large newsrooms, supporting its longevity, and based on google sheets, which are easily downloadable for future timeline tools if the Knight Lab ceases its support.
- When eating an elephant, it is helpful to take a bite at a time. Process-wise, the largest chunk of

time was spent reeling in horror over the terrible portrayals. Productivity increased when a session was limited to working on one series or character: Fu Manchu or Charlie Chan rather than trying to find an exhaustive count of "Dragon Ladies".

- Some other helpful resources were:
 - A memo from the Media Action Network for Asian Americans: Restrictive Portrayals of Asians in the Media and How to Balance Them

Goals for the future:

- It's really important to situate these portrayals in a larger historical context to see where they came from, and in order to guard against them now. I would like to add Eras, such as:
 - The Hays Code and its nasty connection to miscegenation laws, where Asian actors could not be love interests of White actors because it was literally illegal for multiracial couples to exist.
 - The Pacific theater of World War two which fueled massive anti-Japanese sentiment and the internment of 120,000 American citizens of Japanese descent.

- The Korean war, the Vietnam war, the Cold War
- Interviews with Asian and non-Asian people of a variety of ages as to how they view populations mediated through media.
- Make a process-guide that is population-agnostic, so that folks can build data-sets for their own population of choice, say portrayals of people with mental illnesses or portrayals of Mexican Americans, any population can be examined in this way.
- Find other methods beyond timelines to capture the media portrayals:
 - Compilation videos
 - Scripts and casting calls
- Clarify which films commit which pitfalls.

Asian Trailblazers

We were looking at actors and actresses and then we realized we should be talking about creators working behind the scene as well. On the internet, there was a lack of resources to find historical figures from the Asian community in the media sector. We gathered film directors, actors, set designers, and animators. We hope to find more individuals and increase our list and create ways to filter.

Prototyping

Before the grant (context)

This project began before the micro-grant that we received as a class assignment for Danielle Szafir's Data Visualization class our team took in the spring of 2021. We decided to look at discrimination against Asian and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community members as a result of the xenophobia set off by COVID-19.

We wanted to map where incidents of hate were happening, and where there were larger and smaller populations of people of AAPI heritage to see, in part, if there were areas that had especially high levels of hate compared to the size of the community. As we were mapping, we realized that there were serious ethical concerns to mapping AAPI communities. If people want to do these communities harm, it feels dangerous to do the hard work of collecting targets through various data scraping methods for people to easily select from. After the class, we also had a lot of questions and ideas that this microgrant made it possible to pursue.

Brainstorming:

Educational Wiki:

We thought about creating an educational wiki that would have different foods, cultures and stories for different Asian communities and cultures to counteract the pan-Asian stereotypes and celebrate differences.

Resource collection:

We also thought of possibly creating a collection of resources for AAPI community members to connect with others in their culture in their area, data mapping focusing on resources such as community centers rather than on businesses. We decided against this because it is hard to upkeep, and google maps and wikipedia already do many of these things.

The Mega-project:

We then started dreaming up a mega-project that was, in-fact six projects in one;

- Talking to Asian and non-Asian populations about their conceptions of Asian cultures
- (mostly racist) Asian Representation in the west

- stories of immigration
- food stories as they relate to immigration and how food can teach us about sense of self
- Recipes from different people on the same dish (micro-cultural differences)
- Surveying non-Asian people about how they view Asian cultures, surveying Asian people about their culture and other Asian cultures

We then decided to focus on the survey, because we felt that the survey would produce the answers for the other parts of the mega-project.

The survey

As we started building the survey, we came across several large obstacles. One is that writing surveys that capture the nuance needed for social science is extremely difficult. Another is that there are a great many different ways one could be tied to one or multiple Asian cultures, and even the definition of "Asian" and "Pacific Islander" has its own complexities.

We also realized that since it would be difficult to get the depth we wanted for the surveys, we would need to interview people, and if we were going to interview people we would need to consider how we were capturing what they were saying, which led to us concluding we would probably need IRB approval for our project, and that by limiting interviews to people whose languages we spoke, we would be heavily shifting the possible stories told.

We considered having people able to add to a web page with their own stories without needing to be interviewed, but concluded that if we were to have any depth to the stories, we would probably need both moderators to reduce offensive responses and a marketing campaign to get serious responses.

The scope of the mega-project was now starting to look like a social media site, and we knew that we did not have the time, budget or desire to create this. From this crescendo of possibility and massive scope-creep, we decided once again to take a step back. At first we thought about creating an online web magazine with people sharing parts of their culture, but found similar projects (with identical names) that had been started recently. We were crushed for a moment that what

finally seemed like the perfect project was already happening, but it was also a useful point to reset.

[We created a google sheets spreadsheet](#) that we could all easily add to and created an idea analysis process. We all wrote down all of our ideas we had created so far with this information:

- Project Idea
- Purpose
- Target Demographics
- Requirements
- Time Expectation
- Finance
-

We then all wrote down

- pros
- cons
- Vote

for each of the ideas that we could think of, and then we voted for our three favorite ideas. We had an overlap of all three votes for one project idea:

- Project Idea: (mostly racist) Asian Representation in the west
- Purpose: Show people the racism and trouble of many ads and the legacy of colonialism in the

United states with maps of destroyed ethnic enclaves (chinatowns, little saigons, little tokyos, etc.)

- Target Demographics: People who want to learn more about the cruelty of monolith-ism and the power of true stories, people who want to write their own stories (Blog or medium style project choosing an ad or troubling depiction)
- Requirements: A bunch of racist ads, a bunch of AAPI folks interested in talking about those ads or media portrayals, reimaginings of better stories
- Time Expectation: 2 months
- Finance: Depends on if we need to buy physical media (we could have a show in the Black Box)
- Pros: Oci: I personally haven't seen this done before so this would be a really unique thing to do. Grace: this could be really empowering and powerful for folks to reimagine what stories could be like.... but is this mapping (how to tie it into tech? Honestly maybe using VCRs and having a live exhibition of the old and the new stories)
- Cons: Oci: This probably would take a while to research and compile Grace: This could be emotionally painful to the people responding and it could be difficult to find folks who want to write, speak, reimagine

- Vote: Grace, Oceane, Dan

From this we began to prototype using Figma and build out our website using React.js and open-source best practices to create a collection of bad representations of Asian community members as well as trailblazers making a difference.

Brainstorming lessons learned:

Watch out for scope-creep and duplicating existing resources.

- We learned to set a flag if we said "It's like XXX but it's YYY", for example: "It's like Wikipedia, but for cultures".

Break down your big project into small projects and collectively choose one

- Your project will grow to fit your scope, and it helps to see everything you're thinking of.

Write your most realistic time estimate, now double it.

Prototyping with Figma

After finalizing our project idea, we visualized prototype design ideas on Figma. In order to have a friendly and pleasant user interface to talk about this relatively heavy topic, we decided to adopt a colorful and playful graphic style for our website. Starting designing on the Pitfalls page, we went through multiple iterations of backgrounds with different geometric shapes and color combinations to ensure readability and a unique characteristic. When choosing the colors, we intentionally avoid using the colors that could be associated with Asian stereotypes and negative symbolism in Asian culture. For example, we avoided using yellow and red for the title color because yellow is a discriminative racial color metaphor and red is associated with blood and death in some Asian cultures.

Although our final prototype developed using React.js has some discrepancies from our Figma prototype, the Figma prototype gives us a great foundation of how we should program our site. The differences shown on the final prototype were discussed and decided to improve overall user experience.

React.js

React.js is a JavaScript library that allows us to build UI components and reuse them. The ecosystem of react is supported by many developers worldwide as well by Facebook. It's popularity makes it an ideal technology for a new open source project. Our code lives inside a git repository which resides on github. Github is extremely popular as a place to foster open source and it makes it easy for people to find public issues aimed at beginners. We started out using React Router for the navigation component and did a 180 and started coding in NextJS. Next.js is a React Based framework with server side rendering capability. To style our app(based on the Figma), we use SASS, a great modern preprocessor scripting language that is interpreted or compiled into Cascading Style Sheets. We opted to use it because as the app grows our styling will grow and SASS makes extending our stylesheet a breeze.

User Testing

Testing methods

To test what the project means and how it benefits the AAPI community, we will conduct user testing with a group of users from different backgrounds to gather

diverse feedback. Testers with a programming background may be helpful to provide feedback on the technical building of our prototype, while testers with a design background may help us understand if our project can effectively convey messages to readers. We will also invite testers who are members of the AAPI community to evaluate our project. Their feedback is key to show us if our messages are beneficial to the AAPI community and how that would impact the AAPI community. There will be multiple forms of testing depending on the user's needs. Users who aren't available for a testing session moderated by us will be invited to test our project on their own and communicate their thoughts and suggestions with us through emails. Users who are able to commit to a testing session will be invited to a pre-scheduled zoom meeting and asked to simultaneously share their thoughts with us when testing the project. Emails sent to testers will include all the questions below to collect feedback. Testing session will use these questions as foundation, but may not touch on all questions. Testers and moderators are encouraged to discuss areas that are not mentioned in the questions below but key to the findings.

Questions

What does the website make you think?

How does it strike you?

How does our content and design differ from the other websites focusing on similar topics?

What are some things you like about this project?

What are some things you don't like about it?

What kind of impact do you think this project will have to the AAPI community?

How can we improve this project to bring more impact?

Testers

David - Senior Dev (Tech)

Yvonne (part of the AAPI community) - Design and react

Xuedan - Design and Web

Lori Emerson - MAL person perspectives on the info that we're presenting

Ellen Do - (AAPI community) ATLAS

Erika Palmer - Design

Justin Gitlin

Danielle Szafir - Data vis!

Don Wilson

Aileen Pierce

Outcome

We will share more information about this section once we collect information from our testers.

Results

After gathering our data and coding our website, the finish result is a polished and thought out website that became an open source project. An open source project means “anybody is free to use, study, modify, and distribute your project for any purpose”. With our project being open source(including our data set), we hope to collaborate with mindlike developer who’d like to remix and improve our website and create a transparent and honest view on Asian representation in the media.

The website is divided into four areas (accessible by the nav bar). We have Home, Trailblazers, Pitfalls, and About Us. When navigating to the homepage we start off with a colorful background as well as graphics related to our site. We give a little bit of background information on what Asian Erasure is and then the user has more than one way to go to the other three pages. At the bottom of the home page we have three cards which provide a short summary about Trailblazers

page, Pitfalls page, and the About Us page. In the trailblazers page this is where you have a card for each of the individuals who has done great work in the Movie and TV industry. You can click on the card and it'll lead to their website with more information about them. After the trailblazers page, we have the pitfalls page which contains a card for each movie we have information on and when you click on a movie it brings up a specific timeline on that movie with information like why it didn't have great representation or how it went as far as offending and misrepresenting. The last page is the About Us page which gives a short bio about Dan, Grace, and Oceane. For people looking to contribute to this open source they could gather more data or improve the accessibility of the site or improve the code itself.

Conclusion

Asian Erasure is a project meant to last and be expanded upon. The current version is focused on two areas. The pitfall page uses data we collected to showcase movies who misrepresented the Asian Community and we have the trailblazers page that displays Asian individuals from the film industry.

Next steps

Data analysis

- "people in the background" : So many movies with special effects have huge animation subcontractors in Korea and India. Hollywood stands on the backs of Asian people, but they aren't recognized. What does an in-depth analysis of these credits show us?
- Are there more white people who have played lead "Asian" actors than asian actors in Hollywood? Probably, but this is difficult to prove while hand-parsing.
- Can we create more historical nuance to our timelines, looking at how conflicts with Asian countries and regions and ideological tensions echo in our media?
- How can we use common portrayals to combat anti-Asian discrimination and fear, especially as our society becomes more and more po
- Make our project more accessible for audiences with disabilities and limited internet capability.
- Provide off-line alternatives for non-technical audiences.

- Expand our project scope by including more films and creators on our website.
- Share our project open source and invite more people who want to contribute to this project to collaborate with us.
 - This format could easily be used for any population misrepresented by the media. Neurodiverse people, people with mental illnesses, Latin communities, Black communities, etc. This project creates a tool anyone can use to interrogate media portrayals of a group.

Stuff that's harder to fix

- Ensure that every element of our project is accessible to all users.
- Set up the code and design in a way that any interested contributors can easily work on this project in the future

Work Cited

“Starting an Open Source Project.” Open Source Guides, <https://opensource.guide/starting-a-project/>. Accessed 20 Nov. 2021.

[Restrictive Portrayals of Asians in the Media and How to Balance Them](#)

Wikipedia

- [Examples of yellowface](#)
- [Portrayal of East Asians in American film and theater](#)

[Film-Affinity](#)