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# THE ASIAN BABY GIRL (ABG) THROUGH A FILIPINA AMERICAN LENS\*



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## **ABSTRACT**

The gendered violence exacerbated by the racist rhetoric of the Covid pandemic left many in the Asian American community scarred, angry, and frightened. Our panel's speakers trace the histories of gendered violence that women of Asian descent have faced in the United States, covering the intersecting topics of race, gender, sexuality, cultural heteropatriarchy, and the ongoing legacies of Orientalism and neo-imperialism. We then link these histories to the Asian American youth culture known as the Asian Baby Girl or Asian Baby Gangster (ABG), an intergenerational form of resistance that has strongly challenged, or in some cases capriciously and enigmatically adhered to, gendered expectations of the ideal Asian woman in America.\* We assess the ABG as a complicated and gendered aesthetic in Asian youth culture that, despite receiving criticisms from both within and outside communities of Asian descent, continues to provide a constructive platform for discussions on Asian women's agency and socio-political and cultural visibility.

## **GENDERED AND RACIALIZED STEREOTYPES OF ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN: A BRIEF HISTORY**

For Women's History Month in 2021, I (Stacey Salinas) offered a free virtual lecture and workshop series on BIPOC Feminisms because I was concerned with the rise in violence against Asian women during the pandemic. Over the course of three weeks, I taught on the historic types of violence that women of

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\* This paper is an adaptation of our 2022 Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) Panel: "Undoing the Model Minority Myth Through the Asian Baby Girl Aesthetic" presented by Stacey Salinas, Angel Trazo, and Allyson Remigio.

Asian descent have witnessed over the centuries, and I wanted to create a space for Asian American women to speak on their anger and grief so that we could together combat the hypersexual and fetishized depictions of Asian women in media. All of these sexist stereotypes in one way or another have affected how we view and express our own sexual agency as women of color.

I dedicated the workshop series to exploring the origins and development of the Asian woman as “Oriental fetish” during the Age of Imperialism.<sup>1</sup> I discussed the histories of human trafficking and its effect on women from Asia and other parts of the Global South, the purpose and legacy of the Page Act (1875), the voyeuristic nature of travel guides and post card culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the formation of R&R stations located near American military bases, and the gendered violence of major colonial and neo-imperialist wars. The majority of the audience had never heard these colonial histories of the Pacific, let alone the gendered nature of them. I wanted to make sure to point out that the victimization of our Asian sisters continues to be immense and speaks to a darker history of victimization and exploitation. But within that narrative of violence, I also wanted to address the movements in Asian women’s history of resistance against gendered and racialized stereotypes via survivance.<sup>2</sup>

The majority of millennial and Gen Z audience members who registered for the workshop had never heard of the China doll, lotus blossom, Madame Butterfly, nor dragon lady stereotypes.<sup>3</sup> What initially became a set of public lectures and workshops on radical Asian American feminisms and BIPOC women’s history became a collective moment between myself and the audience to reflect on all of the ways we, as Asian women, had been treated and judged as Orientalist fantasies. I wanted the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul H. Pratoska, ed., *South East Asia, Colonial History: High Imperialism (1890s-1930s)* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Tina Chen, *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 64, 72; Leslie Bow, “Fetish (Part I: Keywords)” in *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature* (2014), 138-147.

<sup>2</sup> Drawing from Native American and Indigenous Studies’ scholars, “survivance” is “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimmy. Simply, survivance is survival + resistance.” Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. vii The caricatures born out of imperialist violence have indeed created victims out of Asian women, and in these same histories of gendered violence and stereotyping, Asian women have been forced to fulfill these stereotypes to survive. But they have also re-tooled them to make themselves visible and heard, and they have also tried to abolish them altogether.

<sup>3</sup> Based on the definitions provided by the Pew Research Center, millennial refers to the generation born between 1981 and 1996 and “GenZ” refers to the generation born between 1997 and 2009.

participants to consider the alternative ways we have stood against and within those tropes by presenting our collective and transpacific histories; it was my discussion of the Asian Baby Girl (ABG) as a contemporary opportunity to tackle our traumas and pains as Asian women that received the most confusion, surprise, disbelief, and even pride from the audience. What I had realized from the audience's reactions was that, similar to the stereotype of the model minority myth, the ABG had become a stereotype that millennials and GenZ'ers had also internalized in complicated, and, in some cases, potentially harmful ways.

Reviewing Asian American representation in American pop culture via American cinema in the last century, we can clearly see these stereotypes and how they grew from one caricature to the next into the model minority girl nympho. Orientalist fantasies continued to follow this more recent stereotype, as they did with the dragon lady and China doll caricatures of centuries past. What we see historically emerge for Generation X and millennials is the creation of the model minority girl, born from the brain drain of 1965, who cannot disentangle herself from a previous sexist trope: the Asian nerdy-girl-nympho. We see her in *Mean Girls* (2004) as the Vietnamese American women labeled the "cool Asian nerds" who sleep with the high school coach. We see her in the *Austin Powers* (1997-2002) films as the Japanese twins called "Fook Me" and "Fook U." We see her in the *Fast and Furious* (2001-2011) film franchise as car-loving but deadly LA gang girls, who in their downtime are studious but provocatively dressed, mere sexual accessories to both the White and Asian male gang leaders of the films. Similar to other moments in Asian American history, this new take on the Asian American woman as a sexy gang member lackey speaks to the real gendered and racialized violence Asian American women were experiencing in the 1980s to 2000s.

### **ASIAN BABY GANGSTERS**

I remember very clearly as a high schooler then college undergraduate that the Asian Baby Gangster title usually had the connotation of an Asian woman who was rebellious, wore provocative clothing and too much eyeliner, was open to having a good time, was quite vocal with her opinions, and prone to instigating

fight or gossip. As an undergrad, I saw these Asian American women as brave, as I was brought up in a traditional Filipino household. But many other Asian American college youths did not share my opinions of the ABG; they were quick to lambast the presence or personalities of ABGs as unrefined “hoes” with poor taste. Most preferred the model student performance and were quick to verbally destroy anything outside of that stereotype. Growing up in the Bay Area, I was familiar with seeing 1990s Asian American woman representation in the Asian pop culture trends surrounding me. One of the cultural moments I remember being exposed to was the presence of Asian American gangs. The women who were part of these circles were particularly different from Lea Salonga’s Miss Saigon and the well-spoken beauty pageant queen, Miss Philippines, that I was taught to admire and aspire to be.

As scholars like Kevin D. Lam and Bangele Deguzman Alsaybar have explained, the 1980s–1990s was an era where many first- and second-generation Asian American youths were coming of age.<sup>4</sup> Southeast Asian and East Asian refugees and immigrants who had left their homes, due to the postcolonial and political violences and instability in their homelands, were rearing their children in urban sectors of the United States that historically were and continue to be underfunded BIPOC spaces.<sup>5</sup> Many Southeast Asian and East Asian American youths who were coming of age during this period did not identify with the traditional culture and beliefs of their war-torn parents. They also did not find warm and inviting spaces in their schools and other public spaces, as they were seen as “too Asian” and not American. Many Asian American youths who have witnessed or took part in Asian American gangs have explained in multiple studies some of the many reasons behind the growth of Asian American gang culture including: (1) shortcomings in the home environment; (2) alienation from school; (3) estrangement from American culture; and (4) peer pressure.

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<sup>4</sup> Kevin D. Lam, *Youth Gangs, Racism, and Schooling: Vietnamese American Youth in a Postcolonial Context* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Bangele Deguzman Alsaybar, “Satanas Ethnography of a Filipino American Street Brotherhood in Los Angeles,” Masters thesis, (University of California at Los Angeles, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Kevin D. Lam, “Asian American Youth Violence as Genocide: A Critical Approach and its Pedagogical Significance,” *Equity and Excellence in Education* 52, no. 2-3 (2019): 255-270, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2019.1672594>; Bangele Deguzman Alsaybar, “Youth Groups and Youth Savers: Gangs, Crews, and the Rise of Filipino American Youth Culture in Los Angeles,” PhD dissertation, (University of California, Los Angeles, 2007).

Gang culture became a space for Asian American male youths to talk back to the racist and emasculating narratives and stereotypes they experienced. It also provided structure and a type of chosen family support system, one that many Asian American refugee and immigrant households did not necessarily have because of the grueling day to day of working to make ends meet, and lack of healthy conversation between first-gen parents and second-gen youths. Filipinas and other Southeast Asian women who were part of these gangs were also mingling and sharing space and coalitions with Chicana and Black sister gangs. Thus, the look and makeup aesthetics that the ABG took on became an amalgamation of multiple cultural influences.

Within this social context, the ABG became a chance for Asian American female youths to also find their own support system to escape from the many complicated traumas and personal, cultural, and social issues they faced. ABGs that I grew up with and saw were the alternative to the model minority student. The ABG was a fast-talking, scissor- or razor blade-carrying, eyeliner- and lip liner-wearing phenomenon that our principals and teachers (who were majority white) could not wrap their minds around.

The ABG as an auxiliary to Asian male gangs also took on the same hobbies and cultural spaces as their brothers. Souping up cars into “rice rockets,” attending public dances and DJ spaces in public community cultural events like barrio fiestas, wearing outfits that traditional Asian parents would not approve of, or wearing the particular male outfit that Asian gang members wore as part of their gang’s signature—all of these trends of ABG culture became part of other mainstream entities where Asian American counter-culture began to grow. We see the ABG look in *For Him Magazine* (FHM), we see the ABG as part of the car model import scene began to reach overseas, and we see the ABG look promoted in the Singaporean and Philippines FHM covers. But just like the lotus blossom, Madame Butterfly, dragon lady, and model minority nympho girl, the ABG also became targeted and labeled as hypersexual. The Asian American community would also label her as such, and American cinema would take notice and commodify her in the *Fast and Furious* franchise. The re-tooled and re-packaged Asian Baby Gangster imagined onscreen again was silent, with few lines, but heavy sex appeal. This newer fetish or spectacle of the Asian woman onscreen

would obscure the real issues that Asian American women were facing on the ground in the streets of neglected Asian American communities of California like Los Angeles, San Diego, and Hercules. These commodified movie gangster girls had little to no lines in these films. Thus the real stories of Asian Baby Gangsters and their issues within underfunded but heavily policed communities, their lack of public education and health resources, and the real sexual violence they experienced as sexual accessories in some of these gang circles also went unheard while their images onscreen became more remakes of America's fascination with the oversexed Asian woman.

### **THE ABG IN ASIAN AMERICAN SOCIAL MEDIA**

A new digital era emerged in the 1990s with the global introduction of the Internet. Asian American youths utilized technology to communicate their interpretations of Asian America in the multicultural era of the nineties. We see the slang and language of ABG emerge and spread through the beginnings of instant messaging platforms like AOL Instant Messenger, chatrooms, MySpace, Friendster, and Xanga.<sup>6</sup> The music scene of the 1990s also was reimagined and widely available through programs like Napster, Limewire, and Kazaa, allowing people to download and share music. Asian American youth created their own musical aesthetic and style and situated themselves in the evolving and diverse music scene that Black female artists like TLC, SWV, and XSCAPE paved the way for during the early nineties through platforms like MTV. AZN for youths growing up in the 1990s and 2000s was in reference to Asian American pride movements and led to hip hop anthems like “Got Rice?”

Amidst the growing network of Asian American digital counter spaces, the Internet—coupled with television—made more available the fetishization of Asian women via websites that promoted mail-order bride and Asian women in sex work. Despite these challenges, Asian American youths continued to use their digital creative resources to (re)interpret what it meant to be Asian in America. Filipina American artists like Pinay and

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<sup>6</sup> Xanga was a blog website created in 1999. The website gained more popularity during the early 2000s and the majority of its subscribers were Millennial Asian American youth (ages 12-18). Xanga was a personal blog and photoblog website where subscribers treated it as their own personal, but public, virtual diary. Millennial youths could share their personal page with their friends and the broader online community. The Xanga platform was also highly personable as subscribers could choose for free which music to play on their page, which decorations, gifs, font, photographs and more that they could use to decorate their page to suit their particular tastes.



Jocelyn Enriquez refashioned their culture, femininity, and sexuality for broader audiences through music, challenging the model minority and mail-order bride stereotypes. Filipina artists challenged gendered, racialized expectations through hair, make-up, styling choices, lyrics, and music video aesthetics. Digital spaces allowed Asian American youths to explore their identities, divesting from the model minority expectations. AZN Pinay artists' contributions during the 1990s and early 2000s allowed for other Asian American women to express themselves beyond the caricatures of the dragon lady, model minority myth, and mail-order bride. By putting their own cultural spin on pop culture, Pinay artists produced a counter space to the model minority by entering BIPOC hip hop and RnB spaces, thus creating a pathway to the modern day Asian Baby Girl.

Once a niche, local, California-based Asian American subculture in the 1990s to early 2000s, the Asian Baby Girl has become a highly-viral Internet aesthetic among Asian American young women since the 2010s. In the 2010s, the ABG was popularized on a national scale by Asian American YouTube videos such as the Fung Bros' "Types of Asian Girls" (2014)<sup>7</sup> and Chow Mane's "Asian Baby Girl" (2018).<sup>8</sup> The ABG went viral again in 2018 through the proliferation of ABG memes circulating the global Asian imaginary on the 1.9-million-member Facebook page Subtle Asian Traits (SAT).<sup>9</sup> The ABG aesthetic continued to spread in 2020 as the top Asian American makeup and fashion content creators, mostly East Asians, transformed themselves via "ABG Transformation" makeup tutorials. Uprooted from its local California context, the ABG subculture has been aestheticized, commercialized, and globalized with Singapore Nylon advertising "ABG makeup products" and #abg spreading on Instagram and TikTok.<sup>10</sup> The impact of the ABG on Asian American young women is evidenced by a plethora of online publications describ-

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<sup>7</sup> Fung Bros, "18 Types of Asian Girls," YouTube. July 22, 2014, video, 12:35, <https://youtu.be/WI-YPEQb6rQ>.

<sup>8</sup> Chow Mane, "Chow Mane—ABG (Music Video) \*OFFICIAL ABG ANTHEM.\*" YouTube, March 18, 2018, video, 3:14, <https://youtu.be/YZpdMBYmkeA>.

<sup>9</sup> Isabella Kwai, "How 'Subtle Asian Traits' Became a Global Hit," *New York Times*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/11/world/australia/subtle-asian-traits-facebook-group.html>.

<sup>10</sup> "Everything You Need to Know About The Asia Baby Girl Trend That's Taking Over the Internet," *Singapore Nylon*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.nylon.com.sg/2020/03/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-asian-baby-girl-trend-thats-taking-over-the-internet/>.



ing the ABG on college campuses across the country.<sup>11</sup>

The current ABG aesthetic involves winged eyeliner and false eyelashes on an Asian female face, trendy outfits paired with hoop earrings and a floral or dragon tattoo on a thin (but curvy, often courtesy of breast implants) body, and a “baddie”/“bad-ass” attitude and “party girl” lifestyle. She is seen at the center of Yelp-worthy Asian eateries and boba shops, electronic dance music (EDM) raves, Asian Greek Life, and Asian night clubs across the country.<sup>12</sup> The ABG acronym has also recently been utilized by Asian Boss Girl, a popular Asian American podcast that leans into the model minority myth as it features millennial East Asian American media personalities who interview successful Asian American entrepreneurs. However, some references to the ABG’s Southeast Asian origins remain, with the stereotypical ABG female named “Vivian Tran” and her Asian Baby Boy (ABB)/“Asian fuckboy” counterpart named “Kevin Nguyen,” as both Tran and Nguyen are ethnically Vietnamese surnames.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike other stereotypes created by white, mainstream U.S. culture that have been imposed onto Asian American youth, namely the model minority myth and gendered typecasts such as the lotus blossom or dragon lady, I argue that the ABG subculture is a youth-created set of racialized, gendered, and sexualized constructions that simultaneously defy and reify hegemonic perceptions of Asian American women in the United States. For my dissertation, I (Angel Trazo) hope to: 1) historicize the development of the ABG subculture in 1990s California, and 2) compare how the ABG subculture has changed over time through shifts in local California culture as well as through social media. My main research question is: How does the figure of the Asian Baby Girl influence how Asian American women conceptualize their own race, gender, and sexuality in the United States?

The following preliminary research findings are based on thirty-two surveys and five interviews with GenZ (ages 18-24) and Millennial (ages 25-38) Filipina/o/x Americans conducted

<sup>11</sup> “The Rise of the ABG,” *U Penn The F-Word Magazine*, March 7, 2020, <https://upennfword.com/2020/03/07/the-rise-of-the-abg/>; Mai Tran, “It was a cultural reset: a short history of the ABG aesthetic,” *i-D Vice*, October 7, 2020, [https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/g5p44x/it-was-a-cultural-reset-a-short-history-of-the-abg-aesthetic](https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/g5p44x/it-was-a-cultural-reset-a-short-history-of-the-abg-aesthetic); Zoe Zhang, “What the ‘ABG’ identity says about ESEA femininity,” *The Michigan Daily*, September 15, 2021, <https://www.michigandaily.com/michigan-in-color/what-the-abg-identity-says-about-esea-femininity/>.

<sup>12</sup> Jacquelyn Tran, “Boba, Chè and ABGs: A San Jose Local’s Guide to Vietnamese Drinks,” *KQED*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13904913/vietnamese-drinks-boba-che-guide-san-jose>; Talitha Angelica Acaylar Trazo, “Wanna Get Boba?: The Bond Between Boba and Asian American Youth in San José, California,” MA thesis, (University of California, Los Angeles, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Ku Kim, “The Official ABG & ABB Test,” 2020, <https://abgcalculator.com/>.

between March 2022 to May 2022. Of the survey respondents, twenty-seven identified as female and five identified as male; one identified as first-generation, four identified as 1.5-generation, twenty-two identified as second-generation, and five identified as third-generation. Several key themes emerged in regard to the ABG.

*Participation in Panethnic Asian American Communities.* The ABG is considered a panethnic Asian American subculture, though panethnicity is limited to East Asians and Southeast Asians (to the exclusion of South Asians). The 1990s and 2000s ABG was thought to be affiliated with an Asian gang, be involved in the Asian American import car scene, and from a California ethnic enclave (in the Bay Area, the OC, or LA). The post-2010s ABG can be found anywhere in the country and even abroad. She is part of the Asian Greek community or affiliated with Asian cultural clubs in college, or part of a “rave family” comprised of Asian Americans at electronic music festivals. Throughout the years, to participate in the ABG subculture is to find a sense of belonging within various panethnic Asian American communities and subcultures.

*Hypersexualization and Hyperfemininity.* Asian women in mainstream American media remain implicated in the Orientalist fantasies of White men. However, the Asian Baby Girl wants the Asian Baby Boy. While this gendered trope unproblematically reinforces heteronormativity, it also disrupts past notions of the White man’s imperial claim over the Asian woman’s body. Nevertheless, the ABG is critiqued for not disrupting the objectification of Asian American women, despite this being a feat that no Asian woman can overcome within the systems of imperialism, racism, and heteropatriarchy.

Furthermore, the ABG asserts her hyperfemininity and hypersexualization through her cultural consumption and, borrowing the term Jillian Hernandez uses to describe the Latina “chonga,” “aesthetic excess.”<sup>14</sup> For the ABG, aesthetic excess is a practice of consumption that is both extremely local and global. She goes to Asian-owned boba shops and night clubs (typically located in Asian ethnic enclaves such as NYC Koreatown or Eastside San José) and patronizes Asian American ethnic niches, needing a nail girl, eyelash girl, and hair girl in order to maintain

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<sup>14</sup> Jillian Hernandez, *Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 12.

her aesthetic and lifestyle. These local spots become hallmarks of Asian American youth culture and sustain the local Asian American community economy. But the ABG is also a global consumer with a passion for fast-fashion, purchasing from online retailers that source their clothing from Asian sweatshops, or whose lash extension kits, Korean cosmetics, or circle lenses come from Asian production factories abroad. The ABG also been “meme-fied”; social media has flattened to a stereotype and an aesthetic that no longer has the historical origins attached to her. ABG can mean “Asian Basic Girl,” emphasizing the shallow superficiality of this subculture.

*Racialization.* The ABG is not White. Rather, she refuses assimilation to Whiteness by drawing on aesthetics and youth cultural scenes associated with people of color, namely the Latinx and African American communities. This is highlighted by Asian Americans in hip hop and HyPhy culture, positively noted in collaborations between P-Lo and E-40 or critiqued in reference to Asian Americans’ use of AAVE or the N-word. This is also seen in Asian American youths’ participation in the import car scene, a derivative of the Chicano low-rider scene.<sup>15</sup> However, the newer generation of the ABG leans into the model minority due to stereotypes associated with college (being pre-nursing majors and rushing Asian sororities). In addition, the ABG remains a perpetual foreigner, a trait rooted in the visibility of her Asian racialization. Interestingly, what get stereotyped as “ABG hub” cities are in predominantly-White nations: San José in the U.S., Sydney in Australia, Toronto in Canada. The ABG aesthetic can be seen as resistance within predominantly-White societies. However, is solidarity possible through shared aesthetics alone? Can this connection based on racialization among Asian women be enough for transnational coalition building in the next generation?

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Asian women have had many historic responses to the gender-based violence committed upon her communities for the last three centuries. Asian American women have responded critically to such Orientalist depictions and have demonstrated their

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<sup>15</sup> Soo Ah Kwon, “Autoexoticizing: Asian American youth and the import car scene,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 7, no. 1 (2004): 1-26, doi: 10.1353/jaas.2005.0004

ownership of their sexuality while also discarding or, in many cases, re-working interpretations and expectations of the western and traditional Asian ideals of what counts as feminine. These long histories of survivance have culminated in the Asian Baby Girl, a culturally syncretic avatar that in some ways upends the colonial framing and practice of containing the Asian woman under the White male gaze. This is an ongoing project. In our research and recollecting of Asian American women's history, we found that the form--the persona--of the ABG had always been present. The culmination of generations of Asian women's struggle against settler colonialism and Orientalism simply has brought us to one of our more recent responses, or incarnations, of our contempt for the violence and objectification we have received.