

For the Love of Jah, I am a Hundred Percent!

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Perception seems to run against latter generation Asian Americans. As a Chinese-American, born in Riverside, California, and living in various places in the United States throughout his youth, (Indiana, Tennessee, Bermuda, California), Garrett Wang, who currently plays Harry Kim on Star Trek: Voyager, has had to deal with the challenges of being an Asian American and becoming an Asian American actor.



The fundamental challenge for him while growing up was dealing with blind racism. "Eight years of my life was spent in Memphis, Tennessee," Wang recalls, "And I was made very, very painfully aware of who I was, that I was not in the 'in crowd' so to speak, not one of the 'status quo' because I didn't have Caucasoid features. I was reminded of that by strangers day in and day out, and it [became] very, very annoying."

In his teenage years, there were times when he virtually denounced his Chinese heritage because of the prejudice and hatred he had to deal with, and mainstream American culture didn't seem to help matters. "All my life I was exposed to films, TV, people, but mostly *Caucasian* people, mostly films with *Caucasians*, mostly TV with *Caucasians*," Wang recalls.

It wasn't until his two exchange trips to Taiwan that his whole perception of himself changed. "After both trips, I think I found myself," Wang says. "I understood where I was from, who I was, by being immersed within a country where I looked like the majority. I was not the minority. And that, like, changed a light in my head. I immediately had so much more self-confidence, not worrying about what other people said, [or] their perceptions."

That confidence has helped him gain a foothold in a career path that is difficult enough. Wang notes, "The whole key is that you need to 'get tape' on yourself; in order to get people to respect that you can act, you need to have proof that you've already acted in something else, so it's such a catch-22." But as an Asian American actor, there is an additional challenge. "Asian American actors have it tougher," Wang says, "because so

many of the auditions that are coming out, there are still a large percentage which are stereotypical, and there's no way around it." Roles like the Chinese delivery boy, the kung-fu Chinese mafia man, or the grocery store owner with the strong accent still persist. "So when you're starting out, if you were to turn down everything that was stereotypical, you would pretty much have one audition... a year," Wang says with a sarcastic chuckle.



Wang recalls, "I did do [roles] that were I think were really just cheezy. One was [for] a friend of mine who was a Mainland [China] actor, and, one day he was doing some type of film and he just called me up the night before, 'We need a couple hundred people to be in this scene I'm in, and will you just come down to play this part?' I'm like, 'Okay, I guess so.' It turns out, I'm in this limo and the scene is, I'm supposedly this Chinese mafia guy, a young guy in a suit, and [my friend] is the rebellious gang guy, and he kills me by choking me to death." Wang comments with a laugh, "That's the last time I did anything from someone who called me overnight!"

With his career now on the upswing, for instance, he was named as one of People magazine's 50 most beautiful people of 1997, Wang now has the opportunity to make a difference. His steady role on Star Trek: Voyager gives him the chance to show an Asian American in a non-stereotypical role, a rare opportunity in Hollywood. "Through the history of television, how many non-stereotypical roles do you have? So few for series regulars," Wang notes. In the past 40 years there have

been less than a dozen Asian-American actors in such roles in shows that lasted longer than a single season. Other notable actors include, George Takei ("Star Trek"), Jack Soo ("Barney Miller"), and Dustin Nguyen ("21 Jump Street").

Wang's effort against Asian American stereotyping continues in his movie career, with his role as Troy Tashima in Toronto-born, Eric Koyanagi's independent film "Hundred Percent." "Hollywood needs a movie like this. They haven't seen movies like this before" Wang says about the film that screened at the opening gala of the second annual Vancouver Asian Film Festival.

Wang's role is one in which art imitates life, as he plays an Asian American actor, supported by his girlfriend Cleveland (Lindsey Price). His character is faced with the dilemma of developing a career at the expense of his dignity and everything that is important to him. Mixed in with that in a pulp-fiction-esque style, are the stories of Isaac (Dustin Nyugen) who falls in love with Thaise (Tamlyn Tomita), and Slim (Darion

Basco) and Casey (Keiko Agena), two Rustifarian, "In the Hood" wannabes on a journey of spiritual discovery with as much marijuana as they can smoke.



In this "comedy with a slightly different slant," Wang co-stars with an all Asian-American cast in a movie that challenges and derives its humour by having fun with Hollywood's Asian stereotypes. It's the ability of the film to be both funny and meaningful that gives the film an implicit depth, giving the message that while the characters are "Asian" in appearance, their personalities are totally different from what one would expect through rooted stereotypes. The perceptions of the world surrounding these characters are supplanted by their own resolve to be unique—to be a hundred percent themselves.

One of the benefits of the film once it goes into general release is the potential to reduce the amount of ignorance that persists in society with respect to Asians born and raised outside Asia. For anyone who's had to deal with racism and prejudice, it's the ignorance that breeds such perceptions. Wang says, "When I walk down the street, and they make fun of me, if they start doing a little kung-fu bit, or [imitate a Chinese voice]—and it's always the voice, they always try to imitate the accent—they're not making fun of me, that's not me they're making fun of, I don't speak like that!"

Wang continues, "And that's what was so difficult for me to deal with as a youth growing up in that, I have all these people coming up and making this funny sound out of their mouth, which doesn't relate to me at all because I speak perfect English; I don't speak with an accent. And for [people] to do that, all I can refer to are people who are new [immigrants]. And so often times, there is I think some sense of animosity from Asian Americans toward Asian Nationals because it's the Asian Nationals, the way they speak, who are being imitated. The 'joke' is on them, yet it gets misdirected onto myself, which pisses me off."

Implicit to Wang's efforts is the belief that breaking the stereotypes perpetuated in Hollywood productions is a key step in the fight against racism and prejudice. "The only time it's going to stop is when someone gets up to the point where they are a household name across the world and at that point you have a platform where everyone is listening," Wang says. "I think that would definitely help cut down these racist viewpoints that a lot of people seem to have in America."

Wang continues, "There are still a lot of pockets of prejudice around. People who have to deal with it, have to realize that it's going to happen, people will say things, people will be prejudiced. The only thing is, you just have to be true to yourself. Be your own person and do what you know is right. And through time, if that person has any brains, and they

get to know who you are as a person, that's how you break through the stereotypical bonds that are holding down a lot of people."

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