

Who Are You and Who Are We?

Gaze and Identity in *Bling Empire*

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Abstract

The twenty-first century saw a rise in popularity and interest in East Asian cultural and media products. First created for the local audience, they are now disseminated globally, carrying with them the cultural and identity conflicts of their respective societies. Netflix's *Bling Empire* makes a similar journey as the first US reality TV series with an all-Asian main cast. The cast is mostly East Asian whose narrative centers on the ideas of movement and diaspora reflecting the journey of cultures and ideas across national borders. While this journey allows for an increased understanding of cross-cultural influences, cultural nuances are often lost. *Bling Empire* foregrounds exaggerated caricatures of Asian Americanness and instead globally circulates surface-y stereotypes. The inability to fully grasp the cultural insight necessary to understand these cultural and media products is a further commentary on the danger of "glocal" products of the twenty-first century.

Netflix's *Bling Empire* embodies seemingly contrasting American and Asian experiences in the United States. Inspired by Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, this essay attempts to analyze how the gaze functions in the identity-making of the cast members as they interact in the construction and reception of the series. While unified in their expression of material wealth, the cast members range from immigrant to Asian American to adoptee experiences. The varying backgrounds of the cast members reflect existing structures of real-world cultural interactions. The series weaves very personal struggles of marriage, family, infertility, and relationships to the heightened awareness of the gaze

cues. Therefore, the gaze helps to explain the internalized external gaze cues the cast members, and by extension the audience, must negotiate in the understanding of their constructed world.

Keywords: Identity, gaze, Asian American, global, bicultural

Bling Empire is a Netflix reality TV series first broadcast in January 2021 that follows the lives of very wealthy, mostly East Asians in Los Angeles in the United States as they deal with personal and interpersonal issues in their lives. Its executive producers include Jeff Jenkins, best known for producing *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, Christine Chiu, and Kelly Mi Li who star in the show. While the show does not intend to offer social commentary, its all-Asian cast divulges from the stereotypical depictions of Asians in American media. Since its first release in 2021, two more seasons have come out as well as its spinoff series in New York City, *Bling Empire: New York* before being canceled in 2023. For this paper, only the first season will be discussed to do a deep dive into certain themes and ideas. A close analysis of the show's personalities through the study of gazes will hopefully offer insight into how they are being looked at and how they view themselves as they look around them.

Following the proliferation of the model minority myth where artificially created differences augmented the tension between races in the mid-twentieth century, Asians in American media have been portrayed in extremes either as exotic sexual (feminine) objects or nerdy emasculated men. *Bling Empire* offers a look into the lives of people who are still very much Asian despite their ostensible wealth. This portrayal is further convoluted by the internalized external gaze cues where societal pressures, of which being Asian is one, guide and redirect portraiture of self. The cast's narratives explore the theme of movement and diaspora that both illuminate and generalize various Asian experiences in America. The new and repeated stereotypes of Asian Americanness are globally circulated by the reach provided by

the media giant Netflix. The reality television aspect of *Bling Empire* adds a unique awareness where the reality is manufactured for the audience. As the cast members struggle with their own internalized identity, they also must struggle with how they are portrayed on television.

“Good Representation”

The increase in interest in Asian culture has been at the center of many scholarly works. Japanese cultural products gained transnational popularity in the 1990s and continue to be an important cultural force internationally.¹ With the recent boom in the cross-border circulation of Korean and, to an extent, Chinese media products, scholarly discourses have focused on understanding this flow.² Transmedia storytelling has played an important role in this transnational exchange of cultures. Dave et al. discuss “new interesting pathways in conceiving how categories of ‘Asian’ and ‘Asian American’ exist in counterbalance and dependency within global popular culture.”³ The rise of the internet has impacted how stories and cultures are now understood in the global context. Cultures are not simply sent and received but circulated as the audience plays an ever more important role in shaping media

1. Dal Yong Jin, “Converging East Asia,” in *Transnational Convergence of East Asian Pop Culture* (Routledge, 2021), 52–72, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003126850>, 52; Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, *Regionalizing Culture: The Political Economy of Japanese Popular Culture in Asia* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2014), xv–xx, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wqw63>.
2. Doobo Shim, “The Growth of Korean Cultural Industries and the Korean Wave,” in *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave*, ed. Beng Huat Chua and Koichi Iwabuchi (Hong Kong Scholarship Online, 2008), 14–31, <https://doi.org/10.5790/hong-kong/9789622098923.003.0002>; Dong-Hoo Lee, “Media Ecologies and Transnational Media Flow in East Asia,” in *Transnational Convergence of East Asian Pop Culture* (Routledge 2021), 32–51, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003126850-4>.
3. Shilpa Dave, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha Oren, *Global Asian American Popular Cultures* (New York University Press, 2016), 2, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=e000xna&AN=1084264&site=ehost-live>.

products.⁴ In *Bling Empire*, the cast members range from immigrants to Asian Americans to adoptee experiences. The varying backgrounds of the cast members reflect existing structures of real-world cultural interactions. The transnational flow of Asian cultural products needs to be understood in this dynamic. Cast members of *Bling Empire* carry the burden of representing the various Asian cultures within the American context.

The response to the show was divided. Almost immediately after the show came on air, an opinion piece was posted on Subtle Asian Traits stating that *Bling Empire* is not the kind of representation that Asian Americans need at this present moment—many claiming that it is not the right kind of representation.⁵ A simple Google search on the topic brings up many articles reflecting the sentiment. While these initial articles and opinion pieces written about the show do not accurately reflect the entirety of reception and reaction to the show, they do show a pattern of opinions that add much to the discussion. One article asserts that “‘Bling Empire’ Is Not Good Representation for Asians.”⁶ Another claim is that “Netflix’s *Bling Empire* Is Warping Asian Representation When It Matters Most: Opinion.”⁷ They are centered around the idea that Li Charmine Anne’s self-highlighted point summarizes well: “My beef is this: out of all the stories we can tell about an underrepresented ethnic group, why do we have to tell *these* stories?” The basic premise of these opinion pieces is that Asians, on average, do not

4. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: University Press, 2008); Leigh H. Edwards, “Transmedia Storytelling, Corporate Synergy, and Audience Expression,” *Global Media Journal* 12, no. 20 (Spring 2012): 1–12, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/transmedia-storytelling-corporate-synergy/docview/1323983738/se-2>.

5. Subtle Asian Traits is the largest international Facebook group for diasporic Asians. It gained popularity as a place to post memes about Asian-ness, providing a sense of community for said diasporic Asians.

6. Li Charmaine Anne, “‘Bling Empire’ Is Not Good Representation for Asians,” Medium, February 1, 2021, <https://aninjusticemag.com/bling-empire-is-not-good-representation-for-asians-731a30c0bbce>.

7. Rachel Yang, “Netflix’s ‘Bling Empire’ Is Warping Asian Representation When It Matters Most: Opinion,” EW.com, February 23, 2021, <https://ew.com/tv/netflix-bling-empire-warping-asian-representation/>.

live like the cast members. Olivia Truffaut-Wong further states that because *Bling Empire* is one of few shows with an all-Asian cast, it unfortunately “bear[s] all the responsibility of Asian representation. . . . That lens, full of glitz and glamour, might seem like a positive portrayal of Asians, but it’s also an extension of the Model Minority Myth, spotlighting Asians as an economically successful minority.”⁸

Christine’s Year of the Pig party is one of the first scenes in the series remarkable for the red color that dominates the screen. The red serves as a symbol of wealth and extravagance as well as the sort of Asian-ness that the series attempts to portray. The party acts as an opportunity to introduce the cast members who come together under the ruse of celebration. *Bling Empire* frames the party as particularly Asian without specific discernment to which Asian culture they are referencing. Christine and her husband Gabe are Chinese, and the party is distinctly Chinese in nature. While Lunar New Year is celebrated in many Asian cultures, each culture has distinct celebration practices. The blending and confusion of different Asian cultures is a common misrepresentation in American media.

Participation of the Gaze

Bling Empire employs Kevin as a narrative mechanism that bridges the gap between the cast members and its intended audience. Looking at the demographic makeup of American viewership, the majority of its intended audience members are neither rich nor Asian. In the show as well, non-Asian figures are on the periphery as the partners of the Asian cast. Kevin’s outward appearance belies his narrative function as the symbol of the representative “average.” While he is fully Asian, he is most unlike other cast members in

8. Olivia Truffaut-Wong, “The Downside of ‘Bling Empire,’ ‘House of Ho,’ and the New Wave of Asian Representation,” *Refinery 29*, January 27, 2021, <http://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2021/01/10275847/bling-empire-house-of-ho-crazy-rich-asians-stereotypes>.

that he comes from a middle-class white family (having been adopted from Korea as a toddler). His upbringing is a point of relatability for the viewers who probably do not possess the same level of wealth as the cast members of the series. Thus, the analysis of Kevin Kreider reveals how the audience is expected to perceive the show. The first words uttered on the show are by Kevin who claims: “When I saw *Crazy Rich Asians*, I thought it was a nice fantasy. . . . Then I meet Kane’s friends. They have the whole world at their disposal. And I’m just, like, ‘Oh my God, this is real.’”⁹ His statement immediately draws a parallel to the film and paints the cast members as rich and crazy. As this outside, “average” member of the world navigates the “craziness” around them, the audience too grows accustomed to the craziness of the show. In that, it also speaks to the flaw in this system as Kevin inherently embodies a certain disconnect that the viewers must negotiate before they can fully engage in the reality of the series.

The show’s choice of Kevin’s gaze as the narrative force is intentional and important. The viewers are supposed to become part of this constructed reality through Kevin. To explain this phenomenon, Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” offers a description of how people derive pleasure from looking at a visual medium. One is from being looked at while the other is from the recognition of ourselves in what we see.¹⁰ The second pleasure is the part Kevin performs. The other cast members constantly remind us that Kevin is different. He cannot afford the same things, and he is not comfortable with his Asian-ness as he grew up in a white American family. He blunders with certain aspects of Asian culture because he is unfamiliar with it.¹¹ Despite its predominantly Asian cast, the series frames Asian-ness as foreign. In episode 3, for example, Kevin points to a

9. Jeff Jenkins et al., *Bling Empire*, episode 1, aired 2021, on Netflix, 0:10–0:34.

10. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 835–36.

11. This also brings up the question of whether the show is geared toward a white audience or an Asian audience. Despite Kevin’s outwardly Asian appearance, he mirrors white sentimentality and upbringing.

large cinnamon stick in an Asian food and medicine store and assumes exoticness. He asks, “What is this? This isn’t deer, right?”¹² He continues to act amazed in the store. The cast’s craziness is attributed not only to their wealth but also their Asian-ness. Decorated in red and gold, Christine’s Lunar New Year party in season 1, episode 1, is ostentatious and distinctly Asian. This is a strange and foreign world the audience is asked to step inside.

Kevin’s dissimilarity is his selling point. His unfamiliarity with Asian customs is especially prominent in the first season. He is shown trying to learn more about the Asian culture that is distinct from the rest of the cast members who seem comfortable fitting into Asian culture and standards.¹³ However, Kevin is still an active participant in the unfolding events. In some scenes, he not only drives the plot forward but is also at the center of what is going on around him.¹⁴ He is not simply a narrator but a character of this reality TV, and as a character, he embodies the first pleasure mentioned by Mulvey: pleasure in being looked at.¹⁵ Taking this idea one step further, Mark Andrejevic talks about the role voyeurism plays in the construction of reality TV. He theorizes that “in short, subjectification entails active submission to surveillance, which means that we don’t just endure the monitoring gaze, we embrace the drive to make ourselves seen.”¹⁶ His desire coincides with the same desire in the audience members. Like so, Kevin is the mechanism that makes the audience an active participant in the show.

Yet, Kevin embodies a certain disconnect that problematizes his gaze. His role is effective as long as he stands apart from the rest of the cast members, but as the show progresses, he becomes more comfortable with the

12. Jeff Jenkins et al., *Bling Empire*, episode 3, aired 2021, on Netflix, 0:22–0:24.

13. Asian culture, again, is referenced in a nonspecific manner. The cast members are of different ethnicities but the differences are blurred for the simple “Asian” identity marker.

14. For example, Kevin’s struggle with his adoption (and supposed abandonment by his birth parents that led to his adoption) is foregrounded in episode 6 where he undergoes a hypnotic treatment to find closure with his situation.

15. Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 835.

16. Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 189.

world where he must remain a stranger if his role is to remain successful. In season 1, episode 2, he is gifted a pair of Dior shoes by Anna. At first, he feels uncomfortable with the shoes and tries to return the gift after only wearing it once. When he finally accepts the gift, he slowly enters this world with his Dior-clad feet. Sweeney and Whitney's study of the crowd's gaze reveals how quickly people become influenced by it. They analyzed that "when people see social information, such as gaze, in a crowd, their tendency to join in is strikingly amplified compared with when they view the same information in an individual."¹⁷ As he slowly emulates the other cast members, his gaze becomes distant from the gaze of the audience. The viewers relate less with Kevin as the show progresses. He becomes a part of the spectacle rather than the observer. Then, the audience must choose another gaze rather than the default gaze of Kevin. They must choose to relate to other characters. This relatability is the bait that keeps the viewers interested in the series. When they make a choice, the perception of reality is heightened, so the audience becomes invested in the actions of the cast members. Because Kevin fails as an objective mirror to audience views, the series becomes an open ground from which each viewer can choose what gaze to adopt. Edwards "argue[s] that for reality TV, character itself becomes a focal point of transmedia storytelling."¹⁸ Like so, the ability for the members of the audience to be able to relate to these various characters strengthens the ability of the same people to enjoy the show.

Asian Expectation and Marriage

The key point of relatability the cast members explore is linked to their negotiation of Asian-ness as they interact and inhabit American culture.

17. Timothy D. Sweeney and David Whitney, "Perceiving Crowd Attention: Ensemble Perception of a Crowd's Gaze," *Psychological Science* 25, no. 10 (2014): 1903–13, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614544510>, 1911.

18. Edwards, "Transmedia Storytelling, Corporate Synergy, and Audience Expression."

Among the group of very rich personalities with which the viewers can identify is Cherie Chan. Kane Lim tells the viewers that Cherie is pregnant with her second child but is not married to her boyfriend, which is “super rare in Asian culture.”¹⁹ This is a point of contention for Cherie and her boyfriend. Cherie claims, “I definitely think by now I should be married. And I’m not.”²⁰ This sentiment is echoed by other cast members like Kane Lim in episode 1 and Christine Chiu in episode 3. Christine states that her parents would have highly disapproved of her if she were in Cherie’s situation. Cherie’s marital status is highlighted as a problem because it is tied to Asian cultural expectations. The cultural expectations hang over the whole show despite the characters’ outlandish antics. Laura Mulvey explains that the male gaze is an overpowering force that controls how the traditional visual medium is created, participated in, and viewed. *Bling Empire*’s overpowering gaze is that of unspoken cultural rules and expectations.

This is highlighted in none other than Christine Chiu. Christine gave birth to Baby G, a son, after ten years of trying to get pregnant. Because she was unable to give “birth to an heir,” she was ostracized by her husband’s family for over ten years. This treatment leads to her more traditional views where she tries to follow the unspoken rules as closely as possible. Her disapproval of Cherie’s marital status exemplifies such choices. Kane’s statement on Cherie’s status as something “super rare in Asian culture” perfectly illustrates this point. When it is revealed in episode 3 that it is due to Gabe’s health issues that Christine and Gabe had a hard time conceiving, this idea of saving face is brought up. Christine cries and says, “I took the blame all of these years. I took it for him because I didn’t want him to be upset. I stepped up and bore your shame.”²¹ Like so, Christine represents the stereotypical Asian gaze in cast members’ lives, especially regarding family structure. Andrejevic states the cast members of reality television are aware

19. Jenkins et al., *Bling Empire*, episode 1, 32:49–52.

20. Jenkins et al., *Bling Empire*, episode 3, 6:13–17.

21. Jenkins et al., *Bling Empire*, episode 4, 12:25–46.

that they are being seen. Fascinatingly, this awareness seems twofold for the Asian Americans in the show. They must remain cognizant of how they are viewed by other Asians in the show and by the viewers who watch the show. They propagate and perpetuate the stereotype and represent an overbearing Asian gaze as something harmful and restrictive.

However, Cherie explains that she is split between her identity as “an American girl” and also someone who wants to keep “Chinese values.”²² She wants to marry because the tradition demands it, but she also thinks she can be independent. Like Cherie, the cast members of *Bling Empire* continuously negotiate with the gaze’s influence as they try to decide what is best for them: stay within the boundaries or break out. In episode 8, Cherie decides to propose to Jessey instead of waiting for his proposal. When she tells Christine of the plan, Christine disapproves. She asks Cherie to think of the situation practically: Would Cherie be happy breaking the tradition? This negotiation with gaze cues is studied by Lo et al. who found that “even for the same group of biculturals—in this case, East Asian Canadians—it seems that their social attention system may operate differently at an automatic level depending on whether they think of themselves as independent or interdependent in the moment.”²³ They explain that depending on how the subjects view themselves, they react differently to the gaze cues. This shows that the gaze is understood internally with external influences. The cast members are still influenced by what it means to be Asian in their lives and the choices they make, but they also negotiate with this gaze as they live in a new environment. So, Cherie tries to follow a tradition but goes about it in a very nontraditional way. She proposes to the groom instead of another way, showing that she is both influenced by her culture and by her surroundings. She is the “American girl” with “Chinese values.”

22. Jenkins et al., *Bling Empire*, episode 3, 7:46–50.

23. Ronda F. Lo et al., “Does Self-Construal Shape Automatic Social Attention?” *PLoS One* 16, no. 2 (2021): E0246577, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0246577>.

It is important to note, however, that both Cherie's and Christine's negotiations with their Asian identity are heavily gendered. It seems to only bother Cherie that she and Jessey are unmarried. There are multiple instances when Cherie brings up the issue of marriage and Jessey skates around the issue. In the third episode, Jessey states, "Nowadays, what is traditional?"²⁴ He has already established a family with Cherie but seems hesitant to marry her. The burden of family falls heavily on the women of the show. Christine bore Dr. Chiu's shame because having a child is thought to be a woman's responsibility. Throughout multiple episodes, she mentions her poor treatment by her in-laws for her and Gabe's shared infertility issues. Bailey and Steeves state that "the gaze of the empowered few serves to discipline and disempower the objectified many."²⁵ Both Cherie and Christine have to deal with the stigma of deviating from this idealized path of a family while Gabe and Jessey seemingly escape any criticism. The cast members seem to perpetuate prefixed gender roles in the show. The show heavily pushes the heteronormative image of family where the end goal of a relationship is marriage and a child.

Conclusion

Sweeny and Whitney state that "in nearly every human interaction, the visual system gathers a wealth of social information that people use to understand each other's behaviors and intentions."²⁶ How we participate in this visual system or gaze uncovers a great deal about how people negotiate their own understanding of reality. Their participation reveals a desire to not only see but also to be seen. This is related to "commercial metaphors that privilege a

24. Jenkins et al., *Bling Empire*, episode 3, 8:15–17.

25. Valerie Steeves and Jane Bailey. "Living in the Mirror: Understanding Young Women's Experiences with Online Social Networking," in *Expanding the Gaze* (University of Toronto Press, 2016), 57, <https://doi.org/10.3138/j.ctv1005f87.7>.

26. Sweeny and Whitney, "Perceiving Crowd Attention," 1903.

view of the self as commodity and of social interaction as entertainment.”²⁷ By showing their private lives, they gain certain social capital. Cherie’s negotiation with the social cues has a ripple effect on the show’s cast, where Kane is inspired to “just break traditions and, um, just live your life.”²⁸ This negotiation between breaking and honoring tradition is at the center of how the characters negotiate their Asian-ness, but it is also something that even non-Asian viewers can relate to. The viewers of *Bling Empire* take part in the construction of reality through the eyes of each cast member. This participation is at the heart of *Bling Empire* and reality TV. Reality is produced but must seem real to the viewers.

27. Steeves and Biley, “Living in the Mirror,” 61.

28. Jenkins et al., *Bling Empire*, episode 8, 29:14–18.