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I SEE ASIAN PEOPLE

With emerging representation in film and TV, can we say we've made it?
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IN 1985, I was taken on a treasure-seeking adventure with Mikey, Brand, Mouth, Chunk, Andy, Stef, Sloth, the Fratellis and Data. If you are an '80s child, are drawn to retro cult appeal or just like the act of doing the truffle shuffle, then you know that I'm talking about the legendary film *The Goonies*.

Data (who was played by the decade's go-to Asian boy, Jonathan Ke Quan) was the only "ethnic" one of the bunch. From the first moment he spoke, I could barely understand him because his diction was in perfect broken English. Progressive, fists-of-fury Asians might reproach this lovable character as a puppet in an Asian Minstrel Show. I, on the other hand, see this role as groundbreaking — if not for the fact that the character wasn't as blatantly offensive as a Long Duk Dong might have been, then because Data was an integral part of what would become a classic ensemble cast.

During my years as a spoken-word militant, I would get my panties in a wad when it came to this kind of stuff. I don't know if I've become soft to the portrayal of Asians in American entertainment or if Asian Americans are becoming more commonplace on the big and small screen — either way, I feel that we have little reason to complain. Things could be far worse: *Outsourced* could get picked up for a full season ... oh, wait. What I mean is that maybe we should put down the picket signs, relax and just enjoy the work of our brethren — without getting too comfortable. We can't forget about the looming *K-Town* reality series, for example. By the time this column goes to print, it may already have proven to be a cultural touchstone of cringe-worthy stereotypes causing irritable bowel syndrome. On the plus side, it will show that Asian Americans can be fame whores like the rest of them, breaking out of that model-what-was-that-phrase-again myth. In a weird, screwed-up way, it could be a win-win situation.

A small pack of Asian American actors have certainly added relevance to Hollywood: Margaret Cho, Aziz Ansari, Danny Pudi, Mindy Kaling, Ken Jeong and the list goes on — especially with some of the current hits on television. *Glee* has struck token-Asian gold with Jenna Ushkowitz and Harry Shum, Jr., and *Hawaii Five-O* is relishing in its success with Daniel Dae Kim and Grace Park in two of the four lead roles.

What's different now is that all of the aforementioned actors are being cast for their acting chops and not because of their Asian-osity. They are regular people who happen to be Asian: finally, a healthy representation via a prismatic variety of Asian Americans. Good for us, right?

Earlier this year, I, in a fit of nostalgia, purchased seasons one and two of *21 Jump Street*. The purchase felt like a no-brainer (a steal at \$19.99), and it, much like Padma Lakshmi's role in the 2001 movie *Glitter*, was an enlightening moment for me.

Besides being a super-awesome show about undercover officers fighting crime in troubled high schools, the major sell of *21 Jump Street* was Johnny Depp (by the way, it's still his finest work). The more I watched the show, though, the more I noticed Dustin Nguyen as Officer Harry loki. He dressed in acid-washed Z. Cavariccis, rad blazers with huge shoulder pads and occasionally sported the trendy dangling feather earring.

There may have been one or two instances when the show was splashed with an "Umm, they're forgetting their Asian viewers" moment here or there — but they didn't feel offensive enough to remember. Nguyen was just one of the guys, as much of a "dude" as Peter DeLuise and Depp. Like his colleagues, Nguyen's was a character that helped define a generation: He was cool, in style and dealt with realistic teen issues. Why wasn't he the pop culture poster child for the late '80s? His character's name was Harry Truman: You can't get more American than that.

Data from *The Goonies* may forever dominate as emblematic of Asian Americans in mainstream '80s pop culture but maybe we should make room on the shelf for people like Dustin Nguyen. God knows it's better than being Long Duk Dong'd. 🙄

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