

# Sylvia Chong interview

**Salo:** [00:00:00] Good morning. How are you?

**Sylvia Chong:** Good morning. I'm good. How are you?

**Salo:** I'm very good. Thank you

**Sylvia Chong:** for joining me. Yeah, no problem. My pleasure. .

**Salo:** I would be interested if you could tell the audience who are you and a little bit about your

**Sylvia Chong:** research and work. Yes. My name is Sylvia Chong, full name Sylvia Shin Huey Chung.

I say this cuz there are a couple other Sylvia Chongs running around academia. I am a media studies and Asian American studies scholar and I am, right now I'm an associate professor at University of Virginia. Sort of neighbors with you and I teach in American studies in English and I run the Asian Pacific American Studies Minor, which I helped co-found back in 2004.

**Salo:** That's very impressive. Yeah. I found out about your work through. In a really roundabout way. I don't mind, do you mind if I tell this story about how I Of course, yeah. This is a couple of years ago and I was getting my someone in my [00:01:00] family a Christmas book, and then in the New York Times article about the review, they brought up your work, the Oriental of Scene Diaz.

Yes. I think it was, it might have

**Sylvia Chong:** been . He's like the only person, famous person who knows about my work. And that's a complicated thing too.

**Salo:** Yeah, no, of course. And then I had, I think it was actually, yeah, cuz another professor of mine mentioned they went to uni together. But yeah, that's a whole other tangent.

Years later, I'm here at Georgetown. I'm trying to find, you know, specific works about diaspora and media and ethnic studies. And then it came back to me, I was like, oh, the oriental of scene. And yeah, I think it's a great book. I

would like if you could tell the audience a little more about its conception, its inspirations, and what it's about, obviously.

**Sylvia Chong:** Sure. And, and, you know, so I'll, I'll start with a little something personal, I guess or intellectual as well. When I went to Berkeley, and it was for my PhD in rhetoric, I had had very little encounter with ethnic studies, which is a field I belong [00:02:00] to right now. But I went to school in the northeast little school called Swarthmore.

I don't know, we could count the number of Asians of any color, you know, in one hand. I thought it was amazing just to discover feminism, much less talking about women of color and issues of race. So, when I began this project, I had, I was taking film classes also something I had not done. And thinking about this, Renaissance of violence in American cinema and where it was traced to, and as, as I was doing research, it was on American directors.

They consistently pointed to Asians and Asian cinema as inspiration and, or, I don't wanna say inspiration, some of it was inspiration, like people watching, let's say the Japanese Samurai films Kung fu films. But some of it was, I wouldn't, I don't wanna call it inspiration because it's really quite exploitative.

It's sort of being influenced by watching dead Asian bodies during the Vietnam War as many people have told me. Then, and now the Vietnam Wars really poorly studied in, in American curriculum. [00:03:00] And I was no exception, but the war felt very personal to me because it I'm a 1.5 generation immigrant.

I immigrated as a child of my family and we immigrated in the wake of the Vietnam War. We are not Vietnamese-American, but It meant that the events of the seventies were very crucial to shaping the experiences of my family who I came to be. But I had no idea about that. I ended up zooming in on the Vietnam War era stuff was to understand this question that a lot of people confront.

Who am I? Where do I come from? But I approached that question differently because it wasn't about literally who I am and how I feel, and like who I feel in community with. But all of these interpolations and ideological constructs have preceded me and created a space for my family to be part of the Post 65 immigration generation and also the rise of Asian America as a con, as a pan construct.

So, so I [00:04:00] ended up studying a really terrible and terrifying thing, which is the history of representations of, of maim. Asians, but I also studied it in the context of the burgeoning of an Asian-American consciousness that was

able to take that trauma and grab it, grab onto it as an organizing principle and sort of a point to dis-identify with.

And, and so I found that really powerful. And also the idea of it wasn't just dead Asians that, you know sort of mystifies a really complex geopolitical situation in Vietnam. It was also a time in which the third world movements were taking inspiration from decolonial military movements and independence movements around the world.

And the North Vietnamese were seen by a lot of the American left and American ethnic left as part of that. So dead bodies were also revolutionary bodies. And so it was a way of thinking about different kinds of politics that arise out of death and not just thinking of death as trauma and melancholia, but [00:05:00] also as revolution.

and utopia and ha holding those two things in common and thinking about, well, what is this Asian American movement that came out of this? And how and how did it powerfully draw from other movements going around including black liberation and, and, and early feminism, second wave feminism. And also the, the, the conservative backlash.

Both of these how did all of these movements come out of this kernel of a war in Asia, you know that the US happened to be involved with. Mm-hmm. , could

**Salo:** you expand a little more on that last part about the intersection of this Orange Club scene and the war, the war in Vietnam with the black power movement, with feminism, and with the law and order conservatism?

I'm really interested if you can expand on that.

**Sylvia Chong:** Sure. I'm, so the book is unlike a lot of ethnic studies books, it's not a book about the production of media by by a group. , you know, and, and the control of the means of production. It's very much about the opposite. But [00:06:00] then also despite it being the opposite about media being made by Asians, how did people understand that media?

So part of the story begins before the Asian American movement when we're looking at the beginnings of the Vietnam War occurring. So we officially declare war in 64. And so the early images of the war are coinciding with images of the civil rights movement, you know, and if not exactly coinciding a couple years later.

And then also the backlash, you know, with the death of Martin Luther King Jr. J F K did that very violent year of the 68 coinciding with the Tet Offensive, which was the year in which people realized, oh shit, we're not gonna win this war against these peasants. They're a little bit more advanced than we thought.

Having that all come together had people making cheap. Some usually not thought through cheap political analogies. You know, the Viet Con are among us. Everyone who's against us is, is, is a terrorist. You know, all these things. But then also a lot of radical movements thinking, well, this is the down the beginning of the downfall of the American Empire.

We can be part of this, we can be, we can take advantage of this. They, people [00:07:00] who are fighting abroad they may not be us. And I say that they might not be us because many of these activists, like for example, SI Carmichael or No people the early Black Panther Panther Party, they were not Vietnamese.

And then early Asian-American activists met, many of them were largely Chinese Japanese and Filipino-American. They were not Vietnamese but they were singing brother. or they were seeing similarities, tanks running through Vietnam tanks, running through Detroit, you know, people shooting at unarmed civilians you know outside of Saigon, people shooting at unarmed civilians in a protest in LA or something.

So people started thinking about these analogies. So when, when I talk about a CORIs of movements I mean, a lot of scholars have done this careful social history, and I'm not a careful social historian because I'm not tracing the actual formation of these movements, but I'm talking about how these movements fed off of this media that I think you could very easily categorize as [00:08:00] one-dimensional and very exploitative and stereotyping, right?

Dead Vietnamese. And of course there were other Vietnamese that they didn't show, but they liked to show dead Vietnamese. So. Here, it's not so much that these movements necessarily caused one another, you know, the causation is something historians talk about. But what I do in media studies, and I'm trained in a lot of this sort of high theory, but I, what I like about it is it talks about these things that aren't quite logical, which is, you see these images, they're all mixed up in your brain.

They form something like an unconscious and it's a collective unconscious because you didn't individually see it. It was broadcast on the news for millions of people to see. So now everyone's got this weird mixed up, visual unconscious

tanks, national Guardsmen, soldiers, you know, of all kinds, people being hurt people you know, people being arrested, people being tortured.

How does that all feed into then the language that social movements. . So when I say these movements are connected, there, there are other ways. They are connected literally by organizers and people and events. I'm talking about a more psychic or [00:09:00] imaginary connection. Imaginary doesn't mean not real.

Imaginary means in the imagination where they imagine themselves symbolically to be united by certain things happening. And, and interestingly, because it's imagination, it's not always people. It's taken up by conservatives and right ring folks as much as left, left with leftists. So you have, you know, people like Rambo, Rambo, the story of Rambo is born in this era.

You know, people who are writing about veterans, the white veterans that returns being like the most damaged of all, you know, the suffering the most out of all all groups. But what, what do they use as the language for that suffering? The torture they saw do on the news being done to Vietnamese.

Mm-hmm. . So it's this interesting thing where the sidekick language, the imaginary language, , it becomes used for all sorts of politics. And so my book was a chance to trace that, and it was a way, indirectly for me to think about, well, this is kind of what people are thinking about with Asians just before I came.

And it was especially potent to me because my family is I guess [00:10:00] we identify ethnically as Chinese American, but nationally it's actually very complex. My dad is from Malaysia, my mother is from Taiwan. So there's this you know Chinese diaspora that includes Vietnam and my dad served in the military in Malaysia.

I don't know what he did, I just have a picture of him with a gun. Who knows, you know, fighting counterinsurgency. I have no idea. This, this is all happening and it's profoundly changing the notion of Asians as simply a dispensable Cooley workforce, which might have been like an earlier 20th century stereotype.

Now Asian Asians were subversive and dangerous and revolutionary. , know, and that could go in a lot of different directions, but I think one positive direction it went into was the Asian American movement, which I very much

consider myself a product of, even though my parents and I did not participate in, you know, the movement in the seventies.

Mm-hmm. ,

**Salo:** I'm really interested in that idea. For the audience, I feel like it'd be evenly split between understanding what the model minority myth is and those who don't. I'm wondering if you can expand on it a little bit and also talk about how do you get from Asian [00:11:00] being more dangerous in the post Vietnam era to a kind of resurgence of the model minority myth that is so prevalent, I would say, and dangerous.

**Sylvia Chong:** Oh, that's a complicated question because I think a lot of people, including activists, understand it differently. Than I do. And I might eventually get around to writing about this in my second book. The Model Minority Myth, as most people understand it. I mean, maybe Salma, I could ask you how you understand it.

It's, it's like, I because you grew up probably of what? Like a neutered version of it. Like Asian nerds or something like that. Are you really gonna ask

**Salo:** me or is this like ?

**Sylvia Chong:** I'm just, I'm just curious. Like popularly, like, you know, how would you understand it? How do I understand it, I guess? I mean, that's also complicated.

This is not an orals test. ,

**Salo:** Just because of my own family history. I mean you don't know this about me, but I have cousins who are half Asian. I have a cousin who's half Filipino, another one who's part Japanese. I'm Latino. And so, and my parents, when they came to the United States, they went to the Bay Area.

And so I feel like it's very complicated. I feel like, you know, in this really weird I arguably messed up way. I [00:12:00] don't know if I'll keep this, but you know, I feel like sometimes it was like an aspiration to my grandparents, like, look at how. For Asian Americans have come in this country compared to Latinos, you know, like, we need to be more like that.

And it's always something where I've been like, yes, but no. Like, it's a complicated topic for these, you know, class and racial reasons. And so I I wouldn't say it's neutered, but I wouldn't say it's, it's pretty complex. Yeah.

**Sylvia Chong:** Okay. Well, sorry. I, well, I guess what I mean, neutered is it's not, it's, it's not threatening.

Well, it's used differently now than maybe when it was first invented. I think now post eighties, it's like the Asian wiz kid. It's like, you know, tiger moms. Mm-hmm. Asian cultural values make Asians and they usually refer to East Asians, although I know that, you know south and southeast Asians like we models too.

But that Asian whi. are just way too good at stuff, and we cannot compete with them. So we so we need to do things that they don't, but first of all, they don't need affirmative action because, you know, there's no poverty in Asian America, [00:13:00] and everyone's equally gifted with these pre or natural math skills.

And if we don't stop them, they're gonna take over the American economy and the world economy or something like that. There's sort of this, it's a, it's a sense of competition and drive, but it tends to be about economics. Okay? If you go to just the pre-Vietnam war era late fifties, early sixties, when people started writing the articles that they know traces the, the root of this idea, it wasn't about that at all.

It was about racial triangulation and political inactivity. Because the, the people who were writing about it you know William Peterson a Berkeley sociologist was famous famously cited, but a lot of, lot of people were writing about it, sort of without the term, basically you're saying in this era of black protest, fifties and sixties, why are the blacks complaining so much?

They don't have it. The worst Asians have it. The worst, actually. Usually it was Japanese-American, single death. [00:14:00] Japanese Americans had it worst because we just recently put them in concentration camps, but they didn't complain. They're not having widespread protests. And yet when we look at them, they're slowly starting to, you know, have like better numbers, you know, like lower arrest rates, lower, lower, you know higher like employment rates, higher income, not as good as whites, but better than other minorities.

So the model minority. When it was not, it wasn't Asian wiz kids. And it wasn't about competition with whites, it was about suppressing black protest through

an explicit triangulation that said, there are other groups that have had it worse and they are making the best of what they they have.

And look how successful they are among minorities. Why can't you be like them? You know, this was the, or so the, and the reason why, sort of, I say like, I don't wanna mean neutered, but it, it was a very much a political move to sort of suppress. Protest as a way [00:15:00] of writing historical injustices and also say that the system is working well because look, you know, we can put you in camps and you come out like you bounce back like the Energizer bunny.

And that was ac There was a famous book a lot of nese knew it at the time, a Japanese, Japanese-Americans called Quiet Americans, in which Japanese-American a lot of community leaders, Chinese and Japanese-American community leaders, and Ellen Wu writes about this, bought into this and actually artificially suppressed things like juvenile delinquency and dropout rates within their community.

So, so as the rehabilitate their image, and a lot of Japanese Americans in particular, well, both Chinese and Japanese Americans were living in the shadow of active persecution. You know, first under incar, you know, Japanese American incarceration, second under Cold War, McCarthy, you know, anti-communist roundups of labor leaders and, and leftists in Chinatowns.

So you have two groups reeling from police persecution and government persecution presenting themselves as quiet Americans. And then you have a, a new generation starting to learn about the camps, starting to learn about Chinese [00:16:00] exclusion and going, wait a minute, that's not right. And so part of the Asian American movement as it happened, you know in the sixties and seventies, was about not only are we not quiet Americans we are not benefiting from this system of whiteness as much as you think

And we have much more in common with, with third World and, you know , you know, at the time it, it start, it started out mostly black liberation, but, you know, then it was, you know, the, a Aim m American Indian Movement and the Chicano movement in, in California. Really, you know, like we have common cause of these other movements, you know, so like one of the schools that has started at San Francisco State it, it wasn't just an Asian American strike, it was a third world liberation strike of, of allied student groups.

W and it wasn't a single cause, you know, it wasn't an anti-war strike. It was a strike about self-determination invisibility in the curriculum, lack of representation in the faculty, and it was a Japanese American university

president there was striking against in San Francisco. So I guess when I say neutered, I just meant like a lot of people think nowadays, model minority myth is.

you're [00:17:00] a nerd. And then the way the neutered is like, no, I'm not, I draw too. But it was a political question in the sixties, which is like, you're neutered because you won't, you, you know, not to organize and become completely active. And that's the key to your success. And the counter to that was, screw you, let's organize

Yeah.

**Salo:** Interesting. I guess I'm thinking about, I mean, you would call it like there's different words to different cultures, but like bobba t politics, right? Like really take the edge off. What was a truly revolutionary idea and over time it becomes, I draw too It becomes as,

**Sylvia Chong:** yeah, yeah. Bobba liberalism is Yeah.

Is very interesting. And I think it's a very americanist kind of notion, but it's interesting that symbols are interesting. Bobba Tea is the Milk Tea Alliance is also an alliance of democracy activists who are actively being shot at in Myanmar, Thailand, and, and Taiwan. So yeah. Bo Yes. Beba [00:18:00] liberalism as people's view it in the us it is a consumerist sort of notion of individuality.

So indivi, you use American indivi, liberal individualism to contest the model minority myth because the main problem, the myth is a lumping together a stereotyping, a sort of neutering of your ability to flourish and be, and work at Goldman Sachs. . Whereas originally it was like the model, minority myth was about using minorities to suppress each other's activism.

And the way to counter that was to say, well, we first, you're not gonna use us to suppress another group's activism, and we're also gonna be activists in alliance with, and also on our own. Mm-hmm. interesting.

**Salo:** I'm thinking about a lot of things at once. , apologies.

**Sylvia Chong:** I mean, this is something that's very lost in the popular imagination.

And I, I spend, I teach a lot of history classes and I try to make this triangul. racial triangulation, really clear to students because obviously Asian American students want to study about Asian [00:19:00] Americans, but it's not like we exist in a vacuum, you know? And I grew up in California too, so Yeah. Outside of the, a black, white binary, but also with a lot of other antagonisms Right.

You know mm-hmm. , like who's the more model minority, you know successful Latinos or successful Asian who could out white each other .

**Salo:** Yeah, I mean that's, that's part of the I guess conception of this podcast, right? Is I grew up in a world that was, I mean, it's a fun, I guess, but it was very much not black or white.

You know, I grew up in Texas, I grew up in California. My family was very diverse. Everyone I knew was all these different ethnicities. And my first real approach with like American whiteness was when I went to undergraduate school. I went to school in Portland, Oregon, and I was like, oh, this, the world is not my world.

like, the world does not look like how I grew up. And it was a really interesting wake up call. Yeah. In a lot of different ways. Yeah. . I guess I want to kind of circle back a little bit and maybe find ways that your work could be more applicable. Right. And we're talking about coalition building, which in my opinion, I feel has kind of been lost over the years.

That's another reason I [00:20:00] thought of this podcast. I'm wondering how could you think your , for those who can't see the professor just shrugged. How could your work be kind of applied towards that coalition building like it originally was in the sixties and seventies?

**Sylvia Chong:** I shrug, . I'm sorry. I'm, I'm, I'm not trying to you mean what you say, but I don't know that I agree.

Okay. That there's less coalition building now than there was before. Partly because I think there's a lot more coalition building in PO localized pockets than we think and than we see. And there is also a romanticization of left politics of the seventies as being much more cohesive. and conscious and allied than it was.

So I think it's a little bit of both. So by, you know, part of when I teach about the sixties and seventies is to try to show the complexity of it. It wasn't like every Asian American was an Asian American activist, . It wasn't [00:21:00] like

every white person was out to shoot them . And, and now, you know like black Lives Matter and Anti-Asian hate that, that tho those are sort of like, you know, touchstones for a lot of people and people going, you know, why aren't you stand for each other?

But it's like, I don't know what you mean by standing. Like, is there not enough Twitter activity for you? Like, do you need to like put a little screen on your Facebook page to say, I stand with you? Or is it about like, local? When I say local, I'm not just trying to fetishize what happens, but I just mean local as in it happens in such small ways.

that it doesn't have a larger geographical presence. And unless someone's tweeting about it or blogging about it, there's no media presence about it. I think there's, there's more alliance now than people think, and there was less alliance back then than people think as well. And I think that's sort of the balance we needed to, that movements can be very powerful with a very small active minority working with very clear goals.

Mm-hmm. , but that doesn't mean they had the consensus of, of a majority of even their community members behind them, you know?

**Salo:** [00:22:00] Mm-hmm. . Okay. Thank you. I guess originally I was thinking yeah, lemme rephrase what I said, make myself sound good too.

I don't know. I feel like with social media and the fractured media environment my mind went to, it's a lot harder to, we can maybe circle back to the media after this question also, but just, you know, it's a lot harder to kind of find a consensus. Quotation mark, quotation mark. than it used to be, just because there's no monocultural centers.

But the question may have just been problematic from the start. So , we can disregard everything. .

**Sylvia Chong:** That's fair. I know where it's coming from. I get that question a lot from people. And I think like one, I like to be contrarian. People used to invite me to give talks about leadership, and I would give talks and I'd show up and I'd say, I'm gonna give, talk about failure, and objection.

And you deal with it what you want, you know, and people are like, okay, Oreo people are like, I I want you to talk about the bamboo ceiling and I'm gonna get come and give this raging anti-capitalist talk about like, you know, buying into the modern minority myth. So failure oh, it, if you read my [00:23:00] book it's

very depressing, , but a lot of it is about Some, some of it is about sort of the inspiration or the activist drive that emerges out of trauma.

So where was I going with this? I'm sorry. Let me think about this again. Rephrase your question again for me. Saloon.

**Salo:** Oh man. Which one? I was just talking about fractured media environment, monocultural things. Ok. Yeah,

**Sylvia Chong:** yeah. You know, so, so like the so fractured media environment, I think we, we idealized the degree to which there was a unified media in the past mm-hmm.

or that the media represented some sort of consensus. I mean, a lot in a lot of ways. What you saw was the consensus of a group of elite journalists filtering out what fil filtering, what they thought was the pulse of donation, whatever that is. And so if you do. Research in, let's say so a, a newsletter that I use a lot for historical research is Gira.

It was a student publication out of Los Angeles of the Asian American Movement. But the, a lot of the [00:24:00] tenants of the Asian American movement early on was community activism. So it would be people act doing things around town. So it wasn't just U C L A based they would cover protests and things that were never in the mainstream media, you know.

But one of the things that they, you know, they would cover is like people marching anti-war protests with Asian Americans, where they would talk about looking at the Mii Massacre, which was a, a publicized a, a massacre that happened in 68 that was publicized in 71. I'm sorry. The trial was in something it was public size in, in, in 69 where, where American soldiers marched into a village, were very angry about attack on them.

And just killed everyone in a village and then left the bodies for an army photographer to photograph bodies of elderly people and of children. And Asian , an Asian Americans would, would, would have rallies in which they would talk about. I stare at those pictures and I don't see dead, see dead Vietnamese.

I see my grandmother, you know, I see my family in those villages today. I think people would say, oh, you know, check your privilege. [00:25:00] That's not your grandmother, your privilege, you know, San third generation, Japanese American. You know, you have no right to this story. And it is sort of true, you know, but it was a powerful moment of identification leading towards politics.

Mm-hmm. , it was saying this. It wasn't appropriating that as my family, and then I'm gonna wallow in my pity it was saying that could be my family. And what us Asian Americans don't realize is that we're one step away from that being our family. Mm-hmm. You know? So get off our butts and do something about that.

So it was a moment of failure. No one, we failed to stop these massacres, you could say, you know, becoming a moment of leadership, of imaginative leadership. So I, I talk about, I used to talk about that. I and then other Asian Americans would, would go there was a big move towards performative protests.

It's a lot of anti-war groups with stage ds. I always thought it was really powerful when Asian American groups, stage [00:26:00] ds mm-hmm. because they were you know, so a Diane would be, you know, you go and you're trying to get pe, you're bringing the war homes. You go to some, you know suburban town that's like pro-war.

And you say, This could be me lying. And then you have like a fake shooting and then you have like, pretend people pretending to be bodies laying on the ground and then you're performing the immediacy of death, you know? Mm-hmm. , I always thought it was really powerful when people of color, but especially Asian people perform that cuz you're lying down and you're performing death and, but you're like, you're, you're, you're very few steps away from that in the sense of like, people you could be descended from or related to or are there.

And I think it was also powerful when other people of color did it because these were communities that could easily have been subject to racial violence in the us you know, and, and left for dead on their, in their front doorstep. So, so the, these moments of allyship were fleeting cuz you were aligning yourself with someone who wasn't there.

And it [00:27:00] was you know, a distant, you know, because like you were trying to bring home the fact of some kind of political violence. That wasn't necessarily there, but, but it still was powerful and useful because what's the alternative? Alternative is, well, I mean, I mean, I don't want to say there are no alternatives, but if, if the alternative is that's not me, I don't need to concern myself with that.

That's a, that's a hard thing to base the politics on and hard thing to base any future allyship or coalition building on. So the coalition building there, you

know led a lot of groups, you know, like I, I know he is, he's been outed as a potential f b I informant, but there were, you know, Asian Americans like Richard Aoki who revolved themselves with the early Black Panther party.

And, and they were persuasive partly because, you know, the Black Panther was like, well, yeah, you know I see where you have a grievance too. You know, come organize with us. I, I feel like I don't know the details of the case [00:28:00] intimately, but I feel like the you know, the harm that Richard Aoki could have done you know, is balanced out by sort of, you know, the, the power in which they enabled him to just say, you know, go and organize in your own movement.

Mm-hmm. , you know, you're, you're a part of us, not because we're gonna let you in, in all Black Secrets, . And there were very few, you know but but to say, you know, you go and take our tools and organize your people over in San Francisco, J Town or, you know, in Alameda J Town or something. So these were moments of distance, symbolic allyship that were important because people then said, okay, I will go and do, or this gives me a reason to act.

Mm-hmm. . And that's different than I think the allyship people imagine, which is like, you know, two groups shaking hands and then going to a march together. I mean, that is a kind of allyship or like, I don't know, two people retweeting each other's tweets. I guess that's a form of allyship too. . It's not visible in those ways, but it's also, but it's still meaningful.

I wanna circle

**Salo:** back real quick to more contemporary Asian [00:29:00] American media. Oh my God, I had a whole anecdote that I forgot. I remember. Okay, I'm gonna cut that fire. Sorry. But can I take a, tell a quick anecdotal story? I was in a meeting with some Latino producers Latin American for the most part.

All born in the US grew up in like LA or Miami or, you know, where Latinos grow up and a pretty condo frame in these different meetings. Like, I, I think that's what stuck out to me the most was that they were tired of nautical stories. They were tired of a drug dealers, they were tired of migrants. And they was one movie they kept pointing towards, where they would say, wheres are that?

And it was crazy, which Asians, and it stuck out to me. Cause for those who can't see , Sophia just put a gun to her head. , when I talked to my Asian friends, they'd all have. You know, valid criticisms of classism, of anti, you know, south

Asians, of all these elements. And I thought it was very interesting to say, why is that the example we should look up to?

And I wanted to just get your thoughts on that quickly.[00:30:00]

**Sylvia Chong:** I, I've been writing and giving talks about crazier Rich Asians for a couple years now, and if I ever finish my second book, which is about yellow face I do wanna write about Crazy Rich Asians and the contemporary moment, the reason I put a gun to my head , sorry. It's okay. I shouldn't use violent things lightly.

This is also the thing I teach about, which is the Saigon execution, which is part of deer hunter, which is part of a lot of Vietnam media. Yes, everyone wants to be part of some kind of prosperity narrative. , you know, and and the, the, to the degree to which people loved Asian American Asian Americans loved Asians, it was, I guess the sense that, like, I feel seen we have to break that down really complexly because it's like you feel seen in something so ugly and limited. Says something about the psychic impoverishment [00:31:00] and neutering of whole swaths of ethnic America, that the only way you can feel seen is if you get a glossy image in the national media.

How far is that gonna go? You know, and what does that mean? You know? So, so Why don't, okay, why don't you feel seen in the migrants, you know, and the victims of narco violence around you? Because, because I mean, that's complicated because that's, like, that's not, that's media too. But it's also, you know, is a major crisis happening in in Mexico.

I have a lot of friends working on narco media and NACO politics. It's, and, and I, and when they work on NACO Media, I tell them, please be careful, . It, it, you know, it's a real thing. So it's kind of like, you know, Asian Americans going during the Vietnam War saying, I'm tired of being seen as like dead peasants.

You know, I haven't been shot in a village. I'm like, successful and I run a business and I speak English. I, I.[00:32:00]

Sorry, this is, this is complicated. I'm, I'm, I'm annoyed by this in on so many different levels. Yeah. So the first level is I don't think it, it's only Asian American's fault. I think there's something about our contemporary moment that has pushed politics into this realm of visual identification that is really

dangerous and alluring at the same time, representational politics as the ground for politics. I don't think that representational politics are unimportant, but I think it's, there's something interestingly neoliberal about our 21st century moment that has made that ground of politics seem more urgent than bread on the table.

You know immigration reform, you know, class solidarity, many other things. Mm-hmm. . Okay, so that's one. But the other thing [00:33:00] is, you know, this there's nothing very second gen about the embrace of crazy ions. Do you know that you've seen it? Yeah, I can, I do spoilers. Okay. Spoiler alerts for anyone.

When I started three

**Salo:** years,

**Sylvia Chong:** but like, there's, there's taught lots of things I haven't seen, so I get it. Sorry. Crazy Rich Asians is, the movie is very different from the book, which I read. And the book is hilarious. And it's much, even though it's equally obsessed with the ultra-rich, you know, the elements of the plant is still there.

It's very much, it's a very class conscious satire. Mm-hmm. about sort of this, the ways in which global. finance has enabled, you know, this, the rise of alt ultra-rich in many different countries. You know Singapore, Hong Kong, China, the, those, that's the triangle in the, in the book series. The movie made it about like poor Asian American Econ professor, who by the way, is probably not poor because they make twice [00:34:00] as much as humanities professors, poor Asian American econ professor struggles to be accepted by the real Asians that sh she's marrying into, and when they accept her, that's the, that's the reconciliation of Asia and Asian America that is so sad, and so untrue because like, that sense of acceptance is, I mean, well anyways why do you need them to accept you, you know, is part of it.

And, and then like what is the push, the, this, sorry, I, I'm getting lots of trains of thought con confused, but this is also the model minority myth. Says, you know, Asians are successful because of their culture. Right? There's something that makes Asian Americans distinct from other Americans, and we want to strive to keep it that way.

Confucian values, whatever the hell that is. Okay. So Asian Americans who buy into that part of it need that reconciliation because it's, it's part of sort of that acceptance that their provisional provisional cultural citizenship ship in the US

is predicated on an essential foreignness. [00:35:00] So the movie is about the drama of acceptance from foreign Asians.

Mm-hmm. , and not from the acceptance from white people. . Yeah. You know, so I, you can imagine another crazy would be much less popular and probably very racist in which, you know, Eleanor, like you know Henry Golding's family, you know, that whole rich family would be like rich white people and like you're wearing into it and it'd be all the ways that are racist against you.

No one would like that movie, first of all, but crazy Richie Whites maybe it would turn into Get Out or something like that, but but any, but like if that whole family is replaced by whites, you would see in that desire for acceptance all the ways in which this is like essentially self hating and sort of painting yourself into a political and, and psychic corner in which your self-love is predicated on recognition from another who will never give you full recognition.

Yeah, right. So crazy rich whites will never be made, but Crazy Rich Asians, everyone's like, this is so heartwarming and like, you know, we love this. I feel seen. [00:36:00] So we feel seen by the premise that we are essentially still foreign. , and we are not full people until we find reconciliation with the foreign side of our otherness.

Mm-hmm. , this is, it's both, this is a bullshit on so many levels because first of all you know, new Asian Americans younger Asian Americans have very transnational families, and Asian cultures are quite diverse and modernized in their own ways. So who's gonna say like that? You know like South Korea is like more advanced than America in some ways, you know, technologically and economically.

So why would you need like some you know, you don't need recco reconciliation because there's much less of that divide, this imagined divide between like the traditional other and the modern American. . Mm-hmm. . So that doesn't exist. And then second of all, even pushing for that divide means we accept that our conditional Americanization is based upon a fundamental impossibility to become Americanized.

I, okay. Just to be clear, I'm not saying that Asian Americans should [00:37:00] become Americanized and basically become white, but what we're saying is that we accept that our pro provisional whiteness or inclusion is premised on forever being linked to this for another. Mm-hmm. , we accept that. We embrace it.

We're gonna go to Singapore and meet our mother-in-law. Mm-hmm. , you know so like, why is an Ella marrying a white man or a black man or a Latina man, you know, or like, you know, any other, or another Asian American, you know, it's like it's the, the, all the different ways in which that could have played out didn't play out.

and I'm not blame the source material, but it just, I'm d but the, the way it captures the imagination is go back home, go to the other. That is where you really are. And it, and, and then the worst thing is it invents what you really are. That is, that doesn't exist. You know, the, the movie's vision of Singapore, talk about bva liberalism, it's Singapore without, its British colonialism.

It's Singapore without its interethnic. Conflicts between Indians and, and and belay and Chinese it's Singapore without racial conflict [00:38:00] and Singapore that is entirely Chinese. Mm-hmm. , which is imaginary bullshit. and then it's Singapore that is like, you know, eat some dumplings and you know, and you're one of us.

So like Chinese culture becomes like panda expressed, you know, or something like that. So it makes up what is Asian. It makes up what Asian culture is, you know? So I don't, I'm not as familiar with the Latin American diaspora, but, but, you know, but I have got a lot of students who are not from Mexico who complain about coming to La Latina to Latina students, Latinx students who complain that their Bivian roots, their Ecuadorian roots make them feel like they don't, they aren't not properly Latino.

Yeah. You know?

**Saló:** Mm-hmm. . Sorry. I was gonna, yeah. Yeah.

**Sylvia Chong:** So, so, so, so it's sort of like, you know, this, you know, people talk about not feeling, you know, like Asian American, cuz not East Asian, but even the East Asians are inventing a, a vision of East Asia or even, you know, SSOP Asia. Chinese ask for Asia that's completely imaginary.

Mm-hmm. . , [00:39:00] you know and satisfies some like, you know, mystical, you know, origin story that justifies political exclusions, you know? And so I don't wanna say that it's a cause, but you go dot, dot dot and you get to Covid and people are like, get your Wuhan VI virus out of here. It's like, you think I'm any closer to Wuhan than you are

You know, I, I have not been back to China, you know, for like decades, you know? I, the closest I get to China is the same as you. We buy our stuff from Walmart. Globalization is your link to China and y and our link to, to, to covid. But somehow our bodies are infectious, you know? Mm-hmm. . So I don't wanna say that crazy rich Asian caused anti-Asian violence, but what we think of as a beautiful.

comes out of an ideological premise that I have a lot of trouble with, which I think you can be plausibly linked to the core of anti-Asian violence, which I is not new, but has just never gone away. It just has had a new reason to rear its head. [00:40:00] Yeah,

**Salò:** of course. That's very interesting, everything cuz there is someone, which I hadn't quite thought about, but that Asian latin comparative politics thing.

Yeah. You know, I mean, I at one, one side of me is very sympathetic for the older generation of Latinos who had to leave their home because, you know, even with violence, it's a beautiful place. They miss their families, they missed their cultures. And I get that completely with , with kinda my generation. I'm still a little confused because I feel like they're creating this idealized world where classism, high levels of classism and inequality, you know, just don't exist.

Or racism is just like, oh, you know, isn't there? And I'm like, no. Those things, or colorism, like these things are so prevalent, but you know, growing up in the US Yeah. You know, it's mostly, not mostly, but the, the entertainment is what Cubans and Mexicans, if you're Salvadorian like me, or Bivian, or Ecuadorian, of course [00:41:00] you're gonna say like, oh, but where am I in this picture?

You know, because even with similarities, it doesn't, it isn't there, but it wasn't there in the first place. Like, it's such a messy conceit that this representation politics kind of pushes onto us, right? Where it's like behind your corner and like stick to it. Like, what the fuck is that ? You

**Sylvia Chong:** know? Right. It's, it's, it's sort of if you allow someone to define that, there's an essential core to who you.

You are also letting some elite person, even if they're the same ethnicity or color as you, you know, whatever take control of that narrative. And we've seen in Asian American circles a lot of dangerous paths that has led into. So I'm married to a mixed race Indian American man who, because he's biracial is very distant from his politics, but it's me.

But it's meant that, you know, I'm trying to figure out how do I make sure my kids who have an Indian surname grew up with some connection to that. But I have a lot of in south Asian academic friends who are deeply [00:42:00] disaffected with Hindu nationalist politics with sort of, you know, regional sort of, Eras and clashes with casteism, you know?

And so they've taught me that it, it's like you can't just say like, okay, if I give my kids Dali and holy, they, the. They have made whole, you know, it's like we went to a Dali party and then I had my friends tell me like, we, we gotta be careful how we celebrate it because it's not, it can turn into an hin, hindutva sort of supremacist celebration of, of the unification of a, a South Asian identity around Hindu Brahman sort of values and cultures.

And we don't want that. You know? So we're gonna have our sort of like eclectic multi ethnic, multi-religious devali, which is not gonna be the daal you'll get everywhere, you know? So so, so, so yeah, you can fund the nationalism or people who are like, you know, we don't want racism against Asians Chinese.

But does that mean I support Xi and, and his campaign against Uyghurs and his suppression of rights in Hong Kong and his. , [00:43:00] my family's, my, my immediate family's in Taiwan and his potential bombing, the hell, you know, Taiwan off the face of the earth. Do I support that? Just because I don't want people to beat up like poor Chinese grandmas in New York.

No. Right. So there's a way in which if we allow their us to be defined by a pure core of who we are, you know, so like we're not white American and we're proud to be Chinese. Not, I'm just taking my example, that's fine. But is there one definition of Chinese? And if we allow someone to define that, you know it's not enough to say there are many different things, but it's like there's things at stake in the many different things.

So it's not just I celebrate a multicultural China, it's like I celebrated China that is anti colonialist and genocidal, you know, against the speakers. I tried to celebrate China. That is not national, you know, so it's not bound to any one nation state. And I try to ch celebrate China.

That's not Han supremacist. , which, you know, takes one minority, or sorry, not a minority majority, but one group as the image [00:44:00] of what Chineseness looks like. Mm-hmm. , you know, so I don't wanna say, you know, okay, it, it, it's different. So l let Latinx politics is different. But it is similar in the sense that

there are potentially elite groups, elite people who are like, I wanna define what Mexicanness is, and it's very light-skinned and it's Spanish speaking.

It's not indigenous, it's not black. It's and it's very capitalist, you know? Okay. You know, I'm not saying those people aren't, you know who they are, but it's like, you know, I, I'm sure you can push back against that without being anti-Mexican. Just like you can push back against Chinese things without being anti-Chinese.

Mm-hmm. .

**Salò:** Oh yeah. That's a, that's awesome. I guess I'm conscious of the time and I had this idea, I don't know if you're interested, but I wanted to kind of just ask you about, Final thoughts on a few media things that I know have come out recently, and I don't know if you've seen them or not, but just, you know, very quickly thoughts and then maybe we can talk about your book and then just close out your next book.

[00:45:00] I mean, sure. Have you seen the Farewell?

**Sylvia Chong:** Yes.

**Salò:** What did you think? Yeah. What did you think about it?

**Sylvia Chong:** actually, I think it's beautiful. Mm-hmm. . But I think it's beautiful for reasons that maybe aren't what's captured Okay. In the press. I think what people see in the press is like, oh, this is a family getting back to its roots. But I think this is where like Lulu Wong, the director, writer and, and sort of her cinematography really tells its story.

I think what she's telling is the story of the disillusionment of various migrant classes and. and the disappearance of, of, of an, of a China, you know, before our eyes. Mm-hmm. , because what you ha when, when you have Aquafina, I forgot her character's name, but, you know, going back to visit China what you see is a China that looks more like Detroit, you know?

Mm-hmm. Anna China that is also changing [00:46:00] before your eyes. And I think you see, you know, with the debates between the family it stayed and the family that left you know, various levels of idealization. So the family that's stayed is prosperous, but also idealizes what America is, and the family that's left is not struggling, but is not, you know, that has not exactly made it and is deeply burned by its immigration, you know, story.

So I think the, I think the story that the farewell tells is not a cultural story. , but a story about social change and about different classes of migrants and about the effects of globalization on, on the Chinese diaspora. Yeah, that's

**Salo:** an interesting way to view it. I thought it was what was really proud to me was the personalness of it, you know, especially just the fam familial relations.

I, I, I loved it. I thought it was great. But, sorry. Next one. R r did you catch which one? R r r, the Hollywood movie? No,

**Sylvia Chong:** no, I don't. Sorry. No.

**Salo:** Okay. Everything everywhere.

**Sylvia Chong:** All at once. [00:47:00] Oh. I think it's very beautiful, but I haven't I think it's very beautiful and I think it has a really wonderful depiction again of a non-model minority. Chinese migrant life that Asian American migrant life that is not seen. I think it depicts sort of the, the, the sort of, the sadness of that, you know, really well. I don't, I don't know if anyone else shares my thoughts, but I, I actually am more, I'm more troubled about its queer politics.

Hmm. Because I think there is this not that there isn't exclusion, but in my experience, Asian families are much more accepting of queerness than white families. But it's, but it, it happens to norm be like of a more, like, don't ask, don't tell, or like, you know, it's all good. You know, we're gonna rather than a, you know, you know, put on my P flag t-shirt and, and go rallies.

So this notion that this essential anti queerness is, is the trauma in the family sits poorly with me. Mm-hmm. . , I don't know if it [00:48:00] has any biographical basis in any of the writers, and I feel like it, it reaches for a trope, you know, this sort of homo nationalist trope, which is, you know, America's the land of, of freedoms including of queer freedoms.

Taiwan legalized gay marriage decades ago. So it's like, okay, look, every, every Asian nation's different. But it's like, you know, don't put that homophobia sort of flag on my doorstep. That's kind of what I don't love about it. And so the fact that that is the main cause that riffs the universe between the, the, the queer daughter and the mother it's heartbreaking, but I also just don't know that it's it, that part felt the least true to me.

Mm-hmm. , that felt like a white coming out story embedded in an immigrant's laundromat. You know. Interesting. Yeah. Asian American children hide a lot of hurts. And I'm not saying that there isn't a lot of rejection from, from cian American children, but I, I just don't know that I, I'm not sure I believe that that would end the universe

**Salo:** Okay.

**Sylvia Chong:** Let, but that [00:49:00] said, I thought the fighting was amazing and the, and the other plot was amazing. And the queer love and the hotdog love was amazing.

**Salo:** What about the Juan Car, Juan Car Way? Sendup . I thought those were amazing. Oh

**Sylvia Chong:** yeah. Well, you know, I can totally believe that oh, I forgot the name of the actor.

The, that the male lead. I can totally believe that he could be like in another world, in a Wonka Way universe. Yeah. Yeah. ,

**Salo:** I have one more and then we can go talk about your next book. Sorry. Do you need to go if

**Sylvia Chong:** it's too much time? No, no, I'm sorry I talk too much. That's my problem. No, this is,

**Salo:** this is great.

I'm having a great time. You like Marvel movies

**Sylvia Chong:** some degree. Did you see? I only watched the non-white ones.

I dunno, any of the white ones. Sorry. .

**Salo:** So that makes, that makes three of them, right? Black Panther one and Two, and then Trunky. Am I missing one? ?

**Sylvia Chong:** Yes. I have been meaning to see The Eternals and Dr. Strange, but those will probably more be hate watches than anything. Yes. I just [00:50:00] saw rewatch Sanchi with my, my family.

I have two kids, six and 10, probably six year olds. A little too young for this stuff, but I'm forcing her to watch it. Yeah, they both loved both black Panther movies.

**Salo:** Yeah, I loved the Mexican actor, the Notch. I think he's great. Funny enough, he's in Nau, Mexico, but he's such a good actress.

**Sylvia Chong:** Oh, is he?

Yes. Well, cause he, you take the roles you get, I, what are you gonna do?

**Salo:** Right. That's that's still a tragic part, isn't it? Yeah, it's, yeah. That's a whole lot the conversation. Don't worry. .

Yeah.

**Sylvia Chong:** I, I love sh she, I don't think anything deep of it, and I think, you know, there's been a lot less like racial savior narratives about it than decre Rich Asian.

So there's less grossness there. I will say I was debating this with my, my husband too there there is sort of a, there is some debate about whether simul, you know, was like the right charac, right actor to pick, to play sh chi whi, which gets again to cultural purity and like sort of notions. People are like, you [00:51:00] know, he's not attractive enough.

He's not like the Asian American heart thro we needed him to be. And, and I'm like, what the hell ? You know, I, maybe, maybe it's hard because he has to start next to Tony Leon, who is beautiful, even his old age. But, but I think there's, again, this is notion that like, you know, our beauty standards, east Asian beauty standards are fucked up.

Let me just say that. Yeah. No, not everyone needs to look like a prepubescent K-pop idol. Even if that is who is most popular , all of East Asia. And, and there is a little bit of masculinity, toxic masculinity, politics there. That's been a ongoing debate in Asian American circles. Do Asian American men really need to be re manipulated?

Mm-hmm. , you know, so that they don't, you know, get queered what is, you know, queered and I don't know that I believe that. So Shanki kind of fits into that long-standing debate, you know, so he gets his fallas back by kicking bud.

But, you know, but I think all in all, it's not, it, it is not the worst thing it could be.

And there's funny moments [00:52:00] about the diaspora meeting, meeting Asian America. Yeah.

**Salo:** I speak KBC is the one environment. . Yes. I guess I wanna say two things about that, and then the last question, but. You know, my girlfriend disagrees. I think, I think he thinks Sim Louis is really hot. is what she told me while we watched the movie

And then, I can't believe Marvel, God, Tony Le won. That was su when I heard that news I was like, really? And then I, I was this, I know the way Marvel gets these big actors, like actual actors always impresses me like Michael Douglass and Tony Luong. I'm like, oh,

**Sylvia Chong:** Mar Marvel. This, I mean, for film study scholars, this is something people are really trying to wrap their brains around.

The consolidation of the mediascape into a few places. I mean I need to watch Eternals. I don't really want to, but I need to because Chloe's out directed it. But I, but I don't wanna watch the Eternals cuz it sounds like crap. And I don't care if you know they're Asian Americans in it. I don't care if you get my chance in it.

[00:53:00] And, and. I'm sorry, who's the South Asian guy? . There's like a com and isn't there, there's a handful of Asians. There's like that guy from Dr. Strange, and then there's the guy from who's the comedian from Silicon Valley. Kuil. Yeah, Kuil. Johnny Kuil, not Johnny. And, and then there's some other Asian guy and then there's Gama Chen from Crazy Rich Asians.

But I just, I just don't care. ,

**Salo:** I think that's, I think that's a fair opinion to have .

**Sylvia Chong:** I need to watch Dr. Strange, because I heard about the Dust Stop between Margaret Show and Tilda and I really wanna see like what messed up. So Asian Tilda Swinton played. I didn't know there was a, that's watching

**Salo:** controversy.

I knew there was controversy. I didn't know there was a full on dust up between Margaret Joo and Tillis Horton. I need to look that up after this. Yeah. Yeah. That's all interesting. What is your next book about? Do you have a title for it? Do you know when it's going to release?

**Sylvia Chong:** You're released when it's written.

Second books you, as you may know, are notoriously hard and [00:54:00] they're harder in particular for faculty who take on a lot of other roles burdens. So I've just been kind of sucked up in doing service and admin for a while. But my second book which I've been researching for over a decade, so you'd be like, why is it not out?

Is about yellow face in Hollywood mid-century and it's called Yellow Face Peril. And it's trying to think about how yellow face as a pract yellow face is when non-Asians put on makeup and junk and try to play an Asian role. But my argument includes Asians sort of playing Asian roles in Hollywood and sort of, you know, the ways in which that is structured.

So though it's centered around the World War II era, in which we had a lot of Chinese and Koreans playing the Japanese enemy, And raising questions about loyalty and as the degree to which assimilation is linked to loyalty and belonging. But also the ways in which actors slay two preconceived notions of what racialization [00:55:00] looks like, even when they already are racialized in ways that contradict or reinforce the ways they live their racialization offscreen.

So it's sort of a, a, it's a performance and performance studies, heavy discussion of performance strategies, but also racial ideologies, you know? And so how we got from the era that said like, everyone's a cool chink terrorist to like, oh, we like Asians and they're csu. So twenties to sixties, and in a way, many ways, it's a prequel to the Oriental Epsy.

Well,

**Salvo:** okay. I look forward to reading that. That sounds really interesting. Thank you. Don't hold your

**Sylvia Chong:** breath.

No. I mean, you, thank you for having me. I think you know a lot of my questions are complicated because I think if we examine the past, which I hope

we continue to do, it has a lot of lessons for us in the present. We are not beholden to living the way other people live before us. But I think if we looked at the choices that people made ordinary [00:56:00] people as well as, you know, people you know connected, savvy elites I think we see some of the choices that they were faced with, you know, difficult ones.

There's no perfect choice and maybe we can celebrate some of the things that they achieved. I don't mean in a boba, liberalist way, but just celebrate sort of like the alliances and the small victories that they were able to earn, even if they came at a price.

**Salo:** Thank you so much for coming on. This has been really fantastic.

**Sylvia Chong:** Thank you. Good luck with editing this . Thank.