

February 4, 2015 2:31 p.m.

Network TV Ate My Life: Eddie Huang on Watching His Memoir Become a Sitcom

By **Eddie Huang**



Bamboo-Ceiling TV

The network tried to turn my memoir into a cornstarch sitcom and me into a mascot for America. I hated that.

Photograph by Kenneth Cappello



This piece originally ran in January 2015. We are rerunning it with Fresh Off the Boat premiering tonight.

“Just say the line,” said Melvin, our executive producer.

“Did you read?” I asked. “If you can find any crumb of a complete thought in the book that remotely infers ‘America is great,’ I’ll read the line.”

“Eddie, we need it for the episode. It’s a big moment! You have a black kid and a Chinese kid breaking bread over a Jewish hip-hop concert. Where else could this happen? America IS great!”

“Of course you picked a Beastie Boys concert. That’s what you people do — you make Asian sitcoms for white people praising *Ill Communication* because we’re both acceptable, unthreatening gateways to black culture. These kids couldn’t break bread at a Gravediggaz show?”

“It’s not your story anymore. Get over it. The kids ARE NOT going to a Gravediggaz show! This is a HISTORIC network-television show inspired by your life, and it’s going to get Americans It’s never going to be the book; it’s never going to be It’s and you know what? Orange chicken gets America really excited about Chinese people in airports.”

“Then what did you buy my book for? Just make *A Chink’s Life ... With Free Wonton Soup or Soda: A reverse-yellowface show with universal white stories played out by Chinamen.*”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about. This show is on the AMERICAN BROADCASTING CHANNEL. It’s the holy grail! Network television! Just say the line, man ...”

Complete silence.

“How about a compromise? What about ‘Ain’t America great?’ or ‘America’s not half-bad!’”

I'd known Asian-Americans like Melvin my entire life. Those –Professor X–Uncle Chans, willing to cast down their buckets, take off Cerebro, and forget that successful people of color are in many ways “chosen” and “allowed” to exist while the others get left behind. They spout off about the American Dream or Only in America as if they're about to rob the next great fighter from I empathize with Melvin, but Uncle Chans are basically born-again-Christian felons who will praise anything as long as they don't get sent back to Rikers. I'd rather be Tunechi, “Left Rikers in a Phantom, that's my

From the Chinese Exclusion Act to *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* to your favorite talking head's favorite “ching chong” jokes, America never ran out of the shadows to defend the honor of their obedient Chinamen. Despite being the “man's” preferred lapdog of color, everything Asian-American immigrants have was fought for. We still wake up spotting the man 10 points, walking with our heads down, apologizing for our FOB-y aunts and uncles as if aspiring to wash your shirt or do your taxes were really such an insidiously foreign idea. In a way, I accept that I have to be 10 points better; what I won't accept are Melvins.

“Run the tape.” I said to the editor recording the session. The red light went on.

“America ain't three fifths bad.” #Compromise



Huang (in Basquiat crown) with his family in 1985. Photo: Courtesy of Eddie Huang

I used to try to understand my existence underneath the but with no way out through the master's house, I laced up my Timb boots, initiated Chinkstronaut mode, and escaped the gravitational pull of society. Since 2009, I've opened **Baohaus** (<http://nymag.com/listings/restaurant/baohaus02/>), produced and hosted **Huang's World** (<https://munchies.vice.com/show/huangs-world>) for Vice, and, in January 2013, Spiegel and Grau published my memoir, **Fresh Off the Boat** (<http://www.amazon.com/Fresh-Off-Boat-A-Memoir/dp/0812983351>). It told my life story as a Taiwanese-Chinese-American creating his own America replete with bound feet, bowl cuts, sports sex, and soup dumps. I even got love in the **Times** (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/24/books/review/fresh-off-the-boat-by-eddie-huang.html?pagewanted=all>). Dwight Garner said it was "a surprisingly sophisticated memoir about race and assimilation in America. It's an angry book, as much James Baldwin and Jay-Z as Amy Tan. That it's also bawdy and frequently hilarious nearly, if not entirely, seals the deal." Life was good.

I also became a TED fellow. But after two days, I got kicked out of Chris Anderson's Carefully Curated Conference for Intellectual Limp Biscuit. That's when I met Melvin Mar, who came through and kind of rescued me ...

“I love the book. I want to make it a show, buddy!” said Melvin. “Like *Malcolm in the Middle* or *Everybody Hates Chris*, with a 12-year-old Eddie and retro ’90s setting in Orlando.”

“Everybody hates those shows.”

“*Malcolm in the Middle* was great!”

“Okay, I liked *Malcolm in the Middle*. But Malcolm’s dad turned into a meth dealer on AMC. I don’t want my dad portrayed that way.”

“What are you talking about? Everyone loves Heisenberg.”

“My dad has better hair,” I said. “But I need more than that. I need *Married With Chinese People*. I want Ed O’Neill to go yellowface with a perm, *faux*-gator shoes, and blue-lens Cartier frames. If you can make that happen, you can have the book.” #TheGodAlBundy

After several conversations with my agent about industry standards and Ed O’Neill’s availability and unwillingness to go yellowface, we came to an agreement on a term sheet with the studio, which simultaneously attached Nahnatchka Khan (who was behind *Don’t Trust the B— in Apt. 23*) as the writer and got a put-pilot commitment from ABC. I was in Chengdu when Melvin broke the news.

“What’d I tell you, man? I’m gonna make you a star.”

“I’m already a star, Melvin, my basketball team made the second-division finals in the Fastbreak NYC playoffs this year, and I hit two 3s.”

“Your life story is going to be on network television! Get excited!”

“I would be excited, but you attached a Persian writer, and I’m kinda worried it’s going to be *The Shahs of Cul-de-Sac Holando*.”

“Relax, is a unicorn! She’s a Persian writer who understands the American experience of getting shit on, fighting back, and wrote *Don’t Trust the B— in Apt. 23*.”



The sitcom version of his family. Photo: Bob D'Amico/Courtesy of ABC

“I get it. She has her own America complete with songs of saffron ice-cream dreams deferred, and we can show solidarity in but it’s not the same. I’m and this can’t be *Soft-Ass Glutinous Asians in Apartment 23!* This shit’s gotta go hard. We haven’t had an eat-rocks Asian male role model . And why isn’t there a Taiwanese or Chinese person who can write this? I’m sure there’s some angry Korean dude in Hollywood who grew up eating Spam, watching his dad punch his mom in the face, who knows how to use Final Draft!”

I didn’t understand how network television, the one-size fits-all antithesis to *Fresh Off the Boat*, was going to house the voice of a futuristic chinkstronaut. I began to regret ever selling the book, because *Fresh Off the Boat* was a very specific narrative about SPECIFIC moments in my life, such as kneeling in a driveway holding buckets of rice overhead or seeing pink nipples for the first time. The network’s approach was to tell a universal, ambiguous, cornstarch story about Asian-Americans resembling moo goo gai pan written by a Persian-American who cut her teeth on race relations writing for Seth MacFarlane. But who is that show written for?

We all know that universal demographic doesn’t exist; even at the level of the person, the network’s ideal viewer doesn’t exist, much less know what it wants. This universal market of Jos. A. Bank

customers watches cornstarch television and eats at Panda Express because that's all they're being offered. I didn't need the show to be Baohaus or Din Tai Fung; I would have settled for Chipotle. Yet, for some reason, no one wants to improve the quality of offerings until someone forces them to. A Jedi has to say, "I want to be incrementally better than the Seth MacFarlanes and McDonald's of the world!" for anything to change. Isn't that the genius of Shake Shack, *South Park*, and In-N-Out Burger? What happened to being an incrementally aspirational society? Wasn't America the City on the Hill? In Hollywood, it felt like, we were the town in a valley run by western Michigan.

"Listen, buddy, the show is never going to be the book. What you are hoping is that people watch the show, buy the book, then say, 'You know, that show is funny, but the book is better,'" said Melvin.

"But it doesn't have to be that way! *Game of Thrones* is based on books, and it's fucking heat rocks."

"I hate to break this up, but the books are better," whispered my manager Rafael.

"You get what I'm saying. It's still a good show."

"Eddie, the point of a network show is for people to come home from work, laugh for 22 minutes on the couch, watch your TV family solve the A-plot and B-plot, and end up on a similar couch as one big, happy, AMERICAN family."

"That show is a lie, Melvin!"

My instincts told me to call a former space traveler. Someone who'd shunned gravity and returned, only to retreat once again: Margaret Cho. I had never met or even talked to Margaret, but I remember her jokes about penises being like snowflakes and still refer to my dick as a six-inch meatball sub. When she wasn't helping me contextualize my penis in the pantheon of fast-casual sandwiches, she helped me navigate being Asian in America: a spirit guide leading me through San Francisco bookstores, fragrance departments, and Korean dinners. was America's first Asian — specifically, Korean-American — sitcom, but it got canceled after one season. Asians like myself ate our hopes and dreams by the grain burnt at the bottom of a seasonal stone bowl, vowing to one day return.

"They have no idea what they're doing, but they'll have opinions about everything you're doing," she warned.

"It's as bad as everyone says, huh?"

"It's worse. When I did it, I was just happy to be there, and every time they told me I was too Asian, not Asian enough, too fat, too skinny, I listened. You have to fight them at every step."

"Why does anyone even sign up for this Hollywood High School bullshit? It's not like there aren't other ways to tell stories."

"Because you CAN do it. You've been irreverent everywhere you've gone, just don't change now. You go to Hollywood and you go be the same person you've been the whole time. I believe in you, and to be

honest, we need this.”

Over the next year, I went to production meetings, sat on set at times, gave alts, and checked for authenticity, but I couldn't stomach the culture of scripted sitcoms. In our first production meeting, there were about 50 to 60 people gathered in a classroomlike studio setting, with Jake Kasdan, Natch, Lynn Shelton, Melvin, and myself going scene by scene through the script.

Eventually, we got to the macaroni-and-cheese scene. Throughout the book tour, it was my favorite scene to read because it exemplified how foreign white culture was to me. I remember the first time I saw macaroni and cheese, as a guest in my friend Jeff's home, thinking it was pig intestines cut into half-moons hanging out in an orange sauce. Jeff found it incredulous that I didn't know what macaroni and cheese was, but it was formative; he got a taste of macaroni and cheese from my eyes, discovering how it felt to be gazed on and seen as exotic instead of being the one gazing. The script took the moment and exploited it for humor as opposed to making it a teaching moment, so I spoke up.

“The setup for the joke in this scene is nonexistent. People need to understand how weird it is for Young Eddie to see macaroni and cheese for the first time.”

“The visual does it for you. Look at the mac 'n' cheese, it's disgusting!” said Jake, who put the prop on the table.

“Yeah, it looks like shitty mac 'n' cheese, then the joke becomes that it's bad mac 'n' cheese. The point is that it's foreign, not bad.”

Melvin got tense; Natch spoke up.

“I know what Eddie's saying. We'll address it. There could be more setup.” Within seconds, I got a text from Melvin. “Welcome to pilot season, kid.” Eventually, they just cut the entire scene.

Throughout the process, I kept speaking to Melvin and Natch about context and perspective so that viewers truly understood how diverse Asian America is. My father loved America. He wanted to come, listen to rock 'n' roll, grow long hair, and cop dome from Jewish women at Penn State. My mom had no choice. She was brought to the country, never really fit in, but never felt less for it. She's a strong, confident woman who many times felt that America made no sense. What the hell are chicken tenders? Why did people waste napkins at the restaurant? Why do their kids bruise fruit at the store? Frankly, she thought she was better than America because she came from a culture with 5,000 years of experience. I needed that contrast in the show supported by the specific musings and perspectives of Asian-Americans who actually lived this life. We couldn't represent everyone who lived this life, but for the individuals we did represent, I felt a duty to be accurate.

A few weeks after we taped, Melvin kept blowing up my phone.

“We tested the show, and there may or may not be a handful of butt-hurt white people ...”

“Success!”

“Maybe. But listen, white people keep you on the air. They have to feel included. If people understand our perspective, they won’t be offended. So I pitched them an idea. We gotta hold the viewer’s hand through this because they’ve never been inside an Asian-American home before.”

“Yeah?”

“I know you love *Wonder Years* ...”

“Son ...”

“I told them that we should do voice-over on the show. It’ll help the audience get into the mind of Young Eddie.”

“YOU GOTTA LET ME GET MY KEVIN ARNOLD ON!”

“Who is pitching this dickhead, you or me?”

“You, Melvin.”

“You’re gonna get your Kevin Arnold on, buddy.”

And for a few months, it went well. The lines were more or less in some acceptable “network Eddie” compromise voice, and when I had issues, they adapted. But everything fell apart after that November voice-over session.

“Listen, I tried to put myself in your shoes after voice-over yesterday,” Melvin said.

“Yeah.”

“I can’t ask you to say ‘America is great.’”

“Thanks, man. You get it, right?”

“Yeah, I do. Like you said, it goes against the essence of the book.”

“Exactly.”

“We’re asking too much of you. I watch you on set, read your emails, and it’s killing you to watch us make this show ... Maybe we should have someone else do voice-over?”

I let it marinate for a second.

“You there, buddy?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think?”

At first, I saw his point. “I mean, I’m sure you can find someone who will actually read what you put in front of him.”

“We don’t need to put you through this. We can go harder next time.”

That’s when I realized what was really going on. It wasn’t that I hated the show. It genuinely entertained me, but it had to do more. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* satisfies groundlings and intellectuals alike. Tragedy is easy and comedy’s hard, but we weren’t even trying! My story had become an entertaining but domesticated vehicle to sell dominant culture with Kidz Bop, pot shots, and the emasculated Asian male. I got upset when they dressed like a Fung Wah bus driver or like an And-1 yard sale or like the Crocodile Hunter with kitty-cat heels. We couldn’t go out like this! If America is ever going to treat its cold sores, its culture will have to force conversations examining freedom, equality, and ASIANS IN GATOR SHOES.

“Naw, fuck that! You’re trying to steal my story. We may never get another chance!”

“Eddie, calm down, man! No one is taking your story from you. They’re not ready for the book. The show is a bridge; it’ll get them there, but it’s still your story!”

“Nah, son. People ARE ready!”

I hung up on Melvin, parked my car, and hit the interwebs via **Twitter**

(<https://twitter.com/MrEddieHuang>) . “Producers of #FreshOfftheBoat want me to say ‘America is great’ or they’ll replace me. What’s a chink to do?”

Three weeks later, the EPA had announced it was no longer consulting scientists, Ferguson had announced there would be no indictments, and I sat in my massage chair numb to America, getting the gluten kneaded out of my back fat. Everything I saw, from Republicans suing Obama over immigration reform to the script for our second episode, where ODB is appropriated to teach Young Eddie how to make it rain, made absolutely But in my post-Thanksgiving slumber, I turned on the Michigan–Ohio State game. Since Desmond Howard did the Heisman, I’ve been a Wolverines fan. They’ve been hot trash recently, but I still hold out hope ... BECAUSE YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN A PROMO FOR YOUR LIFE STORY IS GOING TO RUN ON ABC DURING THE GAME WHEN YOU ARE TAKING BONG RIPS.

All of a sudden, I screamed, “THERE IT GO!” The *Fresh Off the Boat* logo flashed across the screen, my TV mom, Constance Wu, going buck-wild in a Taiwanese market, Young Eddie, searching for Lunchables, and Randall Park with the jade pendant, flossin’ just like my pops. THERE WERE REAL ACTORS ON TV TALKING ABOUT THE PITFALLS OF WHITE FOOD!

My friend Rocky was staying at the crib and missed the commercial, so I played it back.

“Ninja, we made it.”

“YOU made it.”

“Nah, son, WE MADE IT.”

“I ain’t never seen anything like this. I don’t know what to say. I knew it was coming, but ... son ... YOU GOT ASIANS ON TV!”

But I still wasn’t convinced. Everything I ever knew rang in my head: “It’s not enough ... You can’t just get on base. We got to come home.” Quickly, I pulled up the pilot episode on my laptop and played it for Rocky. The standard shots were there, the kitchen scenes, banter, banter, banter, but through all the fucking duck sauce and wonton strips, Melvin and Natch did it ... They fucking did it. In the black-box TV format, *there we were*. And after about 19 minutes of shiny suit-bubble goose bounce, there was real talk.

“Get to the back of the line, chink!” said Edgar, the only other person of color at school. It was the most formative moment of my childhood; the first time someone ever called me a chink, held in a two-shot. Two kids of color forced to battle each other at the bottom of America’s totem pole on ABC.

After 18 months of back and forth, I had crossed a threshold and become the audience. I wasn’t the auteur, the writer, the actor, or the source material. I was the viewer, and I finally understood it. This show isn’t about me, nor is it about Asian America. The network won’t take that gamble right now. You can’t flash an ad during THE GAME with some chubby Chinese kid running across the screen talking shit about spaceships and Uncle Chans in 2014 because America has no reference. The only way they could even mention some of the stories in the book was by building a Trojan horse and feeding the pathogenic stereotypes that still define us to a lot of American cyclope. Randall was neutered, Constance was exoticized, and Young Eddie was urbanized so that the viewers got their *mise-en-place*. People watching these channels have never seen us, and the network’s approach to pacifying them is to say we’re all the same. Sell them pasteurized network television with East Asian faces until they wake up intolerant of their own lactose, and hit 'em with the soy. Baking soya, I got baking soya!

It doesn’t sound like much, but it is. Those three minutes are the holy trinity Melvin, Randall, Constance, Hudson, Forrest, Ian, and I sacrificed everything for. Our parents worked in restaurants, laundromats, and one-hour photo shops thinking it was impossible to have a voice in this country, so they never said a word. We are culturally destitute in America, and this is our ground zero. Network television never offered the epic tale highlighting Asian America’s coming of age; they offered to put orange chicken on TV for 22 minutes a week instead of Salisbury steak ... and I’ll eat it; I’ll even thank them, because if you’re high enough, orange chicken ain’t so bad.

But for all the bullshit I heard at studios about universal stories and the cultural pus it perpetuates, I felt some truth in it for those three minutes. It takes a lot of chutzpah to launch a network comedy with a pilot addressing the word *chink*, yet it works because it’s the safest bet the studio could have made. The feeling of being different is universal because difference makes us universally human in our individual relationships with society. We’re all fucking weirdos. The social contract is here because we have a collective desire to be individuals and preserve our rights to pursue singular happiness with or without cilantro. But we’ve been fixated way too long on universality and the matrix’s pursuit of

monoculture. It's time to embrace difference and speak about it with singularity, idiosyncrasy, and infinite density. No more drone strikes, no more Nielsen boxes, no more "we are the world" ... if it's walkin' dead with a red dot, take the shot.

Chinkstronauts, ride out ...

**This is an extended version of an article appears in the January 12, 2015 issue of New York Magazine.*

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