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## Heated Rivalry Is a Step Forward for Gay Asian Representation — But Also Highlights the Burgeoning Masculinity Crisis

Shane Hollander is upending western pop culture stereotypes around Asian men

BY KEVIN NG | PUBLISHED ON JANUARY 27, 2026

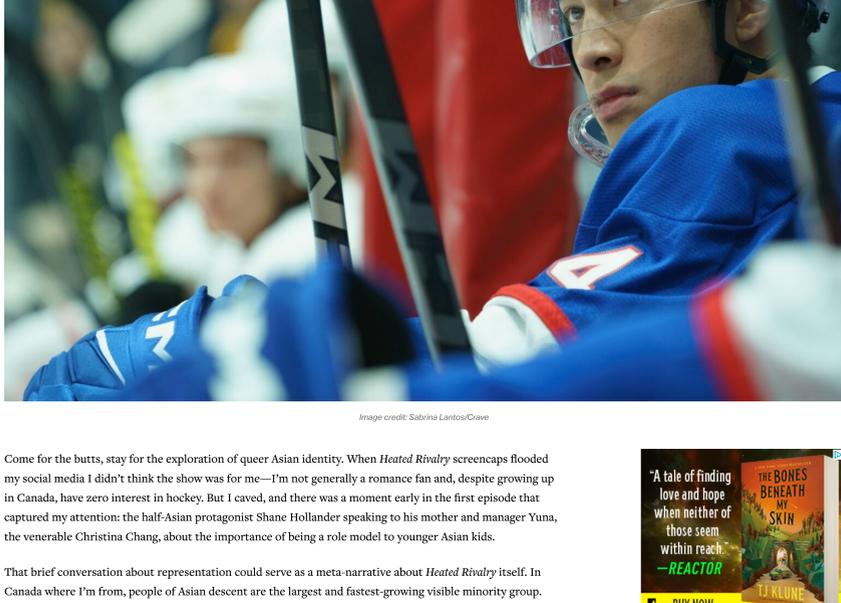


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Come for the butts, stay for the exploration of queer Asian identity. When *Heated Rivalry* screencaps flooded my social media I didn't think the show was for me—I'm not generally a romance fan and, despite growing up in Canada, have zero interest in hockey. But I caved, and there was a moment early in the first episode that captured my attention: the half-Asian protagonist Shane Hollander speaking to his mother and manager Yuna, the venerable Christina Chang, about the importance of being a role model to younger Asian kids.

That brief conversation about representation could serve as a meta-narrative about *Heated Rivalry* itself. In Canada where I'm from, people of Asian descent are the largest and fastest-growing visible minority group. We make up over 20% of Canada's population in comparison to the US's 7%—that percentage increases to over 25% in big cities like Toronto and Vancouver. But you would never realize that if you flipped through your typical gay magazine, circuit party, or gay Instagram feed. Images of gay life remain distinctly whitewashed, and there was nearly thirty years between Ang Lee's 1993 *Wedding Banquet* and 2022's *Fire Island* to provide any mainstream representation of gay Asian life.

Representation isn't much better for our straight counterparts. It's a phenomenon that shows the power that culture has over society. The "Yellow Peril" of the 1800s cast Asian men as servile, industrious, and peaceful while at the same time being beastly and uncivilized. For generations Asian men were portrayed in film as caricatures, from Christopher Lee's Fu Manchu to Mickey Rooney's Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

This pushback to this threat was a cultural emasculation of the Asian man. This reached a pinnacle in 1984's *Sixteen Candles*, where the character of Long Duk Dong was portrayed as skinny and impotent. Even the *kung fu* boom of the 1990s, which brought Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Bruce Lee into the mainstream, wasn't enough to subvert these stereotypes. Despite being amongst the most profitable and physically fit movie stars, they were never marketed as being romantically or sexually desirable. It took 2018's *Crazy Rich Asians* to convince Hollywood that an Asian man could be a bankable romantic lead—and even then, Henry Golding's career hasn't taken off the way many predicted it would. There is, of course, Keanu Reeves, whose film career has encompassed everything from action to romantic comedy (and, arguably, the gayest possible sports film in *Point Break*), but his ability to pass as white likely is a contributing factor.



Image: Sabrina Lantos/Crave

Which is why it's so gratifying to see a gay Asian character as a main character in one of the biggest hits of the year. *Heated Rivalry* is based on a book series by Canadian author Rachel Reid, who explicitly describes the character as half-Asian (in an apparent nod to current Montréal Canadiens captain Nick Suzuki). There is, of course, a long legacy of Asian and other ethnic minority characters being whitewashed—Scarlett Johansson's casting in 2017's *Ghost in the Shell* being a prime example—so there was no guarantee on how Shane would be cast.

The show's creator and director Jacob Tierney not only doubles down on Shane's Asianness, but expands upon the nuances of the character's ethnicity beyond what is in Reid's novel. "It was important to me because there are not a lot of people who are not white in the NHL, and there are not a lot of people who are not white as leads in romances either," Tierney said in a Q&A after the Toronto premiere. "I think a lot about Shane's personality is as an outsider, and to me Shane had to be Asian. It would just be monstrous to make him white."

Tierney's writing is effective because it is specific—the character of Shane is not meant to represent the totality of the Asian experience. There is a precision to the way Tierney writes about Yuna, who represents a very specific kind of East Asian mother; Shane's overwhelming perfectionism and pressure to act as a role model for all Asians; the nerd-chic of the glasses; how his white last name provides him with some level of social capital; how he folds his clothes before sex.

But the character of Shane also reveals the limits placed upon gay Asian men when it comes to masculinity. Hockey is, even within the world of professional sport, a hypermasculine space—the NHL is the one major men's sports league with no out gay players in its history. The cultural emasculation of Asian men also extends into the gay world: the classic "no fats, no femmes, no Asians" may be less common on Grindr than it was a decade ago, but the stereotypes of Asian men as effeminate, submissive bottoms still persist.

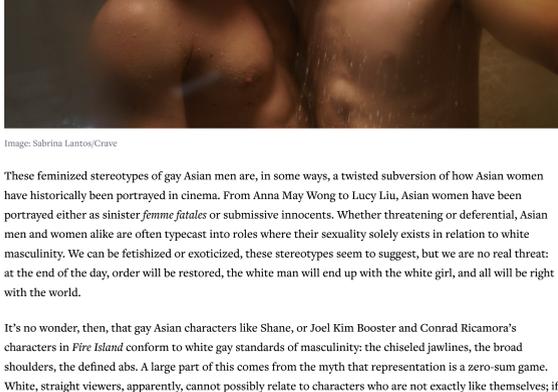


Image: Sabrina Lantos/Crave

These feminized stereotypes of gay Asian men are, in some ways, a twisted subversion of how Asian women have historically been portrayed in cinema. From Anna May Wong to Lucy Liu, Asian women have been portrayed either as sinister *femme fatales* or submissive innocents. Whether threatening or deferential, Asian men and women alike are often typecast into roles where their sexuality solely exists in relation to white masculinity. We can be fetishized or exoticized, these stereotypes seem to suggest, but we are no real threat: at the end of the day, order will be restored, the white man will end up with the white girl, and all will be right with the world.

It's no wonder, then, that gay Asian characters like Shane, or Joel Kim Booster and Conrad Ricamora's characters in *Fire Island* conform to white gay standards of masculinity: the chiseled jawlines, the broad shoulders, the defined abs. A large part of this comes from the myth that representation is a zero-sum game. White, straight viewers, apparently, cannot possibly relate to characters who are not exactly like themselves; if shows about non-white characters are jockeying for screentime with shows about non-straight characters, the statistical likelihood of a gay Asian lead becomes vanishingly small.

But without our own role models for masculinity, are we fated to fall into white standards of masculinity?

It's a particularly striking question when K-pop seems poised to take over American culture. *KPop Demon Hunters* was Netflix's unexpected runaway success of 2025, offering an entirely different aesthetic of masculinity shaped by the open vulnerability and slim androgyny of BTS and Exo. Soon, Asian men will be caught between two wildly different masculine ideals, both culturally and aesthetically restrictive in their own ways—though two options are better than one. But in a predominantly white society the choice is clear: conforming to the aesthetic ideals of the dominant culture gives greater access to cultural and political capital.

You can see this clearly walking down the streets of San Francisco, New York, Vancouver, or Toronto: the hordes of Asian tech and finance bros with their Patagonia vests and Equinox memberships, manifesting their version of the American Dream. Andrew Yang's cryptocurrency-forward, Joe Rogan-adjacent political career epitomizes both the folly and tragedy of trying to conform to white standards of masculinity for widespread acceptance, whether on television or in real life.

Shane Hollander is, of course, a top-ranked hockey player, and it would be ridiculous for him not to be muscular. But the construction of masculinity is so much more than physical appearance, even if the show's marketing has been able to capitalize off the proliferation of thirsty screen grabs. Confidence, dominance, control: all of these are explored as facets of Shane's personality and shapes how he manages (or doesn't manage) his relationships.

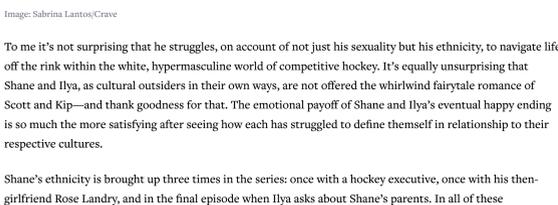


Image: Sabrina Lantos/Crave

To me it's not surprising that he struggles, on account of not just his sexuality but his ethnicity, to navigate life off the rink within the white, hypermasculine world of competitive hockey. It's equally unsurprising that Shane and Ilya, as cultural outsiders in their own ways, are not offered the whirlwind fairytale romance of Scott and Kip—and thank goodness for that. The emotional payoff of Shane and Ilya's eventual happy ending is so much the more satisfying after seeing how each has struggled to define themselves in relationship to their respective cultures.

Shane's ethnicity is brought up three times in the series: once with a hockey executive, once with his then-girlfriend Rose Landry, and in the final episode when Ilya asks about Shane's parents. In all of these conversations there is an ambiguity—his ethnicity is at once a marketing boon and liability, one that automatically makes him a candidate to be bullied in his youth and then a role model in adulthood. Shane's ethnicity is always explored in relation to others, whether it be his bosses, fans, sponsors, or peers. In each of these interactions, you see how his ethnicity comes with the weight of expectation, of fulfilling a particular role—and you see how that expectation prevents him from leading an authentic, free life. There's satisfaction, too, in using hockey—the whitest major league sport—as a medium through which to explore queer Asian masculinity, as if subverting the decentering and desexualization of Asian men in the UFC world despite its origins in Asian martial arts.

It's notable that both Reid's books and Tierney's television series have been a hit amongst women, a fact that they attribute to the fact that many women crave seeing a world free of the patriarchal power dynamics of straight relationships. Yet what this relationship offers is an opportunity to explore the nuances of how hierarchies in power and dominance can be viewed through the synergistic or competing lenses of gender and race. These hierarchies are materialized in Shane and Ilya's professional rivalry, which poses a question for women: to unmasculine displays of tenderness or intimacy beyond the masculine ideals of race, country, and career. We each embody a multitude of patriarchies.

What Reid and Tierney understand is that the experience of an ethnic minority is similar in many ways to that of being queer. There's a constant need to code-switch, to surveil one's environment in order to understand which aspects of one's identity are safe or advantageous to reveal, and a guilt in either conforming or subverting stereotypes. It's doubly exhausting when both of these identities are at play, and when the expectations and stereotypes of both identities begin to intersect and deviate. *Heated Rivalry* succeeds because it serves as a meta-narrative about queer Asian identity itself: How much should it divulge about its sexuality versus its ethnicity? How does it conform to or subvert gender tropes? And how does its proximity to whiteness inform its success? 🍷

### About the Author

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**mr-kitka** • 1 hour ago

Thank you for this thoughtful analysis! "We each embody a multitude of patriarchies" (a phrase I haven't heard before) is an excellent shorthand for the intersectional safety-checks anyone not "maxed out" on privileges must contend with.

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ERIN MORGENSTERN, THE STARLESS SEA