

MEGHAN: Growing up in Los Angeles, these are the types of foods I would eat: tamales, ghormeh sabzi, larb, matzo ball soup, adobo... along with your usual kid fare of chicken nuggets and fries and burgers and pizza. And the types of languages I would hear? Honestly, more than you can imagine. From Armenian to Farsi, Korean, Spanish, Hebrew... Los Angeles, despite how segregated it sometimes felt, was full of culture that you could see, feel, hear and taste on a daily basis.

The multitude of Asian cultures was a huge part of that for me. My weekends were spent in Little Tokyo, or having iced teas in Thai Town, or sitting with my friend Christina Wong and her parents at a local Chinese restaurant. I remember this so vividly and them teaching me why chow fun with dry noodles was so much better than chow fun with wet noodles. Now obviously I had a real fixation with food (not much has changed there), but more than that, I had a real love of getting to know other cultures.

And part of that, my mom and I would often go to the Korean spa together. Now those of you who haven't been to one before it's a very humbling experience for a girl going through puberty because you enter a room with women from ages 9 to maybe 90 all walking around naked, and waiting to get a body scrub on one of the tables lined up in a row. All I wanted was a bathing suit but you're not allowed by the way. And once I was over that adolescent embarrassment, my mom and I, we would go upstairs, we would sit in the room upstairs, having a steaming bowl of the most delicious noodles, and we'd look around at all of these other women. These beautiful Korean women who had embraced the generational tradition of the jimjilbang and shared it with one another.

Now that was a part of the Asian American culture that I knew. I hadn't known all the stigmas and archetypes that so many women of Asian descent specifically had faced until many, many years later. Those terms, ideas, and stereotypes they just - they weren't familiar to me. Like the ones we see in so many movies and throughout pop culture...

[WATERFALL OF POP CULTURE REFERENCES TO ASIAN WOMEN]

MEGHAN: Movies like *Austin Powers* and *Kill Bill* – they presented these caricatures of women of Asian descent as oversexualized or aggressive. And it's not just those two examples. There are so many more. But by the way I'm not the only one who's taken notice...

**Cho:** This ancillary dark character in the side of like the shadows playing this evil, exotic force. We sort of have to take those roles if we want to work at all.

MEGHAN: That's comedian and actor, Margaret Cho – and what she's referring to is the Hollywood trope of Asian women, which she knows all too well...one of which – as you just heard her say this “evil, exotic force” – is more commonly known as “The Dragon Lady”.

*(Bring up mysterious music)*

**Meghan:** Do you want to walk us through what the origin of Dragon Lady is?

**Cho:** Well, Dragon Lady really comes from this sort of fantasy of Orientalism.

It's actually a character that...it's like um, it's similar to the femme fatale in that, you know, a woman who is beautiful and deadly. Because we can't just be beautiful. We have to have, like it has to come at a cost and it's kind of like, evil queen adjacent. But it's also so pinned to this idea that Asianness is an inherent threat. That our foreignness is somehow gonna getcha. The mystery and the exoticism of it is part of it. And unfortunately, that trope has really stuck to film, but also to Asian-American women or Asian women.

*(End mysterious music)*

MEGHAN: The Dragon Lady – the East Asian temptress, whose mysterious foreign allure is scripted as both tantalizing and deadly... this it has seeped into a lot of our entertainment.

But this toxic stereotyping of women of Asian descent... this doesn't just end once the credits roll...

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## INTRO

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<< INTRO THEME BEGINS >>

MEGHAN: I'm Meghan, and this is ARCHETYPES – my podcast about the labels and tropes that try to hold women back.

And today, I'm sitting down with two women who've broken out of the pervasive stereotypes that many East Asian women face...

**Cho:** it wasn't exactly about not fitting in because that was never an option. I was never going to fit in. But it was more about, why her? [laughter] I'm not what, uh, Koreans necessarily wanted their representation to be. But unfortunately, I was there.

MEGHAN: We'll have more from comedian and actor, Margaret Cho! And we'll also be hearing from broadcast journalist, Lisa Ling...

**Ling:** When I'm in an environment where I know I'm the only Asian woman in the room, I, I find myself not shying away from it and asserting myself even more.

MEGHAN: That's coming up! Stay with us. We'll see you after the break.

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## ACT ONE

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**Cho:** I can hear you.

**Meghan:** Welcome. I can see and hear you, too.

**Cho:** Thank you. I'm such a fan.

**Meghan:** Oh, my gosh. Me too. Oh, hello. Cameo by... ?

**Cho:** Lucia Catarina.

**Meghan:** Lucia Catarina? [laughs] How old is she?

**Cho:** Lucia Caterina is three years old. She does not like squirrels. She doesn't mind birds, but she really is very anti-squirrel.

**Meghan:** What does she like?

**Cho:** She likes cats. She likes cat food. [laughter] She hopefully she'll stay quiet. I think she'll stay quiet. We'll see. We'll see!

MEGHAN: So that's Margaret Cho and Lucia Catarina. Margaret is one of those stand-up comics who's always had a distinct voice. She got her start in her hometown – San Francisco – in the early 90s. She was this one lone Korean-American woman comic – in an industry that was mostly full of white men. And she *owned* her difference. There was a, there was a fearlessness to her comedy. She was brash and deeply unapologetic. And as the daughter of Korean immigrants, right from the start, she set out to upend some tired stereotypes...

*Cho: "I do enjoy being a comedian. I've been a comic for a long time. I always wanted to do this, ever since I was a kid. But I never saw Asian people on television or in movies, so my dreams were somewhat limited. I would dream, "maybe someday I can be an extra on MASH."*

MEGHAN: For those of you who don't know the reference, MASH was a TV show in the 70s and early 80s about a mobile army hospital during the Korean War. And while Margaret didn't end up as background on this sitcom, with her booming stand-up career, her star took off. And in 1994, all this attention earned her a leading role in the ABC sitcom *All-American Girl*. This was a semi-biographical show mostly inspired by her stand-up.

CLIP OF ALL-AMERICAN GIRL

**Mom:** Margaret, do you know why I encourage your brother to become a cardiologist?

**Margaret:** No.

**Mom:** *Because I always knew one day you would give me a heart attack. What are you wearing?!*

MEGHAN: Since that time, Margaret's become a cultural mainstay. Most recently making a guest appearance on the show, *Hacks* - which I love - and starring as a sort of den mother in the movie, *Fire Island*.

**Meghan:** I'm so excited to talk to you honestly. I mean, when we were conceiving this show just the idea for me of archetypes and these labels that so many of us are confronted with constantly that try to hold us back. And there's so many of them, you know, from bimbo to diva to slut. Yeah. Any, any number of them. Have you ever experienced being called or identified as any of those, for example.

**Cho:** Oh, all the time actually. I mean, any time I assert myself, it's like I've got an attitude. I'm like, No, I don't have an attitude, I just want— I want chips! I mean, I don't know. It's almost as if, people sort of assume when women are asking for what they need, they're somehow a drain. And it's very different from when men ask for what they need. When men ask for the idea that, oh, he knows what he wants, he knows who he is.

**Meghan:** Right, he's clear.

**Cho:** But when women - Yeah, he's clear. But when women do, it's somehow an offense.

MEGHAN: Through the years, Margaret, though, she hasn't let this kind of pushback stop her. She keeps reaching, she keeps striving for greater representation and inclusivity. And she keeps lifting up her own voice.

**Cho:** I think that comedians essentially have one joke that they find different ways of telling. So my essential joke is, I'm here, but I'm not supposed to be here. So every joke has that DNA in it.

MEGHAN: This idea of visibility, it's all connected to the sorts of movies and TV that Margaret grew up watching – both the characters she saw – and didn't see.

**Cho:** Well, I'm from San Francisco, and I grew up really kind of raised by television and raised by movies. But I never saw Asian people in them. And so I never felt visible. I never felt seen anywhere. And then later, I guess, I started to go into silent films, and I started to realize, Oh, this is actually like an archetype, this archetype of the Dragon Lady.

And there was a silent film actress named Anna May Wong who was actually Chinese-American. She was born in Chinatown in Los Angeles, and she was the first Asian American movie star, at the dawn of film. And she couldn't get any roles in America. So she was in a film where she played sort of this caricature of an evil Dragon Lady.

*CUE: Daughter of the Dragon*

*Ling Moy: "Look into my eyes."*

*"Set her free, do you hear me?"*

*"Never."*

*"Ling Moy, I can't believe such loathsome jealousy in you!"*

*"No love now, no jealousy...just merciless vengeance!"*

**Cho:** I actually have– I'll have to send you– a painting of myself as Anna May Wong playing this very character.

**Meghan:** Oh my gosh, I would love that.

**Cho:** And I think that for me, I really can see why Anna May Wong would want to take that role because it's like she's not offered any roles here. I mean, she's in a few American films where she basically reprised that role.

**Meghan:** How old were you when you remember seeing that for the first time?

**Cho:** I was probably in my late teens.

**Meghan:** Yeah.

**Cho:** But really seeing that made me really fascinated and want to see other Asian representation. And so I really got deeply into Hong Kong cinema. I got really deeply into seeing, like, Korean soap operas, which of course now everybody loves that.

K-drama CLIP

**Cho:** I think when you start to see yourself, you get a taste of it and you get addicted to it and you just want to see like I want to feel seen. And so that really made me want to explore world cinema more just because I didn't feel like I even existed here.

[BEAT]

MEGHAN: You know before we go any further with Margaret on that, I want to take just a little detour to explore just where this trope of the Dragon Lady, and others that are closely related to it – where they come from. So we can better understand the impacts these stereotypes have on people's lives, both on and off the big screen. So, as we often do on *Archetypes*, we called up an expert. This time, its sociologist Nancy Wang Yuen:

**Yuen:** East/Southeast Asian women are either stereotyped as lotus flowers who are submissive and quiet or dragon ladies who are overbearing and unlikable.

The Dragon Lady stereotype is essentially the femme fatale stereotype, but kind of exoticized and hypersexualized in a very kind of specific Asian way, that's not actual Asia, but Asian in terms of the imagination.

Anytime an Asian woman is on screen, when they're not the lead, the temptation for them to fall into one of those tropes is very high.

MEGHAN: Nancy wrote a book called *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*. And in it, she talks about the impact that all of America's wars in Asia – from Japan to Korea to Vietnam – have had on the portrayal of Asian women in Hollywood. And how the sex work around those military camps - how this shaped the hypersexualized depiction of Asian women in movies like *Miss Saigon* and *The World of Suzie Wong*. And Nancy, she also shared with us her own personal interaction with this very trope...

**Yuen:** I myself have been propositioned in an airport in Atlanta, of all places, by a stranger who said "me so horny." Just yelled that out to me. And I was there for, like, an academic conference. I knew why– because I looked around and I saw that I was the only Asian woman in that area. I knew he was talking to me, even though I don't even know if he'd seen *Full Metal Jacket*, which is where that line comes from.

MEGHAN: So, in the 1987 film *Full Metal Jacket*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, that infamous line is delivered by a Vietnamese sex worker, as she approaches two American GIs.

**CLIP from *Full Metal Jacket***

**Woman:** Hey baby! You got girlfriend Vietnam?

**Soldier:** Not just this minute!

**Woman:** Well, baby. Me so horny. Me so horny. Me love you long time.

MEGHAN: But the line didn't stay there. It jumped off the screen, and it made a huge imprint on pop culture. Two years after the film came out, it was sampled over and over and over...

**2 LIVE CREW / ME SO HORNY**

MEGHAN: This track– by 2 Live Crew – it topped the Billboard charts. And references to this infamous line, they've persisted in mainstream media, appearing in shows like *South Park* and films like *The 40-Year Old Virgin*.

**Yuen:** So when people ask me, does Hollywood matter? It's just entertainment. I can point to this – where lines from a fictional movie that maybe no one's even seen, now is part of culture and the way that Asian women are harassed and belittled. Those tropes still exist. And certainly we know that it resonates with people in everyday life because of

all the anti-Asian racism. And so when we have white actors who can be anything they want, it's very troubling in terms of who do we think of as more human? Who do we think of as one dimensional caricatures?

MEGHAN: The power and the impact of these stereotypes, that have the ability to strip the humanity of entire groups of people – it cannot be underestimated. People *all people*, are multi-dimensional, and layered... like Margaret Cho.

**Meghan:** I mean, it's just so interesting because I think when you just feel as though you aren't seen or you're all just archetyped into the same thing, that no one can differentiate the you-ness in all of that. And you have a very unique story. I mean, everyone has their own unique story, but even just your background and where you grew up and how you grew up I think is so fascinating. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

**Cho:** I grew up, you know, and I became a comedian in the midst of AIDS activism. It's kind of where I got my start as being a comic and doing shows. My parents owned a gay bookstore because my dad loves male attention. He's very handsome. And South Korea's primary export is male beauty.

**Meghan:** Is that true?

**Cho:** It is!

**Meghan:** Oh my gosh, I had no idea.

**Cho:** Male beauty... Well, if you think about BTS, you think about all the K-drama, all the stars, all the men. The men are highlighted far more than the women. (Laughter) So we had a gay bookstore and all of the men would paint portraits of him and he still has them in his home. And so, you know.

**Meghan:** What was it like for you, like, just to grow up in that environment?

**Cho:** Well, I feel like they kind of went and got that business because maybe subconsciously somewhere they knew that I was gay and that in that they wanted me to feel understood because they didn't know how to do that. Maybe. And so, you know, I was raised around very heavily tattooed queer men who were all early supporters of Harvey Milk and walking and protesting and gay priding and taking me to gay pride celebrations in 1978. And so from there, to have witnessed the turmoil and tragedy of AIDS, and then watch the community rise again was incredibly inspiring. It gave me a big lesson in gay history in that we are resilient.

**Meghan:** Mm-hm

**Cho:** And that we can survive even a plague, which we did.

**Meghan:** But it's amazing because I think, you know, that's where your activism began. And then a huge layer, of course, is, I believe, you know, your voice as a Korean-American woman. Right. So there's, it's, it's a duality because you have two things where the activism is very key. But when you look at archotyping, especially surrounding what happens to Asian-American women and what happened with that shooting in Atlanta, to my understanding, was they were saying part of the motivation for that shooter was because of this fetish he had surrounding specifically Asian women. And so, I'm curious, when you heard – in that moment, if you can take us back to that time when you heard that news story... I remember where I was and the calls I received from some of my friends.

**ARCHIVAL:** *Breaking news tonight in the deadly massacre at three Asian spas in the Atlanta area. Multiple reports cite police saying six of the victims were women of Asian descent.*

**Cho:** It was so infuriating. It was that entire episode. I mean, from the fact that these guns are legal to buy to the law enforcement excusing his actions as he's had a "bad day" to this idea that somehow he was, he felt justified because of these representations of Asian women, which are creating us as not as human, but somehow fantasy.

**Meghan:** Hmm. That's such a key point. The dehumanizing of it all.

**Cho:** The dehumanizing of it all. Yeah, exactly. Like it's this fantasy object is not a real person. That also, with the dragon lady archetype within there, is somebody who should die to make the world a better place somehow, you know, that they're somehow out to get you.

**Meghan:** Hmm. Which goes back to the origin story you were talking about. Right?

**Cho:** Yes.

**Meghan:** You have to take it back to the beginning because people don't realize how that's seeped into us. It's even when, you know, it's a different version of saying like, oh, I know, I don't read the stories. I don't read tabloids, but you see the headline, so it makes an imprint. So you might not know where this unconscious bias or this stereotype that you have in your head about someone comes from.

**Cho:** Right.

**Meghan:** But when you start to peel back the layers and you understand where it got planted...

**Cho:** Hm, yeah.



**Meghan:** Then you can understand how we get to that point, which can be incredibly dangerous, as we saw. I was really surprised after that shooting by public sentiment and public reaction. How did you feel about how it was reported—

**Cho:** The framing of it was that they were dragon ladies. I mean that, that we know we're not going to say Dragon Lady, but that's what the assumption was. The reality of it is that these were women, they were just at work. The weirdness of like those old archetypes...The Dragon Lady still holds true even in news coverage, even though they don't say Dragon Lady, it's almost like the shorthand of massage parlor or Asian spas. It's dehumanizing and it's like only a fraction of who we could be.

**Meghan:** Mm.

**Cho:** But it really is very much down to society's only like, wanting us to appear a certain way or only allowing us to appear a certain way and not allowing the totality of being that they do of white people.

BEAT / MUSIC

MEGHAN: Up next we'll hear from broadcast journalist Lisa Ling, whom I love, on her search for a sense of belonging – and the ways in which she's fought back against stereotypes...

**Ling:** Here I am. Rolling Stone has just named me Hot Reporter. And someone at my place of work cut out that article, drew slanted eyes over the eyes, wrote, "Yeah, right." And then put it back in my mailbox.

MEGHAN: Can you even imagine? We'll have that and more with Margaret Cho after the break. You don't want to miss this. Stay with me.

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## ACT TWO

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MEGHAN: In August 2018, the film *Crazy Rich Asians* hit movie theaters. This was the first time in 25 years that an *American* film, set in the present day, featured a majority cast of Asian descent. And what happened with this film? Oh, it just went on to become the *highest grossing romantic comedy of the entire decade*.

MEGHAN: Hollywood had severely underestimated the appetite for a film with that kind of Asian representation. And this kind of erasure is something Asian-Americans have had to contend with for a really long time.

**Lisa Ling:** I think Asian people in this country have been historically just overlooked. I mean, look, our history isn't told in our history books. I mean, one could go their entire

educational career without learning a single thing about Asian-American history or the contributions of a single Asian-American.

MEGHAN: That's broadcast journalist, Lisa Ling – an American of Chinese and Taiwanese descent – best known for her work on networks like *CNN*, *Nat Geo*, and *HBO Max*.

**Ling:** Not feeling like you belong. Right. Feeling like you exist on the periphery is, in many ways, its own kind of oppression.

**Meghan:** Yeah.

**Ling:** And, and it becomes easy to understand how and why so many Asian people started to get attacked in the wake of COVID. Because if you don't see these people as being from here, if you don't see me as being from here, it becomes so much easier to dehumanize me.

**Meghan:** Completely.

**Ling:** Because you have no grounding. Your people have no grounding.

MEGHAN: Growing up in the suburbs of Sacramento in the 70s and 80s, Lisa was keenly aware that she just didn't really fit in. And she didn't really see herself reflected in the media. That is, with one major exception... which proved to be incredibly important...

**Ling:** To be honest with you, the reason why I pursued broadcast journalism at all was because growing up, it's the only path that I thought was available to me. I was someone who grew up in a broken home. My parents were divorced when I was seven, and the television was always on in my home. It was like my favorite babysitter. And I used to have these fantasies of, of being part of it somehow, because I thought, if I can get on TV, maybe I, I will have a better life one day. But no one looked remotely like me on TV except for Connie Chung.

**Meghan:** Oh my gosh, Connie Chung!

**Ling:** As you recall... Connie Chung.

CLIP OF NBC Nightly News jingle and then Chung speaks

**Ling:** She still is just the, the symbol of elegance and intelligence and, and grace. And she really allowed me to know what was possible. She was the only Asian person on a national stage. And, and so I thought that this would be my only pathway.

MEGHAN: See, this is why representation matters so much. Because had there not been Connie Chung, who knows if Lisa's career would be as illustrious as it has been. Because she got her big break at age 26, as a co-host on *The View*. And she's gone on to deliver hard-hitting reporting on women's issues throughout the world, and to host her own shows, like *This is Life*

and *Take Out*. But before all of that - this is great you guys - in the early 90s, she started at this place called *Channel One News*.

**Ling:** Anderson Cooper was one of my colleagues.

**Meghan:** Oh my gah – and you were so young when you – how old were you when you started that?

**Ling:** I was 18 when I started, and they hired a bunch of young-looking correspondents, and it was sort of like the Beverly Hills 90210 of news...

CHANNEL ONE CLIP:

*Hi everyone, I'm Lisa Ling*

*And I'm Anderson Cooper, this is Channel One News.*

**Ling:** They wanted young people to be delivering this information to school age kids.

MEGHAN: And with this job, Lisa traveled all over the country and the world, learning and reporting and sharing. And yet, there were times when that old feeling, you know the one she talked about – that uncomfortable yet familiar feeling of not fitting in... those old stereotypes... there were times where they still followed her...

**Ling:** While I was at Channel One, Rolling Stone magazine every year had an issue called The Hot List, and I was named Hot Reporter one year. And I mean that, it was so exciting for me. You know, I'm this, this like, country bumpkin kid from a suburb of Sacramento. [laughter] And here I am. Rolling Stone has just named me Hot Reporter. And it was such a, it was such a moment for me and uh someone at my place of work cut out that article, drew slanted eyes over the eyes, wrote "Yeah, right," and then put it back in my mailbox.

**Meghan:** Oh my gosh.

**Ling:** And when I retrieved that from my mailbox, it was like every kernel of excitement that I possessed just withered away. It was just, it was so devastating that someone that I would see every day in my place of work, where we're supposed to feel comfortable, just harbored those feelings about me and, and had the nerve to make it racial.

**Meghan:** Right. And I wonder for you if any of those sort of archetypes or things that you've been called or faced or even more specific to race, if you've if you ever remember a moment where you were called a dragon lady or those sort of stereotypes fed into someone's perception of you before they even got to know you.

**Ling:** You know, I think it's less about being called, but, but certainly those stereotypes have been in my consciousness and they've really propelled me. I do think that because

I am a woman of color, there have been numerous times when I haven't been seen the same way. When – When it would come to promotions or accolades or even salary, even finances. But also I think when I'm in an environment where I know I'm the only Asian woman in the room – and look, I spend my time in this country, you know, in small towns, very homogenous places. And so on many occasions, I'm the only Asian woman in the room.

**Meghan:** Yeah.

**Ling:** I find myself not shying away from it and asserting myself even more.

**Meghan:** Interesting.

**Ling:** ...And speaking louder and standing taller and, and, and claiming my space here. You know, I mean, I think that that's something that is so important for us to convey to the younger generation and to our kids that we deserve to take up space. We really do. And I think culturally, particularly in the Asian culture, it's been one that that sort of discourages that. You know, there's that, popular term, the nail that sticks out gets hammered down.

**Meghan:** Mhm.

**Ling:** You know, I think the, the, the amazing aspect of being an Asian-American, particularly being an American, is... we want to stick out. We don't want to be hammered down. And, and we can bring this rich history and this rich culture along with us. But we're empowered to be able to say what we want, whenever we want. And that's a really powerful thing. And again, part of the American experience that I think is the most positive. [laughter]

**Meghan:** Right.

**Ling:** That ability to be unapologetic and unabashed. It's something that I certainly value.

[BEAT]

MEGHAN: *This* is a value that Margaret Cho also shares. And in the early 90s, around the time that Lisa was on Channel One News, Margaret got the chance to bring a *distinctly American* spin on her life as an Asian-American to audiences all across this country. She starred in ABC's *All-American Girl* – which was a slice of life sitcom from inside a Korean-American home.

And in the show, Margaret's character, she worked at a department store makeup counter. And she spoke to her parents in a way that was...I guess some would probably describe it as unabashedly American.

*CLIP OF ALL-AMERICAN GIRL*

*Margaret: Why is he wrong for me? (laugh track) And I hope you've got something better than "he's not Korean"*

*Mom: I do. He's American.*

*Margaret: Haha, well, I've got news for you mom. I'm American. Eric is American. Even Stuart is American. Tell her.*

*Stuart: I'll try. Mom, (Stuart starts speaking in Korean to mom)*

MEGHAN: The show was inspired by Cho's comedy. And while it only lasted for one season, *All-American Girl* was still a really big deal – this was the first primetime American sitcom to be centered around an Asian family.

**Meghan:** I remember so vividly *All-American Girl* on ABC and how exciting that was. But also I grew up in L.A.

**Cho:** Right

**Meghan:** so Korean American culture is so much a part of what I grew up around. It's a huge part, but I think for a lot of other parts of this country, maybe not so much or, you know, here, just like, you know, Mexican-American culture, Korean American culture, you learn how to say hello, hola or yoboseyo...

**Cho:** Oh, yes, yes.

**Meghan:** you know, that is L.A. to me. And so I think it would be really interesting to hear your take on when you were working on that show, what it felt like to introduce that. And were you playing into or playing against sort of the archetypes that you had felt subjected to that you saw within the Asian-American community?

**Cho:** I think that, well, our show historically came out at a very interesting time, and now I realize what the importance of it was after the Rodney King officers had been acquitted.

**Meghan:** Oh I remember.

**Cho:** And how terrible, how terrible that was and how terrible the black community was treated and how angry that entire time was. You know, and so the last time Koreans had seen themselves actually were on their rooftops with shotguns.

MEGHAN: What she's talking about is the timing of when *All-American Girl* premiered in the fall of 1994, a little more than 2 years after the L.A. Riots – that time period in the spring of 1992, when my home town of Los Angeles erupted into violence and civil unrest after the acquittal of the four officers charged with excessive force in the arrest and beating of Rodney King. Now this was a really tense time for race relations in LA, with the Black community, the white community, the latino community, and the Asian community. And specifically in that, a lot of Korean mom

and pop shops, were targeted during this time, and a lot of the shopowners — as Margaret was just referencing — took protecting their stores into their own hands... this was all over the news...

*[Archival sound of NBC Nightly news coverage of L.A. riots]*

*Reporter: Many Koreans, who yesterday were the shopkeepers of South Central Los Angeles, today have lost the businesses they took years to create.*

*Reporter: 41 Korean businesses in South Central have been torched, dozens looted.*

*Newscaster: He Lee spent last night, and will spend tonight, guarding his appliance store, a small battalion of employees and relatives will try to help*

**Cho:** So the Korean community were so paranoid about their perception because they had never been shown on the news, they'd never seen themselves on the news or seen themselves in American culture at all. And then suddenly there was this image of them in the sort of very violent context that they were really uncomfortable with.

So when my show came out, it was really hard for the Korean community because they just also didn't necessarily approve of me because I was not college educated (*laughs*) I'm not...I'm not educated at all. I'm very crass. I'm queer. I'm not what they wanted me to be. I'm not what Koreans necessarily wanted their representation to be. But unfortunately, I was there.

**Meghan:** At that moment in time. That was not what they were looking for for the poster girl.

**Cho:** Right. And so that was the big problem of it wasn't exactly about not fitting in because that was never an option. I was never going to fit in. But it was more about how. Why her, why her (*laughs*). And then so it was really sad because I thought, oh well the Asian-American community is going to be behind this. And a lot of people were and a lot of people credit our show as the first time they saw themselves on television and inspired them to go and have a great artistic career. Whether that is Ali Wong or John Cho or Joel Kim Booster or Bowen Yang, you know, all of these amazing and wonderful comedians. So I think um, it really inspired a lot of people, but it also really upset a lot of people. And so we didn't have the support fully, which kind of made the network question whether this was the right project to do such a very outrageous undertaking, because it actually was in 1994 to have an Asian-American family for a cast, was incredible.

**Meghan:** I think most people would describe you as a trailblazer. Did you feel that pressure at the time or were you just doing what felt authentic to you without the pressure of knowing that you were the one that was opening the doors or that people would be standing on your shoulders to go to the next level?

**Cho:** I didn't think about it in those terms. I didn't think that far ahead. I was just trying to get by and trying to work on my own. And I never thought everything would go as it did. But I'm really, I'm really grateful that it has. But yeah, I didn't really feel that pressure in that way. It was more just feeling lonely that I was really like kind of the only one out there. And then, you know, wanting there to be more and there not being more. I mean, after all, American Girl was over. There wasn't another Asian-American family on television until 2015.

## BEAT / MUSIC TRANSITION

### Three Words

**Meghan:** One of the things that's been really important for me in this with whoever I've spoken to is to really understand if you have the ability to frame yourself to say, you know, I've been identified as this, this, this and this throughout my life, you know, I'm asking everybody the same questions. Which is what three words would you use to describe yourself as a kid?

**Cho:** Um. Shy, afraid. And unseen, which I think, um, was really it was hard because you never sort of felt like seen and then what one was afraid of and.

**Meghan:** What were you afraid of?

**Cho:** I think I was just afraid of everything. I was just afraid of being uh. I think being too loud, I was always too loud. I was always afraid of being too aggressive because I was always too aggressive. I was afraid of being too much of a tomboy, which I'm still a tomboy. So it wasn't till like I think later when I started to have gay male babysitters, when I started to kind of be more an adult, and I started doing stand up comedy. I started standup comedy when I was 14.

**Meghan:** So then if we think about you now, what three words would you use to describe yourself now?

**Cho:** Joyful, growing and nurturing

**Meghan:** That's beautiful. Do you ever?

**Cho:** Yes

**Meghan:** I mean, and what are those differences then tell you in terms of despite archetypes or feeling othered or feeling scared and all of that, that growth and that path you've taken? I guess my questions are what does that tell you about your own journey? But also maybe where we are as a society? Has that changed to make you feel a different way or has it been your own internal growth?

**Cho:** Both. I think it's both, but I think it's also that society's changed. And also a generation of Asian-American and queer entertainers that have gotten inspired by my journey are now out there doing incredible work. And I can enjoy, like, the fruits of my labor, you know, through their work. And to me, that's the greatest achievement I can imagine, is this incredible group of people who are doing such amazing work that was inspired by me. So that's that's the most of it. And then I think it's, it's growing old and understanding the brevity of life that you have to really enjoy the time you have because it, it's, it's not very long.

**Meghan:** Yeah.

**Cho:** You know, it goes by very fast.

**Meghan:** It's so true

**Cho:** And so and I love that I get to do it.

**Meghan:** It's incredibly impressive what you've done, what your career has done, what you continue to push conversations about, even just in this chat, you know, I think it's going to be eye opening for a lot of people. And just helpful for us to understand, again, the totality of a person. Congrats also on Fire Island.

**Cho:** Oh, thank you.

**Meghan:** Yeah, it's been a huge success.

**Cho:** I loved it. I love the movie. I mean, I love I love Joel and I love Bowen. We actually talked a lot about you on set.

**Meghan:** Oh, really?

**Cho:** Yeah, we were just admiring you just so much.

**Meghan:** You know, it's I... I really appreciate that. Margaret Cho, thank you so much. Honestly, I'm thrilled. When I came downstairs and I was "I'm talking to Margaret Cho this morning!"

**Cho:** Oh I love you, thank you!

[BEAT]

MEGHAN: That was Margaret Cho. And as you know we also had Lisa Ling on the show today. But what you didn't know is that we had a surprise guest pop in - Lisa's nine year old daughter, Jett. Who had been staying in the control room while we were recording and came in right at the end to make a little cameo.



**Meghan:** Here Jett has a question. Do I want to come sit here? Do you have a question that I should ask your mom?

**Jett:** Uh. Why don't you let me have a puppy?

**Meghan:** Matters of consequence, Lisa. Why can't Jett have a puppy?

**Ling:** Well, she can at some point. We have a lot of people in our home.

**Meghan:** What would you name your dog when you get it? What do you want to name it?

**Jett:** Umm... Cookie.

**Meghan:** That's great. That's awesome. Thanks for joining us, Jett. Amazing, thank you. Is everybody happy in there? I think so. Cool.

**Ling:** Thank you for having me.

**Meghan:** Oh, my gosh. I so appreciate you being here.

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**CLOSING THOUGHTS**  
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MEGHAN: By the way, I asked Lisa her three words as well, which included sponge-like, curious and conscious. But I also took the moment to ask Jett, her nine year old daughter, the three words that she would use to describe herself too. And it stayed with me because true to form as any cool and precocious nine year old would do. She said the unexpected. She said one of the words she would use to describe herself was weird. She actually said weird twice. And I loved it. Because she gets to. As we all get to define ourselves as we see fit. If you want to be weird or be sponge-like, be silly or fierce, be curious, or even self-doubting or unsure some days and strong and brave on others. Whatever it is. That's up to you. Just be yourself no matter what any societal framework or archetype or loud voice coming from a small place tells you that you should be. Be yourself. Your full, complete, whole layered, sometimes weird, sometimes awesome, but always best and true self. Just be you. You're so much greater than any archetype.

I can't wait to be with you again next week, thank you so much for joining me. As ever, I'm Meghan.

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**CREDITS**  
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Archetypes is a Spotify Original

The podcast is a co-production between Archewell Audio, Gimlet and Spotify

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