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Author(s)	Wing Tek Lum
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Chan Is Missing Marks New Age of Asian American Film

By WING TEK LUM

(Author's note: Last year I participated in a literary/visual artists' collaborations exhibition, my belated contribution being a poem entitled "The Return of Charlie Chan." This poem was published simultaneously in Bamboo Ridge, no. 11, and the June 3, 1981 issue of East/West. It was this poem I believe which led to my being asked recently to participate in a panel with Wayne Wang to discuss his film, Chan Is Missing. This panel was sponsored by the Honolulu Academy of Arts and the Hawaii Literary Arts Council, and my prepared remarks form the basis for this review.)



Wayne Wang (second from left), director of the much-acclaimed *Chan Is Missing*, posed with his parents and actor Marc Hayashi at a recent reception. *Chan Is Missing* is now playing at the Cannery theatre in San Francisco and grossed \$26,500 in one week, breaking all records at the Cannery and running just a little under New York's first week. However, according to Mel Novikoff of the Surf Theatres, total attendance — including low-cost matinees — was probably greater than in New York. (Photo by Kem Lee Studios)

As the title suggests, one specific Chan is not in this movie — i.e., that most famous Chinaman in all America, Charlie Chan (who in fact graced these very screens about four months ago), is not employed here. Moreover, this movie is not structured from the point of view of two well-known television blockbusters, *Shogun* and *Marco Polo*, which are seemingly about related subject matter. In these, the emotional center of the story is still the Westerner entering a foreign environment, the primary feeling conveyed to the viewers being one of alienation.

AT HOME

Lastly, *Chan Is Missing* to me does not have the same tone of voice as some of the other artistic works which have come out of community — the grossest examples being the tour guides and cookbooks — where one again has the feeling that the readership which the author has chosen to write to is really the larger society, there being so much explaining, so many footnotes, sometimes so much apology for not being white.

With *Chan Is Missing* I have instead a feeling of being at home, a sense of belonging, for the point of view is our own, and we are its primary audience. The characters in the movie, simply put, are believable; they are like people I know and can even furnish names for from my personal experiences. They are not caricatures, personalities with exaggerated idiosyncracies, like those sometimes employed by our local comics. Ordinary, real people, we might say — neither the simplistic Number One Son goofball nor the simplistic Bruce Lee superhero. Who we see on the screen is merely us, faithfully and lovingly recorded. In sum, *Chan Is Missing* is a movie made of a community, by a community, and for a community. I salute its integrity.

The title as related to Charlie Chan also suggests that we will not see the familiar detective genre: that methodical deductive reasoning where small clue is added to small clue until the puzzle is inscrutably solved. As the lawyer near the beginning of the film forewarns: this movie is not about facts, but an emphasis on listeners and speakers — in short, an inquiry into epistemology. Further, as Jo confesses at the end, no final solution is actually given, even of the type in *Citizen Kane* with that child's sled.

Many have already pointed to the affinity between this film and the New Wave school of French cinema, where not everything fits, where a clue may not really be a clue, where events are linked together in ahistorical fashion.

SUBJECTIVITY

What we learn about Chan Hung are many things, perhaps too many and too contradictory. Each source

adds a perspective on him, and sometimes we get a perspective on a perspective — as when Amy adds her two cents on how well off the cook really is. We are made very aware of the subjectivity of our sources, even more so because of their second-hand nature. In *Citizen Kane*, for instance, we are given flashbacks with the Kane character present, providing the audience with first-hand action and behavior to make an independent evaluation of him. More like perhaps *Rashomon*, *Chan Is Missing* forces the audience to make decisions on trusting this source or that, on trusting all sources or none at all.

Chan Hung is therefore presented as the sum of his social parts; his individual sense of identity or what he may feel about himself — so much a preoccupation of guru-filled America — is still unresolved, an enigma. This does not mean that *Chan Is Missing* perpetuates the inscrutability stereotype, that lie that has dehumanized our race by claiming that we are difficult to figure out, and thus not worth the attempt. The movie deftly turns inscrutability on its head, for the real message of the film in my opinion is that we are a community, a community (as the Cantonese-speaking Mr. Fong says) which is not a monolithic mass of people who all look alike, rather a multi-faceted grouping of unique individuals (as exemplified by the cacophony of voices in the restaurant scene).

Here our distinctions are well-defined, not blurred or confused. There are strongly held personal passions here — otherwise why would one eighty-odd-year-old man kill another over some flags.

In a brief 80 minutes we are shown the wide spectrum of personal decisions regarding acculturation and assimilation. There are the Chinese living in America like the scholarly Mr. Fong. There are also Chinese-Americans (those who prefer, grammatically, to use the hyphen, schizophrenically keeping both the words "Chinese" and "American" as equal nouns); Henry the cook is perhaps in this category, which is symbolized by the contradictory image of Christmas tinsel in the same window as the God of Longevity statue.

Non-hyphenated Chinese Ameri-

cans (where the word "Chinese" serves as an adjective modifying the base noun "American" similar to "Native Americans" or "Black Americans") form the core of this film: Jo, Amy, Steve, the social worker, George — all to varying degrees; the analogy of the unique-tasting apple pie baked by Chinese techniques is representative of their efforts to synthesize the contradictions.

Lastly, Mr. Lee, the insurance agent who jokes about Chinese as if he were not one, to me very nicely describes the most assimilated character in the movie, an American of Chinese ancestry.

But the movie does not stop here, for these distinctions are all in a state of flux, as individuals interact with each other. Note that the fellow most concerned about our "one hundred plus years in America" is the FOB cook, Henry. Perhaps the main character in the film is really San Francisco Chinatown, Chan Hung being used as a foil. The emphasis on individuals (with eccentric barking dog tapes and wisecracks on spelling backwards) gives way to an emphasis on relationships between individuals.

Two people like Chan Hung's daughter and Steve may have different opinions about Chan Hung. But that doesn't mean that, if one of the two is right, the other must perforce be wrong — merely that they are different. Such an attitude I believe is akin to our aloha spirit in its deepest sense, and contrary to the melting pot myth where all of us are to be assimilated into sameness (for further discussion on this point, see my apologia for ethnic writing in the Art Council of Hawaii's *Cultural Climate*, January, 1982).

CONTRADICTIONS

Wayne Wang has likened the recent Japanese American movie *Hito Hata* to "an Asian John Wayne, where all the characters are good." This aversion to such romantic heroes, as has been mentioned earlier, is consistent with his anti-Charlie Chan stance, for neither stereotype presents a realistic picture of our community. But this does not mean that *Chan Is Missing* therefore shies away from taking a moral position; the romantic hero as a role model for our community is superseded by a picaresque pro-

tagonist, one with contradictions, with good points and bad.

The central emotional force of this film is Jo's choice to pursue his search for Chan Hung. On the pier, when Steve argues with him to turn to the police, Jo reveals the reason for his stubbornness. He is a friend, Jo simply states. Midst the myriad of ambiguities, Jo accepts Chan Hung for whatever he is — on trust. Friendship will win out, even if the \$4,000 is missing, even if we never truly solve the riddle of Chan Hung's disappearance. The heart of this film is what Jo calls "understanding," a tolerance and an acceptance of these who are different from you, who are equally as unique as you.

A pluralistic Chinatown, the movie says, will have its strengths and weaknesses, but in and of itself may be a neutral thing. What is more important is how people deal with such a situation. In a world of moral relativity (i.e., without any one absolute), one still must not avoid taking personal stands. Ignorance of others' differences (the integrationists' choice) is also not recommended. We must speak our minds, share our special differences on the common ground of our community.

During the controversial filming of *Charlie Chan and the Curse of the Dragon Queen*, a few defenders of that old detective chided his Chinese American critics for missing the point of that series; they fondly recalled the campy fun, the harmless frivolity — with the implication to me being that they felt we should loosen up more and be able more to laugh at ourselves.

FOIBLES

This reasoning I felt was rather insidious: I think we were open to such humor; it was just that we never saw anyone in those films that was recognizable enough. And the real justification for my feelings here is this film, for *Chan Is Missing* is in contrast refreshingly witty. We laugh with and not at those on the screen (again something I do not feel occurs with our local comics). The foibles we see are ones we can acknowledge and identify with. Primarily, I think it is because the wry humor is one that is grounded in a

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Chan

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bittersweet reality. Barking dog tapes are necessitated by past burglaries. The scene with the babbling lawyer might appear overly ridiculous but for the fact of her very true observations on cross-cultural misunderstandings. The film in short is presented in a tragicomic mode, with individual scenes containing many layers (or allusions, if you will). It reflects a Shakespearean vision of humanity's broad breadth. It is a vision that in our community is one of many, and more importantly embraces most.

Probably the greatest praise I could give this work is to offer my constructive criticism on how I would improve it. I didn't really like the "Grant Avenue, San Francisco" soundtrack, as I could not believe anyone in Chinatown would still be playing it, especially with the same frequency as the Sam Hui songs. But this is a minor point.

More importantly, I want to admit—like Jo did at the end of the film—my bias for wishing for more of a solution. In my case I wish that this already very good story provided us with more of a historical dimension so that we are told, in addition to how, also why the characters behave as they do. For instance, Chinese are neither more nor less factious than any other racial group; but that the Juk Sing and Juk Kok may not get along in Chinatown is due in part to their different histories in America, influenced by external forces such as the variations in US immigration policies over the years. Such a preference for more didactic references may not fit with the ahistorical style of this present film. Rather than tamper with *Chan Is Missing*, I will eagerly await Wang's next project. □

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