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CHAN IS MISSING

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Chinese Puzzle

Did it ever occur to you that Don Rickles jokes don't translate into Chinese? You may ponder this odd bit of information after seeing *Chan Is Missing*, a delightfully unique Chinese-American movie that is a treasure trove of just such precise, unexpected but resonant cultural illuminations. With the lowest of budgets (less than \$20,000) and a ten-day shooting schedule, a 33-year-old filmmaker in San Francisco, Wayne Wang, has opened up a new cinematic door: this is the first feature made with an all-Asian-American cast and crew. More to the point, it's a real treat, a movie whose amiable nature and modest appearance belie its sophisticated ambitions.

At first glance, "Chan Is Missing" presents itself as a thriller. Jo (Wood Moy), a Chinatown cabbie, and his hip nephew, Steve (Marc Hayashi), are hunting down a Taiwanese businessman who's disappeared with their \$4,000. Wang wants you to think of "Charlie Chan"—and every other hoary Chinese stereotype—the better to explode your Oriental myths. Under the guise of his funky detective story, Wang is taking us on



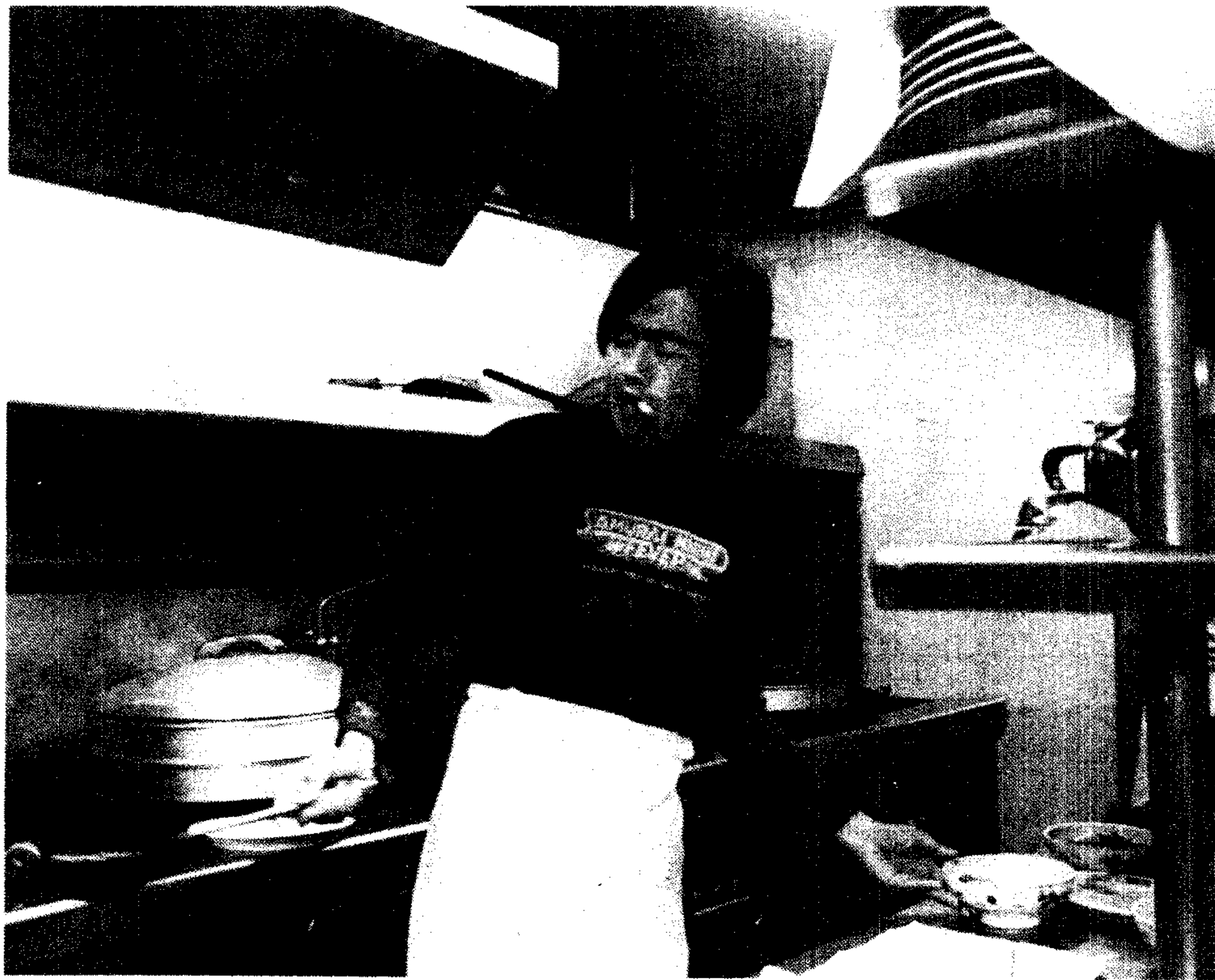
A film by
WAYNE WANG

a guided tour of San Francisco's Chinese-American community, where he explores the question of assimilation, the conundrum of identity, the political schism between the Taiwanese and the People's Republic partisans. Everyone our sleuths meet tells a different story about the elusive Mr. Chan; the portrait that emerges—like that of *Citizen Kane*—is a picture of a contradiction; the riddle, not the solution, is the point. Chan, one realizes, is an off-screen symbol of the heterogeneous reality of the Chinese-American experience.

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Relish: This may sound didactic, but it's nothing of the kind. Irony is Wang's mode, droll digressions are his manner, cross-cultural cacophony his delight. Though "Chan" is sometimes technically primitive, it shares with some of Robert Altman's films a fond, laid-back relish for the incongruous. The street-smart Steve talks in a melange of racial idioms and disdains the rhetoric of cultural politics—"That identity shit is old news." A cook in a "Samurai Night Fever" T shirt sings "Fry Me to the Moon" while he stir-fries. Funniest of all is an earnest young woman's academic dissertation on the cross-cultural linguistic misunderstandings in the aftermath of a traffic accident, a rap that Lily Tomlin might envy. There are also such assorted thriller conventions as the Other Woman, threatening phone calls and newspaper photos that may or may not provide a lead. "If this were a TV mystery," muses Jo, the narrator, "an important clue would pop up at this time and clarify everything." Wang's vision, however, is peripheral. The important clue is not forthcoming, yet much is revealed.

—Newsweek Magazine
continued ►



Film: 'Chan Is Missing'

It cost less than \$20,000 to produce. It's photographed in grainy black-and-white, mostly in San Francisco's Chinatown, with a cast composed entirely of Asian-American actors. Its title is "Chan Is Missing," and it's a matchless delight.

It is, however, so small and modest in appearance that when you suddenly find yourself laughing with it helplessly, your first suspicion is that someone near you made the joke, not Wayne Wang, the Hong Kong-born, San Francisco-bred, 31-year-old film maker who produced, directed and edited "Chan Is Missing," and co-wrote the screenplay with Isaac Cronin and Terrel Seltzer.

The film will be shown today at the Festival Theater at 8:30 P.M. and tomorrow at 1 P.M. in the New Directors/New Films series. When it eventually goes into commercial release, I hope it will be in a small, modest way that will allow it to find an audience at its own civilized speed. It's a film to be discovered without hard-sell.

"Chan Is Missing" is about Jo (Wood Moy), a middle-age taxi driver with the face of an Oriental Job, and Jo's nephew Steve (Marc Hayashi), a restless, gabby young man who talks like Charlie Chan's No. 2 son overdosed on Richard Pryor. Jo and Steve, in an effort to get their own taxi medallion, have entrusted their savings — \$4,000 — to a fellow named Chan Hung, a wheeler-dealer from Taiwan who has apparently absconded with the loot.

Jo and Steve's search for Chan is conducted with the self-aware solemnity of an especially inscrutable Philip Marlowe case, but the Chinatown through which they move hasn't much to do with Marlowe's world of shadowy sleaze. It's resolutely ordinary — a place of neat middle-class apartments, well-lit inexpensive restaurants, busy kitchens, language schools, sunny sidewalks and one center for the elderly.

The more that Jo and Steve find out about Chan, the less they know. Chan's estranged wife, a haughty, thoroughly Americanized lawyer, dismisses Chan as a hopeless case, that is, as "too Chinese." There are reports that Chan: 1. has returned to Taiwan to settle a large estate, and 2. has important ties to Communist China. The clues grow curiously and curiously.

Chan seems to have played some part in a scuffle between rival political factions during a New Year's parade, when marchers sympathetic to Taipei locked flags with marchers sympathetic to Peking. Jo studies a newspaper photograph of the incident, looking for "Blow-Up" clues, before deciding that the photograph is of another scuffle entirely.

There are suggestions that Chan, who was guilty of a minor traffic violation the day he disappeared, is connected with an argument between two elderly Chinese in which one fel-

low shot the other dead — in a fit of temper. A visit to a center for the elderly reveals that Chan liked to tango and was nicknamed Hi-Ho, after the cookies he so loved. Chan's world is one of tumultuous contradictions and even more tumultuous anti-climaxes.

The pursuit turns up the existence of the obligatory "other woman," prompts telephoned warnings ("Stop asking questions about Chan"), which may possibly be calls to a wrong number, and, at one point, leads to an interview with a hip Chinese cook who wears a "Saturday Night Fever" T-shirt and morosely amuses himself by singing "Fry me to the moon."

"Chan Is Missing" is a very funny movie, but it's not a spoof of its characters or even of its so-called "mystery," which, like everything else in the film, is used to illustrate the film's quite serious concerns. These are identity, assimilation, linguistics and what one hilariously earnest young woman, describing Chan's argument with the traffic cop, defines as "cross-cultural misunderstandings."

Mr. Wang, who went to college in San Francisco and has worked on theatrical and television films in Hong Kong and San Francisco, obtains superlative performances from Mr. Moy, Mr. Hayashi and the dozens of other actors who appear in supporting roles. He never wastes a minute of his footage, which has the beauty of something functional transformed by being perfectly realized.

I would especially recommend paying attention to the closing frames of the film, a series of shots of Chinatown facades, suddenly seen devoid of people. This is not architecture arbitrarily tacked onto the film. Nor is it a conventional leave-taking. Rather, it's a final reminder of what Jo and Steve have learned in their search for Chan — that what isn't seen and what can't be proved must remain as important as things seen and proved. Not since the final frames of Luis Buñuel's "Tristana" has there been an ending so dazzling in its utter simplicity.

—Vincent Canby, N.Y. Times

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