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WOOD MOY IN WAYNE WANG'S *CHAN IS MISSING*, AAIFF '82

We're sitting in the dark, tapping our toes to the driving beat of *Rock Around the Clock*, Hong Kong style. The images start. What looks like a white screen is actually a windshield reflecting sky. It begins to fill with environmental reflections as the car moves down the street. For a brief moment we see Jo, the driver. The glass whites out again with passing sky, followed by more reflections. A glimpse of hand on wheel. We are working hard, involved, trying to keep up with the changing portrait. And the opening credits are still rolling.

This is the tone-setting first scene of the feature film *Chan Is Missing*, by producer/director Wayne Wang. Suspense and comedy work on one level, but a dash of social comment is subtly evident as well. The reflections which move quickly across the windshield are views of San Francisco Chinatown as well as precursors of a theme which unfolds during the course of the film, regarding the interpretation of reality.

*Chan Is Missing* follows two San Francisco Chinatown cabbies in their search for Chan Hung, a missing partner who is in possession of \$4,000 of their money. The film is at once a spoof on the Charlie Chan genre and a statement on Chinese America in a diversity hitherto undepicted in theatrical film history. As the two cabbies, Jo (Wood Moy) and Steve (Marc Hayashi), comb Chinatown for clues leading to their partner, they encounter a full range of characters in the community, each imbued with a unique personality, each sharing a different impression of the increasingly enigmatic Chan. There is Henry the wok cook (Peter Wang), who guzzles milk and is tired of cooking sweet-and-sour pork for white folks. There is a young Asian American woman lawyer (Judy Nihei), whose fast, circular talk on Chinese English semantics is an exercise in semantics itself. There is Chan's estranged wife (Ellen Yeung), who is trying to make a go of it in America and feels her husband is "too Chinese" to do likewise. There is Mr. Lee (Roy Chan), Chan's sponsor and insurance

# **CHAN IS MISSING:**

## **A BREAKTHROUGH FILM**

### *An In-depth Study of This Film Classic By Writer Diane Mark*



man, who regards Chan as an immigrant who needs educating. There is Mr. Fong (Leung Pui Chee), a scholar who thinks the key to finding Chan Hung is to "think Chinese."

The film's central characters, Jo and Steve, are both ABC (American-born Chinese) in contrast to Chan, who is FOB (fresh off the boat). But because Jo is second generation, one generation closer to the immigration experience (Steve is third), he empathizes with Chan Hung, especially when Steve accuses Chan of absconding with their money. The major conflict between Jo and Steve is a heated argument which erupts on the pier after several days of unsuccessful searching. Jo defends Chan's integrity; Steve questions it. If Chan is a metaphor for Chinatown, or the "Chinese" part of Chinese American identity, then Jo's defense of Chan and his dogged attempt to find him is symbolic of the second generation's relative loyalty to Chinese culture, especially in discussions with the young. Likewise, Steve's distance from Chan, his feeling of having been cheated by him, his inability to understand why Jo trusts him, is representative of a Chinese American who has found little use for Chinese thought and culture for his survival in the United States.

This very presentation of diversity among Chinese American characters in a film is a concept largely untested in American movies. Mainstream viewers have previously been exposed to a mere handful of Chinese character types recycled over and over again. Stereotypic portrayals have been the rule. Wang replaces these stock images with realistic, everyday characters who bear little resemblance to each other or to their predecessors in western film history.

### Hollywood Images

In theatrical history, *Chan Is Missing* can easily be considered a breakthrough film. It stands out in its depiction of Asian Americans as people (versus props), 3-D (versus 1- and 2-), and self-expressive (versus deaf-mute or programmed with

Confucianisms). During the silent film era, such hits as *The Chinese Rubbernecks* (1903), *Heathen Chinese and The Sunday School Teacher* (1904), and *The Yellow Peril* (1908) reinforced what most Americans suspected—that Chinese were alien, cunning, and somewhat laughable.

Always the pioneer, D.W. Griffith, in *Broken Blossoms* (1919), established, unwittingly perhaps, several stylistic elements in the characterization of Chinese which have been repeated in film to this day. One element was the use of white actors in yellow face to fill Asian roles. In the *Pearls* documentary *Mako* (Educational Film Center, 1979), a makeup artist demonstrates how Hollywood still achieves that slant-eyed, buck-toothed "Asian look" today.

The most well-known Asian characters in American film history have been portrayed by white actors and actresses. The list is lengthy. To appear Asian, these actors and actresses adopted exaggerated mannerisms which, repeatedly done, created stereotypes and cardboard caricatures. Actors Warner Oland and Boris Karloff played Fu Manchu for a successive four decades. Peter Sellers revived the character in 1980. Warner Oland transferred his acting-Asian skills to the portrayal of Charlie Chan, a role later played by Sidney Toler and Roland Winters, and, in 1980, by Peter Ustinov. In television David Carradine was cast in the *Kung Fu* series, playing a Shaolin monk wandering, dazed, through the Wild West.

Another element retained from the days of Griffith is the negative resolution of white-Asian love relationships. The Asian male's threat to white womanhood (read "white manhood") is usually eradicated by the end of the film, through the death or departure of the Asian man. A third element which has persisted to shape the image of Asians on film is the vision of Chinatown as a mysterious, quaint, exotic place. The dark, dank streets of Griffith's Chinatown echo in many contemporary Hollywood movies and television dramas.

These and other film images of Asians in America have occurred and reoccurred throughout the century. Because of the larger-than-life influence of the screen, these Asian stereotypes reinforce impressions and, in young minds, give root. But the stock roles are reflective of societal mores and perceptions, and thus are not adverse to box-office sales. And so the images persist.



# • Dinner Restaurant



## Asian American Filmmaking

As influenced by the civil rights and Black movement of the 1960s, the Asian American movement precipitated not only political change, but a cultural renaissance. In this unique historical period, there was the highly motivated creation of poetry, drama, short stories, novels, music, video and films which were expressly *Asian American*. Most of this work by Asian American creative artists has over the ensuing decade and a half been enjoyed within the community alone. A non-exotic Chinatown does not a Hollywood hit make.

In the area of film and video, Visual Communications (Los Angeles) produced numerous documentaries (e.g. *Wataridori: Birds of Passage*, *Cruisin' J-town*, *Chinatown 2-Step*) and a first Asian American dramatic feature film *Hito Hata: Raise the Banner*. Christine Choy (Third World Newsreel, New York) made a number of documentaries, including *From Spikes to Spindles*, *Bittersweet Survival*, (with J.T. Takagi), and *Mississippi Triangle*. For the past six years, the "best of" Asian and Asian American films have been rounded up for the Asian American International Film Festival, sponsored by the media arts

organization Asian CineVision in New York City.

A few film series have been produced for television and broadcast on PBS. The Educational Film Center (Springfield, Va.) sponsored the production of the first two Asian American film series aired nationally on public television, *Pacific Bridges* and *Pearls* (Executive Producer Noel Izon). San Francisco producer Loni Ding featured community children in the series *Bean Sprouts*. In fall 1983, a collection of Asian American films by independent producers (packaged by the National Asian American Telecommunications Association) was aired for a national audience on PBS.

While exposure of Asian American productions has been gradually improving in the realm of television, this has not been true in the theatrical marketplace. *Chan Is Missing* was the first Asian American film to "cross over" and enjoy success in the mainstream film world. It received its major boost in the New Directors/New Films Film Festival at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, accompanied by an enthusiastic review by *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby, who called the film a "matchless delight" and the "revelation of a marvelous, secure new talent." "Not since the final frames of Louis Bunuel's *Tristana*," wrote Canby, "has there been an ending so dazzling in its utter simplicity." *The Village Voice's* Carrie Ricky wrote, "Wang has composed a valentine, not a dirge, for the collision of cultures." Movie reviewers around the country sent equal praise to press. Most were amazed at how skillfully the production's meager \$20,000 budget had been used. Towards the end of this deluge of hosannas, however, some critics stressed that this was, after all, a \$20,000 film, with all its inherent limitations, and that the excess raving was placing undue pressure on this new director's future. What stands out in the mass of reviews of *Chan Is Missing* is the critic's joyful message that good 1980s filmmaking is not just multi-million dollar budgets, bankable stars, and



special effects. The basis for a good film is still a good story.

### Box Office Success

There are several key elements which stand out in an examination of the box office success of *Chan Is Missing*. Most basic is the competence of the production itself, traceable to the talents of a largely Asian American cast and crews, as orchestrated by producer/director Wang. Assisted by writer Terrel Seltzer, Wang developed a dramatic framework which left room for additional input and on-location improvisation by the principal cast. The other writer credited, Isaac Cronin, developed voice-over narration.

Actors Wood Moy and Marc Hayashi played important roles not only in the film itself, but in the synergistic process of fleshing out the drama, based on their senses of character and plot action. In supporting character roles, Judy Nihei, Peter Wang, Roy Chan, and George Woo deserve special mention. Musical selection and composition by Robert Kikuchi-Yngonjo effectively strengthens the film's visual concepts. The mixture of Hong Kong pop, Pat Suzuki ("Grant Avenue"), and Kikuchi-Yngonjo's own Asian American music not only enhances the drama but is reflective of the diverse nature of Chinatown life. Cinematographer Michael Chin worked well in the documentary-type shoot-from-the-hip format. His montages of Chinatown scenes contain numerous well-composed shots which document both the minute and broad aspects of the community canvas.

A second key element in the successful reception of *Chan Is Missing* is the time of its release. The stage was set by a progression of events which began, in one sense, with the Asian American movement of the late 1960s, during which there emerged in the Asian American community the desire to create alternatives to Charlie Chan, Fu Manchu, Suzie Wong, and other stock portrayals of Asians. Wayne Wang's own sensibility of Asian America began to take shape when he was a San Francisco Bay

Area college student during this turning point in Asian American history.

*Chan Is Missing*, like other successes, might well be viewed in the context of the cultural developments which influenced its creation. A body of Asian American works in theater, film, and literature was steadily produced within the national Asian community, building in quality and sophistication through the 1970s. Much of this work was not afforded dissemination by mainstream publishers and producers, whose decisions are based primarily on financial viability and current trends in the marketplace. In the mid- and late-1970s, Maxine Hong Kingston and David Henry Hwang received broad public attention in the worlds of literature and theater. This exposure of Asian American subject matter on the best seller and hit play lists, despite controversy in the Asian American arts community, furthered the concept of Asian American culture in the public mind. All these factors readied the stage for a *Chan Is Missing* to appear in the film world, and garner success from general audiences.

Thirdly, the popularity of *Chan Is Missing* might be traced to its offering of a slice of American life which is unique and new, a characteristic looked upon with particular favor by the cinematically-sophisticated moviegoers of the 1980s. Wang's Chinatown is inside—inside the Chinese restaurant, inside the kitchen, inside the wok. It is inside family apartments, cafes, and even inside Jo's head. In his documentary-type treatment of this traditionally exotic locale, Wang manages to simultaneously satisfy both the white mainstream audience, which has never had this first-hand filmic experience, and Asian American viewers, who find a realistic portrait of themselves a refreshing relief.

### Chan As A Film

*Chan Is Missing* is not without its problems as a film. The marriage of documentary and dramatic formats works more successfully in some scenes than others. The use of professional amidst non-pro-

fessional actors and actresses somewhat affects the evenness of tone throughout the film. The film's low budget is also evidenced in its simplified, sometimes repetitive camera technique, including static shots, numerous close-ups of news clippings and the "flag-waving incident" photograph, and borderline talking head shots which afford characters little movement but are economical in terms of production. There are also numerous "thinking head" shots—Jo alone in thought at a table, in his cab, walking down the street, with voice-over narration. But Wang has found ways to make these difficulties work in favor of the film. The hand-held shots, for example, actually provide an intimacy that further pulls us into the film, giving us the sense of going along on the hunt for Chan. The hand-held and from-the-car shots liberate the camera, infusing it with the same freedom enjoyed by Steve and Jo as they move at will through Chinatown. We also slip briefly into the skins of characters for which the camera takes the point-of-view, including a waiter serving a table and the grandmother who intently watches a scene from an upstairs window and feigns indifference when the action enters the room.

In the past, Asian American plays and films have concentrated on soul-searching, lessons of history, examination of the Asian-White relationships, generational conflict—very serious subjects which have been treated as such. In recent years, the plays of David Henry Hwang (*FOB*, *Family Devotions*) and Rick Shiomi (*Yellow Fever*) have upped the "entertainment quotient" of Asian American theatrical drama. *Chan Is Missing* shares their ability to make people laugh along with, rather than at, Asian characters. *Chan* also operates with the awareness of general audiences, injecting the added dimension of genuine affection for the community.

With decades of demeaning portrayals of Asians in film and television, the tendency for contemporary Asian American filmmakers has been to earnestly counterbalance Asian media images by creating ultra-



positive characters. Character faults are attributed less to individual deficiencies and inabilities than to the binds of history, racism, and tradition. In *Chan Is Missing* the characters are everyday people who don't always keep their cool, stay on top of the situation, or find what they are looking for. Wang's characterizations show Asian Americans as human beings rather than dime-a-dozen stereotypes or do-no-wrong heroes, typical characterizations which are equally dehumanizing on either end of the scale. *Chan Is Missing* has demonstrated that it might not be necessary for Asians to kowtow, cater, or conquer through *jeet kune do* to assure box office viability.

As viewers, we are also offered a language lesson while watching this film. Ears are initiated to Cantonese and Mandarin, in addition to Chinese American English in Black dialect, professional dialect, Chinatown dialect, wok cook dialect. And if language is a medium of culture, then we are brought to a closer understanding of the societal variety of Chinese Americans and their tendency to not all look (and talk) alike.

*Chan Is Missing* might, in addition, provoke more troubling thoughts about Chinese American society. There is the notion of the disintegration of the Chinese American family. Jo is divorced and the Chans are estranged. For a people traditionally touted to have overriding family ties and the unerring ability to take care of their own, this is a divergence. There is also the portrayal of Chinatown as one which is filled with complexity, even for Chinese Americans. We are shown a Chinatown which is a living, breathing community filled with optimism and dashed dreams, the daily grind and political intrigue. Chan is missing. If Chan symbolizes the Chinese part of Chinese America, the question is, should the search continue, and are we prepared for the find?

### Changing Perceptions

The artistry of a film piece made within a genre can be measured by the filmmaker's original contributions to the estab-

PHOTO: CORKY LEE



lished conventions and his/her ability to absorb and react to its standard features to give a unique expression to the form. Within the mystery genre, Wang utilizes various conventions—the disappearance, the chase scene, the pounding suspense music. He refuses, however, to exploit Chinatown by presenting it as the exotic, dark, mysterious locale it has traditionally been used for in the genre. *Chan Is Missing* depicts everyday life on Chinatown streets and within its offices, businesses, and homes. But the difference between the real and the heretofore *reel* Chinatown has been so great that the effect is far from mundane.

In another original take to the mystery genre tradition, Wang does away with the normal ending to the story. The Western-created Charlie Chan would have solved the puzzle. Jo and Steve, for all their efforts, do not. This has, in fact, been one of the criticisms of *Chan Is Missing*. The lack of a traditional resolution to the mystery has been unfortunately interpreted as a lack of resolution altogether. But the notion that Wang has suggested throughout the film—the Asian ability to search hard for a solution while accepting ambiguity—is underscored in this ending, which is, in fact, the only ending possible.

A primary vehicle for this inherent ambiguity is the use of the "negative" character. One of the most successful sequences in the film is one in which Jo

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walks and drives through the Chinatown streets with the fear that he is being followed. With gripping music and a series of quick cuts—a glance in the rearview mirror, a close-up of feet walking, a look over the shoulder directly into the camera—Wang has constructed a suspenseful chase scene in which the camera perspective is that of the pursuer. This pursuer, whether a figment of Jo's imagination or a real person, is, like Chan Hung, a "negative" character whose presence is felt but not seen.

As in most movies, *Chan Is Missing* ends with a withdrawal, in this case, of camera from locale. The final sequence of scenes commences with a shot of Steve and Jo relaxing in their cab, which is parked beneath the Golden Gate Bridge, away from Chinatown. They no longer talk directly about Chan Hung, but reflect on the merits and contradiction of "thinking Chinese." The segue to the ending montage is a long hold on a shot of rippling Bay water reflecting the sunlight. By its reversible, flat nature, it is a scene wide open to interpretation, and perhaps a most appropriate cinematic metaphor for the entire film. As volume is pulled up on the music tract, we hear Pat Suzuki belting out "Grant Avenue, San Francisco, California, U.S.A. . . ." and are left with a punctuated sense of the vast differences between tinselled storefronts and real people in movement on the streets of their community.

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