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# ROBERT HATCH

## Chan Is Missing
### Bob le Flambeur

*Chan Is Missing* is a mystery movie and appropriately full of clues, blind alleys, suggestive bits of evidence and promising hypotheses. But at the end, instead of one of those gratifying scenes in which everything is made clear, we are shown a series of quietly beautiful shots of the streets and buildings in San Francisco's Chinatown. When the lights come up, Chan is still missing. Since we are, almost all of us, Westerners and therefore made uneasy by unanswered questions, you would expect us to file out of the theater in a mood of ill-tempered perplexity. In fact, the picture is as completely satisfying as it is specifically uninformative.

Wayne Wang, who produced, directed and (with Isaac Cronin and Terrei Seltzer) wrote the movie, is himself technically a Westerner. Though born in Hong Kong, he was raised in San Francisco and is wise to its ways and lingo. But like his characters, he has a mind that can slip back and forth from East to West so unobtrusively as to cause hardly a ripple. His plot is neatly, enticingly developed, yet the puzzle of what happened to Chan is not his subject but only the occasion for it. The subject is how people behave toward one another; at a deeper level, it is a wry but cheerful acknowledgment that what we don't know is as much a part of our experience as, and probably no less important than, what we do know.

But I mustn't approach *Chan Is Missing* with a solemnity that would make Wang and his troupe chuckle. Here are the facts, such as they are. Jo (Wood May) and his nephew, Steve (Marc Hayashi), are a couple of Chinese-American taxi drivers who want to buy a cab and go into business for themselves. To do so, they must first get hold of a taxi medallion, and they entrust the negotiations to one of their colleagues, Chan Hung, a recent arrival from Taiwan who is thought to be a particularly agile bargainer. They also trust Chan with $4,000, and after waiting several days for him to reappear at the garage they begin to wonder if that move was prudent.

Jo is a tiny man, sloppy of dress and neat of movement. His habitual gait is a short-paced jog that suggests the weight of a yoke across the shoulders. Jo's face is deeply creased and impassive; his speech is spare and succinct; his eyes are hooded, masking his enjoyment of folly, quite often his own. Steve, a head taller and a generation cockier, has mastered the "like, man," expletive-laden speech of his age group. He protests with a satisfied grin when Chan's daughter (Emily Yamasaki) calls him a Chinese Richard Pryor. Steve is impatient and worried; he wants to go to the police. Jo is fatalistic and patiently methodical; he points out that the two of them know a lot more about Chan's ways and care much more about the $4,000 than the cops possibly could.

So Jo and Steve, but especially Jo, poke about in Chinatown. They visit Chan's favorite restaurant; they ask for news of him at an old-folks center, where he often dropped in to lend a hand. He has not been seen recently at a language school for recent arrivals, and when they track down his former wife, she shrugs him off as a hopelessly unassimilated coolie. They stake out his room, and in a pocket of some clothes he has left there, they find newspaper clippings about an elderly Chinese man who killed a lifelong friend in an argument as to whether Taiwanese or mainland banners should be carried in a local parade. Under the seat of Chan's cab, Jo discovers an automatic, wrapped in a mechanic's rag. He is advised on excellent authority that Chan has gone back to Taiwan, and with equal assurance that he has disappeared into the Communist underground. He is urged to look for a certain woman, but with no hint of where she might be found. There comes a moment when Jo thinks himself a hunted man. He takes to looking over his shoulder, to staring in his rear-view mirror. His heart goes out to Chan.

All in all, Jo and Steve find out a good deal about their quarry. It seems clear that he was something more than a cab driver with a gift for tricky transactions, but just what he was, or where he went, they never find out. One day Chan's daughter returns the money, without comment, and the quest ends.

*Chan Is Missing* is witty and shrewd; it is enchanting from the start and increasingly so as it proceeds. Primarily that is because the movie is fragrant with friendliness. Jo is a superbly friendly man. He approaches everyone—lawyer and short-order cook, sharp businessman and naïvely enthusiastic language coach—with the same modest confidence. It is an attitude innate in the man, but sustained by the atmosphere of Chinatown. People there do what they can to help. In this case, they are no help at all, but they share with Jo and Steve a common lack of knowledge. They are all brothers in ignorance, and that, the picture seems to say, is the great solace of the human condition.

Wang is a fine director. His actors, from leads to passers-by in the street, endow their characters with striking and, for the most part, endearing personalities; his grainy, black-and-white photography (Michael Chin is the cameraman) has the depth and range of the best lithography. And Wang is also a capable businessman; he made *Chan Is Missing* for less than $20,000.