Journal of American Studies of Turkey
2 (1995) : 13-19.

Chinese-American Cinema Today

Douglas W. Cooper

One of the major events in the American film industry today is the emergence of a new Chinese-American cinema. Its advent heralds a major corrective to Hollywood's stereotypical minority images and allows minority film-makers themselves to decide on their own image. For, Chinese-Americans well know that the way they are shown in the media often determines the way they are treated in society.

Until now, Hollywood has churned out a number of mainstream movies that dramatized newspaper headlines about the so-called Chinese mafia. These movies drew on people's concern for the spread of crime, the lack of security in city streets, and the war on drugs. These films linked the Chinese with such domestic urban anxieties, further marginalizing and indeed criminalizing them, perpetuating the old "Yellow Peril" myth that has flourished on and off since the nineteenth century (Chink 78).

The old racist stereotypes persist in popular culture, and nowhere more tenaciously than in the cinema. From the sad and silly stock figures of nineteenth century stage plays (Wong 170), the cliché characters grew to include familiar film figures such as the sinister villain (Fu Manchu), the clever detective (Charlie Chan), the wise sage, the China doll, the dragon lady, and a variety of domestics and menials from cook to laundryman to gardener to houseboy (Jones 28-36). In the sixties and seventies Hollywood began to check its dialog for racist words like "Chink" and "Chinaman." However, in 1974 the misleadingly named *Chinatown* retained stereotypic menial roles for Asians, included obscene slurs, and briefly dragged in an actual Chinatown to give symbolism to the story's doomed conclusion.

The relatively recent force in American film-making comes directly from the Chinese-Americans themselves. It comes as an alternative phenomenon that began in the early nineteen-eighties and has continued into the nineties. The effect of their films is to counter Hollywood's stereotypes of gangsters and crime-lords, substituting their own sense of who the Chinese are in America. They emphasize family in various blends of "domestic comedy" with Americana. They adhere to an "immigrant" genre in a new sub-genre one might call the "Chinatown" movie. In

this new sub-genre, the image of the Chinese is humane, the treatment of characters sympathetic and well rounded, the people ordinary. In these films, we see the Chinese in America as just one more ethnic group struggling to make the American Dream their own, facing in that struggle both hardship and prejudice.

This paper discusses first three Hollywood films of the eighties and nineties reflecting the Chinese-Americans negatively, and then contrasts them with six films made in the same period by the Chinese-Americans themselves, to demonstrate the novelty these have brought to the American cinema.

I

Two mainstream films from the eighties and one from the start of the nineties illustrate the negative Chinese-American image of the recent past. *Year of the Dragon* (1985) dramatizes just how many racist slurs a blockbuster can have. *China Girl* (1987) tries to treat the Chinese more fairly but links them with crime. And *King of New York* (1990) has sinister Chinese gangs lurking in the background. All three use evil Chinese figures as colorfully exotic objects of hate or novelty, but mostly as gangsters, murderers, and drug-traffickers, in short, as the new Chinese mafia, the "Yellow Peril."

In the first film, the popular *Year of the Dragon* (1985), the precinct captain of New York's Chinatown, Stanley White, initially tries to control youth gangs, but soon discovers an underworld of drug-smuggling and murder involving local businessman Joey Tai. White falls in love with Tracy Tzu, the Chinese-American reporter covering the story, while his efforts to root out the sources of crime involve a Chinese mafia, gangland killings in a Chinese restaurant, and drug shipments from the Golden Triangle in Southeast Asia.

The movie bears a statement of disclaimer at its start:

> This film does not intend to demean or to ignore the many positive features of Asian Americans and specifically Chinese American communities. Any similarity between the depiction of this film and any association, organization, individual or Chinatown that exists in real life is accidental.

Several characters continue the rectifications. Joey Tai reminds reporter Tracy how upright Chinese citizens endowed a chair in Chinese history at Yale University, and organized charitable loan-funds and meal programs. Another Chinese character delivers an encomium about the Chinese who had an advanced civilization long before the Europeans. He pleads, "No more Chinaman jokes. Those days are over!"

Yet the film deprecates the Chinese in a non-stop flood of xenophobic stereotypes. Called "yellow niggers," they are said to "drive [cars] like their music, from right to

left." Chinese businessmen are crooked, "always involved in something." Racist Stanley calls Tracy "slant-eyed" and insults her even as he tries to seduce her, sneering "you going Chink on this--do you do it sideways or something?" Then, "Like all Chinks! Why don't you come out and say what you're thinking?"

The Chinese in North America are depicted as criminals having ties with the Chinese Triads of the old country, the main crime families existing even before the Mafia. Cooperating with the Italian Mafia, they share extortion rackets, run the illegal drug trade, and buy off City Hall. They pursue these activities through a far-flung network of crime that extends to Canada and back to Hong Kong and the Golden Triangle.

In the somewhat more fair-minded *China Girl* (1987), two sensitive New York City teenagers, one Italian and the other Chinese, fall in love. Like Romeo and Juliet, Tony and Tyan, the two sympathetic teenagers, are caught in a feud between the Italians and the Chinese when the Hong Kong Chinese try to overpower the Italian Mafia. The two star-crossed lovers meet, romance, and die amid internecine warfare waged between their opposing gangs.

Again, racial stereotypes abound. One of Tony's thug friends taunts an older couple who open a Chinese restaurant, confusing Asian groups, calling them "Mama-san," "Papa-san," and "Chinks." He complains that "[they] always have a camera in their hand[s]," and that "[they are] always squinting, even when its cloudy." Although Tony defends them, saying "the Chinese are people, too," this 1980s film still manages to update the old Fu Manchu image. Instead of hatchet-wielding Chinamen, we have Chinese thugs armed with switch-blades and nunchakus, a deadly chain-and-ball weapon.

A third and more recent crime film, *King of New York* (1990), gives the Chinese gangster image yet another boost. Although they remain more in the shadows than in the earlier two films, the Chinese have no less a negative image in this film. When gangster Frank White returns from prison to re-establish his control over New York City's illegal drug trade, he directs his black gang to distribute what the Chinese gang supplies, and buys political protection with benevolent contributions. However, when he confronts the police detective on his case one too many times, he is fatally shot.

Before this happens, the Chinese gang, led by Larry Wong, has a huge shipment of cocaine to distribute. Like the vampire in F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), which they watch in a private screening, they prey on the public who are the victims of their drug trafficking. When they refuse to cooperate with White's benevolent schemes, a double-cross leads to murder. One scene is shot in the narrow streets of New York's Chinatown where the Hongkongese gangsters and their punkish China molls are gunned down in a surprise attack.

Intertextuality deserves notice. *Year of the Dragon*'s subplot of youth gangs subverting the more orderly criminal activity of their elders becomes the main plot of *China Girl*, as if it were a TV spin-off from the earlier idea. China doll Ariane from *Year of the Dragon* puts in a cameo appearance in *King of New York* , associating with hoods, crooks, and racketeers. "White" echoes between two of these films. In both films people named White hold sway over those of color--black, brown, or yellow--whether as a guardian of the law (Stanley in *Year of the Dragon*) or as a drug-lord (Frank in *King of New York*). The spectator is left wondering whether these constitute components of a larger work, a crime genre of which one of the inseparable elements is the Chinese.

II

Recently, a handful of Chinese-American filmmakers have emerged with their own films. These give a very different picture of the ethnic Chinese. Throughout the eighties, these modest movies came from independent filmmakers, but in the nineties they have joined the mainstream, with huge box-office successes such as *Joy Luck Club* and *Wedding Banquet*. They are films in a variety of genres, from film noir to travelogue, from immigrant film to women's film, domestic comedy, and Americana. But the major theme shared by all is the tension between the old and the new, China and America. Frequently, the vehicle for examining that tension is the family.

Between them, three Chinese-Americans, Wayne Wang, Peter Wang (no relation), and Ang Lee directed some six films specifically about ethnic Chinese in the US. These films have appeared over the last fifteen years to a surprising degree of popularity and critical notice. Wayne Wang as the director of four of the films ranks prominently as a commentator on their condition ("Dialogue on Film" 17-19).

An immigrant whose parents fled China for Hong Kong, Wayne Wang made his first American film, *Chan Is Missing* (1981), on a shoe-string ("Chinese Takeout" 23-28). In a grainy black and white, it tells how two San Francisco Chinese, Jo and his wisecracking nephew Steve, try to track down a business associate named Chan who has disappeared with their savings while going to get them a taxi license. Jo's voice-over narration describes their search, their uncertainties, and their speculations as they walk self-mockingly in the footsteps of Charlie Chan and his Number One Son.

It is film noir as the two search for Chan in various neighborhoods, following clues and questioning those who knew or spoke with him. He may have skipped town with the money, gone back overseas, been caught in feuds between Chinese

factions, or even be dead. Some call him a simple man, others a genius. We never see him. The two never find him.

In the process we get a dead serious essay on marginality, a minority view of America punctuated with jokes, riddles, and cross-cultural puns. Although it concentrates on the Chinese experience, it includes a long scene at an elder's social club for Filipinos and other Asians, pointing up similarities between all immigrants and outsiders living in the US. A joking dialogue that examines the difficult job of moving from the margin into the social mainstream continues in scene after scene between Jo and Steve .

Wang's second feature,*Dim Sum* (1985) is a cross between a "woman's picture" and a "family picture" (subclass: "immigrant" or "melting pot"). Like *Chan Is Missing*,*Dim Sum* demythologizes the threatening "Yellow Peril" and inscrutable Other of earlier stereotypes.

It chronicles the effect of generational and cultural tensions on the interpersonal relationships in a Chinese-American family. Also, like *Chan Is Missing*, it is set in San Francisco's Chinese neighborhoods. In this film, Geraldine looks after her widowed mother, Mrs. Tam. Her mother, her Uncle Tam, and all her friends miss no chance to remind Geraldine that she ought to get married. Mrs. Tam increases the pressure by a fear of dying until she returns from a trip to China with a more optimistic attitude.

Strong ties to the old culture mark the day-to-day experiences, images, and recollections of their life. They remove their shoes at the door, eat with chopsticks, recall the taste of Chinese delicacies, grow plum blossoms in their windows, play mah jong, set-off fire-crackers, and give out *lai-see* (lucky money) at the New Year. Uncle Tam recalls that it was in Geraldine's father's dance-hall that he, "a Chinaman," had been able for the first--and only--time to "look at a white woman."

However, the American dream draws them all. The younger generation of women chafe at their "old-fashioned" Chinese male counterparts obsessed with having sons, as well as VCRs. Mrs. Tam studies U.S. history for her citizenship test so that she can go back to Canton as "an American." Even Geraldine is able to share her knowledge and enthusiasm for American movies with her uncle.

Wayne Wang's next Chinatown film,*Eat A Bowl of Tea* (1989), looks again at the life of the Chinese in America, but from a more historical point of view. It creates the milieu of New York's Chinatown in the early 1940s, when the notorious Chinese Exclusion Acts were about to be repealed (Chink 46).

Wah Gay, long separated from his wife in China by those laws, persuades his son Ben Loy to go to China for a bride and bring her back. When Ben does so and marries, he is unable to engender children. The frustrated bride Mei Oi is seduced

and makes the young couple and the father the butt of jokes. The father avenges himself on the adulterer and flees. Finally, Ben and Mei reconcile and start a new life in San Francisco.

A voice-over narration at the film's beginning explains one of the central themes of the 1961 novel by Louis Chu on which it is based. It tells how turn-of-the-century immigration laws and the demand for cheap labor allowed only the men to emigrate from China (Jackson 116). Unlike Wang's earlier films, *Eat A Bowl of Tea* recreates the ghetto universe of rejected immigrants in a claustrophobic world circumscribed by white American bigotry, racism, and hostility towards Asians.

A fourth film about Chinese-Americans in the eighties helped make a trend while examining what the words "American" and "foreign" mean. *A Great Wall* (1985), directed by Peter Wang, explores the cultural bonds between the Chinese on either side of the world, when the Fang family from San Francisco visit their relatives in Beijing. It also points up both cultural continuity and difference, showing how genuinely "American" the Chinese have become in the US, how much the New World makes a "new man," and what is lost in the process.

Wry humor dominates the encounter between Leo Fang (played by the director) and his sister Mrs. Chao and her family in Beijing, with English subtitles for the Mandarin. Comedy arises from juxtaposing ideas expressed in, first one language, then the other; or in seeing events from two points of view. While the father in the Chao family feels that one should not disagree with the "leader" of one's "work unit," Leo Fang tells how he spoke up to the "boss" of his "company," accusing him of racism. The teenage Americans are surprised to see that in China the sexes do not mingle, or even flirt, an act thought to be "disgusting." The Fangs embarrass their relatives in China when they meet them by hugging them in public. Fashion modeling requires having a good build and being "politically sound." The notion of privacy scarcely exists among family members in China.

The concept that emerges here turns the "exotic" Chinese stereotype on its head. For a while, we see the Chinese-Americans as true Americans and their Beijing relations as foreigners, athough they are one and the same family. However, soon we realize that each can be viewed in two ways. Seen from the outside, both are foreign, the Chaos of Beijing unfamiliar and Other, the Fangs of San Francisco strange new beings. For example, upon seeing the American visitors for the first time the Chao family's neighbors ask, "Who are these strange people? Japanese? No, Filipino, maybe." Yet our point of view has been radically altered by identifying with both groups, so that, seen from the inside each is familiar, each is family, all of them are one of us.

III

In the 1990s Chinese-Americans and Chinese-American filmmakers left Chinatown to enter the mainstream of American movies with two major box office hits, *Joy Luck Club* and *Wedding Banquet*. (However, other bright stars are today *not* on the screen but in the board-rooms of major studios. Chris Lee is senior vice-president at TriStar Pictures, Teddy Zee is at Columbia, Bonnie Lee is at Geffen, and Richard Sakai is at Gracie Productions (Corliss 70).)

Once again the director Wayne Wang captures the Chinese immigrant past, but this time in a film adapted from Amy Tan's best-selling book *Joy Luck Club* (1989). With a script co-written by Tan herself, the film, like the novel, moves back and forth between the China of an earlier time and today's San Francisco where the club of four immigrant aunties meet regularly for mah-jong and discuss their American-born daughters, now in their thirties.

Within this frame, a series of flashbacks details the plight of the mothers when they were in China as virtual chattel and victims, and the problems of their present-day daughters. Auntie Suyuan tearfully abandoned her twin babies at a roadside during the 1937-38 Japanese invasion of Kweilin in the hope that others would rescue them; Auntie Ying Ying drowned her infant son to spite her cruel husband; Auntie Lindo escaped a husband mismatched from an arranged marriage; and Auntie An Mei watched helplessly as her mother, a concubine, died. Compared to these, the daughters' modern problems seem slender indeed, but both book and film focus on the difficulties of mother-daughter communication and on the continuity of their Chinese heritage.

A dinner party with the film's characters assembled--mothers, daughters, and spouses--sets the tone of this movie, where we see all of them as ordinary humans in one big American--albeit hyphenated American--family, a family like that of nearly all Americans, with an immigrant past. The film indulges no appetite for exotic chinoiserie. As Amy Tan observes, it shows "Asian Americans who are not emperors, not martial artists, not servants in rich houses" (qtd. in Corliss 70). Its wide appeal to viewers made it, with its big Hollywood studio backing and distribution, a box office smash hit.

The same year, 1993, also saw the release of Ang Lee's enormously successful situation-comedy, *The Wedding Banquet*. A joint Taiwanese-American production with a few scenes in subtitled Mandarin, it deals with an interracial homosexual couple in Manhattan consisting of Simon, a Caucasian, and Wai-Tung, a Taiwan-born real estate investor. Wai-Tung tries to placate his parents--who are visiting from Taiwan and want a grandchild--by frantically arranging a marriage of convenience with Wei-Wei, a pretty Shanghinese tenant in one of his buildings, who will get a green card out of the deal. The formal wedding banquet which results is a roaring, drunken success from which raucous friends refuse to leave, even lingering in the nuptial bedroom until satisfied that the couple will

consummate their union in bed. The final fallout is that the parents discover Wai-Tung is gay, Wei-Wei is pregnant, and they will get an heir, for whom Simon offers to be "one of the fathers."

The comedy owes a large part of its success to its sit-com plot, its gay motif, and its culture-clash theme. On the *American* side, its protagonist is thoroughly integrated into Manhattan's business and socio-sexual way of life. On the *Chinese* side, he has strong ties to the "old world" of his parents, although he rejects their pressure to procreate and their adherence to conventional gender roles. In Taiwan the movie became the biggest box office hit in that country's history, and in the US it drew huge audiences everywhere it was shown.

IV

Perhaps it is no accident, then, that Chinese-Americans and Asian-Americans are emerging into the limelight. They are doing this in a number of ways: one is by dealing with sympathetic subjects, another is by providing positive images of the Chinese-American, and a third is by winning their own roles as actors and actresses. Most important, as filmmakers they are doing it by making their own statements about the Chinese-American experience . Thus, while racial stereotypes remain in many a big budget movie, these and other Chinese-Americans are moving into the system and gradually helping to change the face of American movies today.

Works Cited

"Chinese Takeout. Wayne Wang Interviewed by David Thomson." *Film Comment* 21.5 (1985): 23-28.

"Chink!" *A Documentary History of Anti-Chinese Prejudice in America*. Ed. Cheng-Tsu Wu. New York: World, 1972.

Corliss, Richard. "Pacific Overtures." *Time* 13 September 1993: 70.

"Dialogue On Film: Wayne Wang."*American Film* 11.9 (1986): 17-19.

Jackson, Donald Dale. "Behave Like Your Actions Reflect on All Chinese." *Smithsonian* 21 (1991): 114-118

Jones, Dorothy B. *The Portrayal of China and India on the American Screen, 1896-1955: The Evolution of Chinese and Indian Themes, Locales, and Characters as Portrayed on the American Screen*. Cambridge, MA: Center for International Studies, MIT, 1955. 28-36.

Wong, Terri. "From Ah Sin to Kwai Chang."*The Life, Influence and Role of the Chinese in the United States, 1776-1960*. Proceedings/Papers of the National Conference held at the University of San Francisco, July 10-12, 1975. San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1976: 170.