THE MANY MEANINGS OF A MISSING CHARACTER: MULTIPLE DISCOURSES OF CHINESENESS AND CHINESE IDENTITY IN WAYNE WANG’S FILMS

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Abstract:
This thesis highlights a method of representation that is critical of both images of Chinese powerlessness and images of Chinese power. In *Chan is Missing* and *The Princess of Nebraska*, two films by Chinese American director Wayne Wang, representations of Chineseness and Chinese identity are always determined through the discursive context in which they are enunciated. The films each employ the device of a missing subject, in order to show that its meaning does not refer to the subject itself but rather is determined through the context in which it is talked about. This creates different and often conflicting versions of the same subject, which can only be resolved by seeing that the subjects of Chineseness and Chinese identity are always a response to the contexts out of which they are discussed.
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CHAPTER 1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: Positive and Negative Images of Race in the US

1.1 Positive and negative images of race as ideological constructs

A central question that will weave through this thesis is the difference between outright racism and concealed racism. To do this, we will focus on the cinematic representation of images of race. Specifically, we will show how images of racial others in America have been distorted through both “negative” images of racial others, which cause fear of racial others, and “positive” images of racial others, which neutralize both aggression or ambition in racial others and reinforces feelings of superiority and comfort among the white majority audience.

Both negative and positive images of race and ethnicity have been constructed to support the ideology of white male American privilege. Powerless images of Chinese men neutralize them as non-competitive, compliant and asexual. This stereotype has been studied by many Asian American scholars, such as Eugene Franklin Wong, who shows that Hollywood cinema effeminizes Asian men, to confirm the sexual dominance of the white male audience. However, Asian women are often depicted as extremely beautiful and sexually attractive. Despite the difference in the sexuality of images of Asian men and Asian women, both depictions are incentivized because they complement the sexuality of white men. This is a unified latent motivation behind the diverse representations of Asian men and women, which tie them together into one discursive context.

In this thesis, I am interested in film director Wayne Wang’s formal device of a central character that is never seen or heard from, and the political implications of this absence. Specifically, in the 1970s and 80s, before Wang produced his first film around a missing Chinese character, activists thought that the remedy for images of powerless Asian men in Hollywood cinema was to put stronger Asian characters on screen. In most instances where powerful Chinese characters were popularly accepted by a White American audience, the movies were set in a foreign country, or the characters worked for or with US law enforcement under White supervision. This thesis argues that Wang’s use of an absent character is a strategy to highlight how

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images of Chinese in the US are always guided and limited by the idea of White male American superiority.

1.2 Literature review
Many scholars have disagreed about the connotations of the terms “Chinese identity” and “Chineseness.” These are two terms which both refer to people or cultural artifacts with origins in China; however, Chinese identity and Chineseness are evoked in different contexts, and thus have different meanings. For the purposes of this paper I will distinguish between them by drawing on two theorists with different ideas about agency and identity.

I am led to the conclusion that common experience is an essential layer of Chinese identity formation, whereas Chineseness is a method of marking China as a set of cultural and historical factors that separate China as “perpetually foreign.”

This distinction is helpful in understanding the modes of representing, or not representing, Chinese characters in the films of Wayne Wang.

Stuart Hall wrote that identity is “who I am.” Although this definition seems open to interpretation, one thing is clear. The “I” exists and has a stake in his or her own identity. Hall specifically discusses the expressions we make on our face and how that says something about our identity. Although there are many ways of interpreting identity—for example, identity can be what you are thinking when you wear an expression or it can be what other people perceive of you as you wear that expression—the bottom line is that “I” determine my facial expressions, so “I” have a stake in forming my own identity. Thus people who consider themselves Chinese retain agency in forming Chinese identity.

By contrast, Rey Chow wrote that Chineseness is an “ethnic supplement” to topics, such as modernity, capitalism and feminism, which are assumed to be of Western origins. Chineseness has been used to “ghettoize” non-Western versions of supposedly universal phenomena. The fact that Chineseness is defined as a

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4 Ibid.
“supplement” suggests that it is not part of Chinese identity. Specifically, Rey Chow discusses that “there remains in the West...a continual tendency to stigmatize and ghettoize non-Western cultures precisely by way of ethnic, national labels.” This points to the idea that Chineseness is determined in the West, and that people who consider themselves Chinese do not retain agency in forming Chineseness, an important difference from Chinese identity.

Although Chineseness originates in Western discourse, Chinese intellectuals have adopted it for political purposes such as nationalism. Rey Chow calls this a “reactive position” taken by Chinese intellectuals, in the context of aggressive Western armies who have occupied China over the past hundred and fifty years. She explains that, “what we often encounter is a kind of cultural essentialism—in this case sinocentrism—that draws an imaginary boundary between China and the rest of the world. Everything Chinese is fantasized as somehow better—longer in existence, more intelligent, more scientific, more valuable and ultimately beyond comparison.” Thus Chinese intellectuals respond to cultural ghettoization with cultural essentialism that also emphasizes the difference between China and the rest of the World.

Throughout this paper we will focus on Chineseness as a Western construct and show how it has been used as a supplement for universal character traits. The basic assumption of Chineseness is that when universal character traits are adapted to Chinese contexts and characters, they must somehow be changed and their differences must somehow be marked. In response, Chinese identity encompasses the subjective process of identifying (or not) with the discourse of Chineseness (Chinese American identity encompasses a choice to identify with American discourses of Chineseness and Chinese identity encompasses a choice to identify with the reactive position of sinocentrism).

In this thesis, we are not dealing with Chineseness as an entity or essence. We are dealing with discourses of Chineseness. Stuart Hall referred to discourses as “ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic or practice.”

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7 Ibid.
To illustrate his example in this instance, he referred to the practice of showing up to a soccer match. The practice of attending a soccer match encompasses multiple acts of dress, food and beer consumption, before, during and after the match, and customs dealing with whom you will and won’t interact with and in which ways you will and won’t interact with them. Each of these acts is part of a discourse of nationalism in Europe.

This idea of discourse as practice will inform the thesis in two ways. First, we will look at many modes of film representation which all enter into the practice of making a film, such as the way a character is portrayed through visual markers (such as costumes and make-up), auditory markers (such as accents and impediments), as well as inter-textual references to other films. Second, we will look at cultural contexts in which films are released, including a period of increased immigration from Asia to the US in the early 20th century during which anti-Asian politics grew more popular and another period during World War II where Chinese were popularly represented as allies and friends to the US. We will assume that discourses of Chineseness, performances of Chineseness, mobilize multiple modes of representation in response to political contexts such as these.

However, sometimes identity is essentialized as a strategic response within a specific discursive context. The term “strategic essentialism” is attributed to Gayatri Spivak who used it in her 1987 essay “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography” to refer to the shared goal of a group of academics to define the subaltern/peasant consciousness in order to form a “visible political interest.”

Spivak is saying that even though essentialism is wrong, because there is no essence, we can still speak from a collective position as a strategic move. Throughout this paper, speakers may seem to essentialize certain Chinese characteristics; however, we can sometimes look at the discursive context to which they are responding to read these as instances of strategic essentialism.

One main purpose of discursive analysis is to recognize that meaning does not

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9 Ibid.
emanate from one place, one speaker or one instance, but rather travels across many nodes which all have an influence on it. Foucault wrote that discourse “does not function in the form of a chain---it circulates. It is never monopolized by one centre. It is deployed and exercised through a net-like organization.”11 This insight informs the mode of analysis employed in this thesis. We will analyze many characters within the same film all informing and changing the meaning of one central character.

In the next sections, we will analyze images of Blacks and Chinese in American popular film and literature. We will show that the ways that people discussed these images of race informed and changed the meaning of race, even when the images remained the same. On the other hand, we will highlight that when images were changed, these changes were often guided by the idea that White male Americans were superior to other people.

1.3 Race in discursive context: Uncle Tom throughout American history

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, one of the most widely read and referenced pieces of literature in America, represents a popular example of how a character’s meaning changes according to the context in which it is discussed.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is the story of an elderly slave who retains faith to his master and to a Christian God, even as his owner continually mistreats him. Harriet Beecher Stowe serialized this novel in 1851, in direct response to the creation of the 1850 fugitive slave law, with the goal of building and spreading sympathy for the condition of slaves. She attempted to rally abolitionists and potential abolitionists to the cause of freeing slaves, in light of their mistreatment and in light of the shared religious convictions of the slaves and the abolitionists.

According to Hollis Robbins, co-editor of *The Annotated Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Uncle Tom has been discussed by many important political and cultural figures in the United States across many eras and, in each era, he was discussed differently. According to Robbins, “Uncle Tom began as a Christ figure…but has been

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transformed into a silent, sexless, stalwart servant.”12 This shows two ways he was talked about in two different periods of time.

In the 1850s and 1860s, Uncle Tom was discussed as a Jesus Christ figure. Indeed, Harriet Beecher Stowe said of the novel, “I did not write it. God wrote it.”13 Stowe wanted to play on the anger as well as religious faith of early and potential abolitionists by tying Uncle Tom to their own religious experience.

A hundred years after it was written, Uncle Tom was invoked in a very different manner in the context of the Black Power movement of the 1960s. This was a period in which many Black Americans turned to Islam as a way or separating themselves from the culture of White Americans. Malcolm X, a Black Power Movement leader, referred to Uncle Tom as a “defenseless” man whose power was taken away from him by too close a relationship with White masters and their Christian God. Malcolm X specifically referred to Martin Luther King Jr. as a “modern Uncle Tom, who is doing the same thing today, to keep Negroes defenseless in the face of an attack.”14

The image of Uncle Tom will be referenced throughout this paper, especially in the chapter about Charlie Chan, a popular character in early Hollywood film that is often read as a Chinese version of the Uncle Tom character. Just like Uncle Tom, Charlie Chan has been referred to in a wide variety of ways and has sparked numerous debates from cultural and political leaders of the Asian American community. Frank Chin, Asian American scholar, artist and writer has even made an explicit connection, writing, “Chan was an Asian Uncle Tom, the bastard offspring of ‘racist love,’ which offered white approval in exchange for Asian American self-abasement.”15 However, this viewpoint represents a specific time arising from a specific discursive context and is merely one of many voices in the discussion over the meaning of Charlie Chan and the discussion of the broader issue of American representations of Chineseness.

1.4 The trope of non-competitive Chineseness in historical context

Gina Marchetti, a prominent scholar who focused on representations of Chineseness in American film wrote “even if the main emphasis of a particular study is textual, the cultural framework in which that work exists and functions must also be taken into account for any understanding of the ideological operation of the text to take place.”

Throughout her published research, Marchetti references the greater discursive context in which representations of asexual Chinese men and hypersexual Chinese women emerge. One of her recurring themes is that literary images of non-competitive Chinese men arose within the discursive context of fear that Chinese men posed a threat to white American male dominance.

What Marchetti focused on is that classic Hollywood film images of Chinese men are predominantly asexual. This neutralizes them as sexual non-competitors in response to perceived and discussed threats of miscegenation and intermarriage. By feminizing Chinese men, the sexual dominance of the white male audience is confirmed. However, Marchetti writes that Chinese women are often sexualized. They are the objects of the white male gaze, and their sexuality complements rather than conflicts with the sexuality of the white male. Along this line, a whole subfield of Asian American studies blossomed around the study of hypersexual Asian (compared to white) women and emasculated Asian (again compared to white) men.

Figure 1: A book cover from the 1994 edition of Romance and the “Yellow Peril”

In the cover image of Marchetti’s book Romance and the “Yellow Peril,” which is a still from the 1957 Hollywood film Sayonara, we can see the

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19 Marchetti, Gina. Romance.
objectification of Asian women as lustng but subservient sexual characters in American film. The Japanese actress Miiko Taka is wearing a low-cut blouse and as she is being gripped forcefully from behind by Marlin Brando, an act that exposes the shape of her body by pulling the material tight around her, as her open mouth reaches back and up towards Brando’s. Marchetti’s book sparked a whole academic subfield in the 1990s and 2000s that studie the objectification of Asian women as sex objects or sexual beings and calls for expanded roles for Asian women in film.

In response to the American discursive context of White male supremacy, filmic representations of weak Chinese characters are often constructed to ameliorate White fears of competition with dominant Chinese men. These images support institutions of White supremacy by limiting the roles to which Chinese people aspire. Even positive images of Chinese men are constructed to provide little or no threat to the sexual and social dominance of the White male majority audience. This shows the precisely distorted role of non-competitive, asexual Chinese men in film, which ameliorates White fears of competition for jobs, women and social dominance with Chinese men.

1.5 THESIS: Wayne Wang uses an imageless subject to critique the idea that positive images represent progress.

This chapter has explored Chineseness as a practice of representing Chinese people based on culturally essentialized differences. Specifically, we have demonstrated how the presentation of a Chinese person throughout early American cinema was often used to make the case for the dominant characteristics of White American men.

In the rest of this thesis, I seek to demonstrate that, given the history of Orientalized visual representations of Asian characters in Hollywood films, Wayne Wang’s radical approach was to refuse to present any image of the central character, and that by doing so, he reveals that identity is an artifact of power relations, rather than an essence that can be located within a particular place or group of people. Rather than being visually marked as Chinese, absent characters are perceived by other characters as being Chinese. This highlights the discursive origins of Chineseness and Chinese identity.
In the next chapter, I will explore attempts to counter the submissive, non-competitive representation of Chineseness in Hollywood films by films that portray heroic, powerful, intelligent Chinese men. I will show that even these films cannot pry loose the overarching assumption of White male dominance. Then, in the final two chapters, I will demonstrate how Wayne Wang’s strategy of refusing any visual representation of the key Chinese figures in his films in part succeeds where these other strategies of counter-representation have failed, precisely because it allows him to show that identity is an artifact of speech and performance.
CHAPTER 2: Images of Powerful Chinese Men In a Discourse of White Male Superiority

2.1 Introduction

Stuart Hall has written of various strategies for “contesting the regime of racialized representation.”20 He wrote about reversing stereotypes, to create counterexamples for each stereotype. He wrote about replacing negative representations of blackness and tropes with positive representations and tropes of blackness, such as the “Black is Beautiful” campaign of the 1960s and 1970s, which replaced the ideal of white skin as beautiful with the idea of black skin as beautiful.21 This chapter will make the argument that merely replacing a negative stereotype with a positive stereotype does not adequately contest the regime of racialized representation because it does not address the larger discursive context. It also does not recognize the underlying issue that dominant discourses of race in the US have only accepted certain images of Non-Whites, specifically, ones that can be incorporated into an ideology of White male supremacy.

This chapter will focus on images of powerful Chinese men in American film. These all mark attempts to replace images of weak Chinese men with images of successful Chinese men integrated into American or international cosmopolitan society. However, this chapter will argue that constructing powerful images of Chinese men in the discursive context are only accepted if they do not pose a direct threat to the stability and superiority of White men in America.

The first section of this chapter is an analysis of one of the most negative stereotypes of Chineseness in American cinema, Long Duk Dong, to illustrate how a powerless image of Chineseness caters to the interests of the majority White audience and a White producer. The character of Long Duk Dong relegates Chinese to a role of a servant, weak and imbecilic. His image enters into the discursive context of White privilege and it seems to support the idea that Asians cannot compete effectively for roles of power. This section establishes concrete characteristics of powerlessness in the American stereotype of the Chinese man for our reference. It also points to the

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material bases of stereotypes, with images of Chineseness promoting Western or American dominance over non-Western cultures.

The second section of the chapter is an analysis of a few prominent powerful Chinese men who were widely accepted by an American film audience. This section introduces the idea that attempts to replace powerless images of Chinese men with powerful images of Chinese men do not work. Ideological mechanisms at the root of both negative and positive representations create a trap in which White audiences only accept powerful representations of Chinese men if they do not pose a threat to White superiority.

2.2 Traditionally a Powerless Figure
From their first appearances in early Hollywood cinema, Chinese men have been predominantly placed in powerless roles and have been excluded from holding roles of power. These images of Chineseness were created by White producers to promote the idea that Whites are more able than Chinese people and in turn, this supports the continued promotion of Whites into positions of power in American society.

Celinas Parrinas Shimizu has reviewed early Hollywood representations of Chinese men as “pedophilic (Richard Barthelmess in yellow face in Broken Blossoms, 1922), masochistic (again, Barthelmess, in Son of the Gods, 1932), criminal (the Fu Manchu series), and quaint (Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto).” Eugene Franklin Wong showed that characterizations of powerless Chinese men, specifically the Chinese male as eunuch, persisted in American film through the publication of his study On Visual Media Racism in 1978. Many current scholars, including but not limited to Darrell Y. Hamamoto, Peter X. Feng, and Richard Fung, write about the continuation of Hollywood’s representations of Asian men as powerless or asexual.

There are two main negative consequences these powerless images have on Chinese men in America. The first negative consequence is that powerless representations of Chinese men leave Chinese men with no powerful role models in

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American culture. This affects Chinese men by leaving them feeling that they are at the bottom of a masculine hierarchy. Darrell Hamamoto wrote that Chinese men are only shown images of “reproductive failure” and that this failure comes from “the lack of [sexually successful] examples to follow.”

This leads to a second problem of overcompensation through misogynistic displays of Asian masculinity. An example of this overcompensation is Hamamoto’s campaign to add more roles for Asian men in pornographic film as a way to empower them and to embolden their sexuality. This campaign has been charged as misogynistic by Asian feminist scholars, some of whom also bemoan the growing misogyny among Chinese American men as a community. Celinas Parrenas Shimizu wrote that “various representations of explicit sex that range from political pornography [a direct reference to Hamamoto] to experimental film, illustrate the problem of celebrating heterosexual privilege that does not account for its injury to others…I am specifically concerned about representations of Asian American men engaging desire, love, romance, and sex in composing their manhoods.” This quote should be read as a comment on the excessive response of Asian pornographic filmmakers and other Asian male filmmakers to aggrandize the sexual prowess of Asian American men at the expense of Asian American women. Shimizu is defending the position of Asian women in these films, whose bodies have been dominated on film to create an image of powerful Asian men. Shimizu points out that there are other ways to assert masculinity besides sexual domination and exploitation of Asian women on screen, which only serves to reinforce stereotypes of the submissive Asian woman.

The next section focuses on the powerless images that are at the root of both of these issues of emasculation and overcompensation. The analysis of these images will contextualize and illustrate the forces of racism against the Chinese community in American film. It will also show that these negative characteristics were attributed

26 Hamamoto, Darrell Y.  “The Joy Fuck Club.”
to Chinese men precisely to celebrate White privilege without any thought or care for the negative impacts we have just reviewed.

2.2.1 Images of Powerlessness

The representation of oppression is based on representational tropes. In other words, oppression is real. However, when oppression is represented, it forms a trope of race relations, which are then broken down into short digestible visual cues and then reproduced in other contexts. These cues promote the idea that racial others are not successful because of their own traits, rather than because of institutional barriers to their success. One example of this is the trope of stooped shoulders signifying a lack of confidence or social stature. Originally in American literary and film representations, Asians were shown as servants or low-status service workers. Asian men were shown as highly deferential and limited from interacting with white women in anything resembling a sexual flirtation. More recently, images of Asian men often continued to rely on the mark of the stooped shoulder, because this had become a trope of marking Chineseness.

![Figure 2: An image of a powerless Chinese man in the Hollywood film Sixteen Candles (1984)](image)

This shot, from the 1984 Hollywood Classic film *Sixteen Candles*, shows Long Duk Dong, a Chinese foreign exchange student first trying a quiche. In this scene, he is very subservient, eating with his head down, answering very politely to the white grandpa, praising his “very clever dinner.”

You can see his stooped shoulders, his eyebrows are accented in this shot, and his eyes are hidden. The image of Long Duk Dong in this shot is the image of subservience.

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29 Ibid.
Long Duk Dong plays the role of foreign exchange student and a servant for grandpa, whom he helps with chores, such as mowing the lawn and doing the laundry. By the end of the film, Dong has crashed grandpa’s car while driving drunk. He has thus begun his retarded maturation, from docile child to rebellious teenager. However, he does not achieve maturity as all of the other white male characters do, but rather, he matures into a drunk.

![An image of a drunk Chinese man from Sixteen Candles (1984)](https://example.com/image.png)

Figure 3: An image of a drunk Chinese man from *Sixteen Candles* (1984)

In this shot, from the end of *Sixteen Candles*, Long Duk Dong, has just been discovered sleeping on the lawn in the middle of the daytime, drunk. Long Duk’s transformation is humorous because it inverts the stereotype of docility that was set up in the beginning of the film. Getting drunk is a rebellion against grandpa and driving grandpa’s car drunk is a betrayal of his trust. Although he has moved one step up on the ladder of maturity, from docile child to rebellious teenager, he is still in quite a pitiable state. His transformation is motivated by the humorous inversion of the stereotype of a docile Chinese male, rather than being designed to place him into a position of power vis-à-vis the white males. He still ends up on the ground, at first face down in the mud, and then flipped over on his back, looking up at the white family patriarch.

Long Duk Dong’s name highlights the function of the Asian American character to spotlight his own asexuality. “Long Duk Dong” sounds more like Chinese rather than Japanese sounds, and this discursive effect shaped the choice to present him as Chinese. Once again, the ways Asians are discussed in a White American context, which both stokes White men’s sexual egos and mocks the

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Chinese sounds Long-Duk-Dong and their English meaning, has molded Long Duk Dong into a Chinese rather than Japanese character. His emasculation is brought into sharp detail constantly throughout the film, and the film overcompensates with a name that casts ridicule on Chinese Americans. The function of this ridicule is to make the White viewer feel more powerful, to soothe him into the thought that no matter how frustrated or sad or powerless he is, he can always at least count on being more powerful than an Asian.

It is also important to recognize that the actor playing Long Duk Dong, Gary Watanabe, is not Chinese but rather Japanese-American. This highlights the most important aspect of his character, which is that his Chineseness is constructed as a device through which a White superiority complex can be stroked. This has ignorantly caused harm to the Chinese American community for the sake of building White male American superiority.

2.3 Powerful Chinese Men in the Context of White Male Superiority

Often a movie becomes popular in multiple locations for different reasons. Gina Marchetti talks about The Wedding Banquet, a film by Ang Lee that became popular in China and in the United States for very different reasons. The film is about a young man who invites his father to come from Taiwan to the United States to celebrate his wedding. The film captures the pressure that the young man’s father has placed on him to get married and the subsequent stresses that puts on his romantic, social and work lives. However, the young man is also gay. Although he eventually marries a Chinese woman, he retains his relationship with his male partner throughout the film, which he hides from his father during his father’s visit.

According to Marchetti, the film became popular in China because people identified with the cross-generational worries and pressures applied to children to get married. However, the film was popular in the United States because of its controversial solution to parental pressure, especially in the context of the growing LBGT movement at the time. In each discursive context, the film has a different

meaning, and this film was able to attract two audiences because “rather than attempting to create a homogenized audience that could conceivably understand everything, The Wedding Banquet simply hopes for enough overlap not to lose anyone along the way.”

Similarly, the images of powerful Chinese men that I will analyze in this section were all created for both a Chinese American audience as well as a White American audience. Images of powerful Chinese men cater to a Chinese American audience with a powerful masculine character in their own image. However, images of powerful Chinese men also cater to a White American audience either by exoticizing Chinese characters, placing them in a non-American setting, or by framing their power within humility, which remove them as threats to White superiority.

In the following section we will analyze director Wayne Wang’s positive images of Asian Americans. We will focus on images that specifically place Chinese men into positions of power that were previously reserved only for White men in American film. We will then analyze the most popular images of powerful Asian men in the American context, Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. In all three cases, we argue that these characters became popular only because they did not challenge the discursive context of White male superiority in America.

2.3.1 Images of Power

Figure 4: An image of a powerful Chinese CEO from Snow Flower and the Secret Fan (2012)

In this shot on page 16, from the opening scene of Wayne Wang’s 2012 feature film, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, actor Russell Leong plays a CEO of a successful international company. He is economically successful, celebrating the opening of a new office in New York City. He is politically successful, commanding a large company of workers and satisfying everyone with a suave speech, peppered with jokes and references to those around him. He is handsome, bathed in soft yellow light, smiling at the head of the table. He represents a powerful image of a Chinese American, however, he is safely removed from the American context in Shanghai. When his two employees are sent to New York City to start a branch office, they are unable to duplicate their boss’s success. Even in Wayne Wang’s film, a Chinese character can be powerful in China, but becomes easily overpowered in America.

![Figure 5: An image of a powerful war hero and his proud father in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989)](image)

In this image, from Wayne Wang’s 1989 feature film, *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, young Russell Leong plays a war hero who has fought triumphantly in World War II for the American army. He is standing behind his proud father, rising above him in the frame, appearing twice his father’s size. The image of a war hero in American film does not traditionally utilize non-White characters. This image places a Chinese man in one of the most traditionally masculine roles, a returning war hero with battle experience and the medals to prove his valor.

In these films, Wang has created images of powerful Chinese men who can serve as positive role models for an Asian American audience. However, these characters still are limited to playing roles of power that are either removed to a different continent, or that directly support the United States Army. In this way, these

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powerful images of Chinese men do not pose a direct challenge to the power of White American males. The argument that powerful Chinese men cannot be accepted if they are shown threatening White male supremacy will become even more apparent in the next two sections.

2.3.2 Bruce Lee as Case Study

The Bruce Lee films marked the incorporation of a very powerful role for a Chinese male in international film. They placed a Chinese male in a prominent position of power; in physical confrontations with White, Black and other Asian opponents Bruce Lee is always victorious. Although Bruce Lee was passed over for the main roles in Hollywood’s *Kung Fu* television series for a White actor, after returning to Hong Kong, his films gained an international audience and his fame came to eclipse all of his rivals both in the United States and around the world.\(^{36}\)

![Figure 6: An image from Way of the Dragon (1972) of Bruce Lee about to defeat Chuck Norris.](image)

In *The Way of the Dragon*, Bruce Lee plays a martial artist who is sent from Hong Kong to Rome to protect his cousin’s business from Mafia violence. This film was first released in Hong Kong in 1972, but an American release soon followed in 1974 because Bruce Lee had developed an American fan base and because he catered to it in the film by fighting American martial artists, most notably Chuck Norris.\(^{38}\) In the scene above, Bruce Lee is shown defeating Chuck Norris in a final faceoff, after which his power is no longer contested as the dominant alpha role in the film.

However, the impact of his victory, as a Chinese man over a White man, is mitigated by its exotic location, across an ocean from America. This exotic location at

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\(^{38}\) Bowman. Pp. 177.
which they fight is the Coliseum in Rome, which both references the Western history of fighting as competition and sport, but also which can be recognized as distinct from modern American culture and location. Thus, Bruce Lee exhibits the superior fighting skills without threatening the superiority or security of Americans in their own home.

Powerful images of Chinese therefore do not take into consideration the broader cultural discourse of why Chinese were allowed to be powerful in exotic locations but not in America. Empowering Bruce Lee in an exotic location does not directly threaten the supremacy of White males in America.

2.3.3 Jackie Chan as Case Study

Jackie Chan is another example of a Chinese hero who was popularly received by an American mainstream audience. Jackie Chan has played roles set in the United States, which seems to confound the claim that Chinese heroes must be removed to exotic locales to neutralize their threat to White superiority in America.

However, Jackie Chan is an ambivalently heroic figure. His fighting style is often off-balanced and bumbling. Although he wins his fights, he often seems to be fighting from a disadvantage and his character rarely inspires fear from opponents. This has been called his signature, “low-key charisma.”

Jackie Chan always acts with a humility that is a far cry from the boastful stagger of Bruce Lee. Even after winning a fight, Jackie Chan often apologizes to onlookers, or tries to win back the affection of his opponents. He is far from a dominating figure. Neither is he a rogue hero. He often is depicted carrying out the orders of a police superior (Police Story, Police Story 2, Super Cop) or a relative who has begged for his help (Rumble in the Bronx). Jackie Chan is therefore allowed to be a hero; however, any symbolic threat he might pose is mitigated through references to

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his humility, echoing tropes of servitude in depictions of Chineseness such as those exhibited by Long Duk Dong and analyzed at the beginning of the chapter.

2.4 Becoming More Critical of Power and Powerlessness

The examples in this chapter are images of powerful Chinese men that have been created for or popularly received by American audiences. Their undeniably powerful roles are alternatives to the weak roles that Chinese men usually played in Hollywood films. Images of Chinese men displaying virility, business acumen and martial prowess arguably suggest that the domains once reserved for White men in American films have been opened up to Asian men as well.

Yet we should not simply conclude that the creation of a powerful Chinese character is a successful counter-representation of Chinese men. The images of powerful Chinese address viewers who enjoy a position of White privilege leading to powerful representations of Asians only so long as they do not directly threaten the superior status of Whites in America. Certain powerful characters, such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, have been widely accepted by the American mainstream, but their acceptance does not mean the paradigm of White male superiority has been destabilized. For instance, Bruce Lee’s martial arts skills cast his character as impervious to pain and invincible in battle. These are similar to the ways that Americans talked about their adversaries in the fierce battles they fought with unarmed or poorly armed soldiers in Asia during WWII or the Vietnam War. The idea that Asians were impervious to pain allowed Americans to justify their slaughter of much less well-armed enemy combatants, since it was both a compliment and a method of dehumanization.

Therefore, the need remains for a strategic response that can highlight how images of race are always guided by the larger discursive context.

In the following chapter, we will analyze Wayne Wang’s use of the literary device of a missing character, which serves to highlight the role of discursive context in motivating the emergence of both positive and negative images of Chinese.

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CHAPTER 3: *Chan is Missing: The Many Meanings of a Missing Character*

3.1 Introduction

*Chan is Missing* focuses around a Chinese character that is missing altogether from the film, leaving no basis for creating a distinguishing Chinese identity. Rather, the missing character invites multiple meanings of Chinese identity to emerge through the way that he is discussed. These multiple meanings overlap significantly with broader meanings of Asian American identity and ethnic American identity in general.

The film was released during a period in which activists were working to organize Americans of Asian, South Asian and Southeast Asian ethnicity and nationality into a broader and more powerful Asian American political bloc. It was hoped that political alliance between Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans could be used strategically to highlight that racism was not simply a Black-White phenomenon. Forging a common Asian *American* identity allowed Asian Americans to highlight their shared goals of wanting to assimilate. But political organization also served a goal of increasing Asian political influence in America and changing the perception that America is a nation of European ancestry and lineage. Although *Asian* was originally a monolithic term created in racist discourse to lump diverse peoples, Asian American identity was adopted by Asian Americans to fight for equal political power, access and status with European Americans.

*Chan is Missing* was released in 1982 by a young San Francisco-based, Hong Kong-born film director named Wayne Wang. At the time the film was released a small group of mostly young and fledgling Asian American film and television directors had already produced a string of documentary and independent films based in San Francisco’s Chinatown district, however, none of these projects had gained national recognition. *Chan is Missing* was the first film produced by an independent Chinese director to gain national recognition. Film historian Jun Okada writes, “that it
became a bridge between Asian American media arts and the larger critical and popular establishment of American cinema.”

*Chan is Missing* a fictional film about two Chinese men, Jo and Steve, who live in San Francisco Chinatown in the 1980s. They are searching for another man, Chan Hung, who remains missing throughout the film. Jo and Steve talk to many different Chinatown residents who each give their own opinion of where Chan has gone and why he has left. At the end of the film, Jo and Steve have not found Chan Hung but what they have found is that different people tell different stories of Chan Hung’s life and identity.

The fact that Chan Hung is missing throughout the film is a formal device that prompts characters to discuss his identity. Each character discusses him in a different context, the context in which they have interacted with Chan. In this chapter, then, I will demonstrate in concrete detail how Wang uses the device of the missing character to show that identity is constructed through speech and performance.

Key elements in the dominant discourse about Chineseness are best represented through the film’s references to the character of Charlie Chan, a film character created by White directors and White actors to represent Chineseness to a White audience. The first part of the chapter will examine the Charlie Chan character. It will take a look at the conflicting scholarly claims that Charlie Chan was emasculated and exoticized through different clothing, posture and speech than that of the White characters and yet he was also a heroic character. It will end with the conclusion that the Charlie Chan character was motivated by the American desire to leverage differences between the Japanese and the Chinese, thus demonizing the Japanese by making Charlie Chan a hero with distinctly Chinese qualities.

In the second part of the chapter, we will show how *Chan is Missing* addressed the dominant discourse of Charlie Chan from a position that wished to emphasize similarities between Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans. Asians had been lumped together as a characteristic of a racist discourse that assumes the other is monolithic at times, while at other times, strategically pitting subgroups

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of the other against one another. By creating a film around a missing character, Wayne Wang opened up more ways of talking about Chinese identity and highlighted overlapping experiences with a broader range of Asian Americans.

3.2 Charlie Chan
The figure of Charlie Chan, a fictional Chinese American detective from Honolulu, is similar in many ways to the figure of Uncle Tom, discussed in Chapter 1. Like Uncle Tom, Charlie Chan has become a popular subject, discussed by many cultural and political figures in America, and he has been given a different meaning by all of them depending on the discursive or historical context in which he was invoked.

Charlie Chan was originally a character in a book series and his image was subsequently popularized through film appearances throughout the 1920s, 1930’s and 1940s. Charlie Chan was a detective on the Honolulu police force whose detective skills were valued and sought after all across the globe.

Charlie Chan’s character was based on a real person, Chang Apana, who was a detective on the Honolulu Police Force. Chang spent the first half of his police career, starting in 1898, as a street cop in Honolulu’s Chinatown. By 1916, he had been promoted to detective based on his record as well as his contact with Chinatown residents who served as informants. However, the author and creator of the Charlie Chan character, Earl Derr Biggers, did not discover Chan in Honolulu. He came up with the idea for Charlie Chan while reading through old Honolulu newspapers in a New York City public library. Charlie Chan was put into his first novel in an extremely brief appearance, appearing in one scene only. After publication, the character received attention from the press and readers and Biggers developed Chan into the main character of his subsequent novels.\(^44\)

In the 1970s, with the emergence of the civil rights and affirmative action movements, American students of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, as well as Southeast Asian descent organized together over a new communal Asian American identity, based in common political goals and common types of racism that they all

faced. During this period, activist, author and playwright Frank Chin was very outspoken in calling Charlie Chan “a bastard son of racist love,” a negative indictment of the character based on the slurs that Charlie used to insult and mock Japanese and Black characters. This comes directly out of the context where Japanese and Chinese students were trying to overcome animosities towards each other based on the previous generation’s military conflict between Japan and China in which millions of Chinese were murdered during the Japanese occupation of China in World War II. The alliance that was being attempted between Chinese and Japanese Americans was part of the larger context of the political organization of Asian Americans out of separate ethnicities and nationalities.

In the 1990s, the era dubbed by many as the era of “multiculturalism,” people were once again politically demarcated by regional and cultural background, as the gathering of knowledge of other cultures attempted to show that American culture was moving into a more caring mode of acknowledging everyone’s differences and unique backgrounds. This has sparked a turn of interpretation of Charlie Chan character as an “unlikely hero.” Gina Marchetti talked about Charlie Chan as a “cultivated and benevolent” character. She wrote about him briefly and points out that he was created “at about the same time as the polished but diabolical” Fu Manchu. In fact, she conflates their appearance because Charlie Chan became popular decades after the creation of Fu Manchu, and was propagated into a different historical context.

In a recent book on Charlie Chan, published in 2011, Yunte Huang claims that Charlie Chan was an unlikely heroic character “both in spite of and because of racism” in the US at the time. This book was written in an era where immigration has been put at the forefront of a political debate and lessening restrictions on immigration has become a shared political goal of many liberal academics. In this context, Huang claims that “the obvious target [for the Charlie Chan films] were the

48 Huang, Yunte. P 283.
Huang writes that the US government had just signed the Johnson Reed act, which put quotas on immigration by country of residence, mainly affecting Japanese immigration, since the previous Chinese Exclusion Acts already excluded Chinese. In this context, the American people found an unlikely ally in Charlie Chan and the Chinese because of his ability to present a negative image of the Japanese and to justify the exclusion of Japanese potential immigrants. This comes out in some of Charlie’s quips on the Japanese, such as “Cooking business begins to get tiresome, like the company of a Japanese.”

Regardless of the age in which he was discussed, the Charlie Chan image was widely acknowledged to be an Orientalized image of Chineseness because it was a positive, friendly and helpful image of a Chinese man that directly bolstered White American political goals of demeaning the Japanese and Black characters who posed a greater threat to White supremacy at the time. In the following sections, we will look at the multiple, often conflicting, ways in which scholars have argued that Charlie Chan is a product of a racist imagination.

3.2.1 Charlie Chan’s Asexuality

Many scholars have noted that Charlie Chan was an asexual character. Elaine Kim bemoaned his “yellowface asexual bulk” as the racial markings of a Chinese character by a racist pre-Civil Rights age America. Jessica Hagedorn introduced Charlie Chan as “obsequious,” the opposite of bold and romantic.

In this section we will show the textual basis for these claims. However, we will also establish the counter-argument posed by literary theorist Charles Rzepka, and later supported by Chinese literary scholar Yunte Huang, that asexuality and social quirkiness was a generic marker of the detective, and that marking Charlie Chan in accordance with generic characteristics of a detective did not signify racism. Rather the racism of the Charlie Chan image came from his positioning vis-à-vis

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49 Huang, P 192.
50 Huang, P 160.
Black, Japanese and even Arab characters, differences that could become the foundation for an argument for racial hierarchy based in racial difference.

Figure 7: An image of Charlie Chan stooping his shoulders from Charlie Chan in Egypt (1935)

Charlie Chan has been called a hyper-logical sleuth, akin in characterization to the contemporary Asian math nerd. Chan has often been analyzed as a caricature: hyper-attentive to logical details at the expense of forming a human connection with the other characters. Textual analyses of the Charlie Chan films support this finicky and asexual characterization of Charlie Chan.

In the film Charlie Chan in Egypt, Charlie Chan’s character lives up to these accusations. Chan has been called upon to travel across the world to Egypt to solve a mystery surrounding the disappearance of an elderly professor. Each of the characters he comes in contact with is highly educated; however, these characters lack the keen sensitivity and attention to detail that Charlie Chan exhibits. This becomes evident in point-of-view shots of Charlie Chan focusing on details that escape the attention of others: in one scene, he takes notice of the handwriting on a prescription; in another, he finds, on an x-ray of the dead man, the faint marks of an exit wound left by a bullet. In each case, he surveys the scene as a “Cartesian space,” coolly and calculating, while the other characters glance back and forth at each other.

In the above shot from Charlie Chan in Egypt, Charlie Chan has rushed upstairs with a White client, Tom Evans, after they hear his fiancé, Carol, screaming in pain. We can see him standing back and inspecting the scene, while the other characters are huddled around caring for the woman. Rather than inquiring as to the status of the woman, he glances around the room for clues and gazes upon the scene.

53 Charlie Chan in Egypt. Dir. Louis King. Fox Films 1935.
54 Hagedorn. “Introduction.”
55 Charlie Chan in Egypt.
looking for connections to the murder he is investigating. It is in this scene that he focuses on the handwriting of the pharmacist on Carol’s prescription, evidence that will be used to condemn the real murderer at the end of the film.  

It is scenes like this that critics point to when they suggest that Charlie Chan’s hypersensitivity to detail marks him as asexual. Sonja Foss writes that, “The glance most closely approximates the female experience, the accumulation of information through interaction and the value of relationship over objective, static knowledge.” It is different than the gaze, which asserts power by taking in the whole scene and mapping it onto what Foss calls “the Cartesian scopic regime.” Charlie Chan gleaned both the clue of the bullet as well as the clue of the handwriting from gazing over the entire room. Charlie’s gaze separates him from bonding with the other characters as they glance back and forth, gaining “a subjective, relational orientation to the scene” while Charlie Chan surveys everything down to the smallest object in the room. However, antisocial characteristics are common traits for detectives in fiction. As we will see in the following section, and as others scholars have argued, Chan’s hyper-logical analysis and sensitivity to detail are not specific to the racial codes of Hollywood depictions of Asians, but rather are part of the generic markings of the detective in early American film, derived from tropes of regional and racial difference in early British and American detective novels.

3.2.2 Creating Racial Difference: Regionalism and Charlie Chan’s Bright White Suit

In Stuart Hall’s “The Spectacle of the Other,” he defines stereotype on the basis of fixing difference. He asks, “What then, is the difference between a type and a stereotype? Stereotypes get hold of a few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development to eternity…the point is, stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes

57 Charlie Chan in Egypt.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
In this section, we will look at one way in which Charlie Chan’s difference was fixed from the other characters. This specific stereotype does not signify in and of itself an inferior status; but in the next section, we will show how this difference does get leveraged into *inferior-superior hierarchies*.

![Figure 8: An image of Charlie Chan wearing a bright white suit from *The Black Camel* (1931)](image)

In this image from *The Black Camel*, all suspects gather together to watch as Charlie recounts each character’s detailed connection with the case, clearing each character one by one until he finally accuses the killer. His brightly colored suit marks Charlie as different. This film is also the earliest extant “talkie” in the Charlie Chan series. Before the advent of talkies, Japanese actors played Charlie; however, after sound was added, these Japanese actors were replaced by the White Warner Oland. Many scholars and critics have noted that Charlie Chan always wears Western suits as opposed to the Oriental robes of Fu Manchu and other previous Chinese characters. However, what I have found is that across multiple films, in order to fully differentiate Oland from the white characters as a Chinese character, he nearly always wears a different colored suit than the other actors, which helps accentuate his difference from others on a physical level. Because Oland is not physically different enough from the other actors without dressing in a different color, his brightly colored suits become a stand-in for racial markers.

Physical differences provide a spectacle that gives the White viewer concrete aspects of difference to focus on and enjoy. Stereotypes function to fix and accentuate such differences between people, which can then be leveraged as arguments for superiority and inferiority.

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64 See Appendix 1: Charlie Chan’s Bright Suits, for more evidence that Charlie Chan was marked by wearing brightly colored suits in most of his appearances.
*The Black Camel* is a film set in Honolulu, about the murder of a fictional actress, Shelah Fane, who has traveled there to shoot a film, and the subsequent investigation of her murder. The actress had been traveling with a woman friend and both of them had developed romantic interests early in the film and early in their stay in Honolulu. The three surviving characters, Shelah’s friend Julie O’Neill and their two budding lovers—all White—become the three main suspects in the murder of Shelah Fane.

Charlie Chan is hired to investigate the murder and he procures the help of an Italian mystic, Tarnavero, who was traveling with Shelah Fane as her personal advisor to the occult. The movie therefore creates a clear distinction between the White American suspects and the foreign and marginalized detective figures. This exoticization and marginalization of the detective figure was popular in the interwar detective genre.

In “Race, Region, Rule,” Charles Rzepka argues that nearly every popular detective character in fiction between the World Wars had “an unpromising, often comic, appearance.” He then compares Charlie Chan to a priest (Father Brown), an insurance inspector (Roy Cohen), and a political refugee who has left his country in disgrace (Hercule Poirot), three other dominant characters in the detective literature of the period. 65

Each of these popular detective characters is a member of a socially marginalized group. Father Brown is a Catholic in a predominantly Protestant early 20th Century America. Roy Cohen is a Jew in the early 20th century American South. Hercule Poirot is a Belgian refugee in England in a period of international wars and national sentiments. Like these characters, Charlie Chan is also characterized by his racial or ethnic difference. Rzepka points out that “regionalism [a growing number of references to the dialect and culture of a main character] was one of the most influential forces at work in America by the end of the 19th century,” which was when the detective novel rose to popularity and when generic conventions for the novel were set. At that time, regionalism “promised to consolidate a largely Anglo-

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American hereditary identity threatened with dilution by waves of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe as well as Asia.”66 This argument places the emergence of generic conventions in historical context of concerns over immigration’s diluting effects on Anglo-American identity in the 19th century US.

Charlie Chan is spared the masquerade of wearing imperial robes; he wears suits just like the other upper class white characters. However, his suits are always a different color. This helps to draw the gaze towards Charlie, and to base his cultural difference once again on an immediately apparent physical difference in dress. This gratifies the audience with the immediate recognition of a racial other through physical difference, even when Charlie’s face is turned away from the camera.

Charlie Chan’s bright suits, like his bright logic, are manifestations of what Rzepka has called “Regionalism.” The Charlie Chan character thus fetishizes regional and linguistic difference in order to soothe Anglo-Americans into the comfort that they have retained their superior niche. Drawing attention to Chan’s “difference” even in this subtle way reaffirmed the distinctiveness of Charlie Chan, reaffirmed the distinctiveness of Anglo-Americans and helped to assuage fears that their self-claimed superiority had not yet been eroded by the America’s melting pot.67 There were still differences between them and the others, and these differences could and would be used to establish arguments for superiority and inferiority.

3.2.3 Leveraging Racial Difference: Charlie Chan’s Strongest Racist Legacy

Figure 9: Charlie Chan (with his back to the camera) dines with Tom Evans, archaeologist, while Snowshoes serves them from Charlie Chan in Egypt (1935). Differences in speech and mannerism among these three characters build an argument for race-based differences in cognition.

66 Rzepka 1467.
67 Rzepka. Regionalism.
68 Charlie Chan in Egypt. Dir. Louis King. Fox Films 1935.
In an effort to establish credibility and rapport with his white clients, Charlie Chan often relies on differences between himself and other racial others to gain recognition and acceptance from Whites. Differences between Charlie Chan and the White characters also remain prevalent. These differences are used to establish superiority and inferiority along racial lines.

In the film, Charlie Chan in Egypt, Chan works as a detective for private hire to a White customer who wants him to find his wife’s father who has gone missing. While there, he meets a Black American who has moved there because a palm-reader has told him his family came from Africa, and this Black American follows Chan from this first scene and works for him. This working relationship of boss and servant is not the only basis of the difference in the three races White, Chinese and Black.

One of the main differences in establishing the superiority of one race over another is through their spoken English. Tom Evans, the White character who employs Charlie in the search for his wife’s missing father, is a young academic in training to become a professor of archaeology. His use of language is sophisticated and nuanced as well as accurate. Charlie Chan also exhibits the use of nuance to relate sophisticated notions and connotations and even to foreshadow a breakthrough in discovery.\(^69\) This shows that both characters have the habit and ability to contemplate, but separates them because Tom Evans has the greater ability to enunciate his thoughts in a manner understood to all, whereas meanings can only be inferred and guessed at through Charlie’s ungrammatical speech. Snowshoes, the black assistant of Charlie Chan and the servant of Tom Evans, lacks the ability to enunciate or to even contemplate. Yunte Huang has pointed out that Snowshoes shows the inability to contemplate on his own, agreeing to follow Charlie on an expedition without knowing where that expedition will lead or what it entails.\(^70\)

Huang also points out that more subtle differences between the characters show Chan and Snowshoes as more altruistic and spiritual than the white character Evans.\(^71\) However, as Said has shown, being spiritual in the colonial context was seen as an inferior foil to the logic-driven scientific progress attributed to the West

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69 Ibid.
70 Huang Pp. 241
71 Ibid.
and the West only.\textsuperscript{72} In this way, differences between Charlie, Tom Evans and Snowshoes support the ideology of White superiority over the other races. The regionalism that is associated with a differentiation of accent and dialect in literature and film, is magnified in the case of Charlie Chan, who is not just a migrant from a different place, but who is also not White. Thus, the spiritual qualities of Snowshoes and the riddled wisdom of Charlie Chan are part of an Orientalized positive depiction that is racist, not just regionalist.

3.2.4 \textit{Leveraging Difference Between Chinese and Japanese}

The differentiation between people of different regional backgrounds supported racist discourse in Hollywood by internally dividing non-whites, weakening their position and their ability to organize against White supremacy. Positive images of some ethnicities differentiated them from other ethnicities that were represented through negative images. Positive representations of Chinese characters such as Charlie Chan promoted Chinese as a trustworthy, hard-working, stable ally of Whites, while negative representations of Japanese characters, such as Sessue Hayakawa as “The Cheat” helped to build a counter-image of Japanese as cheating, lazy and scheming. Thus, both positive and negative images served to weaken the position of Chinese and Japanese, by highlighting and exacerbating ethnic rifts between Japanese and Chinese.

Depictions of China have often been used to promote American political goals. Jeffrey Wasserstrom studied this phenomenon, writing that, “China is, after all, a large and strategically important country with which US citizens have had a complex ongoing love-hate relationship.”\textsuperscript{73} Wasserstrom traced this love-hate relationship back to the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century, to the start of the China-US trade when two opposing ideas became popular, one which supposed that there would be a day when the “oldest and youngest of countries would find common ground” and another which “worried that when the dragon woke, the shock waves would reach across the

But Wasserstrom also pointed out that the way China was discussed often had nothing to do with Chinese-US relations, but rather told more about domestic politics in the US. This informs our analysis of Charlie Chan, because his Chineseness was used to support a domestic policy in the US that affected White Americans but did not affect Chinese or Chinese Americans.

In 1924, the Johnson-Reed act was passed to put quotas on immigration into the United States by country of origin. The quotas were not allotted in even amounts to all countries. They severely limited immigration from Japan and other Asian countries, while restricting less severely immigration from Europe. While there was a history of immigration acts against the Chinese in the US, the Johnson-Reed act was targeted against the Japanese and not the Chinese. The China Exclusion Acts of the late 1800s had already barred the Chinese from immigrating to the United States.

Besides racism, there was a more historically contingent precipitating factor in the passing of the Johnson Reed Act. The Japanese defeat of the Russians in the 1904-5 Russo-Japanese war both fascinated and terrified the United States. It led the United States to increase their military presence in the Pacific. In the ensuing years, Japan’s economy also grew and more Japanese came to the United States, mostly as students or temporary visitors. The Johnson Reed Act was largely an effort to make sure that these Japanese visitors would not stay in the United States.

Since the problem of Chinese immigration had already been neutralized, “Chineseness” was exoticized, tamed and promoted throughout popular culture. As Huang pointed out, one of the most popular and lavishly expensive new cinemas in Hollywood was Grauman’s Chinese Theatre. Huang described the Chinese theater, “soaring 90 feet, it boasted two gigantic coral-red columns supporting a jade-green roof. Between the columns flew a thirty-foot-long dragon…with a pagoda as the box office, the theater also featured ushers dressed in Chinese costumes.”

Chinese culture was differentiated from Japanese culture and promoted in alliance with American culture and in tension with Japanese culture. Charlie Chan films promoted this tension with quips against the Japanese. Even when the Japanese

74 Ibid. Pp. 17.
75 Huang. Pp. 148
76 Huang Pp. 196
were not being referenced, Charlie Chan was marked as a much more amiable character than the prominent Japanese roles in Hollywood at the time such the Japanese villain of the extremely popular film *The Cheat*.\(^{77}\) Positive images of Chinese were pitted against negative images of Japanese in order to divide the legally subdued Chinese position from the unimpeded Japanese threat. This example reinforces the idea that positive and negative images can coexist in a racist discourse to serve the same end.

3.2.5 From Charlie Chan to Chan Hung

In the 1970s, Charlie Chan’s image became a rallying point around which Asian Americans protested racist representations of Asians in the American media. A movement of scholars, writers and film directors began to actively expose the complicity of Charlie Chan within an ideology of racism. Two notable landmarks in this movement were the 1993 publication of *Charlie Chan Is Dead* and the 2004 publication of *Charlie Chan Is Dead 2*, both anthologies of contemporary Asian American short fiction.\(^{78}\) However, many scholars spoke out earlier against the racist construction of the Charlie Chan image, most notably Eugene Franklin Wong, Elaine Kim and Frank Chin, all early voices in the Asian American civil rights movement and all founders of the field of Asian American studies.\(^{79}\)

Wayne Wang was a student of film in San Francisco during the civil rights movement and he became one of the earliest film directors to actively oppose the pervasive image of Charlie Chan in film. In *Chan is Missing*, he took a novel approach of creating a film around a central character whose image is never shown. This was a method of critiquing the complicity of mainstream images of Chinese in American racist ideology.

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\(^{77}\) Huang, Pp. 194


However, this film also marks a milestone in the Asian American cinema movement. Gina Marchetti writes, “Although many Chinese filmmakers had worked in America before, *Chan is Missing* represents an important change in orientation—away from the ethnic Chinese community as the main audience and toward a much wider target audience.”\(^8^0\) Marchetti specifically refers to another essay by Peter Feng, who wrote that the film marked a shift for the Chinese American community from “Being Chinese American” to “Becoming Asian American.”\(^8^1\) This can be seen as the same transformation that motivated the change from Charlie Chan to Chan Hung. While Charlie Chan was used to separate and distinguish the Chinese from Japanese and Blacks in particular, and from other national ethnicities in general, Chan Hung emerged in a new context, in which deemphasizing differences and highlighting similarities between Asian Americans was an important step in emphasizing a shared history of discrimination based on the perceived similarity of their race as Asian.

This shift from Chinese American to Asian American can be seen as a form of strategic essentialism. In response to the discursive contexts of both racism and civil rights, Asian Americans gave themselves a louder voice to promote the idea that racism was not simply about Black-White race relations. There were certain tropes of racism that all Asians were prey to in the American context and they often lived in ethnic enclaves with people from other parts of Asia and Southeast Asia, as the film shows by including San Francisco’s Manilatown into the search for Chan Hung. The lumping together of all Asians into one category “Asian American” was originally imposed by the dominant culture to highlight one characteristic of similar physical appearance while disregarding internal differences between Asian ethnicities and nationalities. On the other hand, people of Asian, South Asian and Southeast Asian ethnicities and nationalities turned this category of “Asian American” around and used it to form solidarity through strategic alliances. They used the term to promote the idea that they were also American, forming a solid and large part of the American population. The term was also used to change the perception that the United States was a nation of only European American heritage, culture and history.

3.3 Chan Hung

Chan Hung, the missing character in *Chan is Missing*, is a resident of San Francisco Chinatown. He has promised to help the two other main characters, Jo and Steve, to buy a taxi license. However before the film has even begun, he has already gone missing, along with Jo and Steve’s money. The film revolves around Jo and Steve’s search for Chan. They talk to many people throughout Chinatown who knew Chan and they try to put together these stories to learn about Chan’s whereabouts and his possible motivations for taking their money.

Oftentimes, the people whom Jo and Steve interview tell them that Chan Hung is “too Chinese.” However, the vast majority of the characters that Jo and Steve interview also consider themselves Chinese. Therefore, when these people are talking about Chan they are also sharing their preconceived notions of what constitutes Chinese identity.

The film captures how war veterans, working professionals, disgruntled low-income laborers and Chinatown community volunteers talk about being Chinese. Each speech is representative of a different discourse on Chinese identity.

3.3.1 Different Speakers, Different Chan Huongs

The way that each character talks about Chan differs according to their position. Many characters refer to Chan as “too Chinese” and they talk about the characteristics that make him “too Chinese.” In each instance, the way Chan’s Chineseness is described is determined by the discursive context in which he is discussed.

One example is Steve. Steve is Jo’s nephew, a young man in his 20s. Steve tries to distinguish himself from Chan and other foreigners by talking about himself as an American. Steve emphasizes his own tour in the American military when he talks with his Uncle Jo, and this hints that Steve’s attachment to China is not as strong as Chan and Jo’s. Although Steve talks about his cognitive dissonance in fighting other Asians, he specifically uses the Black culture term “brothers” in an African American accent, to refer to the Vietnamese.\(^82\) The way Steve talks about Chan is by

mimicking his heavy foreign accent.\textsuperscript{83} He highlights and focuses on the fact that Chan was born outside of the US in order to distinguish himself as an American born Chinese and Chan as Fresh-Off-the-Boat.

Representative of the young generation who grew up in Chinatown during the 1970s and 1980s, Steve identifies more broadly as an American person of color rather than narrowly identifying with the Chinese culture of his parents and family. He often speaks in an African American accent, and holds many views that might be shared by other disenfranchised minorities in the US. For instance, Steve talks about his distrust for the police. He says that the police are not going to look for a missing Chinese person and this is why he feels it is his own responsibility to search for Chan and to find the money Chan has stolen.\textsuperscript{84} Steve’s identification with people of color leads him to search for Chan, taking the law into his own hands so that he can catch the man who has wronged him. He believes that the police will not help him unless he is White.

Another person who talks about Chan is Mr. Lee. Mr. Lee is a middle-aged lawyer and a legal sponsor for Chan Hung. Representative of an older generation than Steve, who grew up in a time when Chinese were allowed into White schools while Blacks were not, Mr. Lee identifies strongly with being White. He talks about people of color in the dominant terms that distance them from him. He tells Jo about “one colored guy” that Chan Hung hit with his car. He gives Chan Hung advice that he should not be threatened by “these big Black guys,” and that he didn’t have to listen to any strangers unless they were policemen. The terms he uses to refer to people of color, “colored” and “Black guy,” are very different from the term that Steve uses in his African American accent, “brothers.”\textsuperscript{85} Mr. Lee’s trust for the law and police also oppose Steve’s mistrust for the police. Mr. Lee’s trust for the law also leads him to search for Chan so that he can ensure that Chan is assimilating properly and according to all legal regulations and timelines.

This shows that identity is constructed through discourse. Steve and Mr. Lee represent two different discursive positions. Mr. Lee speaks the language of

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\textsuperscript{83} Chan is Missing. (film) Dir. Wayne Wang. \\
\textsuperscript{84} Chan is Missing. (film) \\
\textsuperscript{85} Chan is Missing.
\end{flushleft}
assimilation whereas for Steve, Chinese identity is more a matter of being a racial minority, than a matter of culture.

Chan Hung’s wife who tells Jo to call her Liz instead of Mrs. Chan represents another position. Liz sees her Chinese identity as pitted against the dominant culture and upward social mobility. She says that Chan is “too Chinese” because “he doesn’t even want to apply for American citizenship.” Liz’s identification as a marginalized person trying to gain status by becoming more American leads her to drop her search for her husband and to consider his loss a good riddance.

Again, this shows that identity is constructed through discourse. Like Mr. Lee, Liz also talks about assimilation. However, she seems even less interested and even less aware of race than either Mr. Lee or Steve. She does not sympathize or even recognize the excessive hardships that her husband faced in trying to find and keep employment as well as to help his family improve their lives in a time and place where being Chinese and speaking in a Chinese accent were a disadvantage to social and job mobility.

The way Liz talks about her husband reflects her fear that he will always remain marginalized because he is unwilling to assimilate. She does not call her husband by his Chinese name, Chan Hung, as everyone else in the film does, but simply and formally refers to him as “my husband.” Her attitude towards speech very is from Steve’s. She tries to adopt an American name for herself and does not call her husband by his Chinese name, while Steve on the other hand tries to establish his assimilated status by putting on an African American accent. This shows that Chinese identity is informed by the character’s own goals, and that Chinese identity is performed or responded to according to positive perceptions or negative associations of race and Whiteness that differ based on the position of the speaker.

In this sense, Chan Is Missing does not attempt to create a new, more positive dominant discourse about Chineseness and Chinese identity; it takes the further step of deconstructing the very idea that there can be a single, unified discourse about Chinese identity in the first place.

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86 Chan is Missing.
87 Ibid.
The many meanings of Chinese American identity also show that there is no set of characteristics corresponding specifically to Chinese Americans that marks them as different from other Asian Americans. The themes that this film develops, such as assimilation, marginalization and race, are themes that all Asian American audiences—indeed, disenfranchised minorities of many different ethnicities—would identify with.

3.3.2 Without an image

Each interview of other characters by Jo and Steve shows the way that Chinese identity is constructed through discourse. In each interview, an image of Chan Hung would stifle speech by refuting anything that is not true about that particular image. For instance, although Chan Hung is from Taiwan, multiple characters theorize that he has returned to the mainland. However, the film also references a picture of Chan Hung waving a Taiwanese flag. If Jo had this picture, he could immediately refute these theories that Chan has gone back to the mainland. Chan Hung’s identity as constructed through discourse is thus much more flexible than how it would appear in an image. Through Chan Hung’s absence, and through the absence of images of Chan Hung, the film creates space for characters to talk about him in more ways.

At the end of the film, a voiceover by Jo lists all the different ways Chan is talked about throughout the film. This voiceover is laid on top of a long shot of rippling water filling the entire frame. The image of water conjures up feelings of emptiness and open space. It also symbolizes fluidity and mutability. The image of water plays on this symbolism and serves as a metaphor for Chan Hung’s missing character. The open space and fluidity of the water symbolize the fluidity with which people attribute characteristics to Chan Hung. The mutability of the water symbolizes that nobody’s attributions can limit or capture Chan’s identity in full. The emptiness of the missing character pervades the film and creates a space for novel discourses of Chinese identity to flow in and out.

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88 *Chan is Missing.*
89 Ibid.
3.4 Meta-cinematic Moments in the Absence of Images

Occasionally in *Chan is Missing*, discussions of Chan Hung are filled with “meta-cinematic” references. These are the moments when *Chan is Missing* refers to or makes use of cinematic representations used in other films. In this section, we will specifically show how *Chan is Missing* creates meta-cinematic moments that reference and mock representations of Charlie Chan from the Charlie Chan films.

David L Vierling used the term “meta-cinematic” in his 1974 study of Ingmar Bergman’s film *Persona*. He writes that, “*Persona* is a film of a film (a fact usually subordinated by critics to the ‘story line’ of the film).” Vierling builds upon this point by writing that “the viewer who tries to *story* the film, keeping its parts tied together causally and logically, will experience difficulties from the start.” Thus Bergman separates his meta-cinematic methodology from that of other literary critiques by referencing other films and talking about the uniqueness of film as a medium.

In this section, we will follow Bergman’s guiding example by showing how *Chan is Missing* is “a film of film.” Specifically, we will conclude that *Chan is Missing* references and mocks the generic acts, props and mannerisms that allowed White actors to perform the main role as a Chinese character in the Charlie Chan films.

The meta-cinematic moments both serve as parody of Charlie Chan as well as a more serious critique of the practice of performing Chineseness with White actors. These meta-cinematic references isolate the filmic conventions that allowed White producers and actors to easily perform the character of Charlie Chan, recreating a stock character out of multiple White actors during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.

3.4.1 *Chan Hung’s Mistresses: Referencing tropes of inferior sexuality*

In Charlie Chan’s films, inferior sexuality was a trope of Chineseness. Female characters fall in love with other White male characters however they never fall in love with Charlie. Eugene Franklin Wong was one of the first Asian American scholars to point out that there were no White female-Asian male couples in

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Hollywood up through the 1960s and there were only two in the 1970s. Charlie Chan’s logical prowess was adapted within this filmic discourse, which prohibits Chinese sexuality on the screen.

Chan Hung’s character is briefly, in one instance, given a sexual vivacity never allowed to Charlie Chan. At one point in the film, Jo stakes out an address he is told is the apartment of Chan Hung’s mistress. Rather than finding the mistress, there is a time-lapse shot where many women enter through the doorway of the apartment building and all of them are scrutinized as potential mistresses. As each woman is paraded through the doorway, the audience is left to consider the possibility of Chan Hung’s relationship with a new woman, building up the aura around Chan’s sexual potential.

However, this scene mostly suggests women who are old or fierce-looking as potential sexual partners of Chan Hung. This shows how Chinese men have been relegated to a sexually inferior position in film, where the only sexual partners they can be imagined with are outcaste women who would not be sought by a white male. Only one of the four women is conventionally attractive, young and wearing make-up.

![Figure 10: Potential mistresses of the Chinese male character from Chan is Missing (1982) shot in succession. Only the woman on the far left is wearing make-up. She is much younger than the others.](image)

This is a meta-cinematic comment on the inferior sexuality of Chineseness as presented through Hollywood film. The images of potential sexual partners are paraded across the scene in one brief segment of one scene. These images are not direct references to Charlie Chan’s wife, but rather they are more indirectly referencing the broader cinematic discourse in which Chinese men are not sexually partnered with women who are desirable in the mainstream.

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This shot from *Chan is Missing* is a photo of Jo and Chan Hung, and is the only image of Chan Hung to appear in the film. Chan Hung appears to the right of the photo, and most of his body and his face lay hidden in shadow. All we can see are two isolated body parts, the legs and the hands, protecting the crotch area.

Thus, the only image of Chan Hung, a partial image, references how film or media images more broadly focus on the sexuality or asexuality of race to the extent that it becomes a defining characteristic. Stuart Hall wrote about an Olympic gold medalist, Linford Christie, and how when he won the gold medal the news focused on “the size of his lunchbox” in his victory photo. In this photo from *Chan is Missing*, we see Chan Hung actively resisting the leering gaze of the camera. He is holding his hands in front of his privates, protecting his privates from being exposed. The photo draws attention more broadly to the media’s focus on the sexuality or asexuality of non-White subjects. It shows that any attention to someone’s sexuality, praise or mockery, can be shameful when it becomes the main concern in talking about a person.

3.4.2 *Chan Hung’s Dark Room: Referencing tropes of night and darkness*

As Yunte Huang has pointed out, Charlie Chan was promoted as an ally in order to make a negative comment on the evil nature of the Japanese, and to differentiate them from the Chinese who had been tamed and were being primed to become an ally with the United States. However, in *Chan is Missing*, the film actively resists differentiation between different Asian ethnicities. Jo and Steve include Manilatown in their search for Chan, and a Japanese American actor is cast to

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play one of the main roles as a Chinese American. The film resists the role of “the good Asian” that was assigned to the Chinese, and replaces it with a narrative in which Asians share the similar plight of marginalization and misunderstanding by the dominant White culture.

Many scholars have written about the demonization of Asian characters in early Hollywood cinema. Huang made the point that Japanese superstar Sessue Hayakawa was “a symbol of forbidden love…causing anxieties around miscegenation.” He also pointed out that two other Japanese actors, “George Kuwa and Kamiyama Sojin entered the Hollywood scene soon after [Hayakawa]…playing mostly evil and villainous Asian roles.” Hayakawa, too, played in many evil roles, such as an evil prince in *The Thief of Baghdad* whose face remained half-hidden behind a paper fan. He also appeared in the noir film, *The Bat*, in which he walks around a dark house at night with a candle, and finally opens a door that casts the shadow of a bat above the white characters in the scene. This scene and the image of the bat are very similar to the Batman symbol, however in Hayakawa’s context, it inspired fear and anxiety rather than the connotations of heroism that have been attached to it with the Batman series.

![Image of bat projection](image)

Figure 11: A silhouette of a bat is projected onto the wall behind the white characters from *The Bat* (1926). The bat is projected from Hayakawa’s position, after he has just stepped out of the room, suggesting a connection between his character and this fear-inspiring symbol.

In reference to these evil and villainous Asian roles, which were popular enough to form a trope in silent noir films, there is a scene in *Chan is Missing* that references noir tropes in building Chan as a suspicious character. The scene in which

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Chan’s living space is introduced exaggerately refers to film noir techniques of low lighting and shadow play to form images of suspicion and evil.

Jo and Steve have already gone to the motel where Chan has been living during the daytime and they have found no trace of Chan Hung. In the next scene, Jo decides to go back at night and look for his friend. The new setting of nighttime search opens up the ability for the film to reference old film noir tropes of lurking evil and shadow tropes associated with the search for Chinese characters in film noir.

These three shots show the role of dark lighting and shadow casting in creating a setting of suspicion and evil. At first, we see the outside of the hotel where Chan lives, a dark and seedy-looking image. It is nighttime and the street outside of the hotel is dark and deserted. Then, the camera cuts to the door opening into Chan’s hotel room. The room is also dark, and all we can see is the dim light from the hallway shining onto a blanket or pillow on the floor. This evokes the film noir trope of lighting from one side of the scene to cast shadows across the scene, a trope that we have already noticed in our analysis of The Bat.

This film noir reference in Chan is Missing is an example of a meta-cinematic moment. The use of film noir techniques is exaggerated and jarringly applied only so that the audience is presented with an immediate awareness that a reference to something outside of the film plot is taking place. This exaggerated reference mocks the effect of low lighting in film that creates a feeling of suspicion among the audience. It also points to noir film in which Asians were cast in suspicious roles.

3.4.3 Chan Hung’s Irregular Grammar: Referencing tropes of pidgin speech

During the silent film era, Japanese actors Sessue Hayakawa, Kamiyama Sojin and George Kuwa were given many roles that they were subsequently denied with the

99 Chan is Missing (29:00, 29:12, 29:18)
advent of talkies. Once dialogue was recorded, filmmakers immediately began using White actors to portray Asian characters. The White actors who played in Asian roles performed a precisely irregular speech, ungrammatical because articles were left out, and verbs were left unconjugated, and it was choppy and slow in rhythm.  

Sidney Toler was the second White actor who played Charlie Chan. He replaced Warner Oland, the first White actor to take on Charlie’s role after Oland died at a young age, but he took on the same ungrammatical speech that Oland used in his Charlie Chan roles.

This is exemplified in the opening interaction of the 1939-film *Charlie Chan at Treasure Island*. When the film opens, Charlie and his son are on a plane from Honolulu to San Francisco and they are flying through a storm. His son is scared and walking around the plane before he reaches his seat and sits down next to his father. In their interaction, we can see how Charlie’s Chineseness is performed through his ungrammatical and choppy speech.

Jimmy Chan: Pop, before it’s too late, I think there's something you ought to know.
Charlie Chan: **Number 2 son resemble criminal about to make confession.**
Jimmy: I don’t know if I ever told you or not, but I think you’re the swellest pop a fella ever had.
Charlie: **Humble parent thanks unsettled weather for expression of love from favorite offspring.**
Jimmy: Oh, but I mean it pop, honest.
Charlie: **Then do not let fair skies tomorrow change restless mind.**

As a white man playing Charlie Chan, Sydney Toler uses his accent stands as a marker of his ethnicity. However, it is not so simple as this. A Chinese American actor, Victor Sen Yung, who speaks in perfect English, plays Charlie’s son. In fact, the speech of Charlie Chan was often juxtaposed with the idiomatic and Americanized speech of Charlie’s sons. This shows that accents are unreliable indicators of a person’s background, however, they are still relied upon to distinguish characters as Chinese in the performed discourses of Chineseness.

The trope of irregular English in the construction of Chinese characters also emerges in a scene in *Chan is Missing*. In this scene, Jo and Steve are walking down

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100 Chin, Frank. “Introduction,” Aieee!  
101 *Charlie Chan at Treasure Island*. Dir. Norman Foster. 20th Century Fox 1939. (2:18-2:42)  
102 Chin, Frank. “Introduction,” Aieee!
an alley brainstorming for leads on Chan Hung’s whereabouts. They are simultaneously talking about their identities as Chinese Americans and the differences between themselves and “Fresh-Off-the-Boat” (FOB) Chinese immigrants. Steve begins by labeling Chan Hung as an FOB, and then jokingly asks Jo if he has a soft spot for helping FOBs, since Jo’s ex-wife was also an FOB. Jo responds by saying that Chan Hung was not an FOB to the same extent as his wife was. He says that Chan Hung just put on an accent when he wanted others to think he was an FOB. Once again, the film explores the boundaries between people and the identity labels that group people together. In this case, Steve tells a story, highlighting Chan’s broken English, to support his argument that Chan is in fact an FOB.

Figure 13: An image of Jo and Steve in conversation as Steve comically acts out Chan Hung’s broken English, from Chan is Missing (1982)

Steve says:

“…So later on that day, I say, hey, those are some really nice pants, are you gonna take them off too?”
“He gets all embarrassed, he takes it serious, he gets all embarrassed on me, he says…No, I not do that for you.”
“I said, Chan Hung I was just kidding with you, y’know?”
“He says, No, I never do that for you.”
“All I’m saying, is that’s what I mean, he reminds me of my old man that way, you’know?”

In this passage, Steve’s impersonations of Chan Hung’s voice have been put in boldface type. Chan’s character is constructed and referred to through the use of irregular English speech. This is a reference to Charlie Chan’s ungrammatical speech. However, in this scene, as well as in the Charlie Chan films, accented speech is not a reliable marker of Chinese identity. Jo points out that Chan has performed his

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103 Chan is Missing (13:34)
104 Chan is Missing. (12:42-13:34)
FOB accent in front of Steve. He used language strategically in this situation to assert his FOB status, while in other situations he could use it to assert his assimilation through a different accent. This shows that he can determine through his own performance to mark himself as a fresh immigrant or as a more assimilated American. The performative aspect of the Chinese accent thus transforms it from a potentially harmful marker, showing that Chinese are not Americans, into a strategic device that can be used to assert different identities in different situations. This scene is both an intertextual reference to the performed accents of Charlie Chan films, as well as a broader meta-cinematic comment which highlights that accents can be performed to mark a Chinese American as more Chinese or more American.

3.5 Conclusion: The Many Meanings of a Missing Image

Stuart Hall has written of various strategies for “contesting the regime of racialized representation.”\(^\text{105}\) He wrote about reversing stereotypes, to create counterexamples for each stereotype. He wrote about replacing negative representations of blackness and tropes with positive representations and tropes of blackness, such as the “Black is Beautiful” campaign of the 1960s and 1970s, which replaced the ideal of whiteness as beauty with blackness as beauty. He also suggested a more recent and radical approach in avant-garde art of re-appropriating racist tropes in art and mocking them to show that the tropes themselves had no meaning. This new practice hoped to show that it was only through a larger cultural context that these tropes gained meaning.\(^\text{106}\)

This chapter has illustrated a radically different approach to contesting racial representation. Instead of highlighting racial tropes, this chapter’s analysis focused on how a missing image of the main character clears a space for new ways of discussing that character based in new discursive frameworks. In each instance, the construction of Chinese identity does not accord to a single essence but instead emanates differently out of many different discursive contexts. The absence of Chan Hung is also a political strategy that empowers Chinese people. Absence becomes a method of

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\(^{105}\) Hall, Stuart. \textit{Representation.} Pp. 269.

not responding to demands for identification rather than trying to identify new meanings through these old forms.

At the end of Chan is Missing, Jo relates a riddle that he has heard from another character. A man tries to convince a woman who has been given to him as payment for a debt that she can escape from sleeping with him through a choice. He points to two doors, both of which lead to his bedroom and tells her that one of them leads to the outside. If she chooses the correct door, she can go home. However, the woman knows that both doors lead into his bedroom. She responds to his trick by saying “that door is not the door that leads outside.”

This riddle is an analogy for the power relations in the US between dominant White people marginalized Chinese people. The structure of power dictates that many portrayals of Chineseness and Chinese identity will be directed into a field in which they will create a case for White superiority. Therefore, the absence of an image entering the field of White supremacist interpretation highlights the fact that the both positive and negative images have been used to demean the Chinese position.

In this chapter we have shown the extent to which the device of the missing character enables Wayne Wang to deconstruct earlier notions of Chineseness. He uses the blank space to engage critically and humorously with earlier filmic tropes of Chineseness. Wang also uses the blank space to highlight how the entire notion of identity is discursively constructed by drawing on multiple narratives and frameworks of identification.

\[107 Chan is Missing.\]
CHAPTER 4: Deconstructed Narratives of China in *The Princess of Nebraska*

4.1 Introduction

*The Princess of Nebraska* also employs the filmic device of a missing subject which motivates the characters to search for and talk about Chinese identity. In marketing materials, it was highlighted that, “In many ways, this project would represent a return to Wayne’s seminal feature film, ‘Chan Is Missing,’ made in 1982 for a budget of $20,000 and answering another question of cultural identity.”

However, in *The Princess of Nebraska* the missing subject is not a character; rather the missing subject is China. The film discusses China without showing any images of China. It contains many different narratives of China from many different characters, which highlight the many discursive contexts and positions that inform the meaning of China.

The refusal to represent China as an image clears a space for many new meanings of China to flow in and out of the film. Rather than providing solid answers to the “where do I come from?” and “where do you come from?” questions of identity, Chinese identity is fluid because the meaning of China changes throughout the film based on who is talking. The method of not showing any image of China helps to make sure that none of the narratives of China are privileged over others.

*Wayne Wang released* *The Princess of Nebraska* in 2007, twenty-five years after the release of *Chan is Missing*. Just like *Chan is Missing*, *The Princess of Nebraska* is based in San Francisco Chinatown although the setting has become flooded with cosmopolitan culture. As opposed to *Chan is Missing*, which was shot wholly in Chinatown and which represented it as an ethnic ghetto enclave, there are scenes in *The Princess of Nebraska* of Chinese living in the suburbs as well as in the downtown areas outside of Chinatown. There are also white characters, Indian characters and Black characters that are shown in Chinatown as well as in Chinese circles in suburbia.

*The Princess of Nebraska* is rooted in a love triangle that exemplifies this cosmopolitan aspect of the film. The love triangle includes one white man, Boshen, whose Chinese name we will discuss later in the chapter, one Chinese man, Yang

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Suming, and one Chinese woman, Sasha, whose multicultural name mirrors the White Boshen’s Chinese name. Their love triangle develops in Beijing, but by the start of the film, Boshen has been exiled to America for being a gay rights activist, and Sasha has come to America to study in graduate school, leaving only Yang in China. Before Sasha leaves for America, she has an affair with Yang and becomes pregnant with his child but she doesn’t realize it until she is already in America. Yang will not respond to Sasha’s calls from America, so in the beginning of the film, Sasha meets with Boshen in San Francisco to discuss her pregnancy and the possibility of having an abortion. In talking about their relationships with Yang Suming, they also talk about their memories of China.

Despite the focus on China as the origin of their relationship, the film is shot completely in San Francisco and no images of China are shown. China is shaped and formed exclusively through the narratives of Boshen, Sasha and other auxiliary characters. In the first half of this chapter, I will focus on American liberal narratives of China. The chapter will analyze how American liberal narratives of China are rooted in Cold War history and also how they do not resonate with discourses of China from Chinese people.

In the second half of the chapter, I will focus on a range of positions from which narratives of Chinese identity emerge. These narratives are filled with emotional and metaphorical language that belies different understandings of China than the American liberal narratives of China. Narratives of Chinese identity rely on origins, family and experiences of events in Chinese history.

In the third section, I will analyze how Sasha and Boshen speak about China. In the film, Sasha is Chinese and Boshen is White. Although they have both lived in China and loved in China, the film shows how they discuss their life and love differently. These differences shed light on the differences between Chineseness and Chinese identity, which we highlighted in the beginning of the first chapter.

In each section, this chapter will show how the film employs the device of a missing China, to clear space for China to be discussed within more discursive contexts.
4.2 The Theoretical Problem: China discussed in the American Liberal Context

Often scholars of China will point to the historical specificity of their claims to China, and this is often in good conscience to place Chinese history within a China-centered discourse. However, the fact that China is always used as a modifier points to the fact that the West is hardly ever used as a modifier in discussions of Western culture.

In the fall 1998 edition of *boundary 2*, this point was formalized into an argument. The entire issue was devoted to a debate on the meaning of Chineseness, but the most cited article to come out of this edition was Rey Chow’s, “On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem.” In this article, Chow wrote about how Chineseness was created as an ethnic marker by Western culture. She laments that often, academic studies of the historical specificity of China and the cultural specificity of *Chineseness functions to establish and lock differences between China and the West*. Thus, the ethnic markers that are attached to studies of China in the West serve as stereotypes. Chow writes, “whereas it would be acceptable for authors dealing with specific cultures, such as those of Britain, France, the United States, or the ancient Greco-Roman world, to use generic titles such as ‘Women Writers and the Problem of Aesthetics,’ ‘Gender Trouble,’ ‘Otherness and Literary Language,’ ‘The Force of Law,’ ‘The Logic of Sense,’ ‘The Sex Which is not One,’ ‘Tales of Love,’ and so on, authors dealing with non-Western cultures are often expected to mark their subject matter with words such as *Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Korean, Vietnamese* and the like. While the former are thought to deal with intellectual or theoretical issues, the latter, even when they are dealing with intellectual or theoretical issues, are compulsorily required to characterize such issues with *geopolitical realism.*”

Chineseness as a modifier throughout Hollywood history can be taken as a case in point. White characters generally do not have to be marked or remarked upon as White, while Chinese characters are often marked by the characteristics of yellow-face and accents.

Although Chineseness was created within a Western discourse Rey Chow writes that Chinese intellectuals have also embraced it. Starting in the 1800’s Chinese

intellectuals cast suspicion on anything coming from the West and often applied the Chinese label to issues that were universal or shared with the West. Chow called this a “reactive position” and a “paranoid tendency” in the face of Western military aggression and violence.\textsuperscript{110} She writes that this double-logic still exists, with Western discourse still searching for characteristics to prove China’s separateness from the West and with Chinese intellectuals and cultural leaders still insisting that, “everything Chinese is somehow better—longer in existence, more intelligent, more scientific, more valuable, and ultimately beyond comparison.”\textsuperscript{111}

In contrast to Chineseness, \textit{Chinese identity emerges as the search for the vast number of ways that people feel that they themselves are Chinese}. In 2007, Shih Shu Mei, another scholar of Chinese literature, published a chapter entitled “Against Diaspora: the Sinophone as places of Cultural Production”. In this article, Shih points out that the term Diaspora implies a homeland, from which all Chineseness has dispersed. She writes that “it is important to interrogate the unifying category of the Chinese diaspora not only because it is complicit with China’s nationalist call to the ‘overseas Chinese’ who are supposed to long to return to China, but also because it unwittingly correlates with and reinforces the constructions of Chineseness as perpetually foreign—‘diasporic.’”\textsuperscript{112} Therefore, she calls for a change in terminology, from Diaspora to Sinophone studies.\textsuperscript{113} In the first three chapters of this thesis, we have seen how Hollywood films have constructed Chineseness as something that is perpetually foreign. We will expand upon this notion in this chapter.

In this paper, we have focused on both Chineseness and Chinese identity. Their separate meanings become very clear in the two types of umbrella discourses that emerge in \textit{The Princess of Nebraska}.

The first half of this chapter will focus on one discourse of Chineseness, one way China is marked as different by those who do not consider themselves Chinese. We can tell that they do not consider themselves Chinese because their reference to

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid. Pp. 6.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{113} Shih, Shu-mei. Pp. 25-42.
historical and cultural specificities of China are made mostly in attempts to justify why China’s experience cannot fit into the Western theoretical ideals of political liberalism.

The second half of the chapter focuses on Chinese identity, the ways China is experienced by people who consider themselves Chinese. These characters base their narratives of Chinese identity in universal emotions of pain, longing and love. We are led to the conclusion that personal lived experience is a layer of Chinese identity formation, whereas Chineseness is a method of marking China as “perpetually foreign.”

However, our analysis will explore the idea coming from the film itself that personal experience of China is not a sufficient basis for establishing Chinese identity. In the last chapter, we focused on the image of Charlie Chan, a Chinese detective in Western, Hollywood discourse which allows him to be a hero while still retaining markers of foreignness. In this chapter, we will see how Chinese can also utilize a discourse of Chineseness that foreignizes themselves from Whites, by insinuating that personal experience of China is not the only factor that makes a person Chinese and hinting at the importance of origins in their Chinese identity.

The lack of any images of China leaves a space for all of these different discourses to emerge through the film. Similar to Chan is Missing the lack of an image of the main subject, in this case China, sparks multiple discussions which all bestow new meanings on China. Unlike Chan is Missing, this film more explicitly separates White discourses of Chineseness from discourses of Chinese identity.

4.3 A Background on the Short Story: The Princess of Nebraska

The Princess of Nebraska, a film directed by Wayne Wang, is based on a short story of the same title by Yiyun Li. The story is about a love triangle between two men, Boshen and Yang Suming, and a woman, Sasha. In the story, the characters are all originally from China, but the story is set in a coffee shop in San Francisco showing how two of the three characters cannot move on from their romantic entanglement. In the coffee shop, Sasha and Boshen discuss Sasha’s pregnancy with Yang Suming’s child, while in their own minds they are remembering their relationships with Yang.
The short story only has one scene, punctured with many flashbacks that complicate the story and allow for character development in lieu of a plotline. Each additional flashback adds justification for the tone with which the characters talk about the pregnancy or suggests what the characters might say next. For example, Sasha remembers how she “was the first person in his life who did not worship” Yang Suming, and this justifies her tone of annoyance by suggesting that she has been saddled with a pregnancy from a man she has not loved.\textsuperscript{114} However, Boshen remembers the intense jealousy he felt when Yang stopped seeing him, and this suggests that he has the ulterior motive to suggest that Sasha give birth to Yang’s baby.\textsuperscript{115}

The film was changed from the story version in two main ways, both of which make these flashbacks into part of the plot. These changes help to highlight the many different positions and the many different influences Boshen and Sasha have on their identity. However, the film changes the flashbacks from scenes that occurred in China to scenes that are encountered in San Francisco.

\textit{4.3.1 Differences between the Film and the Short Story}

The major way the movie deviates from the short story was to fit the flashback scenes, the character’s inner thoughts, into the plotline and action of the film. This introduces a new set of characters into the film, because many of the characters in Sasha and Boshen’s thoughts and memories, become physically present. Each character that was added to the story highlights a different experience of China that Sasha or Boshen lived through and talked about. However, the film takes these characters out of China and has them talk about China from the film’s setting of San Francisco. For instance, in the story, Sasha thinks about when her mother gave birth to her in the countryside and they were both forced to stay in the countryside, because Sasha did not have a Beijing residency card. In the film, Sasha listens as a character tells the same story about being stuck in the countryside. In the film, the way

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid. Pp. 75.
characters *talk about* China is more important, whereas in the story, the we are given most of the information through the *thoughts* of the characters.

Another difference is that the film version added in a set of characters that are not mentioned in the short story version, representing a Liberal American position on China. In the story version, issues of civil rights are discussed, both in the Chinese and American contexts. In the Chinese context, Boshen is exiled for protesting for gay rights. In the American context, Sasha must leave Nebraska or else she cannot have an abortion. In the film version, the theme of human rights is highlighted with the addition of a new set of characters. In the film, a crowd of liberal Americans discusses how China is violating human rights. Sasha sits in the middle of this crowd and becomes so upset that she yells at them. Through these characters, the film highlights the irony of anti-abortion protests in an America that respects human rights, an irony that can only emerge from a specific reading of the story, which focuses on the way that China is discussed in reference to its human rights abuses.

Many characters, Chinese and American, are added to the film version to highlight the many positions from which people talk about China. Depending on the discursive context in which China is discussed, Sasha reacts differently. In what follows, we trace her reactions to the narratives of American liberal intellectuals as opposed to the perspectives of her compatriots. In the first case, she simply rebels against their discursive subjugation of China to America. In the second, she finds herself confronted by personal experiences of China that are filled with the same contradictions of enmity and nostalgia that she also feels.

### 4.4 Bias and Dichotomy: Discourses on China from American liberal intellectuals

In the first half of this chapter, we will look at narratives about China from non-Chinese characters. These narratives represent one specific type of American discourse on China, the American liberal intellectual discourse, where bias against China takes on a dichotomizing stance between America as liberal democracy and China as its politically oppressive other. This contemporary American liberal discourse originated during the Cold War, and it is still based in the idea that China is
the world’s most powerful *Communist* nation, a threat to America’s Capitalist well being and Democratic way of life.

This is another example of Jeffrey Wasserstrom’s point that often when China is talked about in the American context it is in a way that boosts American domestic policy. Unlike in the last chapter, where Chineseness was discussed as a positive attribute to divide Chinese characters from Japanese characters, in the Cold War discourse, China is discussed in a negative light. China’s Communism and corrupt bureaucratic officials are demonized in contrast to the morality of the free market and liberal democrats. Alongside the example of positive Chineseness from last chapter, the negative Chineseness of the Cold War discourse shows how both negative and positive images can be used to promote American supremacism. This time, instead of directly referencing racial supremacy, cultural supremacy is referenced.

The Cold War discourse is different from an Imperial discourse. Cold War discourse asserts the right for China to develop independently from US military and diplomatic control. However, the American liberal discourse of China assumes that China will follow Western patterns of capitalist development and supports Capitalism as a model for how Chinese development will, and should, progress. The Cold War exploited the idea that liberal notions of Capitalism and Democracy, on top of which the American military goals were justified, were universally applicable. This ignores all indications that whatever the Chinese government is, it is certainly not moving in the direction of embracing the kind of liberalism that is represented by the US Constitution and Bill of Rights. Therefore, the Cold War discourse constructs China as a fantasy through which American liberal ideals can spread, justifying their ideals as natural and superior.

The Cold War discourse shows how the American liberal intellectual pigeonholes China into discussions of Communist and Capitalist governing policies. American characters discuss China as a potential launching site for American liberal political ideals and as a potential trading partner with corporate America. However, the Chinese government is often posited as a potential risk and liability to opening trade relations. The American government is never blamed for hindering the growth of trade relations.
Although the American Liberal discourse focuses on the ideals of Democracy and Capitalism, it is not only propagated by American citizens. Discourse according to Foucault is defined by decentralization of power.\textsuperscript{116} Therefore, we will see that Chinese also enter the discussion, in ways that support, mock and also sidestep the assumption of democracy’s superiority. We will also see that people from other countries weigh in on this discussion, invoking a stance from which China is considered an enemy of the United States as well as an enemy of the entire liberal democratic sphere of influence.

4.4.1 Alvin and friends: American liberal intellectuals

The film introduces a group of American liberals discussing China at a dinner party. The main character, Sasha, is in attendance. She listens to the guests construct their own narratives of China with skepticism as she is from Beijing and much of what they discuss about China lies outside of her own experiences of China. Sasha rebuffs their speeches on China with one simple line of analysis, “You guys know nothing about China.”\textsuperscript{117} Thus, the scene not only highlights themes in the American liberal discourse of China, but also comments upon how China is often portrayed falsely.

At the outset of the dinner scene, a middle aged Indian lady with an accent is discussing a scheme of marketing major league baseball in China. This is an example of the bias through which Americans discuss China in American terms. \textit{It is also a comment upon the wide reach of the liberal discourse of China.} American businessmen, scholars, lawyers and policy makers, and also non-Americans or recent Americans all participate in the American liberal discourse. A wide range of nationalities and ethnicities can thus unite as liberals in their condemnation (or misunderstanding) of China. By joining into this decentralized conversation, they can influence or test their ability to influence the discourse and they decentralize the discourse to an even greater extent.

\textsuperscript{116} Foucault, Michel. \textit{A Brief History of Sexuality}. Pp. 98.
\textsuperscript{117} \textit{The Princess of Nebraska} (21:40)
The Indian lady finishes her narrative by saying that she is unaware of the particulars of how Chinese will become interested in baseball. She references a statistic that “there is going to be one point five billion people in China,” however, this statistic is unsubstantiated. According to international census studies, China’s population is supposed to peak at just fewer than 1.4 billion people and at this time, India’s population is projected to become the largest in the world. The fact that the speaker is Indian, shows that not only is the statement ignorant, by refusing to acknowledge that India will soon be the largest nation on earth, but it is also biased for projecting India’s impending population problem onto China.

Some of the guests look to Sasha to authenticate their views on China. The first guest to explicitly address Sasha is a middle-aged professor who asks Sasha if she has ever heard of the man who stood in front of a tank on Tiananmen Square. She introduces the topic by expressing pity that the young college students she encountered on a recent visit to Beijing University, China’s top university for liberal arts, were completely unaware of this “Tank Man.” This construction of pity for the Tank Man frames China with the American government policy of supporting democracy protests around the world and the American media policy of aggrandizing these protests and their influence. It also shows pity that members of the young generation of Chinese don’t know their own history. The professor asks Sasha if she has ever heard of the Tank Man, and Sasha replies that she has only heard a little, “from my grandma.” This simultaneously shows that young people in China have less knowledge of their history but also less interest. The fact that the discussion of the tank man is one of many points about the lack of civil liberties in China points to a sense of superiority on the part of the American professor. However, Sasha’s response is to return the insult by claiming that the professor is out of touch with contemporary reality, thus not granting the professor the satisfaction of approval.

Other guests at the party are unaware that the manner in which they speak about China, even when they are not talking about their Communist policies and

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118 *The Princess of Nebraska* (19:09)
120 *The Princess of Nebraska* (20:10)
government, demonizes China as a morally reprehensible place. One man talks about the shortage of girl babies in China and how that has made them “ironically” more valuable than boy babies. His addition to the discussion refers to an idea that is often discussed in reference to China, the idea that Chinese culture sanctions the murder of baby girls. This man does not notice the offense that Sasha takes to his comment.¹²¹

Figure 14: Two images of Sasha at a dinner party from *The Princess of Nebraska* (2007). Sasha’s exhibits offense to the dubious statement that Chinese girl babies are more valuable than Chinese boy babies. (Right) Sasha’s offense is part of her detachment from the other guests at the dinner party, who are portrayed in their own circles at a distance from Sasha. (Left)

Again, this liberal narrative focuses on a topic of human rights violations within the People’s Republic of China. The issue that Sasha begins to take with the liberals at the table is that they repeatedly focus on the topic of human rights abuses, highlighting a dichotomy with the West’s formation and continued support of a particularly defined set of human rights and establishing the West’s superior position through this dichotomy. This is offensive to Sasha as she has recently been the victim of anti-abortion protests and laws in the US, which either support human rights in a conservative fashion or oppose human rights in a reactionary fashion depending on the outlook.

The dinner party conversation shows how American liberal discourse has placed China’s questionable morality, at the center of their discourse on Chineseness. Most of the conversation is limited in scope to discussing the effect of oppressive or morally debased actions attributed to China’s lack of human rights. Chineseness thus comes to be associated overall with restriction and conservatism. In the discursive realm of American liberal politics, the Chinese government, and thus Chineseness, is diametrically opposed to the theoretical bases of openness and freedom for which America stands. Wang powerfully ends this scene with Sasha’s terse, angry reaction.

¹²¹ *The Princess of Nebraska* (19:46)
¹²² Ibid.
What Wayne Wang achieves in this scene is to reference the motivations behind depictions of China in American liberal discourse.

Sasha’s harsh rebuke of the American Liberal discourse of China can be seen as a strategic essentialism of China. She tells the American Liberals, “You guys know nothing about China.” In this sense, she seems to claim that she has a more authentic viewpoint on China than they do. However, she is strategically using Chinese identity in much the same way that Gayatri Spivak used the subaltern/peasant consciousness. Whereas Spivak defined problems that all peasants face, Sasha defines a problem that all Chinese people face, and in defining a problem takes a first step in fixing that problem.\textsuperscript{123} The problem that she faces from the American Liberals are their sense of superiority based in the dichotomy between Communism and the favored Capitalism, also in the dichotomy between Western human rights and Chinese human rights violations. Therefore, for Sasha the problem is how people demean China in the way they talk about China. By claiming that China has some other essence she clears space for myriad alternative ways of talking about China besides in reference to Communism and human rights violations.

4.5 Personal Histories: Generational Perspectives of China from People of Chinese Origin

In the second half of this chapter, we will look at narratives about China and Chinese identity from characters of Chinese origin. For these Chinese characters, their experience of being Chinese has a lot to do with politics and historical experience. However, these experiences are not dictated and bounded by discourses of government and political economy. They are informed by family, participation in the labor force, and emotions such as isolation, regret and nostalgia.

These narratives also represent a range of different generations of Chinese, spanning the 1960s through the present day early years of the twenty-first century. The different narratives of China that are given by characters of different generations often differ in their content as well as tone. These characters have been added to the film version to personify and concretize specific historical experiences of China. In

\textsuperscript{123}Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorti. \textit{In Other Words}. Pp. 205.
the film version, Sasha thought about the experiences of her parents, growing up in a different time in China. However, the film brings her into direct physical contact with characters that represent her parents’ experiences of China. By doing this, the film makes the new point that Sasha comes to America unaware of her own history and the history of her parents. The film instead highlights Sasha’s superficiality and consumerism as endemic of the newest generation of Chinese.

Sasha thus becomes the recipient of multiple narratives of China, and each new narrative defamiliarizes China as well as adding to her understanding of it. Thus, it makes the idea of a One China narrative nearly impossible by placing different narratives in different settings, different decades and among different details. The end result is realizing that the generational gap in personal experiences is too large to bridge together into one cross-generational narrative of China and Chinese identity.

The following discourses of Chinese identity are defined through personal experiences. They exhibit a viewpoint that is more complex than the American liberal discourses that were not defined through experience, and they are not filtered through any source besides personal memory and perception.

4.5.1 Generational Perspectives on China

There are three distinct generational perspectives portrayed in The Princess of Nebraska. Each perspective is rooted in an experience of a different period of PRC political campaigns. The two older generations’ perspectives are rooted much more deeply in the history and politics of China. However, the youngest generation’s perspective also shares the identification with the people and places in the older generations’ narratives and does not rebuke the older generations’ perspectives of China.

4.5.1.1 Gene’s Narrative of The Great Leap Forward

The first Chinese character who confides his narrative of China to Sasha is Gene, the owner of a bar in San Francisco Chinatown. After Sasha walks out of the dinner party filled with liberal intellectuals, she walks downtown until she reaches the Chinatown district. In this familiar zone, Sasha captures familiar signs in Chinese, Chinese families and other visitors, as well as storefronts on her mobile phone.
camera. However, she remains upset by her predicament as an unmarried and pregnant young woman, and breaks down crying on the street. Mei, a sex worker in a Chinatown bar, happens to walk by Sasha while she is crying and stops to comfort her. First, she greets Sasha and offers her a cigarette and then invites her for a drink in a bar. At the end of a night of carousing and hooking-up with a stranger, Sasha is left feeling still quite anxious and depressed about her situation. As she is leaving the bar, she walks by Gene, the bar owner, and he calls her over to sit with him. Gene is drinking and is already heavily drunk.

At first, Gene establishes that he is of a different generation than Sasha. He chides Sasha that she has been drinking but he does not believe that she is old enough to drink legally. Then, he chides her for being such a recent immigrant to the United States. He asks and discovers that Sasha only left China four months ago. This sets Gene up for taking a very condescending tone towards Sasha at the end of their interaction, calling her a lucky little girl and reminding her to do her homework.

Gene’s narrative of China is jarring for Sasha. He tells her about the death of his family members, although he does not go into descriptive detail. Gene says:

In that time, the back yard, front yard, under the bed, there was steel everywhere. Beneath a thousand tons of steel, you’ll find my whole family.

Gene’s narrative of China lacks description, because he is speaking metaphorically. Yet his narrative encompasses a tone of suffering and death despite repressing the more gruesome details.

Sasha’s reactions to Gene’s narrative are very different from her reactions to the narratives of the American liberal intellectuals. This is interesting since Gene’s emphasis on misguided government policies that wreak havoc on the Chinese people is not far from that of the American professor. However, the camera captures empathy and sadness in Sasha’s downcast eyes and silence in response to Gene’s story. Although the narrative is short, it is grounded in years of lived experience and suffering, rather than clips of news or brief travel experiences. Although it is a

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124 The Princess of Nebraska (39:23)
125 The Princess of Nebraska (39:40)
126 The Princess of Nebraska (39:49)
negative view, it is an eyewitness point-of-view account that causes her to internalize rather than reject the horrors it depicts.

At the end of the conversation, Gene perhaps realizes that Sasha has sullenly latched onto his experience and he once again distances himself as a generation apart from Sasha by giving her fatherly advice. He tells her:

You’re lucky, little girl. You’ve grown up in the new China. Don’t mess around so much. Stay home and do your homework.127

In this way, Gene ends their interaction condescendingly, underscoring not only the generation gap between him and Sasha, but also the gap in their experiences of China. His experiences of China were not as “lucky” as hers. He offers her fatherly advice which is condescending because he does not know that Sasha is in fact burdened with her own unwanted pregnancy, a much larger issue than “completing homework,” and that her life is not as lucky as he portrays it to be. Yet Sasha does not leave Gene with skepticism or disgust. Rather she listens to his entire discomforting story with her full attention and has no skepticism to offer as she leaves. Until the end, the conversation retains its flirtatious aspect, with one Chinese man speaking directly to a younger Chinese woman to gain her respect. Gene is thus using China to talk about himself.

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4.5.1.B Mei: Living in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution

The next narrative we focus on is Mei’s story of her personal experiences of China. At the end of the night Sasha wanders the city streets with Mei, a woman she has just met that night, until they decide to share a hotel room. In the hotel room, Sasha opens up to Mei as a younger sister to an older sister, and reads to Mei from her diary about her love and her pregnancy. Mei follows not by giving advice, but by

127 The Princess of Nebraska (39:57)
128 The Princess of Nebraska (39:49)
opening up to Sasha with her own troubles, which stem from her personal experiences growing up in the grasslands in China.

Mei’s narrative in the film highlights a half-generation gap between her and Sasha. She begins her narrative while looking at her own reflection in a mirror on the wall:

I look just like my mother…
She was from Beijing too. Just like you.129

In the short story version of *The Princess of Nebraska*, however, Sasha was from Mongolia. Sasha’s mother was from Beijing. Mei did not exist in the short story and she has now stepped into Sasha’s role so that the Sasha of the film version can play a younger role.

Mei’s narrative highlights a historical context that is separate from the millennial generation into which Sasha was born.

My mother got sent to Mongolia in 1972 for labor reeducation. She got stuck in the grassland after having me. I didn’t have any legal residency in Beijing, so she had to stay with me. My mother said that she never regretted having me. That I gave her life purpose, a place to be, even if it was not the best place…130

Mei’s narrative of China is short, but loaded with strong conflicting emotions and complex identifications with the Cultural Revolution.

Mei and her mother’s experiences of being stuck in one place inform one of the meanings in the absurd title *The Princess of Nebraska*. This title implies the juxtaposition of a grandiose position in a minor place. It both emphasizes Sasha’s and Mei’s dislocation from home and mocks the fact that their childhood dreams have been thwarted. As we will see in the next section, the story of Mei and her mother parallels the main dilemma of Sasha and her pregnancy. If Sasha has her baby, then that would mean that she would also become stuck. This is one example of the greater complexity of narratives of personal experience, which often reference emotional experiences that are not to be found in more impersonal narratives of China. In this

129 *The Princess of Nebraska* (51:33)
130 *The Princess of Nebraska* (51:45)
scene, Sasha sympathizes with Mei’s in a brash emotional response, demanding that Mei leave with her so that they can both shake off their feeling of being stuck.

By talking to various people, Sasha figures out about the missing subject. In some instances this missing subject is China, in other instances it is her baby. While talking to Mei, they discuss the idea that having a baby will make you feel stuck. While talking to Gene, they discuss another idea that it is both impossible to forget and impossible to return to a place where dead relatives are buried.

Both Gene’s and Mei’s narratives of China represent their Chinese identity as a burden that they carry with them. Marchetti writes, “Within diaspora, identity becomes an issue (and sometimes a burden).”\textsuperscript{131} She specifically cites the piling of identities that only become differentiated in discursive contexts of diaspora, such as the identities of “Chinese exile, Hong Kong émigré…sojourner, a citizen or naturalized citizen, an overseas Chinese, a Chinese American, an Asian American” that are often used to refer to the same person.\textsuperscript{132} Thus, the diasporic status of Sasha, Gene and Mei implies a constant pending internal decision between homeland and hybridity, and in this liminal state, they retain a weighty stake in discourses of Chineseness in a way that White Americans do not.

4.6 Sasha’s Burden: The uncertainty of the future and being saddled with an identity
If Gene and Mei carry around their Chinese identity as a burden, the burden that Sasha carries is a pregnancy. It is a burden that is made even heavier to carry because of the uncertainty that surrounds it. Sasha is not sure whether she will perform an abortion or carry her pregnancy to term. Even as she contemplates this decision, she is uncertain of how each decision will unfold in the future. The more layers of complexity in her condition, the heavier her burden. The baby becomes an allegory for the Chinese identity, which is also a burden because of the complexity of identity in the diasporic context.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
The fact that there is so much uncertainty about the baby leads Sasha to sink deeper into a contemplative mode about the possibilities for her own future. Similar to Jo’s companion Steve, whom he travels with in *Chan is Missing* as he searches for his Chinese identity, Sasha has a companion who offers her advice and claims to share a stake in the burden of her identity. Sasha’s companion is her baby father’s ex-lover, a White man named Boshen.

In the short story, Boshen is a Chinese character, who is exiled to the United States. In the film, Boshen is a white character, who is exiled back to the United States. Changing Boshen into a White American in the film adds ambiguity to the film. Although Boshen is a White man with a Chinese name, the origin of his name is never explained in the film (in the short story it does not have to be explained because he is a Chinese man with a Chinese name) and Boshen is never referred to by an English name. Yet, the addition of Boshen also mirrors the addition of the American liberals, because they both show how White Americans talk about China and allow the film to highlight the White American position on China. While the American liberals represent the position of mostly White people (and some other non-White people) misunderstanding and condemning China, Boshen represents a position of White people loving and romanticizing China and glossing over any of China’s shortcomings.

Sasha represents a position of Chinese people loving China. Sasha’s lover and the father of her unborn child, Yang Suming, was also Boshen’s male lover. This lover who connects Sasha and Boshen is missing throughout the film, only appearing in one brief flashback when Sasha recounts their lustrous affair. The fact that he is missing leaves both Sasha and Boshen searching for a reason why Suming has abandoned them. Once again we see the role of an absent character as a device for prodding a character into a self-reflection searching for clues that implicate themselves in their loss of the missing character.

The fact that the missing character is bisexual adds weight to its role as a literary device. It rips an even larger hole in the film where even more possibilities can explain his absence and it leads to deeper and deeper searching in the other characters and a heavier burden of identity. It also underscores the burden of love that
Chinese people must carry by making the Chinese character a female who biologically carries a baby and making the male character White, showing that White people who love China don’t share the same burden of identity with Chinese people.

Boshen wants the baby to cement his relation to his elusive lover, but it's the woman's body that has to bear the burden of having the baby. Maybe Boshen’s love affair is also with China, but it oddly gets routed through a Chinese woman’s body. It is more difficult for Sasha to love China unconditionally, because she is the one that must suffer for her love.

Boshen attempts to persuade Sasha to carry out the pregnancy and bring Yang’s child into the world. His first line in the film is to ask Sasha, “So, have you decided yet?” By the end of the film, he is more brashly trying to convince Sasha to give birth. However, Sasha is unable to get rid of her burden with a quick decision and she resents that Boshen presses her to choose a specific future for herself and for the baby. As a Non-Chinese, Boshen can love China without feeling burdened, and this is because he does not carry a Chinese identity with him wherever he goes. He can give up his ties to China and to Yang Suming and lead an American life.

However, Sasha cannot move on so easily from her pregnancy. Sasha tells the clinic worker at the end of the film that she “didn’t like the way people looked at her outside the clinic” in Nebraska. Even if Sasha makes a decision to abort her pregnancy, she would still suffer under other people’s judgments of that decision.

The burden of the baby is thus an allegory for the burden of the Chinese identity in diaspora. Just as Sasha’s pregnant condition cannot be erased through a quick choice, so the burden of Chinese identity cannot be erased through any quick identifications. The condition and burden of being Chinese, as with the condition of being pregnant, is that others continue to make judgments upon this condition, whether or not you have chosen to revoke the Chinese identity or grasp it.

Therefore Chinese diasporic identity is carried around as a burden by each of the Chinese characters, because it contains many conflicting and complex layers and emotions. However, choosing one emotion or identity over another cannot simply lift

133 The Princess of Nebraska.
134 The Princess of Nebraska.
the burden of identity. There are repercussions for any choice to either revoke or grasp a Chinese identity and there is also an inability to know how others will react to your decision.

The absence of the baby is the plot device that motivates Sasha to search for her identity. The absence of China is the plot device that similarly motivates all Chinese characters in the film to search for their Chinese identity. China’s future, like the future for Sasha’s baby, remains uncertain and because of this, the search for China—like the search for Chan in *Chan is Missing*—prompts all of the characters to define their own identity. It also draws out the different backgrounds and identities of the characters, showing that Chinese diasporic identity implies a burdened love while Chineseness implies a romantic one.

4.7 Highlighting the context through which China is enunciated
Instances in which China, Yang Suming and Sasha’s unborn child are discussed are all examples of where the subject is never shown. Rather the discursive context determines the meaning of the subject.

In the American liberal context, the critique of PRC government policy serves an underlying purpose of defining Americanness as the opposite of Chineseness. The focus on reprehensible morality as the essence of Chineseness shows how the discourse on Chineseness in the American liberal context is limited to promoting America as a morally superior culture. It points more specifically to the underlying concerns over Communism as something to be feared and Capitalism as something to be championed. In this way, the American liberal discourse roots its arguments in the naturalized conceptions of Capitalism and Democracy that will spread to the world.

In the context of people of Chinese origin, conflicted and complex personal histories that form the discourse of Chinese identity can also serve to defamiliarize China. When people of Chinese origin discuss China through their own experiences, they do not use statistics and international political standards to justify their narratives. Narratives of Chinese identity from people of Chinese origin are perceived as a burden because they are so uncertain about its status and yet they still identify with being Chinese.
Although at times Chinese identity is about meaningful personal experiences of China across a broad range of domains (personal, professional, familial, sexual, etc.), at other times, it seems that the question of “origins”—people of Chinese origin, birth or ancestry—remains an essentializing idea. As in most real life discussions of Chinese identity, the idea of personal experience cannot be separated completely from the idea of origins. The film still assumes that people of Chinese origins are burdened by Chinese identity while people who are White or non-Chinese cannot be burdened by Chinese identity, even if they have experienced long periods of time in China and close relationships with Chinese people. We talked about strategic essentialism as a way to essentialize a people in response to a shared hardship. However, the essentialism of shared origins is not tied to any political oppression or goals. The cultural essentialism implied by the privileging of shared origins may instead be an example of a Chinese response to the political and military attacks on Chinese sovereignty, which Rey Chow mentioned was a recurring “problem” that Chinese faced when representing themselves to the world.

4.8 Conclusions and Thesis Restated

The thesis of the paper is that by removing images of key Chinese characters, or by removing images of China, Wayne Wang clears a space for more representations of Chineseness and Chinese identity to emerge. The thesis of the paper is framed in the popular political goal of Asian American independent filmmakers in the 1970s and 1980s to invest in positive images of Chinese men in American film and media. Theorists, filmmakers, historians and activists suggested creating positive images of Chinese men to replace the negative images that abounded in American film at the time when Wayne Wang studied film at San Francisco State University. It continues to be a popular goal today. However, the first two chapters of the paper shows that the investment in positive images of select Chinese men does not pay off with a positive overall image of Chinese men in cinematic representation.

The first chapter of the thesis addresses the issue of positive images that are Orientalist. Edward Said, who coined the term, writes that “Orientalism [is] a
Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. "135 Although positive images are created of Blacks as helpful Uncle Toms, or of Chinese as sexual and beautiful Anna May Wongs, these images are both supportive and constitutive of white male dominance.

The second chapter of the thesis directly addresses the issue of images of powerful Chinese men that are well received only when they are exoticized or subservient to the greater discourse of White male supremacy at home in America. This chapter shows that the investment in positive images of select Chinese men does not pay off with a positive overall image of Chinese men in American discourse.

Our thesis highlights a method of representation that is critical of both images of Chinese powerlessness and images of Chinese power. When faced with the choice to create powerful or powerless images, Wayne Wang found an alternative method, employing a missing character as an acknowledgment that neither powerful nor powerless representations provide “the door to the outside” of a racist discursive context. The thesis of the paper, which is addressed in the third and fourth chapters, is that Wayne Wang turns away from producing direct representations of Chineseness and instead references how meanings are been bestowed onto Chinese characters through discourse.

*Chan is Missing* is a film that portrays the many ways Chineseness and Chinese identity are constructed and performed. The blank space caused by a missing main character invites many different performances of this character. These performances open up Chinese identity to a wide range of interpretations. One of these interpretations focused on the deconstruction of racist images of Chineseness in Hollywood film, highlighting specifically the image of Charlie Chan as an iconic racist image.

*The Princess of Nebraska* is a film that portrays the many ways China is constructed and known through narratives. The blank space caused by a lack of images, invites many different narratives of China. These narratives often come into conflict with each other because the same subject of China is discussed differently in response to different discursive contexts. This chapter focuses on the deconstruction

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of narratives of Chineseness, highlighting specifically American liberal narratives that criticize China as well as Oriental images that love China uncritically and unconditionally.

Chan is Missing and The Princess of Nebraska both employ the device of a missing piece, clearing a space that allows new ways of talking about Chineseness and Chinese identity to flow in and out of the film. None of these discussions are able to define the missing subject, because the space remains open, repeatedly inviting new discourses to rush through it. This creates different and often conflicting versions of the China, Chineseness, Chinese American identity and Chinese identity, which can only be resolved by understanding them not as fixed, unchanging essences but as ways of speaking about, thinking about, performing and knowing what is Chinese.
Appendix: Charlie Chan wears a different color suit than other characters in nearly all of his appearances.


*Charlie Chan in Egypt.* Dir. Louis King. Fox Films 1935.


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