

Chinatown on the Big Screen:

How Has Chinatown Been Represented in 21st Century Hollywood, and What Are the Implications of These Representations on Real U.S. Chinatowns?

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Even if they've never been to a Chinatown, most Americans have a clear mental image of the space. This is due, in part, to the frequent portrayal of Chinatown in Hollywood films, which has shaped a mythic "Chinatown" in the American consciousness apart from the actual, material spaces across the United States. The appropriation of Chinatown for Hollywood profits is important to consider in light of current issues facing U.S. Chinatowns, primarily gentrification and displacement. In the following paper, I argue that Chinatown is most commonly rendered in 21st century Hollywood as a space for white consumption from which Chinese Americans themselves are displaced, a depiction which can have real material impacts.

From the beginnings of Hollywood cinema, Chinatown has been depicted on-screen. In fact, Chinatown films were practically their own genre in the early 20th century, with short silent films depicting the trips of white tourists into Chinatown. Whereas "Chinatown trips... attracted an (upper) middle class audience," these "movies... made Chinatown available for consumption to the masses" (Haenni, 22-23). Such depictions were often overtly racist, portraying Chinatown as "unsanitary" and "morally aberrant" (Anderson, 586). Scholars have conducted many critical analyses on the depictions of Chinatown in twentieth century films, but the 21st century has thus far not been seriously examined. However, Chinatown's presence in Hollywood films has not disappeared, with many city narratives featuring a Chinatown scene. Here, I will examine how four 21st century Hollywood movies, *Freaky Friday* (2003), *Nancy Drew* (2007), *Men in Black 3* (2012), and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014), depict Chinatown, arguing that while many historical stereotypes of Chinatown persist, the idea of Chinatown as a space for white consumption is foregrounded, a representation which has real and problematic implications.

The primary mode of consumption is literal, as all four films feature a Chinatown restaurant, thus “reinforcing Chinatown as a place of consumption not only in food, but in sights, culture, and people” (Le 2015). By devoting the majority of Chinatown screen time to restaurants, Chinatown’s role as a product to be consumed is foregrounded. Further, restaurants in Chinatown function to honor their white guests. In two of the films, *Spider-Man* and *Freaky Friday*, families go to a Chinatown restaurant to celebrate significant life events: in *Spider-Man*, Gwen’s graduation, and in *Freaky Friday*, Tess’s upcoming wedding. In the various restaurant sequences, shots are usually framed so that the protagonists and those they are with are the focus of the shot, with all other customers and restaurant workers in the background. This speaks to a more general portrayal of the relationship between Chinatown and the films’ non-Asian main characters, in which Chinatown and its residents serve as a backdrop for the stories of white characters.

The presence of Asian American characters in the background of shots emphasizes their interchangeability with the Chinatown space in the film’s eyes. For example, in the street scenes in *Nancy Drew* and *Freaky Friday*, many Chinese American figures are present on-screen. However, they are out of focus along with the Chinatown architecture, walking across the screen behind the main characters. Residents of Chinatown are thus depicted as part of the space, a moving piece of the Chinatown scenery against which white characters are foregrounded. Residents are robbed of agency in their own space; Hollywood views Chinatown in terms of what it offers white tourists more so than as a place of residence and leisure for Chinese Americans.

The representation of Chinatown as a commodified space is contingent on how the space itself is structured in the film. The first manner through which Chinatown is structured is where it is located within the metropolis. *Spider-Man* emphasizes the embedded position of Chinatown in the Manhattan space, for rather than depicting a commute, the previous scene cuts immediately to Chinatown. Additionally, at the end of the Chinatown scene, a shot of Peter running down a Chinatown street cuts smoothly into a shot of Spider-Man running atop a Manhattan skyscraper. Thus, Chinatown is characterized as a space fluidly connected to the rest of the city. *Nancy Drew* begins by similarly emphasizing the continuity between L.A. and Chinatown. During Nancy's first trip to the city, there is a montage-like sequence of the view from her car with the pop song "Come to California" playing in the back. In this sequence the Chinatown archway is briefly depicted as well, suggesting that Chinatown is integral to the city and just one piece of cosmopolitan L.A.'s allure. In the rest of the film, as well as in *Freaky Friday*, the depiction of car trips, even highway ones, emphasizes the distance between Chinatown and suburban L.A. Rather than removing Chinatown from the city, these emphasize Chinatown's embeddedness in the city through its removal from the suburbs. Thus, for the most part films depict Chinatown as integral to the city space, a physical display of the city's diversity and cosmopolitanism utilized to lend authenticity to the rest of the metropolitan narrative.

Even more significant than where the space is located is how it is characterized. Kay J. Anderson's "The Idea of Chinatown" noted a few major stereotypes used to construct the physical Chinatown space in Vancouver, one of which was the construction of Chinatown as "A Celestial Cesspool" (586). In *Men in Black*, Chinatown at first appears to be rather clean; the front of the restaurant is depicted as large, well-decorated, and without any apparent signs of

squalor. However, when J and K demand to see the kitchen in order to investigate claims of food-borne illnesses from the restaurant, a different world is revealed. Here the film constructs the kitchen as the hypothetical “backstage” (Dhingra, 123), to offer a dramaturgical reading, in which the filthiness of Chinatown supposedly resides. The kitchen teems with chickens running wild and unsightly alien creatures, some of which are being served to customers. In this way, *Men in Black* uses the stereotype Anderson pinpoints of Chinatown as “dirty” and “unsanitary” to quickly establish a plot point and subsequent action sequence by operating on viewer’s stereotypes of the space (586).

The major stereotype displayed in these films, however, is Chinatown (and its people) as “Forever Foreign” (Chin, 6), a common trope in popular U.S. media. “Cultural understandings of Chinese immigrants as permanent foreigners ha[ve] long been established” (Lee 2010:150), and the films analyzed consistently operate under this stereotype. In particular, Orientalist conceptions of Chinatowns as mystical and even supernatural spaces emphasize this foreignness. As Edward W. Said proposes, Orientalism is an “exercise of cultural strength” through which the West “promote[s] the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’)” (43). This understanding of the East as an immutably foreign and mystical Other translates into conceptions of the Chinatown space within the U.S. *Men in Black* clearly appropriates the Forever Foreign stereotype, with the restaurant owner, Mr. Wu, and the server revealed to be aliens. The back of the restaurant, overflowing with alien creatures, plants, and other unidentifiable objects only compounds the air of otherworldliness of the Chinatown space. However, there is a somewhat contradictory message within this sequence; when Mr. Wu first greets J and K he speaks in broken English, but when pressured by the agents, drops the act,

and instead speaks with a Midwestern American accent. Here, the implication seems to be that the mystical foreignness which white consumers come to experience in Chinatown is merely a performance on the part of the Chinese Americans for the benefit of non-Asian consumers. This is not a trope peculiar to *Men in Black*. Some early silent films depict Chinatown as a performance on the part of its residents in order to profit off of tourists, “the emphasis on fakery shift[ing] the focus of attention... from a fascination with the hidden dangers behind the walls of Chinatown, to a fascination with the ‘show’ itself” (Haenni, 27-28). In this convoluted way, Hollywood films recognize one way in which Chinatown residents assert their agency: by using Chinatown stereotypes for personal profit.

In *Freaky Friday*, conceptions of Chinatown as supernaturally foreign are embedded in the very plot of the film. The mother of Pei-Pei, who owns the Chinatown restaurant, offers Anna and Tess fortune cookies when she sees them arguing, which cause them to switch bodies. Here, the foreignness of Pei Pei’s mother, emphasized by her lack of fluency in English, has a supernatural and almost dangerous power; she is able to cause an earthquake and place a spell which Anna and Tess spend the whole film attempting to reverse. The film clearly links Pei Pei’s mother’s supernatural control to her Chinese-ness. In one shot, she stares at Anna and her mother with a knowing smile while a gong sounds in the background and Chinese music plays.

Orientalist perceptions of Chinatown abound in *Nancy Drew* as well, for it is in a Chinatown antique shop that the clue to the film’s central mystery is hidden. Here, the will of a deceased actress is hidden in a secret compartment of an ornate box full of Chinese iconography. Nancy has to “make the dragon bow,” turning a golden dragon on the side of the box, in order to open its hidden compartment. The use of Chinatown by the white Hollywood actress to hide her will

and a sequence in which a number of mysterious boxes are explored come together to form a Chinatown whose mysticism the white mainstream consumes in an attempt to experience its danger and exoticism.

Surprisingly, the Yellow Peril stereotype of Chinatown as a dangerous “Vice-Town” is almost altogether absent from the films (Anderson, 549), and sometimes even directly opposed. In *Spider-Man*, for example, the nighttime streets are colorful, relatively well-lit, and crime-free. In fact, Peter has to leave Chinatown and go downtown to fight crime in the subsequent scene. In *Freaky Friday*, Chinatown is only shown in the daytime and is primarily a crowded, bustling space with no indication of danger. In *Nancy Drew*, although crime occurs in Chinatown, the insinuation is that this crime is not inherent to Chinatown, but rather is of outside origin. The first example is the bomb that goes off in Chinatown, which is actually placed in Nancy’s car by the film’s white villains. When it goes off, we see Chinese extras running away in the background. Since the films consistently conflate Chinese characters with the space itself, the fact that its residents are terrorized by the bomb implies that Chinatown itself is victim to the criminal act. Later, the Chinese shop owner, Louie, acts as an ally to Nancy, helping her solve the case. Chinatown is a safe place, for it is only when Nancy crosses the gate to leave Chinatown that she is abducted by the white villains of the story. Thus, the films for the most part subvert the stereotype of Chinatown as crime-ridden, instead depicting it as a place of enjoyment and consumption for white characters. By doing away with the historical stereotype of Chinatown as dangerous, 21st century films make Chinatown more desirable in the eyes of mainstream consumers.

By depicting Chinatown as immutably foreign, mystical, and ripe for white consumption, the four films rid Chinatown of its material reality. Whereas Chinese Americans formed Chinatowns “in response to... [U.S.] racial ideolog[ies]” (Anderson, 580-581), here Chinatowns are conceived of in terms of how they cater to white Americans. The films dehumanize Chinese Americans by reducing them to a part of the background, another prop lending authenticity to a foreign space. This is not to rid the actors themselves of agency, for there are moments in most of the films where Chinese American characters assert their personhood and even defy the stereotypes the rest of the film imposes on the space. However, it is undeniable that Chinatown in these films is used to foreground white characters, often adding a layer of authenticity to the city narrative or providing a supernatural impetus for the plot.

As Anderson states, “the study of the Chinese and their turf is also a study of our categories, our practices, and our interests” (581). Studying how Chinatown is depicted in Hollywood tells us a lot about how our culture regards Chinatown: a space to be consumed by the white mainstream. This is a trope seen throughout Hollywood depictions of foreign spaces. As Michael Richardson argues in terms of the 2003 film *Lost in Translation*, Hollywood films “[treat] the world as a kind of American playground, to which ‘others’ are mere backdrops” (170). This attitude is particularly dangerous when enacted towards Chinatown in light of the increasing gentrification of “Chinatowns across the nation” (Villanueva, 3). In George Villanueva and Debbie Liu’s anti-displacement report focused on Chicago’s Chinatown, Chinatown residents spoke of the importance of challenging “mainstream public perceptions that often see Chinatown primarily as a tourist trap comprised of Chinese restaurants and novelty shops” (14). Their study addresses how local journalistic media representations “feed into

Chinatown's image as a tourist trap" by focusing on restaurants and events which cater to outsiders (Villanueva, 14), but the same portrayal is clear in Hollywood films.

As consumers of mainstream media, it is essential we look critically at how Hollywood films represent Chinatown. The orientalist and consumerist views of the Chinatown space create an ideology to support and uphold practices of displacement occurring in Chinatowns across America. With the rise of gentrification in Chinatowns and other communities of color, hegemonic narratives which promote these spaces as sites of consumption for affluent whites may have serious implications.

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