

## ***An Interior Chinatown Analysis***

**by Rodrigo Laux**

*Interior Chinatown* is a satirical novel written by Charles Yu, published in 2020. The book explores the Asian-American experience, specifically focusing on the way Asians are represented and treated in American media and culture. The story follows the life of Willis Wu, a Chinese-American actor who has spent his entire career playing background roles as "Generic Asian Man" in a popular TV police procedural drama called *Black and White*. Wu dreams of becoming a leading man but feels trapped in the stereotypical roles he is offered. As Wu navigates his personal and professional life, the novel delves into larger themes of identity, assimilation, and representation. Yu uses a unique format to tell the story, employing a screenplay-style narrative to blur the line between reality and fiction, challenging the reader's perceptions of what is real and what is scripted. The book ultimately asks important questions about the nature of identity, the effects of systemic racism, and the need for representation and inclusion in mainstream media. By examining the historical and contemporary manifestations of racism and stereotyping, as well as their impact on Asian American experiences and identity, the novel makes clear that addressing these issues is crucial for achieving a more just and equitable society.

Postcolonial theory can be used to analyze the ways in which *Interior Chinatown* engages with the colonial legacy of America's treatment of Asian Americans. As Chan Sucheng notes in the article "Asian American Struggles for Civil, Political, Economic, and Social Rights," Asian Americans have historically faced systematic discrimination and marginalization, beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This legislation effectively banned Chinese immigration and made Chinese immigrants ineligible for citizenship, thereby establishing a racial hierarchy that relegated Asian Americans to the

status of perpetual foreigners. The effects of this history are still present in contemporary society, as evidenced by the experiences of Willis Wu in Interior Chinatown. In this context, postcolonialism refers to the cultural, economic, and political effects of colonialism on the colonized people. In the novel, the Chinese immigrants face discrimination, marginalization, and identity crisis in America. They are viewed as perpetual foreigners, and subjected to stereotypes and prejudices. The dimly lit apartment in Interior Chinatown was filled with the fragrant aroma of home-cooked Chinese cuisine. Older Brother, a first-generation Chinese immigrant, sat at the worn-out dining table, surrounded by stacks of job applications and rejection letters. He had arrived in America with hope, seeking a better life for his family, but the reality had proven harsher than he had imagined. As he sifted through the letters, each one bearing the same polite rejection, a newspaper headline caught his eye. It read, "New Chinatown Redevelopment Plan Unveiled." His heart sank as he realized that the community he had come to call home was now being threatened by gentrification, pushing Chinese immigrants further to the margins. Older Brother's frustration and sense of displacement weighed heavily on him. The world outside seemed to view him only as a foreigner, a perpetual outsider. He felt ignored, excluded, and as though others in positions of authority were unconcerned with his struggles and goals. One evening, as he walked to a community meeting hosted at a nearby community center, he overheard statements made disparagingly about him by onlookers who made fun of his accent and discounted his presence. His long-simmering rage over the institutionalized prejudice against Chinese immigrants was fueled by the hurtful statements. At the meeting, Older Brother sat with his fellow residents, whose features displayed a mix of resolve and resignation. The redevelopment proposals, which promised economic prosperity but would destroy Chinatown's cultural heritage, were discussed by the speakers. The desire to fight for the survival of his community and the affirmation of their value raged in Older Brother's heart. When it was his turn to speak, he

rose up from his seat, his voice trembling with a mix of anger and sadness. "We are not mere tokens or commodities to be bought and sold. Our stories, our contributions, and our struggles matter. We deserve respect, dignity, and the right to define our own identities in this country. His impassioned plea echoed through the room, stirring emotions and igniting a spark of hope among his fellow community members. They stood together, determined to reclaim their voices and confront the forces that sought to marginalize them. Even if the obstacles were still great, Older Brother didn't let prejudice overwhelm him. He recognized in himself and his neighborhood the resiliency developed through hardship, a fortitude that could resist even the most trying situations. In this scenario, Older Brother, a personification of the Chinese immigrant experience, is highlighted as he battles prejudice, marginalization, and a persistent identity struggle. He works to break down the social constraints that hold him back and to promote the value of accurate portrayal and cultural preservation through his voice and deeds. Chan also stresses the significance of comprehending the historical background of the prejudice and exclusion that Asian Americans have experienced in the US. Asian immigrants had to contend with a variety of discriminatory laws and regulations throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited Chinese immigration to the US, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. These historical occurrences continue to have an impact on Asian Americans' lives today, and Charles Yu makes numerous references to them in *Interior Chinatown*. In the book, for instance, Willis Wu's father shares tales with him about his own experiences as a Taiwanese immigrant, including the difficulties he encountered in getting employment and being treated differently.

The novel also includes references to the internment of Japanese Americans, such as when in one pivotal scene, the protagonist, Willis Wu, finds himself working as an extra on a popular TV show called "Black and White." The show perpetuates racial stereotypes and

features predominantly white actors, relegating Asian actors to minor roles like "Generic Asian Man" or "Background Oriental Male." During a break in filming, Willis encounters an older Asian American actor named Old Asian Man. Old Asian Man shares his own experiences of working in Hollywood for decades, always confined to playing limited and demeaning roles. He recounts how Asian actors have been historically marginalized and reduced to caricatures, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that reinforce the perception of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. Old Asian Man tells Willis about his own efforts to challenge the status quo and demand better representation. He speaks of the discriminatory practices that have persisted throughout history, including the era of Yellowface in which white actors would don makeup to portray Asian characters, further erasing the presence and humanity of Asian Americans.. By including these historical references, Yu underscores the ongoing impact of discrimination and exclusion on the lives of Asian Americans today. He also highlights the importance of understanding this history in order to work towards greater social justice and equality. Additionally, by connecting the experiences of his characters to these historical events, Yu emphasizes the continuity of the Asian American experience across generations, and the ongoing struggle for civil, political, economic, and social rights. The novel highlights the struggle of the Chinese immigrants to assimilate and integrate into American society while also maintaining their Chinese identity. For instance, Willis, is a second-generation Chinese American who aspires to be a Hollywood actor. However, he is often typecast as a generic Asian character, such as "Generic Asian Man #1," which highlights the racialization of Asian Americans in the media.

In Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown*, he delves into the ongoing struggles faced by Asian Americans in contemporary society, specifically within the entertainment industry. Through the character of Willis Wu, Yu vividly exposes the marginalization and stereotyping of Asian Americans in Hollywood, where they are often confined to limited and stereotypical

roles. Willis Wu, the protagonist, grapples with breaking free from these constraints and yearns for greater recognition and success as an actor.

Furthermore, Chan's article underscores the significance of collective action and solidarity within the Asian American community. Throughout history, Asian Americans have united to challenge discriminatory laws and policies, striving for acknowledgement of their invaluable contributions to American society. This sense of community and shared struggle reverberates within the novel, as Willis Wu finds solace and support from fellow Asian American actors and activists in his quest for improved representation and acknowledgement within Hollywood. The article effectively sheds light on the prolonged and ongoing battle of Asian Americans for equal rights and recognition in the United States, while Yu's novel offers a contemporary portrayal of the persisting challenges faced by this community today.

Moreover, the novel powerfully reveals the dynamics of dominance exerted by the majority culture over marginalized groups. White Americans are portrayed as the dominant culture, while Chinese immigrants are cast as the marginalized group. The novel skillfully satirizes the Orientalism pervasive in Hollywood, which reduces Chinese immigrants to exotic and inferior figures. It emphasizes the homogeneity of the Chinese community, overlooking its inherent diversity in language, culture, and values. In Act IV, Willis poignantly describes the film industry as a realm where everything is commodified, packaged, and sold back to the world, where people's stories, histories, and cultures are transformed into a single, massive industrial product. This critique aptly illuminates the exploitative nature of Hollywood, profiting from the narratives and cultures of marginalized individuals for the sake of entertainment. By weaving together the struggles of Asian Americans for representation and recognition, the novel masterfully exposes the complexities of the entertainment industry and the broader power imbalances within society. It serves as a poignant reminder of the need for continued efforts to dismantle stereotypes, champion equal

rights, and celebrate the diverse voices and experiences within the Asian American community.

Furthermore, postcolonial theory emphasizes the ways in which colonized peoples resist and subvert the dominant culture. Asian immigrants had to contend with a variety of discriminatory laws and regulations throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited Chinese immigration to the US, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. These historical occurrences continue to have an impact on Asian Americans' lives today, and Charles Yu makes numerous references to them in *Interior Chinatown*. In the book, for instance, Willis Wu's father shares tales with him about his own experiences as a Taiwanese immigrant, including the difficulties he encountered in getting employment and being treated differently. As a foundational work in the Asian American activism movement, *"The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s"* by Glenn Omatsu offers insightful perspectives into the difficulties faced by Asian Americans in the struggle against oppression. Asian Americans experience a complicated web of oppression, which he refers to as the "Four Prisons": racial, economic, gender, and sexual oppression. This is an important factor to consider. His analysis of the historical and social circumstances in which Asian Americans have found themselves in the United States (Omatsu) lends credence to this idea. According to him, it is challenging for Asian Americans to experience actual liberation due to the interconnectedness and reciprocal reinforcement of different types of oppression. For Instance, racial prejudice frequently results in economic marginalization, which feeds into the oppression of gender and sexuality. Omatsu highlights the value of forming alliances and coalitions with other oppressed groups in order to address these issues as well as the necessity of challenging the ideological and cultural foundations of oppression. These ideas are pertinent to postcolonialism because they show how Asian Americans are

subjected to oppression and marginalization because of their racial and cultural identities, which are frequently viewed as alien and subordinate to the dominant culture. This is analogous to postcolonialism and show how many people have experienced marginalization and oppression as a result of colonialism and empire. Furthermore, Omatsu's ideas emphasize how critical it is to comprehend how oppression works on several levels and impacts various facets of people's life. This concept is pertinent to Charles Yu's "Interior Chinatown," which examines how cultural preconceptions and expectations define Asian American identity and prevent them from fully participating in American society.

The novel underscores the power of collective action in challenging oppressive structures and highlights the need for solidarity among marginalized groups.

Psychoanalytic theory, on the other hand, can help to unpack the ways in which Willis Wu's personal identity is shaped by his experience of racialization. Asian Americans are viewed as "model minorities" who have successfully blended into American culture, according to Mari Matsuda's "We Will Not Be Used: Are Asian Americans the Racial Bourgeoisie?" She contends that this perception puts Asian Americans in a precarious position within the American racial hierarchy. This impression, however, obscures the systemic racism and prejudice that Asian Americans actually experience. Willis Wu, an Asian American living in Interior Chinatown, continually battles his desire for acceptance and prosperity with his need to play into racial stereotypes. The idea of the "racial bourgeoisie" is examined by Matsuda in relation to Asian Americans living in the United States. According to Matsuda, a class of individuals of color who have attained some degree of prosperity and privilege inside the dominant society, frequently at the expense of other people of color, is known as the racial bourgeoisie. According to Matsuda, the dominant society uses this class to continue to exert power and control over other people of color. Because the book emphasizes the ways in which Asian Americans are frequently

misunderstood and marginalized in American society, this idea is pertinent to Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown*. Willis Wu, the protagonist, is a struggling actor who is constrained by the roles that are open to him because he is Asian American. He frequently has to settle with clichéd parts like "Asian Delivery Guy" or "Kung Fu Master". She demonstrates how Asian Americans who succeed in the dominant society may be utilized to uphold the status quo and create negative stereotypes about other people of color by studying the idea of the racial bourgeoisie. The article contributes to illuminating why these stereotypes endure and why they are so damaging to Asian Americans. In other words, Asian Americans may become involved in the very structures that oppress them if they achieve success in the dominant society. This is shown in *Interior Chinatown*, where Willis Wu frequently has to play to these prejudices in order to thrive as an actor. For example, he is forced to wear a "Chinatown" costume and speak in broken English in order to play the role of "Background Oriental Male." By doing so, he perpetuates the harmful stereotypes that have limited his own opportunities as an actor.

The book *"Racism: From Domination to Hegemony"* by Howard Winant also provides a framework for comprehending how racism functions in modern society. While overt forms of racism have declined, Winant contends that more covert and sneaky manifestations of racism still exist, such as institutionalized discrimination and cultural appropriation. This study is especially pertinent to *Interior Chinatown* because the book discusses how Asian Americans are frequently reduced to crude and insulting stereotypes in the media. Winant contends that racism has changed from an overt form of hegemony to a more covert and systematic form. According to Winant, racism in contemporary society is a structural problem that is deeply ingrained in institutions and social structures. It is not just an issue of personal prejudice. Given that Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown* addresses concerns of race and representation in Hollywood, this concept is especially pertinent to that work. Yu



draws attention to the ways in which Asian Americans are ignored and misrepresented in the media through his portrayal of the character of Willis Wu. As an Asian American actor, Willis has struggled to break out from the few, frequently provocative roles that have been made available to him. This struggle is a reflection of the persistence of racial power structures in both the entertainment business and society at large. Additionally, Winant's theory of hegemonic racism contributes to the explanation of why Asian Americans and other ethnic groups are frequently presented as "model minorities." This description is frequently used to excuse the marginalization of other minorities, especially African Americans. By positioning some racial groups as more successful and deserving than others, the concept of the model minority serves to support the idea of a racial hierarchy (Matsuda). This concept refers to the idea that Asian Americans are a successful minority group that has achieved a high level of education and income in the United States. While this may seem like a positive stereotype, Matsuda argues that it is actually harmful because it places unrealistic expectations on Asian Americans and obscures the ways in which they are still subject to racism and discrimination.

Through the story of Willis Wu, the novel delves into larger themes of identity, assimilation, and representation, challenging the reader's perceptions of what is real and what is scripted. By using a screenplay-style narrative, the book blurs the line between reality and fiction, ultimately asking important questions about the nature of identity, the effects of systemic racism, and the need for representation and inclusion in mainstream media. Using postcolonial theory to analyze the novel, it becomes clear that the story engages with the colonial legacy of America's treatment of Asian Americans. The novel exposes the power dynamics of the dominant culture over the marginalized one, portraying White Americans as the dominant culture and Chinese immigrants as the marginalized group. Through satire and critique, the book also highlights the ways in which Hollywood exploits the stories and

cultures of marginalized people in order to create profitable products for the entertainment industry.

Furthermore, psychoanalytic theory can assist in illuminating how Willis Wu's racialization experience influenced his sense of self. In "We Will Not Be Used: Are Asian Americans the Racial Bourgeoisie?" by Matsuda, the author contends that while frequently being viewed as "model minorities" who have successfully blended into society, Asian Americans actually hold a fragile place in the American racial hierarchy. Willis Wu confronts his Asian American identity head-on in *Interior Chinatown*, continually battles his need for acceptance and success, and is constrained by the parts that are open to him as an Asian American actor. The book "Interior Chinatown" as a whole illustrates the nuanced realities of Asian Americans in modern America. The book provides a comprehensive perspective of the racist experiences of Asian Americans and the ongoing fight for representation and inclusion in mainstream media by combining postcolonial and psychoanalytic theories.

## Works Cited

- Chan, Sucheng. "Asian American Struggles for Civil, Political, Economic, and Social Rights." *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, edited by Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Thomas C. Chen, Rutgers University Press, 2010, pp. 213–38. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bmzn3s.16>. Accessed 3 May 2023.
- Matsuda, Mari. "We Will Not Be Used: Are Asian Americans the Racial Bourgeoisie?" *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, edited by Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Thomas C. Chen, Rutgers University Press, 2010, pp. 558–64. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bmzn3s.32>. Accessed 3 May 2023.
- Omatsu, Glenn. "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s." *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, edited by Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Thomas C. Chen, Rutgers University Press, 2010, pp. 298–330. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bmzn3s.20>. Accessed 7 May 2023.
- Winant, Howard. "Racism: From Domination to Hegemony." *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, edited by Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Thomas C. Chen, Rutgers University Press, 2010, pp. 126–40. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bmzn3s.12>. Accessed 7 May 2023.