Two Hundred Years of Stagnation

by Aiden Etchason

Interior Chinatown by Charles Yu is an award-winning novel following the life of up-and-coming actor Willis Wu, whose goal in life is to become nothing more than "Kung Fu Guy." Charles Yu is a screenwriter and author. *Interior Chinatown* won the National Book Award in 2020. The story follows an often-ignored subject: Asian racism and discrimination. Asian Americans have been in the US for hundreds of years but have never really been regarded as "Americans." The novel brings this uncomfortable and unfortunate conversation to life and explore much discrimination and racism against the Asian American community. Asian Americans like the fictional Willis Wu, his parents, and father's friend Allen Chen are representative of a whole community of people. Their struggles emulate the struggles of generations of Asian Americans--both past and present and give insight into the real-world problems that the Asian American community faces.

Throughout American history there have been many instances of anti-Asian sentiment and actual passed laws aimed to stop Asian Americans. Note the last part of that word: American. Throughout history, when looking at laws and measures aimed against certain people in the community, Americans have been discriminating and putting down…Americans. ChangeLab's Asian American timeline shows that in 1882, Congress, under the direction of President Chester Arthur, passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese workers from America and made it illegal for Chinese immigrants to become U.S. citizens. Fast forward to 1941 during World War II. President Franklin D. Roosevelt created and signed Executive Order 9066 into law, banning Japanese Americans from public spaces and sending them into internment camps.

Willis Wu puts it best, “After two centuries [in America], why are we still not Americans? Why do we keep falling out of the story?” (Yu 251).

According to a timeline of Asian American history by History.com, The first major wave of immigration of people from Asia occurred in the late 1800s. Asian people arrived in boatloads to the U.S. in search and hopes of a better life. Not too long after this wave, many more Asians would migrate to the U.S. to escape persecution and government overreach. Willis Wu’s father, known as “Young Wu” in Act IV of the book is one of those people. He left Taiwan in search of a better, freer life in America. As Yu writes, “Young Wu dreams of the American air. Barbecues, baseball on the radio and in the streets. In his dreams, he arrives on a bright Monday morning, the ship pulling into port, friendly strangers waving him and the others onto shore” (Yu 144). However, for him and millions of other Asian immigrants the reality is much more stark: “Young Wu arrives in the dead of night. He waits in line to have some papers stamped…it is cold…no one is there to greet him” (Yu 144). For me, this goes against everything that I have been taught and seen as a white American boy from the Midwest. I see all these pictures of the boats coming to shore on bright days with multitudes of people eager to help. Instead, this group is processed like a group of livestock off to slaughter. Immigration control is acting as a dominant race, with no intentions of even trying to make a humane process. Young Wu arrives in America and immediately is shipped off to Mississippi, where he is put in a group home with five other Asian immigrants, one of whom, Allen Chen, is from Taiwan as well.

That leads into the next point: an in depth look at Allen Chen and his role for the novel. As mentioned earlier, Allen is one of the housemates of Young Wu. He, like Young Wu, is Taiwanese. His character only exists textually for a couple pages, but his role is so much bigger. One night, Allen is brutally attacked and called a “jap” by the man who attacked him. Allen goes

on to survive and becomes successful. However, later on in his life, he overdoses on sleep medication and dies.

Melissa A. Liu, et. al. of The American Psychology Association and The Society for the Study of Culture, Ethnicity, and Race report that discrimination and poor mental health go hand in hand. They say, "research has demonstrated that increases in racial discrimination lead to greater alcohol use risk, depression, and anxiety symptoms" (Liu et. al. 2). Allen becomes an extremely successful person and creates a name for himself. As Yu describes it, "When [Allen] is fifty-one, he is granted a patent, which turns out to have a wide range of industrial applications…The patent is acquired by General Electric for almost three million dollars…the first of several patents Allen will go on to acquire" (Yu 149). Although he is extremely successful and seemingly wealthy, Allen still struggles as a result of the attack against him on that fateful night years before he received the patent for his great work. Even though he has succeeded in a multitude of ways, he still is hurt so much by what happened to him that he ends up killing himself.

Allen Chen is representative of a whole number of people who have been attacked or discriminated against because of their race. Although his time in the text is limited, his message very well plays on. Through my interpretation, I see him as any activist or movement in history. The movement begins somewhere. Allen is not around for much of the book, and people are not protesting his death out in the streets. However, he represents a large culture of people who have been discriminated against, beaten, and taken to their very end because they were accepted by their own people. Allen almost is the present day Asian American. He is in the spotlight for a short period of time, but represents a large message and problem at hand. While Allen is nowhere near one of the main characters of this text, his message and idea he represents certainly goes on.

In Young Wu's early goings in America, he and his roommates would share stories and compare the names that they were called each day: "All five of Wu's housemates are called names. They compare names. Chink, of course, and also slope, jap, nip, gook…Chinaman" (Yu 146). No matter how hard the men try to fit in and work to become fully Americanized, they are always known and referred to as Chinamen. But the positive attitudes of the men lead them to think nothing of these interactions or worry about them. However, by being called close to everything other than an American, the men are experiencing "othering." Othering is "judging those who are different from ourselves as inferior" (Tyson 267). The people who interact with the men at the time are in Mississippi, a state notorious for racism, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. Because the men are different from the average white Southern American, they are considered inferior and called names.

When Young Wu comes to America, he is there as a graduate student, a smart man. He finishes his time at Mississippi State University with a 3.94 GPA and is accepted into a doctoral program at UCLA. After his mother becomes sick, though, he quits the doctoral program halfway through in hopes of finding a job; "He looks for work in his field. In other fields…After one particularly bad interview, the recruiter offers some unsolicited advice. 'No one really wants to hire you,' he says, 'It's your accent.' 'I don't have an accent,' Wu replies. 'Exactly. It's weird.' So Wu learns to do an accent, and then gets a job…washing dishes, busing tables. In Chinatown" (Yu 150). Instead of fulfilling his dreams as a doctor and using his knowledge and opportunity to his advantage, Young Wu settles for being Kung Fu Guy and it leads him to the same place every other Asian American in that community is: The SRO. Young Wu represents not only Asian American immigrants, but immigrants of America as a whole. All they want to do is fit in and become American, but the dominating race wants nothing to do with them. Hwang's above

theory is played out perfectly by Young Wu. Young Wu searches and searches for a job with qualifications much higher than the average person. But because of the internalized racism that he is experiencing, he minimizes himself in hopes of fitting in.

In a similar way, Willis Wu conforms to what the majority race wants him to do to "fit in." Wu is every bit of an American citizen than the next person, yet his number one goal is to become Kung Fu Guy. And, in his quest to become Kung Fu Guy, he degrades himself in order to hopefully make some sort of progress. Wu goes through moments in script when he is talking perfect English and then changes to a broken English to sound more Asian. For example, Wu has many moments of speaking in the script text style of the book and is speaking in perfect English during those moments. Then, when put into his role for the show, he speaks in choppy, broken up English, like this example before the speaking role of Wu in Black and White, "You can't believe it. How much fun they're having. How little they care" (Yu 82). Then, when in character for Black and White he says, "No. He would never doing a crime" (Yu 83). In order to fit the mold of the dominant race, Wu degrades himself and ultimately degrades his own race to fit in.

Throughout the novel, Wu represents the Asian community as a whole. People in the Asian community have experienced racism for generations, and just stayed content and comfortable where they are, even if it hurts. Everyday racism occurs when the minority race "are routinely devalued as they go about their daily lives" (Tyson 228). This definition from Lois Tyson is exactly what Willis Wu and the Asian American community experience daily. They live in a society that was designed for them to fail.

In a much larger role, Willis Wu, the main character of *Interior Chinatown*, experiences racism and discrimination from others and even from himself. Wu grows up in Chinatown in the SRO (Single Room Occupancy) surrounded by other Asian Americans. His whole life, Wu wants

nothing else than to become “Kung Fu Guy.” By this belief and goal, Wu is experiencing and dealing with “internalized racism.” Internalized racism is the “conscious or unconscious belief pressed upon them by a racist society that they are inferior to whites” (Tyson 229). Wu’s only goal is to be Kung Fu Guy. Ask any young white boy who aspires to be an actor, and they will tell you they wish to be some main character, not the background guy who does Kung Fu. Wei-Chin Hwang, from the Department of Psychological Science at Claremont McKenna College puts it nicely: “Blindly accepting the dominant group’s views facilitates the development of a psychological false consciousness, where minorities minimize, devalue, and denigrate their heritage to assimilate and fit in so that they can avoid or lessen judgment from the dominant group” (Hwang 598). This occurs throughout *Interior Chinatown*.

With that idea in mind, enter Black and White, the show within *Interior Chinatown*. Black and White plays on many of the common tropes and stereotypes seen in American film and television and those of contemporary crime shows. Throughout the show, characters’ names are listed, and they are purposefully listed in discriminatory and hateful ways. Some examples of character names include Generic Asian Man, Old Asian Man, White Lady Cop, and Black Dude

Cop. These names are not only the fictional character names given to the characters of Black and White; they represent the ways in which minority groups are discriminated against daily and the generic names society has narrowed them down to.

The effect that these stereotypical names and callings have on the minority races is disappointing. According to Stephanie L. Haft, Iris B. Mauss, and Qing Zhou, members of the

Department of Psychology at the University of California Berkely, “98% of Asian American college students reported experiencing at least one act of discrimination in the past year,” and continues later to mention, “anxiety symptoms may be especially salient psychological outcomes to evaluate in relation to racial discrimination in Asian American young adults” (Haft, Mauss, and Zhou 2). These names and discriminations hurt people in many ways. *Interior Chinatown* gives us the example of Allen and the names that are used to label the characters in Black and White.

That last thought leads into the next point of *Interior Chinatown* replicating present day discrimination against Asian Americans. As mentioned many times throughout the paper, the characters in *Interior Chinatown* represent people of color and those in the minority community in real life. The book was written right before the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. During that time, protests to stop Asian hate in America grew to a level never seen before as a result of members of the Asian American community being attacked because of COVID. This idea spread from people like President Donald Trump calling the virus the “China virus” and blaming those in the Asian community for the worldwide pandemic. In an interview, Charles Yu touches on the hate seen during that time, saying, “The intersection of this book as fiction and what was happening in the world was upsetting but not entirely surprising. Xenophobia against immigrants has always existed,” and continues by mentioning, “You don’t need to pick your timing that well for it to be a relevant topic, but it did afford the opportunity for conversations I had never had in public and in private” (The Seattle Times). Yu’s perspective in this point is quite helpful and interesting to read and dissect. Although the book was written before the national media was making daily stories about racism and discrimination against the Asian and immigrant

community, Charles Yu was hard at work creating *Interior Chinatown*. His book was written at the perfect time, if a book about racism and discrimination can have a perfect time, to give even more perspective as to how those in the minority community may feel. Charles Yu's characters almost give an expert opinion and way to look at the attacks and hate speech against minority communities from the perspective of those within. American culture makes jokes and stereotypes about the Asian community, Americans consume that content and see it in film, television, and social media which, in turn, makes discriminating and attacking the Asian American race feel easier and "okay" since pop culture does it.

In an op-ed for the Los Angeles Times in March of 2021, Charles Yu also wrote, "I think about this: 3,795 incidents reported from March 19, 2020, through Feb. 28…3,795 lives disrupted, devalued or even destroyed…Someone to spit on, curse at, shun, dehumanize, attack…In doing so, they erase all of it: the years, decades of memories, love, work, service. They erase the stories of these Americans" (Yu). *Interior Chinatown* is an inside look at what the Asian American goes through day by day, and the effects that racism and discrimination have on a person or people within a community.

One of the 3,795 attacks that Yu references even happened to an 84-year-old Thai American: "In San Francisco, an 84-year old Thai man died after being assaulted while walking. The reported increase in violence and harassment experienced by Asian Americans has been attributed to beliefs that Asian people are responsible for spreading COVID-19" (James, Hansen 2). However, this issue is not unique to just modern-day America; In 1982, Vincent Chin was killed by white men in Detroit, Michigan. The reason the two white men who killed Chin cited

for killing him was that their unemployment was caused by Japanese car imports. Just as Allen Chen was attacked in *Interior Chinatown* just for being Asian, so too are people in real life America. Not just people…*Americans* are being attacked by Americans for looking different than someone else.

Asian Americans, although being in this country for over 200 years, are still attacked and seen as others by the popular American culture. Whether in books, television, film, or even in real life as shown by the attacks on Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Americans have made little to no progress, by no large fault of their own. *Interior Chinatown* gives readers an inside look into the struggles that Asian Americans experience and gives an insight into the struggle of Asian Americans in the U.S. Even though Asians first came to America 200 years ago, their struggle to just fit in feels as though it has no end, and that the work for change and progress is just beginning.

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