

Interior Chinatown: Research Essay

by Mariah Crawford

Interior Chinatown by Charles Yu is a satirical novel that explores themes of identity, race, and representation through the lens of Hollywood and Asian American Culture. The novel follows the character Willis Wu, an aspiring actor, who struggles against the limited and stereotypical roles available to him as an Asian American male. According to a review by The New York Times, the novel is a “mind-bending and genre-twisting journey into the Chinese American experience that is as witty as it is profound, as heartrending as it is hilarious, and which tries to make sense of a country’s troubled history of race while imagining a better future” (Kakutani). The book presents a critique of the stereotypes and generic depictions of Asian people that are pervasive in mainstream media and popular culture. Yu critically examines the consequences of these stereotypes and challenges readers to reflect on the complexities of cultural identity, representation, and assimilation within the context of Interior Chinatown.

Presentation of Stereotypes

One of the ways that these stereotypes are presented in the book is through the dialogue of characters. For example, in one scene, Willis Wu's mother tells him, "You have to be a good little Chinese boy. Study hard, be obedient, don't make trouble" (Yu, 13). This statement reflects the stereotype of Asian Americans as passive and obedient, rather than assertive or independent. The novel uses the formatting of a screenplay to highlight the ways in which Asian Americans are often reduced to "types" in popular media. As one character explains to Willis, "The thing is, they don't want you to be a person. They want you to be a type. The guy who delivers the food. The kung fu master. The math whiz" (Yu, 102). This statement underscores the limited range of roles available to Asian American actors, as well as the ways in which these roles perpetuate

harmful stereotypes. These characters are often portrayed as one-dimensional representations of Asian people. This creates harmful and inaccurate depictions of their culture, language, mannerisms, and experiences.

In addition, the novel depicts characters who have internalized these stereotypes and struggle to break free from them. For example, Willis's father is a believer in the "model minority" myth, which positions Asian Americans as successful and high-achieving due to their cultural values and work ethic. As Willis reflects, "I know that in his mind, the model minority stereotype is supposed to be a compliment, but it doesn't feel like one to me. It feels like a burden" (Yu, 134). This passage illustrates the ways in which stereotypes can be internalized and perpetuated even within a family. This is depicted with a variety of techniques to present stereotypes in a critical and thought-provoking way, highlighting their damaging effects on individuals and communities. According to a study conducted by 3 collegiate students, "Stereotypes can have profound negative effects on the individuals targeted by them. They can lead to feelings of marginalization, self-doubt, and low self-esteem. Additionally, stereotypes can perpetuate bias and discrimination, limiting opportunities for advancement and contributing to social inequality within communities" (Dovido, Kawakami, Gaertner 02).

Depictions of Asian Women

The book also critiques the ways in which Asian women are often exoticized and fetishized by people who are not Asian. The novel also reinforces the stereotype of Asian women as sexual objects through the character of "Dragon Lady," who is a seductive and manipulative femme fatale. The novel critiques this stereotype by highlighting the ways in which it is used to justify violence against Asian women. According to an article published by the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF), "Stereotypes about Asian women as submissive,

exotic, and hypersexualized have been perpetuated in media and society, contributing to the objectification and dehumanization of Asian women. These stereotypes not only foster a culture of fetishization but also create a justification for violence, as individuals may perceive Asian women as disposable and lacking agency or autonomy." For example, in one scene, Willis watches as an Asian woman is murdered on a television show, and he reflects, "The thing is, the show isn't really about her. It's about the guy who killed her. And why? Because she was sexy, exotic, different" (Yu, 102).

The stereotype of Asian women as exotic and submissive is then challenged in the novel through the character of Karen, who is Willis's love interest. Karen is depicted as a strong and independent woman who challenges Willis to think more critically about his place in the world. For example, in one scene, Karen tells Willis, "I don't want to be some mystical Asian woman. I just want to be a regular person" (Yu, 109). The novel also illustrates the pressures that Asian women face to conform to certain beauty standards. For example, in one scene, Willis's mother tells him, "Girls should be pretty. Thin. Light-skinned. With big eyes" (Yu, 2020, p. 13). This statement highlights the ways in which Asian women are often objectified and valued primarily for their physical appearance.

Moreover, "Interior Chinatown" presents a nuanced and complex portrayal of Asian women and challenging some stereotypes. The novel highlights the ways in which these stereotypes can be damaging and limiting, while also acknowledging the realities that many Asian women face in navigating a world that often reduces them to narrow and limiting representations.

Psychoanalytic Theory in Interior Chinatown

Psychoanalytic theory is a framework for understanding human behavior and experience that emphasizes the role of unconscious desires and conflicts. This theory can be applied to the novel to shed light on the psychological motivations and conflicts of the characters, as well as to explore the broader themes of identity, power, and oppression.

One concept of psychoanalytic theory is the idea of the unconscious mind. According to this theory, individuals are often driven by unconscious desires and impulses that are hidden from their conscious awareness. In *Interior Chinatown*, the character of Willis Wu can be seen as an example of this. Willis is driven by a desire to be recognized as a fully realized human being, rather than as a two-dimensional stereotype. However, this desire is often obscured by his unconscious fear of failure and his belief that he is only valuable when he conforms to certain expectations. This conflict between his conscious desires and unconscious fears drives much of the plot of the novel.

YU explores the consequences of stereotypes on individuals and their sense of self. He illustrates how continuous exposure to these stereotypes affects Willis Wu's perception of his own identity and potential, compelling him to internalize the limited roles society assigns to Asian Americans. The novel poses critical questions about the psychological toll of assimilation and the erasure of cultural heritage that often accompanies it, demonstrating the lasting impact of stereotypes on self-esteem, aspirations, and personal growth.

In addition to these individual-level conflicts, psychoanalytic theory can also be applied to the broader social and political themes of the novel. For example, the novel can be seen as a critique of the power dynamics at play in Hollywood and in American society more broadly. According to psychoanalytic theory, individuals are often driven by a desire for power and control. In the novel, we see the differences in power dynamics based on the roles available to

Asian American people. They are often limited to playing stereotypical roles and are not given the same opportunities as their white counterparts. The protagonist of the novel, Willis Wu, struggles to break out of his role as “Background Oriental Male” and achieve his dream of becoming “Kung Fu Guy.”

Overall, psychoanalytic theory can be a useful framework for understanding the psychological motivations and conflicts of the characters in "Interior Chinatown," as well as for exploring the broader themes of identity, power, and oppression in the novel. By analyzing the unconscious desires and conflicts of the characters, psychoanalytic theory can shed light on the complex and nuanced ways in which individuals are shaped by their social and cultural contexts.

African American Theory in Interior Chinatown

African American theory is a framework for understanding the experiences and perspectives of African Americans, and the ways in which their identities and experiences are shaped by systemic racism and oppression. While Interior Chinatown focuses primarily on the experiences of Asian Americans, African American theory can still be applied to the novel to explore the ways in which systemic racism and oppression operate in American society and shape the experiences of people of color more broadly.

A major aspect of African American theory is the idea of double consciousness, which refers to the experience of being forced to see oneself both through one's own eyes and through the eyes of others. This concept can be applied to Interior Chinatown through the character of Willis Wu. Willis is acutely aware of the ways in which he is perceived by others as a two-dimensional stereotype, and he is constantly struggling to reconcile this external perception with his own sense of self. This conflict between internal and external perceptions of identity can be seen as a manifestation of double consciousness.

Another concept used in African American theory is the idea of intersectionality, which refers to the ways in which multiple forms of oppression (such as racism, sexism, and homophobia) intersect to shape the experiences of individuals and communities. This concept can be applied to "Interior Chinatown" through the experiences of Asian American women in the novel. Asian American women face unique forms of oppression and marginalization, including hyper sexualization and objectification, that intersect with their experiences of racism and xenophobia. This intersectionality is highlighted through the character of "Dragon Lady," who embodies the hypersexualized and exoticized stereotype of Asian women.

Additionally, African American theory emphasizes the importance of resistance and agency in the face of systemic oppression. According to Asian Americans Advancing Justice, "Resistance is essential in challenging the systemic oppression faced by Asian American communities. It serves as a powerful tool for reclaiming agency, asserting cultural pride, and advocating for justice and equality. By actively challenging stereotypes, speaking out against discrimination, and organizing for systemic change, Asian Americans contribute to a larger movement for social justice and help create a more inclusive and equitable society" (AAAJ 2021). This concept can be applied to Interior Chinatown through the character of Willis Wu. Despite the external pressures and limitations imposed upon him by Hollywood and American society more broadly, Willis is able to resist and challenge these forces through his own agency and creativity. For example, he rewrites his own script and uses his imagination to imagine a world in which Asian Americans are fully realized human beings rather than two-dimensional stereotypes.

African American theory can be a useful framework for exploring the themes of identity, power, and oppression in Interior Chinatown. By analyzing the ways in which systemic racism

and oppression operate in the novel and shape the experiences of Asian Americans, the theory can shed light on the complex and nuanced ways in which different forms of oppression intersect and shape the lives of people of color in American society. Furthermore, by emphasizing the importance of resistance and agency, the theory can provide a framework for imagining more just and equitable futures for all marginalized communities

Overall, *Interior Chinatown* presents a scathing critique of the stereotypes and generic depictions of Asian people that are pervasive in mainstream media and popular culture. Yu offers a profound critique of these depictions by shedding light on their origins, exploring their psychological impact on individuals. It also encourages a deeper understanding and appreciation of the complexities and diversity of Asian American culture. Yu prompts readers to reflect on the societal and systemic factors that reinforce stereotypes. Through metafictional elements, such as the TV show script excerpts throughout the novel, Yu emphasizes the nature of representation and how media perpetuates and reinforces harmful stereotypes. By examining the mechanisms that preserve these portrayals, the novel encourages readers to critically analyze their own consumption of media and the role they play in perpetuating stereotypes.

Works Cited

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