**_Interior Chinatown_ Analysis**

**by Jocelin Pierre**

Through his novel *'Interior Chinatown'*, Charles Yu calls attention to the many barriers that Asian Americans face in their attempts of being socially accepted in America. Through the character Willis Wu, Yu gives a perspective of what its like to grow up in a society that doesn't accept you. The dream of a peaceful integration is short lived, as Asian Americans are targets of racism, stereotypes, hate crimes, and misrepresentation within the United States. When faced with this kind of treatment within a country where you are the minority or overall, an immigrant, it creates a feeling of unwelcomeness. While many people might only think of racism as explicit acts of abuse or violence, there are other "quieter" forms that can be damaging too. when the sense of not being accepted is expressed clearly through your community, it becomes a gateway to your own self rejection and or self-hatred all stemming from racism. Yu presents internalized racism, intra-racial racism, and interracial racism within his novel through the conflicts and experiences that Willis Wu is faced with throughout his journey of becoming more then the limitations that society placed on him, and that he in two placed on himself.

Medium.com defines Internalized racism as the result of the implantation of racist stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies by white society about one's own racial group. The result of this implantation can lead to feelings of self-doubt, disgust, and disrespect for one's race and oneself. Most of this implantation, or brainwashing, starts from the media but is repeated by society at large. The result of this implantation of these ideas is self-hate. A typical result is mocking your own accent, and perpetuating stereotypes about your own race (A & M).

In a study done by Effua E. Sosoo, the dangerous effect of internalized racism is further discussed. Racial discrimination is the leading cause of internalized racism, which has a direct

connection to depressive and anxiety symptom distress. One explanation for these relations is that internalized racism may lead to internalized stereotypes which, in turn, lead to sadness, anxious arousal, and decreases in self-esteem ( Sosoo ).

Throughout the story we are about to see Willis Wu is somebody who is subject to internalized racism. Wu is constantly patronizing his physical, Wu brushes over his wishes to exchange his soft and delicate facial features for something more ridged and less "Asian". Wu's desire to look more American really stems from wanting a sense of belonging. "You wish your face was more—more, something. You don't know what. Maybe not more. Less. Less flat. Less delicate. More rugged. Your jawline more defined. This face that feels like a mask, that has never felt quite right on you. That reminds you, at odd times, and often after two to four drinks, that you're Asian. You are Asian! Your brain forgets sometimes. But then your face reminds you." ( Yu, ). Wu expressing this desire for a "less Asian" appearance also is insight that he might have low self-esteem when it comes to presenting himself to the public. He wants to feel like he is more than just a generic Asian American man living in the SROs with the rest of the Asian Americans in his community. "You always seem to have just arrived and yet never seem to have actually arrived. You're here, supposedly, in a new land full of opportunity, but somehow have gotten trapped in a pretend version of the old country. ( Yu, )." Wu is also caught mocking his own accent when he finally gets a chance to get some screen time within the *"Black & White"* show. While doing this other Asian actors on the set would try to hide their disgust and disappointment with him for playing into that stereotype.

Yu also calls attention to the negative effects that internalized racism can have on Asian American through the story that is shared regarding Allen Chen. Despite Chen becoming wealthy and successful with a loving family, he couldn't seem to shake the feeling of being ill at ease

within the United States and eventually takes his own life at the age of 56. It is hard to live joyfully in a society that will continue to reject you. Not only did Chen suffer physically due to the past trauma he's encountered from his assault he experienced in college, but Chen also was suffering mentally as maybe he felt that no matter what he archives within himself and for his family, to the outside world he will always and forever be just a "Jap" or a "China man". Living with that mindset for years is bound to develop a sense of depression. A quote shared by older brother later within the trial scenes of the book can attest to rejection that Asian Americans feel because they are rejected as "real Americans" because they don't appear as such. "when you think about American, what color do you see? white? black? We (the Chinese) have been here 200 years....the German, the Dutch, the Italian, they came here in the turn of century; they are Americans. Why doesn't this face ("yellow") register as American? Is it because we make the story too complicated? ( Yu, )".

Dr. Richard Q. Shin, a professor at the University of Maryland, shares his experiences of working to unlearn internalized racism over the course of his life in a 2022 YouTube interview with Spoken Project. His story highlights the gendered ways in which Asian American men are inundated with unique racist stereotypes and how these experiences can have a very harmful impact on one's self- esteem, identity, and mental health. Dr. Shin also shares how his younger brother, who committed suicide, was also impacted by internalized racism. Shin discusses past conversations that he had with his brother on how Asian American men would be devalued within society and it felt as if they were stripped away from their membership as men. Shin continues the conversation about his brother sharing the fact that his brother became invested in bodybuilding as a form to mask the "brokenness"/ "sadness" he was feeling deep down inside. He also shares the importance of normalizing and validating experiences of internalized racism

and the critical need to find people who support you. “At age 28 I should’ve shed myself of my internalized racism, I should feel great and no longer have these feelings of self-hatred and insecurity but The personal experience with this makes me understand that it’s a lifetime process” (Spoken Project).

Another great interview that serves as a testament to the concepts of internalized racism involves Korean American song writer Eric Nam. Nam did an interview with Bloomberg Quicktake in 2020 talking about how “the thing about internalized racism, and microaggressions, and small casual forms of racism is that it is very hard sometimes to notice it. And its very hard to recognize it, call it out, and try to change it because it can seem so inconsequential… because we grow up with it, from such a young age, it becomes internalized and becomes normalized” ( Bloomberg Quicktake ). Nam goes on to discuss what was going on in the Asian American communities at the time during the pandemic and how hate crimes were increasing as a result of the negative label that was placed on Asians at this time ( Bloomberg ).

Wu displays the idea of intraracial racism by expressing the different kinds of Asianness and which kinds were deemed successful. The symbol of success at the time was being casted as “Kung Fu Guy,” it was the most important role at the time opposed to all the generic, stereotypical, background roles Asian Americans were casted for. Everyone in Wu’s community aspired to play that role. “Bruce Lee was proof: not all Asian Men were doomed to a life of being Generic. If there was even one guy who had made it, it was at least theoretically possible for the rest. But easy cases make bad law, and Bruce Lee proved too much. He was a living, breathing video game boss-level, a human cheat code, an idealized avatar of Asian-ness and awesomeness permanently set on Expert difficulty” ( Yu, ). Wu continues his observation on the desirable Asian feature by introducing the concept of older brother. Bruce Lee was the man, the myth, the

legend, the guy that was worshipped and older brother was who you could grow up to be if you were lucky. The guy with good hair, above average height, and athletic. “He’s five eleven and three-quarters. — Which, for the record, is the perfect height for an Asian dude ( Yu, ).” This mentioning of these desirable features in appearance is the same as colorism within the African American community, by which some African Americans would desire lighter skin or observations dealing with the size of their lips, nose, etc. would be made. Wu also directs attention to Karen and her mixed-race attractiveness, “Able to pass in any situation as may be required,” she says. “I get it all. Brazilian, Filipina, Mediterranean, Eurasian. Or just a really tan, White girl with exotic looking eyes. Everywhere I go, people think I’m one of them. They want to claim me for their tribe” ( Yu, ).

Charles Yu did an interview with PBS Newshour in 2021 and touched in the topics of interracial conflict. Yu recalls growing up and only seeing Asian represented through martial artist characters and restaurant owners within film. Having that be the only representation of Asian culture created a cultural invisibility to someone’s consciousness. “It creates this alternate version of reality, like seeing that over and over again I think can’t help but enforce this idea that these Asians are not part of the main story of America, in fact they aren’t really Americans because when we see them, they are often casted as foreign” (PBS Newshour). Yu continues to discuss the hate crimes that took place during the pandemic. “For me it’s just a reflection of the fact that, to some extent, Asian Americans still aren’t seen as fully American” (PBS Newshour). Yu closes out the interview stating that his book is about a background guy who wants to be a part of the show and have his own story. Which I translated it to Asian Americans just want to be accepted at the end of the day. They want to live out their American dream and finally be able to identify themselves as Americans, instead of being looked at as the outcast.

The final concept of African American theory that I would like to make a connection with is the interracial conflict. Interracial conflict occurs between individuals of different races. We see this occur within the last act of the book. Willis and Miles get into an interracial competition where they try to prove they are the more oppressed one of the two. Miles and older brother both point out how this conflict between Asians and African Americans just keep both demographics down compared to their white counterparts. We are able to see Willis judging himself and within that judgment, he becomes self-aware of his contribution to keeping himself within boundaries set for him. He is able to break free in the end in hopes of being something more than “Kung Fu Guy”.

Eventually Willis Wu was able to become more enlightened on the “quieter” forms of racism that are present by the end of the novel. Even though he is reaching this stage of self-realization later in life, it’s not to late for him to change the path and go against the limitations he himself as well as society placed on him. Now that he is more aware of the bigger picture, he will be able to beat the systemic racism that is present within the SROs of Chinatown and the poverty that was once his inevitable doom. He can become more than just “Kung Fu Guy” and he can start being the parent to his daughter that he never had for himself. The process obviously won’t take a day, Wu probably has his fair share of trauma, but it is the first step to properly integrating. Once he can accept himself as someone greater than he can start working to become someone greater.

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