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Introduction

Race, Sex, and the Chinese Diaspora in American Film

The Chinese Diaspora on American Screens: Race, Sex, and Cinema looks at issues of race and sexuality as central concerns in cinema generated by and about Chinese communities in America from the mid-1990s to the present. Examining media works from the United States and Canada as well as transnational coproductions, the book ventures beyond commercial cinema to explore documentaries, experimental films, and hybrid and digital forms that use different aesthetic idioms to discuss the Chinese experience in America. Interspersed with chapters focusing on the textual analysis of specific films are interviews with filmmakers, authors, and others involved in Chinese American screen culture.

The chapters that follow highlight the depiction of the Chinese in American cinema in relation to the multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural mix that defines the Asian experience in diaspora. The focus herein, then, is not on the ethnic Chinese in isolation but rather on how film depicts Chinese people in relation to other ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities. As I point out in *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*,[1] since the silent era the American commercial film industry has been enthralled by stories involving interracial romance. While maintaining a gender-racial hierarchy with white, Anglo-American men firmly at the top, these films contain contradictory sentiments about race, gender, and sexuality that question the neat division of the races and the assumption of male dominance in America.

In the wake of the civil rights movement and the changes in immigration laws in the 1960s, filmmakers began to explore the role of Asian Americans in the United States in more nuanced ways. With the concomitant growth of

American independent film and Asian American cinema, space began to open for new voices on Chinese America to emerge on-screen. Many of these filmmakers returned to the topic of interracial relations but from a distinctly different perspective. Aligned with the characteristics of what Hamid Naficy might call an "accented cinema,"[2] these screen depictions provide a very different view of what it means to be Chinese in America. The heterosexual norms associated with the Hollywood romance find a queer expression in stories from the Chinese diaspora. The rigid rules governing the depiction of Hollywood's idea of the Confucian patriarchal family break down as Chinese families mutate to include not only interracial branches and LGBT and queer relations but also ties to other places, from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) to Europe, Australia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. The European-Asian binary for example, opens up to the very different relationship between African Americans and the Chinese community. The separation between the black-white dyad and the Chinese community has collapsed, and historical bonds forged during the civil rights era reemerge on-screen as mainstream hits rather than ghettoized "cult" favorites.

Hollywood's global domination may be undisputed, but it does not continue without economic, aesthetic, and ideological competition. From the rise of the American independents to the continuing global importance of European art cinema, world screens accommodate more than commercial fare, and to stay viable, Hollywood relentlessly seeks new markets, larger audiences, and reliable profits. It seems far from coincidental that Hollywood's support for Chinese filmmakers and performers such as Ang Lee, Jet Li, Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-Fat, and John Woo should coincide with the opening of the Mainland Chinese market to more coproductions and modest increases in non-Chinese movie screenings. Ironically, these filmmakers with transnational connections see Hollywood as a way out of what may be a politically and/or economically uncertain future in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or the PRC. Following the same economic and political vicissitudes that sent them to Hollywood in the 1990s, some in this cohort have returned to Asia to take advantage of growing opportunities for coproductions between Hong Kong and the PRC.

As I point out in my book *From Tian'anmen to Times Square: Transnational China and the Chinese Diaspora on Global Screens, 1989–1997*,[3] the 1989 suppression of the protests in Beijing fueled the Chinese diaspora and inspired many filmmakers to look at global Chinese politics more critically. The period from the mid-1990s to the early years of the twenty-first century has been marked by enormous political, social, economic, and cultural transformations that have had a tremendous impact on the film culture of global China as well as on Hollywood, Asian American, and Chinese diasporic/nomadic filmmakers. Momentous changes gripped the Chinese globally. The Deng era ended, the Guomindang (KMT) lost power and regained it in Taiwan, Hong Kong began to adjust to its new status as a special administrative region (SAR) under Tung Chee-Hwa and later Donald Tsang, and the circulation of ethnic Chi-

nese around the world continued. The Asian financial crisis of 1997 sent many of the economies of the region into a downward spiral, with unemployment figures reaching new highs in places like Singapore and Hong Kong, and the banking "tsunami" of 2008 continues to trouble the recovering region.

As the PRC entered the World Trade Organization and hosted the 2008 Olympics in Beijing and Shanghai's 2010 World Expo, new pressures came to bear on its human rights record, labor practices, and legal structures. Its continued economic growth occasioned more pronounced class divisions, elevated crime levels, labor exploitation, and social malaise. The severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) crisis highlighted this negative side to social change by underscoring the lack of communication between the PRC and the rest of Greater China (particularly Taiwan), the failure of a transnational Chinese public sphere to deal adequately with a life-threatening situation, the decay of the public health system and social services in an increasingly privatized Chinese economy, and the fragile nature of the economic and personal ties that make up global China.

While the forces of globalization gave rise to economic and social crises during this period, transnational contacts also enabled certain segments of the ethnic Chinese community to cross borders in order to advocate for political reform, social change, or cultural innovation. The importance of these lines of communication for feminist and queer communities within the Chinese-speaking world became more pronounced, with increased World Wide Web presence; more Internet contacts; and the growing transnational circulation of DVDs, VCDs, and other digital video materials. Chinese youth continued to take advantage of the wealth of options open to them to craft an identity distinct from the values and sense of self associated with their parents. The Chinese cultural sphere expanded and influenced other global culture industries—most notably, Hollywood—and increasingly porous cultural borders created enormous changes within American and international screen culture, from art cinema to mass commercial forms. However, the legacy of colonialism, racism, and class antagonisms continued to be seen in America and elsewhere.

The chill of the "war on terror" has dramatically changed the world since 9/11, updating geopolitical configurations after the end of the Cold War. It makes sense, then, that one of the first responses to 9/11 from Chinese film culture should come from Evans Chan, a diasporic independent filmmaker who is based in New York City and Hong Kong. *Bauhinia* (2002) tells the story of a young Chinese film student contemplating an abortion while making a documentary about the PRC's one-child policy. During filming, the airplanes struck the World Trade Center, and Chan incorporated 9/11 into the narrative, skewing the story away from the PRC's policies into a contemplation of personal security, political responsibility, and another consideration of the meaning of "human rights." Although Chan sees the film as an "elegy" to the victims and survivors,[4] it depicts the escalation of anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric

in America, and subsequent films involving the Chinese diaspora consider this as well (see Chapter 2).

Ethnic Chinese filmmakers and performers may command a more prominent place on American screens in recent years, but they still face ethnic marginalization, racist ghettoization, and limitations based on gender and sexual orientation. However, in the digital age, screen cultures have expanded, and there has also been an explosion of minority voices on smaller video, computer, and mobile phone screens. Taking this motion picture presence into account, this book moves from Hollywood star vehicles and transnational coproductions to Asian American independent features and experimental shorts. The Chinese on American screens, then, inhabit a liminal space between Hollywood's response to the "rise of China" and the changing face of Chinese America, transformed by newer immigrants, so-called "flexible citizens,"[5] and closer ties to other places in the Chinese diaspora no longer cordoned off by Cold War hostilities. Chinese American filmmakers trace their ancestry in America, claim their stake in America as a new homeland, or take pride in their ability to hover between countries without committing to specific ethnic or national identities. Generational and gender differences meet with a range of sexual orientations, class positions, educational levels, and personal ambitions.

Moving from notions of the representation of the Chinese on Hollywood screens to the power of Chinese Americans to craft their own images outside the commercial system requires an understanding of the various ways the ethnic Chinese in America position themselves within a wider diasporic experience. The concept of "diaspora" now extends beyond the biblical dispersal of the Jewish people after the conquest of Israel to include various scatterings of people who may not maintain the longing to return to the homeland of the exile or the dream of assimilation of the immigrant. Because of race, ethnicity, language, religion, or other differences, those in diaspora cultivate a distinct identity and may have closer ties with other, similar communities around the world than with any "homeland." In fact, they may be multiple émigrés, moving from Mainland China, for example, to colonial Hong Kong or Malaya and on to the Caribbean or Canada over generations before settling, for the present, in America.

Within diaspora, identity becomes an issue (and sometimes a burden). The same filmmaker, performer, or fictional character may be, at various points, a Chinese exile, a Hong Kong émigré, an American immigrant, a mainlander, a Taiwanese, a Cantonese speaker, a Mandarin speaker, a Hokkien speaker, a Hakka or non-Han Chinese, a sojourner, a citizen or naturalized citizen, an overseas Chinese, a Chinese American, an Asian American, a "majority" Han, or a "minority" from elsewhere. Ties to China may be strong, weak, or broken. Connections to established Chinatowns may be essential to survival or nonexistent. Extended families may remain in China or be scattered around Southeast Asia or be relocated elsewhere on the planet. Within the Chinese diaspora, various dialects of Chinese may or may not be spoken, and films may or may

not be in English or Chinese. Diasporic filmmakers may take up ethnic Chinese subject matter or ignore it or do both (e.g., Ang Lee, Wayne Wang). This book reflects these differences, multiple identities, and varied approaches to looking at the diasporic Chinese on American screens.

Although Shu-mei Shih makes a strong argument for turning away from the notion of the "diaspora" in favor of the "Sinophone," the focus here remains on the more linguistically nebulous category of the "diasporic." However, it seems important to remember, as Shih reminds us, that diaspora should have an expiration or "end date." She notes, "Everyone should be given the chance to become local."[6] However, as the chapters that follow indicate, that process has been a particularly long one for many Chinese Americans. Shih's decoupling of place of residence from ancestral origins opens up the study of the Chinese on contemporary American screens to a more critical understanding of the political nature of the relationship between identity and representation. Shih eloquently states:

> To decouple homeness and origin is to recognize the imperative of living as a political subject within a particular geopolitical space in a specific time with deep local commitments. To link homeness with the place of residence therefore becomes an ethical act that chooses concrete political engagement in the local. The claim of rootlessness by some nostalgia-driven, middle-class, first-generation immigrants is, for example, oftentimes narcissistic to the extent that it is not aware of its own trenchant conservatism and even racism. The place of residence can change—some people migrate more than once—but to consider that place as home may thus be the highest form of rootedness. Routes, then, can become roots. This is not a theory of mobile citizens who disidentify from the local nation-state and disengage from local politics, but the politicization of that mobility.[7]

This book deals with films made primarily in English; however, the dialectic between "roots" and "routes" remains salient as filmmakers work between Asia and the United States, the Sinophone and the Anglophone, as well as within the African, Chinese, and other diasporic communities.

Historical Background of the Chinese on American Screens

As Arthur Dong points out in his documentary, *Hollywood Chinese* (2007), Chinese filmmakers have contributed to American screen culture since the silent era. In 2006, the National Film Registry of the United States selected Marion Wong's *The Curse of Quon Gwon: When the Far East Mingles with the West* (1916) for inclusion. Although no complete print of the film survives, the fact that Arthur Dong[8] uncovered several extant reels speaks volumes about the unwritten history of Chinese American filmmakers, ethnic Chinese women

Figure 1.1 Scene from *Hollywood Chinese* (2007). Directed by Arthur Dong. Courtesy of DeepFocus Productions, Inc. Photo source National Archives.

filmmakers, and the creative power of overseas Chinese working outside of the commercial Hollywood system. Made shortly after D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat* (1915), this Chinese American film must be considered an equally important achievement within the history of American—and world—cinema.

Although Wong's efforts in the United States may be somewhat isolated, they are far from unique. In fact, another pioneering ethnic Chinese woman filmmaker, Esther Eng/Ng Kam-ha, had a career that spanned decades. Her classics, such as *Golden Gate Girl* (1941), made under the auspices of the transnational Grandview Film Company, dramatize life in the Chinese diaspora, appealing to audiences in Hong Kong as well as San Francisco. As a performer, American-born Anna May Wong had a career that traversed several continents and spanned the silent and sound eras as well.

The current star status of Jackie Chan and Jet Li in Hollywood most likely would not have been possible without the international megastardom of Bruce Lee. Lee stands at the cusp of the Chinese diaspora and the American Dream, and over thirty years after his death in 1973, he is still Hong Kong's most recognized movie star internationally.[9] Born in San Francisco, Lee grew up in Hong

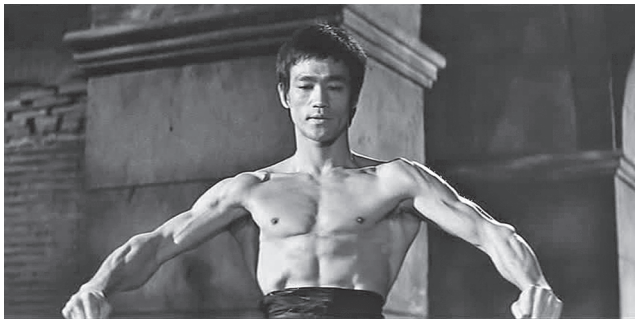

Figure 1.2 Bruce Lee as Tang Lung (a.k.a. Dragon) in *Return of the Dragon/Way of the Dragon* (1972). Directed by Bruce Lee.

Kong within a theatrical family and performed in Cantonese films from an early age. As a young man, he returned to the United States (Seattle, Washington) to attend college, settled on the West Coast, married a white American, taught martial arts, and worked in Hollywood. However, after a series of minor television roles, Lee was passed over for the lead in the television series *Kung Fu* in favor of David Carradine, so he returned to Hong Kong to work for Golden Harvest.

Lee starred in Lo Wei's *The Big Boss/Fists of Fury* (1971), a film about the plight of ethnic Chinese laborers in Thailand suffering at the hands of an unscrupulous boss involved in the drug trade. In *Return of the Dragon/Way of the Dragon* (1972), which Lee wrote and directed, he again finds himself up against gangsters, this time while working at a Chinese restaurant in Rome. His climactic battle with karate champion Chuck Norris in the ruins of the Coliseum still serves as the quintessential image of the nonwhite, ethnic underdog going to battle with the representative of the West against the backdrop of its ruined and ruinous imperial history. As he stretches his muscles in preparation, Lee concretizes the flexibility, adaptability, cunning, energy, power, and perseverance associated with the diaspora.

As he fought against capitalist exploitation and racism, Lee became not only an icon of ethnic Chinese pride (an affirmation of as well as a Cold War counterargument to the PRC's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution with its own anti-imperial/anticolonial discourse) but also an emblem of diasporic consciousness in which the immigrant must imagine ways to fight for survival in a hostile, foreign land. With America bogged down in Vietnam and Nixon going to Beijing to reach some sort of accommodation with Mao, Lee spoke to the contradictions of the day. He merged a preoccupation with Asia with a burning desire for civil rights and personal liberation, and his Hong Kong films reached a global audience, rivaling Hollywood's international hegemony.

In 2005, Mostar, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a place that had been Yugoslavia when Bruce Lee died in 1973, erected a statue to commemorate the sixty-fifth anniversary of his birth, and Hong Kong followed suit shortly afterward.

On the seventieth commemoration of his birth in 2010, a theme park near his ancestral home in Shunde opened, bringing the Lee legend back to the PRC. Born in San Francisco; buried in Seattle; and commemorated in Mostar, Hong Kong, and Shunde, Lee posthumously dominates the cinematic legacy of the Chinese diaspora. Writer, director, actor, choreographer, star, kung fu master, Lee brings together the craft of martial arts cinema with his experience of the diaspora, which transformed the genre worldwide. He merges the Chinese diaspora and global popular culture into a single dynamic body, and it seems fitting that he should testify to the importance of the Chinese diaspora within world cinema. As discussed further in Chapter 2, Lee also had a particularly strong following within the African American community. Even before Lee's phenomenal success, in fact, African American viewers were drawn to Hong Kong imports featuring Chinese heroes battling white villains, the rich, and the privileged. Although Hollywood–Hong Kong coproductions changed, the interest among African American, working-class, and other young male viewers continued. When the 1995 Jackie Chan vehicle *Rumble in the Bronx* (see Chapter 2) was picked up by Miramax, then, it revived rather than invented American interest in Chinese martial artists on-screen.

However, commercial, transnational connections involving Hollywood action films tell only part of the story. Ethnic Chinese film directors have had a very different experience with American cinema. Ang Lee, for example, began his career as an American independent with strong transnational ties. He has made multilingual films set in the Chinese-speaking community in the United States (*Pushing Hands* [1992] and *The Wedding Banquet* [1993], discussed in Chapter 5). He has made films set in Taiwan and China as well (*Eat Drink Man Woman* [1994], *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* [2000], and *Lust, Caution* [2007]); however, he also moves freely within commercial circles with "non-ethnic" features such as *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *The Ice Storm* (1997), and *Hulk* (2003). He continues to work on the commercial fringe with features such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)—made in English—which have nothing to do with China or its diaspora.

Another case in point is Wayne Wang, who focused on stories about the Chinese in America in the early stages of his career. *Chan Is Missing* (1982); *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (1985); *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989); and, to a large extent, *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), discussed in Chapter 6, are about the Chinatown experience and address the consequences of a history of anti-Asian racism within a multigenerational community.[10] The films are made in English, and he casts actors of various ethnicities as Chinese Americans; he has been hailed as a pioneer in Asian American filmmaking precisely because he has been open to moving outside the Chinese diaspora to tell his tales about ethnicity in America.

In many respects, Wang benefited from a growth spurt of Asian American media activity in the 1970s and 1980s. At the crossroads of the civil rights movement and the rise in American independent film production, several

Asian American organizations began to scrape together funds to put images of Asians on-screen outside the confines of Hollywood. These included, among others, Asian CineVision in New York City; Asian American Arts and Media in Washington, D.C.; Visual Communications in Los Angeles; the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA) in San Francisco; and the Foundation for Asian American Independent Media (FAAIM) in Chicago. Other organizations such as Third World Newsreel began to emphasize work done by and about the Asian community in America, including several films about Chinese Americans (notably, Christine Choy's *Mississippi Triangle* [1984], in collaboration with Allan Siegel and Worth Long). Film festivals dedicated to Asian American filmmaking emerged, and Chinese diasporic filmmakers, such as Wayne Wang, were welcomed. In fact, Wang may have been inspired by the work of other filmmakers operating in San Francisco's Chinatown, judging by what appear to be echoes of Curtis Choy's *Dupont Guy: The Schiz of Grant Avenue* (1975) and *The Fall of the I-Hotel* (1983) in *Chan Is Missing*.

Wayne Wang, however, also maintains strong ties to Hong Kong, where he grew up. He draws on the talent of not only Hong Kong artists, including his wife, actress Cora Miao (Miu Hin-yen), and fellow filmmaker Allen Fong, but also Taiwanese American performers such as filmmaker Peter Wang (director of *A Great Wall* [1986]; actor in *Ah Ying* [1984], directed by Allen Fong). As a filmmaker, he operates within and between various identities—Hong Kong, Chinese, Chinese American, Asian American, American independent, diasporic, and transnational. He has made films that are set within America but completely outside the Asian American community (*Blue in the Face* [1995] and *Smoke* [1995]) and films that are set in Hong Kong (*Life Is Cheap . . . but Toilet Paper Is Expensive* [1989] and *Chinese Box* [1997]). Despite the fact that he works primarily outside of Hollywood, he has enjoyed more substantial budgets for commercial release (*Maid in Manhattan* [2002], *Because of Winn-Dixie* [2005], and *Last Holiday* [2006]). His career has taken him from Asia to mid-America and from Chinatown to African American New Orleans and Hispanic New York City. He moves freely between ethnic America and the Chinese diaspora, and his career has been built on these transnational, multiethnic connections.

Wang began his feature film career with the pioneering *Chan Is Missing*. Although many Chinese filmmakers had worked in America before, *Chan Is Missing* represents an important change in orientation—away from the ethnic Chinese community as the main audience and toward a much wider target audience. Peter X Feng has described the development of the film's characters and the movement of the narrative, as well as the entry the film gained into Asian American circles, as reflecting a shift from "being Chinese American" to "becoming Asian American."[11] However, questions of identity in diaspora extend beyond the political, social, or cultural need for an Asian American sense of community. Wang and the characters in his film move in and out of ethnic groups, "being" and "becoming" Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese, diasporic Chinese, Asian minorities, American immigrants, and "flexible citizens" of

Figure 1.3 Wood Moy as Jo in *Chan Is Missing* (1982). Directed by Wayne Wang.

a world in which "new ethnicities"[12] have replaced older national allegiances. It seems appropriate, then, that Chan should remain missing and the unsolved mystery at the heart of the film should stand as a metaphor for the mercurial nature of identity within diaspora.

In addition to presenting the narrative puzzle conjured up by the missing Chan of the title, Wang's film engages with another mystery at the heart of diasporic cinema. Given the pervasiveness of the Chinese throughout the world, the limitation of their screen images to a handful of types in Hollywood begs the question of why Hollywood's Charlie Chan, routinely played by white actors in "yellow face," should eclipse the ethnic Chinese Chans of the world who always seem to be "missing" on-screen. Racism has haunted ethnic Chinese cinema since the dawn of the medium coincided with the 1900 Boxer Rebellion and film was put in the service of anti-China propaganda. Chinatown motion pictures, too, justified exclusionary laws by showing hatchet battles, tong wars, and opium dens.[13] These images legitimized the importance of police surveillance and control in the Chinatown ghettoes, keeping the fear of the "yellow peril" alive and racial hierarchies intact. The Sax Rohmer literary creation, Fu Manchu, the face of this threat, became a commercial film fixture and one of the most enduring figures demonizing the Chinese as a venomous, alien force sweeping the planet. More nomadic than diasporic, this Eurasian supervillain still lurks, in various guises, in the dark alleys of the world's cinematic Chinatowns, threatening the white population at every turn.

However, throughout Hollywood history, as Arthur Dong's comprehensive documentary *Hollywood Chinese* shows, Chinese American performers have been engaged in ongoing negotiations and contestations over their depiction on-screen. A dialectic exists between the ethnic "insider" and "outsider" in Hollywood, and many players, such as Anna May Wong, Nancy Kwan, Keye Luke, Jackie Chan (discussed in Chapter 2), Joan Chen, Lucy Liu, and B. D. Wong, struggle with performing a racial identity imposed on them while trying to gesture toward resistance.[14] Valued as expert insiders, they still have difficulty avoiding conforming to type and taking up the "yellow face" offered. Many,

such as Bruce Lee, turned back to Asia as a way out of this "classical mess."[15] Others, such as Anna May Wong,[16] continued to drift within the diaspora, making films in England and Germany, touring China, and returning to Hollywood during the war years to make films in support of China's struggle against the Japanese. Despite U.S. support for the Chinese cause during World War II, as Chinese American actor Victor Wong points out in Renee Tajima-Peña's film *My America . . . or Honk If You Love Buddha* (1997), the Asian face represented the enemy for mainstream Hollywood.

As Chinese Americans have flowed in and out of Hollywood over the years, the industry has held tight to its own fantasy of Chinatown (*Broken Blossoms* [1919], *The Tong Man* [1919], *Chinatown Nights* [1928], *The Hatchet Man* [1932], *Chinatown* [1974], and *Big Trouble in Little China* [1986]), sometimes with input from the community (*Flower Drum Song* [1961]) and, at other times, with Asian America's vociferous condemnation (*Year of the Dragon* [1985]). The Chinese presence behind the camera in Hollywood has been rare (e.g., James Wong Howe) until the relatively recent arrival of Wayne Wang, Ang Lee, John Woo, Tsui Hark, Ronny Yu, Ringo Lam, and a few others.

However, the Chinese diaspora boasts independent filmmakers who delight in talking back to Hollywood in order to take back the screen. Through political gestures, family portraits, avant-garde explorations of identity, and/or satires of Hollywood's stereotypical portrayals, diasporic Chinese media artists, working in diverse formats (from indie features to experimental videos), have self-consciously, self-reflexively turned the camera and turned the tables on Hollywood perceptions. Some films, such as *Chan Is Missing*, rework Charlie Chan. Others take Chinatown back with carefully observed family portraits, whether fictional (Stephen Ning's *Freckled Rice* [1983]) or factual (Arthur Dong's *Sewing Woman* [1983], and Christine Choy's *From Spikes to Spindles*: *A History of the Chinese in New York* [1976] and *Monkey King Looks West* [1990]), humorous self-portraits (Kip Fulbeck's *Banana Split* [1991], analyzed in Chapter 7) or tragic murder cases (Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Peña's *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* [1987]).

Some look back (Loni Ding's *How We Got Here: The Chinese* [1975]), while others look to the younger generation and the future (Jessica Yu's *Ping Pong Playa* [2007]). Several take a critical look at what it means to be Chinese within the entertainment industry (Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* [1994], examined in Chapter 6), and others celebrate success (Arthur Dong's *Forbidden City USA* [1989]) or satirize Hollywood's monotonous misconceptions (Valerie Soe's *All Orientals Look the Same* [1986], Kip Fulbeck's *Some Questions for 28 Kisses* [1994], and Deborah Gee's *Slaying the Dragon* [1988]) and Chinese Americans' skewed self-perceptions (Pam Tom's *Two Lies* [1989] and Sharon Jue's *My Mother Thought She Was Audrey Hepburn* [1992]).

Diasporic filmmakers insist on viewing Hollywood's Chinatown from a different perspective, and Sinophone[17] or multilingual transnational productions probe being Chinese in America from yet another angle. While

an occasional film may take place in the heartland, for the most part these films are geographically bicoastal, with narratives set in Los Angeles–San Francisco–the American West or located in New York City. As Staci Ford points out in her study of Hong Kong filmmakers in the United States, this polarity reflects the divided perception of America as a frontier (the West) open to fantasy (Hollywood) and the United States as the pinnacle of urban modernity (New York).[18]

The West Coast films play with popular culture. *Chan Is Missing*, for instance, picks up on not only Charlie Chan mysteries but also a wealth of Hollywood noir visions of San Francisco, from Orson Welles's *Lady from Shanghai* (1947) to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). Other Chinese narratives set on the West Coast generally follow a similar line. For example, the Jackie Chan series *Rush Hour* (1998, 2001, 2007), examined in Chapter 2, updates its own version of the ethnic Chinese police inspector, as does Sammo Hung's television series *Martial Law* (1998–2000).[19] The two old pals, alumni of the Seven Little Fortunes Beijing Opera troupe and Hong Kong movie veterans also stuck with reworking Hollywood's generic vision of Chinese railway laborers, miners, and laundrymen in the Old West.[20] For example, Sammo Hung directed Jet Li in *Once upon a Time in China and America* (1997) as Chinese folk hero Wong Fei-Hung practicing kung fu and traditional healing on the American frontier, and Jackie Chan traveled in America and England with his Wild West buddy in *Shanghai Noon* (2000) and *Shanghai Knights* (2003), respectively.

Chinese filmmakers from around the world, in fact, cite Hollywood for global audiences who have no trouble understanding what the "dream factory" connotes. A photo of the Hollywood sign alone serves as evidence the American Dream can exist in Fruit Chan's *Hollywood Hong Kong* (2001). Feng Xiaogang's comic take on life in a trailer in Los Angeles in *Be There or Be Square* (1998) also leaves Hollywood concepts of Chinatown behind to focus on the specifics of being from the PRC in the United States. The hard-luck story of a pair of immigrants trying to beg, borrow, or steal their piece of the American pie, including an attempt at moviemaking, takes the viewer even farther away from opium dens and tong wars. In *Just Like Weather* (1986 [the literal translation of the Chinese title is *American Heart*]), Allen Fong travels with the subjects of his film—a couple involved in a stormy relationship contemplating immigrating to the United States—on a road trip from San Francisco to New York City. Part documentary and part melodrama, the film indicates that—in fact as well as fiction—the road to America can be as rocky as any dicey marriage. Justin Lin's *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002) takes a hard look at the dark side of the young "model minority" in the status-conscious, social-climbing milieu of Orange County, California, as a group of high-achieving high school students degenerate into murderous drug dealers.

As film locations move east, the diasporic tales become even grimmer. If New York's Chinatown remains quintessentially sinister in American productions such as *Year of the Dragon*,[21] *China Girl* (1987), and *The Corruptor*

Figure 1.4 Sihung Lung as Mr. Chu and Deb Snyder as Martha Chu in *Pushing Hands* (1992). Directed by Ang Lee.

(1999), then—as Stephen Teo notes in his analysis of Clara Law's *Farewell China* (1990)—venturing out of the Chinese community often turns into a trip into the lower rungs of Dante's *Inferno*.[22] The mean streets of New York serve as the ruin of Chinese sojourners in films as diverse as Evans Chan's *Crossings* (1994), Philip Chan's *Tongs, a Chinatown Story* (1986), and Peter Chan's *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1996). In fact, in *Comrades*, Bao (Eric Tsang), a hard-boiled triad gangster, gets killed by a street gang in New York because he is slow giving up his wristwatch to the muggers. New York proves inhospitable, if not lethal, in other Hong Kong productions as well, from John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow II* (1987) to Mabel Cheung's *Illegal Immigrant* (1985) and *An Autumn's Tale* (1987)[23] and Stanley Kwan's *Full Moon in New York* (1990).

Even in the New York suburbs, an aging Chinese tai chi practitioner suffers from the cold and condescending looks of his white daughter-in-law in Ang Lee's *Pushing Hands*. The bonds of matrimony prove rocky in Sylvia Chang's cross-cultural "green card" marriage melodrama *Siao Yu* (1995), analyzed in Chapter 6. However, New York also functions as an educational, artistic, and—more importantly—financial center for PRC filmmakers in such films as Xie Jin's *The Last Aristocrats* (1989) and in the popular television series *Beijinger in New York* (1992). For Chinese filmmakers, the American city represents contradictory hopes and dashed dreams. It functions as both a nightmare world of capitalism run amok, racism, and violence and the potential realm of freedom from the constraints of traditional Chinese culture and politics.

For example, Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet*, also set in New York City, takes up the trope of the "green card" marriage in order to probe the link between gay liberation and the Confucian Chinese family. Lee's film introduces a queer dimension to the immigration story, and its protagonist takes haven in New York City to escape the heteronormative constraints of his traditional family in Taiwan. The appearance of *The Wedding Banquet* marked a sea change not only for the depiction of the Chinese diaspora on-screen but also for the portrayal of homosexuality and queer desire within Chinese-language cinema.

Lee married the "green card" romantic comedy to the patriarchal melodrama and placed it within the context of New Queer Cinema. These connections opened a floodgate that not only highlighted the importance of the Chinese migrant within the queer community but also spotlighted the sexuality of the diasporic Chinese. While other films explored the diaspora as economic or political and some took up questions of the personal (e.g., emigration as a means of escaping an arranged marriage or some other difficult family situation), *The Wedding Banquet* broached the issue of leaving hearth and home to escape from the suffocating consequences of homophobia.

Of course, many Chinese LGBT filmmakers had made important contributions to the depiction of Asian queers before 1993. Richard Fung's *Orientations* (1985) and *Chinese Characters* (1986); Ming-Yuen S. Ma's *Aura* (1991) and *Toc Storee* (1992), which is discussed in Chapter 5; Quentin Lee's *Anxiety of Inexpression and the Otherness Machine* (1992); and Paul Lee's *Thin Lips, Thick Lips* (1994) all appeared earlier than or around the same time as *The Wedding Banquet*. However, the commercial success of *The Wedding Banquet* encouraged the making of feature films specifically about the queer experience within the Chinese diaspora—from "coming out" melodramas and queer romantic comedies to meditations on same-sex desire. Alice Wu's *Saving Face* (2004), for example, also set in New York City, looks at lesbian love in a similar fashion, within the context of the Chinese family and the ethnic community.

Overview of Chapters

This book is divided into two parts. Part I examines the relationship between the African and Chinese diasporas as played out in American film culture. Beginning with a discussion of Jackie Chan's connection with African American culture both within and outside of Hollywood, Part I continues with a chapter devoted to the Jet Li vehicle *Romeo Must Die* (2000), which explores the theme of unrequited interracial romance within the context of the martial arts genre. Part I concludes with an examination of Yvonne Welbon's autobiographical *Remembering Wei Yi-fang, Remembering Myself* (1995), in which the filmmaker ruminates on her experiences living as an African American woman in Taiwan.

Part II begins by looking at the challenge queer culture poses to the Chinese patriarchy in films that focus on the relationship between fathers and sons—Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet*, Ming-Yuen Ma's *Toc Storee*, and Richard Fung's *Dirty Laundry* (1996). Part II continues with a chapter focusing on the way generations must redefine family relationships within the Chinese diaspora. It looks at four features involving interracial romances—Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club*, Mina Shum's *Double Happiness*, Sylvia Chang's *Siao Yu*, and Quentin Lee and Justin Lin's *Shopping for Fangs* (1997). A closer look at multiracial relationships in Kip Fulbeck's autobiographical videos follows. The formation of family ties within the diaspora, in fact, provides a point of depar-

ture for many Chinese films. As Rey Chow notes in her study of the "sentimental" in contemporary Chinese film, these are "films in which the experiences of migrancy, so often aggravated by economic hardships and ethnic discrimination, are staged against the demands of the traditional kinship family with its inordinate emphasis on genealogical continuity, financial stability, filial loyalty, and the subordination of women."[24]

The book concludes with a reflection on how American screen culture has come to terms with issues of race, ethnicity, and sexuality within the Chinese diaspora inside and outside the Hollywood mainstream. While the politics of the nation-state remain salient, a parallel politics of racial and sexual identity emerges as the circulation of people gives rise to enormous changes within the Chinese family, queer communities, and Chinatowns across the country. Rather than cordoning off different facets of film culture, this book brings the various aspects of Chinese American screen culture into greater proximity to illuminate aspects of that culture that have not received the attention they merit.

Rather than being a spin-off of Hollywood marketing strategy, for example, the relationship between African Americans and Chinese in diaspora demands to be seen as extending beyond the parameters of male action to take in the role African American women have played, for instance, in the way the Chinese "mediate" between black and white in America. The connections between queer identity and reconfigurations of ethnic Chinese identity also are explored with an eye to changing attitudes toward both race and sexuality. Gender and family structure take on new meanings, and this reformulation can be seen on American screens. Considerable interest in American ethnic communities and their relationship to the cinema exists; however, few books have taken a serious look at the Chinese diaspora on American screens in relation to African Americans, LGBT/queer issues, and gender in a way that highlights their interconnections.[25] By bringing a range of films together into a single volume that addresses their fundamental similarities through their engagement with issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, this book aims to fill that gap.