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Shaping Stereotypes in a Space of Absence

A Linguistic Analysis of Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing*

Abstract

Wayne Wang's Chan Is Missing *(1981) was acclaimed by the critics and broadly appreciated by the public for its innovative style and its lively depiction of San Francisco's Chinatown. Academic discourse has focused on the film's ability to embody the essence of Asian Americans (Tajima 1990), and on the challenges it poses to the common assumptions concerning this specific minority within the United States (Feng 1996). Indeed, the film is a milestone for cinema in general, and for the representation of Asians and Chinese Americans in particular, for it manages to be many different films at the same time.*
The aim of this paper is to use Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate the linguistic image construction of Chan (whose name echoes the notorious Charlie Chan from the beginning of the 20th century) within the film. His identikit is (and at the same time fails to be) the outcome of a chorus of different voices. While the two protagonists, Jo and Steve, look for the missing Chan Hung, they talk to several people who have met him. Each character delivers a fragment of a shapeless portrait that does not help the protagonists finding him, actually causing even more confusion on his location and his identity. Each description has little to do with Chan himself, as it only represents the characters' confrontation with the stereotypes attached to the Asian and Chinese American community. This attempt to use Chan as an image of what each character wants to detach from in order to define themselves is made possible and at the same time invalidated by his continuous absence, which represents the essence of the stereotype itself—only real in the words of the beholder.

Keywords: *stereotypes, cinema, Systemic Functional Grammar, Critical Discourse Analysis, Asian American*

This article sets out to investigate the linguistic construction of cinematic stereotypes in a film that evokes them to openly challenge their power.[1] The methodology will intersect Transitivity Analysis coming from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a systematic approach able to encompass a broader context interpretation (Sriwimon and Zilli 2017). The reasons for choosing the film *Chan Is Missing* (1981) lay in its ability to accomplish such a challenging task in an appealing way.[2]

1. Why *Chan Is Missing* (1981)?

Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing* (1981) can be considered a milestone in Asian American film, whose reach went well beyond the community that had originated it. The film was appreciated in film festivals, was acclaimed by the critics and, with cost just above $22,000, it also managed to recuperate its investment and make profit (Patterson 1983; Feng 2002). According to Diane Mei Lin Mark (1984), who edited a published version of the script, there are three main reasons for the film's success. The first is linked to its production, which featured "the talents of a largely Asian American cast and crew, as orchestrated by producer/director Wang" (Mark 1984, 5). A second possible contribution to the film's box office success is its timing, as it followed the activism of the 1960s Asian American movement and the sophisticated (but largely underrated)

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[1] The author wishes to specify that the focus of this paper is not a discussion on Asian American or Chinese American *identity*. The aim of the article is a linguistic analysis of Chan Hung as a challenge to *ethnotypes*, intended as a fictional "rationalizations of cultural difference" (van Doorslaer et al. 2016, 3). Thus, all references to the debate on identity are only made in order to explain and contextualise the use of language in the case study, and to offer cues for further exploration of the subject. Matters of identity are out of the scope of this study, and have been explored in much greater detail by authors such as Yến Lê Espiritu (1992), Lisa Lowe (1991) or Peter Feng (2002). Therefore, the terminology used here to refer to individuals and groups is drawn from existing literature and not questioned. In this article, the term 'Asian American' follows Feng's conceptualisation (1996; 2002) that, echoing Lowe (1991), envisions an identity in motion. This notion defies all fixed definitions and uses the term as a political means to resist "the discourses that exclude Asian Americans, while simultaneously revealing the internal contradictions and slippages" (Lowe 1991, 39) of the term itself. The political stance of the use of this term is also found in Lê Espiritu, who notes that the external imposition of the term can become a resource for collective affirmative action (1992). 'Chinese American' and 'Chinese diaspora' will also be used to refer to the overseas Chinese (Huaqiao) living in the US and to American citizens of Chinese origin. The term 'Chinese' is meant to include all ethnic Chinese. Far from being interchangeable, the terms 'Chinese' and 'Asian' will be used according to the way the terms were deployed in the cited literature.

[2] The film is all but outdated. The comments on the film, uploaded on YouTube, generally outline discourses on identity, relating the film to the viewers' own experiences. A user nicknamed "whatsgoingon07," for example, left their impressions: "any speculation on his whereabouts reflects on the viewer's biased opinion and opinion on oneself! Mr Chan is the answer to the problem of self identity in America!"

artistic work flourishing in that community throughout the 1970s (Mark 1984, 5-6). The third reason is inherently bound to its innovative depiction of Chinatown: far from the exotic and dangerous allure of the old films that had shaped the American imagery (e.g., Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*, 1919), Wang's Chinatown is "a slice of American life" (Mark 1984, 6), real, diverse, and unique—and open for the audience to see from the inside. Asian American viewers were also drawn to the theatres because the film managed to be realistic and unapologetic "for not being white" (Lum 1982, 9), and to finally offer Asian Americans a screen image they could identify with. *Chan Is Missing* brought Chinatown inhabitants to life as self-expressive individuals with their own personalities. Until then, most films featuring characters of Asian origin offered two-dimensional stereotypes, soaked in what Ono and Pham define "yellowface logics" (2009, 45). Certainly, the old practice of yellowface is increasingly obsolete today, since WASP actors do not mimic Asians (and Asian Americans) using makeup and stereotyped mannerisms as they often used to, especially for the main roles. However, "implicit yellowface requires that [Asian and Asian American] actors meet a predefined and arbitrary notion of authenticity and downplay their own existential identities and experiences" (Ono and Pham 2009, 54) to meet the supposed expectations of the white majority. This does not happen in *Chan is Missing*, whose originality earned it recognition as an exquisitely Asian American film (Tajima 1990), demonstrating that "Asian Americans could be artists, could be commercial filmmakers, and could support Asian American filmmaking, as well as successfully market Asian American films to wider audiences" (Feng 2002, 150), while giving Asian Americans their own cinematic voice.

To defy previous, stereotyped images of Asians and Asian Americans, the movie had to evoke them as a way of eventually exorcising them from the screen. This process takes place thanks to the missing character of Chan Hung, a diegetic device which triggers most of the film's dialogues. In San Francisco's Chinatown, the taxi drivers Jo (Wood Moy) and Steve (Marc Hayashi) look for their colleague Chan Hung, who disappeared after they had entrusted him with $4,000 to purchase a taxi license for them. While the two protagonists search for him, they talk to several people. Each character delivers a fragment of what ends up being a shapeless portrait, in a spiral of incoherent clues that cause even more confusion on Chan's location and even on who he really is. By the end of the film, neither the protagonists nor the viewers have any idea of who Chan is: the viewers will eventually realize that the descriptions referring to him represent the other characters' confrontation with the stereotypes attached to the Asian and Chinese American community. While generally talking about him as the most stereotypical member of that community, all the characters act on the screen in ways that clearly distance

them from any previous cinematic Asian or Asian American. This, however, does not mean that a new Asian American model arises from the void of Chan Hung, who remains invisible for the whole film. The characters' attempt to use him as an image of what they want to detach from in order to define themselves is indeed allowed by his continuous absence.

Ramírez Berg (2002) identifies a series of features that characterize stereotypes (some of which might be particularly useful in this discussion) and explain the difficulties in eradicating them. First, these features are applied with rigid logic, systematically reducing each individual to a specific category, so as to simplify complexity and ensure a "psychic comfort in fixing the Other" (Ramírez Berg 2002, 15); they are partially based on facts, or on partial views of facts (Ramírez Berg 2002, 16). In order to remain credible, images need to assume the homogeneity of the stereotyped group, and this makes them too general to be good predictors of individual behaviors (Ramírez Berg 2002, 16-17). Such a supposed uniformity within the group seems particularly paradoxical for a category like "Asian American," which encompasses a variety of nationalities, ethnicities, languages and religions (Abrams 2019). Even limiting the discussion to the sole Chinese diaspora, it is still possible to find a significant diversity. Another fundamental feature of stereotypes is being "conveniently ahistorical, selectively omitting the out-group's social, political, and economic group history" (Ramírez Berg 2002, 17). For example, the model minority stereotype (further explored later) assumes Asians and Asian Americans do not experience mental health issues and are naturally inclined to work tirelessly, but research has proven that this stereotype is what actually prevents suffering Asian Americans from seeking therapy (Abrams 2019). Another key element that reinforces stereotypes is their repetition, which gradually replaces reality:

> A 'vicious cycle' aspect to repeated stereotyping arises because expressing learned stereotypes reinforces and to that extent validates and perpetuates them. Stereotypes are false to history, but conform to another historical tradition—namely, the history of movies and movie stereotyping. They begin, over time, to become part of the narrative form itself—anticipated, typical, and well-nigh 'invisible.' Ironically, then, representation becomes narration. (Ramírez Berg 2002, 19)

Furthermore, stereotypes are made more difficult to eliminate because they are loaded with ideology: they establish power relations and contribute to their preservation (Ramírez Berg 2002, 21). In American history, people of Chinese origin have often passed from friends to foes because of ideological (and economic) clashes between the US and China (Greene 2014, 1). Lastly, stereotypes can be considered as beliefs affecting both the dominant and the stereotyped

groups (Ramírez Berg 2002, 21), and that is why making Asian American characters themselves deal with the issue is part of the challenge to prejudice.

Thus, the reasons for choosing *Chan Is Missing* for the present investigation lie in its breakthrough role in the history of cinema (Mark 1984, 2) as well as in the immense power of its main theme, namely, stereotypes. The movie is a watershed between representation from the outside and the possibility of self-representation. It is a crucial point of departure to deal with the past and reflect on the achievement and limits of present. Moreover, quite a few authors have spoken about the film, but mostly without a specific focus on language. Linguistically, *Chan Is Missing* lights plenty of sparks for investigation,[3] which are surely not restricted to those explored here. In this paper, as previously stated, the main focus is the linguistic construction of Chan Hung, as the empty space where stereotyping is evoked and exorcised.

2. Methodology

The extensive literature on Chinese and Asian American stereotyping, as well as the existing work in film studies, Chinese and Asian American history, and psychology are a key to decipher and interpret the linguistic construction of Chan Hung. In addition, given the interest is on this specific film as a case study for the aforementioned reasons, representativeness does not constitute an issue. The fact that *Chan Is Missing* deals with stereotypes is broadly accepted, but not much has been said about *how* this is achieved linguistically. The methodology used in this essay draws from Sriwimon and Zilli's study (2017) of gendered stereotypes constructed through language in the news. The originality of their approach lies in the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) "as a conceptual framework, and Transitivity Analysis from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as an analytical framework" (Sriwimon and Zilli 2017, 137). Although it was used for a broader corpus and for a different medium, its solid structure seems particularly fitting here, as it extracts the images directly from language, and offers quantitative data to a broader, contextual interpretation that goes beyond syntax (Wodak 2001). More specifically, the interpretation here aims to see how power relations built through media-constructed stereotypes were enacted and resisted (Fairclough 1992; van Dijk 2004) in this film.

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[3] A further topic for investigation could be the linguistic diversity of the speakers, using Mandarin, Cantonese, and various hues of American English, from those spoken by native Mandarin and Cantonese speakers to the varieties of second and third generations, increasingly translingual (Canagarajah 2013).

The analysis only included the lines that concerned Chan Hung from the script (as published by Mark 1984) and the English closed captions on screen for the sentences in Mandarin and Cantonese.[4] These were not divided into sentences (not the most appropriate unit for spoken language, Butt et al. 2000), but into clauses, considered in SFL as the basic unit in expressing meaning (Thompson 2013; Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). In particular, the clause reduction was operated using Thompson (2013) as the main reference. Thus organized, the text allowed answering the following research questions: a) in what SFL roles is Chan most often located? b) which stereotypes are evoked? c) which roles are employed to construct the stereotypes?

To find an answer to such questions, the corpus underwent a threefold tagging process: first, each clause was attributed to a specific process type (and subtype, if applicable) according to SFL. Subsequently, Chan's SFL role within the clause was identified. Last, each clause was read within the film and against the broader cultural context to identify the evoked stereotype. The stereotype categories identified in literature and expected to show in the film were: "fresh off the boat," or FOB (Feng 2002), "yellow peril" (Ono and Pham 2009; Kawai 2005; Greene 2014), "model minority" (Kawai 2005; Chao et al. 2013; Greene 2014), and "eccentric/nerdy" (Zhang 2010). Another category, "invisible," was devised to take into account all the clauses that saw Chan as disappeared, unfindable, invisible—indeed, the absence of Asian Americans from screens has been a long-standing Hollywood convention (Chong 2016).[5]

3. Results and discussion

After the subdivision, the total number of clauses analyzed was 281.[6] Table 1 outlines the overall distribution of processes and roles in the clauses, while the recurrence of the stereotypes is reported in Table 2. When analyzed separately, the most recurrent process was by far material (48.8%), the most recurrent role was actor (36.3%), while FOB was the dominant stereotype (45.2%).

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[4] The lines cited from the film are quoted from Mark's written screenplay (1984). The translation of Mandarin and Cantonese lines is drawn from the subtitles on screen (Wang 1981), therefore in those cases the minute of the caption appearance is cited as a reference.

[5] These categories will be explored in detail in the next section.

[6] Two aspects of the clauses are worth underlining: first, projections where Chan was mentioned were counted as clauses and analysed separately. Second, it seemed important to also include the clauses where general remarks about Chinese people were made to explain or comment on Chan Hung's actions.

Material	48.8%	Mental	19.2%	Relational	15.7%	Verbal	14.2%	Behavioural	2.1%
Actor	36.3%	Senser	10.3%	Carrier	10.0%	Sayer	8.5%	Behaver	1.8%
Goal	8.9%	Phenomenon	5.7%	Token	2.5%	Receiver	3.2%	Circumstance	0.4%
Circumstance	2.5%	Beneficiary	0.7%	Circumstance	3.2%	Target	2.1%		
Beneficiary	1.1%	Circumstance	2.5%			Circumstance	0.4%		

Tab. 1: Distribution of Chan's roles and stereotypes, all referred to the 281 clauses analyzed

The abundant material processes, which amount to nearly half of the clauses, reflect the nature of the language (mainly informal) used by the characters in their interactions. Rather than making general remarks about their impression of Chan, they tend to describe him by recalling his actions (e.g., "he comes down here [to the Manilatown Senior Center] every week," Mark 1984, 29), as he is mostly the actor (36.3% of the 281 clauses), more rarely the goal, and only occasionally the circumstance or the beneficiary. These two roles are also not often found in the mental processes, the second-most recurrent. Here, too, Chan Hung is the protagonist of the narration (e.g., "he doesn't like it here [the US]," Mark 1984, 46). Relational processes are mainly attributive, as testified by the near-total presence of Chan as a carrier in these processes (e.g., "he's not successful like Mr. Lee," Mark 1984, 53). Despite mental roles are more frequent than relational, the roles of senser and carrier are substantially equal in the 281 utterances. The sayer role is slightly less recurrent (8.5% of the 281 clauses), almost as present as the goal role in the material processes.

Since most answerers do not have a real, intimate connection with Chan, they tend to relate episodes that either convey an idea of his personality or describe the last time they saw him.[7] This confirms the connection with the classical detective story dialogue structure, and in particular with Charlie Chan films, openly cited by both Steve and Jo in distinct moments (Mark 1984, 52; 57-59), and implied in Wayne's choice of the surname for Chan Hung.

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[7] Not only do the witnesses do that, but also Jo and Steve, when assessing the state of their investigation, evoke Chan by describing episodes they have witnessed.

FOB	45.2%
Invisible	18.9%
Model minority	14.9%
Yellow peril	13.5%
Eccentric	7.5%
Total	100.0%

Tab. 2: Overall stereotype distribution

Table 2 shows that the pattern of the stereotypes is to some extent similar to the one of processes and roles, where there is a substantially dominant one, but the others are quite similar to each other and make up more than half of the clause total. In fact, while the FOB stereotype is individually the most present, the others are very close to one another, and taken together they outnumber the FOB. This means that, for more than half of the clauses dedicated to him, Chan is described in different ways. There are two important factors to bear in mind when considering all the data related to stereotypes. First, the FOB category, as explained below, is the one that allows most 'overlapping' with others, e.g., it is possible to be an FOB *and* to display some typical features of other stereotypes, like the hard-working attitude of the model minority or the sadistic nature of the yellow peril. This means that, while having its distinctive traits, the FOB perfectly embodies the aforementioned stereotype vagueness. Second, a considerable number of clauses falls in the category of invisibility, i.e., sentences that express the impossibility of finding Chan Hung (e.g., "we're looking for him," Mark 1984, 54). As will be explained, the meaning of the invisibility category can be twofold: on the one hand, it echoes the lack of space dedicated to Asian Americans in Hollywood; on the other hand, the fact that he cannot be found represents the emptiness of stereotyping itself. It might be worth looking at the stereotypes and their realizations in detail to gain better insight.[8]

3.1 Chan Hung as an FOB

It is not arduous to imagine how migrating to a remote land with significantly different customs and language could imply some degree of culture shock, which varies according to many factors, but the potential trauma cannot be underestimated (Ward et al. 2001). That is possibly the fact-based aspect of the FOB stereotype, the starting point of a reification transforming a stage of

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[8] Given its peculiar nature, the "invisible" stereotype will be treated for last.

life into a fixed, generalized condition of existence. The FOB is *constantly* misplaced, awkward, uncapable of dealing with their life in the new country.

Actor	16.0%
Sayer	6.8%
Senser	5.3%
Carrier	5.0%
Circumstance	2.8%
Goal	2.8%
Behaver	1.8%
Receiver	1.8%
Token	1.4%
Beneficiary	1.1%
Phenomenon	0.4%
Total	45.2%

Tab. 3: Chan's roles as FOB

Table 3 shows how Chan's roles are distributed in the FOB stereotype (only categories above zero were reported). The percentages are always referred to the total 281 clauses. The FOB image is mainly realized with Chan as the actor—Chan mostly *acts* like a newcomer, for example when "he can't find a job" (Mark 1984, 63) that matches his education or when he finds himself in trouble and "he couldn't cope with it" (Mark 1984, 64). The other roles with a significant recurrence are sayer, senser and carrier. As a sayer, Chan is often disoriented or speaks in a way deemed as 'inappropriate' or 'Chinese' by the other characters. For example, when a lawyer (Judy Nihei) asks Steve and Jo about Chan Hung, she describes an encounter of his with a policeman, where his speech, "typical […] of most Chinese speakers" (Mark 1984, 18) causes the officer to think he did not stop at a stop sign. In fact, when asked whether he did *not* stop, "Mr. Chan automatically answered 'no'" because in Chinese "the answer has to match the truth of the action" (Mark 1984, 18). In mental processes, and especially with Chan Hung as the senser, his cultural assumptions are at the core of the discussion. Henry (Peter Wang), his former university colleague at aeronautic engineering back in Taiwan, now a cook at a Chinese restaurant, refers an episode he witnessed. Chan, ashamed to see his more successful former

university colleagues walking in the restaurant, escapes from the back door and does not come back. According to Henry, this happened because Chinese like Chan Hung "are very concerned about their dignity" (Wang 1981, 11:32). This roughly recalls the Chinese concept of face, especially when referred to the importance attributed to prestige and social position.[9] Similarly, as a carrier, Chan has attributes that draw him away from Americanness—to say it with his ex-wife Mrs. Chan's words (Ellen Yeung), "he's too Chinese" (Mark 1984, 46).

The prevalence of the FOB stereotype confirms the traditional opposition between them and the ABCs (American-born Chinese), which further complicates the generational gap by implying an even greater change of mindset (Ma 2014, 6). In Hwang's play *FOB*, considered as emblematic of the FOB-ABC conflict (Feng 2002, 161-162), the initial profile of the immigrants of Chinese origin is harsh and full of resentment. They are described as "clumsy, ugly, greasy […] loud, stupid, four-eyed FOB. Big feet. Horny. […] High-water pants. […] Someone you wouldn't want your sister to marry. If you are a sister, someone you wouldn't want to marry. […] Boy FOBs are the worst" (Hwang 1990, 6-7). FOB males are undesirable, while FOB women, often merely conceived of as a possession, are more easily accepted (Feng 2002, 163). The most evident trait of the FOB is their inability or unwillingness to assimilate. Frequently this lack of assimilation leads to isolated/segregated individuals, ridiculed and pitied by the ABCs. Many characters at some point refer to Chan Hung as an FOB, often with an openly negative acceptation. His ex-wife, for example, separated from him because he did not equal her ability to become more 'American.' She is appalled that "he doesn't even want to apply for American citizen" (Mark 1984, 46). This opinion is shared by many others and, in some cases, it is expressed in a rather patronizing tone. The Newcomer's Language Centre's director, George (George Woo), does not know or remember anything specific about Chan, but he does not hesitate to state that he has the "typical problem" of "most immigrants," since he "wanted […] to continue to be Chinese" (Mark 1984, 49). Mr. Lee (Roy Chan), his sponsor and insurance agent, is just as condescending: in his depiction, Chan Hung is unsophisticated and slow-witted, as he states, "I have a hard time explaining to him" (Mark 1984, 56) the way insurance and sponsorship work. Henry, a first-generation immigrant like his friend Chan Hung, lives his professional 'downgrading' with a mix of resignation and rancor against Americans. He does not blame Chan for his lack of success, as "the Americans don't want you to work in aeronautical engineering!" (Wang 1981, 10:54).

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[9] The Chinese conceptualisation of face is particularly complex. The main distinction is between *mianzi*, linked to social status, and *lian*, which is the adherence to the social standards of moral behaviour (Jia 2001).

Jo and Steve's visions are poles apart. Jo, a second-generation immigrant, whose ex-wife was also an FOB, feels more sympathetic towards Chan as he is "somebody from China coming over here and trying to find himself" (Mark 1984, 62). He sees Chan as a friend, and he knows in his heart that "Chan Hung wasn't just another dumb Chinaman like the guy in Mr. Lee's story" (1984, 57). Steve's ideas of Chan are mostly negative. He sees Chan's FOB-like behaviors as unacceptable, and looks at him with derision, contempt, and anger. Steve recounts of an episode when Chan was unable to understand he was being mocked for his FOB attitude. Chan's awkwardness, Steve says, "reminds me of my ol' man that way, you know. Fucking embarrassing" (Mark 1984, 28). Steve's bitterness towards Chan is intertwined with the recurrence of the FOB stereotype across the dialogues. The FOB configurates as the main opponent of all the characters, because "the image of the FOB is entirely a creation of the ABC, and a creation the ABC depends on to stabilize his or her own sense of identity" (Feng 2002, 162).

3.2 Chan Hung as a model minority

A famous cinematic representation of the model minority was undoubtedly Charlie Chan, whose amazing ability to solve crimes was mitigated by his FOB-like speech, which "spews forth fortune-cookie native wisdom" (Ma 2014, 5), and by his loyal service to the white authority. In fact, there are mainly two ideas arising from this image: the first is the studious Asian Americans, incredibly endowed in hard sciences but uncreative and too career-oriented (Ono and Pham 2009, 83-87). According to Chang (2003, 9-10), this stereotype started to emerge after 1949, when numerous intellectuals (and their offspring) migrated from Taiwan, aspiring to attend prestigious universities, or on a scholarship. Little interested in preserving their Chinese customs, they did not live in Chinatowns, and were mostly fluent in English. By the 1960s, the media would regularly talk about them as 'success-stories,' with the main purpose to diminish the struggles for civil rights by elevating "a minority group that had quietly 'made it' in society" thanks to "strong family values, determination, and hard work" (Mok 1998, 192). Such values constitute the link with the second idea about the model minority, which is being hard-working, quiet, honest, docile, and pious, an image that turns China and the Chinese into a nostalgic cinematic projection of a bygone, rural America (Greene 2014, 77-78) and provides a comforting framework for the exploitation of Chinese labor (Chang 2003, 105-106).

Actor	7.8%
Carrier	2.8%
Senser	1.8%
Sayer	1.1%
Circumstance	0.4%
Receiver	0.4%
Target	0.4%
Token	0.4%
Total	14.9%

Tab. 4: Chan's roles as model minority

Chan Hung also embodies this stereotype, albeit less frequently than the FOB. Despite the apparently positive acceptation of such an image, it is too heavy a burden in terms of expectations.[10] As shown in Table 4, the most significant role for the model-minority Chan is certainly the actor, with 7.8% of the 281 clauses considered, for example when he successfully "studied aeronautical engineering" (Wang 1981, 10:34) and graduated with Henry, or when Jo resolutely affirms that "he didn't take the money" from him and Steve (Mark 1984, 65). His roles as a carrier of attributes like intelligence and honesty score slightly less than 3%: apparently, Chan Hung's brother took credit for his "word processing system in Chinese," to create which he "must be a genius" (Mark 1984, 74). The only other significant role in this stereotype is the senser, which mainly manifests when Jo speculates about Chan's behaviors: when he hears stories depicting him as clueless, he is sure that "he had a lot more on his mind than that" (Mark 1984, 38). Not many people in the film share this vision of Chan, but they defend it strongly. Among them, his daughter Jenny (Emily Yamasaki) is sure that "he wouldn't bum you out on a

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[10] A page on the website of the University of Texas at Austin, in the section Counseling and Mental Health Center (cmhc.utexas.edu/modelminority.html), can be a very good example of the influential role played by the model minority stereotype. Titled "Model Minority Stereotype for Asian Americans," it provides a basic description of its features:
- smart (i.e., "naturally good at math, science, and technology")
- wealthy
- hard-working, self-reliant, living "the American dream"
- docile and submissive, obedient and uncomplaining
- spiritually enlightened and never in need of assistance! (2008)

The website invites Asian American students to seek help when they feel suffocated by such unfairly high expectations placed on them.

deal" (Mark 1984, 65) as he "is honest and trustworthy" (Mark 1984, 74). Henry, his former course mate, admires his intelligence, as he remembers that Chan Hung "was a very good student, always the top one in class" (Wang 1981, 10:43). Jo actively tries to understand him. In voice-over, he repeatedly confutes any opinion that "makes Chan Hung out to be too simple" (Mark 1984, 38). These words uttered by Jo are particularly important, as it is not just Chan that cannot be "too simple," but the whole Chinese American, and the Asian American communities at large. Indeed, this image not only ignores the people struggling within the Asian American community, but also works to deprive them of the means for affirmative action (Chao et al. 2013, 90).

3.3 Chan as a yellow peril

This stereotype is older than the model minority one, as it first appeared between the nineteenth and the 20th century. At that time, "the West feared the yellow race as a menace that would threaten the domination of the White race" and the "American version of the yellow peril provided a justification or rationale for excluding Asian immigrants and continuing US westward expansion […] to the Asia and Pacific region" (Kawai 2005, 112). One of its most ancient and vivid embodiments is the villain Dr Fu Manchu,[11] who represented "all the cruel cunning of the entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect" (Rohmer [1913] 1997, 13). Such stereotype features immensely intelligent and cruel characters, with a taste for torture and a complete disregard for human life (Greene 2014, 54-56). Intelligence is the link between two ostensible extremes, yellow peril and model minority. Indeed, a minority that is able to stand on its own feet thanks to talent and determination can easily become a threat to white America (Okihiro 1994, 142).

Actor	5.0%
Circumstance	2.8%
Carrier	1.4%
Phenomenon	1.1%
Beneficiary	0.7%
Receiver	0.7%
Sayer	0.7%

[11] Originally imagined by the British author Sax Rohmer, the character appeared countless times in films and television both in the UK and the US (Greene 2014).

Goal	0.4%
Target	0.4%
Token	0.4%
Total	13.5%

Tab. 5: Chan's roles as yellow peril

Table 5 displays how yellow peril is only slightly less recurrent than model minority, as if they mirrored each other. Here, too, most clauses see Chan Hung as an actor (5% of the 281 clauses), possibly involved in mysterious events, thefts, even a homicide. When Jo finds a gun in Chan's taxi, Steve immediately thinks that "Chan Hung was the one who actually killed the neighbor" (Mark 1984, 58). There is also a significant recurrence of circumstance, as the two protagonists sometimes find themselves wondering about facts that may or may not involve him, or when Steve insists they should "go to the police about Chan Hung" (Mark 1984, 46).

At Manilatown Senior Center, the Filipino Frankie (Frankie Alarcon) has his convictions about what he calls "Oriental people" (Mark 1984, 31-32), which he expresses when another character says that Chan Hung did not have the financial means to travel to China. Even though Frankie seems to have been in good terms with Chan, he considers 'Orientals' like him to be deceitful with money: he thinks that "when they say they haven't got it … they got it" (Mark 1984, 32). However, the only character who consistently sees Chan as a yellow peril is Steve. He did not trust him in the first place, often ridicules his FOB-like attitude, and he is sure he stole the money the protagonists had entrusted him with. With a completely different attitude from Jo's, Steve always tries to freeze Chan's identity (Feng 2002, 162) in different fixed roles, and he aggressively affirms that he "rips off your money" and "is a fucking liar" (Mark 1984, 64).

Although the explicitness of this stereotype might make it seem obsolete, the recent rise in Asian hate in the US (linked with the COVID-19 pandemic) has shown that yellow peril has not disappeared (Cable 2020; Hong and Bromwich 2021)—rather, it keeps simmering beneath the surface, ready to emerge when called forth by ideological instances.

3.4 Chan Hung as an eccentric

In her investigation of the reasons why Asian Americans are often unpopular at school and university, Zhang (2010) explores a stereotype that she defines as "nerdy" and "left out": Asian Americans are imagined as having unusual interests and being very poor communicators—not necessarily or not only because of their limited language skills (like FOBs), but because they

lack the social skills necessary to initiate friendships. Such a stereotype is especially attached to men, who are also seen as non-masculine (Ono and Pham 2009, 71). This stereotype can in part overlap, most likely, with the model minority or the FOB—the latter being the case of the infamous Long Duk Dong from *Sixteen Candles* (1984), released just a few years after *Chan is Missing*.

Senser	3.2%
Actor	2.1%
Target	1.1%
Carrier	0.7%
Circumstance	0.4%
Total	7.5%

Tab. 6: Chan's roles as nerdy/eccentric

This stereotype does not neatly take shape in Chan Hung, as it can be evinced from its barely relevant occurrence. However, he does show some traits that make him, if not nerdy, at least an eccentric. In this category, as shown in Table 6, the actor role does not prevail. In fact, when talking about him as an eccentric, what is mostly mentioned is his 'unusual' taste. When Jo and Steve ask about him at the Manilatown Senior Center, it is clear that Chan Hung is not the most popular. There, everybody knows him only by the silly nickname Hi Ho, "because he always likes Hi Ho cookies" (Mark 1984, 29). They also know that he spends time at that center because "he like to listen to music" and "his favorite was mariachi music" (Mark 1984, 32). They barely remember the conversations they had with him, and their opinions about him are vague and contradictory.

Furthermore, as often happens to nerdy people of Asian descent (Zhang 2010), Chan seems to spend quite some time on his own, and that is possibly the reason why, after hearing about an incident between PRC and Taiwan supporters in a parade he attended, "Chan Hung just got paranoid" (Mark 1984, 58) that some pictures he had taken might put him in danger, but really, according to his old neighbor, he simply "made everything up in his own mind" (Mark 1984, 58).[12]

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[12] Research in the field of behaviour therapy and experimental psychiatry proposes loneliness as a risk factor for "the formation and maintenance of persecutory delusions" (Lamster et al.

This image, only sketched in *Chan is Missing,* continued to appear on screen regularly (Ono and Pham 2009, 71-72) and is acknowledged beyond academic investigation as a real obstacle to Asian American media representation (Levin 2017).

3.5 Chan Hung, not found

In 2016, studies about the presence of Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) in the entertainment industry showed that one of the grimmest images can be the absence of any image:

> APAs have not achieved the American Dream in society or in the entertainment field. For example, in the 86 years of the Oscars, four out of 344 awards went to Asians (0.01%) while 93% of the awards went to Whites (320 out of 344). In 2014, the APA population was 5.62%, but APAs only occupied 1% of credits in the media and 3% of characters on primetime. While 3% is more than the 1.9% reported in 1998, there is still a large disparity between the APA population and their on-screen appearances today. (Chong 2016, 30)

The issue of representativity in the media is an issue of equality, and the gradual improvement in recent years does not mean that a balance has been achieved (Chong 2016, 30). That is most likely why the only visible feature of Chan Hung is that he *is missing*: Chinese Americans, and Asian Americans, have been largely absent from American films as characters because of underrepresentation, as actors because of yellowface and whitewashing,[13] and as human beings because of yellowface logics and gross stereotyping (Ono and Pham 2009).

Goal	5.7%
Actor	5.3%
Phenomenon	4.3%
Circumstance	2.5%
Receiver	0.4%
Target	0.4%
Token	0.4%
Total	18.9%

Tab. 7: Chan's roles as absent

2017, 51), and reveals that patients often identify loneliness as a cause, rather than a consequence, of their psychosis.

[13] According to Gabriel, whitewashing is a form of "cultural bleaching" (1998, 5) that transforms non-white characters into white characters in the media, in order to reaffirm the dominance of the dominant group.

The clauses dedicated to Chan's absence are the second most recurrent after the FOB ones, nearly 20% of the analyzed total (Table 7). As a disappeared person, Chan is primarily a goal: Jo and Steve are looking for him throughout the film, albeit their motives are quite different, since Steve mainly wants his money back, and Jo is worried for him. The lawyer and Mr. Lee also look for him, as they want him to settle the car accident issue that had caused Chan Hung's encounter with the police officer—the former to prove her cultural point, the latter to confirm his own position as a generous sponsor and insurer.

The clauses related to invisibility seem to be particularly repetitive in terms of structure and lexical choice: most often, the clauses in which Chan is a goal are accompanied by the verb "looking for" (e.g., Mark 1984, 17, 20, 29, 32, 41, 44, 54, 55). Nearly as recurrent is Chan's role as an absent actor, as for example in the clauses "[he] missed his court date" (Mark 1984, 19) and "he wasn't home" (Mark 1984, 20) whenever the protagonists try to talk to him—in one word, "he disappeared" (Mark 1984, 58). Rather significant is his role as a phenomenon, especially with the verb "to see," when a character says that they have not seen him lately or relate the last time they did (e.g., Mark 1984, 17, 19, 30, 54, 55, 56, 74).

Jo's quest opens and closes with clauses related to 'seeing' Chan Hung. Towards the beginning he seems concerned, as Steve and him "haven't seen him in two days" (Mark 1984, 17). This condition does not change, despite all the efforts to find him: the last lines in the film are Jo's final considerations on the whole case. He accepts the idea of not finding him, but is bothered by the fact that he does not know "who Chan Hung really is" anymore (Mark 1984, 73). Indeed, while each person he talked to has their own ideas, none is supported by evidence, and second-hand opinions are not enough for Jo: "the problem with me is that I believe what I see and hear. If I did that with Chan Hung I'll know nothing" (Mark 1984, 74). What he knows about Chan is the same as the only picture he has with him, where Chan is standing in the shadow and his face is not visible—"I still can't see him" (Mark 1984, 74) are Jo's last words before the film ends with a long montage of urban sights.

Although one might argue that the impossibility of finding Chan Hung is more a diegetic element than a stereotype, from the film it is possible to infer two ways in which invisibility has to do with cinematic stereotypes. First, absence *is* a cinematic stereotype, in that Asians and Asians Americans have not been taken into consideration, even for roles that could have rightfully been allocated to them. Asian Americans have long been excluded from American cinema through practices such as yellowface (e.g. *The Good Earth*, 1937) and whitewashing (e.g. *Ghost in the Shell*, 2017). Second, this void really represents the essence of stereotyping at its fullest: the protagonists, who belong to a stereotyped community, go on a quest to find the

substance of their mediated image—Chan Hung. However, no real facts or clues on Chan Hung can be found, as a stereotype has no substance. The characters use language to shape Chan in a space of absence, because a stereotype is only real in the *words* of the beholder.

4. Final remarks

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the linguistic construction of the character of Chan Hung, in order to understand how Wang's film *Chan Is Missing* evokes and exorcises the stereotypes that have affected Chinese American and Asian American presence on cinema screens.[14]

The transitivity analysis of Chan-related clauses in the film showed that the most recurrent role for him is actor: while the audience cannot *see* him, they can hear stories of what he presumably *did*. This reflects the prevalence of material processes, which can be expected in informal texts like the fictional dialogues of this film (Thompson 2013, 135). In all processes, Chan mainly has the 'active' role: actor in material processes, senser in mental processes, carrier in relational processes, sayer in verbal processes. In behavioral processes, far less recurrent than the others, Chan is still the behaver. Such 'active' role, however, is somehow paradoxical, since he never appears and the audience is left clueless to discern reliable narrations. Predictably, when intersecting roles with stereotypes, this 'active' prevalence does not change significantly. Only as an absent character he is the goal of the actions slightly more often, as the characters look for him.

The analysis has also assessed the recurrence of some Asian American stereotypes, such as the FOB. This figure, dominant in the film, is revealing from many perspectives. First, the FOB seems to be the most introjected stereotype, a projection of the American-born Chinese necessary to define themselves as *more American*. Furthermore, the FOB represents an extension of the generational gap: Steve, the young co-protagonist, has the most cynical opinion of Chan. In addition, the all-embracing nature of the FOB category makes it closer to an empty box that can be filled with other features when convenient. At the same time, while the FOB is the most recurrent stereotype individually, much screen time is occupied by clauses suggesting other images. But, since the whole film happens in Chan's absence, no opinion is confirmed, and the audience is left with a Chinatown that does not feature stereotypes. Indeed, the film does

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[14] Although the choice of a single case study may appear limited in scope, the crucial role of the film in cinematic history justifies its choice, and proposes itself as a tile in a broader investigation that includes more films and their audience's perceptions. A broader corpus research is being conducted by the author, which will include a selection of films and their translations, with the final objective to test the results in a perception study.

not attempt to replace the existing stereotypes with a better model to adhere to: Feng suggests that *Chan Is Missing* "does not resolve the issues it raises" (1996, 99), and that "the indeterminacy of Chan's identity undermines everyone else's" (2002, 161).

Chan Hung is then a winning challenge against ethnic stereotypes, or *ethnotypes*, whose role in fiction has often been to immobilize the other, to work as "rationalizations of cultural difference" (van Doorslaer et al. 2016, 3). Indeed, the absence of Chan defies all attempts to force him into "the (neo-) Aristotelian nature of the idea of 'character' as an instance of […] 'motivation': i.e. the narrative predication of behaviour and acts to actorial figures, linking 'what people do' to 'how people are'" (van Doorslaer et al. 2016, 3). That is why Feng underlines that *Chan Is Missing* can be considered a symbol of an Asian American identity in motion, speaking from the interval between all the exogenous, imposed, fixed identities exorcised by the characters. Chan Hung represents a vindication of discontinuity from "the ways ideology has shaped the telling of history" (Feng 2002, 18), a choice to stop trying to fit into a fixed identity based on unattainable continuity and uniformity.

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