The Reconstruction of the Image of Chinese Female Immigrants in *Full Moon in New York*, *Siao Yu*, and *Finding Mr. Right*

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This article explores the changing cinematic images of Chinese women immigrants in the United States, focusing on three films by directors from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, respectively, in order to demonstrate ways in which contemporary transnational Chinese cinema introduces alternatives to established stereotypes. *Full Moon in New York* (1989) by Stanley Kwan (關錦鵬), *Siao Yu* (1995) by Sylvia Chang (張艾嘉), and *Finding Mr. Right* (2013) by Xiaolu Xue (薛曉璐) all illustrate how the social, political, and economic changes that have taken place in China since the 1980s have inspired contemporary Chinese filmmakers to construct new images of Chinese female immigrants. The new transnational Chinese cinema develops female characters who are more complex than the stereotypical images of the Lotus Blossom or the Dragon Lady (Tajima 309), and introduces elements of Chinese culture that are less known to Western viewers. To this end, the characters may represent stronger traditional views, as in Kwan's film; may adapt multicultural traits, as in Chang's film; or may be American Dreamers, as in Xue's comedy.

In the early history of Chinese immigrants in the United States, Chinese women were stereotyped as "exotic curios, sexual slaves, drudges, or passive victims" (Yung 3). Based on these stereotypes, most Hollywood films portrayed Chinese women in a derogatory manner. In "Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed: Images of Asian Women," Renee Tajima states that "Asian women in film are, for the most part, passive figures who exist to serve men, especially as love interests for white men (Lotus Blossoms) or as partners in crime with men of their own kind (Dragon Ladies)" (309). In light of this, the images of Asian women in American cinema could be confined to two types: "the Lotus Blossom (also known as China Doll, Geisha Girl, shy Polynesian beauty), and the Dragon Lady (Fu Manta's various female relations, prostitutes, devious madames)" (309). One prominent example of a Lotus Blossom is featured in the aptly-

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named film *Lotus Blossom* (1921), starring Lady Tsen Mei, while one famous example of a Dragon Lady is Anna May Wong's character in *Thief of Baghdad* (1924) (Tajima 309). Owing to deep-rooted prejudice, many influential forms of Western popular culture have marginalized Asian women (Uchida 167); in order to create new images of Chinese immigrants, the three directors discussed here use Self-Orientalism to deconstruct traditional Western stereotypes and then reconstruct images of Chinese women immigrants by focusing on depicting their female characters' personal frustrations and struggles while living in the United States.

Although the three directors are from different Chinese locales and depict different types of problems that Chinese immigrants in America face in different eras, they all focus on female immigrants' struggles for survival in their new milieu. They depict Chinese female immigrants as powerless, with no choice but to stay in America. In light of this, comparison of these three films reveals different facets of the images of Chinese female immigrants. Xiaolu Xue, from China, Sylvia Chang, from Taiwan, and Stanley Kwan, from Hong Kong, each bring distinct backgrounds, idiosyncratic ideas, and particular filmic techniques to the depiction of Chinese immigrants to the United States. Each film also presents the experiences of Chinese female immigrants in a different historical period: *Full Moon in New York* is set in the 1980s, *Siao Yu* was filmed in the 1990s, and *Finding Mr. Right* was made in the 2010s.

Stanley Kwan's *Full Moon in New York* tells the story of three Chinese women in New York. Zhao Hong (Siqin Gaowa) who is from mainland China, has just married Thomas, an American-born Chinese man, and is trying to adjust to her new American lifestyle. However, she is not completely content, as she longs to bring her mother to America. Li Feng Jiao (Maggie Cheung) is from Hong Kong and is burdened with managing a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown, working as a real estate agent, and confronting her homosexuality. Wang Hsiung Ping (Sylvia Chang), an actress from Taiwan, attends multiple auditions for stage performances without much success. The three women meet occasionally and befriend one another at Li Feng Jiao's restaurant, becoming examples of Chinese emigrants who instinctively cling to one another within the Chinese community.

Sylvia Chang's *Siao Yu* depicts an illegal immigrant Chinese girl (Rene Liu) in New York, who works as a sweatshop seamstress, whereas her lover, Jiang Wei (Tou Chung Hua), is a student who works in a fish market. To help her boyfriend stay in America, Siao Yu marries Mario (Daniel J. Travanti) for a green card. Mario is an Italian American who has incurred a large amount of debt from gambling, and in order to repay his debts, he agrees to marry Siao Yu. Once married to Mario, Siao Yu moves into his spare bedroom, and the two develop a close friendship. As a consequence of their growing care and concern for each other, Siao Yu's boyfriend becomes jealous, and at the end of the film, Siao Yu decides to stay behind to take care of Mario, even though she loves Jiang Wei. In this light, Mario is a crucial figure in representing the possibilities of assimilation by new Chinese immigrants, with the film depicting recent Chinese immigrants to the West not only living within their tight-knit com-

munities but also socially interacting with Westerners in their daily lives.

Finding Mr. Right was inspired by the successful Hollywood film *Sleepless in Seattle*. Its protagonist, Wen Jiajia (Tang Wei), lives the luxurious life of a wealthy Chinese businessman's mistress. She is forced to give birth in Seattle, as her child could not obtain *hukou* (household registration) because her boyfriend is a married man. In Seattle, she meets a Chinese driver called Frank (Wu Xiubo), who helps her to find a Taiwanese confinement centre (maternity hotel) operated by Mrs. Huang (Jin Yanling). During her stay in Seattle, her boyfriend suddenly cuts off her financial support, as he is facing a criminal investigation in China. Upon losing her financial support, Wen establishes a close relationship with Frank, who had been a doctor in China before moving to the United States. Eventually they fall in love, but Wen's married boyfriend wants her back after he has won the lawsuit and divorced his wife. However, after returning to Beijing, Wen realizes that she has changed and decides to leave her boyfriend and be a single mother. The story ends with Wen meeting Frank once again at the top of the Empire State Building, where their romance continues.

Is the Moon Really Fuller in the West?

A brief account of the early history of Chinese migration to the West is useful to set the stage for an investigation of the changing stereotypes of Chinese immigrants in Western society. Chinese people began to migrate to "Gold Mountain," or California, in the nineteenth century in hopes of improving their lives (Ling and Austin 187). For generations afterward, Chinese people regarded America as a place of hope for a better life, expressed in the phrase "The moon is fuller in the West." This notion is reflected in several films about Chinese diasporas, such as Clara Law's *They Say the Moon Is Fuller Here* (1985) and Stanley Kwan's *Full Moon in New York*.

The three films discussed in this article treat various aspects of Western stereotypes of new Chinese immigrants, yet one similarity they share is that their female protagonists all make attempts to remain in the United States and pursue the "American Dream." To create a new image of Chinese female immigrants in their films, the three Chinese directors deconstruct the Western stereotypes of Chinese women, in what could be interpreted as a type of Self-Orientalization. Of these three films, Kwan's *Full Moon in New York* follows the traditional approach of depicting Chinese immigrants as the object of the "Western gaze," and consequently, the ideology of "Self-Orientalism" is most apparent in this film.

According to Claire Conceison, "Self-Orientalism" in the Chinese context involves Chinese people's use of Western stereotypes "with a result of mystifying, exoticizing, even fetishizing the Orient" (43). *Full Moon in New York* was produced in the 1980s, and during this period, mainland China began to develop its economy following the adoption of Deng Xiaoping's "open door policy" in the late 1970s. During this time, Hong Kong could be characterized as undergoing a period of political instabil-

ity. Mainland Chinese people had more freedom to travel to other countries in the mid-1980s than they did in the 1970s. Therefore, because many mainland Chinese people believed they would have better lives in the West, especially in America, many Chinese decided to emigrate during this period. This is supported by Wanning Sun's comment:

> America, in the popular consciousness of the late 1980s and early 1990s, embodied the promise of everything that China wanted but lacked—wealth, modernity, freedom, adventure, and above all, exotica—and was so imagined by both those who had access to mobility and those who did not. (48)

Based on this observation, it is understandable that many mainland Chinese were willing to leave their motherland for the West, even if they had to become illegal immigrants.

Although in the 1980s, Hong Kong experienced economic development due to the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, this period also saw an influx of migrants from Hong Kong to the West. Ronald Skeldon states that "the return of the British crown colony of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty on 1 July 1997 is seen to be the main factor increasing nervousness and causing migration" (3). In light of this, many Hong Kong films produced before 1997 focused on this issue.[1] *Full Moon in New York* focuses on the lives and difficulties of new Chinese immigrants during this political era, and it is therefore not surprising to see that the film is more conservative in handling the issues of new Chinese immigrants than many films of the 1990s that deal with similar topics.

Nevertheless, Stanley Kwan has not directly followed the typical strategies of his Western counterparts in portraying Chinese immigrants. Kwan does not exoticize his female characters in the image of the "Lotus Blossom" or "Dragon Lady," choosing instead to depict the struggles of Chinese immigrants in New York, especially the manner in which Chinese people were regarded as "second-rate" citizens in their new country. The director tries to provide another perspective on new Chinese immigrants as an attempt to reconstruct the image of new Chinese immigrants in America. According to Sheng-Mei Ma:

> In order to retire racist stereotypes, one is obliged to first evoke them; in order to construct ethnicity, one must first destruct that which is falsely reported as one's ethnic identity. Both result in an unwitting reiteration of Orientalist images. (xi)

In light of Ma's comment on the use of stereotypes, Kwan can be said to have created his own images of Chinese immigrants by deconstructing Western stereotypes. It is thus not surprising, and even expected, to see the ideology of Self-Orientalism in the deconstructive approach of Kwan's film.

Tony Mitchell's commentary on Self-Orientalism can also provide a different manner of interpreting the Self-Orientalist characteristics of *Full Moon in New York*:

> Both Self-Orientalism and reverse Orientalism open up possibilities for bypassing rigid stereotypes and expressing an often playful form of identity politics in which East and

> West can explore each other's exotic fetishisations and fascinations without being overcome by the anxieties surrounding notions of racial authenticity. (115)

Since Westerners have entrenched prejudices toward Chinese immigrants due to limited knowledge and contact, as well as to exposure to early Western films involving Chinese characters, Western audiences cannot truly be said to have "fresh" or different perspectives on Chinese immigrants. Hence, to recreate a new image of Chinese immigrants, Chinese directors are making efforts to move away from stereotypical representations of both the West and the East to correct the misunderstandings of the West.

The Self-Orientalist Features of *Full Moon in New York*

Full Moon in New York begins with a wide shot of the wedding ceremony of the two protagonists, Zhao Hong and her American-born Chinese husband. Among them are mainly white Americans with a few Asian faces in the group. Because Zhao is from mainland China and has just immigrated to the States, she has a poor command of English; consequently, she is the only one who cannot fully enjoy the happiness of the wedding even though it is her own. Because it is a Western-style wedding, Zhao is unfamiliar with the process, and has to rely on her husband and his friend Wang Hsiung Ping to give her guidance throughout the ceremony. From this opening scene, it is foreseeable that Zhao, a stranger to the United States, will encounter difficulties due to her cultural "difference." The scene conveys to the audience her strong sense of loneliness and isolation in her host country.

Zhao Hong is presented as a "China Doll," a voiceless "toy" owned by her "Chinese" husband. She is unable to earn a living and has trouble finding friends because she does not speak English properly; the only way she can make new friends is by associating with others who speak Chinese. Through her husband, Zhao befriends Wang Hsiung Ping and Li Feng Jiao. Unlike Zhao, both Wang and Li have a very good command of English, and both of them have achieved success in their careers. Wang is an actress in Western dramas, and Li is the owner of a Chinese restaurant and a real estate agent. Nonetheless, they both find it difficult to be accepted by mainstream white culture; Wang was rejected for the role of Lady Macbeth because she is Chinese, and Li was sexually harassed because she is a Chinese woman. These examples show that mastering English is only one of many problems for Chinese immigrants, who are still regarded as the "outsider" and "minorities" in Western societies for numerous reasons.[2]

Stanley Kwan was born and raised in Hong Kong and therefore was not directly influenced by the Cultural Revolution. However, he realizes the significance of the Cultural Revolution as an example of both the "exoticism" and the "otherness" of

Chinese history, and has thus included references to this major historical event in his work. Traces of the impact of the Cultural Revolution are present in *Full Moon in New York*; for example, Zhao's mother was forbidden to travel to the United States, where she had earned her education, and her husband was accused of being a "rightist" and killed, simply because he had studied in the United States. Similarly, Wang's father's mistress suffered because of the preconceptions of this "irrational" historical event. Wang's father was a member of the Kuomintang and therefore held a deep-rooted prejudice toward the Communist Party. To allow others to learn about the dark side of the Cultural Revolution, Wang's father abused his mistress in order to present her as a victim of this chaotic political movement. By removing the "mysterious" veil from this significant Chinese historical event, Stanley Kwan offers a new perspective on China and the backgrounds of many Chinese immigrants for Western audiences who may not be familiar with the history, which is unlike the representation of China and Chinese immigrants by other Western directors such as Michael Cimino, who associates Chinese immigrants with triads in *Year of the Dragon* (1985). In addition, Zhao's and the mistress's determination to stay in America serve as examples of the idea that "the moon is fuller in the West." After experiencing the Cultural Revolution, Zhao and the mistress see "America" as their new hope. Therefore, even though Zhao feels alienated in a foreign country, and the mistress has to endure physical abuse by Wang's father, neither one wishes to return to the "road of no return" in China.

Another reason for reading *Full Moon in New York* as a product of Self-Orientalization is Kwan's representation of the protagonists' communities in a manner that makes them seem insular. Even though the film is about the lives of new Chinese immigrants in the West, the interaction between the newly immigrated Chinese people and Western people is limited. This may be an approach meant to add "isolation" and "exoticism" to the communities of new Chinese immigrants in the West. With little description of their Western counterparts, Stanley Kwan has concentrated on closely examining how new Chinese immigrants rely on their "Chineseness" to obtain and fight for a new cultural identity in an alien environment. By emphasizing the "Chineseness" of these new immigrants, the film foregrounds the contrast between the West and the East and perpetuates the image of the "other" for a Western audience.

Stephen Teo, a well-known Hong Kong film critic, notes that Kwan is not making a melodrama about Chinese women in the United States but rather is trying to make an allegory:

> With all three characters effectively acting as symbols of different social natures of Chineseness, the film is really an allegory about China and its quest for political unity. […] The three women subsume their differences when they get together and all personal bitchiness is set aside for the sake of an abstract vision of China, which however, may mean more to the characters than to the director.

Teo's critique highlights an important issue that many Westerners ignore: Chinese immigrants have different types of "Chineseness" depending on the Chinese commu-

nities to which they belong. For example, they may speak different Chinese dialects: at the beginning of the film, when Li first meets Wang, Li assumes Wang knows Cantonese and starts speaking Cantonese to her. However, Wang's first response is "Can you speak Mandarin to me?" This scene shows that although both Li and Wang are Chinese, they do not share the same Chinese culture because they speak different dialects. However, Western audiences are generally unable to differentiate Mandarin from Cantonese without the help of the subtitles. Therefore, the subtitles in this scene help Western audiences appreciate the diversity within the umbrella term "Chinese culture" while simultaneously creating a sense of exoticism.

The Reconstruction of the Image of the "Lotus Blossom" in *Siao Yu*

Like *Full Moon in New York*, Sylvia Chang's *Siao Yu* contains Self-Orientalistic elements, though because *Siao Yu* was produced in the 1990s, its use of Self-Orientalist imagery is different from previous and later films about Chinese immigrants. Sylvia Chang creates her female protagonist, Siao Yu, based on the Western stereotype of the "Lotus Blossom"; however, as the film progresses, Siao Yu becomes less of a "Lotus Blossom" stereotype as Chang focuses on her reason for and inner struggle with this stereotype in order to reconstruct a new image of Chinese female immigrants.

Siao Yu is an illegal immigrant who works in a Chinese sweatshop, though in one scene with her boyfriend Jiang Wei, she is seen wearing a T-shirt from the prestigious Tsinghua University. This is a reminder that even though she belongs to the elite educated group in China, she cannot make full use of her talents in America, as she does not have the necessary opportunities to do so. In *The New Chinatown*, a study of Chinese immigrants in New York, Peter Kwong found that most illegal immigrants from China are from well-off families or have received higher education, but do not necessarily find work in middle-class milieux, thus falling within the common stereotype that Chinese people can obtain only low-paid jobs in the West. The words on Siao Yu's shirt are printed in Chinese, so that audiences who can read Chinese will know she is highly educated, while those who cannot will not know her educational background. Siao Yu, being a well-educated woman, is willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of obtaining a green card for her boyfriend. This immediately raises the important question of why an educated Chinese woman would prefer to be an illegal immigrant in America. Much like Zhao Hong and Wang Hsiung Ping's father's mistress in *Full Moon in New York*, Siao Yu believes in the "American dream." Despite the rapid economic development in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the 1990s, many mainland Chinese still believed that America was better than China, that "the moon is fuller in the West." Siao Yu sees America as a new hope for herself and her boyfriend, and this belief is her main reason for adhering to the "Lotus Blossom" stereotype.

Nonetheless, Sylvia Chang does not merely follow the traditional Western stereotypes of new Chinese immigrants in her work; she also creates a new image based on the old clichés by mixing both Western and Eastern stereotypes. For example, Siao Yu does not marry only to get a residence permit, but does in fact show affection toward her "husband." Chang therefore uses the traditional Hollywood model of an interracial romance, in this case between a Western male and an Asian female, as the focal point of her film, with Siao Yu as an American man's "gift" and a passively good woman (Tajima 309, 317). In an article for *Jump Cut*, L.S. Kim argues that because of what she calls the "Western gaze," viewers in the United States generally perceive Asian women as passive, vulnerable females who are ready to be rescued by men or by "white knights." Hence, the stereotypical representation of interracial love on Hollywood screens is "a Western white male with an Asian female." Further developing this stereotype, Gina Marchetti states that "in interracial tales of seduction, the attractions of Asian sexuality, in fact, are usually offset by an inevitable tragic ending. The Asian seducer or seductress generally dies, and the moral lapse of the Westerner finds some suitable expiation" (68). In other words, most stories that centre on interracial love generally end tragically, with the female character often becoming the victim.

Although Chang uses this Hollywood formula, she does not portray Siao Yu as a victim, instead depicting the white man, Mario, as the tragic hero. In *Siao Yu*, Mario acts as the "white knight" for Siao Yu by helping her to get a green card at the beginning of the film, but the stereotypes are reversed when Siao Yu plays the role of the "white knight" by taking care of Mario. Instead of reinforcing the Western stereotype of the "Lotus Blossom," Chang allows Siao Yu to make her own choice when, toward the end of the film, Jiang Wei asks her to leave the invalid Mario and to move back with him. Siao Yu refuses Jiang Wei's request even though she loves Jiang Wei and sees Mario only as a friend. Feeling sympathetic to and obliged to take care of Mario, Siao Yu stays with him until he dies. This unconventional ending helps to create a new impression of Chinese female immigrants. Unlike the ambitious and self-centred Li Hung in Clara Law's *Farewell China* (1990), Siao Yu demonstrates that Chinese women can be affectionate toward their "legal" husbands despite only marrying in order to establish permanent residence.

In addition, Siao Yu's decision also echoes the idea of the "American dream." Ironically, she marries Mario for the sake of obtaining a green card to secure her future with Jiang Wei in America, only to break up with Jiang Wei at the end. Things changed for her once she moved in with Mario, as she began to assimilate into American culture and regard America as her new home. Although her affiliation with China, represented by her relationship with Jiang Wei, is part of her past, she cannot and does not want to return to her past in China. Therefore, she decides to choose Mario, and America, as her future, and is willing to abandon her past in favour of her new future as an American.

In contrast, *Finding Mr. Right* offers a different perspective on Chinese immi-

grants, particularly illegal Chinese immigrants in the 2010s. Although traces of Self-Orientalist elements are present in the film, *Finding Mr. Right* deals mostly with the social phenomena in China that have led many Chinese women to go overseas to give birth. According to Wang Ning:

> *Finding Mr. Right* concerns the hottest topics now in China, such as giving birth in the United States, mistresses, living off a woman etc., this film was warmly welcomed by the audience in all cinemas in China and netted box office returns after only one month of nearly 500 million RMB. As a low-cost film which was filmed within 38 days with a production cost of only 30 million RMB, it indeed exceeded the expectations of most film experts. This is the first time in China that a domestic film shows on screen the theme of giving birth in the United States. (239)

Though, as Wang points out, the popularity of *Finding Mr. Right* in mainland China is related to its relevance to important social issues in the PRC, it also raises audience awareness of Chinese women giving birth in America in order to obtain United States citizenship for their children, a phenomenon that Hannah Beech describes in an article in *Time Magazine*:

> The U.S. is one of the few nations where simply being born on its soil confers citizenship on a newborn. That policy has spawned a birth-tourism industry, in which pregnant foreigners flock to American hospitals to secure U.S. passports for their babies […] All of which has led to a proliferation of so-called anchor babies. At least 10,000 such Chinese babies were born in America in 2012, according to an estimate by an online platform dedicated to monitoring and rating confinement centers ("maternity hotels") for Chinese women giving birth in the States. The Jia Mei Canadian and American Baby Counseling Services Center, with offices across China, charges between $30,000 and $40,000 to women who want to deliver babies in the States. The fee includes a plane ticket, accommodation in Los Angeles or Chicago in a two- or three- bedroom apartment or house, plus all the citizenship paperwork for the newborn. Women spend two months in the U.S. before delivery and one month postpartum. Nannies, drivers, and a chef will be shared among three women, promises Jia Mei. Of course, Chinese-speaking doctors will be on call. Naturally, a thriving business catering to these foreign passport holders has developed.

Xiaolu Xue's *Finding Mr. Right* focuses on Chinese women who decide to give birth and stay in maternity hotels in the United States. This subject matter means, therefore, that the film deals more with the community of the confinement centres—Chinese nannies, Chinese drivers, and Chinese doctors—than with the surrounding local communities. As a mistress, Wen Jiajia has no choice but to give birth outside of China, as her baby would have no *hukou* (household registration). Like her counterparts in *Full Moon in New York* and *Siao Yu*, Wen, the protagonist of *Finding Mr. Right*, believes in the "American dream." Her decision to give birth in Seattle is a reflection of the actual situation of most Chinese women who risk their lives to give birth in America, as epitomized by *Los Angeles Times* interviews with Chinese mothers whose children were born in the United States. One Chinese mother who declined to provide her first name in the interview states that "China has developed

very quickly […] but Chinese people still have this perception of America as a dream place to live, that it is bigger, better, stronger."

In addition to its treatment of the idea that "the moon is fuller in the West," *Finding Mr. Right* depicts a new stereotype of the Chinese people: the *tuhao* or nouveau riche. According to Y. Cai, as cited by Xu Mingwu and Tia Chuanmao, the past three decades have seen an increase in the number of middle-class people in China. Those who spend their money extravagantly, display garish tastes, and lack "good" cultural traits or sophistication are known as *tuhao* in Chinese (Xu & Tia 2). The film's protagonist, Wen Jiajia, is a typical *tuhao* at the time she arrives in Seattle in preparation to give birth, as the gradual closeups of her clothing illustrate. Later, when she meets Frank, the Chinese driver, at the airport, she immediately tells him off for his delay in picking her up. This scene could be read as Xue's sarcastic mockery of rich Chinese people who believe that having paid for a service gives them some type of ultimate authority. Similarly, when Wen arrives at Mrs. Huang's confinement centre, she is willing to pay double for a bigger room, even if that means taking the room of the hostess, Mrs. Huang. In addition, because Wen's wealthy married boyfriend has supported her stay in the United States, she indulges in high-end shopping and stays in an expensive hotel suite just to watch fireworks. The multiple closeups of Wen's UnionPay card further reinforce her *tuhao* status. According to Bomee Sheng, most Chinese tourists prefer to use UnionPay cards instead of cash for overseas spending whenever the retailers accept UnionPay ("Reuters"). All of these scenes not only highlight characteristic *tuhao* behaviour, but also illustrate the rapid economic development of the PRC, such that Chinese immigrants, legal and illegal, enjoy better financial status than they had in the past.

However, when her boyfriend is arrested due to a criminal investigation, Wen breaks up with him and returns to Beijing. Nonetheless, she still cannot forget Frank, who represents America, and thus brings her son to Seattle once again. In the end, she and Frank meet again, and she decides to stay in America to pursue a new life.

The Significance of the Chinese Communities and Chinese Food in the Three Films

Regardless of the different periods in which the three films were produced, the protagonists of all three films encounter alienation and isolation no matter how hard they try to assimilate into their new culture. As strangers in a new country, these new Chinese immigrants may feel a sudden loss in their own identities, and they become tempted to affirm their cultural identities by choosing to remain close to other Chinese people; hence, Chinatown, or Chinese communities in the case of *Finding Mr. Right*, becomes an essential part of their lives. Elaine Kim notes that Chinatowns served as social networks for new Chinese immigrants, providing them with a sense of belonging that they were unable to attain elsewhere. While the Western population

perceived Chinese immigrants in terms of stereotypes, these immigrants were able to find comfort and empathy from fellow Chinese who could relate to their plight. In Chinatown, this group of Chinese people were welcomed, which enabled them to foster relations and to interact freely, warmly, and personally (Kim 102).

Because Chinatown was the place where most early Chinese immigrants gathered, it is the most obvious starting point for Westerners to explore Chinese culture. However, due to the notorious reputation of Chinatowns throughout the United States and to long-term prejudices and misunderstandings, the resulting images of Chinese immigrants were almost always negative and framed in terms of ethnic minorities. In his historical survey of Chinese immigrants in the United States, Ronald Takai quotes a Chinese immigrant who noted: "Yes, legally you are Americans, but you will not be accepted. Look at your face—it is Chinese" (55). The challenges that Chinese immigrants have faced in their quest for new cultural identities have become a common theme in films dealing with Chinese diasporas. However, in contrast to Western directors who have made films about Chinese immigrants or Chinatowns, the three Chinese directors discussed here use Chinatown or Chinese communities as places in which their female characters can enjoy Chinese food as a source of comfort and sense of cultural belonging.

Full Moon in New York depicts the exotic aspects of Chinese food as well as the processes of preparing it, in order to familiarize it for Western audiences. Li Feng Jiao is the owner of a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown, at which she befriends the other two characters, Zhao Hong and Wang Hsiung Ping. The film features closeups of ducks' heads, for example, as well as scenes of Zhao Hong learning to make Peking duck and gaining satisfaction and a sense of belonging from being able to prepare a new Chinese dish. The use of closeups provides a much broader sense of Chinese food culture than most Western audiences would have otherwise. Kwan's presentation of Chinese food culture focuses on authenticity, as illustrated by his depiction of the step-by-step process of making Peking duck. Chisten Chen has pointed out in the *Washington Post* that in China, "food does not exist merely for physical nourishment; it could be seen as fundamental to social interactions and relationships. In other words, food is necessary for the body and for the soul." Given this social and spiritual importance, it is not surprising that the three women in *Full Moon in New York* display their connections by sharing Chinese meals together, with Chinese food serving as a signifier of their bonding.

Even though none of the characters in Sylvia Chang's *Siao Yu* works in the Chinese food industry, particular scenes show the significance of Chinese food culture. For example, Siao Yu shops for groceries in Chinatown, and when she makes Chinese food for Mario for the first time, he is full of anticipation and excitement. Even when the smoke emanating from Siao Yu's kitchen irritates a neighbour, Mario defends her by saying, "Nothing has happened. This is Chinese home cooking." Mario's simultaneous curiosity about and misunderstanding of Chinese cooking inspires Siao Yu to take the initiative to communicate openly with him.

In *Finding Mr. Right*, even though Xiaolu Xue portrays Wen Jiajia as a *tuhao*, with an expected preference for foreign food such as Alaskan crab, Chinese food is still prevalent, as Xue depicts Wen as a good cook of Chinese food. When Wen finds out that her rich boyfriend has abandoned her at Christmas, she offers to cook dinner for Frank. She chooses to make Chinese food despite the availability of other ingredients in Frank's kitchen that could be used to make Western dishes. Several closeup shots depict Wen making a typical Chinese dish, stir-fried eggs with tomatoes, which is a symbol of her cultural identity as a Chinese woman and a source of comfort for her, even though she yearns for a new life in America. When she feels upset, Chinese food serves as a remedy for her and a "root" for her to hold onto. In addition, because Wen is pregnant and is staying in a Chinese confinement centre, Chinese cuisine is an important part of her new domestic arrangements, due to the Chinese belief in balancing yin and yang in food for pregnant women. In light of this, the Chinese food served in the confinement centre has a similar function to the Chinese food in *Full Moon in New York*: a source of bonding within Chinese communities. Even though the representations of Chinese female immigrants differ in the three films, all three protagonists demonstrate strong connections with the culture of Chinese food, which in turn is an important element in the creation of these characters and the films in which they appear.

Conclusion

The historical periods in which the three films discussed in this article were made have strongly influenced each film's imagery of Chinese immigrant women. Since *Full Moon in New York* was made in the 1980s, the stereotypes of Chinese immigrants mentioned in the film are conventional. The female characters in Kwan's film encounter alienation and choose to remain close to Chinese communities in the United States. Due to China's open door policy, the challenges that new Chinese immigrants faced in the 1990s may be greater than the struggle to earn a living in their host land, and may also include a greater appreciation of the cultural differences between China and the West. *Siao Yu* provides a wider platform for exploring Chinese cultural issues than *Full Moon in New York* does, as the former involves the role of mainstream white culture in the daily life of the main protagonist. *Finding Mr. Right*, by contrast, depicts a relatively new image of mainland Chinese immigrants, the nouveau riche of the 2010s who can afford luxurious lifestyles and, even in the case of illegal immigrants such as the film's protagonist, are not reduced to humble conditions.

Notes

1. Some prominent examples include Mabel Cheung's *Illegal Immigrant* (1985) and Clara Law's *They Say the Moon Is Fuller Here* (1985) and *The Other Half and the Other Half* (1988).

2. In her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that women in third-world countries doubly suffer from both racism and sexism under a patriarchal system. In this light, given that China has been categorized as a third-world country, it is assumed that Chinese women would similarly suffer from racism and sexism in Western societies.

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