

Space, Ethnicity, and Identity: Reading Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing*

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Abstract

Wayne Wang's debut film *Chan Is Missing* (1982) is regarded as a classic Asian American independent production. In this low-cost black-and-white film, the Chinese American director employs the structure of a detective story, in which two San Francisco Chinatown taxi drivers try to get their money back from the missing person Chan Hung. During the process of investigation, different stories are told about Chan that reveal the complexity and heterogeneity of personal identity and, thus, ethnic identity. Appropriating concepts from "film noir" and "flâneur," this paper explores issues of urban space (especially Chinatown as an ethnicized space), and its relationship to identity. It argues that Chan acts as a blank that challenges the essentialist myth about identity. In addition to demonstrating that personal and ethnic identity are always in flux—in the process of becoming, rather than in a state of being—Wang examines San Francisco Chinatown as both a site and a sight. The film is at once his critical intervention into this exotic spectacle as a site of contestation, and a graphic presentation of the director's position, observation, and strategy regarding the problematics of Chinese American identity. The identity politics and politics of location represented in this film substantially change the viewers' conception about San Francisco Chinatown and Chinese Americans.

Key Words: Wayne Wang (*Chan Is Missing*), film noir,

flâneur, urban space, ethnic identity