

[The Unrealizable American Dream: On Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown*]

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[Abstract] *The article analyzes the history of the concept of the “American Dream” in Chinese American literature, and particularly in the work of the Chinese American writer Charles Yu. In his novel Interior Chinatown, he examines the stereotypical perception of Chinese Americans in the eyes of white Americans and highlights the problems that Asian Americans have to deal with, e.g. national identity or discrimination. The novel shows how difficult the process of achieving the American dream is for Asian Americans and how difficult it is for them to find the answer to the question “Who am I,” which is closely connected with the realization of their “American Dream.”*

[Keywords] *American Dream; national identity; stereotypes of Chinese Americans; Charles Yu; Interior Chinatown; Black and White*

The essay will discuss one of the most important themes in Chinese American literature – the “American Dream” – as it is addressed by the Chinese American writer Charles Yu in the novel *Interior Chinatown*. The young author belongs to the second generation of Chinese immigrants. Before writing *Interior Chinatown*, he already accomplished much and realized his own “American dream.” However, in American mainstream society it is not easy for Chinese immigrants to realize their American dream, as discrimination, racism and stereotypical perceptions of Chinese (Asian) Americans have still not disappeared, especially in the minds of white Americans.

In his novel, Charles Yu tries to describe the life of Willis Wu – a Chinese American actor, who plays different roles in various TV series, especially in the series *Black and White*, which goes along the same lines as the popular *Law and Order*. The writer discusses the stereotypes of Chinese (Asian) Americans in well-liked Hollywood movies and TV series where Asian Americans always play minor roles, usually as bad guys. Even when step by step they get closer to their dream – to play the main character Kung Fu Guy – they are still trapped in the stereotypes of the world of *Black and White*. This situation is characteristic not only of Hollywood movies, but also of the real world. Chinese (Asian) Americans are forced to play different minor roles in life; they cannot be themselves but always have to live in the imagination of white and black Americans, their biggest problem being that they are considered not Americans but Asians, or, to be exact, Chinese. This two-dimensional world of reality and illusion they have to produce is a source of tension and despair to the characters of the novel. It is difficult for them to realize their American dream.

Many definitions of the “American dream” have appeared since the beginning of the 20th century, when the concept was first used by the American writer James Adams in his book *The Epic of America*: the “American dream” is “the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement... regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (Adams 404). This is one of the most popular definitions of the American dream. Many other authors in different countries have attempted to define the American dream. For example, in the book *The American Dream: A Short Story of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, the American writer Jim Cullen points out different aspects of the concept: the American dream is a dream of a good life (11), upward mobility (59), equality (103), home ownership (133), etc. In *The American Dream in the 21st Century* Sandra L. Hanson and John Kenneth White quote the results of the surveys done by *CBS News* (1985) and Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates (2008) to show that the content of the American dream has been changing all the time; it has become “more spiritual and vested in emotional, rather than material, security” (2008 survey) (Hanson 10); while in the book *Russians and Americans: About Them and About Us, So Different*, the Russian journalist and chronicler of American life Mikhail Taratuta defines the modern meaning of the “American Dream”: “It is a dream of prosperity, comfort, an opportunity to do in life what the soul aspires to. It is a dream that today is better than yesterday, and tomorrow is better than today. It is a hope that children will be able to live better than their parents, that the new generation

will achieve what the parents could not do themselves” (Taratuta 116, my translation). He stresses that the American dream “seems achievable” and supports the belief that “with hard work one can indeed shake up mountains” (Taratuta 116, my translation). The Chinese scholar Ben Huang, who lives in the United States, also participated in the discussion on the topic; he writes about the “fading American dream,” noting that “in history the American dream means that if you work hard you can be rich, and you will have the opportunity for upward mobility, but now it is difficult for the ordinary American people to get rich and achieve their goals.”

Although different researchers interpret the concept in different ways, in general the American dream is seen as a dream of personal success, which always encourages the American people to struggle for a happy life for themselves and for their children. The American dream has played a very important role in the development of American history and society. It is considered to be one of the most important ideological and social issues in the United States, helping to shape the national character of the American people, including Chinese Americans. In addition, the concept “American dream” is of major importance for the development of American literature, and it is considered to be one of its most popular issues, Chinese American literature being no exception. In the meantime, the dream of becoming rich and successful encourages many immigrants from other countries to come to the United States, “the land of opportunity,” to pursue their goals and realize their “American dreams.”

The earliest Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States as Coolies in the second half of the 19th century, when golden mines were found in California. Many poor Chinese peasants dreamed of becoming rich and found the “Golden Mountain” in America, but many of them were cheated by human traffickers and became Coolie-slaves as soon as they arrived in the New World. Chinese Coolies worked very hard: they built the transcontinental railroad, developed local plantations and agriculture and made a great contribution to the economic development of the United States, but the Chinese workers suffered from discrimination, inequality, racism and even violence (Ding Zemin, 170–176). They were regarded as the “Yellow peril.” In 1882, the United States passed the “Chinese Exclusion Act,” which prohibited all immigration of Chinese workers and the naturalization of the Chinese immigrants who had already lived in the country for many years (Ding Zemin, 177). The birth of Chinese American literature was connected with the poor situation of these Chinese immigrants who were trying to achieve their American dream. In the early stage of Chinese American literature, Sui Sin Far, Lee Yan Phou and Yung Wing tried to introduce Chinese culture and traditions to the American mainstream society in order to counteract prejudice against the Chinese; for these authors, the American dream was the dream of equality (Lee H. X. 469). When the Chinese Exclusion Act was abolished in 1943, the new generation of Chinese American writers (Pardee Lowe, Jade Snow Wong), who had been born in the United States, tried to distance themselves from Chinese culture and traditions. For them the American dream was the dream of Americanization, and it meant the acceptance of American values. The next generation of Chinese American writers (1960–1990), such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan,

Gish Jen and others, preferred to write about conflicts between two generations and two different cultures (the parents stand for Chinese culture, and the children stand for modern American culture). The main issue for these authors is self-identification. They try to find the answer to the question: Who are they, Americans or Chinese? In the twenty-first century, with the spread of globalization and increasing xenophobia, the new generation of Chinese American writers continues to raise the same question concerning the “American Dream,” national identity, stereotypes of the Chinese, etc. that afflict Chinese immigrants. A good example is Charles Yu’s novel *Interior Chinatown* (2020).

Charles Yu (Chinese name: 游朝凯) was born in 1976 in Los Angeles in a family of Taiwanese immigrants; he is a typical ABC (American born Chinese). Yu began to write poetry when he was a child, but his parents, like many Chinese immigrants, did not want their son to become a writer. Thus, he attended Columbia Law School. In college, he took part in poetry seminars, studied poetry, read a lot, and wrote a large number of poems. After graduating from the law school, Yu worked as an attorney at a law firm in New York. Here he started his writing career (Birnbaum). Yu published three books: the short story collections *Third Class Superhero* (2006), *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* (2010), and *Sorry, Please, Thank You* (2012). Then he quit the job at the law firm and became a series editor. As a co-author, he wrote the scripts for the TV series *Westworld* for HBO. In 2007, Yu was named one of the “5 under 35” writers by the National Book Foundation. (Yu, “Interview”, 1, 3, 5) Therefore, we can assume that Yu has already fulfilled his personal American dream of becoming a successful writer.

It should be noted that unlike many other Chinese American writers (Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Gish Jen) who have been always concentrating on the life of Chinese Americans, all the works of Charles Yu written before 2020 were not related to the life of Chinese immigrants but rather belonged to the genre of science fiction. Unlike his well-known compatriots, Yu does not focus on traditional family issues, intergenerational or cultural conflicts. It is only in his latest novel *Interior Chinatown* (2020) that he writes about the unrealized American dream of Chinese immigrants. As a member of the new 21st century generation of Chinese American writers, in *Interior Chinatown*, he tries to explore how the new generation manages to secure their position in the USA and what helps two generations and two cultures finally come to understand each other and achieve harmony and balance. Yu concentrates on the most important problem for all Asian Americans, i.e. the problem of self-identity, and shows how all the stereotypes of the so-called “Chinese” (who are actually American citizens), affect the lives of Chinese Americans as they are multiplied not only in Hollywood movies and TV series but also in the minds of Americans. This signals a new approach to the problem of the Chinese American minority.

As for the motivations for writing the novel, in his interview of BBC Charles Yu admits that it “was the election of President Donald Trump in 2016.” “It’s sometimes really dispiriting and challenging to still feel like a foreigner [in the US].” He refers to the problem of national identity and self-identification, which happens to be the most important issue of the American dream for Chinese (Asian) Americans. In another interview to

PBS NewsHour “Now Read this Book,” Yu emphasizes that as an ABC, who grew up in the 1980s-1990s, he never saw Asians on TV, and if he did, they were usually doing martial arts or working at a restaurant. He believes that if people of other ethnic groups “see that over and over again, it reinforces the idea that these Asians are not part of the main story of America,” and that affects the subconscious level of the American audience. Therefore, Yu decided to write the novel in order to “create a space where background characters get to have a story,” and he “hopes the novel will shed more light on the ongoing debate about representation and Asian American stereotypes, and create a conversation about escaping the roles we are forced into” (“Author Charles Yu”).

According to Yu, the title of the novel *Interior Chinatown* is a term in screenplay writing, which shows the audiences the setting where the scene is shot (Brice, Anne). It has become a metaphor, which happens to dovetail with the interior life of the main character of the novel. The characters of the novel put on masks that are expected of Chinese Americans, but at the same time they are just humans who have their own thoughts and feelings. As the writer himself says, “this is really a book about roles and how we play them [...] but also about how roles can often be very limiting or reductive and, sort of, the people underneath those” [“Author Charles Yu”]. In fact, before reading the book, the readers will already have the impression that the book is about Chinatown and the so-called “Chinese.”

Actually, as a TV screenplay writer, Yu writes this novel in a very unusual way: the narrative structure of *Interior Chinatown* is in the form of a screenplay, which is divided into seven acts, and the whole book is written in the Courier font, just like a screenplay should be, printed with the necessary margins for notes. The author also uses many terms that deal with the production of movies, such as makeup (Yu, *Interior* 71), set design (*Interior* 71), fade to black (*Interior* 123), end romantic montage (*Interior* 173), etc., in order to show the readers that they are not exactly reading a story – they are actually in the story. All the scenes take place in the Golden Palace and SRO (single room occupancy) apartments in which low-income Chinese immigrants live in Chinatown. All the characters are actors playing roles in different TV shows and series, the most important being the series *Black and White*. Actually, the setting already implies a kind of stereotype: Chinatown means *exotic cultures* for the American mainstream, and the name of the series *Black and White* reminds the readers that only these two races play major roles in American society. As for the so-called “actors,” in fact, it means that everyone in this small Chinatown is forced to play a kind of role not only in the fictional world of the TV series, but also in the real world, because of the stereotypes of Asian Americans in American society. In a discussion of his film scripts, Yu speaks of his intention to express “that feeling when you have a formalized role of how you feel inside when you’re inhabiting it” (Yu, “Interview” 5), and this is the most important message of Yu’s book.

As is well-known, a person’s identity includes a number of components, such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation and religion, but it should also be discussed in a broader context of cultural identity, involving people or groups in cultural, subcultural categories or social groups. From this perspective, the novel “Interior

Chinatown” is a story about a dream, the dream of cultural identity and self-identification of Chinese American immigrants: Who are you in America, and how do you define yourself? Willis Wu, the narrator of the book, is an unimportant person. He is from the second generation of Chinese immigrants, born into a “Generic Asian Family” (*Interior* 160), and he lives in a small one-room apartment in Chinatown. He is an actor who plays different minor roles in the series *Black and White*: a disgraced son, delivery guy, silent henchman, Generic Asian man, etc. “In the world of Black and White, everyone starts out as Generic Asian Man,” as the author mentions in the book (*Interior* 15). Since childhood, Willis Wu has dreamed of being like Bruce Lee, a model role for Asian American kids, and he hoped to play the role of Kung Fu Guy just like him, because Kung Fu Guy is considered to be the top part for an Asian actor. Every Chinese child wants to reach this level. Willis Wu works hard and practices Kung Fu every day, but, unfortunately, though he has been preparing for this role for many years, he still cannot play Kung Fu Guy. He is expected to play only minor roles, such as a background oriental male, dead Asian man and so on, and all these roles are silent.

According to the screenplay, which is based on various stereotypes, Willis Wu’s parents immigrated to the United States from Taiwan in 1960s. They had dreamed of achieving success in this country, but because of discrimination and racism they had to move to Chinatown and were expected to play different roles not only in TV series, but also in real life. Wu’s mother has played the roles of pretty oriental flower, Asiatic seductress, young dragon lady, restaurant hostess, beautiful maiden number one, dead beautiful maiden number one, and finally, old Asian woman. When he was young, Willis Wu’s father Ming-Chen Wu played the roles of Sifu, the mysterious Kung Fu Master, still a silent role. He was trapped in Chinatown, and in spite of the fact that he played Kung Fu Master it did not change anything; he was still nobody, and no one cared for him. That is why Willis’s mother did not want her son to be Kung Fu Guy; now Ming-Chen Wu plays only the role of the old Asian man, and has to live alone. Sifu’s most naturally-gifted-kung-fu-superstar-in-training-pupil was Older Brother, who is a good example of Asian success: he “makes every kid in Chinatown want to be better, taller, stronger, faster, more mainstream and somehow less at the same time” (*Interior* 34); he “gives you permission to try” (*Interior* 34). However, one day he left the series *Black and White* and disappeared from Chinatown to become a legend.

In the series *Black and White*, there are two stars – the detectives White Lady Cop Green and Black Dude Cop Turner. One day they come to Chinatown to investigate the death of an old Asian man. Willis Wu decides to help them. He has tried hard and managed to slowly “climb the ladder”: Generic Asian Man Number Three, Generic Asian Man Number Two, Generic Asian Man Number One, and this time he gets his chance and begins to play the role of a “Special Guest Star”: “An Asian Man who gets to talk” (*Interior* 91). Unfortunately, because of the stereotypical plot, even in this role he has to be shot dead. In reality, when Willis is not allowed to work for 45 days (viewers have to forget him), he meets the undercover detective Karee Lee, who is of mixed white and Taiwanese descent, and falls in love with her. Karen tries to help Willis forget his roles in the fiction-

al story. They get married and dream of moving away from Chinatown and forgetting the boring life in the series *Black and White*. But Willis Wu does not want to give up his dream of playing Kung Fu Guy. Step by step, he gets closer and closer to his dream at the cost of being separated from his wife and little daughter Phoebe – he refuses to play in Karen's own show, and the family breaks down. Finally, when he gets the role of Kung Fu Guy, he understands that he is trapped: "A different kind, but still a trap. Because you're still in a show that doesn't have a role for you" (*Interior* 181): this role is written for an Asian Man. Willis realizes that the most important thing in life should be his family. So, he quits the series *Black and White* and decides to stay with his daughter. He finds that his Kung Fu is useless in the Phoebe Land, and he needs to do everything to help the girl realize "this dream of assimilation" and become "a real American girl" (*Interior* 208).

His daughter has a speaking name: Phoebe means "bright" and "radiant" and is believed to shine light into people's life. The book offers an ambiguous outcome: the father who loves the girl is ready to protect this real American dream, but he is arrested for stealing the cop car and leaving Chinatown, bringing the novel to its climax in the courtroom scene. Through Willis Wu and Older Brother, Charles Yu exposes the widespread racial prejudice in American society, numerous stereotypes about the Chinese and even about the whole group of Asian immigrants, as well as highlighting the problem of national identity for Chinese immigrants. He lists all the anti-Chinese / Asian bills (*Interior* 214–215) to prove that discrimination against Asian immigrants really exists. The result is the fact that Chinese Americans are enclosed in Chinatown. That is why when the judge finds Willis Wu guilty, the latter makes an emotional speech in court: "after waiting however many decades for (the dream of being Kung Fu Guy), after how many nights staring at the ceiling or my poster of Bruce Lee or hearing Sifu's words in my head, I finally got my shot," but he realizes that "Kung Fu Guy is just another form of Generic Asian Man" (*Interior* 245); "I spent most of my life trapped. Interior Chinatown... But (Kung Fu Dad) was just another role" (*Interior* 251), "After two centuries here, why are we still not Americans?" (*Interior* 251). Older brother also emphasizes that Asian Americans have their own history of discrimination in the US: "The root of it all, the real history of yellow people in America. Two hundred years of being perpetual foreigners" (*Interior* 237), and the only request of Willis Wu and all the other Asian immigrants is "to be treated like an American. A real American" (*Interior* 227). Older Brother and Willis decide to fight their way out of the room, and Willis dies again, but this time he refuses to accept the end of the episode: he finally escapes from the series and lives with his family. At the end of the novel Willis Wu emphasizes the fact that actually Chinatown is a prison; he and his father Ming-Chen Wu are all trapped there, and they have to play roles as Chinese (Asian) Americans in both TV series and the real world. However, his daughter can move between worlds and become a real American; maybe she will teach her father and grandfather to do the same.

One of the themes of the novel is racial discrimination and ethnic stereotypes which are degrading and offensive. Asian Americans always feel marginalized; consequently, they always have trouble with self-identification and assimilation. Asian Americans comprise many different ethnic groups, and their customs and habits are quite different,

but the mainstream white society in the United States always thinks that all Asian Americans are the same, whether they are Chinese or Japanese. For example, when Allen Chen, Ming-Chen Wu's roommate, was attacked "this is for Pearl Harbor" (*Interior* 149). They are all "Generic Asian men (women)." However, Asian Americans themselves have grown accustomed to this idea, and they have become what the mainstream society thinks they are: some of them begin to be ashamed of their origin and the color of their skin, and others have even begun to interpret Chinese culture, history and Chinese people from mainland China through the lens of American mainstream society. They are happy when they are treated as a "model minority" without realizing how disparaging this notion is. For self-justification, Willis Wu says in court:

"But at the same time, I'm guilty, too. Guilty of playing this role. Letting it define me. Internalizing the role so completely that I've lost track of where reality starts and the performance begins. And letting that define how I see other people. I'm as guilty of it as anyone. Fetishizing Black people and their coolness. Romanticizing White women. Wishing I were a White man. Putting myself into this category." (*Interior* 246)

Therefore, it is difficult for Chinese or Asian Americans to realize their "American Dream." Not only in this book but also in his other works, Yu emphasizes that "I hope I bring experiences as an Asian American man, Asian experiences, but also experiences as just a thinking, feeling human being" (Yu, "Interview" 16). What stereotypes prevent people from seeing is that each person has a personality, his or her individuality, be s/he of Chinese, Japanese, or any other origin.

Yu cannot but address the issue of family, which is dealt with differently in American and Chinese communities. Family is a very strong institution in Chinese culture; every member has a clearly defined role, and elders are highly respected and valued. Their children are supposed to take care of their elders in their later years.

Interior Chinatown is a story of three generations, and the reader sees the changes in the family relations of Chinese Americans in the USA. In the 2/28 Incident, Ming-Chen Wu's father tried to save a land certificate and "risked burning to death for his children's well-being, the chance at a better life", but he was shot dead in front of his wife and children (*Interior* 144). Ming-Chen Wu and his wife Dorothy had tried their best to feed the family, "for the pleasure of strangers, losing themselves in their various guises. Saying the words, hitting the marks, standing near the good light" (*Interior* 160), in order to provide material conditions for their child and make him an American, yet they failed too. Ming-Chen Wu did not fulfil his traditional family role. Likewise, Willis was trapped in the series *Black and White* and the dream of becoming a Kung Fu Guy, like his father. His family was no longer the main issue for him, his career being the most important thing for him – personal success determining a person's place in American society. On the one hand, he has inherited traditional Chinese cultural values, but, on the other hand, he has been influenced by mainstream society's stereotypes of Chinese Americans since he was a child, and therefore he lost himself, like all the others. The writer emphasizes the responsibility of the father who really wants to give the family a better material

life, which happens to be an important element of the “American Dream,” while the only dream of his wife and daughter is to stay together as a family; they are not focused on material success. Only after understanding that the price he had paid for realizing his dream was the loss of his family, he quits the Kung Fu dream and returns to his family, reaffirming its value and admitting that he overlooked his responsibility to his daughter. The first two generations do not manage to achieve their American dream, and it is only Phoebe who has a chance to live differently, while her father has learned his lesson. The writer fulfilled his task by trying to show what happens inside Willis Wu’s mind, and it was Phoebe who helped him to see the world as it is.

On the other hand, through the changes in the family relations of Chinese Americans, Yu also tries to show the readers that the attitudes of the three generations to their self-identification changed dramatically in response to the changing environment. When Ming-Chen Wu and Dorothy move to the New World, they try very hard to find themselves in the USA, which treats them unfairly: they cannot find any job outside Chinatown, they cannot even find a house: “The reason no one will rent to them is the color of their skin, and although technically at this point in the story of America this reason for no renting to someone is illegal, the reality is, no one cares” (*Interior*, p. 153). They have to move to Chinatown and play different roles. The country never accepts them, and it defines them as Generic Asians, although the young couples have done their best to become Americans. “Watched the shows, listened to the tapes, did the hair, took golf lessons. Encouraged English at home, even” (*Interior*, 160). Although in their hearts they want to be themselves, but “not being other people anymore” (*Interior*, 160), they dream of getting out of Chinatown. However, “despite it all, the bigger check, the honorable title, the status in the show, who he is. Fu Manchu. Yellow Man. Everything has changed, nothing has changed” (*Interior* 160). And Willis Wu, who was born into a family of Chinese immigrants in America, is not accepted in the country either. The two generations cannot be themselves: they cannot identify themselves, they are just roles (Generic Asians) in the TV series; yet what is important is that they are thus defined by American mainstream society. No one cares who they are. However, little Phoebe’s life is totally different: she grows up outside Chinatown, she lives in Phoebe Land, where she is not only learning the Chinese language and manners, but is also learning to be herself – a real American girl. Through the little American girl, three generations of Chinese immigrants have finally arrived at their self-identification.

One of the obstacles on the way to achieving the American dream is language. Racial stereotypes, especially about Asian Americans, are reinforced by means of language. Paternalistic or condescending attitudes towards people from ethnic minority groups are revealed in the kind of language they are expected to use. The so-called non-standard accented English is reflected in the grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary of the characters. Yu uses ethnic speech markers that show the origins of his characters. For example, the black dude cop says, “whaddya got” (*Interior* 39), while Special Guest Star says, “If you no need my help, I go back to restaurant” (*Interior* 86), showing a Chinese forming an English sentence according to the Chinese grammar pattern. On the other hand, the

use of non-standard English tells the whole world how the American mainstream underpins linguistic stereotypes: it is hardly possible that an ethnic minority person can speak proper English, and therefore the young Chinese immigrant Ming-Chen Wu cannot find a job because of the absence of an accent: “it’s weird” for a Chinese to speak English without an accent. “So Wu learns to do an accent, and then gets a job, the only one he can, as Young Asian Man, at Fortune Palace, a restaurant. Washing dishes, busing tables. In Chinatown” (*Interior* 151–152). African American detective Turner says to “Generic Asian Man,” “You forgot to do the accent” (*Interior* 79).

To authenticate the speech of Chinese immigrants, Yu uses specific features of Chinese spoken by people from different areas, e.g. Mandarin and Taiwanese, which is important for understanding the history of the relationship between mainland China and Taiwan. For example, “Xie xie Mei Mei” and “Bu iong xie” (*Interior* 186) in Chinese pronunciation and “Keng-chhat u bun-te” (*Interior* 92), “E-hiau kong Tai-oan-oe” (*Interior* 166) in Taiwanese dialect show the origin of these immigrants: despite the fact that they have already moved to America, they still retain their own culture and dialect (“the Taiwanese dialect” is “the family language, the inside language. A secret code”) (*Interior* 92). The process of adapting to a new culture and a new language is very difficult, especially for the elders.

The problems of achieving the American dream are also shown through the conflict between the imaginary and real worlds. In the fictional world of TV series, Chinese American actors have to die, which means that they cannot appear in the next series for a certain time, leaving them unable to provide for their family: “When you die, it sucks” (*Interior* 127); “The first thing that happens is you can’t work for forty-five days” (*Interior* 128). They temporarily lose their jobs and cannot “make a living as a Delivery Guy, or a Busboy, or an Inscrutable Background Oriental” (*Interior* 130). But there is a bright side of this from the family point of view: “Some people think it isn’t the worst thing in the world to die. Because if you never die – if you play the same role too long – you start to get confused. Forget who you really are” (*Interior* 131). For Willis, some of the happiest times of his life were when his mother was “dead,” “because you knew it meant she would be home for six weeks, you would have her all to yourself in the afternoons,” “when she was dead, she got to be your mother” (*Interior* 131). Ironically, here for a child, “death” is a symbol of a return to the normal life of the parents, which reminds the readers that in addition to various roles as actors in the virtual world, they also play an irreplaceable role in the family in the real world. Willis’s daughter Phoebe was really afraid that he would die (*Interior* 203) because she could not yet distinguish between reality and the fiction that TV created. In fact, at the end of the book, Willis Wu refuses to play the dead Asian Kung Fu Guy: he no longer wants to create illusion and live in the world of illusions.

TV series are presented as an important cultural symbol showing how Chinese immigrants feel in the USA. They are also indicative of how most Americans learn about Chinese culture: through its representation in movies, which are full of prejudice. In Hollywood films, Chinese or Asians always play the roles of bad guys, Kung Fu Master (like Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, etc.) or silent Generic Asian Man, while Asian women are usually

prostitutes, etc. They seldom play principal parts. Even the most important role – Kung Fu Guy in the world of *Black and White* – is just a supporting role; at the end of the show Kung Fu Guy always dies. Looking back at his career, Willis Wu says in court that Kung Fu Dad was just another role, a better role than he had had, but still a role; like his father, “you never recognized him for what he could do. Who he was. You never allowed him a name” (*Interior* 251); this results in the loss of hope in realizing the American dream. Of special significance is the title of the series *Black and White*, which looks like a symbol that in America, in a world of black and white, Asian Americans are actually marginalized.

The events of the book take place in “Chinatown”, one of the most important symbols in the novel: a kind of ethnic ghetto. Chinese American culture is oversimplified and stereotyped in order for mainstream American society to easily accept it. But this has little to do with real Chinese culture. Charles Yu quotes the words of Philip Choy about Chinatown:

Chinatown, like the
Phoenix, rose from the ashes with a new façade,
Dreamed up by an
American-born Chinese
Man, built by white
Architects, looking like a stage-set China that
Does not exist. (*Interior* 259)

According to a long-standing stereotype, it is considered that Chinese Americans cannot live anywhere else except in Chinatown, and all they can do is work in a Chinese restaurant, like Willis Wu's family.

When Karen and Phoebe move from Chinatown and play in their own show, the little girl creates a new world with her imagination, in which Willis is not the star of the show, but “something better. The Star's dad” (*Interior*, 201), and her fantastic world symbolizes every person's childhood, when he/she can do what they want to do and be who they want to be so that they do not need to worry about their race. This imaginary world is an idealized world where one's dreams can come true, including the dream of assimilation and becoming an American, i.e. the realization of the American dream.

In spite of the fact that Chinese Americans are playing an ever-increasing role in US society, the attitude of many Americans towards them remains hostile. From the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the American mainstream has been attacking Asian Americans, while many racists demand: “Go back to China!” It does not matter that the so-called “Chinese” are now American citizens, who have already lived in the USA for 200 years. The crisis of national identification for Asian Americans is not fairly reflected in movies, TV series or literary works. Charles Yu writes honestly about the history of Asian immigrants and about the problems they have in realizing their American dreams. Although he creates Phoebe's idealized world, in which Asian Americans can realize their dream, in reality it is not so easy. Asian Americans still have a lot to do to be recognized as real Americans.

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