

# ARTS



Marc Hayashi, Wayne Wang and Wood Moy on the set of *Chan is Missing*.

## Looking for Mr. Chan

*Chan is Missing*  
Princess Theatre Jan. 7, 8, 9, 10

by Jonas Ma

This is a movie which, like a good puzzle game, rewards those who try harder. Other than Mr. Chan in the movie title, nothing is missing: an intriguing plot, intelligent dialogue, full characterization, a sense of humor and, miraculously, a message to relate to.

In fact, in a time of harsh economic realities, when futuristic and retro fantasy reign supreme on the silver screen, what is often missing are little disturbing films with a message, especially on such basic modern conditions as self-doubt and identity crisis. Recent notable exceptions are *Breaking Away*, *Return of the Secaucus Seven* and *Diner*, though the latter is practically nostalgic (for the 50's) in its outlook. I couldn't think of any recent commercial films dealing with this subject as related to ethnic minority groups.

*Chan is Missing* is commercially inconspicuous, but a minor breakthrough none the less. It opens up new perspectives on a segment of North American society which has often been suspected, stereotyped or arrogantly ignored — the

Asian American community. With unusual candor and a sense of humor that delights in contradictions, the debut of Chinese-American director Wayne Wang introduces the audience to a diverse community with its own share of conflicts, self-doubts and idiosyncrasies; as well as vitality, persistence and universal human qualities.

Given the fact that any issue pertaining to minority groups is highly sensitive and intellectualized these days, it is almost impossible to do justice to the subject matter without being guilt-inducing or inaccessible or both. Yet, Wang succeeds largely in overcoming this and comes up with a highly entertaining and illuminating film.

I say largely because at least in one aspect, he has compromised for a convenience. Without a single Caucasian character in a film dealing with a minority which exists in a predominantly WASP culture, he avoids the whole question of racism and therefore saves some members of the audience some uneasiness. This serves as an interesting contrast to the approach of another film dealing with another 'disadvantaged' group (women) — the NFR's *Not a Love Story*.

The film's greatest successes lie in its employment of a familiar form — film noir — to explore a widely unfamiliar subject and in the internal coherence between the narrative and the thematic (the theme of searching).

In the film the protagonists set out to look for a missing person and in the process, stumble across a missing identity. The missing Mr. Chan becomes symbolic in a way that speaks to the whole Asian community. In fact, we never see him in the film or even know who he really is.

This much of the puzzle we know: he is a recent Chinese immigrant settled in San Francisco; he is the business partner of Jo and Steve. Jo is a second generation Chinese-American who becomes sympathetic to Chan's difficulties in reconciling his Chinese background with his American experience. Steve is Jo's nephew, a third generation Chinese-American who walks like John Travolta, talks like Richard Pryor and insists that assimilation and identity problems are out-dated. (Interestingly enough, both Travolta and Pryor are mainstream media heroes of ethnic background). The three of them were supposed to set up their own taxi business. Then suddenly, having been involved in the political clashes between the Taiwanese and Communist factions in San Francisco Chinatown, Chan is gone with their money. Jo and Steve start looking all over Chinatown for him, although they are not our idea of a Charlie Chan.

They run into an array of colorful, very different people in the Chinese community: a native born Chinese-American of the intelligentsia, who wants to write her PhD. dissertation — as a case study of intercultural communication (or miscommunication) — on Chan's humiliating experience of getting a traffic ticket; the principal at Chan's English language school, who promotes his own brand of Chinese-American synthesis, best exemplified by a pie he makes ("definitely American in form, but tastes Chinese!"); the Chinese cook who sings "Fly Me to the Moon" while he is working; Chan's estranged wife who fails to provide any information on Chan but insists on giving out mandarin oranges as her way of apologizing....

There is no archetypal Chinese-American, each is differentiated by class, background, politics, attitudes and so on. Except they do have one thing in common: the recurring problem of identifying themselves in a society which regards them as being simultaneously different ("they are not like us") and the same ("they are all alike").

Even an individual like Chan eludes caricaturing. To the principal at his language school, Chan is close-minded, bent on remaining in his cultural past. To his wife, he is getting too far involved with Chinatown politics. To Steve, he is just a dishonest business partner who ripped them off. To Chan's daughter, he is an honest, good father who is just having a difficult time. Did Chan go back to his old country? Or is he hiding out from persecuting political groups? Or has he gone off to live on the money he took? Or has something else happened to him?

In putting all the pieces together, Jo looks at Chan as possibly being all that other people have said about him, and having been all of these. (except that he would rip them off, the money is finally returned).

Nobody knows what really happened to Chan, or for that matter, to his identity. The puzzle is not inscrutable like a Chinese riddle, but simply complex like a human being caught between two cultures.

Considering that the film is a first feature made on a budget of \$20,000 (with the assistance of the American Film Institute), the results are impressive. Although the visual quality at times borders on the level of home movie (especially the street scenes in Chinatown), it is not without its technical splendor. One particular montage sequence after Jo receives some threatening phone calls telling him to end his search poignantly brings out the intricacy and shadiness of the endeavor and the paranoia that begins to affect Jo.

The acting is generally effective and unaffected. The subtle underplaying of Jo by Chinese-American actor Wood Moy, humble, receptive and ever reflective, particularly serves well as a cognitive anchorage in the aftermath of clashes between cultural waves.

While the character Steve may prove the successful working of the American melting-pot and render questions regarding assimilation obsolete in the long-run (or were his Pryor skits so funny?), the case of Jo is more interesting. He is one of those rare bicultural beings who benefit from a relativistic perspective and develop a greater understanding and tolerance for the agonizing yet creative state of being different and self-doubting.

For anyone interested in the Chinese community other than its foods, or in the uniquely modern problems of identity, or simply a neat film noir with an offbeat humor, *Chan is Missing* should not be missed.

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## the feed bag

Banditos Mexican Restaurant  
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by Wesley Oginski

Yes, fact is stranger than fiction. It is

possible for engineers and Gateway staff to socialize. This bizarre phenomenon occurred last week as two engineers and I ventured to *Banditos* for a light repast. *That's Incredible!*

To top the event off, we all enjoyed ourselves and the excellent Mexican fare and service.

Located on the outskirts of the downtown area, the Mexican restaurant is not very prominent from the outside, yet a different note is struck by its interior decor. Set up to simulate a small villa, tables are set under verandas on either side and the center of the main dining area is overlooked by a balcony. The soft candlelight and low Mexican background muzak helped maintain the illusion.

We arrived early that evening and were promptly seated. As the evening wore on

continued on next page

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