

Metamorphoses: Tracing the Simulacra of Oriental Identity in Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown*

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Abstract- This paper attempts to analyze Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown* through the philosophical lens of Baudrillardian theories of simulacra and hyperreality. According to Baudrillard, the concept of hyperreality explains the loss of distinction between reality and its representation—the loss of distinction between the real and its signifier. I will argue that Chinatown, both in fiction and reality and as a concept, is constructed as a simulation of society, in which the oriental identity and alterity are modeled on the imagined myth of Chinatown. These racial and sociocultural simulations have lost their origins, historically undergoing the theoretical phases of *The Precession of the Simulacra*, they have completely metamorphosed into a simulacrum. In Yu's *Interior Chinatown*, the simulacra of typified oriental identity and alterity are commodified, fetishized, and culturally misappropriated. The simulated stereotyped generic Asian identities are interminably contested against the idealized simulacra of mythologized oriental archetypes. This research traces the developmental phases of such simulations and simulacra of race and identity in America, arguing them to be an inevitable outcome in American society, it being a multiethnic and diasporic empire since its inception.

Index Terms- Simulacra, Simulation, Hyperreality, Chinatown, Asian Stereotypes.

I. INTRODUCTION

Jean Baudrillard's Post-Structuralist critique of western cultures and societies problematizes the fidelity of its representation of truth and reality, the idea that all that is real has lost its original meaning. All representations are replaced by false images of simulacra to such a degree, that the real cannot be distinguished from the unreal, transitioning all that exists from the real to the hyper-real. As theorized in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, American contemporary society and culture embody all the characteristics of simulacra and hyper-realism, an exemplified space in which “the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials” (Baudrillard 2).

Charles Yu's contemporary novel *Interior Chinatown* is a story of American orientalist culture, that this paper aims to analyze through the perspective of Baudrillardian postmodern theories of simulacra and hyperreality. In the world of Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown*, all the characters are simulated on a

metafictional narrative—characters in the novel are simulated inside a script written for a fictional television show called *Black and White*. The protagonist of *Interior Chinatown*, an Asian American actor Willis Wu narrates the story in a screenplay format and acts in a Chinatown restaurant called the *Golden Palace*. The innovative and unique narrative style does not merely limit itself to utilizing conventional postmodern literary techniques such as metafiction, self-reflexivity, parody, and dark humor, but delimits itself by structuring and developing its foundation on a fictionalized and simulated Chinatown.

This research will demonstrate how the real-world inception of Chinatown, generally all over the world, and specifically in the United States of America has lost all its authentic cultural, historical, and socio-political realities. What remains is a mere simulacrum of Chinatown, with imaginary identities and cultural myths. The American experience for all immigrant ethnic minorities is thus based on simulacra of identities and cultures, losing all historical connection with their past, and metamorphosing into simulacra.

The analysis of American Chinatown through the lens of Baudrillard's theoretical framework reveals processes of Asian identity, culture, and myth creation by apparatuses such as American Television, Hollywood Films, and other production and propagation mediums that invent and disseminate mythical cultural and identity archetypes of Chinatown's ethnic minority. As explicated in *Simulacra and Simulation*, it is a process in which the original sign that represents identity is permanently replaced, and “...it is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (Baudrillard 2), losing any authenticity or distinction between the simulacrum and the real.

II. SITUATING ORIENTAL RACE AND IDENTITY IN BAUDRILLARD'S AMERICA

Charles Yu's novel *Interior Chinatown* draws a portrait of Chinatown on America's complex cultural and civilizational canvas. A canvas that according to Baudrillard is already full of abstract simulacrum. The abstract hyperreal simulacra can best be envisaged by affirming the correlated parallels—between tracing the origins of American minority ethnic enclaves, especially Chinatowns and the mega theme park of Disneyland as discussed by Baudrillard in his work *Simulacra and Simulation*. To Baudrillard, Disneyland manifests itself as a

“perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra” (12), a simulacrum that “is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, where all of Los Angeles [California] and the America that surrounds it are no longer real” (12)—Disneyland is a mythical idealized representative simulacrum of American Culture that manifests itself as more real than real America itself. Disneyland erases reality and replaces it with costumed characters, a commodified place of capitalist consumption of the imaginary and illusory simulacra, which manifests itself for most Americans as a source of various phantasmagorical archetypes.

Like Disneyland, America itself is merely a construct of similar microcosmic simulations—the whole of America can be identified as a macrocosm only by means of identifying and describing its microcosmic units. To mention a few of such multiethnic microcosms, Koreatown Los Angeles, California, has the largest concentrated population of Koreans outside Korea, Little Albania in the Bronx, New York City, and Chinatown in Downtown Los Angeles, California; all diasporic cultural hyper-real simulated reproductions of spaces in the New World that is America. Mimicking Disneyland, Chinatown, and almost all other ethnic enclaves are marketed as tourist sites, decorated with orientalist cultural and stereotypical ornamental objects like dragons and paper lanterns. For a Generic Asian living through the struggles of Yu’s *Interior Chinatown*, abiding a small American Chinatown is like living in a simulation—“...and you imagine a home for you and your family... and you open your eyes and see yourself in southern California” (Yu ACT IV).

Disney films have a historical tradition of producing (mis)appropriated and stereotyped oriental films, reducing Asian culture and identity to its stereotypical representations. *Aladdin* (1993), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) — are a few among many associated with the fabrication of orientalized Middle-Eastern identities and folklores, as noted by Said (1978). In his book *Simulation and Simulacra*, Baudrillard describes the simulation model of Disneyland as “...neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp” (Baudrillard 13)—an ideological and cultural representation of the real, “...concealing the fact that the real is no longer real” (13)—the fetishization and commodification of the transmuted oriental alterity.

Furthermore, Hollywood historically produced the archetype of Bruce Lee through populist and consumerist commodification of the kung fu films— a cultural hyper-real generated as a third-order simulation. Every Generic Asian Man in Yu’s *Interior Chinatown* is chasing the phantasmic simulacra of “[Bruce] Lee being legendary, not mythical. Too real, too specific to be a myth” (Yu Act I). Hyperreal cannot be distinguished from fiction, existing as a simulation of reality itself. Chinatown SRO perceive the simulacra of Bruce Lee as “Electromuscular Simulation...An idealized avatar of Asian-ness...a living, breathing video game boss-level...” (Yu ACT I). Bruce Lee manifests as an apotheosized simulacrum for Generic Asian Men of Chinatown, their reality becomes an incessant transcendental struggle to become Bruce Lee, an impossible

mythical ideal, yet it remains “at least theoretically possible” (Yu ACT I).

The hyperreal simulacrum is indestructible and insubvertible—rendering itself wholly and exclusively indistinguishable from the real, and according to *Simulacra and Simulation* it “no longer even knows the distinction between signifier and signified, nor between form and content” (Baudrillard 64). The category of Asian race and identity in America is simulated as a racial sub-category of black and white, coalescing different Asian races as a monolithic phenomenon of simulacrum, perpetuating the urban myth of homogenized Asian identity. In *Interior Chinatown*, Allen Chen from Taiwan is racially assaulted at the hospital. Allen’s Taiwanese identity is confused with Japanese, “Someone beat him unconscious. Called him a jap [Japanese]...This is for Pearl Harbor”, the young protagonist Willis Wu fears that “it could have been him” (Yu ACT IV).

All housemates from different Asian ethnicities realize that “it was them...They are all the same [simulacra] to the people who struck them...Allen was Wu and Park and Kim...Japan, China, Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam. Whatever” (Yu ACT IV). The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 was picked up by Hollywood and made into various films. *From Here to Eternity* (1953) is one of the prominent works starring Frank Sinatra, a romanticized whitewash of American-ness and its collective memory of dropping two nuclear bombs over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Baudrillard interprets Copolla’s Film *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and discusses Vietnam War in his book *Simulation and Simulacra*. According to Baudrillard, Copolla’s “film is the extension of war, and its apotheosis. The war became a film, the film becomes war, the two are joined together by their common hemorrhage into technology” (Baudrillard 59).

Thus, film and television are employed by the American media as a medium to reproduce altered war images as simulacra, completely detaching from real history, and perpetually reproducing simulacra of race, culture, and identity through simulation. The hyperreal construction of indistinguishable simulacra of Asian identity dissolves all oriental racial diversity into a single infused ‘other’, and all is lost “in a dream of blending in. A dream of blending in. A dream of going from Generic Asian Man to just plain Generic Asian Man” (Yu ACT V). Such generic images of Asian culture and identity are designed by the American mainstream entertainment industry to fit and perpetuate pre-existing stereotypes.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard describes four phases or orders of simulation, through the successful completion of these stages, “the false representation [simulacra], simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as simulacrum” (Baudrillard 6). The first stage is the representative reflection of a profound reality, the second stage masks and denatures the representation of reality, the third masks the absence of a profound reality, and the fourth and final stage separates the representation from reality in all aspects, and it becomes a pure simulacrum. The simulacra of race and identity

in America begins with the first European colonization of the continent.

The first order of representation is the realization of newfound identity or American-ness for not only Europeans but for immigrants of other diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural roots as well. Thus, America becomes a land of new opportunities and dreams, where all associated with the Old World now manifests a new profound reality. In the second stage, all ethnic and cultural heritage is detached from the past, embedding the profound new ideation of the American dream in the minds of immigrants. In the third stage, American-ness becomes the new and only profound reality, now, race, identity, culture, and ethnicity become a simulation that has no connection with the past. Finally, the fourth stage metamorphoses everything that was the reality of the past into the concrete simulacra of the present.

The final representation of simulacra becomes the only reality and "...nostalgia [distant memories] assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and signs of reality—a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity" (Baudrillard 6). Chinatowns become a "complex urban phenomena...to reduce the reality of Chinatown to its stereotypical representations would be to perpetuate the stylizations of the past and to underestimate the extent of agency and self-determination in the daily lives of Chinese expatriates and migrant" (Künemann and Mayer 1). In *Interior Chinatown*, Older Brother's speech describes being Chinese in America as "[it] is and has always been, from the very beginning, a construction, a performance of features, gestures, culture, and exoticism. An invention, a reinvention, a stylization" (Yu ACT VI). The identity and cultural simulacra of Orientalism are and have always been a social construct—an imaginary social invention, mass-produced by the apparatus of American ideology.

Historically, Asian minorities in America have always existed in diverse heterogeneous groups, each with its own religious and ethnic traditions, myths, and folklore. From the first cultural contact, their ideals of past mythology and purity of blood and history went through the process of hybridization. Interracial and interethnic marriages produced Mixed race Asian Americans, creating new hybrid oriental identities in America. Losing racial purity of the past and adopting the American dream of success and cultural assimilation became their reality. However, this resulted in them having an ambivalent racial and cultural experience towards their own cultural space.

The reality and ideals that America offers these hybrid individuals do not simplify existence for them, it further complicates. They are presented with a highly dissonant and contradictory simulacrum of ideals within which they are forced to exist having false consciousness of race-based divisions. The model minority stereotype represents Asian Americans as hardworking minorities who are successful in society, high achievers of both literacy and wealth, simulating them as a one-dimensional race, raising them to the pedestal of archetypal perfection, as a perfect symbol of assimilation in the American Dream.

In contrast, the other stereotype simulates their representation as foreign objects, alien to American culture and lifestyle, as primitive exotic pollutants from Asia. In Yu's *Interior Chinatown*, "Older Brother was a National Merit Scholar. 1570 on the SAT" and "... All other Asian Men stood in his shadow, feeling anything was possible" (Yu ACT I). Protagonist Willis's daughter Phoebe "can move freely between worlds", having assimilated into American culture, is a similar model minority character, "without Generic Asian Men...[without] interminable wandering remembrances of the old village and hardship and how they got there...without history...unaware of all that came before" (Yu ACT V).

To the stereotype of the perfect model minority, America propagates an antithetical stereotype—the image of a filthy Chinatown, with a rampant crime rate, full of pollutants, lazy Asians, rat infestations, and an unhygienic lifestyle. Such binary (mis)representations force simulacrum of ambivalent identities on Asian American minorities—contradictory stereotypes giving birth to hyperreal identities—inventing Asian American race/identity simulacra, reducing complex multiracial diversity to over-generalized representations, splitting the sign-signifier relation through mythologized fictional film, television, and literature narrative. As Baudrillard writes in *Simulacra and Simulation*:

The era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referential — worse: with their artificial resurrection in the system of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends to all systems of equivalence, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting signs of the real for the real (Baudrillard 2).

III. THE CASE OF MISSING RACE AND IDENTITY IN AMERICA

The story of all Generic Asian characters, including all autobiographical elements in *Interior Chinatown* is fictional, presented in a screenplay script format, a frame narrative through which truth can never be discovered. However, Exhibit A: The case of missing Asian (Yu ACT VI) gives a chronological account of historical racism against Asian Americans in the United States of America. In his book *The Illusion of the End*, Baudrillard posits a radical hypothesis of the reproduction of history—"every political, historical and cultural fact possess a kinetic energy which wrenches it from its own space and propels it into a hyperspace where, since it will never return, loses all meaning" (2). Since history has lost all its referential meaning and has disappeared, especially with the emergence of a globalized world, any endeavor to reconstruct true culture or identity from the historical past stands futile.

The author of *Interior Chinatown* is an American of Taiwanese descent, excavating blurred Asian identity in America, however, the issue of true identity has become problematic on the global landscape. Act VI of *Interior Chinatown* mentions the racial discrimination in the American constitution, "1859 Oregon's constitution is revised: no "Chinaman" can own property in states". Surprisingly, a

Taiwanese author forges a case for a Chinaman identity in America, whereas, in contemporary Taiwan, more people are separating their identity from China, identifying themselves as Taiwanese. According to Election Study Center, at National Chengchi University, more than 60% of people in Taiwan identify themselves as Taiwanese, whereas around 30% consider themselves as both Chinese and Taiwanese, and less than 5% as only Chinese. (Brown). Similarly, the Korean War of the 1950s split Korean identity into Northern and Southern, with different regimes, values, identities, cultures, and social environments. Japan too has a similar history of conflict with China, having growing internal problems of racism against ethnic minorities, especially xenophobia towards Koreans.

If America is the epitome of racism and cultural (mis)appropriation on the global landscape, then how is it different from the rest of the world? Perhaps, America is just a microcosmic representation of all the world's cultures, a hyperreal simulacrum of all that has ceased to exist in reality. If this is the case, then true identity, in reality, can never be traced or identified. In *The Illusion of the End*, Baudrillard sees history as, "...gradually narrowed down to the field of its probable causes and effects...[and] This is the true end of history, the end of historical reason" (21). For Baudrillard, a quest for discovering true identity in a contemporary post-postmodern world is a futile exercise, it is like "jump[ing] over your own shadow when you no longer have one" (101). If the simulacrum of race and identity is the only truth and reality that exists, the theoretical destruction of simulacrum will only result in the emergence of a great void, an absence of any identity to identify with.

In ACT V of *Interior Chinatown*, the protagonist Willis Wu's daughter Phoebe has a functional illusory notion of identity, because she lives "...without history, unaware of all that came before", and in ACT II, the Emperor lives in a "mist of history, [where] you can [only] hear collective weeping of civilization going back five thousand years". Both individualistic and collective identity is dependent on the imaginary reproduction of the historical past. However, Baudrillard sees history at its end, and any effort to excavate true identity will only reveal "all the monstrous variants of identity" (109).

For *Interior Chinatown* characters, being stuck in a Generic Asian identity is the only reality that exists. Even Willis Wu confesses: "... I'm guilty, too. Guilty of playing this role. Letting it define me. Internalizing the role so completely that I've lost track where reality starts and the performance begins" (Yu ACT VI). America, according to Baudrillard is neither dream nor reality, but a hyper-reality described as a giant hologram. In his book *Simulacra and Simulacrum*, he comments on various Hollywood films (*Apocalypse Now*, *Chinatown*, *China Syndrome*, *Three Days of Condor*), comparing them with the model of Disneyland, a theme park of illusion and fantasy, and a perfect model of simulacra. The *Interior Chinatown* is a similar space, where "old parts"—old characters are recycled, "layers upon layers, accumulating", where no one can "separate the past from present", and all are a mere "former incarnation" of their past selves—stuck in the fictional TV show *Black and White*,

within a fiction that itself is a fictional manifestation of American simulacra of identity, race, and culture. "Chinatown, like the phoenix, rose from the ashes with a new facade, dreamed up by an American-born Chinese man, built by white architects, looking like a stage-set China that does not exist. *Philip Choy*" (Yu ACT V).

IV. CHINATOWNS AS HYPERMARKETS OF EXOTIC CULTURES

Interior Chinatown mentions a historical list of discriminatory Laws of the United States against the Asian ethnic minority. Chinatowns all over the world are constructed as separate cultural protrusions, especially in America due to its history of racist immigration policies of marginalization and segregation. Based on invented myths of cultural traditions, these urban architectural designs can be seen as hypermarkets of foreign cultures—cultural markets of exotic oriental fantasy, where simulacra of invented culture, race, and identity are commodified and marketed as the real. "The channels of dissemination of this fantasy were manifold but literary and film narratives acted as particularly powerful means of mediation for Chinatown images and myths across cultures" (Künemann and Mayer 1).

Like American supermarkets, or according to Baudrillard the hypermarkets, model Chinatowns tempt their consumers of tourism towards marketed and sold commodities of exotic cultures, which are the products of orientalist fantasy similar to that of Disneyland. Hyperreal America is best experienced in places like Disneyland and Las Vegas as described by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*. All commercial signs and signifiers are constructed to enthrall Americans to adhere to consumerism, as "all directions point you towards these large triage centers, that are hypermarkets, towards the hyperspace of commodity where in many regards a whole new sociality is elaborated" (75).

Therefore, American Ethnic enclaves like Chinatown become hypermarkets of exotic cultures and traditions, too unreal and foreign to be contemplated, yet always available in the form of simulated commodities of capitalism. In the process, race and identity become a commodity, and places like Chinatown are transformed into hypermarkets of such commodities. American TV and Film produce images of such commodified identities, in the case of *Interior Chinatown*, each Generic Asian Man is chasing the unattainable archetype of Bruce Lee, rigorously practicing the martial arts of Kung Fu.

Moreover, Chinatowns as hypermarkets thus become marketplaces for simulacra of cultural identity, where all visitors can window-shop fictional identities. Like Disneyland, Chinatown too becomes the ultimate hyperreality of the imaginary, with the driving force at its core being the materialist consumption of simulacra of culture and identity. Masses come to these Chinatown hypermarkets with a mythical mental repository of oriental signs of cultural food and architecture, simulacra that are perpetuated and disseminated by Hollywood

film and American TV across all cultural spaces. Although some Asians find themselves having escaped from these oriental hypermarkets, “leaving Chinatown for the suburbs, living among the whites” (Yu ACT IV), only to find themselves stuck in other racial simulacra of the model minority stereotype—freedom from Chinatown, which is a verisimilitude of glimmering utopia, but a ghetto in reality, then becomes a continuous struggle towards unattainable mythical simulacra of financial and academic success.

The simulacra of the ideal Asian images are internalized as cultural standards across Asian American minority clusters, falsely infusing themselves as a part of their myths and stories. These model minority identities are by-products of Chinatown hypermarkets, sold as independent commodities of stereotypes. In *Interior Chinatown*, Allen tells such stories to the protagonist Willis Wu, “the American Dream-Immigrant Success Story... as he climbs the ladder of academia...to be the best and brightest of them all” (Yu ACT IV). The artificially invented Asian American simulacra of tradition, therefore, metamorphose Asian identity and culture into objects and images of unattainable desires—self-publicizing commodified products of the cultural hypermarkets of Chinatown.

Since the inception of America, all colonial/immigrant nations, cultures, and races have started their new world journey with newfound desires, goals, and ideals. Most early migrations were not voluntary, many of them were forced, whether it be draconian regimes in Europe or socio-political unrest in other Asian countries. In Taiwan “...known as the “white terror”, thousands of Taiwanese are beaten, killed, or disappeared by the regime” (Yu ACT IV). America emerges as a sociocultural machine that perpetually produces identities that cannot be traced back to its origins, therefore, identity and race creation in America can only be described as a simulacrum.

The American experiment has no precedent in history, with its multiethnic and multiracial diversity, it can be seen as a microcosm of the world, where almost all nations have their independent representations. In this complex sociological system, many identities are bound to metamorphose into a simulacrum, completely terminating their present representation from their past. American state apparatuses, such as Hollywood, American news, and entertainment television, either through intentional or unintentional processes of archetype formation, create symbolic objects of desire that are humanly unattainable for American minorities.

V. CONCLUSION

Interior Chinatown spotlights the production and representation of race, identity, and culture in Asian-American minority ethnic enclaves, particularly Chinatown. Jean Baudrillard’s theoretical perspective sees American culture as a manifestation of simulacra existing in a hyperreal space. Oriental ethnic enclaves in America such as Chinatown produce cultural identities, that by their socio-cultural and evolutionary design, emerge as a simulacrum without any trace of a concrete historical past. Although the identity of all Generic Chinatown occupants is a blur between the real and unreal, their persistent struggle to assimilate the race/identity simulacra is undeniable. Comparative analysis of Chinatown with Baudrillard’s Disneyland and hypermarkets in American contemporary society reveals a striking similitude. The role of technological mediums like American TV and Hollywood in fabricating multifarious simulacra of consumption for the American public is found implicated in the case of Chinatown. Thus, the study suggests further Baudrillardian exploration of all identity, race, and culture creation in America.

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