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MAKING CHINESE AMERICAN FAMILIES VISIBLE: A SOCIOCULTURAL AND INDUSTRIAL ANALYSIS OF THE RISE OF CHINESE AMERICAN FAMILY FILMS

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Introduction

In recent years, representations of Chinese American families have achieved unprecedented visibility and cultural significance within American cinema.[1] This heightened prominence is exemplified by a succession of widely recognized and critically acclaimed films released since 2018. A defining moment in this movement was the release of Warner Bros. Pictures' *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). Directed by Jon M. Chu, the film stood as a landmark Hollywood studio production—the first in a quarter-century, following *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), to place Chinese American family dynamics at the heart of its narrative. It commercial success, grossing over $239 million worldwide, demonstrated the market viability of stories centered on Chinese American and, more broadly, Asian American experiences.[2] This milestone catalyzed a wave of culturally resonant narratives, as evidenced by *The Farewell* (2019), *Go Back to China* (2019), and *Boogie* (2021), which collectively signaled a shift in mainstream cinematic storytelling. The trend was further solidified by the triumph of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). Directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (credited as Daniels), the film earned $143 million worldwide and received seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture, thus affirming the cultural legitimacy of Chinese American family narratives in American cinema.[3] Recent release such as *Chang Can Dunk* (2023) and *Didi* (2024) attest the ongoing vitality of this cinematic movement.

While the recent proliferation of Chinese American family narratives might suggest a new cinematic trend, their screen presence is by no means a contemporary invention. In fact, the genre's origins can be traced back to the 1980s—a pivotal decade when first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers began to consistently foreground Chinese American family experiences within the American cinematic landscape. Trailblazing directors like Wayne Wang, Peter Wang, and Ang Lee centered Chinese American characters within domestic narratives, directly challenging Hollywood's conventional portrayals, which seldom recognized "family" as a core component of Chinese American identity. This foundational narrative tradition, established by these first-generation filmmakers, has since been inherited and reimagined by a subsequent

cohort of second-generation Chinese American directors in the twenty-first century. Unlike their predecessors, who were adult immigrants to the United States, these newer voices are typically U.S.-born and/or U.S.-raised children of immigrants who arrived after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. Drawing from their distinct bicultural upbringings, they have consistently gravitated toward family narratives, employing them as a primary lens to explore the complexities of Chinese American identity—often from their own generational standpoint. Their creative output has been instrumental in steering the development of Chinese American family films in the twenty-first century, establishing them as a driving force behind the genre's ongoing evolution and sustained relevance.

The increasing cinematic visibility of Chinese American families is part of a broader global trend: the rising prominence of diasporic family representation within immigrant and transnational communities. This development aligns with an era marked by intensified cross-border movement and global mobility. As Daniela Berghahn notes, the screen has become a key site for portraying diasporic and transnational configurations, directly responding to these shifting global realities.[4] Indeed, as transnational migration and mobility becoming "the key forces of social transformation," family structures and relationships have undergone profound shifts.[5] No longer exceptions, transnational and diasporic families now exemplify how familial configurations are being reimagined to meet the fluidity and demands of global living—transcending traditional frameworks and offering new models of kinship and community.[6] Cinema, as one of the most reflective and influential cultural forms, has played a pivotal role in documenting and articulating these evolving familial realities.

The increasing visibility of diasporic families in contemporary cinema has attracted growing scholarly attention in recent years. Although research in this area remains relatively limited, several key works have made important contributions to the field, including Jigna Desai's *Beyond Hollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (2004), Patricia Pisters and Wim Staat's *Shooting the Family: Transnational Media and Intercultural Values* (2005), Daniela Berghahn's *Far-Flung Families in Film: The Diasporic Family in Contemporary European Cinema* (2013), and Qijun Han's *The Cinematic Representation of*

The Chinese American Family (2016). Apart from Desai's work, which highlights the privileging of familial trope as a constitutive element of South Asian diasporic cultural production, most of these other studies adopt a predominantly transnational perspective. They emphasize the influence of cross-cultural encounters, identity formation, and global mobility in shaping the experiences of immigrant and diasporic families. Such approach offers valuable insights into the sociocultural dynamics that inform diasporic family representations in contemporary cinema, enriching scholarship on family portrayals and contributing to broader discussions of diasporic identity.

However, despite their valuable contributions, these studies tend to privilege sociocultural and diasporic frameworks in explaining the growing visibility of diasporic family narratives in contemporary cinema. They primarily attribute this visibility to the cultural resonance of these narratives within a globalized context. While this approach offers valuable insight into the thematic and symbolic dimensions of diasporic family films, it frequently neglects the critical role played by industrial and institutional forces in shaping their production, distribution, and reception.

This sociocultural tendency finds a clear articulation in S*hooting the Family*, where Patricia Pisters and Wim Staat examine the representation of immigrant families through an intercultural lens grounded in media theory and practice. Analyzing the effects of globalization, immigration, and cross-cultural interactions on familial structures—and drawing on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000)—they contend that the challenges brought about by globalization and the resulting instability of the nation-state have prompted a critical reexamination of the "natural family" as an ideological construct. Within this reconfigured framework, immigrant families are increasingly valued for their ability to embody "intercultural values," due to their unique positioning between nation-states, cultures, and communities.[7]

A similar sociocultural orientation is also evident in the scholarship of Qijun Han, particularly in her study *The Cinematic Representation of The Chinese American Family*, which examines how Chinese Americans and their identities are portrayed in popular media. Han's research further explores the interconnections among Chinese American, Chinese, and

Hollywood cinemas, highlighting the historical, cultural, and aesthetic continuities that inform these representations. Her discussion of the growing visibility of Chinese American family narratives in American cinema acknowledges the influence of Asia-Pacific mobility on Chinese notions of kinship and cinematic practice, situating these developments within a broader assumption of universal shifts in family structures prompted by global mobility.[8] However, this generalized interpretive framework tends to overlook the industrial and institutional conditions that enable the visibility of such narratives. It also neglects the specific link between Chinese diasporic filmmakers' attraction to family narratives and the constitutive force of family in the formation of their identity and artistic expression.

Daniela Berghahn's study *Far-Flung Families in Film* is notable for its focus on diasporic identity and experience through the lens of diaspora criticism, particularly in its recognition of the role played by second-generation diasporic filmmakers in shaping cinematic representations of diasporic families. She attributes the increased visibility of such representations to postwar shifts in immigration patterns and policies, which fostered the establishment of settled diasporic communities and the emergence of a vibrant diasporic film culture led by second-generation diasporic filmmakers.[9] Yet, like the aforementioned studies, Berghahn's analysis primarily highlights the cultural significance of family narratives in articulating diasporic identities and experiences, while offering limited engagement with the industrial and institutional dynamics that shape the production and reception of these films. Moreover, although she identifies "a nostalgia for the homeland" as a pervasive theme in diasporic family films, her study stops short of examining how family narratives—through their aesthetic and thematic structures—are particularly well suited to conveying this form of emotional and cultural longing.[10]

Building on the preceding discussion, this study addresses a significant gap in existing scholarship on diasporic family films by adopting a comprehensive analytical framework to examine their visibility in contemporary cinema—one that goes beyond predominantly sociocultural or diasporic perspectives to also consider the industrial, institutional, and economic factors shaping their production, distribution, and reception. It proceeds from the understanding that the visibility and impact of diasporic family films are not determined solely

by their cultural relevance, but are also profoundly influenced by the structural and industrial environments governing their creation and circulation. Grounded in this expanded framework, the research positions Chinese American family films as a focal site for exploring the ways in which social, cultural, industrial, and institutional dynamics intersect to shape the visibility of diasporic family narratives.

As a diasporic film tradition that has both persisted and evolved over several decades, Chinese American family cinema offers a compelling lens through which to explore how cultural storytelling is embedded in—and shaped by—broader industry structures and institutional dynamics. While the trajectory of Chinese American family films reflects a sustained diasporic engagement—evident in the creative output of both first- and second-generation Chinese American filmmakers—its development cannot be attributed to cultural agency alone. The genre's evolution has also been significantly shaped by broader industrial and institutional dynamics. Historically, the emergence of Chinese American family films in the 1980s aligned temporally with the broader growth of the U.S. independent film sector, which created structural opportunities for underrepresented voices. In more recent years, the genre's rising in growing mainstream visibility and institutional recognition have been closely tied to the strategic adoption of conventional genre frameworks and universal themes. This formal alignment has enabled Chinese American family films to reach broader audiences, integrate into established industry networks, and achieve greater commercial and critical recognition within Hollywood.

Situating Chinese American family films within the broader landscape of U.S. cinema, this study traces their trajectory from the 1980s to the present. It examines how these familial representations have been molded by the dynamic interplay of social, cultural, industrial, and institutional forces. By analyzing film production across two generations of Chinese American filmmakers, the research delineates key developments within the U.S. film industry and the sociocultural contexts that have shaped these narratives, thereby illuminating the mechanisms behind their visibility. Ultimately, it contends that the rise and sustained prominence of Chinese American family representations cannot be attributed solely to their cultural relevance; rather,

they are the product of a complex interaction between diasporic agency, wider sociocultural transformations, and structural changes in the film industry. To investigate this interplay, this research adopts a sociological lens, supplemented by insights from diaspora criticism, to examine the intricate factors shaping the production, distribution, and reception of Chinese American family films.

This study is structured in two parts, comprising three chapters in total. Part I, consisting a single chapter, focuses on the emergence of Chinese American family films as a distinct genre in the 1980s. To contextualize this development, it begins by examining the historical backdrop of initial Chinese immigration to the United States, analyzing how historical immigrant policies shaped Hollywood's stereotypical portrayals of Chinese characters, often denying them interiority, complexity, and meaningful familial relationships.

This historical foundation provides essential context for understanding the cultural significance of the postwar rise of diasporic Chinese filmmakers as well as the early development of Chinese American family films during the late twentieth century. While first-generation Chinese American filmmakers were instrumental in shaping the genre, their creative contributions must be understood in the context of larger structural and historical forces that made their work possible. Accordingly, the chapter also investigates the specific social, institutional, and industrial transformations of the late twentieth century that facilitated the genre's initial development. Building on this foundation, the analysis then shifts from external conditions of possibility to the internal logic of creative decision-making, exploring why these filmmakers chose to center their narratives on Chinese American family life. By close examining Wayne Wang's early career and applying insights from Bourdieu's field theory, this analysis considers the manner in which individual agency, cultural and social capital, and the structural dynamics of the American film industry interacted to shape his thematic and aesthetic choices—ultimately enabling the emergence of Chinese American family films as a coherent cinematic genre by the close of the twentieth century.

Part II, which comprises two chapters, examines the evolution of Chinese American family films in the post-2000 era. Since the early 2000s, second-generation Chinese American

filmmakers have become a driving force in shaping the genre. Drawing on their distinct generational experiences, they consistently employ family narratives as a primary lens to explore and articulate the complexities of bicultural identity, intergenerational relationships, and cultural belonging within the Chinese American community. Chapter Two provides a sociocultural analysis of this narrative trend, focusing on how the lived experiences and identity formation of second-generation filmmakers—shaped by their unique position as U.S.-born and/or U.S.-raised children of immigrants—have informed their engagement with Chinese American cinema. It examines why family narratives have become such a resonant and recurring framework for expressing the complexities of Chinese American identity. In doing so, this chapter highlights the broader social and cultural shaping the development of these family portrayals in the new millennium.

Chapter Three shifts the focus from sociocultural forces to the industrial and institutional dynamics governing the trajectory of Chinese American family films in the 21st century. It pays particular attention to the genre's recent rise in mainstream visibility and institutional recognition within the U.S. film industry. Although second-generation Chinese American filmmakers have been engaging with this genre since the early 2000s, it wasn't until 2018 that their works began to achieve significant mainstream recognition and cultural legitimacy. This shift was catalyzed by the box-office success of Warner Bros. Picture's *Crazy Rich Asians,* and further solidified by a wave of high-profile, critically acclaimed productions such as *The Farewell, Boogie,* and A24's *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, which won multiple Academy Awards. By focusing on two landmark films that exemplify this shift—*Crazy Rich Asians* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*—this chapter draws on Howard Becker's art world theory to examine how second-generation Chinese American filmmakers have strategically navigated the collaborative structures of film production to bring their culturally specific stories into the mainstream. It examines how these filmmakers adopted familiar storytelling conventions and universal themes, built alliances with key industry stakeholders, and aligned their projects with broader institutional norms to secure production support and engage with wider audiences. In doing so, this chapter highlights how diasporic agency,

industrial access, creative collaboration, and cultural negotiation together have enabled the recent ascendance of Chinese American family films, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between filmmaker agency and institutional structures in shaping their visibility in mainstream American cinema.

This study adopts a comprehensive approach to data collection, integrating both primary and secondary sources to explore the factors influencing the visibility of Chinese American family representations in cinema. The primary sources include a curated selection of Chinese American family films from the 1980s to the present, encompassing both independent and studio productions within the American cinema context. The secondary sources draw on existing scholarship on sociological and cultural studies related to Chinese American communities and family dynamics, as well as film industry research on the production, distribution, and reception of both independent and mainstream Hollywood films. This study is further guided by theoretical frameworks from sociology, including Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and habitus, and Howard Becker's art world theory. These lenses facilitate a multilayered analysis of the date, offering a critical perspective on the interplay between social, cultural, and industrial forces that have shaped the cinematic visibility of Chinese American family narratives in contemporary American cinema.

Before embarking on this study, it is essential to delineate the scope and definition of Chinese American family cinema. For the purpose of this research, the term encompasses not only films that portray families fully residing within the United States, such as *Saving Face* (2004), and *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, but also those depicting transnational families whose members are geographically sepatated, as illustrated in *Crazy Rich Asians* and *The Farewell.* This inclusive approach is adopted for several conceptual and methological reasons. First, it reflects the complex and often fluid nature of diasporic experience. Chinese American families frequently maintain strong emotional, cultural, and economic ties across national borders. A definition limited only to households within U.S. geographic boundaries would risk excluding a significant dimension of the lived reality for many in the diaspora, thereby offering an incomplete portrait of "Chineseness" within the American context. Furthermore, this dual

focus allows for a more robust and comparative analysis. Placing domestic narratives alongside transnational ones reveals that the core thematic concerns—such as the negotiation of cultural identity, intergenerational conflict, and the tension between individual desire and familial duty—persist regardless of physical proximity. The grographic disperation in transnational family films often serves not to change these themes, but to intensify and reframe them, offering a distinct analytical perspective on the same foundation concerns. Ultimately, by adopting this comprehensive framework, this study aims to argue that "family" operates as the primary discursive site where Chinese American identity is contexted, performed, and reimaged. Whether the family is contained within one nation or stretched across continents, it remains the central narrative device through which filmmakers explore the complexities of heritage, belonging, and cultural negotiation in a transnational world. This scope is therefore not merely classificatory but is fundamental to the thesis that the family unit is the essential lens for understanding Chinese American cinema.

1. First-Generation Chinese Immigrant Filmmakers and the Emergence of Chinese American Family Films

Form the very inception of American cinema, Chinese characters have made appearances, as exemplified by Edison Company's short comedy *Chinese Laundry Scene* (1895), which featured a Chinese worker. Nevertheless, despite this early visibility, Chinese Americans were seldom depicted with nuanced narrative depth or emotional complexity. Throughout much of Hollywood's history, their on-screen representations were heavily influenced by exclusionary laws and xenophobic sentiments, frequently reducing them to flat, stereotypical caricatures. Consequently, the rich and intricate fabric of Chinese American family life remained conspicuously absent from the cinematic landscape. However, a transformative shift occurred in the 1980s with the emergence of first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers within the American film industry. Pioneering directors, including Wayne Wang, Ang Lee, and Peter Wang, brought Chinese American characters to the forefront of familial narratives, thereby giving rise to a distinct genre: Chinese American family films.

The emergence of Chinese American family films as a distinct genre did not occur in a vacuum. Rather it was the product of complex intersections between shifting immigration policies, diasporic agency, and evolving structures within the U.S. film sector. This chapter traces the genesis of this genre by situating it within broader historical, social, cultural, and industrial transformations. To contextualize this development, it begins with a historical analysis of the initial Chinese immigrant communities in the United States, examining how restrictive policies historically informed Hollywood's reductive portrayals, which routinely deprived Chinese characters of phycological depth and authentic family ties. This historical grounding is essential for appreciating the cultural significance of the postwar rise of diasporic Chinese filmmakers and the genre's subsequent appearance. The discussion then turns to the specific social and industrial conditions that fostered this development. It highlights a confluence of key factors: postwar reforms in U.S. immigration law, the expansion of film studies departments in American universities, and the ascent of new American independent

cinema. Together, these factors created a conducive environment for the entry of first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers into the industry and, by extension, for the formation of Chinese American family films in the late twentieth century. Finally, the chapter investigates the motivations behind first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers' decision to focus on family narratives, with particular attention to the early career of filmmaker Wayne Wang. Building on the insights from Bourdieu's field theory, the analysis examines how Wang's thematic and aesthetic decisions were shaped by his individual agency, his social and cultural capital, and the specific structures of the U.S. film industry—dynamics that collectively contributed to the rise of Chinese American family films.

1.1 Racialized Screens: Stereotyping of Chinese Americans in American Cinema and the Absence of "Family"

For much of Hollywood's history, the portrayal of Chinese Americans has been woefully inadequate, often reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Constrained within a binary framework—cast either as threatening villains or subservient sidekicks—Chinese characters were frequently reduced to one-dimensional caricatures, epitomized by characters like the malevolent Fu Manchu, the cunning Dragon Lady, the submissive Charlie Chan, and the passive China Doll. These stereotypes, entrenched in Hollywood conventions, dominated the cinematic depiction of Chinese Americans for nearly a century, systematically denying them the complexity of fully developed characters with rich personal lives and meaningful familial connections.

The over six decades of legal exclusion of Chinese immigrants through the Chinese Exclusion Act largely explains Hollywood's approach to portraying Chinese characters and the historical absence of Chinese American family life in its representations. In the late half of the nineteenth century, economic hardship and political instability in China, along with news of the 1848 California Gold Rush, initiated an early flow of migrants from China to the United States. These early immigrants, who were predominantly young men from Guangdong province, initially envisioned only a transient stay, aiming to go back to their homeland after amassing wealth and prestige.[11] They made significant contributions to the expansion of the U.S. frontier,

filling essential labor positions in mining, railroad construction, agriculture, and various industries. However, despite their indispensable work, they encountered rampant discrimination and prejudice fueled by racial stereotypes and economic anxieties.

Hostility towards Chinese immigrants emerged early during the first wave of Chinese immigration to the United States. After the worldwide news of the 1848 gold discovery, the gold fields quickly became overcrowded, leading to conflict among miners and fueling anti-foreign sentiment. By 1852, white American miners had largely expelled other foreign prospectors, claiming the gold as their own. Consequently, as Chinese laborers began arriving in large numbers in California during the 1850s, they became the primary target of this entrenched xenophobia. Historian Jean Pfaelzer notes that upon the arrival of Chinese miners in the gold fields, immediate purges emerged, with miners holding conventions to explicitly discuss strategies for expelling the Chinese.[12]

This hostility intensified in the 1870s as economic hardship and job scarcity fueled resentment towards Chinese laborers, ultimately leading to the institutionalized and systemic exclusion and marginalization of the Chinese. White workers, grappling with economic hardship and dwindling opportunities, channeled their frustrations into anti-Chinese sentiment and racist violence.[13] Chinese immigrants were unjustly accused of fostering "a filthy nest of iniquity and rottenness" within American society and of depriving white workers of employment opportunities.[14] Such scapegoating became especially acute in California, where anti-Chinese sentiment intensified, leading to violent attacks and discriminatory legislation.[15] This wave of hostility reached its peak in 1882 with the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Signaled into law by President Chester A. Arthur, this landmark legislation instituted a ten-year moratorium on the entry of Chinese laborers, bringing the first major period of Chinese migration to the United States to an effective end.

To bolster the legal framework established by the Chinese Exclusion Act and its extensions, politicians with white supremacist agendas systematically involved racial arguments.[16] Prominent figures in government, media, and academia propagated the notion that people of Chinese descent were inherently inferior, moral corrupt, and incapable of assimilating into

American society. This discretionary sentiment was particularly pronounced on the West Coast, where a chorus of voices vehemently portrayed Chinese immigrants as undesirable, unassimilable, and detrimental to the nation's well-being.[17] Senator John F. Miller, a key proponent of the original Exclusion Act, exemplified this sentiment, describing Chinese immigrants as a degraded and inferior race that would undermine American labor and societal values.[18] In her sociological analysis, Sarah E. Simons described people of Chinese descent as belonging to a "servile class," arguing that their worldview differed so profoundly from that of Americans that the values of American civilization has little effect on them.[19]

The racist biases propagated by white supremacist politicians against Chinese people were both reflected in and perpetuated by early American cinema. Film historian Dick Strongmen notes that Chinese characters, despite their limited screen presence, were quickly typecast into restrictive roles in early American melodramas. Male characters were frequently depicted as either the morally corrupt "Yellow Heathen" or relegated to a subservient role analogous to the "good Indian."[20] These two tropes, prevalent in early American cinema, both reflected and reinforced the racial prejudices of the time, which viewed Chinese Americans as uncultured, unassimilable, and inherently racially inferior.

The "Yellow Heathen" trope, with its portrayal of Chinese characters as "godless, uncultured, and unprincipled, opium-smoking dropouts from society," reinforced the idea that they were unassimilable and inherently different.[21] Conversely, the "good Indian" trope, while seemingly less overtly negative, perpetuated an equally insidious form of racism. These characters were often portrayed as loyal servants engaged in tasks like cooking, farming, or manual labor, assisting white protagonists in their battles against villains or natural adversity.[22] Their role within the narrative was to cater to the needs and desires of white protagonists. This portrayal reinforced the notion of racial hierarchy and the supposed superiority of white Americans, reducing Chinese characters to one-dimensional figures devoid of agency, existing solely to serve the dominant group. By relegating them to subordinate roles and depriving them of autonomy, the "good Indian" trope—much like the "Yellow Heathen"—served to uphold white supremacy and solidify discriminatory power dynamics.

Fueled by systemic racial biases, early American cinema established a binary framework for representing Chinese Americans, typically casting them as either the morally corrupt "Yellow Heathen" or the subservient "good Indian." This binary representation became a deeply ingrained convention in Hollywood, reinforced through iconic figures such as Dr. Fu Manchu, the Dragon Lady, the China Doll, and Charlie Chan. These one-dimensional caricatures dominated the portrayal of Chinese Americans for nearly a century, obstructing the emergence of complex characters with fully realized personal lives and meaningful familial relationships.

Within the binary framework established by early American cinema, figures like Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan emerged as two enduring stereotypes that came to symbolize how Chinese American masculinity was imagined and constrained within mainstream Hollywood narratives. The initial portrayal of Chinese male characters as morally bankrupt figures—embodied in the "Yellow Heathen" trope—laid the groundwork for a more sinister evolution of this stereotype. As previously noted, early cinematic depictions often framed Chinese men as threats to Western society and civilization due to their supposed lack of moral and ethnic values. However, beginning in the 1920s, this depiction took a darker turn: Chinese villains began to supplant the uncultured "Yellow Heathen" with more calculated and insidious forms of menace. From the evil Foo Chung to Wu Fang, "a parade of evil Orientals graced the silent screen."[23]

This evolution reached its apex in the late 1920s with Hollywood's adaptations of Sax Rohmer's popular *Fu Manchu novels,* which solidified one of the most infamous and enduring racist archetypes in cinematic history: the genius Chinese supervillain, Dr. Fu Manchu. Far from being merely immoral, Fu Manchu was portrayed as a malevolent mastermind, often imbued with mystical powers rooted in ancient Eastern lore and driven by an insatiable desire to conquer and dominate Western civilization. His on-screen career, spanning from *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (Rowland V. Lee, 1929) to *The Fiendish Plot of Dr. Fu Manchu* (Piers Haggard, 1980), cemented this image deeply "in the popular consciousness"—to the extent that he came to represent "more than any other twentieth-century villain."[24]

If Dr. Fu Manchu represents the sinister incarnation of the “Yellow Heathen” stereotype, then the figure of Charlie Chan embodies the “good Indian” trope. Conceived in the early twentieth century by novelist Earl Derr Biggers, this soft-spoken yet astute Chinese American detective soon gained widespread popularity across literature and film, appearing in more than fifty productions from 1926 onward.[25] Possessing an aura of “Eastern wisdom,” he frequently solves crimes involving gambling, opium smuggling, and other cross-Pacific affairs. However, despite his intelligence and crime-solving abilities, Charlie Chan was often depicted as a racial caricature, speaking in broken English, spouting fortune-cookie wisdom, and consistently displaying deference to white authority figures. This depiction, while intended to be humorous, ultimately reinforced the idea that Chinese Americans were perpetual outsiders—intelligent and useful, yet forever foreign and incapable of fully assimilating into American society.

Similarly, the binary framework used to portray Chinese men in early Hollywood cinema extended to representations of Chinese women. The “Dragon Lady and the “China Doll” stereotypes exemplified this dichotomy, both reinforcing harmful racial and gender biases against Chinese American women. Much like their male counterparts, who were often cast in "good Indian" trope of loyal servitude, Chinese women were frequently portrayed as passive, subservient figures, particularly through the “China Doll” stereotype that emerged 1910s. Capitalizing on both the perceived exotic charm and sensual attraction of love involving difference races, and the strong societal prejudice against such unions, Hollywood frequently positioned Chinese female characters in the genre of doomed “interracial” romance as passive and subservient “China Doll.”[26] Films such as *The Forbidden City* (Sidney Franklin, 1918) and *The Toll of The Sea* (Chester M. Franklin, 1922) are prime examples of this trope. In these films, Chinese women were typically portrayed as tragic figures, often sacrificing themselves for love that was ultimately doomed due to societal prejudices and racial barriers. These narratives perpetuated the stereotype of Chinese women as a delicate and submissive object of desire, existing solely to fulfill the whims and desires of white male protagonists.

The “Dragon Lady” stereotype, often presented as the female counterpart to the villainous Fu Manchu, emerged as another prominent representation of Chinese women in Hollywood

cinema starting in the 1920s, providing a stark contrast to the submissive "China Doll" stereotype. Combining "a powerful female allure with a serpentine treachery," she embodied a cunning and dangerous persona, often visually accentuated by stark makeup, hair, and costume styles.[27] Like her male counterpart, the Dragon Lady was portrayed as a threat to Western society, utilizing her feminine wiles and intelligence to manipulate and undermine white male protagonists. This stereotype was most notably embodied by Anna May Wong, the first Chinese American female star, who became both celebrated and typecast for her Dragon Lady roles. Her performances in films such as *Thief of Bagdad* (Raoul Walsh, 1924), *The Devil Dancer* (Fred Niblo, 1927), *Daughter of the Dragon* (Lloyd Corrigan, 1931), and *Shanghai Express* (Josef Von Sternberg, 1932) cemented the Dragon Lady in the cinematic imagination—casting Chinese women as simultaneously seductive and threatening, desirable yet dangerous.

Despite the passage of time and the evolving social landscape, these stereotypes proved remarkably persistent, enduring well into the late 20th century. Film like *Year of the Dragon* (1985) continued to repackage and reframe old tropes. In this case, the character Tracy Tzu, initially portrayed as a powerful and independent journalist, ultimately succumbed to the "China Doll"stereotype. Under the influence of her white romantic partner, her characterization shifts from that of a typical "Dragon Lady" to a compliant, subdued "China Doll," her agency and strength diminished to fit a familiar narrative. Moreover, the iconic characters of Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, first introduced during the 1920s, continued to appear on Hollywood screens into the 1980s, including titles such as *Charlie Chan and the Curse of the Dragon Queen* (1981) and *The Fiendish Plot of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1980).

Although Chinese American characters had appeared on Hollywood screens for decades, their portrayals were overwhelmingly shaped by reductive and racialized stereotypes. Constrained within a binary framework—cast either as threatening villains or subservient sidekicks—Chinese American characters were frequently reduced to one-dimensional caricatures. This pattern of representation did not emerge in isolation but was deeply embedded in a broader socio-political climate shaped by legal exclusion and institutional discrimination. The enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, recognized as the first significant federal

legislation to bar immigration on race and national grounds, codified anti-Chinese sentiment and reinforced the dominant perceptions of Chinese people as uncultured, unassimilable, and inherently racially inferior. These racist ideologies inevitably found expression in early American cinema, which, as Giorgio Bertellini observes, specifically employed racial difference to build its visual representations and storylines, a method through which it shaped its own identity.[28] Within this context, Chinese characters in early American melodramas were quickly typecast into restrictive roles—most commonly as either the morally corrupt "Yellow Heathen" or the subservient "good Indian."[29] This binary framework both reflected and reinforced the racial prejudices of the time, solidifying these negative stereotypes in the American consciousness. This framework laid the groundwork for decades of harmful stereotyping of Chinese characters in Hollywood, where four dominant archetypes emerged: Fu Manchu, the "Dragon Lady," the "China Doll," and Charlie Chan. These one-dimensional caricatures came to define the on-screen image of the Chinese Americans throughout much of the 20th century, becoming deeply entrenched within Hollywood's cinematic conventions. This enduring pattern was further exacerbated by the near-total exclusion of Chinese American voices and perspectives from the filmmaking process due to the exclusionary legislation. As a result, Chinese characters were rarely depicted as fully developed individuals, particularly within the context of family life. As Qijun Han astutely notes, the portrayal of Chinese Americans in Hollywood is so permeated by stereotypes that it leaves no narrative space for the representation of family.[30]

1.2 Breaking Ground: First-Generation Chinese Immigrant Filmmakers and the Rise of Chinese American Family Representation

Prior to the 1980s, Chinese Americans in American cinema were largely relegated to the margins—often depicted as one-dimensional figures stripped of cultural depth, familial context, and emotional nuance. This situation began to change toward the final decades of the twentieth century with the rise of first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers. Among them were directors like Peter Wang, Ang Lee, and Wayne Wang, who arrived in the United States

following the easing of immigration restrictions in the 1960s. They played a pivotal role in redefining Chinese American cinematic narratives. Drawing on personal and community-based experiences, they created stories rooted in the everyday realities of Chinese American families and neighborhoods, offering a stark contrast to the caricatured portrayals long dominant in mainstream Hollywood. By focusing on intergenerational relationships and the cultural complexities of immigrant life, these filmmakers helped establish the Chinese American family films as a distinct and resonant genre within American cinema.

Wayne Wang's first feature, *Chan Is Missing* (1982), marked the beginning of this shift. Taking place within San Francisco's historical Chinatown, this film subverted the stereotypical Hollywood "Charlie Chan" detective trope, not by focusing on a subservient figure, but rather by highlighting their absence, centering its narrative on the search for a missing cab driver named Chan. What initially appears as a simple narrative premise evolves into a nuanced exploration of cultural tensions, intergenerational misunderstandings, and identity fragmentation within the Chinese American community. As the protagonists, Jo (Wood Moy) and Steve (Marc Hayashi), navigate the neighborhood, they encounter a spectrum of voices and perspectives that challenge any singular definition of Chinese American identity. Rather than offering a definitive portrait of Chinese American life in the early 1980s, *Chan Is Missing* embraces ambiguity and contradiction, resisting the essentializing gaze that had long dominated mainstream portrayals. Director Wang stated that his goal was to capture the authentic spirit of the community by bringing together diverse, sometimes conflicting individuals from Chinatown, thereby creating a multi-faceted representation.[31] In doing so, the film laid the groundwork for a new cinematic language in representing Chinese Americans, one rooted in cultural specificity, community insight, and narrative subtlety, that would define the emerge of Chinese American family films in the decades to follow.

The critical and commercial success of *Chan Is Missing*—acknowledged as the pioneering Asian American feature film that attained both widespread theatrical release across the country and commendation from critics in broader society—constituted a historic breakthrough for Chinese American representation on screen.[32] This breakthrough not only challenged the

longstanding Hollywood stereotypes but also launched Wang's filmmaking career, laying the foundation for a body of work that would come to define Chinese American family films as a distinct genre.

Building on the successes of *Chan Is Missing,* Wang continued his exploration of Chinese American themes by directing his first family-oriented feature, *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (1985). The story focuses on the nuanced and tender bond between a a widowed mother and her unmarried daughter, offering an intimate portrait of a Chinese American household in San Francisco. Through their daily interactions, Wang examines themes of intergenerational tension, cultural conflicts, and the delicate balancing act between assimilation and maintaining heritage within the Chinese American community. By highlighting intergenerational relationships and cultural dynamics, Wang's approach challenged the predominant mode of Chinese American representation in Hollywood and established a cinematic framework that would become a hallmark of Chinese American family storytelling on screen.

Despite *Dim Sum*'s limited commercial success, its critical acclaim solidified Wang's growing reputation as a voice for Chinese American generational conflicts. This recognition, combined with his deep understanding of Chinese American experience, motivated him to create two additional Chinese American family films before successfully transitioning to broader storytelling with film *Smoke* in 1995: *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989) and *The Joy Luck Club* (1993). The latter holds particular significance for its groundbreaking status as a Hollywood production that centered its narrative on the domestic sphere of Chinese American life. Like *Dim Sum,* these films centered their narratives on intergenerational relationships and cultural dynamics within Chinese American families, delving into the tensions and negotiations surrounding identity that the immigrant experience brings into sharp focus. Set in the transformative period after the war and the pivotal repeal of the Exclusion Act, *Eat a Bowl of Tea* intimately captures the personal struggles of a newlywed couple adjusting to life in New York's Chinatown. Meanwhile, *The Joy Luck Club*, adopted from Chinese American writer Amy Tan's celebrated novel, employs a multi-perspective narrative to explore the complex

bonds between four immigrant mothers and their U.S. -raised daughters along matrilineal lines, illustrating the generational and cultural tensions that shaped their relationships.

The groundbreaking film *Chan is Missing* not only launched Wayne Wang's filmmaking career but also inspired other Chinese Americans to tell their own stories through film, contributing to the expansion and diversification of the Chinese American family film genre. In 1986, Peter Wang, known for his role as Henry the chef in *Chan is Missing,* directed *A Great Wall* (1986), a deeply personal project that reflected his own experiences as a Chinese American navigating two distinct cultures. *A Great Wall* follows a Chinese American family as they travel to China to reconnect with their roots, exploring themes of heritage, belonging, and the yearning for connection across cultural divides. Although *A Great Wall* remains Peter Wang's only directorial effort, his contribution to Chinese American family cinema is significant. He brought a unique insider's perspective to the complexities of the Chinese American experience, broadening the narrative scope by venturing beyond the confines of Chinatown and delving into the clash between tradition and modernity.

The engagement of Ang Lee with the Chinese American filmmaking in the 1990s further enriched the landscape of Chinese American family films. His acclaimed work, *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), offers a masterful blend of humor and heart. The film centers on a gay Taiwanese American man who navigates familial duty by orchestrating a marriage of convenience to satisfy his traditional parents.[33] Through this narrative, Lee thoroughly examined pressing themes such as sexuality, cultural expectations, and the generational divides that often accompany immigrant experiences. The film's sensitive and insightful portrayal of these issues resonated deeply with audiences, inviting them to reflect on the universal struggle for acceptance and understanding within families. *The Wedding Banquet* honored with the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival amid widespread critical praise, an achievement that cemented Lee's reputation as a talented filmmaker and propelled Chinese American family narratives onto the international stage.

The emergence of first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers in the late 20th century marked a pivotal turning point in the representation of Chinese Americans in U.S. cinema.

Through the pioneering works of filmmakers like Peter Wang, Ang Lee, and Wayne Wang, Chinese American families—long absent or flattened in mainstream cinema—were finally brought to the forefront with depth, complexity, and cultural specificity. These filmmakers challenged entrenched Hollywood stereotypes by portraying intergenerational tensions, diasporic identity struggles, and the everyday intimacies of family life within Chinese American communities. Their films not only established Chinese American family narratives as a distinct genre and meaningful cinematic mode, but also laid the foundation for a narrative tradition that would be embraced and expanded by the next generation of Chinese American filmmakers.

1.3 Structural Opportunities: Social, Institutional, and Industrial Forces Shaping Chinese American Family Films

While the emergence of first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers was instrumental in shaping the early development of Chinese American family films, their contributions must be situated within the broader historical context that enabled their work. The genre's emergence was not solely the product of diasporic creativity or cultural expression; it was also significantly shaped, and in many ways enabled, by shifting social conditions and evolving industrial structures in postwar America. Key developments, such as the liberalization of U.S. immigration policies, the institutional expansion of film studies in American universities, and the rise of new American independent cinema in the 1980s, collectively fostered a more favorable environment for the emergence of a vibrant diasporic film culture led by first-generation Chinese American filmmakers. These structural changes opened new spaces, both literal and symbolic, for Chinese American voices to emerge, allowing family-centered narratives to move from the cultural margins into cinematic visibility.

One of the most significant structural changes that enabled the rise of Chinese American family films was the shifts in U.S. immigration policy in the postwar era. This shift culminated in the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments (commonly known as the Hart-Celler Act), which dismantled the longstanding national origins quota system that had severely limited Chinese immigration for decades. Far from being a mere bureaucratic

reform, this legislation triggered a new wave of Chinese immigration and fundamentally reshaped the demographic and occupational composition of the Chinese American community. These transformations, resulting from postwar immigration reforms, played a crucial role in enhancing the social visibility of Chinese Americans and expanding their participation in mainstream U.S. economic and cultural sectors, including television, film, and related creative industries.

Sociologist Min Zhou identifies a series of key transformations in the post-1965 Chinese American community, most notably a significant shift in its demographic composition. In contrast to the predominantly "poor and uneducated" male laborers from Guangdong province who comprised much of the earlier immigrant wave, the post-1965 arrivals included not only low-skilled workers with limited education but also individuals who brought with them substantial financial resources and educational capital.[34] This demographic evolution was a direct result of the 1965 amendments to U.S. immigration law, which placed new emphasis on reuniting families and attracting individuals with professional skills. Consequently, a growing number of Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States with advanced educational credentials and professional experiences, diversifying the socioeconomic makeup of the Chinese American community.

The influx of highly educated and professionally trained Chinese immigrants following the 1965 immigration reforms signaled not only a demographic transformation, but also a profound shift in the occupational structure of the Chinese American community. Prior to 1965, the majority of Chinese American workers were male, primarily employed in low-status occupations within the ethnic enclave economy, such as service workers, laundrymen, small business proprietors.[35] Service work remained the dominant occupation among Chinese American males throughout the 1940s and the 1960s.[36] However, census date from the 1970s and 1980s revealed a significant shift: professional and technical roles began to surpass service jobs as the most common employment categories among Chinese American men.[37] The proportion of female professionals also increased dramatically, rising from 7.6 percent in 1940 to 16.8 percent in 1980s.[38] This occupational transformation, as sociologist Micheal Chang

argues, can be largely attributed to the post-1965 influx of immigrants who arrived "with privileged backgrounds."[39] Sociologist Betty Lee Sung similarly observes that the arrival of a substantial number of high-educated, professionally skilled immigrants contributed to the reconfiguration of the Chinese American occupational patterns, with many move beyond ethnic occupations ans enter professional sectors within the mainstream economy.[40]

This transformation of the Chinese American occupational structure underscores the far-reaching impact of the 1965 immigration policy reforms in enhancing both their presence and influence across various sectors of American society. By prioritizing family reunification and the admission of skilled professionals, these reforms ushered in a wave of immigrants with substantial economic and cultural capital, many of whom went on to excel in the professional sectors of the U.S economy. This upward mobility not only broadened the socioeconomic participation of the Chinese American community but also amplified their visibility and integration into mainstream American life.

One prominent arena where this growing visibility manifested was the field of cinema. The influx of privileged and professional trained Chinese immigrants, catalyzed by the 1965 reforms, proved to be a key driver behind the increased representation of Chinese Americans in the U.S. film industry from the 1980s onward. Filmmakers like Peter Wang, Ang Lee and Wayne Wang—all of whom came from middle-class Chinese families—aririved in the United States after the overhaul of U.S. immigration law in 1965. After completing their studies at American universities, they began establishing themselves in the film industry by telling stories centered on Chinese American family life. Their presence not only contributed to the visibility and influence of Chinese Americans within the American film industry, but also helped shape the development of Chinese American family films in the late twentieth century.

The enhanced social visibility of the Chinese American community in post-1965 American society is closely tied to the distinct social mobility trajectories pursued by Chinese immigrants from privileged or professional backgrounds. In contrast to the traditional model of upward mobility often observed among immigrants with limited education—the well-regarded approach of starting low and climbing the ladder through consistent hard hard work—the social

mobility of these educated and skilled Chinese immigrants involved entering mainstream professional fields through exceptional educational achievement. This shift in social mobility, characterized by the pursuit of professional careers through educational attainment, is further illustrated by Michael Chang's observation that a large share of Chinese immigrants came from privileged or professional backgrounds, with many initially entering the U.S. to pursue studies at institutions of higher learning. By 1980, they accounted for 31.8 percent of immigrant males engaged in professional and technical occupations.[41] In essence, this new pattern of mobility redefined the socioeconomic standing and representation of Chinese Americans in the United States.

In tandem with the post-1965 shift in Chinese immigrant social mobility—marked by increased access to professional fields through educational attainment—the expansion of film studies departments at American universities, beginning in the 1960s, emerged as another key factor in shaping the development of Chinese American family films in the late twentieth century. Although interest in film training at American colleges and universities had been on the rise since the end of World War II, dedicated film studies programs were rare in the 1950s.[42] A national survey conducted by Jack C. Ellis of college courses in film at 100 American schools from 1952 to 1953 revealed that film courses were primarily offered through Departments of education (38 percent) and speech and drama (17 percent), while Departments of motion pictures offered only 12.3 percent.[43] This distribution suggests that film had not yet been recognized as a distinct academic discipline, but was instead treated as a supplementary or vocational subject. However, this began to change in the 1960s as film gained legitimacy as both art form and a scholarly field.[44] As Shyon Baumann notes, the majority of today's leading film studies degree programs were founded during the 1960s or in subsequent years.[45]

For Chinese immigrants arriving after 1965, this expansion and institutionalization of film studies programs aligned closely with their emphasis on education as a pathway for upward mobility, rendering the film industry a newly accessible professional field and filmmaking a more viable career path. This institutional development not only elevated cinema's status within the cultural hierarchy by recognizing it as a legitimate field of artistic expression, but also

solidified filmmaking as a profession through the establishment of formal academic programs. These developments were particularly significant for the rise of Chinese American filmmakers and the emergence of Chinese American family films in the 1980s. As discussed earlier, many post-1965 Chinese immigrants, especially those from privileged or professional backgrounds, viewed higher education as a key pathway to upward mobility and integration into the mainstream economy. For these individuals, university-based film programs offered both the professional training and cultural legitimacy needed to enter the U.S. film industry.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that most first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers were educated within this newly formalized academic environment. Apart from Peter Wang, who earned a Ph.D. in electro-optics, both Wayne Wang and Ang Lee pursued formal studies in film. Wayne Wang immigrated to the United States in 1969, shortly after the 1965 Hart-Celler Act. Originally a painting student at California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC), he became "more and more absorbed in film" after taking film history courses.[46] As CCAC established a film department during his time there, Wang shifted his academic focus accordingly. Ang Lee followed a similar trajectory: in 1979, he left Taiwan for the United States to undertake theater studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, abtaining his undergraduate degree in 1980. While there, language barriers limited his acting opportunities, restricting him to minor roles and performances. This experience, combined with his growing directorial ambition, crystallized his decision to embark on a filmmaking career.[47] He immediately acted on this resolve by enrolling in the MFA film program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, an institution founded in 1965.

Beginning in the 1980s, Chinese immigrant filmmakers began to make their mark on the American film industry by telling stories about the Chinese American experiences and pioneering the development of Chinese American family films. With the arrival of Chinese immigrants after the 1965 immigration reform, the Chinese American community underwent a significant demographic and social transformation, shifting from a predominantly bachelor society to an immigrant-dominant, family-centered community.[48] This evolution provided fertile ground for cinematic exploration. The family emerged as a narrative microcosm,

encapsulating the complexities of intergenerational dynamics, the tensions of cultural assimilation, and the challenges of preserving cultural heritage. By focusing on the family unit, these filmmakers found a compelling lens through which to explore broader themes of identity, generational conflict, and cultural adaptation in intimate and relatable ways.

Despite this creative momentum, Chinese American filmmaking struggled to gain traction in the mainstream U.S. film industry during the 1980s. As previously discussed, entrenched stereotypes—such as Fu Manchu, the Dragon Lady, the China Doll, and Charlie Chan—continued to dominate Hollywood's representations of Chinese and Chinese American characters, making it difficult for fresh narratives to break through. Compounding this challenge was a significant industry-wide shift: by the late 1970s, Hollywood studios had largely pivoted away from mid-budget productions in favor of blockbuster filmmaking.[49] This model prioritized a select few high budget "event" films with wide commercial appeal, leaving little space for smaller, culturally specific stories.[50] As a result, Chinese immigrant filmmakers faced an increasingly risk-averse system reluctant to invest in films that did not promise blockbuster success.

Paradoxically, however, Hollywood's increasing focus on big-budget blockbusters in the late 1970s also left a space for the rise of new American independent cinema.[51] Emerging in the early 1980s and flourishing through the mid-to-late 2000s, this movement—often retrospectively referred to as the "Sundance-Miramax era,"—saw a surge of in artistically driven films supported by alternative institutions such as the Sundance Institute and distribution companies like Miramax.[52] In response to Hollywood's dominant 'blockbuster mentality,' the new American independent cinema emerged with a distinct production system that prioritized greater artistic expression and storytelling diversity.[53] This system often relied on independent production and distribution firms for financing indie film ventures.

The emergence of Chinese American family films in the 1980s greatly benefited from the emergence of this new American independent cinema. As Hollywood became increasingly focused on blockbuster productions, the indie film movement provided Chinese immigrant filmmakers with an alternative space to develop and share their nuanced, community-rooted

narratives. Notably, filmmakers such as Wang and Lee launched their careers within this vibrant independent film scene, using the creative freedom of indie cinema to tell stories grounded in the Chinese American experience.

Wayne Wang's first two films, *Chan Is Missing* and *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart,* were both independently produced and played a pivotal role in launching his career in American cinema. Funded by the American Film Institute and the National Endowment for the Arts, Wang achieved groundbreaking success with *Chan Is Missing* in 1982. Premiering at the New Directors/New Films festival in New York, the film garnered critical acclaim for its stylistic innovation and nuanced portrayal of Chinese American identity. Following a successful festival run, it was acquired by New Yorker Films—an independent distribution company founded in 1965—and received a limited theatrical release in major U.S. cities. Despite its modest budget of $22,500, *Chan Is Missing* achieved notable commercial success, grossing over $1.5 million.[54] Its impact secured financial backing for Wang's next project, *Dim Sum,* a warm and intimate depiction of Chinese American family life. Produced with the support of American playhouses, the film premiered in the Directors' Fortnight section at the 1984 Cannes Film Festival. While it did not match the box office success of *Chan Is Missing,* it was well received by critics and further solidified Wang's reputation as an independent filmmaker and a leading voice in Chinese American cinema. This growing recognition, along with Wang's deep understanding of the Chinese American experience, propelled him to direct two additional Chinese American family films before successfully transitioning to more mainstream storytelling in the mid-1990s: *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989) and *The Joy Luck Club* (1993).

Similarly, Ang Lee began his career with two independently produced Chinese American family films: *Pushing Hands* and *The Wedding Banquet.* Both were co-productions between Taiwan's Central Motion Picture Corporation and Good Machine, an American independent production company founded in 1991. While *Pushing Hands* did not secure a U.S. distribution deal, its commercial success in Taiwan prompted further investment in Lee's next film, *The Wedding Banquet.* After premiering at the Berlin Film Festival to critical acclaim, *The Wedding Banquet* was acquired by Samuel Goldwyn Films and enjoyed a successful worldwide release.

It went on to gross $23.6 million globally on a budget of just $1 million, establishing Lee as a rising figure in global cinema and paving the way for his transition into the Hollywood mainstream.[55]

In essence, the emergence of Chinese American family films in the 1980s is inextricably linked to the broader structural, demographic, institutional, and industrial transformations that elevated the social visibility and cultural influence of the Chinese American community in the post-1965 era. The Hart-celler Act of 1965 not only spurred a new wave of Chinese immigration but also fundamentally reshaped the community's demographic profile by facilitating the arrival of immigrants from privileged or professional backgrounds. These individuals played a pivotal role in advancing Chinese Americans' presence in broader U.S. society, both socially and culturally. Their distinct social mobility trajectories—involving the pursuit of mainstream professional occupations through educational achievement—significantly expanded the community's participation across various sectors of the U.S. economy. Supported by the concurrent expansion and institutionalization of film studies programs at American universities during the 1960s, this upward mobile generation also engaged with the field of American cinema, contributing to the postwar emergence of diasporic Chinese filmmakers within the U.S. film industry. For many upward mobile Chinese immigrants, especially those from educated or professional backgrounds, these academic developments rendered filmmaking a more viable and legitimate career path, aligning closely with their values of educational attainment and professional advancement. As a result, a new generation of Chinese filmmakers—many of whom completed formal film training in U.S.institutions—began entering the American film industry from the 1980s onward, playing a formative role in shaping Chinese American family films. Yet their creative contributions would not have materialized without the rise of new American independent cinema in the 1980s. Operating outside the commercial constraints of Hollywood, the independent film movement provided with Chinese American filmmakers with the institutional support and artistic freedom needed to develop and share their culturally specific, family-centered narratives.

1.4 Wayne Wang's Strategic Navigation within the Cinematic Field: Chinese American Family films through the Lens of Bourdieu

Building on the preceding discussion of the broader social, demographic, institutional, and industrial forces that enabled the rise of first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers and the subsequent emergence of Chinese American family films, this section shifts focus from external structures of possibility to the internal logic of creative decision-making. By closely examining Chinese immigrant filmmaker Wayne Wang's early career—from the 1980s through the mid-1990s, a formative period for the development of Chinese American family films—this section explores the motivations that led these filmmakers to foreground Chinese American narratives in their work. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, it demonstrates how the interplay between individual agency, social and cultural capital, and the structural constraints of the American film industry shaped the thematic and aesthetic directions of their filmmaking, ultimately contributing to the emergence of Chinese American family films as a distinct cinematic genre in the late twentieth century.

Focusing on Wang is particularly justified given his central role in shaping the foundational phase of Chinese American family films. This period, which began with Wang's *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* in 1985 and continued until around 1993 as first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers gained a foothold within the mainstream film industry, marks the formative stage of Chinese American family cinema.[56] During this formative era, Wang emerged as a dominant creative force, directing nearly half of all Chinese American family films produced at the time, including *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart,* widely regarded as the genre's inaugural work. Moreover, what sets Wang apart is not only the volume of his contributions but also the continuity of his engagement with the genre. He was the only first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmaker whose early career remained consistently aligned with the entire development of Chinese American family films during this pivotal stage, encompassing the full spectrum of production in this genre. In contrast, Peter Wang's engagement concluded with his debut feature *A Great Wall,* while Ang Lee entered the scene in the early 1990s, just as the first wave of Chinese American family film production was

nearing its end. Wang's sustained presence and influence thus make his an ideal case study for analyzing how creative choices intersect with broader field dynamics to produce culturally significant cinematic forms.

With these considerations in mind, it's not an exaggeration to say that Wang's directorial presence was a consistent force in shaping the first wave of Chinese American family films. However, his continued engagement with the genre should not be interpreted as a deliberate political stance or an act of resistance framed within a counter-hegemonic framework. While Wang's early works, as previously discussed, undeniably challenged Hollywood's dominant representations of Chinese Americans, his creative motivations were far more complex and contingent.

Indeed, from the very beginning of his career, Wang consistently sought to distance himself from Chinese American filmmaking. Following the release of his first Chinese American family film, *Dim Sum:Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart,* he deliberately pivoted toward a more mainstream genre with *Slam Dance* (1987), a neo-noir thriller centered on an underground cartoonist entangled in a murder conspiracy. This shift was not ideologically driven but strategically motivated. Concerned about being typecast as a director who could only create films about Chinese American experiences, he felt it was essential to show his equal familiarity with other dimensions of American life and culture.[57] Although he returned to Chinese American family films with *Eat A Bowl of Tea* in 1988 following *Slam Dance*'s commercial failure, he made it clear in public statements that his ultimate artistic ambition lay beyond Chinese American cinema. In a 1989 interview, shortly after the release of *Eat A Bowl of Tea,* Wang stated that his primary interest lay in making mainstream American films. He emphasized that his focus was not solely on middle-class white narratives but rather on the lives and stories of other groups within American society.[58] Nevertheless, he returned to the genre one again in 1993 with *The Joy Luck Club,* despite having previously stated after *Eat A Bowl of Tea* that "he did not plan to make another film about Chinese American experiences" in the near future.[59]

While Wang sought to distance himself from Chinese American filmmaking, he consistently returned to narratives centered on Chinese American family life—an ongoing engagement that, perhaps inadvertently, proved instrumental in the emergence of Chinese American family films during the 1980s. Although this pattern may appear paradoxical, it is more effectively understood through the lens of Bourdieu's field theory, which emphasizes how an agent's position within a field, shaped by the distribution of various forms of capital, influences their strategic decisions.

In Bourdieu's framework, a "field" is a social space structured by a network of objective relations between various positions. These positions are occupied by agents or institutions based on their relative holdings of different forms of capital—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. The amount and type of capital each agent possesses determine not only their position within the field but also their relations to others, shaping their strategic orientations. Moreover, the specific conditions associated with each position, as well as its relationships to other positions (e.g., dominant or subordinate), influence the strategies and behaviors of those who occupy them. An agent's perception and understanding of the field, shaped by their position within it, further inform the choices they make.[60]

Viewed through this Bourdieusian lens, Wang's recurring engagement with Chinese American family narratives—despite his stated desire to move beyond them—can be interpreted as a strategic response to his position within the American film industry. Rather than representing a contradiction, this pattern reveals how filmmakers navigate field-specific constraints and capitalize on the forms of capital available to them in pursuit of artistic legitimacy and professional advancement. To understand this dynamic more fully, it is necessary to examine the configuration of the American film field in the 1980s and identify the dominant forms of capital operating within it. As previously discussed, an agent's position within a field is shaped by their distribution of various forms of capital, yet the hierarchy of these forms of capital varies across different fields, with some fields prioritizing economic capital while others tend to prioritize social or cultural capital.[61]

The 1980s American film industry was a dynamic and stratified field, defined by the tension between the dominance of the Hollywood studio system and the rise of an increasingly robust independent cinema. While mainstream studios prioritized high-budget blockbusters designed for broad commercial appeal, independent cinema emphasized a more personal, artistic approach—often relying independent production and distribution to bring unique and unconventional narratives to the screen. This bifurcated structure mirrors Bourdieu's distinction between the "field of large-scale production" and the "field of restricted production" within the cultural field. The former is oriented toward commercial success and mass appeal, where cultural products are primarily valued for their popularity and market performance. The latter, by contrast, operates with a focus on peer recognition and intellectual validation. Success in this domain is measured by cultural legitimacy among peers rather than mass consumption.[62]

The mainstream American film industry, representing the "field of large-scale production," was predominantly structured around commercial imperatives, generating substantial economic and social capital. In practice, the production of Hollywood blockbusters was largely controlled by media conglomerates whose operations were centered around financial interests.[63] To minimize risk and maximize profits, these conglomerates relied heavily on massive advertising campaigns and the star power of high-profile actors and directors to ensure broad audience appeal.[64] By contrast, independent cinema aligned with what Bourdieu terms the "field of restricted production," prioritizing artistic expression and creative autonomy, and leveraging cultural capital to gain recognition. This is not to imply that economic or symbolic capital was irrelevant within the independent film field; rather, it underscores the important role of cultural capital in shaping a filmmaker's recognition and success. As Emanuel Levy characterized it, the paradigmatic 'indie' film is typically "a fresh, low-budget movie with a gritty style and offbeat subject matter that expressed the filmmaker's personal vision."[65]

In Bourdieusian terms, Wang occupied a relatively weak position within the mainstream American film industry in the early 1980s due to his limited economic and symbolic capital. However, he was better positioned with the American independent film scene, where his cultural capital—derived from formal film education and his unique cultural perspectives on

Chinese American experiences—could be more effectively mobilized. After immigrating from a middle-class Hong Kong family in the 1960s, Wang studied film at the CCAC and later worked as an English teacher at the Chinatown Language Center in San Francisco. This experience immersed him in a dynamic Chinese American community that, by the early 1980s, was undergoing a significant demographic transformation due to the arrival of new immigrants from diverse backgrounds, including a growing number from mainland China following the implementation of China's Reform and Opening-up policies. Drawing inspiration from the people he encountered in San Francisco's Chinatown, Wang conceived his first feature, *Chan Is Missing.* Funded by the American Film Institute and the National Endowment for the Arts, the film was released in 1983 to widespread acclaim. It achieved both commercial success and critical recognition for its innovative narrative style and nuanced portrayal of the Chinese American experience, establishing Wang as a prominent figure within the American independent film scene.

Building on the critical and commercial success of *Chan Is Missing,* Wang continued to explore Chinese American themes in his next work, despite persistent industry skepticism about the commercial viability of Asian American narratives. Following the film's success, Wang engaged in discussions with several studios and pitched a number of projects centered on Chinese American experiences—all of which were ultimately rejected.[66] Despite these setbacks, Wang remained undeterred. Leveraging the economic and symbolic capital earned from his debut film, *Chan Is Missing*, Wang secured independent funding from American Playhouse for his next project, *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart,* released in 1985. This film marked Wang's first direct cinematic engagement with Chinese American family life.

Although Wang faced repeated rejection from the industry, he remained committed to exploring Chinese American subject matter in his second project, ultimately leading the emergence of the first Chinese American family film: *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart.* This creative persistence cannot be understood merely as a reflection of personal interest or cultural loyalty; rather, it should be seen as a strategic response shaped by his evolving position within the American film field. Specifically, Wang's deliberate turn toward Chinese American family

narratives with *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* was closely tied to his position within the independent cinema landscape. As an emerging independent filmmaker who had gained recognition through cultural capital accumulated with *Chan Is Missing,* Wang occupied a relatively advantageous position with the American independent film scene—a space that prioritized cultural diversity, personal storytelling, and stylistic experimentation.[67] This position not only shaped his perception of the possibilities available within the field but also informed his aesthetic orientation. The groundbreaking success of his debut film solidified Wang's belief in the potential of Chinese American themes to achieve both artistic credibility and institutional legitimacy within the American film industry.

As Bourdieu argues in his dialogue with Wacquant,

"The strategies of agents depend on their position in the field, that is, in the distribution of the specific capital, and on the perception that they have of the field depending on the point of view they take on the field as a view taken from a point in the field."[68]

Wang's third film, *Slam Dance*, marked a pivotal shift in his early career, representing a strategic move to gain recognition within the mainstream film industry. Concerned about being typecast as a director of Chinese American films, Wang sought to break into mainstream film market by directing *Slam Dance* in 1987. This murder mystery, blending elements of noir with absurdist humor, was a calculated attempt to appeal to wider audience. However, despite his efforts, *Slam Dance* was a commercial failure, grossing less than $407,000 against a production budget of $4.5 million.[69] The film's underperformance significantly hindered Wang's attempt to establish himself within mainstream American cinema.

In the wake of *Slam Dance*'s disappointing reception, Wang made a strategic return to Chinese American family narratives with his 1989 film *Eat a Bowl of Tea*. This decision was a pragmatic response to his precarious standing within the Hollywood system. The commercial failure of *Slam Dance* underscored Wang's marginal status within the mainstream film industry and highlighted the broader structural challenges of sustaining a career in that sphere, particularly given his limited access to economic and symbolic capital. However, buoyed by

the critical acclaim of his earlier Chinese American films, Wang still found himself well-positioned within the independent film scene. The success of *Chan Is Missing* and *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* not only solidified his reputation as a leading voice in Chinese American cinema but also established him as a respected figure in independent filmmaking more broadly. Returning to his roots allowed Wang to strategically leverage his accumulated cultural capital and industry credibility to secure funding and sustain his directorial career. American Playhouse, which had previously supported Wang's *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart,* represented a unique opportunity for Wang. Originally established in the 1980s as a nonprofit organization, American Playhouse was known for backing films that explored diverse American experiences.[70]

Despite its cultural significance, *Eat a Bowl of Tea* was also a commercial failure. With the notable exception of *Chan Is Missing,* Wang's films throughout the 1980s struggled to achieve box office success. This pattern appeared to reinforce the prevailing perception within the American film industry that there was little market demand for narratives centered on Asian American experiences. Following the release of *Eat a Bowl of Tea,* Wang publicly stated that he had no immediate plans to make another film focused on Chinese American life in the near future.[71] However, the publication and subsequent cultural impact of Amy Tan's 1989 bestselling novel *The Joy Luck Club prompted* him to reconsider. Inspired by the novel's widespread acclaim and cultural resonance, Wang ultimately chose to engage again with Chinese American family narratives—setting the stage for what would become the most commercially successful film of his early career.

With the 1993 release of *The Joy Luck Club,* Wang engaged once again with Chinese American family films. As with his earlier works, his decision to take on this project was deeply informed by his precarious position within the American film industry and the limited professional opportunities available to him at the time. After the commercial struggles of his 1980s films, particularly *Eat a Bowl of Tea,* Wang faced growing difficulty in securing funding. Although Hollywood studios had begun establishing "independent" production divisions, such as Paramount Vantage, Sony Pictures Classics and Warner Independent Pictures, Wang's lack

of box office success made him a less appealing investment. As previously discussed, the mainstream industry, governed by logic of economic and symbolic capital, tends to favor filmmakers with proven commercial performance. At the same time, the independent film sector faced its own challenges in the early 1990s. The proliferation of independent film companies increased competition, and a national economic recession made producers even more cautious about taking risks.[72]

In this constrained landscape, Wang needed a commercially viable project to reassert his relevance and broaden his appeal. Amy Tan's 1989 novel *The Joy Luck Club* offered precisely such an opportunity. While the book has been criticized for perpetuating certain racial stereotypes of Asian Americans, it was nonetheless a phenomenal success in 1989.[73] Centering on the complex relationships between Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters, this novel quickly became a bestseller, reaching the charts within two weeks of its release. This rapid success drew the attention of television and film producers, with Tan reportedly receiving "about five or six offers to option the book" for adaptation.[74] Although Wang had previously expressed a desire to move beyond Chinese American themes, he ultimately approached Tan to adapt *The Joy Luck Club* for the screen. His decade-long experience as a filmmaker had sharpened his ability to identify the commercial potential of such a project. Leveraging his established reputation in Chinese American cinema, Wang was well positioned to lead the adaptation and was ultimately selected as the film's director. For Tan, Wang was the ideal choice; in a 1993 interview, she remarked, "I knew intuitively that Wayne Wang was the right person to direct the movie--if ever there should be a movie."[75]

The Joy Luck Club marked a pivotal moment in Wang's filmmaking career. With the involvement of screenwriter Ronald Bass—best known for his Oscar-winning work on *Rain Man* (1988)—the film adaptation secured production backing from Disney and was released in 1993. Grossing $32.9 million in the United States on a $10.5 million budget, the film's moderate commercial success enabled Wang to transition beyond Chinese American filmmaking.[76] Following this success, Wang directed Miramax's *Smoke* (1995), a long-gestating project that he had been developing since mid-1991. The visibility and momentum

garnered by *The Joy Luck Club* helped attract producer interest in *Smoke* and further expanded Wang's opportunities within the independent and mainstream film industries.[77]

Wayne Wang's early career trajectory—from *Chan Is Missing* to *The Joy Luck Club*—offers a compelling case study of how first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers strategically navigate the structural constraints and opportunities of the American film industry, ultimately contributing to the emergence of Chinese American family films in the late twentieth century. Viewed through the lens of Bourdieu's field theory, Wang's persisted engagement with Chinese American family narratives reveals less a fixed cultural allegiance than a calculated negotiation shaped by his shifting position within a stratified cinematic field. His recurring return to family-centered stories was not merely an reflection of personal identity, but a strategic deployment of cultural capital that enabled him to maintain creative continuity, secure institutional support, and expand his visibility across both independent and mainstream domains. In doing so, Wang not only carve out a viable career path with an often exclusive industry, but also played a formative role in shaping the foundational phase of Chinese American family cinema. His career exemplifies the complex interplay between artistic aspiration, sociocultural context, and industrial structures that defined diasporic cultural production in the late twentieth-century American cinema.

Conclusion

The emergence of Chinese American family films in the late twentieth century represents a significant intervention in the history of American cinema—one that that both disrupts the legacy of racial exclusion and redefines the cultural terms of authorship. Historically marginalized by exclusionary immigration laws and entrenched Hollywood stereotypes, Chinese Americans were long denied narrative depth, emotional complexity, and familial presence on screen. This representational absence began to shift in the early 1980s with the rise of first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers, including Wayne Wang, Peter Wang, and Ang Lee, who consistently placed the Chinese American family at the center of their cinematic work. Through this sustained narrative focus, these filmmakers not only contested dominant

frameworks of racial representation that had long marginalized Chinese Americans, but also helped to establish a distinct genre of Chinese American family films—one that foregrounded cultural specificity, domestic intimacy, and the complexity of diasporic life.

Existing scholarship on diasporic family films, particularly those created by diasporic filmmakers, often attributes their thematic focus on the family primarily to cultural expression or ethnic self-representation.[78] However, while the presence of diasporic authorship embodied by first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers, was undoubtedly instrumental in the emergence of Chinese American family films, this study suggests that its rise cannot be fully explained through a purely sociocultural or diasporic lens. As this chapter demonstrates, the development of the genre was fundamentally shaped by a constellation of intersecting historical and structural transformations that proved pivotal in enabling these films to come into being. Chief among these transformations was the demographic shift brought by the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which dramatically changed the landscape of Chinese American community by bringing a new wave of highly educated and professionally trained Chinese immigrants. Their arrival laid the foundation for the postwar emergence of diasporic Chinese filmmakers within the American film industry and, consequently, the development of Chinese American family films. Concurrently, the expansion of film studies programs from the 1960s legitimized filmmaking as both an intellectual and artistic pursuit, fostering a new generation of diverse filmmakers, while the rise of new American independent cinema in the early 1980s offered crucial alternative platforms for stories outside the confines of Hollywood conventions.

Beyond these foundational external structures, this chapter also examines the internal logic of creative decision-making—specifically, the motivations behind first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers' sustained focus on Chinese American family narratives. This analysis further suggests that the rise of Chinese American family cinema in the late twentieth century cannot be viewed simply as an identity-driven phenomenon, even although the continued involvement of diasporic Chinese filmmakers was undeniably central to its formation. During the formative era of Chinese American family cinema—from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s—Chinese immigrant filmmaker Wayne Wang played a pivotal role, directing nearly half

of the films produced during this era and remaining a consistent presence throughout the genre's early development. A close examination of Wang's career trajectory reveals that his recurring engagement with family narratives was a calculated creative strategy shaped by his evolving position within the stratified field of American cinema. Rather than being identity-driven, Wang's repeated return to Chinese American family films reflects a deliberate deployment of cultural capital—one that allowed him to maintain creative continuity, secure institutional support, and enhance his visibility across both independent and mainstream sectors of the American film industry. This strategic orientation underscores Bourdieu's insight that creative decisions are never made in a vacuum, but are negotiated within a structured space of positions where agents constantly balance personal vision against the resources, hierarchies, and constraints of a specific field.[79]

Taken together, this chapter suggests that while the contributions of diasporic Chinese filmmakers were undoubtedly significant, the emergence of Chinese American family films in the late twentieth century should not be understood simply as a self-evident expression of cultural identity. Rather, it is more accurately conceptualized as a historically and industrially situated phenomenon—produced at the crucial intersection of diasporic creativity and structural possibility. By highlighting both the external structural conditions and the internal creative logic that have shaped the initial emergence of the genre, the chapter challenges conventional understanding of diasporic cinema. It repositions the genre within a broader framework of cultural production that emphasizes not only the politics of representation but also the material conditions of creation and the strategic agency of cultural producers within a dynamic institutional field. This perspective advances a more nuanced understanding of authorship in diasporic contexts: as a practice embedded within and continually shaped by institutional hierarchies, aesthetic conventions, and shifting market conditions. Ultimately, this redefinition of diasporic film authorship opens up new methodological possibilities for analyzing underrepresented cultural production. It encourages viewing such works not merely as a vehicle for identity expression, but rather as a strategically mediated process, deeply shaped by, and continually responsive to, the material and industrial contexts of its creation.

This analytical framework lays the groundwork for examining the genre's subsequent evolution. Building on this foundation, Part II (Chapter Two and Chapter Three) will delve into the evolution of Chinese American family films in the twenty-first century, foregrounding the pivotal role of second-generation Chinese American filmmakers. Drawing on their distinct generational experiences, this generation consistently employs family narratives as a resonant and recurring framework for exploring and articulating the complexities of Chinese American identity, cultural belonging, and intergenerational tensions. Their sustained investment in family-centered storytelling has not only contributed to the genre's expansion in the twenty-first century but has also helped elevate its cultural visibility and institutional legitimacy in contemporary American cinema. While this identity-driven creative force was undeniably instrumental in this transformation, a deeper analysis reveals that this outcome cannot be attributed solely to cultural and diasporic factors. Rather, the growing prominence of Chinese American family films in the twenty-first century must be understood as the product of a crucial interplay between diasporic artistic vision, strategic industry collaborations, and evolving institutional support. By situating the genre's contemporary evolution within these broader industrial dynamics, the following chapters continue to unpack how diasporic authorship is shaped not only by identity politics, but also enabled—and at times constrained—by the material infrastructures of cultural production.

2. Second-Generation Chinese American filmmakers and the 21st-Century evolution of Chinese American Family Films

The first wave of Chinese American family films, pioneered by first-generation immigrant filmmakers in the 1980s, declined in the early 1990s as many of these trailblazers gained mainstream recognition and shifted their focus towards more universal narratives. However, since the dawn of the twenty-first century, Chinese American family films have undergone a notable resurgence with the rise of second-generation Chinese American filmmakers. Unlike their predecessors, who were adult immigrants to the United States, this new generation largely consists of U.S.-born and/or U.S.-raised children of immigrants who arrived following the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. While many members of the post-1965 second generation were still relatively young at the turn of the century, a growing number have since come of age and begun actively reshaping the landscape of Chinese American filmmaking.[80] Drawing on their bicultural upbringing and lived experiences, many in this generation have turned to cinema as a powerful medium for self-representation and cultural assertion, reclaiming narrative agency and articulating more nuanced and authentic vision of Chinese American identity. As a result, since the early 2000s, a new cinematic landscape has emerged, defined by the creative presence and influence of second-generation filmmakers. This generational shift has not only redefined the thematic and aesthetic contours of Chinese American cinema but also revitalized the family film genre. For many of these filmmakers, family narratives have become a central framework through which to explore questions of identity, cultural negotiation, and belonging, fueling a significant revival of Chinese American family storytelling in the twenty-first century.

This chapter offers a sociocultural analysis of the twenty-first-century rise of Chinese American family films. It begins by tracing the lived experiences and identity formation of the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans, then examines how these formative experiences have shaped their creative engagement with Chinese American filmmaking, thereby contributing to the resurgence of the family film genre. By situating their work within the broader context of American racial discourse and diasporic identity politics, this chapter reveals that this generation's artistic practices are deeply informed by the social and cultural

tensions they navigate. As U.S.-born and/or U.S.-raised children of immigrants, they often grapple with cultural dislocation, social marginalization, and intergenerational conflict, particularly when facing the persistent "perpetual foreigner" stereotype and the challenges of navigating a bicultural identity. In response, a powerful generational impulse toward self-representation and cultural affirmation has emerged—one that positions cinema as a crucial medium for reclaiming narrative agency, challenging dominant racial representations, and rearticulating Chinese American identity on their own terms. Building on this insight, this chapter further investigates why family narratives have become a central framework in their cinematic storytelling. Through an analysis of intergenerational acculturation gaps within Chinese immigrant families and the cultural tensions they generate, it argues that this focus on family is rooted in the formative role these tensions play in shaping diasporic subjectivities and experiences of bicultural negotiation.

2.1 Post-1965 Second-Generation Chinese Americans: Sociocultural Conditions and Identity Formation

Despite migration and community formation tracing back to the mid-19th century, the contemporary Chinese American community remains predominantly composed of first-generation immigrants. A 2022 Pew Research Center survey reported that among the approximately 4.7 million Chinese Americans residing in the United States, about 60% were overseas-born, while only 40% were U.S.-born.[81] These demographic characteristics, particularly the high proportion of foreign-born individuals, are largely attributable to the 1965 Immigrant and Nationality Act, which ushered in a new era of Chinese immigration and fundamentally reshaped the demographic composition of the Chinese American community. Within this demographic context, contemporary second-generation Chinese Americans—primarily the children of post-1965 immigrants—constitute a relatively young population. It was not until after the turn of the century that they began to "come of age in large numbers," leading to their growing visibility across various social and cultural spheres in the United States.[82]

Although the term "second-generation" is commonly linked to the post-1965 cohort, its historical roots extend considerably further back. Indeed, the earliest emergence of second-generation Chinese Americans as a visible and distinct group in the United States can be traced back to the exclusion era of the 1930s.[83] However, this earlier second generation came of age amid the far-reaching repercussions of the 1882 Exclusion Act, within a sociopolitical environment defined by systemic discrimination, restricted opportunities for upward mobility, and profound cultural isolation. In stark contrast, the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans have grown up in a more open and inclusive social climate. Shaped by major societal transformations—such as the repeal of racially discriminatory laws and the profound impact of the Civil Rights Movement—the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans have benefited from expanded access to education, employment, and civic participation. These opportunities have enabled them to achieve higher levels of integration and Americanization within mainstream society. Yet, despite these advancements, the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans continue to face many of the same identity challenges confronted by their exclusion-era predecessors, particularly the persistent racialized perception of being "perpetual foreigners" and the complexities of navigating a bicultural identity. This ongoing struggle underscores the complex process of identity formation among the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans and lays the foundation for understanding their active engagement with Chinese American filmmaking in the 21st century, where cinema serves as a vital medium for self-representation and cultural affirmation.

To better understand the enduring identity challenges and complexities of identity formation among the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans, this section begins by examining the experiences of their predecessors during the exclusion era. By tracing the lives and identity struggles of second-generation Chinese Americans who came of age under the restrictive framework of the Chinese Exclusion Act, this analysis reveals how exclusionary immigration policies and racialized perceptions laid the groundwork for enduring patterns of marginalization. In particular, the historical construction of Chinese Americans as "perpetual foreigner" not only shaped the sociopolitical conditions of earlier generations but also exerts an

enduring influence on how contemporary second-generation individuals navigate questions of belonging, identity, and their place in American society.

2.1.1 The Second-Generation Chinese Americans of The Exclusion Era.

Chinese immigration to the United States has a long history marked by official exclusion and systemic discrimination. The first large-scale wave of Chinese immigration began in the mid-19th century, driven by the California Gold Rush. Between 1840 and 1880, an estimated 370,000 Chinese immigrants arrived from Guangdong province in southern China, representing the first significant wave of Asian migration to the United States.[84] Most of these early immigrants were young, able-bodied men who left their families behind in China, driven by the sojourner's dream of returning home with wealth and honor. However, the realities they encountered contrasted sharply with this dream. Instead of prosperity, early Chinese immigrants faced widespread racial prejudice and discrimination. The hostility towards Chinese immigrants emerged early during the initial wave of Chinese immigration.[85] By the late 1870s, economic hardships and job scarcity, coupled with growing fears of labor competition, intensified anti-Chinese sentiment.[86] This escalating hostility reached its legislative climax in 1982 with the Chinese Exclusion Act. The enactment of Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 represented a watershed moment in U.S. immigration policy, inaugurating an era of institutionalized and systematic racial discrimination This legislation explicitly barred Chinese laborers from entering the United States, denied naturalization rights of those already living in the country, and severely restricted family reunification.[87] As the first federal law to specifically target and restrict a specific ethnic group, it constitutes a profoundly discriminatory episode in American history. As Historian Mae Ngai aptly highlights its significance in a documentary, "it was the first and only time in the entire of the United States that a group is singled out by name, Chinese, as being undesirable, this is a truly remarkable moment."[88]

The Chinese Exclusion Act, extended and codified as a permanent law in 1902, remained operative until its 1943 repeal, effectively barring most Chinese immigration to the United States for a period of six decades. While the law technically allowed non-laborers, such as

diplomats and students, to enter the United States with certification from the Chinese government, the reality was far harsher. The act's broad definition of "laborers" to include "skilled and unskilled … and Chinese employed in mining," made it exceedingly difficult for Chinese individuals to prove their eligibility.[89] As a result, during the exclusion era, few Chinese were able to enter this country. The influx of new immigrants from China significantly decreased from 123,000 in the 1870s to 14,800 in the 1890s, eventually reaching a historic low of 5,000 in the 1930s. This trend remained relatively unchanged until the 1960s, roughly twenty years after the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed by Congress in 1943.[90]

While the Chinese Exclusion Act drastically restricted new immigration, its consequences were equally profound for Chinese immigrants already residing in the United States. Beyond its legal prohibitions, the Act deepened the social and economic marginalization of Chinese communities, impacting both individuals and collective life. The relentless enforcement of exclusion policies, coupled with pervasive anti-Chinese sentiment, effectively drove Chinese immigrants out of various industries.[91] Many, disillusioned with the American dream, returned permanently to China. Those unable to afford the journey home—or ashamed to return empty-handed—sought refuge and community in urban enclaves along the West coast.[92]

The need for refuge in urban enclaves, as a direct consequence of the Exclusion Act and the entrenched racial discrimination, fueled the growing segregation and isolation of these communities from mainstream American society throughout the exclusion era. This marginalization was shaped not only by the imperative for survival amidst widespread hostility, but also by the institutionalized segregation reinforced through the Act's exclusionary policies. Life outside these urban enclaves was often perilous, as Chinese Americans faced a heightened risk of racist violence and harassment. This vulnerability was tragically exemplified by the Rock Springs Massacre of 1885 and the Hells Canyon Massacre of 1887, in which dozens of Chinese miners were brutally murdered. These events, along with countless other acts of violence—both documented and undocumented—terrorized Chinese communities and instilled a deep-seated fear that drove many toward self-imposed isolation within these urban enclaves, where a measure of safety and mutual support could still be found. Additionally, discriminatory

housing and employment practices further compounded this isolation, erecting insurmountable barriers to integration. Chinese Americans faced immense challenges in securing housing and employment beyond the confines of these ethnic communities, as documented by Ruthanne Lum McCunn in *Chinese American portraits* and Jean Pfaelzer in *Driven Out*.[93] The systemic refusal of landlords and employers to engage with Chinese Americans rendered it nearly impossible for them to establish a life beyond these segregated communities.

The deepening isolation within urban enclaves was not only spatial and social, but also demographic. Under the constraints and exclusionary immigration laws, these segregated communities evolved into predominantly "bachelor societies." Restrictive immigration policies barred the entry of most Chinese immigrants and prevented wives from reuniting with their husbands, resulting in fragmented family structures and leaving a large number of men to live perpetual bechelors.[94] In 1890, the gender ratio was an astonishing twenty-seven Chinese males for every female.[95] While this severe imbalance began to gradually ease from the 1900s to 1940s, men continued to outnumber women by over twofold during the 1940s.[96] The limited presence of women, together with restrictive immigration policies and anti-miscegenation laws, severely hindered the formation and consolidation of Chinese American families and the natural growth of the Chinese American population through childbirth.

Yet despite these severe demographic constraints and the exclusionary conditions that stunted family formation, a small but steadily growing native-born population began to emerge within Chinese American communities. In 1880, approximately 1,100 Chinese Americans were born in the United States, representing for only 1 percent of the total Chinese American population (then around 104,500). By 1900, nearly two decades after the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act, that number had grown to 9,000, representing roughly 10 percent of the Chinese American population, which had declined to 90,000 by that time.[97] During the 1920s and 1930s, however, this small but steadily expanding second generation began to make its presence more visible. By 1930, the number of U.S.-born Chinese Americans had risen to 17,320, making up 41 percent of the ethnic Chinese population. By the mid-20th century,

native-born Chinese Americans outnumbered their foreign-born counterparts, representing a critical juncture in the trajectory of Chinese American society.[98]

The emergence of this second generation unfolded within a broader context of entrenched racial exclusion that profoundly shaped their lived experiences and identity formation. For second-generation Chinese Americans growing up during the exclusion era, identity negotiation was a constant and often painful struggle. As K. Scott Wong observes, they frequently experienced an internal conflict pitting their strong ties to Chinese cultural traditions against their aspiration for full integration into American life.[99] Despite being U.S. citizens and "primarily English-speaking and American in outlook," they were routinely treated by mainstream society as unwelcome outsiders.[100] Marginalized in public life and systematically excluded from avenues of social and economic mobility, they faced pervasive discrimination—particularly in the labor market, where white employers often refused to hire individuals of Chinese descent for positions beyond menial labor, regardless of their citizenship status or educational qualifications.[101] This persistent racial hostility and discrimination created insurmountable barriers to full integration and fostered deep sense of alienation. As K. Scott Wong—himself a second-generation Chinese American who came of age during the exclusion era—recalls, individuals of his generation were often made to feel "less American" than their white peers, despite their legal status.[102] This exclusionary treatment not only denied them social recognition but also shaped their identity in ways that distanced them from fully embracing an American self-conception. Many, reflecting on their marginalization, drew a sharp distinct in identity, identifying themselves as "Chinese" while labeling their white counterparts as "Americans"[103]

These compounded experiences of exclusion, alienation, and marginalization left many second-generation Chinese Americans struggling with a fractured sense of identity. Caught between their American upbringing and the racialized perceptions that persistently cast them as foreigners, they found themselves in a state of cultural and emotional limbo. For some, the psychological toll of this duality—of being American in language, education, and outlook, yet perpetually treated as unwelcome outsiders—became too great to bear. As a result, a significant

number of second-generation Chinese Americans during the exclusion era made the difficult decision to return to China, hoping to build a future free from the racial constraints they faced in the United States.[104] For many, the promise of opportunity and acceptance in their ancestral homeland seemed to offer a more viable future. This historical turn reveals a striking irony: while millions of Europeans were immigrating to the U.S. in pursuit of prosperity and freedom, thousands of native-born Chinese Americans were leaving in search of a life that American society systematically denied them. Their departure highlights the sharp disparities in how inclusion and exclusion were experienced along racial lines in the United States.

2.1.2 The second-generation Chinese Americans of the Post-1965 Era.

While exclusion-era second generation Chinese Americans contended with systemic discrimination, restricted opportunities, and profound cultural isolation, the post-1965 second generation has come of age in a comparatively more open and inclusive society, achieving higher levels of social integration. Yet despite these advancements, the post-1965 second generation continues to struggle with the enduring "perpetual foreigner" stereotype, an identity challenge that echoes the experiences of their exclusion-era predecessors. This persistent racialized perception has not only deepened tensions surrounding their sense of belonging but also complicated the negotiation of a bicultural identity.

Since 1965, the Chinese American community has undergone a profound demographic transformation, catalyzed by the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. This landmark legislation dismantled the discriminatory national origins quota system that had long restricted Chinese immigration and triggered a significant new wave of migration to the United States. As a result, the Chinese American population expanded from 237,292 in 1960 to approximately 1.6 million in 1990 and 3.3 million in 2010—a more than tenfold increase.[105] This dramatic growth not only represented a significant demographic leap but also fundamentally reshaped the structural composition of the Chinese American community. By prioritizing family reunification, the 1965 Immigration Act favored immigrants with relatives already residing in the United States, enabling thousands of Chinese immigrants to bring over

spouses, children, and extended family members. Consequently, what had once been a predominantly male, bachelor society gradually evolved into a family-centered, immigrant-dominant community.

Amid this broader demographic transformation, the second-generation Chinese American population also experienced significant growth. By the early twenty-first century, first-generation, foreign-born immigrants made up the majority of the Chinese American community, comprising over 60 percent of the population. Meanwhile, second-generation individuals—those born and/or raised in the United States—accounted for 27 percent of the population, with only about 10 percent belonging to the third or later generations (i.e., American-born individuals with American-born and/or -raised parentage).[106] Although the proportion of second-generation Chinese Americans declined from 60 percent in 1960 to 27 percent by the early 2000s, this reduction did not reflect a decrease in their absolute numbers. Rather, it resulted from the dramatic influx of first-generation immigrants following the passage of the 1965 Immigrant Act. As immigration surged, the overall size of the Chinese American population expanded, leading to a proportional decline in U.S.-born and/or raised individuals, even as their numbers continued to grow steadily.

Concurrent with this demographic shift, American society also underwent profound social and political transformations, creating a markedly different environment for the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans. In contrast to their exclusion-era predecessors, this generation has grown up in a more open and inclusive society—no longer confined to segregated ethnic enclaves, isolated from mainstream American life, or restricted to a narrow range of low-paying jobs within ethnic economies. This shift was made possible by landmark changes in immigration and civil rights policies. The 1943 repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, together with subsequent legislative triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement—including the Civil Rights Act of 1964—dismantled many of the legal barriers that had long prevented Chinese Americans from fully participating in American society. As a result, post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans have had greater opportunities to live in more diverse

neighborhoods, pursue a wider range of professional careers, and exercise significantly "more freedom to 'become American.'"[107]

Building on this foundation of expanded rights and opportunities, the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans have made notable strides in integrating into mainstream American society. This integration is reflected in their high degree of acculturation; indeed, as Min Zhou observes, among communities in the United States not of European origin, Americans of Chinese descent show an exceptionally high degree of adaptation to the dominant culture.[108] This acculturation is particularly evident in their exceptional academic and professional achievements, which have been consistently documented in scholarly analyses of this generation. For instance, the 2000 U.S. Census reports that 73 percent of U.S.-born Chinese Americans aged 25 to 34 earned a bachelor's degree or more, well above the 15% and 30% of African Americans and non-Hispanic whites, respectively.[109] Linguistically, a notable shift has occurred within this cohort, with English often becoming their dominant or sole language of communication.[110] Furthermore, this trend of acculturation is also reflected in the high intermarriage rate among Chinese Americans, who frequently form marital ties with both whites and members of other minority groups.[111]

However, these broader societal advancements and the generation's acculturation have not shielded Chinese Americans from the persistent "perpetual foreigner" stereotype. Much like their exclusion-era predecessors, the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans—despite holding U.S. citizenship and having undergone significant cultural assimilation—continue to face racialized perceptions that cast them as perpetual outsiders and challenge their authentic Americanness. This persistent tension is perhaps most clearly reflected in the enduring "model minority" stereotype. Initially coined in the 1960s to celebrate the educational and economic achievements of groups such as Japanese and Chinese Americans, the label has since evolved into one of the most enduring and widespread narratives applied to Asian Americans. Yet, far from being a purely celebratory term, the "model minority" narrative functions as a contemporary articulation of racialized perceptions—subtly reinforcing the view of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners.

The emergence of the "model minority" concept can be traced to the mid-1960s, a period of profound social and political transformation in the United States, marked by the Civil Rights Movement, growing ethnic consciousness, and the launch of multiple "Great Society" initiatives. Sociologist William Petersen first popularized the "model minority" narrative in his 1966 article, *Success Story, Japanese American Style,* published in *The New York Magazine*. In it, Petersen praised Japanese Americans for their exceptional ability to overcome systemic discrimination and achieve remarkable socioeconomic success. He highlighted their educational attainment, low crime rates, and longer life expectancy as indicators of this success, positioning them as model not only for other minority groups but even for native-born white Americans.[112] Around the same time, a 1966 *U.S. News & World Report* article titled *Success of One Minority Group in U.S.* extended this narrative to Chinese Americans. The article described Chinese Americans as industrious, family-oriented, and peaceful and framed their achievements as evidence of their ability to thrive within America's racial hierarchy.[113]

Despite its seemingly positive framing, the "model minority" narrative in fact reflects and reinforces the persistent stereotype of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners by subtly sustaining their outsider status within American society. Ostensibly praising Asian Americans—particularly Chinese and Japanese Americans—for their perceived success, the narrative simultaneously casts them as culturally distinct by attributing their socioeconomic achievements to inherent ethnic traits. In doing so, it perpetuates the idea that they are fundamentally different from, and ultimately separate from, the broader American mainstream. In addition to portraying them as culturally distinct, this narrative also reinforces the perceived otherness of Asian Americans by framing them as "exceptional" or even better than white Americans. This judgment contributes to their symbolic exclusion from the societal mainstream, subjecting them to a distinct set of expectations and standards that further separate them from the broader population. As Min Zhou points out, the model minority image is rooted in the widespread belief that "many Asian Americans perform at levels above the American average," an assessment that not only exposes them to more rigorous expectations compared to the general

American population, but also sets them apart from other minority communities as well as white Americans.[114]

Thus, although it appears to challenge racial prejudice by celebrating Asian American success, the "model minority" narrative is, in reality, a contemporary manifestation of the racialized framework that continues to cast Asian Americans as "perpetual foreigners." By attributing their socioeconomic success to culturally inherent traits and portraying their inclusion as exceptions to the normative American identity, this narrative undermines their perceived Americanness and reinforces their symbolic exclusion from mainstream society. This enduring perception of Asian Americans as inherently different—and therefore perpetually foreign—has been further intensified by the steady wave of Asian immigration following the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. The growing volume and visibility of new arrivals has contributed to the widespread yet mistaken belief that all Asian-Americans, regardless of ethnicity or generational background, are recent immigrants.[115] As Mia Tuan notes, this misconception stems from the fact that most Americans—both white and non-white—are often unable and unwilling to recognize ethnic, let alone generational, distinctions between and within different Asian groups.[116] As this conflation of foreignness deepens, the stereotype of Asian Americans as inherently foreign becomes increasingly entrenched, shaping not only how Asian Americans are perceived by broader society, but also how younger generations come to understand their own identities and place within the American cultural landscape.

As the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype continues to persist and intensify, its impact extends far beyond superficial societal labeling, profoundly shaping the lived experiences of post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans. Despite being U.S. citizens and attaining a high degree of cultural integration, this generation—much like their exclusion-era predecessors—continues to grapple with enduring racialized perceptions that cast them as outsiders and question their authenticity as Americans. As Dania Fong observes, even amid socioeconomic success and significant acculturation, Chinese Americans still face persistent questioning of their legitimacy as "real" Americans.[117] This ongoing societal scrutiny not only

undermines their integration and reinforces their marginalized status but also significantly complicates the identity formation among the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans.

This persistent societal scrutiny, rooted in the enduring racialized perception of Asian Americans as "perpetual foreigners," has profoundly shaped the identity formation of the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans, manifesting in both intensified struggles over belonging and the complexities of navigating a bicultural identity. First and foremost, it has fostered a deep and often conflicting tension around their sense of belonging, forcing them into a continual negotiation between their American upbringing and a society that persistently perceives them as inherently foreign. This tension creates a liminal space where they are simultaneously insiders by virtue of their citizenship and cultural familiarity, yet outsiders through the racialized perceptions imposed upon them. Secondly, this ongoing societal scrutiny has also complicated their efforts to navigate a bicultural identity. Specifically, the persistent racialized view of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners has heightened the sense of ethnic consciousness within Chinese American communities. Constantly reminded—both implicitly and explicitly—of their perceived foreignness, individuals are compelled to maintain a strong connection to their ethnic heritage, fostering a positive sense of ethnic identity as a means of affirming their belonging and cultural dignity.[118] As a result, the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans—socialized in American culture yet raised in immigrant-dominant households where Chinese cultural norms and values were actively preserved—have had to navigate the complex tensions between the expectations of mainstream American society and the cultural traditions and norms passed down by their immigrant parents, navigating a complex cultural terrain that continually shapes their evolving identities.

In summary, despite the profound social transformations of postwar America and the notable mainstream integration of the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans, this group has continued to grapple with the persistent racialized "perpetual foreigner" stereotype—an identity challenge that closely echoes the experiences of their exclusion-era predecessors. This enduring perception has not only deepened their sense of marginalization but also complicated the negotiation of a bicultural identity. These ongoing struggles with identity and

belonging underscore the complex dynamics of identity formation among the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans, highlighting the enduring tension between preserving cultural heritage and confronting societal exclusion. Fueled by these pressures, a distinct impulse toward self-representation and cultural assertion has taken shape, ultimately catalyzing a significant generational transformation in Chinese American filmmaking. Since the early 2000s, the landscape of Chinese American cinema has been profoundly shaped by the creative agency and growing influence of the post-1965 second-generation Chinese Americans. Their turn to filmmaking has not only reshaped the thematic and aesthetic contours of Chinese American cinema but also sparked a vibrant resurgence of Chinese American family films, positioning the family as a central place for exploring questions of identity, cultural negotiation, and the search for belonging.

2.2 Films as Cultural Assertion: Identity-Driven Cinematic Practices of the Second-Generation Chinese American Filmmakers

The initial wave of Chinese American filmmaking, led by first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmakers in the 1980s, began to wane by the early 1990s, as its pioneers shifted their focus to broader, more mainstream narratives. Since the early 2000s, however, a notable resurgence emerged, ushering in a new era of creative vitality and thematic expansion of Chinese American cinema. This revival was exemplified by a wave of independent productions that placed Chinese American identity, family, and cultural negotiation at the heart of their storytelling. Films such as Justin Lin's *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002) depicted a group of morally ambiguous Chinese American youths, challenging the prevailing "model minority" stereotype. Alice Wu's *Saving Face* (2004) explored the complexities of identity negotiation for a second-generation Chinese American woman through the lens of a mother-daughter relationship. Tze Chun's *Children of Invention* (2009) provided a poignant portrait of a family's struggle with the immigrant dream from the eyes of two second-generation Chinese American children. Within a single decade, nearly a dozen significant works emerged, signaling a renewed creative momentum and a reorientation of Chinese American cinema toward more intimate, identity-centered storytelling.

Amid this broader resurgence, Chinese American family film production—a genre that had remained dormant for nearly a decade—also experienced a powerful revival. Nearly half of the films released during this period centered the intricate dynamics of Chinese American family life in their narratives, including S*aving Face*, *Red Doors* (2005), *American Fusion* (2005), *Ping Pong Playa* (2007), and *Shanghai Kiss* (2007).

More than a mere increase in output, the early 2000s resurgence in Chinese American cinema marked a fundamental generational shift. It was a qualitative transformation in authorship and perspective, driven by the rise of second-generation Chinese American filmmakers. Unlike their first-generation predecessors, who were adult immigrants to the United States, these filmmakers are largely the offspring of immigrants arriving under the 1965 immigration reforms. While many members of the post-1965 second generation were still relatively young at the turn of the century, a growing number had come of age as the twenty-first century unfolded, actively participating in and reshaping the landscape of Chinese American filmmaking.[119] Drawing on their bicultural upbringing and lived experiences, many in this generation consciously turned to cinema as a vital medium for exploring the complexities of identity and the challenges of navigating life between two cultures. In turn, the dawn of twenty-first century witnessed the emergence of a new cinematic landscape, defined by the creative presence and influence of second-generation filmmakers. This generational shift not only redefined the thematic and aesthetic contours of Chinese American cinema but also sparked a significant resurgence in Chinese American family films, as these second-generation filmmakers frequently employed family narratives as a central framework for exploring themes of identity, cultural negotiation, and the search for belonging.

While demographic change played an important role in the twenty-first-century generational shift in Chinese American filmmaking, the transformation was not merely the result of natural maturation within the community. At its core, it reflected a generational impulse toward self-representation and cultural affirmation, shaped by the complex realities of second-generation life. As discussed above, contemporary second-generation Chinese Americans—U.S.-born and/or U.S.-raised children of post-1965 immigrants—have grown up

within a sociocultural landscape defined by the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype, the pressures of bicultural negotiation, and the subtle yet persistent forms of marginalization associated with their dual cultural positioning. These experiences have often fostered a deep desire to reclaim narrative agency and to redefine identity on their own terms—prompting many to turn to filmmaking as a means of self-expression and cultural intervention. For many in this generation, cinema has become a powerful space to articulate lived experience, confront misrepresentation, and reimagine belonging.

This identity-driven imperative is vividly reflected in the thematic concerns of second-generation Chinese American films. Departing from the earlier generation's focus on cultural preservation and immigrant adaptation, these works engage with a broader and more nuanced spectrum of identity-related issues. They challenge entrenched racial stereotypes, confront reductive media portrayals, expose socioeconomic inequalities within their communities, and probe the emotional complexities of bicultural negotiation. Through these cinematic practices, second-generation Chinese American filmmakers transform cinema into a platform for reclaiming narrative agency, critiquing mainstream misrepresentations, and articulating a self-defined vision of Chinese American life and identity.

A defining aspect of second-generation Chinese American filmmaking is its active resistance to racial stereotypes, particularly the pervasive "model minority" myth. As one of the most enduring stereotypes applied to Chinese Americans and other Asian American groups, the model minority narrative depicts them as inherently disciplined, industrious, and academically successful. While seemingly positive on the surface, this narrative is deeply problematic. It imposes rigid and unrealistic expectations on Chinese Americans, reducing complex individuals to a narrow set of traits—academic excellence, discipline, and conformity—while ignoring the diversity of individual experiences, aspirations, and struggles within the community.[120] Moreover, as previously discussed, the model minority myth functions as a tool of symbolic exclusion. By positing Chinese Americans as a "model" for both White Americans and other minority groups, it reinforces their status as racial outsiders and

undermines genuine social integration, imposing distinct set of expectations and standards that mark them as separate from the mainstream.

A compelling example of this resistance appears in Justin Lin's *Better Luck Tomorrow,* which directly challenges the model minority stereotype. This film follows a group of high-achieving Chinese American teenagers who gradually descend into unethical and criminal behavior—including cheating, theft, drug use, and ultimately, murder. On the surface, the characters seem to embody the ideals of the stereotype—academic excellence, discipline, and social conformity—yet their actions reveal underlying feelings of disillusionment, frustration, and moral ambiguity. Rather than depicting their descent as a mere personal failure or cultural deviation, Lin frames it as a response to the intense psychological pressures exerted by both societal expectations and familial obligations. Through this lens, the film disrupts the assumption that external success guarantees inner stability or moral virtue, and instead exposes the emotional and psychological toll of conforming to idealized racial identities.

In contrast to Justin Lin's dark and subversive approach, Jessica Yu's comedy *Ping Pong Playa* adopts a satirical tone to deconstruct the "model minority" stereotype of Chinese Americans. The film centers on Christopher "C-Dub" Wang, a laid-back, basketball-obsessed slacker who comically undermines the stereotypical image of academic and athletic discipline often associated with his cultural background. While his family exemplifies traditional values of hard work and success—particularly through their dedication to ping pong—C-Dub prefers video games and daydreams of becoming a basketball star. Yu uses humor and irony to challenge the narrow confines of the model minority myth, illustrating that Chinese American identity is far more diverse than the stereotype allows. When a family emergency compels C-Dub to step into the world of competitive ping pong, his reluctant involvement becomes both a source of comedy and a subtle critique of cultural expectations. Rather than idealizing achievement, the film celebrates individuality, imperfection, and the freedom to reject prescriptive norms. Both *Better Luck Tomorrow* and *Ping Pong Playa*, though stylistically distinct, reflect a shared generational impulse among second-generation Chinese American filmmakers to dismantle reductive representations and reclaim narrative complexity.

The pattern of resistance to the "model minority" myth, evident in the diverse cinematic approaches of second-generation Chinese American filmmakers such as Justin Lin and Jessica Yu, is far from accidental. Rather, it is a deliberate and self-aware act on their part, reflected in their efforts to challenge reductive racial expectations and reclaim narrative agency. This resistance often manifests not through overt declarations, but through the careful construction of complex, multifaceted, and authentically flawed characters. Justin Lin's directorial approach in *Better Luck Tomorrow* provide a compelling example of this intentional subversion. Following the film's release, some viewers criticized its portrayal of Asian American youth as "negative." Lin responded by rejecting the conventional binary of "positive" and "negative" representation. In his view, a portrayal is negative only when a character is rendered as flawless, idealized, and one-dimensional. By contrast, he defines positive representation as one that remains truthful—one that explores "three-dimensional characters" and "the grey areas of life."[121] His remarks underscore a conscious creative choice to prioritize authenticity over cultural reassurance, an approach that directly challenges the narrative constraints imposed by ethnic stereotypes and societal expectations.

In tandem with their critique of the "model minority" myth, second-generation Chinese American filmmakers have also sought to reveal the socioeconomic hardships that this narrative often masks A powerful illustration of this can be seen in the documentary *Take Out* (2004), co-directed by Shih-Ching Tsou (Taiwanese American) and Sean Baker. Shot in a cinema verité style, the film follows Ming Ding, an undocumented Chinese immigrant, through a single, exhausting day delivering food for a Chinese restaurant in New York City. Struggling under the burden of debt owed to smugglers, Ming must earn a special amount by the end of the day—all while navigating long hours, hostile customers, the everyday dangers of urban life, and the constant threat of immigration authorities. Throughout this tightly focused narrative, the film exposes the physical exhaustion, psychological strain, and economic insecurity that define the lives of many undocumented immigrants, disrupting the sanitized image of Asian American success and drawing attention to the harsh realities experienced by those excluded legal protections and mainstream narratives.

Continuing this thematic exploration of immigrant precarity, *Children of Invention*, written and directed by Tze Chun, shifts the focus to the experiences of a Chinese immigrant family struggling to survive in suburban Boston. Loosely inspired by the filmmaker's own childhood, the film follows a recently laid-off single mother, Elaine Cheng, who is evicted from her apartment and forced to relocate with her two young children to an unfinished model unit. In a desperate attempt to regain financial stability, she becomes entangled in a pyramid scheme that ultimately leads to her brief detention. Left alone, the children must navigate daily life in her absence, confronting both physical vulnerability and emotional uncertainty. Rather than resorting to melodrama, the film adopts a restrained tone, allowing the quiet, everyday details of their experiences—missed meals, unanswered questions, and moments of fear—to convey emotional depth. Through this understated storytelling, *Children of Invention* sheds light on the emotional and structural fragility of immigrant life, offering a sobering counter-narrative to the idealized images of resilience and success embedded in the Chinese American "model minority" myth.

In parallel with their critique of racial stereotypes and the dominant "model minority" narrative, second-generation Chinese American filmmakers have also critically examined their representation within the broader media landscape, interrogating how Chinese American identities have been constructed, marginalized, and distorted by dominant cinematic narratives. A compelling example of this critical engagement is Arthur Dong's *Chinese in Hollywood* (2007), a documentary that traces the complex history of Chinese and Chinese American representation in American film. Through archival footage, interviews with actors, and historical analysis, Dong reveals how early Hollywood relied on yellowface, exoticism, and stereotypical figures—such as the villainous Fu Manchu and the submissive Lotus Blossom—to fabricate narrow and racialized portrayals of Chinese American identity. Meanwhile, the film emphasizes the efforts of Chinese American performers who resisted these constraints and sought more authentic representation. By exposing the racialized logic of the film industry and recovering long-overlooked voices, *Chinese in Hollywood* not only critiques a legacy of

exclusion but also reflects a broader generational impulse to reclaim authorship, visibility, and cultural memory.

While second-generation Chinese American filmmakers explore a wide range of themes, the negotiation of identity and belonging remains their central concern. This thematic focus is particularly evident, as nearly half of the films emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century center on struggles over identity. This focus is most vividly expressed in family-centered narratives such as *Saving Face*, *American Fusion, Red Doors, Shanghai Kiss,* and *Ping Pong Playa.* These films consistently employ the family as a central narrative lens through which to explore the tensions between inherited cultural values and American social norms, highlighting intergenerational conflict, emotional negotiations, and the complex process of constructing a coherent identity within, and across, two cultural frameworks.

Drawing from her own experiences as a queer Chinese American woman, Alice Wu's *Saving Face* explores how personal identity is shaped—and often constrained—by the competing demands of American individualism and Chinese familial tradition. The film follows Wilhelmina "Wil" Pang, a closeted lesbian surgeon in New York, who hides her sexual orientation to avoid disappointing her traditional Chinese mother and community. This internal conflict intensifies when her widowed mother, Gao, becomes pregnant out of wedlock, and is expelled from her father's (Wil's grandfather's) household for bringing shame to the family. Gao's displacement forces her to move in with Wil, reversing the traditional parent-child hierarchy and bringing their emotional and generational tensions into close proximity. The forced cohabitation makes the clash between traditional Chinese familial expectations and Wil's contemporary American life unavoidable. Their shared apartment becomes a central site for dramatizing the collision between inherited cultural values regarding marriage, reputation, and conformity, and Wil's American-informed pursuit of personal freedom and self-definition. These tensions unfold through moment of both comedic awkwardness and poignant emotional strain: Gao's repeated attempts to arrange dates with suitable Chinese men for Wil stand in stark contrast to Wil's efforts to conceal her relationship with Vivian, a confident and openly queer dancer. Their interactions, including emotionally charged silences and strained

conversations, underscore the unspoken expectations and mutual disappointments that characterize their relationship. In one of the film's most revealing scenes, when Wil finally comes out to her mother—saying, "I love you, and I'm gay"—Gao, unable to reconcile these two identities, responds, "How can you say those two things at once? How can you tell me you love me then throw that in my face?" This moment encapsulates the deep cultural rift that Wil must navigate: a world in which love, duty, and authenticity appear mutually exclusive. Through this intimate narrative, *Saving Face* offers a compelling portrayal of the emotional negotiation required to reconcile two conflicting cultural systems. Wil's journey toward self-acceptance becomes emblematic of a broader second-generation Chinese American experience—one marked by the search for a coherent identity that honors both personal truth and cultural heritage.

Like *Saving Face*, Georgia Lee's *Red Doors* draws upon the director's own family experiences, lending the film a semi-autobiographical quality that grounds its exploration of bicultural identity in emotional authenticity. Inspired by Lee's upbringing as a second-generation Chinese American in suburban New York, the film centers on the intergenerational dynamics within the Wong family, using the domestic sphere as a narrative stage for depicting the often unspoken cultural and generational tensions that arise between immigrant parents and their U.S. -born children. At the heart of these dynamics is the recently retired and emotionally distant father, Ed Wong, whose traditional outlook contributes to his quiet struggle with alienation from his daughters, whose lives are shaped by American norms that often diverge sharply from his expectations. Within the domestic sphere of their suburban home, the film portrays the subtle yet profound clashes that arise from these differences, exploring how each daughter embodies a distinct facet of bicultural identity negotiation. Samantha's pursuit of a conventional professional path and an impending marriage, Julie's reserved exploration of a same-sex relationship, and Katie's rebellious resistance to conformity through performance art and adolescent mischief each exemplify different strategies of balancing familial duty, cultural expectations, and personal desires. Through these parallel storylines, the film presents a nuanced portrayal of a family negotiating cultural inheritance, generational distance, and the

pursuit of personal authenticity. In portraying how each family member struggles to reconcile individual desires with inherited cultural values, *Red Doors* illustrates the complexity of navigating bicultural identity, not as a singular process, but as a shared, though often fragmented, familial process.

Another significant exploration of bicultural negotiation within a family-centered narrative from this period is Frank Lin's *American Fusion*. Extending this theme into the realm of midlife experience, the film centers on Yvonne, a middle-aged Chinese American woman caught between the enduring pull of filial obligation and the pursuit of personal happiness. This struggle becomes particularly salient through her burgeoning romance with José, a kind and supportive Mexican American dentist. Yvonne's choice of partner ignites cultural tensions, as her traditional immigrant mother strongly disapproves of the relationship, highlighting a generational clash between individual desire and familial expectations rooted in notions of ethnic continuity and cultural propriety. Within their shared home, daily interactions between mother and daughter, often rendered with humor, become a key site where these tensions unfold and where Yvonne must assert her autonomy while still striving to honor her familial bonds. The film sensitively portrays the emotional negotiation involved in balancing the pursuit of happiness at midlife with the enduring force of filial duty and inherited cultural norms. Through Yvonne's journey, *American Fusion* underscores that for Chinese Americans, cultural identity formation is not confined to youth but remains an evolving process across the life course, shaped by changing family roles and shifting interpretations of cultural loyalty.

Kern Konwiser and David Ren's *Shanghai Kiss* introduces a transnational dimension to the examination of the Chinese American bicultural negotiation, framing it through both geographic dislocation and familial tension. The film follows Liam Liu, a struggling Chinese American actor in Los Angeles who unexpectedly inherits a house in Shanghai from his grandmother. In order to settle the estate, Liam travels to China, a practical journey that gradually evolves into a deeper confrontation with questions of identity and belonging. While in Shanghai, Liam experiences a sense of belonging he never felt in the U.S., yet this connection is also fraught with feelings of dislocation—he is perceived as American by locals and remains

emotionally adrift. His American mannerisms, language, and worldview mark him as foreign, highlighting the complexity of negotiating an identity that is claimed in part—but never fully—by either culture. In addition to this global dissonance, the film also explores bicultural tensions within the family unit, particularly in Liam's strained relationship with his father. Although the father rarely appears onscreen, his criticism of Liam's choices and lifestyle is clearly conveyed through their phone conversations. These calls serve as a key narrative device, highlighting the father's traditional expectations and disapproval of Liam's unconventional career path as a struggling actor and his perceived lack of stability. The father's critiques represent the pressure stemming from inherited cultural values regarding success, duty, and conformity, creating friction with Liam's American-informed pursuit of individual passion and a different definition of achievement. Through this layered conflict—between geographic belonging and familial obligation—*Shanghai Kiss* underscores the emotional complexity of bicultural identity for second-generation Chinese Americans, whose efforts to define themselves are shaped not only by external cultural dislocation but also deeply rooted expectations within the immigrant family.

A close examination of the cinematic practices of second-generation Chinese American filmmakers reveals that the generational shift in Chinese American cinema during the early 2000s was fundamentally an identity-driven transformation, grounded in their efforts to navigate and respond to the complexities of cultural positioning within American society. Growing up at the intersection of inherited cultural traditions and the racialized realities of American life, these filmmakers turned to cinema as a deliberate space for self-definition and cultural assertion. Faced with persistent constructs such as the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype, they used film to reclaim narrative agency and articulate a more authentic Chinese American identity on their own terms. This identity-driven impulse is reflected in the recurring thematic concerns that shaped their work. Whether dismantling the "model minority" myth, exposing socioeconomic precarity within their communities, revisiting patterns of cultural misunderstanding, or portraying the intimate tension of bicultural negotiation, these cinematic efforts collectively express a broader generational imperative: to assert authorship over their lived experiences and to reshape the cultural representation of Chinese Americans from within.

This identity-rooted cinematic engagement has not only reshaped the landscape of Chinese American filmmaking by bringing fresh perspectives and concerns, but also catalyzed the twenty-first-century resurgence of Chinese American family films. By centering the family as a central site of emotional and cultural negotiation, these filmmakers transformed domestic narratives into powerful arenas for exploring the questions of identity, belonging, and the complexities of bicultural life.

2.3 The Contemporary Evolution of Chinese American Films

Driven by the identity concerns of second-generation Chinese American filmmakers, Chinese American family films experienced a notable resurgence in the early twenty-first century. As discussed above, films from this period—such as *Saving Face* (2004), *Red Doors* (2005), *American Fusion* (2005), and *Ping Pong Playa* (2007)—demonstrate how these filmmakers consistently place the family at the heart of their storytelling, using it as a powerful lens to explore questions of identity, belonging and cross-cultural tension. This narrative trend however, was not confined to the independent productions of the early 2000s. In the following decade, as more second-generation Chinese American filmmakers entered in the U.S. film industry, family-centered storytelling has not only continued to evolve but also achieved unprecedented levels of mainstream visibility and cultural resonance through a series of high-profile productions. From Jon M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) to LuLu Wang*'s The Farewell* (2019) and Daniels' Academy Award–winning *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), second-generation filmmakers have amplified the emotional and cultural significance of family narratives, bringing the intimate negotiation of identity and belonging to a global stage.

Among these high-profile productions, Jon M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* stands as a defining cultural milestone. As the first major Hollywood studio production in over a quarter-century to feature a predominantly Asian American cast of Chinese descent in a contemporary setting—a milestone not seen since *The Joy Luck Club* (1993)—its release was more than just a cinematic event; it was a watershed moment for Chinese American and Asian American

visibility in mainstream media.[122] While widely celebrated as a groundbreaking romantic comedy, the film is, at its heart, a richly textured family drama. It uses the familiar appeal of romance to probe deeper questions of identity negotiation and cultural belonging. The narrative centers on Rachel Chu, a Chinese American economics professor, who travels to Singapore with her boyfriend, Nick Young, only to discover that he is the heir to one of Asia's wealthiest and most tradition-bound families. What begins as a romantic trip quickly evolves into a confrontation with deeply rooted cultural and familial expectations, embodied most vividly in Rachel's tense relationship with Nick's fiercely traditional mother, Eleanor Young. Although Rachel shares Chinese heritage, her American upbringing and worldview lead Eleanor to regard her as incompatible with the family's values. The film situates this generational and cultural clash with an opulent, extravagant setting, using the tension between Rachel and Eleanor to dramatize the complexities of identity negotiation and cultural belonging. Lavish sequences—such as the family banquet and the climatic mahjong confrontation—visually and thematically stage the opposition between American ideals of individualism and Eleanor's unwavering commitment to duty, sacrifice, and filial loyalty. Over the course of the story, Rachel's journey from feeling like an outsider to confidently affirming her own worth mirrors a broader second-generation experiences: negotiating inherited cultural expectations while forging a personal sense of identity. By choosing self-respect over passive assimilation, yet still honoring Eleanor's perspective, Rachel embodies a hybrid form of agency, one that challenges traditional expectations while bridging cultural divides. In doing so, this film offers a nuanced portrayal of identity, loyalty, and the evolving dynamics of Chinese diasporic family in a globalized world.

The release of *Crazy Rich Asians* marked a pivotal moment in the ascent of Chinese American family cinema to mainstream prominence. Beyond expanding Asian American representation, this film signaled a new era in which the genre achieved increasingly cultural visibility and legitimacy within American cinema. Released by Warner Bros. Pictures, *Crazy Rich Asians* achieved remarkable commercial success, earning over $239 million on a modest $30 million budget.[123] This impressive performance convincingly demonstrated that a

significant market existed for Asian-led stories and that culturally specific narratives could garner both critical acclaim and substantial financial success. Following this breakthrough, the subsequent years witnessed a rise in high-profile projects centered on Chinese American family experiences, further solidifying the place of such films as a vital and celebrated component of mainstream American cinema.

In the wake of the breakthrough of *Crazy Rich Asians,* LuLu Wang's *The Farewell* emerged as another landmark in Chinese American family cinema. While its production preceded the commercial success of *Crazy Rich Asians,* the film's distribution and positive reception nonetheless benefited from the heightened market receptiveness that its predecessor had helped cultivate. Premiering at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2019, it quickly garnered critical attention and was subsequently acquired by A24 for distribution. Opening in the United States on July 12 in just four theaters, the film achieved the highest per-theater average of any release in 2019 during its opening week, a metric that even surpassed the blockbuster *Avengers: Endgame* during its limited run.[124] Ultimately, with a global gross of over $23 million on a modest $3 million budget, *The Farewell* became one of the year's most successful independent productions, further reinforced the growing prominence of Chinese American family narratives into the cinematic mainstream.[125]

While *Crazy Rich Asians* tells a cross-cultural family story through glamorous visuals and grand spectacles, *The Farewell* shifts its focus inward, anchoring its narrative in the quiet rhythms of everyday life and the intimate bonds of family. Drawing on director LuLu Wang's personal experience of her family concealing a terminal diagnosis from her grandmother, the film transforms this deeply private memory into a nuanced exploration of cultural negotiation and identity within a diasporic Chinese family. The story centers on Billi, a Chinese American woman who returns to China after learning of her grandmother's terminal illness. Adhering to the traditional belief that it is the family's duty to shield loved ones from the emotional weight of illness, her relatives choose to withhold the truth from her grandmother, staging a wedding for Billi's cousin as a pretext for a final, unspoken farewell. However, Billi—shaped by her American upbringing and values of honesty and individual autonomy—struggles profoundly

with this depiction. Her desire to tell her grandmother the truth clashes directly with her family's firm adherence to an ethos of collective responsibility, where emotional burdens are shared and, when necessary, withheld to protect others. This ideological divide plays out in a series of intimate yet charged family interactions, from tense dinner conversations to private exchanges with her parents, in which Billi questions the morality of concealing such a life-altering truth. For the elder generation, salience represents an act of love and filial duty, for Billi, it feels like a denial of personal dignity and the right to self-determination. The film masterfully avoids taking a definitive side in this ethical debate. Instead, it uses this conflict to craft a poignant yet subtly humorous narrative that reflects the emotional complexity of navigating the life between two distinct cultures. The film portrays the family not as a battleground, but as a place where these two worldviews converge, collide, and, at times, find a fragile reconciliation. By grounding its narrative in a specific, personal story while avoiding simplistic cultural stereotypes, *The Farewell* transcends the autobiographic to address broader questions of identity, belonging, family loyalty, and the way in which diaspora shapes one's relationship to "home."

Building on the trend of deeply personal narratives, Eddie Huang's 2021 directorial debut, *Boogie*, continues this thematic trajectory. While not a literal retelling of a single family event like *The Farewell*, the film is deeply autobiographic, drawing its characters, settings, and conflicts directly from Huang's own upbringing as the son of Taiwanese immigrants in in Queens, New York.[126] Framed as a coming-of-age sports drama, *Boogie* uses basketball as both a narrative anchor and a cultural metaphor, probing the layered tensions of growing up in a Chinese immigrant household while navigating life as a young man of color in America. The film follows Alfred "Boogie" Chin, a gifted player on the high school basketball court, whose dream of joining NBA clashes with his mother's insistence that he earn a college scholarship and pursue a more conventional academic path. Her insistence stems not only from a desire for long-term stability but also from the filial duty that demands Boogie prioritize the family's financial security over his personal aspirations. Thus, more than a simple matter of career choice, this intergenerational divide reflects a profound divergence in cultural values, where Boogie's

pursuit of self-determination collides with his parents' adherence to collective family responsibility. Huang captures this tension through vividly staged domestic confrontations, such as heated dinner-table arguments, emotionally charged negotiations about Boogie's future, and the quiet, unspoken disappointments that pass between parent and child. Beyond the family sphere, the narrative also exposes the racialized barriers Boogie faces within the world of competitive basketball, where Asian American athletes are rarely envisioned as serious contenders. By intertwining the intimate struggles of home with the broader challenges of representation and belonging, *Boogie* offers a layered portrait of second-generation identity in contemporary America. It illuminates the complex, and often painful process of coming of age and forging a sense of self amid the crosscurrents of two distinct cultural worlds.

Among recent releases in Chinese American family film, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* represents a bold evolution of the genre, pushing its boundaries into a widely ambitious, genre-defying new form. Co-directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, the film masterfully blends high-concept science fiction, absurdist comedy, martial-arts spectacles, and intimate family drama into a single narrative experiences. The film opens in the seemingly ordinary world of the Wang family, who run a struggling laundromat while facing the stress of a looming tax audit. This mundane setting is quickly upended when Evelyn Wang, an overworked immigrant mother, is unexpectedly drawn into a multiverse adventure, leaping across countless alternate realities in a desperate attempt to prevent the collapse of the multiverse. While its multiverse premise marks a a striking departure from the grounded realism of earlier Chinese American family experiences, the emotional core remained firmly anchored in the immigrant family experiences, particularly the fraught but tender bonds between parents and children. The film brilliantly uses the multiverse as a chaotic metaphor for the fractured bond between Evelyn Wang and her daughter Joy. Evelyn clings to traditional Chinese expectations of obedience and family duty, while Joy, raised in the United States, seeks self-expression and personal freedom. This sharp cultural and generational divide leaves Joy feeling unseen, unaccepted, and profoundly misunderstood. It is this emotional distance between mother and daughter that propels the story beyond the confines of family home into a boundless

chaos of the multiverse. As Evelyn is thrust into the multiverse, she encounters countless alternate versions of herself—from a skilled martial artist to a glamorous movie star. Each of these represents a path she might have taken, and each reflects the stained relationship she has with her daughter. The film uses these fantastical "what-if" scenarios not just as chaotic spectacle, but as a direct emotional projection of Evelyn regrets and her daughter's pain. Within these chaos of these shifting realities, Evelyn gradually realizes that the true threat to the multiverse comes not from an external force, but from her own daughter Joy. Shaped by years of cultural dissonance, emotional isolation, and sense of being unacknowledged, Joy's cosmic nihilism has transformed her into the omnipotent and destructive Jobu Tupaki, a force born directly from their fractured relationships. By weaving together Evelyn's quest to save the multiverse with her need to understand the crushing pressure and pain felt by her daughter, this film ultimately resolves its central conflict not through the violence, but through love, empathy, and acceptance. Evelyn learns to embrace her daughter's identity, her chaotic path, and the imperfections of their shared lives. She understands that the love they share is what gives meaning to their existence, regardless of which universe they inhabit. In doing so, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* transforms its wild multiverse spectacle into a moving meditation on intergenerational reconciliation and the search for belonging within the Chinese American family.

The emergence of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* marked a historic turning point for Chinese American family cinema, affirming the genre's cultural significance and legitimacy within the U.S. film industry. As the most ambitious Chinese American family film to date, it achieved an unprecedented dual triumph, sweeping seven Academy Awards, —including Best Picture—while grossing over $140 million worldwide on a modest budget.[127] This success not only provided the highest form of industrial validation but also demonstrated the genre's capacity to resonate audience across diverse cultures and territories. As both a cultural landmark and commercial triumph, the film solidified the cultural standing of Chinese American family cinema as a vital and celebrated part of mainstream American cinema.

In the contemporary landscape of American cinema, the rise of Chinese American family films represents a powerful and ongoing evolution. From the independent productions of the early 2000s to the high-profile successes of the last decade, second-generation Chinese American filmmakers have consistently placed the family at the heart of their storytelling, using it as a central narrative framework to examine the complexities of Chinese American identity, belonging, and cultural negotiation. This sustained creative commitment has not only fueled the growth of Chinese American family films in the twenty-first century but also cemented the genre's cultural visibility and legitimacy within the American film industry. If films like *Crazy Rich Asians* and *The Farewell* broadened the genre's mainstream appeal and proved its commercial viability, the genre-defying spectacle of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* fully affirmed its artistic and institutional legitimacy. This trajectory of the genre, from the margins to a position of cultural and industrial prominence, underscores the significant contributions of second-generation Chinese American filmmakers. By continually focusing on the intimate dynamics of the home, they have transformed the specific struggles of the diaspora into a universal and vital part of American storytelling.

2.4 Why Family Matters: The centrality of Familial Storytelling in Second-Generation Chinese American cinema

As the preceding discussion has shown, the rise and evolution of Chinese American family films in the twenty-first century has been closely tied to the sustained creative engagement of second-generation Chinese American filmmakers. By consistently using the family as a central framework to examine the complexities of identity, belonging, and cultural negotiation, these filmmakers have not only revitalized the genre but also cemented its cultural and industrial legitimacy within American cinema. Building on this foundation, this section investigates the deeper logic underlying this narrative tendency, considering why the family has emerged as the most powerful and enduring lens through which second-generation filmmakers engage with questions of identity and belonging.

In her study on the representation of diasporic families in film, Berghahn attributes the growing prominence of family-centered narratives to the emergence of second-generation diasporic filmmakers. She argues that this development was facilitated by postwar shifts in immigration patterns and policies, which fostered more stable diasporic communities and, in turn, helped to cultivate a vibrant diasporic film culture.[128] In particular, by examining films that foreground the collective memory and lived experience of migration, Berghahn identifies "nostalgia for the homeland" as a pervasive theme in diasporic family cinema.[129] Her analysis adopts a spatially oriented lens, emphasizing the significance of "place" and "displacement" in shaping diasporic identities. As she asserts, "diasporic identities are, above all, spatially coded," underscoring the central role of spatiality and belonging in the construction and representation of diasporic experience.[130]

Despite the valuable insights her theoretical framework offers for understanding the broader dynamics of diasporic family cinema, twenty-first-century Chinese American family films reveal a distinct trajectory that both intersects with and diverges from Berghahn model. While these films align with her observation regarding the growing influence of second-generation diasporic filmmakers, they often move beyond the theme of "nostalgia for the homeland." Instead, second-generation Chinese American filmmakers tend to emphasize the family dynamics, especially intergenerational conflicts, as a critical site for exploring the complexities of bicultural negotiation and the search for identity and belonging.

This cinematic tendency is evident not only in the Chinese American family films of the early 2000s but also in more recent releases. For instance, Alice Wu's *Saving Face* grounds its exploration of identity entirely within the complex mother-daughter relationship, portraying the intense emotional and cultural tensions that arise from navigating differing expectations regarding marriage, sexuality, and familial duty within the confines of the contemporary immigrant household in New York. Similarly, Frank Lin's *American Fusion* places the bicultural conflict squarely within the family, depicting a first-generation mother's disapproval for her second-generation daughter's cross-cultural relationship as the central challenge stemming from clashing views on filial piety and assimilation in the U.S. context. Moving to

more recent works, Lu Lu Wang's *The Farewell* shifts the focus to a transnational family gathering, highlighting the clash between Chinese collectivist traditions and American individualist values through the concealment of a grandmother's illness. This film frames the act of lying—not as a deception, but as an expression of communal care—thus reconfiguring how family duty and cultural loyalty are negotiated across generations. Eddie Huang's *Boogie* further illuminates how intergenerational conflicts manifests in the pursuit of personal ambition, portraying a young basketball player whose dream of professional success are constantly undermined by his immigrant mother's rigid expectations and anxieties about his future, thereby dramatizing the tension between individual self-determination and filial obligation. Finally, the Daniel's *Everything Everywhere All at Once* elevates this theme to a grand, multiversal scale. While the film's premise is fantastical, its emotional core id firmly rooted in the fraught mother-daughter relationship between Evelyn and Joy. The central intergenerational conflict—stemming from Evelyn's immigrant-parent expectations and Joy's search for acceptance—is the force that threatens to tear the multiverse apart, but is also the dynamic that ultimately restores order.

The cinematic focus on family dynamics—particularly intergenerational tension—in the work of second-generation Chinese American filmmakers is deeply rooted in the formative influence of family conflicts on their diasporic experiences. Growing up in immigrant households, second-generation filmmakers often find themselves straddling two distinct cultural value systems. On the one hand, they are influenced by the Confucian traditions emphasized within their families, which prioritize filial piety, collective responsibility, and deference to elder authority. On the other hand, they are immersed in mainstream American society, where notions of individualism, self-expression, and autonomous decision-making are celebrated. This cultural duality often leads to intergenerational conflicts within immigrant families, as second-generation individuals grapple with parental expectations rooted in traditional values regarding filial duty, education, career choices, and romantic relationships—expectations that frequently clash with their own desires for autonomy, independence, and self-definition.[131] These intergenerational tensions are not merely surface-level disagreements, but

experiences that deeply shape the emotional and psychological realities of second-generation individuals. Many grow up feeling caught between competing cultural expectations, often experiencing "anxiety, depression, and somatic problems" as they try to reconcile familial loyalty with personal aspiration.[132] Over time, this state of being caught between cultures becomes a defining aspect of how second-generation individuals understand their identities and navigate their positions within both the ethnic community and the wider American society. It is precisely these lived tensions that second-generation Chinese American filmmakers bring into their work, using family-centered narratives as a way to reflect, process, and reimagine their complex cultural inheritances.

While these conflicts often appear deeply personal in nature—especially when rendered through second-generation Chinese American filmmakers' family-centered narratives—they are, in fact, rooted in broader cultural and structural dynamics that influence the experiences of immigrant families across generations. At its core, intergenerational conflict in Chinese immigrant families arises from fundamentally different patterns of cultural adaptation between parents and children. Cultural adaptation refers to the psychological and behavioral changes that individuals undergo as they engage with a new cultural environment—a process that, as John Berry notes, involves negotiating between the values of one's heritage culture and those of the host society.[133] While cultural adaptation is a shared experience in immigrant families, it often unfolds unevenly within Chinese immigrant households, particularly across generational lines. Influenced by differing degrees of exposure to American society and varying attachments to traditional values, parents and children frequently engage with the host and heritage culture at different paces and through distinct pathways. At the heart of these generational differences in acculturation is a clash in cultural values and belief systems, which often gives rise to intense tensions and disagreements between parents and children over essential aspects of daily life.

Understanding the acculturation-based roots of intergenerational conflict in Chinese immigrant families requires an examination of the distinct cultural adaptation experiences of first-generation (foreign-born and -raised) parents and their second-generation (U.S.-born and/or -raised) children. For many immigrant parents, adaptation does not involve full

assimilation but rather a selective incorporation of American values, often filtered through traditional Chinese cultural frameworks. In her study of Chinese American communities, Min Zhou observes that first-generation parents often transmit a modified form of Confucian ethics that emphasizes filial piety, academic achievement, diligence, and discipline—core values that serve as foundational norms in raising and socializing their children.[134] While some of these values—such as the emphasis on education and hard work—may appear to align with American ideals of self-improvement and upward mobility, they are in fact deeply rooted in enduring Chinese cultural traditions and moral expectations. For instance, children's academic achievement within Chinese immigrant families is not merely viewed as an individual pursuit, but as a fulfillment of familial obligation and filial responsibility.[135] They are frequently reminded that their academic performance is a reflection of the family's reputation and honor, and that "failure will bring shame to the family."[136] This perspective reflects a collectivist orientation rooted in traditional Chinese family values, where family reputation is paramount and individuals are expected to contribute to the advancement and continued respectability of the family as a whole.

In contrast to their immigrant parents, second-generation Chinese Americans experience a markedly different process of cultural adaptation—one shaped by early immersion in American institutions and social environments. Educated in the U.S. school system and surrounded by American cultural norms from an early age, these children tend to align more closely with mainstream values such as individualism, autonomy, and self-expression. Among the three key domains that shape the lives of Chinese immigrant youth—the family, the school, and the community—the school, as Sung notes, "remains the primary socializing institution," playing a critical role in shaping their cultural orientation toward American cultural norms and expectations.[137] Due to compulsory education laws, children spend at least six hours a day in school, often more when accounting for lunch, extracurriculars, and after-school programs.[138] This prolonged exposure makes the school a key arena for cultural learning, where second-generation children internalize not only the English language and behavioral expectations, but also broader American norms that emphasize individual agency, merit-based achievement, and

self-determination. Through sustained interactions with peers, teachers, and the curriculum, these children are continuously exposed to a broad range of American cultural influences, shaping both their affinity for and acculturation to American society.

Drawing on this generational differences, second-generation Chinese Americans typically undergo a more comprehensive process of acculturation than their parents, shaped by early exposure to and participation in mainstream American institutions and value systems. Consequently, many second-generation individuals "aspire to be fully American," embracing individualism, self-expression, and autonomy as central cultural ideals.[139] While they may retain certain elements of their heritage culture—such as regular family gatherings and the celebration of traditional festivals—their engagement with these traditions often involves a process of enculturation, wherein they learn and internalize cultural practices to which they were not fully exposed during early socialization, rather than simply inheriting them through unbroken transmission. Growing up in an American cultural context, second-generation children often lack a meaningful, lived connection to their parents' cultural heritage. They tend to define themselves less through their ancestral origins and instead align more closely with the cultural norms and moral framework of the society in which they were born or raised.[140]

Within Chinese immigrant families, generational differences in cultural acculturation lie at the heart of intergenerational conflict. First-generation parents typically uphold traditional values grounded in filial piety, collectivism, and familial obligation, while their children—shaped by American ideals of individualism, autonomy, and self-expression—often seek personal freedom, self-determination, and personal fulfillment. This generational divergence in cultural orientation, shaped by uneven processes of acculturation, forms the foundation for intergenerational tensions within Chinese immigrant households. Scholars describe this phenomenon as "acculturation gaps"—defined as discrepancies in the degree to which individuals adhere to the norms and values of the heritage versus host culture.[141] These gaps reflect more than cultural differences; they highlight a fundamental clash in value systems within the family unit, often manifesting through conflicts over academic priorities, career choices, romantic relationships.[142] Empirical research on intergenerational conflict in

immigrant families, particularly within Asian American communities, further support this view by consistently highlighting the pivotal role of acculturation-based tensions. Scholars have observed that family members often differ significantly in the extent to which they maintain traditional cultural norms or adopt the values of the host society. These divergent cultural orientations give rise to what is commonly referred to as intergenerational cultural conflict (ICC)—a recurring pattern of tension that emerges in value-laden disagreements, where expectations shaped by contrasting cultural frameworks frequently clash.[143]

While intergenerational cultural conflict stemming from acculturation gaps is common across many immigrant families, Chinese immigrant households often experience a more pronounced intensity of such conflicts due to the stark contrast between traditional Chinese family values and American cultural norms. In Chinese immigrant families, filial piety—a central tenet of Confucian ethics—governs parent-child relationships, emphasizing a child's duty to respect, obey, and care for their parents.[144] This norm entails specific behavioral expectations, such as deference to parent authority, avoidance of open disagreement, and prioritization of family needs over personal desires. Such an emphasis on unconditional filial obligation contrasts sharply with the individualist values of Western culture, which prize autonomy, self-expression, and personal fulfillment. Although both Chinese and Western cultures value the family unit, their underlying philosophies diverge significantly. In Western societies, the family is often regarded as an institution that exists to support the individual—providing "an environment in which the individual can be conveniently raised and trained."[145] By contrast, Chinese culture emphasizes collectivist family ideals in which the individual is expected to serve the overarching goals of the family—specifically, the preservation of its lineage and flourishing future.[146] Thus, individual identity in Chinese households is often intertwined with the collective identity of the family, and personal ambitions may be subordinated to familial obligations and expectations. As such, the stark ideological divergence between Confucian familial obligations and Western individualism renders intergenerational tensions in Chinese immigrant households especially salient.

The pronounced focus on family within Chinese American cinema underscores its critical role as the primary arena for second-generation Chinese Americans' identity formation and cultural negotiation. As this section has shown, filmmakers of this cohort compellingly situate their explorations of selfhood and belonging squarely within the intricate dynamics of the immigrant households in the United States, vividly portraying the intergenerational conflicts and cultural tensions that shape the second-generation experience. By foregrounding the intergenerational conflicts born from "acculturation gaps"—the inevitable byproduct of first-generation parents steeped in traditional Confucian values of filial piety and collectivism, and their American-raised children who often embrace ideals of individualism and autonomy—these cinematic narratives delve into the lived realities of second-generation children straddling two distinct cultural worlds. The stark ideological differences between these contrasting value systems render the resulting familial tensions particularly acute and narratively compelling. Thus, family storytelling becomes an indispensable vehicle for these second-generation Chinese American filmmakers not only to articulate the profound complexities of their bicultural experience and the emotional weight of these cultural negotiations, but also to assert their unique voices and reclaim their agency in defining what it means to be Chinese American in the contemporary landscape.

Conclusion

The rise and evolution of Chinese American family films in the twenty-first century is inextricably linked to a generational shift in cultural authorship. Post-1965 second-generation Chinese American filmmakers, shaped by the enduring presence of racialized stereotypes and complexities of bicutural identity, have increasingly turned to cinema as a vital medium for self-definition and cultural intervention. Their filmmaking practices—disrupting reductive stereotypes, exposing socioeconomic marginalization, interrogating the politics of representation, articulating the complexities of bicultural negotiation—reflect a broader generational imperative to reclaim narrative agency and reimagine Chinese American identity from within. Among the many narrative strategies that have emerged, family storytelling has

taken on particular resonance. More than a thematic preference, it reflects the central role of immigrant households in shaping the affective and ideological contours of bicultural subjectivity. Within these domestic spaces, the negotiation of differing cultural values and expectations often becomes a source of profound tension, shaping the narratives these filmmakers choose to explore. The intergenerational conflicts frequently portrayed in these films are deeply rooted in what scholars describe as "acculturation gaps": the disjunction between first-generation parents' traditional Confucian values, which emphasize parent-child hierarchy, filial duty, collective harmony, and familial obligation, and their second-generation children's emphasis on autonomy and individualistic aspirations. These ideological tensions imbue the domestic sphere with dramatic and emotional weight, transforming it into a primary site for cultural negotiation and identity formation. Thus, rather than signaling a mere revival of genre, the flourishing of family-centered filmmaking represents a generationally driven cultural movement—one that expands the thematic and emotional possibilities of Chinese American cinema while offering a nuanced lens through which to understand contemporary experiences of identity, belonging, and adaptation in a multicultural society.

As this movement has gathered momentum, its impact has become increasingly visible within mainstream film culture. The commercial breakthrough of *Crazy Rich Asians* and the critical acclaim surrounding *Everything Everywhere All at Once* mark a notable shift: Chinese American narratives are no longer confined to the cultural margins, but have begun to take roots in the center of American cinematic discourse. These high-profile successes, however, also raise deeper questions about the conditions that made such a shift became possible. The next chapter addresses these questions by examining the industrial and institutional forces that enabled Chinese American family cinema to transition from the periphery to the mainstream, focusing not only on the cultural narratives but also on the collaborative infrastructures, production networks, and legitimizing mechanisms that sustain artistic visibility within the film industry.

3. The Ascent of Chinese American Family Cinema: An Analysis of Industrial and Institutional Dynamics

Despite the active engagement of second-generation Chinese American filmmakers with the family film genre since the early 2000s, it wasn't until 2018 that Chinese American family films began to gain substantial mainstream recognition and cultural legitimacy within the U.S. film industry. As detailed in Chapter Two, this decisive shift was inaugurated by Jon M. Chu's commercial breakthrough, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). As the first major Hollywood film in over two and a half decades to foreground Chinese American family experiences since *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), this Warner Bros. Pictures release marked a pivotal moment in the rise of Chinese American family cinema to mainstream prominence. With its impressive box-office performance—earning over $239 million globally on a modest $30 million budget—Crazy Rich Asians powerfully demonstrated the broad appeal of Chinese American family narratives, shattering long-held myths about their commercial limitations and opening the door for a new wave of productions.[147] Following this breakthrough, the subsequent years witnessed the emergence of a new wave of films centering on Chinese American family experiences, including *The Farewell*, *Boogie*, and the genre-defying *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Achieving both critical and commercial success, these works further reinforced the genre's place in the cultural imagination of contemporary cinema. If *Crazy Rich Asians* signaled the beginning of Chinese American family cinema's entry into mainstream American cinema, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* marked the genre's achievement of institutional legitimacy. As A24's highest-grossing release to date, the film not only achieved massive commercial success but also swept major film awards, including seven Oscars. Widely acclaimed by both critics and audiences, it definitively established the industrial importance and cultural significance of Chinese American family films within the U.S. film industry.

This chapter investigates the cultural ascent of Chinese American family cinema within the U.S. film industry by foregrounding the industrial and institutional dynamics that enabled its mainstream breakthrough. Grounded in Howard Becker's "art worlds" theory, the analysis centers on two landmark films, *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, to

uncover the strategies through which second-generation Chinese American filmmakers navigated complex production infrastructures, negotiated with institutional gatekeepers, and mobilized collaborative networks to achieve unprecedented visibility. In particular, it examines how these filmmakers adeptly negotiated creative conventions, aligned project visions with industry expectations, and secured legitimization through critical and commercial channels. By tracing the coordinated agency of diasporic filmmakers, producers, distributors, festivals, and awards circuits, this chapter demonstrates how the convergence of diasporic storytelling with structured opportunity enabled a transformative moment in media representation—not as an isolated cultural phenomenon, but as the result of deliberate institutional labor and strategic world-building within Becker's framework of collective art production.

3.1 Theoretical Frameowork: Howard S. Becker's "Art Worlds"

The remarkable ascent of Chinese American Family cinema into mainstream recognition and cultural legitimacy within the U.S. film industry since 2018 is not merely a story of individual artistic genius or shifting audience tastes. Rather, it provides a compelling case study of how cultural products gain visibility, commercial viability, and legitimacy within a highly structured and collaborative field. To illuminate this process, this analysis draws on Howard S. Becker's "Art Worlds" theory, as articulated in his seminal 1982 work. Becker's framework offers the essential conceptual tools to move beyond a text-centric analysis and instead illuminate the complex industrial and institutional machinery that must coalesce to produce, distribute, and consecrate any successful artwork. Accordingly, before turning to the case analysis, this section will first introduce and contextualize Becker's "art worlds" theory as the analytical foundation of this study.

In the traditional narrative of art history and popular imagination, artistic creation is often depicted as the inspired work of a solitary genius. Artists are frequently mythologized as extraordinary figures who create in isolation, driven by innate talent and personal inspiration. Becker's theory of "art worlds," however, fundamentally challenges this romanticized narrative. By shifting the focus of art studies from the isolated figure of the artist to the relational

interactions within the process of artistic production, he argues that a work of art is not the product of an individual artist but rather the result of collective action. It emerges from a cooperative network of participants—encompassing everyone from suppliers of materials and skilled fabricators to curators, distributors, critics, and audiences—all of whom operate through the shared conventions of an art world to "bring works like that into existence." [148] In Becker's view, artistic production, like all human activities, "involves the joint activity" of a great number of participants, and it is "through their cooperation" that the artwork we eventually encounter is brought into being and sustained over time.[149]

Becker's fundamental reorientation of art sociology—from the individual creator to the broader cooperative network of participants—forcefully dismantles the myth of the solitary genius, reframing artistic production as an inherently collaborative endeavor. This premise culminates in his seminal concept of the "art world," defined as "the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for."[150] At the core of this model lie two inextricably linked elements: the cooperative activity of the network and the conventional means that organize it. It is the interaction between this collective action and these shared conventions

3.1.1 Collective Action: The Fabric of the Art Worlds

As a core tenet of Becker's art worlds theory, collective action refers to the coordinated efforts and intricate division of labor that sustain artistic production. Becker contends that every art form—even seemingly solitary pursuits like poetry or painting—relies on a network of collaborators.[151] This dependence stems from the fact that the very materials artists use, such as pens, paper, pigments, or canvases, are themselves products of a broader system of production and distribution. Moreover, if artists want their work to enter the public sphere, they must rely on an even wider array of participants—such as gallerists, curators, critics, publishers, and distributors—who are essential for the work's circulation, exhibition, and critical reception. In Becker's view, it is extremely rare for a single creator to perform all the tasks involved in

artistic production. Any task not performed by the artist must be undertaken by others, and for every aspect where he relies on others, a relationship of cooperation is established.[152]

Within Becker's framework, the cooperative network of art making is extensive. It encompasses a diverse range of participants—from material suppliers and equipment manufacturers to funders, curators, distributors, and critics—each fulfilling specialized yet interconnected roles. Even the audience plays an actively constitutive part in this ecology, contributing vital aesthetic and economic support. As Becker notes, through acts of reception and interpretation, audiences provide financial backing through consumption and engagement, and aesthetic support through understanding and response.[153] Thus, within Becker's model, rather than an isolated creator, the artist operates within the center of a collaborative web, where the contributions of all participants are critical to the final outcome.

This extensive collaborative network surrounding artistic production means that collective action extends far beyond the creative process, encompassing the entire ecosystem through which art comes into being. In *Art Worlds*, Becker meticulously outlines the range of activities required to bring an artwork into social existence—not only its conception and production but also its publication, distribution, reception, evaluation, and preservation. According to Becker, the completion of all these activities is essential for any artwork "to appear as it finally does."[154] That is, for a work to enter the public sphere and attain cultural visibility, it must be distributed and received; likewise, to be recognized as art within a specific art world, it must undergo evaluation and be sustained through preservation and discourse. Yet Becker's argument does not imply that an artwork cannot exist unless all of these activities are carried out. Rather, it suggests that the form, meaning, and social presence of the work are contingent on which of these activities are undertaken. As Becker argues, the non-performance of certain activities doesn't mean a work cannot exist; rather, it alters the work's very form and status.[155] For instance, if no one distributes the work, it might remain a private project; similarly, if no one engages with or appreciates the work, it may remain materially intact yet socially unrecognized. In each case, the artwork's trajectory and significance are reconfigured by these gaps in the cooperative chain.

In this essence, thus, Becker's concept of collective action emphasizes that the art is not a static object but a social process—one whose identity and value are continually negotiated through the actual performance (or omission) of cooperative activities within the art world. The "work" is not merely the physical artifact but the entire site of relations and actions that grant it meaning and position within a cultural field. An artwork may be physically complete yet remain culturally incomplete if it fails to circulate through appropriate channels of recognition and validation. Becker's framework therefore shifts our understanding of an art from a product of individual genius to a contingent outcome of organized collective effort—an achievement that depends not on creation alone, but on successful integration into the sustaining networks of the art world.

3.1.2 Conventions: The Coordinating Framework and Operating Rule of the Art Worlds

While Becker's theory of art worlds is grounded in collective action, it in no way implies that such cooperation is inherently harmonious or devoid of conflict. In *Art Worlds,* Becker extensively documents cases where collaboration occurs alongside disagreement and tension. He describes, for instance, the aesthetic conflicts between a sculptor and a team of skilled lithographers. The sculptor, unfamiliar with the technical nuances of printmaking, assumed that large, flat areas of color would simplify the process. Instead, this design created a professional dilemma for the printers, as such areas required multiple roller passes—a technique that risked leaving visible streaks, which were considered a mark of poor craftsmanship within their professional community. The sculptor's suggestion to incorporate these streaks aesthetically was firmly rejected by the printers, who took pride in their craft and adhered to strict technical standards. The core of such tension lies in the division of labor that structures art worlds, a system that gives rise to specialized professional groups, each with its own values, standards, and priorities. When these groups take on the practical and organizational responsibilities involved in creating an artwork, their participants often cultivate professional, economic, and artistic priorities that differ markedly from those of the artists.[156]

It is precisely in the context of these divergent interests and inevitable tensions that the second pillar of Becker's theory emerges as essential: conventions. If collective action reveals the inherently social nature of artmaking, conventions explain how such cooperation becomes possible in the first place. Conventions refer to an art world's widely accepted and taken-for-granted behavior patterns, modes of conduct, and evaluative norms. Becker understands conventions interchangeable with various sociological concepts—such as norms, rules, mutual understandings, customs, or folkways—all of which refer, in various ways, to "the ideas and understandings people hold in common and through which they effect cooperative activity."[157] For becker, every art world relies on conventions to organize cooperation—conventions that are familiar to almost every "well-socialized member of the society" in which that art world is embedded.[158] It precisely these widely recognized conventions that enable some of the most fundamental and essential forms of cooperation distinct to an art world.[159]

In Becker's framework, conventions enable collective artistic production by functioning as a coordinated mechanism. Rather than eliminating conflict or disagreement, they establish a shared framework of understandings, rules, and standards that guide behavior, manage expectations, and mitigates friction among participants—thereby facilitating efficient and sustainable collaboration across the art world.[160] Although specific conventions may be adapted for a particular piece, Becker argues that an art world's conventions nonetheless "cover all the decisions" essential to the making of artworks, governing not only material and compositional choices but also regulating the relational dynamics between artists and audiences—including their respective rights, obligations, and modes of engagement.[161] 2.In this sense, by providing a common operational language for creative activity, conventions function as a coordinating framework that allows participants with diverse skills, resources, and interests to collaborate efficiently without constant explicit negotiation. They form a tacit infrastructure that not only coordinates practical production but also shapes interpretive and evaluative practices—enabling artworks to be made, recognized, and valued within a shared system of meaning.

Although conventions establish standardized ways of working, in Becker's framework they are not understood as rigid or fixed structures "that determine actions."[162] As he notes,

even when prescriptions appear highly specific, conventions still leave matters unresolved, creating spaces for negotiation, interpretation, and adaptation.[163] This flexibility underscores the idea that conventions function less absolute constraints and more as shared reference points that both guide practices and allow for variation. Moreover, in Becker's view, individuals typically retain the freedom to deviate from established conventions, select from different options, or assign new interpretations to them. [164] Fundamentally, he conceptualizes conventions as dynamic outcomes of ongoing adaptation among collaborators in response to shifting contextual conditions—evolving as the environments in which they are applied themselves change.[165]In this way, conventions both provide a necessary structure for collective activity and remain adaptable, ensuring that an art world can be coordinated without stifling innovation.

3.1.3 Editing: Choices and the Social Shaping of Art works

Building upon the foundations of collective actions and conventions, Becker further develops his analysis of art worlds and artistic production by introducing the concept of editing. Within his framework, editing extends far beyond the traditional literary or cinematic sense of the term; it encompasses the diverse and continuous choices made by all participants involved in the creation of an artwork throughout its entire lifespan—from initial conception to final reception and beyond.[166] Becker argues that the form an artwork takes at any given moment is the result of the cumulative effect of choices—both minor and significant—made by the artist and other collaborators during its production.[167] In this essence, editing is not merely a final stage of refinement but an ongoing, distributed practice of selection, modification, and interpretation that fundamentally determines what the work becomes.

The editing process begins with the artist, yet from the outset it is profoundly social. Becker introduces the concept of the "internalized dialogue," referring to the way artists, at moments of creative decision, anticipate the potential reactions, standards, and actions of other participants within the art world.[168] A painter's choices of certain pigments may be informed by expectations how it will appear under gallery lighting, while a writer's revision of a sentence

may stem from a consideration of how critics are likely to interpret it. This anticipatory form of editing means that the cooperative network exerts its influence even before anyone else has directly engaged with the work. The artist becomes a conduit for the norms and expectations of the art world, making a multitude of micro-decisions that are already shaped by a collectively understood sensibility. Thus, the artist's creativity is never purely individual; it is always a form of social collaboration, a negotiation with an absent yet ever-present community.

However, the agency of editing is clearly distributed beyond the artist. While other participants influence a work by entering into the artist's internalized dialogue, Becker emphasizes that they also affect a work's form more directly by making their own choices, which operates independently of the artist's desires and intentions.[169] A Curator's decision to include or exclude a piece from an exhibition edits its public significance and canonical statues. A Restorer's choice of a specific technique alters its material authenticity for posterity. These interventions are not marginal adjustments but core, constitutive actions that occur at every node of art worlds' network, often without the artist's knowledge or consent. Becker emphasizes that this type of editing continues throughout a work's social life long after the artist has ceased to be involved—indeed, long after the artist has passed away. Each new interpretation by a viewer, critic, or historician is, in effect, re-editing the work, contributing to its evolving legacy and meaning within shifting cultural contexts.

Becker's theorization of editing provides the crucial link between the abstract structures of the art world—its collective actions and conventions—and the concrete form of the individual works of art. It is a mechanism that reveals the artmaking to be a process of continuous negotiation and collective decision-making. By elevating editing to a central theoretical principle, Becker completes his deconstruction of the myth of the solitary genius, showing that "it is the art world, rather than the individual artist, which makes the work"[170]

3.1.4 Art Worlds and the Making of Reputations

If Becker's concepts of collective action, conventions, and editing elucidate how artworks are produced, his examination of reputations reveals how such works—and their creators—acquire

social visibility, legitimacy, and value within art worlds. Conventionally, reputation is regarded as a straightforward reflection of the unique qualities of an artist and their works. Becker, however, deconstructs this individualistic theory, arguing that reputations are not a natural outgrowth of individual genius or artistic merit but are, instead a social construct emerging from the collaborative operation of art worlds.[171] Reputations are made, not born; they arise from a process of "consensus building" within a given art world.[172] This process involves numerous participants—including critics, historicans, distributors, and audiences—whose actions all affect and contribute to the making of reputations.[173] Critics and aestheticians establish the theories and criteria that allow for works to be judged; historians and scholars authenticate the works that form an artist's canon; and distributors select which works are visible enough to be considered for a reputation in the first place.

In Becker's framework, reputation serves as a powerful illustration of art worlds' operational logic: it is a social mechanism that simplifies a complex network of production and evaluation into a clear hierarchy of value. Yet it also exposes the fallacy of the "solitary genius" myth, revealing that an artist's reputation—like the artwork itself—is the outcome of collective action, mediated by conventions, power, and opportunity. Reputation is not just about the individual artist, but about how an art world organizes attention, allocate resources, and legitimize certain narratives over others. Through this, Becker completes his theoretical loop: from the collective activity of artmaking, to the coordination of action through art worlds conventions, and finally to the social construction of value—demonstrating that even a seemingly individual phenomenon like reputation, in its origine and function, fundamentally social.

3.2 *Crazy Rich Asians* and the Collective Making of a Cultural Phenomenon

When *Crazy Rich Asians* premiered in 2018, it marked more than a box office success—it heralded a new era for Chinese American family cinema in mainstream Hollywood. As the first major studio film in over a quarter-century to feature an all-Asian cast and center on Chinese American family experiences since *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), its arrival signaled a profound

shift in the industry's recognition of diasporic narratives. The film's remarkable commercial performance—grossing over $238 million worldwide against a $30 million budget—not only demonstrated the economic viability of Asian-led stories but also established a new industrial precedent, proving that Chinese American family narratives could achieve broad audience appeal and cultural resonance.[174] However, this breakthrough was not merely the result of cultural timing or individual artistic achievement. Rather, *Crazy Rich Asians*'s ascent to mainstream prominence exemplifies how cultural legitimacy is manufactured through what Howard Becker identifies as the collective action of art words—complex networks of participant working within and sometimes against established conventions to achieve both commercial success and institutional recognition.

The film project traces its origine to Kevin Kwan's acclaimed 2013 novel that shares its title of the movie, published by Knopf Doubleday, which quickly attracted international attention and achieved significant commercial success, establishing it as a highly coveted property for cinematic adaptation. Although major studios, including Twentieth Century Fox and Lionsgate, entered in negotiations for the adaptation rights, Kwan ultimately chose to bypass the traditional Hollywood studio system.[175] Instead, he partnered with the production company Color Force, headed by Nina Jacobson and Brad Simpson. In a strategic decision, Kwan sold the film rights to *Crazy Rich Asians* to Color Force for the symbolic price of one dollar, deliberately forgoing significant financial gain in exchange for retaining creative control and active involvement throughout the development and production process.[176]

Kwan's approach was profoundly shaped by his early experiences negotiating with industry executives. During a preliminary meeting regarding adaptation possibilities, one producer suggested recasting Rachel Chu, the novel's Chinese American protagonist, as a white character, contending that such a change would enhance the film's commercial appeal.[177] To Kwan, this proposal not only misrepresented the spirit of the original work but also effectively erased the core value of its Asian American identity. As he emphatically put it, this is a film with both global and local appeal—one that "just happens to star Asians."[178] Thus, in Kwan's view, an all-Asian cast was non-negotiable—a crucial means of preserving cultural authenticity.

This experience underscored the importance of insisting on an all-Asian cat as a direct challenge to Hollywood's longstanding pattern of whitewashing Asian American narratives and marginalized Asian American voices. These convictions ultimately led him to prioritize creative integrity over conventional commercial strategies, leading him to collaborate with Color Force. Producers Jacobson and Simpson not only shared this vision but also devised a practical strategy: developing the project independently—retaining full control over the screenplay, casting, and director choices—before seeking studio distribution.[179] By aligning with producers whose credentials included *The Hunger Games* franchise, Kwan secured partners who combined industry expertise with a genuine commitment to an all-Asian cast.

This deliberate formation of a production collective aligned with Howard Becker's concept of "editing through internalized dialogue," illustrating a preemptive negotiation between institutional expectations and cultural integrity. [180] Kwan's choice to work with Color Force—rather than accept more lucrative studio offers—exemplified this mediated form of creative agency. The resulting coalition functioned as the core of an extensive collaborative network, embodying Becker's principle that artworks emerge through the cooperative activity of "network of people."[181]

Financing the $30 million production required further strategic alignment with partners who recognized both cultural and commercial value. Color Force deliberately sought investors with a dedicated interest in Asian narratives and markets, ultimately finding an ideal partner in Ivanhoe Pictures. This newly established production company, with offices in Los Angeles, Hong Kong, and Singapore, explicitly focused on developing Asian-themed content for global audiences. For Ivanhoe's president, John Penotti, the project was a "godsend," perfectly aligning with the company's mission.[182] Ivanhoe not only contributed 25% of the film's budget but also joined as a co-producer, providing crucial Asian production expertise and regional production support. This partnership underscores Becker's concept of conventions—shared understandings that coordinate action—and how they enable cooperation among diverse participants. Both entities operated under a dual convention: a belief in the untapped commercial potential of Asian-led stories and a commitment to cultural authenticity as ab

inherent value. This shared framework facilitated efficient collaboration, allowing Color Force to maintain creative control while leveraging Ivanhoe's financial resources and regional expertise. The convergence of their interests exemplifies how art worlds function through coordinated action, where economic and cultural motivations intertwine to sustain production.

With financing secured, the focus shifted to the creative adaptation of Kwan's sprawling novel, a process embodying what Becker terms "editing"—a continues series of choices that shape the artwork's ultimate form. Screenwriter Peter Chiarelli, known for his work on *The Proposal* (2009) and *Now You See Me 2* (2016), was brought on to distill the complex subplots and extensive ensemble of characters into a structurally coherent and emotional resonant screenplay. His solution was to sharpen the central romantic plot into a compelling generational conflict, particularly emphasizing the tension between the protagonist Rachel Chu and her boyfriend's Nike Young's mother, Eleanor Young. This narrative reframing was a strategic edit, designed to heighten the emotional stakes and broaden the film's appeal beyond a straightforward romantic comedy. As producer Simpson noted, this focus on the "triangle" between Rachel, Nike, and Eleanor gave the story its dramatic thrust.[183] Such decisions were not made in isolation but reflected an "internalized dialogue" with anticipated audience expectations and industry conventions. Chiarelli, along with Kwan and other producers, crafted a story that adhered to the familiar rhythms and pleasures of the Hollywood rom-com while insistently centering Asian and Asian American faces and cultural specificities. This balancing act—honoring genre conventions while subverting racialized ones—was a crucial negotiation that enabled the film function as both accessible entertainment and cultural milestone.

The selection of Jon M. Chu as director further exemplifies the negotiated alignment of artistic vision and commercial viability. Chu brought not only extensive experience directing commercial successes—including dance films like *Step Up 2: The Streets* (2008) and *Step Up 3D* (2010), action blockbusters such as *G.I. Joe: Retaliation*(2013), and ensemble hits like *Now You See Me 2* (2016)—but also a profound personal commitment informed by his identity as a second-generation Chinese American. He publicly described a moment of clarity in which he recognized that, as an industry insider, he possessed both the professional network and a deep

sense of responsibility to help bring a project of such cultural significance to fruition.[184] His appointment thus represented a strategic fusion genre expertise, directorial proficiency, and deeply personal investment, positioning his as an idea conduit for the collective aspirations taking shape around the film.

With the screenplay and director in place, the project moved to the crucial phase of securing a distributor. In 2016, *Crazy Rich Asians* entered a competitive bidding process among five major studios, ultimately narrowing to a showdown between Netflix and Warner Bros.[185] Netflix proposed complete creative freedom, upfront seven-figure compensation for all key participants, and a guarantee that the Kwan's entire *Crazy Rich Asians* trilogy—including *China Rich Girlfriend* and *Rich People Problems*—would move forward into production. In contrast, Warner Bros.'s bid, though financially less generous, provided a traditional theatrical release and carried the endorsement of CEO Kevin Tsujihara, who at the time was the only Asian American to lead a major Hollywood studio. Faced with these options, Kwan and director Chu—to whom Color Force has entrusted the final decision—elected to partner with Warner Bros., resonating that theatrical distribution would confer a type of cultural legitimacy and public visibility that streaming alone could not provide. As Chu later reflected, the decision was rooted in the desire to elevate the film—and its audience—to a level of cultural significance. He emphasized that seeing a movie in theaters "puts it in a glass box: 'This is special. You are special.'"[186] For him, the theatrical experience was not just about distribution, but about affirming that Asian stories and audience are worthy of attention, respect, and celebration in the public sphere. By choosing Warner Bros., Kwan and Chu ensured that *Crazy Rich Asians* would arrive on screens in a way that visibly honored its community and its cultural impact.

Kwan and Chu's decision to Warner Bros. reflects the powerful influence of what Becker terms the *conventions* of the art world: the deeply ingrained, often unspoken norms that structure professional practice and define value within a field. In Hollywood, box office performance remains a primary convention for measuring a film's commercial success—a metric that streaming release inherently lack. By opting for theatrical distribution, the team was not only merely choosing a platform but also adhering to an established industrial convention

that would enable their work to be recognized and legitimized within the existing system. Their decision underscores how art worlds constrain and guide creative agency, as practioners must navigate and sometimes leverage their very conventions to achieve broader recognition and institutional change. Thus, the selection of Warner Bros. represents a strategic engagement with the conventional mechanisms of Hollywood—specifically, the symbolic and economic weight of box office date—in order to disrupt another convention: the industry's long-standing marginalization of Asian American narratives.

With Warner Bros. on board and the project greenlit, *Crazy Rich Asians* formally launched its casting process in early 2017. Casting decisions continued to shape the film's development in ways that further illustrated Becker's concept of "editing" as a distributed and collaborative process. This was particularly evident in the negotiations surrounding Michelle Yeoh's casting as Eleanor Young. An internationally acclaimed Malaysian Chinese actress best known for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*(2000), Yeoh made it clear that she would not portray a reductive "tiger mother" stereotype, insisting instead that Eleanor embody traditional values without sacrificing complexity or humanity.[187] In order to secure her participation, director Chu enlisted Malaysian American television writer Adele Lim to rework Eleanor's character arc—deepening her motivations and ensuring the portrayal conveyed the complexity of a woman defending her traditional and family rather than simply embodying opposition.[188] This change significantly altered Chiarelli's original script for the third act, transforming the film's central conflict from a simple romantic obstacle to a deeper intergenerational and cultural dialogue about identity and values. This instance of collaborative editing demonstrates how the contributions of various participants—in this case, a star actor and a cultural consultant—directly alter the artwork's form and meaning. The artwork is never static but is continuously molded through the negotiations and interventions of the entire network.

The film's marketing and release strategy, masterfully executed by Warner Bros., stands as a compelling example of collective action shaping both a work's reception and its ultimate success. Under the leadership of Blair Rich, the studio's global marketing head, the campaign unfolded in carefully sequenced stages. The first stage was deliberately focused on Asian

American audiences, cultivating a sense of "ownership" and pride within the core demographic.[189] This was achieved through months of strategically timed advanced screenings—beginning as early as April 2018, four months prior to the official release—alongside partnerships with more than 40 influential community organizations, including the Asian Society, Kollaboration, and the Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment(CAPE).[190] These early interventions, unprecedented for a mainstream romantic comedy, operated as a reputational strategy, generating grassroots support that would ripple out to broader audience. Building on this function, the #GoldOpen movement, a social-media driven initiative facilitated by the Asian American advocacy group Gold House, further solidified this collective effort. Through organized theater buyouts, coordinated group viewings, and targeted social media amplification, the campaign aimed to maximize opening-weekend box office performance.

This powerful, audience-driven collective action had a measurable impact, generating an undeniable buzz and propelling *Crazy Rich Asians* to a record-breaking opening weekend. According to ComScore/Screen Engine's PostTrak date, Asian Americans made up a remarkable 38% of the audience, nearly matching the 41% share of white audiences.[191] This level of attendance represented an unprecedented peak for Asian American viewership and significantly surpassed the participation rate for comparable blockbusters in the preceding years, including *The Foreigner*(18.4% in 2017), *Warcraft*(11.9% in 2016), and *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation*(14% in 2015).[192] By strategically mobilizing diasporic networks, social media influencers, and advocacy organizations, Warner Bros. effectively turned a film release into a cultural event. This created an unprecedented level of audience-driven support that not only fueled its box office success but also established a new benchmark for Asian American visibility within the commercial landscape of Hollywood.

Following the targeted campaign toward Asian American audiences, Warner Bros. strategically expanded its marketing focus to mainstream viewership. While Asian Americans demonstrated the second-highest per-capita movie attendance according to MPAA data, their demographic representation remained at just 6% of the population.[193] To ensure broad commercial success, the studio's subsequent promotional phase deliberately targeted female

audiences, dating couples, Hispanic and African American moviegoers, as well as LGBTQ+ communities.[194] The campaign's core messaging emphasized that *Crazy Rich Asians* was not a niche cultural product but a universally relatable story centered on themes of love, family, and identity.[195] This dual strategy—anchoring the campaign in community-specific engagement while expanding to mainstream appeal—exemplified Becker's concept of reputation as a social construct. Rather than emerging organically, the film's cultural significance was deliberately built through coordinated actions across multiple levels of the art world, ultimately solidifying its status as both a commercial success and a cultural milestone.

The film's commercial success—grossing over $238 million worldwide against a $30 million budget—confirmed the effectiveness of this collaboratively constructed strategy. It challenged entrenched industry assumptions about the marketability of Asian-led films, demonstrating that culturally specific narratives could achieve mainstream resonance when collective action, strategic editing, and reputational work are effectively coordinated. Beyond financial returns, the reception of *Crazy Rich Asians* generated significant symbolic capital for its creative participants, elevating the professional visibility of Chinese American actors, writers, and filmmakers within Hollywood's institutional ecosystem. More significantly, the film's performance recalibrated industry expectations regarding commercially viable content, expanding the range of narratives deemed worthy of investment and distribution. This breakthrough established a crucial precedent, paving the way for subsequent Chinese American family narratives such as *Boogie* (2021)and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) to gain production support and achieve institutional recognition, thereby normalizing Asian American experiences within mainstream cinematic representation.

In conclusion, the mainstream breakthrough of *Crazy Rich Asians* was fundamentally the result of coordinated industrial and institutional efforts, rather than an isolated artistic or cultural fluke. By applying Howard Becker's art worlds theory as an analytic framework, this chapter has traced how film's trajectory—from development and financing to casting, distribution, and marketing—was shaped by deliberate organizational strategies, negotiated conventions, and collective action across an extensive network of participants. This case illustrates that the

journey of *Crazy Rich Asians* from literary adaptation to cultural milestone was not accidental; it emerged through the systematic alignment of creative vision with production resources, distribution mechanisms, and audience-building tactics within a structured industry environment. In this sense, *Crazy Rich Asians* offers a broader lesson: the sustainable inclusion of marginalized narratives in mainstream cinema depends not only on representation itself, but on the deliberate orchestration of the industrial systems that make such visibility possible.

3.3 *Everything Everywhere All at Once* and the Construction of Prestige in Chinese American Family Cinema

While *Crazy Rich Asians* proved the commercial viability of Chinese American family cinema within the Hollywood system, the genre's rise to full institutional legitimacy was cemented by *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). This A24 production, a genre-defying work that blended action, comedy, and sci-fi spectacle with a deeply personal family drama, did more than achieve box-office success. With a global gross of over $140 million on a modest $14 million budget, the film's unprecedented sweep of major film awards, including seven Oscars, demonstrated that Chinese American family narratives were not only commercially viable but also artistically essential. This remarkable achievement, however, was not merely the product of artistic brilliance alone. Rather, it exemplified how prestige is systematically constructed through the alignment of specialized production strategies, strategic distribution, and carefully orchestrated recognition campaigns within what Howard Becker terms an "art world." This section examines how the independent studio A24, known for its distinctive brand of auteur-driven cinema, leveraged its unique position to transform an eccentric genre-blending film about a Chinese American family into an awards-season phenomenon. Through analyzing the film's development, A24's branding machinery, and the deliberate cultivation of critical recognition, we can understand how institutional labor and collective action converged to produce a redefinition of what kinds of stories deserve cinema's highest honors.

The film's journey begins with an understanding A24's distinctive role within the contemporary film landscape. Founded in 2012, A24 had cultivated a reputation as a curator of

distinctive voices and a purveyor of cultural cachet. Unlike traditional studios that often prioritize broad marketability, A24's strategy centers on building a brand synonymous with quality, innovation, and artistic authenticity. As filmmaker Lulu Wang observes, *The Farewell*—the bittersweet Chinese American family drama released by A24 in 2019, which she wrote and directed—exemplified this approach.[196] She notes that A24's brand is deeply connected to "the identities of the artists" it works with and is recognized for elevating singular artistic voices.[197]

This brand identity proved crucial to produce *Everything Everywhere All at Once,* a project whose very premise inherently resisted traditional categorization. The film's narrative—a Chinese American laundromat owner navigating a multiversal crisis while grappling with IRS troubles, family tensions, and existential angst—represented precisely the type of complex, culturally specific project that traditional studios would typically eschew. While the film's directors, Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (the Daniels), had demonstrated a capacity for genre innovation with *Swiss Army Man* (2016), the ambitious scale and pronounced cultural specificity of this undertaking necessitated more than directorial ingenuity; it required an institutional partner capable of mitigating its perceived commercial risks. A24's strategy, predecated on associating its brand with artistic innovation and authenticity, empowered it not only to embrace but also actively champion such a venture, providing the essential creative freedom and institutional legitimacy requisite for it success. Thus, the collaboration was a textbook example of the collective action Becker identified in "art worlds," where a singular artistic vision converges with a supportive institution's strategic positioning to forge a new standard of prestige.

Furthermore, A24's commitment to *Everything Everywhere All at Once* represented not merely an extension of its brand identity, but the strategic culmination of a prestige-building model meticulously cultivated since the late 2010s. Prior to this project, the studio had already demonstrated the viability of investing in Asian American cinema, as evidenced by its successful releases of Lulu Wang's Chinese American family drama, *The Farewell*(2019) and Lee Isaac Chung's intergenerational story, *Minari* (2020). These films not only earned critical

acclaim and prestigious awards but, more importantly, provided A24 with a strategic blueprint for elevating culturally specific narratives into mainstream cultural milestones. This accumulated expertise allowed the studio to position itself as an institutional ally in an industry historically prone to marginalizing Asian American voices. When the opportunity arose to support *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, A24 possessed both the cultural credibility and operational experience necessary to translate the Daniel's visionary project into historic success. The film's triumph thus stands as a testament to how sustained institutional investment can redefine cinematic prestige. Viewed through Becker's framework, this achievement underscores a fundamental principle: the recognition of artistic value is never solitary but always social. It was the pre-existing "art world" cultivated by A24—a network of shared understandings and cooperative partnerships—that provided the essential infrastructure for this unconventional film to be not just created but universally celebrated as a masterpiece.

A24's distribution strategy for *Everything Everywhere All at Once* demonstrated a masterful understanding of how to build prestige through controlled exposure and audience cultivation. Departing from the conventional film-festival circuit often relied upon by smaller independent distributors, A24 strategically opted for a world premiere at the South by Southwest (SXSW) film festival—a venue known for its strong media presence and culturally influential audience. This was followed by a platform release strategy, with the film opening in a limited number of key commercial theaters on March 25, 2022. Rather than pursuing a wide release, A24 deliberately premiered the film in just ten select locations, including iconic venues such as the AMC Lincoln Square in New York and the Grove in Los Angeles, theaters renowned for attracting dedicated cinephiles and industry influence. This dual approach—leveraging a high-profile festival premiere to generate initial critical and media buzz, followed by a curated theatrical rollout—signaled that A24 positioning the film not as a mere entertainment product but as a significant cinematic event for discerning viewers.

The marketing campaign carefully emphasized the film's distinctive qualities while maintaining its narrative complexity. Promotional materials, including trailers and press kits, struck a deliberate balanced portrayal between the film's multiverse absurdity and the intimate

family drama, positioning it as both a visual extravaganza and a deeply human character study. A24 intentionally framed the production as a genre-hybrid comedy consistent with audience expectations for the directing duo, the Daniels, whose earlier A24 feature *Swiss Army Man* had already defined their signature tonal blend. This strategic framing was encapsulated in the studio's official synopsis, which introduced the film as "a sci-fi action adventure" packed with humor and heart from the Daniels—consciously situating it within the filmmkakers' recognized creative identity.[198] Concurrently, A24 aligned its promotional investment with the media habits of its target demographic, concentrating advertising resources in digital and social channels. This tactical allocation proved decisive in reaching the 18–34-year-old audience segment that became the core driver of the film's box office performance. PostTrak audience data collected during its wide-release opening weekend revealed that nearly 70% of attendees belonged to this age group, underscoring the precision of A24's audience targeting.[199] Further exit polling highlighted the impact of its digital-first strategy: among viewers who recalled seeing promotional content, 26% were motivated by YouTube ads and 22% by online trailers, while only 11% cited television spots.[200] By combining a clear authorial positioning with platform-specific outreach, A24 did more than market a film, it mobilized a community, transforming stylistic originality into sustained commercial momentum.

As positive word-of-mouth spread and critical acclaimed accumulated throughout spring 2022, A24 adopted an increasingly expansive release strategy that responded directly to organic audience demand rather than adhering to predetermined marketing formulas. When the film demonstrated remarkable staying power—consistently maintaining strong box office numbers week after week while conventional blockbuster saw steep declines—the studio strategically capitalized on this momentum by expanding its theatrical reach to hundreds of additional venues. This measured rollout culminated in a "slow-burn" success story that ultimately grossed over $140 million worldwide, establishing the film as A24's highest-grossing release to date. The film's enduring popularity was fueled by repeat viewings and powerful audience recommendations—phenomena that Becker would attribute to the successful integration of the work into the ongoing discourse and conventional practices of its art world. Under A24's

careful stewardship, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* thus transcended its status as mere entertainment to become a cultural phenomenon that demanded discussion, analysis, and advocacy—establishing the essential groundwork for its subsequent awards recognition.

The awards campaign constituted the most definitive phase in the film's reputation-building trajectory, exemplifying how prestige is socially constructed through coordinated action within an art world. A24's campaign for *Everything Everywhere All at Once* represented a meticulously orchestrated effort that translated the film's grassroots popularity into institutional recognition through what scholar Brian Hu identifies as the "Asian American prestige film" strategy—a carefully calibrated synthesis "of discourses around race, independent film, and Asian American representation," designed to resonate with both Oscar voters and Asian American audiences prepared to champion the film through social media and in journalistic channels.[201]

Central to this strategy was A24's sophisticated narrative reframing during the awards season. While initial marketing had emphasized the film's genre-bending comedy and directorial signature, the "For Your Consideration" (FYC) campaign strategically repositioned it as an immigrant family drama with universal emotional resonance. The official synopsis was notably revised to foreground Evelyn Wang's journey as "an overwhelmed immigrant mother" who must "save her home and her family," deliberately shifting focus from the multiversal spectacle to immigrant experiences.[202] In this recalibrated narrative framework, the Daniels's distinctive auteur signature—previously highlighted as the primary indicator of artistic excellence—was strategically repositioned to serve a more culturally resonant allegory of immigrant family dynamics. The film's original indie sensibility thus underwent a significant transformation: what began as an eccentric genre experiment evolved into a prestige vehicle for Asian American representation, where the emotional authenticity of immigrant experience—with its intergenerational tensions, cultural displacement, and search for belonging—became the narrative anchor, effectively elevating "indie quirk" into the realm of "Asian American prestige."[203] This recalibration exemplified how distributors, in Becker's terms, continue to reshape a work's meaning in response to audience reception and institutional expectations. By

emphasizing themes of cultural authenticity through recognizable immigrant family narratives, A24 positioned the film as both culturally significant and artistically substantial—qualities that resonate strongly with Academy voters.

The culminating moment at the 95th Academy Awards, where the film received seven Oscars including Best Picture, represented the ultimate act of institutional consecration. In Beckerian terms, this sweep signaled a powerful consensus across multiple branches of the film industry—actors, directors, writers, technicians—all validating the work through their respective voting processes. This recognition was particularly significant for Asian American representation, marking the first time an Asian actress won Best Actress and the first Best Picture winner centered on an Asian American family. The awards did not simply acknowledge the film's quality; they actively reconstructed the boundaries of cinematic prestige to include a story that might have previously been marginalized as "too niche" or "too strange." The film's success challenged entrenched hierarchies of value within Hollywood, demonstrating that stories about immigrant families could embody universal themes, and that genre innovation could coexist with emotional depth.

In conclusion, the trajectory of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* from specialized indie film to Oscar-winning phenomenon provides a master case study in how prestige is manufactured within contemporary cinema. Through Becker's theoretical lens, we see that this outcome was not accidental but emerged from the deliberate coordination of multiple participants within a structured art world. A24 functioned as the central organizing node, leveraging its brand credibility, distribution expertise, and awards campaign machinery to guild the film through the various stages of cultural consecration. The directors, cast, and crew provided the artistic material and performative excellence that made the campaign possible. Critics, guild members, and academy voters acted as legitimizing agents whose collective judgments cemented the film's status.

This case extends our understanding of Chinese American family cinema's ascent. If *Crazy Rich Asians* proved the commercial potential of these narratives, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* demonstrated their capacity to achieve the highest forms of critical and institutional

legitimacy. Its success underscores that sustainable representation requires not just creating compelling stories, but also mastering the institutional logics that govern recognition and value within the field of cultural production. the film's journey illustrates that the contemporary media landscape, artistic triumph and cultural impact are increasingly the products of sophisticated art world management—where creative vision, strategic distribution, and reputation-building campaigns converge to redefine what counts as cinematic excellence.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the rise of Chinese American family cinema is not only a creative development but also an institutional and industrial one. Using the art worlds framework as a guiding perspective, it has traced the evolution of these narratives from achieving market visibility with films like *Crazy Rich Asians* to securing critical and institutional legitimacy with the unprecedented success of *Everything Everywhere All at Once.* The analysis reveals a significant trajectory in the genre's development. *Crazy Rich Asians* exemplified a strategic alignment with mainstream commercial conventions—leveraging star power, genre familiarity, and theatrical distribution—to demonstrate the economic viability of Chinese American family stories. Its success was a testament to the power of collective action within the art world, where producers, distributors, and community advocates collaborated to transform a culturally specific narrative into a broad market phenomenon.

Equally significant, the institutional triumph of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* reveals the sophisticated infrastructure necessary for cultural consecration in the contemporary cinematic field. Its success was not merely a reaction to its artistic merit, but a strategically managed outcome orchestrated by specialized agents—namely A24—who utilized brand capital, targeted distribution, and rigorous awards campaigns to navigate and master the legitimizing logics of critics, guilds, and the Academy. This progression from commercial breakthrough to institutional recognition underscores a central argument: sustainable visibility for marginalized narratives is contingent not only on their artistic innovation but also on understanding how the industry itself produces cultural legitimacy.

4. Conclusion

This study has traced the evolution of Chinese American family films from their emergence in the 1980s to their mainstream and institutional ascent in the twenty-first century, arguing that their growing visibility is not an organic cultural accident but the deliberate product of a complex interplay between sociocultural transformation, diasporic agency, and the strategic mastery of the industrial and institutional mechanisms that govern cinematic production and bestow cultural value. By examining this trajectory across three distinct phases of development—from initial resistance to institutional consecration—this study has demonstrated how the Chinese American family narrative transitioned from a site of cinematic absence and stereotype to a central locus of American storytelling.

The journey began with the diasporic agency of first-generation filmmakers, who, as analyzed in Chapter 1, utilized structural opportunities and strategically negotiated the cinematic field (Bourdieu). Pioneers like Wayne Wang established a foundational cinematic language for Chinese American domesticity, successfully carving out a space for authentic representation against a backdrop of deeply entrenched racialized screens. Their initial effort was crucial for asserting the community's visibility within the independent filmmaking circuit.

The second wave of ascent in the twenty-first century, as examined in Chapter 2, was propelled by deep sociocultural transformation within the post-1965 second generation. Drawing from their distinct bicultural upbringings and grappling with the persistent "perpetual foreigner" stereotype, this generation turned to cinema as a vital medium of cultural assertion. For them, the family unit became an indispensable narrative lens, powerfully articulating the "acculturation gaps" and emotional complexities inherent in navigating American individualism and Chinese familial traditions. Their identity-driven cinematic practices revitalized the genre, infusing it with fresh perspectives and deepening its emotional resonance.

However, as demonstrated in Chapter 3 through the analytical lens of Howard Becker's art worlds theory, the mainstream and institutional recognition of these narratives was contingent on far more than their cultural resonance. The commercial breakthrough of *Crazy Rich Asians* and the historic Oscar sweep of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* were not

organic triumphs of cultural expression, but the direct results of orchestrated industrial labor—a form of strategic, collective action that mobilized producers, distributors, critics, and audiences to reshape the boundaries of mainstream cinema. The former film demonstrated the commercial viability of Chinese American stories by mastering the logics of the Hollywood studio system, while the latter, under A24's expert stewardship, achieved the highest form of institutional legitimacy by aligning artistic innovation with a sophisticated prestige-building machinery.

In conclusion, the significance of Chinese American family cinema lies in this very synthesis. Its trajectory demonstrates that sustainable representation is achieved not when marginalized stories are simply told, but when their tellers master the ability to render them structurally legible and commercially viable within dominant industrial logics. The genre's evolution—from Wayne Wang's strategic indie navigation to the Daniels' Oscar-sweeping triumph—ultimately underscores a fundamental truth: in the contemporary cultural landscape, visibility is decisively forged at the precise intersection of artistic vision and strategic institutional mastery.

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