

Chinatown and the American Dream: Representation of Chinatown in *Flower Drum Song* and *The Year of the Dragon*

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Abstract— Chinese-American literature has become prevalent throughout especially Western culture, as many Asian communities migrated to America and expanded its culture. Amongst many produced works, David Hwang's *Flower Drum Song* and Frank Chin's *The Year of the Dragon* have gained much popularity in 19th century literature as both successfully depicted Chinatown in their own colors through the use of different plots and characters. While the two works share similarities such as referring to the common Asian stereotypes towards Chinese-Americans, their depictions of the life in Chinatown are noticeably different. *Flower Drum Song* provides a more optimistic point of view on the lives of Chinese-Americans, where the American Dream that people have when first entering the United States is somewhat achievable. Mei Li, the illegal Chinese immigrant for instance, achieves her goal by marrying the person she loves in the end. However, in contrast, *The Year of the Dragon* delineates the life in Chinatown from a more pessimistic point of view, where the characters suffer difficulties while trying to survive and fail to find their sense of identity and to satisfy their personal desires. Thus, the paper will explore the similarities and differences of the representations of Chinatown in both *Flower Drum Song* and *The Year of the Dragon* according to each writer's interpretation of Chinatown's reality. Furthermore, the paper will thoroughly examine how Hwang and Chin each portray Chinatown differently by the selection of genres, depiction of characters, utilization of space, and interpretation of Asian masculinity and femininity in their own ways.

Index Terms— American Dream, Chinatown, Immigration, *Flower Drum Song*, *The Year of the Dragon*,

The Asian community has become prevalent throughout the American literature and popular culture as many Asian communities made their way throughout the Western society through migration in the early mid-nineteenth century. In the process of adjustment, the Asians and Asian Americans suffered discrimination and misrepresentations as they were excluded by the American society; it was only natural for the Asian community to be represented to the American's taste, interpretation, and knowledge. One of the most common misrepresentations of Asians were physical appearance, which were commonly represented in films, plays, and other diverse types of media. Jenny Egan in her textbook *Imaging the Role: Makeup as a Stage in Characterization* classifies the Oriental beauty to have "five distinct features: (1) straight black hair, sparse facial hair, (2) epicanthic flap, (3) round, flat face, (4) button nose with a low bridge, and (5) short 'rosebud' mouth (Egan 159)" (Lu, 5). The exact distinctive features particularly distinguished for Asian characters led even further for American actors to paint their faces with a color of white and darken their eye color to portray the Oriental features. Besides physical appearance, however, the communities and lifestyle of Chinese Americans were constantly misrepresented by the Western media as well. Especially the Chinese people, who first settled in America during the early 19th century, had to constantly face the struggle in between preserving their authentic culture and accepting the Western culture. Due to such struggles and misrepresentations, many literary texts

were produced that had different interpretations on how the Chinese Americans were situated in the Western culture, and especially on how they should be portrayed in the media. For instance, the film adaptation (1961) of the original play (1958) *Flower Drum Song* and Frank Chin's *The Year of the Dragon* demonstrate different perspectives of how Chinatown is placed and represented in Western society. Thus, this paper will examine the diversely depicted Chinatowns and Chinese American characters and how differently they represent the Asian American communities struggling to survive in American society in relation to the American Dream.

David Henry Hwang and Frank Chin have different interpretations on the life in America's Chinatown and the reality the Chinese Americans have to face. The musical *Flower Drum Song*, which is based on a novel by Chinese-American author C. Y. Lee, begins its plot with young Mei Li and her father illegally arriving in America in order to find her promised fiancée Sammy. However, the plot soon begins to twist as Sammy already has a lover Linda, and soon the four characters Mei Li, Sammy, Linda, and Ta struggle to find their appropriate and 'meant-to-be' lovers in Chinatown. Ironically, in the end, even though Mei Li entered the United States illegally, such illegality in the end helped her marry the person she loved. Thus, the play ends with the characters finding who they wish to love, which in the end also pleases the elderly as well; therefore, Chinatown meets its happy ending and suggests a optimistic perspective of living in America's Chinatown. In contrast to Hwang, Frank Chin provides a more critical and realistic viewpoint on America's Chinatown. *The Year of the Dragon* takes place in San Francisco Chinatown based on the Eng family who run a small family tour business. It is

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around Chinese New Year and in order to celebrate, all the family members gather in the household, including China Mama who is Pa's first Chinese wife he married in China. The somewhat disoriented Chinese American household struggles arduously to find their true identities as a Chinese and/or American in the Western culture. The play delineates the dismay and inner struggle that the younger Chinese-American generations each have to face as they have failed to achieve the ultimate American dream in their own ways. The play ends with the tragic ending to the death of Pa and the eldest son Fred conforming to the American culture that he had so longingly tried to avoid.

Keeping in mind of the plots, the specific choice of genres of either being produced as a musical or play has great influence in building each story and resolving and/or heightening its conflict. During the 1950s, many media productions initiated to buck the trend of the 'yellowface' casting, which promoted actual Asian and Asian Americans to play the role of Asians instead of casting white actors. However, despite such efforts of increasing the Asian influence in Western culture, the issue of Chinese immigration was not yet resolved, leading many immigrants to be rejected, imprisoned, or deported. To America, Communism was a potential threat to the country at the time, and thus were highly reluctant to accept the Chinese immigrants. Highly aware of the current issue in society, Hwang's *Flower Drum Song* "addressed this issue by introducing and centralizing an illegal immigration plot line, forever cementing the issue of race-based immigration policies in their sunny, splashy vision of quaint Chinatown life" (Kim). The musical cleverly depicted the rather tense and sensitive issue to their own benefit and twisted it into a musical full of music, performance, and entertainment. Making the serious issue of illegal immigration into an enjoyable musical, it brought the effect of soothing the tense atmosphere of the society and at the same time sending the message they intended. The illegal immigrant, who represents the modest and traditional heroine, is the main cause of bringing the four characters, Mei Li, Ta, Sammy, and Linda, to their self-realizations and desires. Most of all, the Americanized Ta who had nothing to do with his father's traditions of being a Chinese, was able to reconnect with his traditions and roots as he fell in love with Mei Li. Ta and Mei Li's relationship does not simply refer and symbolize a mere romance, but rather represents the significance of the two cultures coming together as one. Kim also writes in her essay about Mei Li by saying, "Her undocumented entry, which appears nowhere in the original novel, sets up a contradictory narrative trajectory in which their 'illegal' entry (the word is used in the film) is softened and excused, though, admittedly, at the price of sentimentalizing it rather than examining its root causes" (Kim). Mei Li's entering to the United States, although illegal, can be forgiven as she does not bring any harm to the country, but rather brings a solution for the rest of the Chinese-Americans living in Chinatown. Thus, being a musical genre engages the audience to relate more, empathize and lighten the social tension between the two cultures.

By the 1970s, Chinese immigration laws have become less restrictive and therefore the population of Chinese residents grew as well. As the Chinese community increased, the

Chinese culture expanded its roots as well, inviting the Chinese New Year, firecrackers, Chinese cuisine, etc., into the American culture. However, as the number of Chinese immigrants grew in American society, there were many problems that occurred as well for the Chinese-Americans, especially racism. Thus, many literature and media productions regarding the struggle of the Chinese-Americans were starting to be produced to the public. Out of many, the most representative writer is Frank Chin as he actively expressed strong feelings about the struggles of Chinese-Americans regarding their lost sense of identity. His most powerful weapon was his pen as he tried to fight against the racial prejudices the Chinese people had to restrain from in the white dominated society; the Chinese writer tried to constantly make the Chinese-Americans in America to become alert to their rights they should fight for. "From the works of Frank Chin, we can see clearly his rebellious writing motifs: on one hand, he fights bravely against the western hegemonic discourse with which the white racists impose prejudiced stereotypes on the Chinese Americans; on the other hand, he reproaches fiercely those Chinese Americans who try to cater to the taste of the West by self-orientalizing Chinese culture and Chinese people" (Gang, 77). Naturally, Frank Chin was focused more on examining and developing the dark aspects of being a Chinese American in the white society America. Thus, as Chin's work pursued a different purpose regarding the message it expresses, the play genre emphasizes the harsh and dark reality of Chinatown. As plays are normally more focused on the wording, diction, and to the smallest detail, it provides a more sensitive aspect of the narration, therefore heightening certain emotions the writer wishes to portray. Thus, the two different genres, musical and play, serve very different purposes to further enlighten the narration and story's plot.

First of all, the ways the plots and how the characters do and/or do not achieve happiness in America are different in the two works. For instance, *Flower Drum Song* consists of various outdoor scenes, where characters interact with the outside environment. As an example, Pa goes to the bank, Ta goes on a date with Linda in a restaurant, Linda works at a nightclub, and so forth. The audience therefore are able to see the more active, busy, and social aspect of Chinatown and the people who live there. The characters are very interactive and they are not perceived to be limited by the Western culture; therefore, it demonstrates that the characters have no problem in adapting and accepting the Western culture. Of course, in the beginning, Mei Li and her father Dr. Li, who have come from China, represent the oriental Chinese culture that has not yet been tainted by Westernization. They embody the persona of being simple and traditional and also who lack a sophistication as they are not yet adapted to the urban and modern American life. However, as the plot progresses, Mei Li in the end is suggested to have conformed into the American culture whether intentional or not. For example, once Ta visits Mei Li in Sammy's house to congratulate her and Sammy's marriage, Mei Li asks Ta to kiss her as she has learned from the American TV show. A source confirms by saying, "Yet Mei Li has apparently adjusted well to 'modern' life in America. She stays up to watch the late movie and is inspired to announce her illegal status at the wedding ceremony to avoid marrying

Sammy...juxtaposing the construction of Chinese tradition versus contemporary American television programming" (Thalheim, 27). This clearly demonstrates how the once traditional Chinese has become accepting and adapting to the American urban life, values, and culture. Furthermore, the musical ends with a very happy ending where all four lovers are reunited (or well-suited) with one another, which brings great satisfaction to all the traditional Chinese elderlies, including Dr. Li and Mr. Wang. The musical portrays "...the United States as the epitome of modernity and China as a land of the past. In the case of the musical, the happy ending is only achieved once the young lovers can satisfactorily negotiate their identities as both Chinese and American – members of the 'old world' as well as the 'new.'" (Thalheim, 27). Especially Mr. Wang is able to achieve what he had previously wished and planned for his son, which was having him marry a traditional Chinese woman. Hence, such a satisfactory end result for the Chinese Americans trying to survive in the Western society demonstrates a very optimistic point of view of living as a Chinese American and successfully finding the sense of self-identity.

On the other hand, different from the musical, the entire story of *The Year of the Dragon* is set in one location, which is inside the Eng family's household. The entire narrative takes place inside the house where all the characters gather to celebrate the Chinese New Year. The whole family is seemed to be placed in a position where they are constantly struggling to find their places in Chinatown. The very fact that the story occurs in the household symbolizes isolation, where the Eng family is isolated from the rest of the community and especially the American culture. They are isolated from the Western world based on the American perceptions towards Chinese people and also the set norms that defined the Asians. Thus, this portrays the Eng family as rather anti-social, passive, and at times lonely, as they are unable to fit into the true definition of a so-called 'Chinese American'. In contrast to Mei Li, Pa, the head of the household, is unable to conform into American culture even though he seemingly wishes to at some moments. For instance, the highly traditional Chinese character makes his son Fred call him 'pop', which is a reference to Charlie Chan. He tells Fred, "Call me 'Pop'" repeatedly even though his son refuses to do so (Chin, 131). Such attempt of adjusting to the Western culture by referring to Charlie Chan ends in utter failure as not only his son refuses to accept his change, but also, Pa himself physically is not able to manage such adaptation. Due to his illness, Pa meets his death in the house, where it symbolically represents the traditional Chinese culture unable to conform and accept the Western culture, therefore leading to the very decay of Pa (both physically and literally). Thus, through the tragic ending of the Eng family and their isolation from the rest of Chinatown and the American society, the harsh reality and struggles the Chinese Americans have to go through in order to survive throughout the Western culture can be acknowledged.

Similarly, Asian masculinity portrayed in the two works are very different and worthwhile to examine. Wang Ta and Fred Eng both are the eldest sons that are pressured to follow the high expectations of their traditional Chinese fathers. Although both fathers have high expectations towards

their sons, Ta and Fred are expected to follow different expectations and live a very different lifestyle from each another. For instance, *Flower Drum Song's* Ta lives a life that is rather free and very 'American', where he goes to college and enjoys the luxury of hanging out with friends and enjoying a causal beer now and then. The Wang family is wealthy and the eldest son does not seem to have the pressure of having to earn money right away. He enjoys the American lifestyle of meeting women and going on dates, and also enjoying the education America has to offer. Ta is described as "Like many young Asian Americans of his generation, Ta viewed himself as American-born Chinese fully integrated 'into a homogeneous part of the majority society's core culture' (Chun 79)" (Rousset-Johnson, 15). Being accepting to a more modern culture and having the courage to go against traditional values set by his father, Ta is able to truly become a content Chinese American who is able to live the American Dream. In addition, Ta has the margin to dive into the dating pool, as he goes on several dates with Linda Low, who he instantly developed feelings for. Ta even falls into a dilemma of having to choose between the very Chinese-like Mei Li and the Americanized Linda. To make matters even more interesting, Helen Chao, his friend since childhood, expresses passionate love for him as well. Ta therefore struggles to define his own feelings and who he truly feels passionate for, where such conflict is explicitly portrayed in the film. The fact that Ta has the margin to debate over relationships with females heightens the emphasis on the successful American life Ta is living in Chinatown. Moreover, such romance of the Chinese Americans delineates Chinatown to be a friendlier and less negative environment to live in.

On the other hand, Fred Eng does not have the fortunate opportunity to live like Ta. Fred is the unfortunate one in the family who gives up his own dreams in order to follow his father's wishes as the eldest son. Fred gives up going to college because Pa's ultimate wish was for his eldest son to participate in the family tour business and also gives up writing, which was Fred's passion and dream. Instead, Fred runs the family tour business and dislikes his daily life of being a tour guide. Fred keeps telling himself, "Drop that phony accent. And be me. Just me" (Chin, 71). He has to fake himself with phony accents in order to encourage tourists to visit Chinatown and keep the business going, which clashes with his own personal values. Thus, Fred's ultimate wish of accomplishing the American dream has shattered as he stays trapped in Chinatown. Furthermore, Fred does not have anything else that he can attach himself to, as there is no other reference about Chinatown besides his family and work. Thus, unlike Ta's, Fred's Chinatown is like an empty shell that is only lavishing on the outside and has nothing but darkness in the inside. For instance, when talking to Ma about Pa, he says, "Ma, you're a realist and he's a dreamer..." (Chin, 133). Fred criticizes his father for being unrealistic as he tries to become more 'American' living in Chinatown. Such criticism demonstrates the bitterness Fred holds for Chinatown and the dark and harsh reality he and his family has to face.

Besides the younger generations Fred and Ta, the father figures of the two works show symbolic differences in relation to class. In Chinese culture, which follows the Confu-

cius ideology, fathers are considered to be the center of the household, who holds the authority, power, and status. Hence, following such definitions of Chinese culture, Mr. Wang and Pa naturally take the authoritative roles in the two works. To begin with, both Mr. Wang and Pa are portrayed as ill and in bad health. Mr. Wang coughs especially when he is anxious or hears something that is very disturbing while Pa is even more ill to the point where he cannot function without the help of his family members. For example, when Pa is getting ready to deliver his speech at the ceremony, he receives help from Johnny as his youngest son "lifts Pa's arms and sprays his armpits with deodorant" (Chin, 129). Pa has to receive help for even the littlest thing, making him seem like a child that needs constant caring; thus, such implications degrades Pa's sense of strong authority as a father figure and makes him seem feeble and weak. Thus, such difference in the depth of illness of the fathers distinguish the two; Mr. Wang naturally is positioned in the higher status in comparison to Pa as he is healthier and is able to act based on his own free will. Health is very symbolic in Chinese culture as it relates to the country's dying culture. An article in the Sage journal explains, "In the Chinese culture, death is always regarded as a negative life event except a good death ('bai xi shi' or 'white happy event' to translate it literally into English - that is death as a result of natural cause such as aging with a content life and no outstanding life regrets) (Zheng, 1999) ... In other words, life is lost forever when death occurs" (Xu, 412). Taking the fact that both male figures consider the traditional Chinese culture to be important, health therefore serves as a source that determines the masculinity and also the status of the two father figures in society. Thus, as health is another trait of wealth besides financial power, the physically weak Pa is demonstrated to fall alongside with the fallen American dream.

Furthermore, besides the significant difference of health, Mr. Wang and Pa demonstrate a class difference through their financial wealth as well. The Wang household is very rich as they have a large mansion-like house and a beautiful garden inside the house with a small fountain. The house has many rooms, where a house with many rooms symbolized wealth and the walls and floor are made of marbles. The house in a sense explores a more Western space, following the line of the American dream (where one of the ultimate goals is financial success). The house is consisted of two floors with large furniture and also has a television that was only in rich households during that time. On the other hand, the Eng family does not share the same fortune as the Wang family; rather, according to the house description, the family does not seem to be doing well financially. The house setting is described as, "Old Frisco Chinatown apartment... An old gas stove, a newish refrigerator... A stack of old newspapers against the wall next to the front door. The kitchen is crowded with a neat arrangement of stuff. Kitchen stuff. Sewing stuff. Stuff to be thrown out" (Chin, 72). The choice of diction such as 'old', 'newish', and 'crowded', provides the image of a middle/low class household that struggles to survive. The house seems to be distraught in a way, and it seems to be very disorganized compared to the Wang household; this comparison of the house further heightens the class difference between Mr.

Wang and Pa. Furthermore, as soon as Sis enters the house for the first time, her first words are "Oh, ma, the place hasn't changed a bit. It gives me a chill..." (Chin, 72). Sis's comment on the house summarizes the fact that the house has been in the exact place as it was years ago, and that the house (which parallels with the family as well) is not able to move forward. Thus, without the ability to move forth, the Eng family also is left to stay where they are, trapped in the Chinatown they wish to move away from.

Thus, the two father figures naturally reflect different concepts of paternalism and the role of being the father in the household. Mr. Wang, in *Flower Drum Song*, represents the so-called 'Americanized paternalism', where the father figure is more delineated to satisfying the American audience's tastes. Mr. Wang certainly does portray the stereotypical oriental father figure, who constantly goes back to his Chinese roots and attempts to pass it on to the next generation. However, Mr. Wang does to a certain extent give in to the Western culture and accepts the new tradition. For instance, the father sends both his sons to school, allowing them to have American education and define themselves as Chinese-American. Throughout the musical, the children of the Wang family are shown to play baseball, dance the cha-cha, and also at times complain about how traditionally 'ancient' Mr. Wang seems to be in their eyes. In addition, Mr. Wang and his family enjoy meals outside of the house and goes to the night club, owned by Sammy Fong. Such visitation and exposure to the Western culture demonstrates the father's tolerance to a Westernized sense of paternity, enabling his children and household to move from the traditional culture on a certain level. On the other hand, Pa from *The Year of the Dragon* is far from representing a Western paternalism. As stated above, Pa strictly maintains the traditions of the oriental Chinese culture and rejects any non-Chinese culture. Unlike Ta, Fred was not able to go to school and complete his education against his will; rather, Fred was 'forced' to manage the family tour business (according to the words of Fred). Pa also completely disregards his daughter's American husband and does not even seem to notice the presence of Ross in his house. Even though he cannot completely prevent Western culture to merge in, he definitely tries to avoid such invasion. Thus, Mr. Wang and Pa delineate two similar yet very different types of fatherhood, where one represents the more open and tolerant father figure while the other represents the secluded and traditional.

Besides Asian masculinity, Asian femininity is differently suggested and portrayed in the two plays of Hwang and Chin as well. Hwang and Chin demonstrates how Asian females, whether traditional or not, objectify themselves as a method to adapt and survive in Chinatown. First, Mei Li represents the typical Chinese woman that has not yet been tainted by the foreign Western culture. In *Flower Drum Song*, Mei Li took the role of satisfying the audiences' expectations of a true Asian woman, who is extremely feminine, polite, submissive, and passive especially towards men. Such oriental characteristics are displayed by various distinctive features, especially through her foreign English accent. Her foreign-like accent emphasizes the idea of a person that has not yet been influenced by the Western culture, which exactly fits to the depiction of a traditional Asian woman. Due to her submissiveness,

Mei Li is prone to become objectified by the male society, as she is treated as such from the beginning. The main purpose of her entering the United States was to find her promised husband, where she was chosen as a 'gift' from Sammy's mother to him as a picture bride. Also, when she was presented to Mr. Wang by Sammy, he inspected Mei Li, including her teeth, and commented how strong she was just like a cow; such troubling scene therefore demonstrates how Mei Li was treated as a type of product sold in a market. Most importantly, Mei Li does not seem to be bothered by her objectification but rather takes a step further to behave in certain ways to satisfy Mr. Wang, who is the male authority of the household. However, the typical 'China doll' becomes to open to the new American culture as the musical progresses. Mei Li's song 'I am Going to Like It Here' in the musical implies the possibility of her becoming adjusted to the new culture, as she absorbs different aspects of Western tradition. Also, her marriage to Ta symbolizes her acceptance in becoming a Chinese-American, therefore enabling herself to become an object 'sold' to American culture.

Different from Mei Li, Linda Low is presented as the stereotypical 'Dragon Lady', which implies the East Asian stereotype that portrays women to be deceitful, mysterious, and seductive. Linda is indeed very beautiful and seductive, luring Ta to marry her so she could end her career as a dancer and make her lover Sammy jealous at the same time. Her song 'I Enjoy Being a Girl' in the musical demonstrates her pride towards her beauty, especially her femininity. Her job as a dancer in the Celestial Gardens nightclub pushes her to be more Westernized and break off from the stereotypes of being a traditional Chinese woman. The night club dancers follow the performances of the showgirls of Vegas and also the leading announcer in the club mentions that the girls are highly educated (although its validity is not confirmed), which implies the fact that the so-called 'new Chinese women' are smarter and somewhat sassier than the traditional Chinese women. As Linda expresses her femininity through her songs, job, and choice of physical attraction (long thick hair, short skirt, heavy make-up, etc.), her sexuality is hypersexualized, therefore making her a object of commercial worth. Linda therefore "stood for the uber-girl: long-haired, short-skirted, coy, and flirtatious. Combining international events and such cinematic performances, the Asian and Asian American woman represented doubly exaggerated femininity" (Lim, 174). Linda's beauty and sexuality served as the ultimate source that gave her the opportunity of achieving the American Dream with a luxurious lifestyle.

In contrast, Fred's sister Sis, in Chin's *The Year of the Dragon*, is delineated from a different perspective compared to Hwang's sexually objectified females. Sis, also known as 'Mattie', is objectified into a certain persona she has created in order to sell her cookbook. Sis has become successful in producing her own cookbook with her Chinese recipes under the name 'Mama Fu Fu'. Under the pseudonym Mama Fu Fu, Sis gains credibility and at the same time is able to promote her recipes interactively with her Western audience as well. While talking to Sis, Fred says, "Yeah, Mama Fu Fu! The atmospheric patter between the recipes sure makes Chinatown sound like I'd like to live there..." (Chin, 79). The pseudonym gives her a

more approachable and credible cook, as the diction 'Fu' signifies fortune or good luck in Chinese ideograph and was a commonly used term in America regarding Chinese culture. Hence, Sis was only able to gain credibility and the opportunity to survive in the Western culture when she objectified herself as Mama Fu Fu; without such objectification of herself as a distinguished persona, her chances of achieving the success of the American Dream were low. In relation, Sis is successfully married to a white man, which stereotypically is known to be the 'American dream' for Asian women. However, despite her achievement, her marriage seems to be rather frail as her husband Ross is not accepted by her Chinese family and is treated as a source of ridicule. Her husband most likely does not fit the profile of the typical White alpha male, who is authoritative, physically built, and masculine. On contrary, Ross may be defined as a Sinophile/Chinophile, which refers to a person who has strong interests and passion towards the Chinese people and their culture. Hence, in order to fulfill his certain fantasy of China, Sis's husband struggles to make failed attempts to blend into the Chinese culture, making him even more a point of ridicule. In addition, he is represented as highly passive and undesirable. Ross pitches in the conversation of the family when he says, "Women hate me. Homosexuals hate me...Hawks hate me. Doves. Republicans, Communists, Democrats, Southern Whites...I'm Mr. White Male Supremacist. Middle Middle class American liberal Four Years of College Pig. So I'm used to hostility..." (Chin, 129). His harsh self-criticism switches the power dynamics, leading the white supremacy to be degraded and elevating the inferior race. Hence, such failure of white supremacy makes Sis an object of ridicule, most likely a failure as an Asian woman in the Western culture.

In conclusion, both *Flower Drum Song* and *The Year of the Dragon* acutely portrays the lives and struggles Chinese Americans living in Chinatown based in a Western society and culture. While the musical focuses more on delineating the optimistic and almost dream-like life of Chinatown, the play depicts a more realistic and harsh fall of the American dream; thus, the two works seem to demonstrate the struggle between the desirable reality versus the actual reality. Hence, Hwang's delineation of the desirable reality with its satisfying ending and Chin's portrayal of the actual reality with its tragic fate the characters face reminds the audience of the problem Chinese Americans face. Thus, such unresolved stereotypical struggles and desire to achieve the American Dream ongoing until today still remains an issue that Asians living in Western culture have to yet resolve.

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