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Breaking the Script: Cross-Generational Upward Mobility in Interior Chinatown

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Abstract: This essay examines Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown* through Erving Goffman's framework of front stage, back stage, and off-stage to analyze how Asian American identity is scripted and contested. Focusing on the Wu family, it traces three generations negotiating the pressures of racial performance. Ming-Chen Wu, the first generation, enters the United States with aspirations but becomes trapped in stereotypical Chinatown roles such as Sifu or Old Asian Man, showing how survival often requires conformity. His son, Willis Wu, initially internalizes the same logic, aspiring to become Kung Fu Guy, but gradually realizes the limits of such roles. His courtroom speech exposes both complicity and resistance, revealing the difficulty of escaping externally imposed scripts. The third generation, Phoebe, grows up beyond Chinatown, embodying the possibility of self-definition unburdened by inherited stereotypes. By juxtaposing these trajectories, the essay argues that *Interior Chinatown* critiques the persistence of racial scripts while envisioning cross-generational mobility not simply as economic advancement but as the symbolic and cultural freedom to live beyond performance.

1. Literature review

Existing scholarship on Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown* has approached the novel from multiple perspectives, highlighting its treatment of discrimination, identity performance, and the symbolic role of Chinatown. Nur examines the forms of Taiwanese American discrimination in *Interior Chinatown*, applying Pettigrew's framework to reveal both direct and indirect patterns of exclusion, including citizenship status, racial prejudice, and government restrictions[1]. This sociological reading underscores how Yu dramatizes structural inequalities embedded in immigrant life. Similarly, Yuan situates the novel within the discourse of the American Dream, arguing that Yu exposes the contradictions of Asian Americans' pursuit of upward mobility[2]. Yuan shows how racial stereotypes and systemic barriers render the "American Dream" unrealizable, echoing the dilemmas of characters such as Ming-Chen and Willis Wu.

Other critics emphasize questions of identity and performance. Yubing explores how the novel stages ethical dilemmas through the theatrical form of a screenplay, foregrounding the struggles of Asian American characters to balance family, career, and identity[3]. Yubing contends that Yu demonstrates how various modes of identity performance, whether through attempts at integration or through disengagement, frequently culminate in failure, thereby exposing the precarious and unstable

position of Asian Americans within mainstream U.S. society. Sun and Wei extend this discussion by analyzing Chinatown as both a physical and symbolic space[4]. They argue that Yu participates in a broader literary tradition that transforms Chinatown from an ethnic enclave into a cultural signifier, highlighting its dual role as both a site of entrapment and a locus of cultural identity.

In addition to these literary approaches, sociological engagements with Goffman's theory have offered useful conceptual frameworks. Serpa and Ferreira revisit Goffman's notion of the backstage, emphasizing its relevance for contemporary identity negotiations[5]. Their insights resonate with Yu's dramatization of the "front stage" of Hollywood sets and Golden Palace performances, contrasted with the "backstage" of SRO housing, where characters seem to step outside the script yet remain bound to racialized expectations.

Together, these studies reveal a consistent interest in how Yu's novel dramatizes the entanglement of performance, identity, and discrimination. This essay draws on Goffman's dramaturgical framework to examine *Interior Chinatown*. The novel portrays a movement across generations: Ming-Chen conforms, Willis resists, and Phoebe embodies symbolic freedom. Together, these shifts show how racial scripts endure, yet they also open a path toward moving beyond them.

2. Introduction

In *Interior Chinatown*, Charles Yu uses the structure of a scripted television show to examine Asian American identity across generations. Given that Yu himself cites Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* as a key influence, it is appropriate to draw on Goffman's framework in analyzing the novel. Through sociologist Erving Goffman's concepts of front stage, back stage, and off-stage, he shows how racial stereotypes shape both external perceptions and self-identity. However, across different generations, we can see that these Chinese Americans are trying to break this constraint and achieve upward mobility. The Wu family's story reflects the struggles and aspirations of immigrant families, highlighting their fight for agency. As a first-generation immigrant, Ming-Chen Wu fully embraces performance, eventually becoming unable to separate his roles from reality. His son, Willis Wu, initially follows the same path, aspiring to be Kung Fu Guy, but eventually realizes how trapped he is and begins pushing back. Phoebe, the third generation, grows up outside Chinatown, free from the racial struggles that define her father and grandfather. She represents the possibility of living beyond racial scripts, shaping her identity without the weight of the past. Through their journey, *Interior Chinatown* critiques the racial expectations placed on Asian Americans while also offering a hopeful vision, where cross-generational upward mobility is not just about financial success but about the freedom to define oneself beyond imposed roles.

3. Theoretical Framework and Textual Background

3.1 Charles Yu's Interior Chinatown: Context and Overview

Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown* is a satirical novel that examines Asian American identity, stereotypes, and the struggle for self-definition within American culture. Written in the form of a television script, the novel highlights how Asian Americans are repeatedly cast into limited, stereotypical roles such as "Generic Asian Man," "Kung Fu Guy," or "Old Asian Man." The story follows Willis Wu, a Taiwanese American actor who dreams of rising from the background to achieve the role of Kung Fu Guy, the highest position available to someone like him within Hollywood's racial hierarchy. His father, Ming-Chen Wu, represents the first generation: an immigrant who once aspired to an academic life but ultimately became trapped in the endless cycle of Chinatown performances. His mother, too, embodies roles such as "Pretty Asian Woman" or "Old Asian Woman," demonstrating the gendered constraints of these scripts.

As Willis navigates auditions, restaurant jobs, and community life, he realizes how much these roles dictate not only how others see him but also how he sees himself. A turning point comes in his courtroom speech, where he acknowledges complicity in these stereotypes while also voicing resistance. The narrative then shifts toward his daughter, Phoebe, who symbolizes hope: growing up outside Chinatown, she has the chance to live beyond the limitations imposed on earlier generations. Through humor, irony, and metafictional play, Yu critiques systemic racism while imagining the possibility of freedom and authenticity beyond racial performance.

3.2 Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory: Front Stage, Backstage, and Beyond

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, first developed in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, offers a powerful framework for analyzing social interaction through the metaphor of theater. He distinguishes between *front stage* behavior, in which individuals perform roles in public while adhering to social norms and cultural scripts, and *backstage* behavior, where they relax, prepare, or express themselves more freely, away from the audience's gaze. Goffman also emphasizes the importance of "setting," "appearance," and "manner" in shaping these performances, noting that social life is always context-dependent and influenced by cultural expectations[6]. Importantly, people work hard to maintain the separation between front stage and backstage, since violating this boundary creates confusion or discomfort. His model reminds us that identity is not fixed but negotiated through repeated performances, and that the act of moving between stages itself reveals the pressures of social life.

In the context of Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown*, Goffman's framework helps illuminate how Asian American characters navigate racial stereotypes as scripted performances. The front stage is embodied by spaces like the Golden Palace and Hollywood sets, where characters such as Ming-Chen and Willis Wu conform to roles like "Generic Asian Man" or "Kung Fu Guy" to meet societal expectations. The backstage emerges in private spaces such as the SRO, where these characters might appear to let down their guard but remain psychologically tethered to the scripts imposed on them. Yu's narrative structure highlights how these boundaries are fragile, since even private spaces are haunted by the demands of performance[7]. By applying Goffman's concepts, this essay examines how Yu dramatizes the tension between external performance and inner identity. It also explores how cross-generational shifts, from Ming-Chen's acceptance, to Willis's resistance, to Phoebe's freedom.

4. Front Stage: Hollywood Stereotypes and Racial Scripts

The front stage of Asian American identity is heavily influenced by Hollywood's racialized depictions, producing Asian stereotypes. Yu's portrayal aligns with sociologist Erving Goffman's theory that people conform to expected roles within a given cultural script. This theme is vividly captured through the depiction of the Golden Palace, a restaurant that functions as a symbolic stage for performing Asianness. The Golden Palace has been around for quite some time. It is previously known as the Palace of Good Fortune and then the Jade Palace [8], suggesting that while the name has changed, its role in presenting a fixed image of Asian identity has stayed the same. For example, Ming-Chen Wu spends most of his life inside this space, moving through its roles until he can no longer separate himself from the performance it demands. As a first-generation immigrant, he exemplifies how deeply Asian Americans are confined to these stereotypes in their initial attempts at belonging. In other words, Ming-Chen Wu remains within this system, playing roles like Sifu and Old Asian Man, ultimately accepting these constraints as the price of survival in America. At the same time, while Ming-Chen ultimately becomes trapped in the Golden Palace roles, Yu emphasizes that this was not his original trajectory. He first arrives in America as a graduate student in Mississippi, where he enjoys a stipend and briefly feels prosperous. When Ming-Chen receives his first stipend as

a graduate student, he can hardly believe the amount is real. For a brief moment, he experiences an unprecedented sense of financial security, a feeling of prosperity he has never known before. Living with international peers, he is far removed from the racial scripts of Chinatown, which highlights that his eventual entrapment is not inevitable but the result of systemic pressures.

The Golden Palace embodies this idea by presenting a version of Asian culture tailored to outside expectations rather than reflecting real lived experiences. It isn't treated as a community but as a stereotyped stage. As Bonnie Tsui writes, Chinatown often functions as a flexible set that "could be made to represent itself or any other Chinatown in the world" [8], reinforcing the idea that it's a visual shorthand for "Asianness." Within this space, "friends and neighbors, rivals and fellow kung fu students" show up dressed as "prep cooks and dishwashers" [8], underscoring how everyday people are cast into scripted roles. At the same time, the description of "dead moths clinging to yellowing, torn paper lanterns" and "cloudy tanks of lobsters crawling over one another" is stereotyped of Chinatown, which seems very old and worn. The author also uses decorations such as the "neon Tsingtao sign" and "lychee margarita-tini" to exoticize Asian elements into consumable novelties for white audiences. These decorations showed up in places full of Asian stereotypes shaped by Hollywood, where Ming-Chen worked.

Beyond aesthetics, Yu emphasizes the entrapment of Asian identity within a cyclical framework. This is especially true for Ming-Chen, who slowly disappears into the role of Sifu. His career trajectory from Young Asian Man to Old Asian Man to invisibility mirrors the struggles of many immigrants who labor in roles dictated by societal expectations, and he ultimately accepts these constraints as the price of survival in America. Ming-Chen's inability to escape typecasting represents the broader immigrant struggle of being seen only through the lens of stereotypes. His story demonstrates how first-generation immigrants are often forced to perform a racialized identity, unable to challenge the roles imposed upon them. Finally, he is no longer seen as a full person, but as "some mystical Eastern force, some Wizened Chinaman" [8], and his identity is stripped with "no age or build, just a role, a name, a shell where he used to be."

What's left is not a father or a man but a figure shaped by other people's expectations. Over time, he becomes distant, quiet, and hard to reach. This is how he became Sifu. And this is also how he lost himself. It is also clear that the role doesn't stay on stage. It follows him home. Even backstage, he continues to carry it until it becomes hard to tell what part of him is left that isn't performance.

5. Back Stage: Personal and Cultural Struggles

According to Goffman, the backstage is where people can step away from the roles they play in front of others. It's often seen as a more private space, where performance lets up, and people can be more themselves. But in *Interior Chinatown*, even the backstage doesn't offer that kind of relief. For characters like Willis and his friends, the expectations don't disappear when the audience is gone. The line between performing and being blurs, and it becomes harder to tell where the role ends and the person begins.

Spaces like the SRO building and late-night community gatherings serve as the back stage, where Asian Americans temporarily shed their assigned roles. However, rather than offering complete freedom, these spaces reinforce a cyclical entrapment, where characters believe they are escaping but ultimately remain confined within the same structural limitations. Over time, Willis and his family internalize their roles, making it difficult to separate performance from self-identity. One key example occurs in the SRO, where Willis and his friends argue about martial arts and Hollywood's preference for certain fighting styles. They debate whether Wing Chun or flashy kicks are more desirable, ultimately concluding that Hollywood simply wants "cool Asian shit." [8]

Though they are physically removed from the Golden Palace, their conversation reveals how they

remain psychologically tethered to its logic, unable to conceive of themselves outside the framework imposed upon them. Willis's brief questioning of this reality is met with silence before his friends dismiss him as a downer and resume playing cards, suggesting a collective resignation to the roles they have internalized.

However, Willis begins to find that he has been trapped in this performance. During a dramatic scene where Willis is on trial, he delivers a speech that fully articulates his realization "Maybe I'm Kung Fu Guy at the moment, but I know as well as you all do that this is about half a rung above jack shit and I'm about one flubbed line from being busted back down to the background pool. It sucks being Generic Asian Man." [8]

He acknowledges that his entire life has been dictated by an externally imposed racial script, and his biggest mistake was internalizing it. Willis confesses that he has internalized these stereotypes, allowing them to shape his career and his perception of himself and others. For the first time, Willis openly challenges the system, calling out the injustice of being confined to these roles and the deeper implications for identity. His speech is not just about himself but about all Asian Americans who have been placed into these limited roles. The scene ends with an acknowledgment that he, like many others, has been complicit in maintaining this system by believing that success could be achieved within it rather than by rejecting it entirely. But even after the speech, the scene ends in kung-fu fighting. It's as if no matter what is said, the story still has to return to something familiar. Even in a courtroom, even at the moment when Willis seems to break out of the script, the narrative falls back into the same performance. It's a reminder that the structure he's trying to escape is still in place, that even resistance has to be staged.

Willis differs from his father in that he actively seeks to disrupt this cycle. His realization that even becoming a Kung Fu Guy is still a form of entrapment signals a step toward resistance. Unlike Ming-Chen, who accepts his role as fate, Willis begins to redefine his identity on his own terms, even if his ability to fully escape remains uncertain.

6. Off-Stage: Potential for Freedom

If the front stage represents Hollywood's racial scripts and the back stage reveals their psychological entrenchment, then off-stage emerges as a potential site of transformation. In Goffman's framework, off-stage is where individuals exist outside the immediate gaze of either performers or audience, suggesting a space where alternative identities might be explored.

Phoebe's living world is a space where there no stereotypes. Phoebe Land is described as a world without Generic Asian Men, Hostess, Prostitutes, or Old Asian People reminiscing about hardship. Instead, it is filled with "songs and flowers and upbeat jangles and jumps" [8]. At the same time, Willis observes that Phoebe "lives here, without history, unaware of all that came before" [8]. This stark contrast to his own childhood underscores the generational shift: Phoebe does not inherit the burdens of racial performance.

Unlike her father and grandfather, who remain trapped within the Chinatown system, Phoebe is moved out of Chinatown by Karen, signaling an attempt to break the cycle.

Karen's decision suggests rejecting the inherited roles that have trapped Willis and Ming-Chen. When Willis follows Phoebe into her castle, which is her closet, he watches her create her own world. It is a place of imagination, self-expression, and generosity, where she envisions a store where she sells things she makes but also gives them away for free. Observing Phoebe, Willis realizes she is not performing or acting. She is simply being. This moment contrasts with his childhood, where he always tried to play a role, striving to become a Kung Fu Guy. Watching her, he recognizes that she represents the possibility of a life unburdened by racial scripts.

Willis's experience in Phoebe Land marks his final break from Kung Fu Guy. In the final moments

of the novel, Phoebe asks Willis: "Are you still Kung Fu Guy?" Willis responds: "Nope…I'm your dad." Phoebe replies: "Oh…That's good." [8] This exchange symbolizes Willis's rejection of the role that once defined his existence. Instead of identifying himself through Hollywood's lens, he chooses a more personal, authentic identity as a father. Unlike his father, who was permanently trapped in racialized roles, and his younger self, who aspired to be a Kung Fu Guy, Willis finally chooses a different path, one defined by authenticity rather than performance. At the same time, Phoebe represents the potential for freedom from racial performance and stereotypes. She exists in an off-stage world, one that contrasts sharply with Willis's and Ming-Chen's past, marking her as a character who may not need to be defined by the struggles of previous generations.

7. Conclusion

In *Interior Chinatown*, Charles Yu explores the tension between performance and reality through three generations of the Wu family. Using the concepts of front stage, back stage, and off-stage, he highlights their shifting relationship with racial identity and the slow journey toward greater freedom.

Ming-Chen Wu, the first generation, is fully trapped by racial stereotypes. As an immigrant, he arrives in America with aspirations but finds himself confined to roles like the martial arts master or the aging, invisible old man. He internalizes these expectations, unable to distinguish between acting and living. His son, Willis Wu, initially follows the same path, believing that becoming a Kung Fu Guy is his only way to succeed. However, as he matures, he realizes the limits of both Chinatown and Hollywood's racial roles. His rejection of Kung Fu Guy and his decision to tell his own story mark his attempt to reclaim personal agency.

Yu dramatizes how Asian Americans often exist as visible yet invisible figures within the social landscape. Characters like Willis and Ming-Chen occupy spaces where their presence is acknowledged but their individuality is denied. As Goffman notes, "civil inattention demonstrates that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that one does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design"[9]. This notion captures the paradox of the "Generic Asian Man" role, in which recognition is paired with erasure. The Chinatown setting embodies this paradox, where Asian American characters are granted visibility as background performers yet remain excluded from full participation in the social script.

Phoebe Wu, the third generation, represents a break from this cycle. Raised outside Chinatown, she is not burdened by the same racial constraints as her father and grandfather. Unlike them, she has the freedom to shape her own identity, embodying the fullest sense of upward mobility, not just geographically but symbolically.

As Burns reminds us, Goffman should not be seen only as a sociologist of face-to-face encounters; his work also uncovers the rules and rituals that sustain social order, many of which echo in Yu's portrayal of Chinatown.[10] In *Interior Chinatown*, these rules appear in the form of racial scripts that confine characters to narrow roles, but Yu also traces how each generation negotiates them differently. From Ming-Chen's reluctant acceptance, to Willis's growing resistance, to Phoebe's chance to imagine a life beyond performance, the novel shows both the weight of stereotype and the fragile hope of escape. What emerges is not only a critique of systemic constraints but also a vision of freedom. It points to the possibility that identity can be lived rather than staged.

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