

## Article

# Learning to Speak Chinese: Defining the Sino-American Film Paradigm

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**Abstract:** This article proposes a new paradigm, Sino-American film, that is centered on Chinese language in American films. Sino-American films comprise two generations. The First Generation includes *Pushing Hands* (1993), *Take Out* (2004), and *Saving Face* (2004) and is characterized by independent production, limited distribution, and creation during a period when Asian Americans were rarely represented on film. The Second Generation includes *The Farewell* (2019), *Tigertail* (2019), *Shang-Chi and the Legend of Ten Rings* (2021), and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) and is characterized by a Hollywood production model, widespread distribution across streaming services, and creation during a period of growing Asian American cultural representation. Sino-American films negotiate both Chinese-language film and Hollywood by focusing on overlooked characters—Chinese-language-speaking Americans. This article contributes to conversations in Chinese film studies and Asian American studies by bringing Asian American film into exchanges with three Chinese film studies paradigms: transnational cinema, Chinese-language film, and Sinophone film. This cross pollination uncovers new areas for further study. Sino-American film demonstrates the importance of Sino-American language, ethnicity, and culture within the subsuming category of Asian American film. Furthermore, pairing Sino-American films with Chinese film studies uncovers a new category of Chinese-language film outside assumed contexts and paradigms.

**Keywords:** Chinese-language film; Hollywood; Asian American cinema; transnational cinema; Sinophone; Sino-American film; *Shang-Chi and the Legend of Ten Rings*; *Pushing Hands*; *The Farewell*; *Saving Face*



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## 1. Introduction

The opening sequence of *Shang-Chi and the Legend of Ten Rings* (2021) begins 1000 years ago. We linger on a battle standard emblazoned with the Ten Rings insignia before pulling away to survey a horseman army led by the Tony Leung-portrayed Wenwu<sup>1</sup>. The scene might seem familiar. The mise-en-scène has played out previously in John Woo's *Red Cliff* (2008) with Tony Leung portraying the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* general Zhou Yu. But this is a Marvel film<sup>2</sup>. As Wenwu charges forward, the Ten Rings jump from his forearms to CGI life. A quick succession of scenes filmed in a historical epic style depict events stretching from the Napoleonic Wars to World War II, informing us that Wenwu has “chased money and power for a thousand years”. An intertitle reveals a flash-forward to 1996. Wenwu is seen browsing the pages of an illustrated manuscript depicting legendary creatures from *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai jing*) including nine-tailed foxes, *fenghuang*, and *qilin*. We learn of “the legend of Ta Lo. A hidden village with mythical creatures and ancient magic. Where people practice a martial arts style from the gods”. Wenwu expeditions into a bamboo forest to find the lost village and is stopped by the masked guardian Yingli. In the style of *wuxia* films like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), Yingli and Wenwu begin to battle before their fight starts to shift<sup>3</sup>, from fighting to mutual appreciation, from mutual appreciation to dance, and, finally, from dance to attraction<sup>4</sup>. The opening sequence ends with Yingli, now a mother to their two children. She bequests a jade pendant to her son, the young

Shang-Chi, telling him “I want you to have this. Whenever you feel lost, this will help you find your way home”<sup>5</sup>. The final scene from the sequence is striking. It is the culmination of a nine-minute opening that has displayed several transnational film styles. But more importantly, the sequence has unfolded entirely in Mandarin.

*Shang-Chi* is part of a growing number of Hollywood films that have begun to tell stories bilingually in English and Chinese language<sup>6</sup>. This is separate from a declining phenomenon most visible during the 2010s where Hollywood films feature scenes that provide snippets of fan service to Chinese-language audiences through awkward insertions of Chinese-language dialogue and the casting of popular actors. The insertions range from innocuous to bewildering. In a rather unexpected case of product placement, audiences at the start of *Iron Man 3* (2013) are informed that Iron Man is fueled by the milk brand *Guliduo*. While halfway through *The Martian* (2015), a convoluted plot point is inserted where the China National Space Administration is introduced to provide the *deus ex machina*, a technologically advanced booster rocket, that enables NASA to reach Mars and save stranded botanist Dr. Mark Watney. Recent Hollywood films employing Chinese-language actors or dialogue have differed from these clumsy insertions by featuring multiple Chinese-language scenes spoken by Asian American characters, which strengthens their representation and animates their stories. The rise of Chinese language in traditionally anglophone Hollywood has challenged the relationship between Chinese-language films and Hollywood.

This article has three aims: (1) It proposes a paradigm of Sino-American film. (2) It presents a new history of Sino-American films beginning with Asian American cinema. Starting the paradigm with Asian American cinema encourages cross pollination between Asian American studies and three major Chinese film studies paradigms: transnational cinema, Chinese-language film, and Sinophone film. (3) I find that Sino-American films branch into a “First Generation” characterized by independent film production, limited distribution, and creation during a period when Asian Americans were rarely represented on film, and a “Second Generation” defined by the Hollywood production model, widespread distribution across streaming services, and creation during a new period of popular Asian American cultural representation.

If we think of the stakes of this article through the metaphor of Shang-Chi’s pendant and its promise of “find[ing] your way back home”, we find a clear bifurcated tension that Asian Americans face. Should Shang-Chi, or ‘Shaun’, find his way home to his Mandarin-speaking father Wenwu and sister Xialing? Or should he stay with his Chinese American surrogate family, which he shares with his friend Katy? One answer could be found in recent popular Asian American films like the skateboard documentary *Minding the Gap* (2018) and the rom-com *Always Be My Maybe* (2019). Both films have expanded the definition of Asian American film, encouraging viewers to consider what Kandice Chuh would term “imagine otherwise” (Chuh 2003). “Imagine otherwise” is a call and maneuver to reconsider the terms of, and relationship between, “Asian American” and “Asia”. Whether as a skateboarding documentary on trauma, manhood, and racism in the Rust Belt (Wicker 2018) or as a clever social commentary on the rom-com genre (Yamato 2019), recent Asian American films have challenged conventions and depicted an exciting breadth of experiences and stories. But these films are filmed in English. Asian American films speaking in non-English languages distinguish themselves through their language-specific context and culture.

*Shang-Chi* is emblematic of a group of films that use Chinese language to tell their stories. Chinese-language American films deserve their own attention and study. This group of films, which some might term “Chinese American film”, use Chinese language to varying effect and explore what it means to speak the Chinese language in America. This ranges from depictions of Chinese-language communities like in *Take Out* (2004) and code-switching bilingualism within a family like in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). This tests traditionally diverging and conflicting paradigms including Chinese-language film and Hollywood. Chinese-language film has been discussed as a separate paradigm

that serves as a resistance to dominant hegemonic Hollywood films (Lu 1997a, p. 132), while Hollywood is perceived as a monolingual film industry that depicts multilingualism negatively (Bleichenbacher 2008). When the pair have worked together, it has been through traceable flows of production and distribution. While excellent contributions have been made studying Sino-US co-productions and transnational cinema (Jin and Su 2019; Lim 2019; Zhu 2022), these studies have focused on flows from the United States to mainland China. I differentiate from these two paradigms through my centering of Chinese-language American films. This reverses the flow, as in the case of Ang Lee, from Chinese-language-speaking spaces to Hollywood. It can also complicate and disrupt the metaphor of flow entirely through home-grown Chinese-language American films as in the case of *Saving Face* (2004). I find that this new category of films must negotiate challenges including filming in a minority Chinese language and production in an American film industry that has traditionally resisted positive minority representation. Films like *Shang-Chi* offer an exciting multilingual overturning and restructuring of seemingly dominant and entrenched paradigms.

Sino-American film is a framework for Chinese-language-speaking American films. It is defined by the relationship between Chinese language and Sino-American identity, ethnicity, and culture<sup>7</sup>. Sino-American films can be blockbusters or independent films. Rather than starting with diaspora or the margins, Sino-American films are centered on depicting Chinese language and its use in America. Sino-American films intentionally center Chinese language and the potential for language, with all its nuance and connotation, to elevate and provide meaning to a work.

Sino-American film is in an ongoing and active paradigm that is changing as audiences, scholars, directors, and producers debate and respond to Sino-American representation. For now, Hollywood has responded with unprecedented films that feature a Sino-American representation driven by language, ethnicity, and culture. Global audiences are still unsure what to make of Sino-American cultural politics. In mainland China, Sino-American films like *Shang-Chi* or *Everything Everywhere All at Once* have not received widespread theatrical distribution and conversations oftentimes focus on evaluating the “Chinese-ness” of the film’s representation (Davis 2020). In other Chinese-speaking film markets that are dominated by Hollywood, like Taiwan and Malaysia, Sino-American films have been successful. Are Sino-American films the start of a competition for representation between Hollywood and the mainland Chinese film industry? I argue the picture is more nuanced and complex than that. There is a compelling space for both that can work together to strengthen and improve the other. One avenue for productive exchange can be found in the distinctions between the two generations of Sino-American film.

The real and lived *popularization* of “imagine otherwise” is where the First Generation and Second Generation of Sino-American films diverge. The First Generation is characterized by an absence of Asian American representation that could only be filled through independently produced films with limited circulation and viewership. The First Generation was filmed during a period in the United States when Asian Americans felt isolated and ashamed of language, ethnicity, and culture. Examples from lived experience abound, from “smelly Asian cooking” (Giang 2015), feeling that one’s life could only be lived as a “Generic Asian Man” (Yu 2020), or growing up with a “self-hate identity” (Kuo 2022). The First Generation’s films like *Saving Face* grew from this context and had to be produced on small budgets. The Second Generation coincides with representation becoming mainstream through Hollywood-produced films and global accessibility from streaming and online communities. This coincides with shifts in self-perception. The Second Generation is being filmed during a time where Asian Americans can begin to imagine otherwise as in the case of *Shang-Chi*. From the rise of Boba “as a symbol of Asian cool” (X. Zhang 2021b) to Asian American masculinity being redefined (Marume 2022), the Second Generation is defined by a shared “Asian Pride” (Oyen 2015). But despite this generational shift, there are still questions surrounding what it means to be Asian American and the significance of Asian American films. Some have felt that Asian American is incoherent

to them (Kang 2021), while others feel it is an inadequate identity marker that flattens cultures (Zhou 2021). The Second Generation's active engagement with Sino-American identity contributes to this conversation and provides an alternative that is grounded in shared language, ethnicity, and culture.

As I contend with Sino-American films, Asian American is so broad a category it obscures the many languages, cultures, and ethnicities it encompasses. Sino-American films provide an explicit focus on Chinese language and culture, which the overarching Asian American film category lacks. While Asian American film has provided important advocacy work in making conversations and representation mainstream, it is difficult to discuss experiences unique to language, ethnicity, and culture. Sino-American film provides a new space for constructive dialogue and mutual understanding as fundamental questions and conversations emerge from the Second Generation's search for understanding and identity. This is of interest to a global community of Chinese scholars and viewers outside America who can celebrate empowered Asian characters in Hollywood while being wary of Hollywood's role in fashioning identity. There has also been an adjacent rise in the Chinese-language film industry that is facing similar questions. An extensive comparative study of the two is beyond the scope of this article, but I encourage mutual dialogue and exchange between two separate systems as they tell their stories.

I begin the following section with a literature review on Asian American cinema that encourages cross pollination between Asian American studies and three major Chinese film studies paradigms: transnational cinema, Sinophone film, and Chinese-language film, illustrating why Sino-American film is needed.

## 2. Critical Terms in Sino-American Film

Asian American studies is rarely in conversation with Chinese film studies. Because Asian American studies centers on racism against people of color in the United States, analytical frameworks and discussions are seldom areas of exchange for East Asian studies. While dialogue is found in immigration, diaspora, Orientalism, and transnationalism, there is a fundamental difference between the disciplines. For Asian American studies, the starting point is race, while in East Asian Studies, the starting points are language, ethnicity, culture, or history. In Chinese film studies, the discipline has studied Asian American films within the context of diaspora and assimilation. In the case of Ang Lee, Asian American films have been discussed within a transnational context (Ren and Liang 2002; Chiang 2012). But what if research started with Asian American films? This reversal provides an alternative way of seeing Sino-American films and fills a gap between Asian American films and Chinese film studies. By privileging Sino-American films, the perspective on diaspora shifts, and we see with an eye towards the past and how, or if, it relates to Asian Americans today. Instead of concluding that one should repatriate to East Asia (but how could you if you are American?), Sino-American films have focused on representing characters that are empowered by Chinese language to explore and make their own meaning and identity. This section clarifies current terminology to consider the complexity of four critical terms: Asian American cinema, transnational cinema, Chinese-language film, and Sinophone film. Through this repositioning, I contribute to both Asian American studies and Chinese film studies, and position Sino-American films in contemporary conversations on what it means to be Asian American today.

The use of Asian American as an identity marker emerged in the United States during the 1960s as a rejection of previously imposed categories like "Oriental". The coining of "Asian American" can be traced to both the Asian American movement that arose from a diverse range of grassroots efforts and Asian American activism during the 1968 Black Student Union/Third World Liberation Front Student Strike that valued solidarity with other social justice movements (Choy 2022, p. 53). As Peter Feng traces, Asian American began as a political rather than cultural term (Feng 1996). "Asian American" gained further momentum as a response to anti-Asian violence and the absence of Asian American legal representation within the justice system, as evidenced during the killing of Vincent Chin.

The killing of Chin mobilized solidarity amongst a pan-Asian movement, particularly after widespread viewership of the PBS rebroadcast of the documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1987). This history demonstrates how “Asian American” was formed not because of shared ethnicity, language, or culture but as a response to violence and racism against Asian Americans. This community of solidarity is still shared today in Asian American film, where representation of Asian Americans on film has been celebrated as a step in addressing racism in Hollywood.

As the “Asian American” identity marker began to circulate, the 1980s marked the start of Asian American cinema. Asian American cinema is a category that was created after the release of *Chan is Missing* (1982), which leveraged a 22,000 USD budget to depict the San Francisco Chinatown community. Embodying the independent and activist qualities that characterize Asian American cinema (Chong 2017), *Chan is Missing* was filmed after receiving a grant from the American Film Institute to produce “a semi-documentary about cab drivers, including two who were Asian American” (Wang 2022). The success of *Chan is Missing* on the festival circuit provided a space for discussion about what it means to be Asian American in relation to diaspora. As Glen Mimura puts it, “Asian American film and videomakers have consistently produced independent documentary and fictional works that challenge, reimagine, and advance the existing terms of cultural representation” (Mimura 2009, p. xiv). For *Chan is Missing*, its compelling representation of Asian Americans is striking, but its use of Mandarin, Cantonese, and English without subtitles meant that not all Asian Americans fully understood the dialogue or context of the work (Tajima-Peña 2023). The film traverses dinner table conversation about tensions between mainland and Taiwanese politics during Chinatown’s New Year’s Parade, depicts cooks who speak Cantonese while wearing *Saturday Night Fever* t-shirts, and interviews an ESL teacher who conceptualizes his identity through Chinatown apple pies. As illustrated by *Chan is Missing*, even at the start of Asian American cinema, there was an explicit nuance that was available to Chinese-language speakers that was not available to all Asian American viewers. Despite this, *Chan is Missing* was a breakthrough for Asian Americans who, for the first time, saw Asian Americans on screen as protagonists and fully realized characters.

The conversations that began with Asian American cinema have been amplified by the success of recent Asian American films like *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Turning Red* (2022), and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* that have been celebrated as a breakthrough for Asian American representation in Hollywood. While conversations have focused on representation and identity provided by recent Asian American films, there is an evident unspoken and unacknowledged gap between the representation of Asian Americans and the representation of language, ethnicity, and culture that diverges amongst the Asian American community. This is evident by Sino-American films that use Chinese-language dialogue. I want to pair this gap with debates on Chinese language in Chinese film studies that will demonstrate how Chinese-language films are active beyond national borders and can contribute to understanding how Sino-American films relate to Chinese-language use.

Transnational cinema, Chinese-language film, and Sinophone film are three of four paradigms that encompass Chinese-language film studies. Two articles that best survey and evaluate the differing methodological approaches available and practiced by Chinese-language film scholars are Chris Berry’s “What is Transnational Cinema? Thinking from the Chinese Situation” (Berry 2010) and Sheldon Lu’s “Notes on the Four Major Paradigms of Chinese-language Film Studies” (Lu 2012). As Lu details, there are four dominant paradigms in Chinese film studies: Chinese film (Y. Zhang 2004), transnational cinemas (Lu 1997b; Berry and Farquhar 2006), Chinese-language film (Lu and Yeh 2005), and Sinophone film (Shih 2010; Khoo and Yue 2014) that differ in their varying evaluation of localities, borders, languages, and power. Both Berry and Lu ground their conversation in an overarching question—how do we categorize and understand a Chinese-language film that is produced beyond national borders? Within the different frameworks that all four paradigms provide, none have included Hollywood films, or even independently produced American films, in their discussion. This reflects the historical reality of Hollywood

as a traditionally monolingual industry that has ignored Chinese-language films. But it also reflects an anxiety about Hollywood, and even American films, as hegemonic forces that are fundamentally in opposition to Chinese-language films. Within this context, it is no wonder that Asian American films and Chinese-language films are rarely in conversation. Would a paradigm that recognizes films as an interconnected global product be the best fit?

Transnational cinema is a response to globalization. Because of globalization's entangled global web of film production and distribution, transnational cinema has been read as the paradigm against national film and culture. In his 2010 article, Berry applies Higbee and Lim's article on transnational cinema to the Chinese situation (Higbee and Lim 2010). As he critiques at the start of the article, there is a "tendency to use the term [transnational cinema] widely, loosely, and often without any definition" (Berry 2010, p. 112). Berry takes transnational cinema as a critical term seriously. He proposes that instead of transnational cinema as "an acceptance of globalizing neo-liberalism" (Berry 2010, p. 121), it is a complicated space where both the Hollywood production model and a contrasting diasporic small-budget film model operate. The Hollywood production model is best detailed in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Bordwell et al. 1985). A separate Chinese variation has been recently detailed by media studies scholars, particularly through Sino-American co-productions, as traced by Wendy Su (2016, 2019), Aynne Kokas (2017), and Ying Zhu (2020). As the co-production approach makes clear, the Hollywood production model is inseparable from the conditions of globalization. This is particularly evident in Taiwan, where CGCG studios were responsible for the CGI in Guillermo del Toro's *Trollhunters: Rise of the Titans* (2021) and where Hollywood has crowded out the domestic Taiwanese film market to the detriment of domestic Taiwanese films (Udden 2007, p. 154). Transnational cinema is the underlying paradigm that spans global film<sup>8</sup>. But as Berry anticipated, the term has become so widespread and adopted it has not responded fully to unique challenges within Chinese-language films.

Sheldon Lu and Emilie Yeh's paradigm of Chinese-language film is a translation of the term *huayu dianying*, which is used to refer to films that use any forms of Chinese like Mandarin or Cantonese or dialects of Chinese like Shanghainese or Hakka. The term is helpful; it encourages scholars to deftly traverse the world stage and consider a shared cultural Chinese-language space. Films like Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) and the Malaysian Lunar New Year film *King of Mahjong* (2015) welcome comparison through their speaking of Chinese language. To some extent, Chinese-language films have always been loosely connected to Hollywood through the presence of Chinese or Chinese American directors, actors, or screenwriters. But there has not been a call to include Chinese-language American films into Chinese-language film. This demonstrates an unstudied difference between the two that is complicated by contemporaneous discussions surrounding how Chinese-language use, and identities associated with its use, are complicated by tensions throughout East Asia. This can make the discussion fraught and uncomfortable. Sino-American film fills this gap in the literature and explores the stakes of this understudied group of films.

Within discussions on identity and race that are central to Asian American film, the translation and connotation of *huayu dianying* is complicated. While *huayu* is translated as Chinese language, its direct translation is "language of the Chinese nation". This originates within the modern (*xiandai*) *huaren* nation-building project during the Beiyang (1912–1927) and Nationalist periods (1928–1949). Originally created to unify the Han majority and the Manchu, Mongol, Hui, and Tibetan minorities, *huaren* has since expanded to include not only all 55 ethnic minorities that live in mainland China and Taiwan, but anyone of Chinese descent living overseas (Lu 2007a). This imposes an explicit and inescapable relationship to China upon all diasporic Chinese. Thus, a fourth-generation Chinese American might be labeled as *huaren* despite having no active or desired relationship with China<sup>9</sup>. *Huaren* has been used to lay claim to anyone of Chinese heritage living abroad, and its unsolicited ascription is apparent even within Hollywood today, where it can exert and

impose claims on identity. This was best illustrated during Chloé Zhao's nomination and eventual win for *Nomadland* during the 2021 award season. While no Chinese language is spoken within the film, because of Zhao's ethnicity, she was identified as a *huaren* and there were even discussions about whether *Nomadland* could be a Chinese film (Marchetti 2021). First winning the Best Motion Picture—Drama category at the Golden Globes in February, her victory was celebrated on the Chinese social media platform Weibo and trended, with outspoken former Professor Qiao Mu saying "She is the light of the Chinese people" (Chen 2021; Qin and Chien 2021b). But within days, past comments made by Chloé Zhao about China were discovered and she was immediately criticized in newspapers and online. By the time she won the Oscar for Best Picture in April, her name was censored on Chinese social media (Qin and Chien 2021a). *Huaren's* use for political purposes even in films that do not even speak Chinese language has changed the stakes around the application of *huayu dianying*. The politicization of the term has influenced conversations surrounding the Chinese-language film paradigm in mainland China. In one article, Li Daoxin critiqued Sheldon Lu for de-centering the mainland from the Chinese-language film paradigm (Li 2014). Conversely, the translation into English as "Chinese-language film" has implications for conversations on Sino-American films.

While Chinese-language film covers the breadth of Chinese languages across all geographic regions, an alternative paradigm, the Sinophone, was first proposed by Shu-mei Shih in 2007 and has undergone further revisions as the term is applied and discussed in various contexts. Shih proposed the Sinophone to "remove the emphasis on ethnicity and nationality, and instead highlight communities of Sinitic languages cultures spoken and used outside China and on the peripheries of China and Chineseness" (Shih 2007, p. 30). The Sinophone is inspired by paradigms including Francophone and Anglophone that originate from a colonizing force. For Shih, the Sinophone crystallizes around three historical processes that mainland China has emerged from: continental colonialism of empire that produced internal colonies, Han settler colonialism, and immigration out of China (Shih 2011). The term has been refined over the past two decades and has become arguably the major paradigm in English-language East Asian studies today. The definition has a precarious relationship with mainland China. When it was first defined, it was as "a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture have been taking place for centuries" (Shih 2007, p. 4). The exclusion of mainland China was subsequently debated. Sheldon Lu, in an article and later review of Shih, proposed the inclusion of mainland China within the Sinophone definition (Lu 2007b). While Song Hwee Lim raised questions on the privileging of language, asking "how does one judge at which point these languages are no longer spoken?" (Lim 2011, p. 38). In a foreword after Lu and Lim's publications, Shih writes "[Sinophone] as situated 'on the margins of China and Chineseness', was never intended to exclude China, but to give space for minoritized and colonized voices within China... as a way to understand 'Chinese' empire in its historical variation" (Shih 2012, p. 5). The question of mainland China has been rife with debate; however, because the Sinophone's position has excluded mainland China from its definition, it cannot welcome or account for all Sino-American films. Though a space might be found for some Sino-Americans, not all share a rejection of mainland China.

Intertwined with the Sinophone has been the relationship between Sinitic-speaking Americans and the Sinophone. When it was first theorized, it was placed in a footnote, where Shih distinguished "between Chinese America and sinophone America, with the latter referring to [S]initic-language-speaking American communities" (Shih 2007). Since 2007, Shih has elaborated further on the Sinophone's relationship to diaspora. In one vision, "the Sinophone recedes or disappears as soon as these languages in question or abandoned... the Sinophone can only be a notion in the process of disappearance as soon as it undergoes the process of becoming" (Shih 2014). But can diaspora have an expiration date? Could successive generations reclaim a form of connection through studying Sinitic

languages or joining and living as an active member of a community of Sinitic-speaking Americans? In recent years, instead of Sinitic disappearance, there has been a resurgence of interest among Americans to learn and speak Sinitic languages. This is seen in films, where instead of disappearance, recent American films have been practicing and speaking in Sinitic languages. Reasons for this are beyond the scope of this paper and deserve further discussion<sup>10</sup>.

A compelling conversation responding to the Sinophone was published by Chris Berry, who returned to his 2010 study over 10 years later in response to the growth of the Sinophone paradigm. Responding to questions of diaspora, Berry moved beyond Sinitic language to consider other facets beyond language. As Berry writes, films like Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* "have a Chinese side" (Berry 2007, p. 36) or feature what Gina Marchetti terms "intertextual layers" (Marchetti 2021); they are culturally Chinese films that are not filmed in Sinitic languages (Berry 2021, p. 187). This idea of culturally Chinese films differs from another approach offered by Naomi Greene, who prefers "Chinese elements" (*zhongguo yuansu*) as a useful term for how Hollywood uses Chinese aesthetic and cultural style to appeal to Chinese audiences (Greene 2014). Berry's 2021 article embraces what he terms the Sinosphere, an idea that encompasses not just Sinitic languages but culture as well. But despite the flexibility and range of the Sinosphere, it arrives at similar conclusions to Berry's critique of transnational cinema from over 10 years ago. The Sinosphere is similarly expansive and broad. It cannot speak directly on the rise of Chinese-language and Asian American representation. We need a more localized and focused term that is responsive to American debates and conversations.

By pairing Chinese film studies with Asian American cinema, it is evident there is benefit to their pairing and cross pollination, particularly regarding contemporary conversations among the Asian American community. Focusing on Chinese language in Asian American films reveals competing demands between ethnicities, diasporas, and identities. Sino-American film intervenes within the four paradigms, bridging the gaps between them to contribute a new alternative grounded in a particular iteration of language, identity, and culture. Sino-American films provide a valuable intervention to Chinese film studies by providing a helpful category to understand previously ignored and overlooked films. As the stakes of Sino-American representation become increasingly political, I see Sino-American film as a microcosm and paradigm of larger conversations concerning Sino-American relationships and demands across the world. The Sino-American film's First and Second Generations provide grounded examples for how the stakes of Sino-American films have changed over the course of 40 years.

### 3. I Guess I'm Not Chinese Enough—First-Generation Sino-American Films

Sino-American films fall under two generations. The First Generation shares similarities with the previous history of Asian American cinema. Like Asian American cinema, the First Generation is marked by the release of *Chan is Missing*, the debut work from *The Joy Luck Club's* (1993) Wayne Wang. It is a response to an absence of Sino-American representation. Focusing on Sino-American reveals a serious engagement with diasporic experiences. Three films, *Pushing Hands*, *Take Out*, and *Saving Face*, provide three different representations of diaspora through the First-Generation hallmark of independently produced films with limited circulation and viewership. *Pushing Hands* uses a biracial family to explore miscommunication between languages. *Take Out* is one of the most Mandarin-intensive Sino-American films. It features a cast who exclusively speak Mandarin highlighting the challenges faced by undocumented immigrants. *Saving Face* represents a hinge that anticipates the Second Generation through its auteur director but features production and distribution by a Hollywood studio and use of the rom-com genre. Together, the films capture a compelling Sino-American picture of diasporic representation.

During the First Generation, cultural organizations and film festivals were the primary production and distribution channels for Sino-American films. For instance, Ang Lee's first two films, *Pushing Hands* and *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), were part of the Taiwan



independent film movement of the 1990s, which was a response to the decline of the domestic film industry. In an attempt to revitalize the Taiwanese film industry, the government used a subsidy system to award money for low-budget films (Udden 2007, p. 154). Both films received their start through the Taiwanese subsidy system through Taiwanese government screenwriting competitions (Norman 2016). However, both eventually received funding through the Taiwanese government studio Central Motion Pictures and the American independent production company Good Machine. The pair were filmed in New York City Chinatown and featured Mandarin dialogue and depictions of Sino-American families. Ang Lee's filmmaking has been the subject of interest for scholars for some time as a useful example for testing the limits of Chinese-language theory in transnational cinema (Dariotis and Fung 1997; Shih 2007; Dilley 2015). *The Wedding Banquet* has received substantial scholarly attention for its depiction of a gay interracial couple negotiating cultural differences (Chua 1999; Marchetti 2004) and for its parallels with Lee's later work in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) (Leung 2008). *Pushing Hands* has received little scholarly attention, despite its compelling focus on the tensions and interplay between language and diaspora culture in America. Produced on a budget of 400,000 USD, the film was financially successful in Taiwan, enough to fund *The Wedding Banquet*. While the film's production unusually directs money out towards America, it is the bilingual dialogue, biracial tensions, and language use within *Pushing Hands* that deserve further critical attention.

*Pushing Hands* is an excellent example of a Sino-American film because of its use of Mandarin to portray the complexities of a biracial family. Take the opening sequence as an example. The film begins with an absence of language. Grandpa Chu practices *tai chi* in an American-style living room with a calligraphy hanging scroll and two porcelain vases. In the adjacent study trying to write her novel is Martha, his white American daughter-in-law. Over the first five minutes of the film, nothing is said, and it is clear that Grandpa Chu and Martha cannot communicate in any spoken language. During their lunch scene, shots of Grandpa Chu digging into a heaping bowl of rice are juxtaposed by Martha's Triscuit lunch. In a later afternoon scene, Grandpa Chu is shown practicing his *tai chi* while Martha elects to go jogging. Finally, when Grandpa Chu puts on Beijing Opera, the shrill song is too much for Martha and she gives her father-in-law headphones, telling him *xiexie*, thank you. As the opening sequence demonstrates, there is an uncomfortable peace in bifurcation, separation, and disregard.

In *Pushing Hands*, the family's inability to communicate speaks to the experience of a generation of bilingual Sino-Americans who are pulled and torn by the demands of translation and competing cultures. This is portrayed later in the opening sequence, as Grandpa Chu's son Alex and grandson Jeremy return home and we hear Mandarin. During dinner, both Grandpa Chu and Martha have things to say to Alex, who acts as the intermediary for their culture clash. As Jeremy leaves the table to watch cartoons, the pair begin an English-Mandarin cacophony. Grandpa Chu tells Alex, "American people teach children everything's a deal, like doing business", Martha then cuts over Grandpa Chu, telling Alex about a new house with a guest home in the back. "You should at least take a look at the photos. It's apparently a real steal", "If children can't concentrate on eating, what else can they concentrate on?" Responding to his father, Alex says, "*shiyi, ba*" or "yes father", while to Martha he says, "I'm not looking at photos". Grandpa Chu loudly continues, "And these American cartoons are only adding weirdness and violence to this chaotic world for children, it's just a mess". We catch a snippet of Martha asking, "Can I just talk to you for five minutes here?" But Martha and Alex's conversation is quickly drowned out by Grandpa Chu saying, "Our sages said..." He is finally stopped by Alex, who ends the conversation with "*Ba, chifan ba*" or "Dad, eat"<sup>11</sup>. Alex continues in Mandarin, apparently more concerned about his father than Martha, "Don't get upset. I'm just afraid your dinner's getting cold"<sup>12</sup> Martha finally asks about her father-in-law, "What was he babbling about?" "Violence in cartoons". "How can he complain? He's a martial arts expert himself! Isn't that violence enough?" "Would you cut it out both of you?"<sup>13</sup> The scene is remarkable for its clear portrayal of what it can mean to live within an absence (or refusal) of communication

and how it might feel to take the role of intermediary. Monolingual listeners receive half an argument and conversation and are perhaps perplexed by the other speaker. On the other hand, bilingual listeners are subjected to the full argument complete with Grandpa Chu's *chengyu*, empathy for Martha's request for boundaries, and sympathy for Alex as the go-between. One of the achievements of *Pushing Hands* as a Sino-American film is its full unapologetic presentation of the experience and challenges of navigating language, ethnicity, and culture.

Sean Baker and Shih-ching Tsou's *Take Out* illustrates the First Generation's connection to Asian American cinema through its barebones production and filming style and its Chinese-language dialogue. *Take Out* was produced in true Asian American cinema fashion with a shoestring 3000 USD budget and a frantic style similar to *Chan is Missing* (Lack 2022). But instead of the multifarious experimental genres that *Chan is Missing* employs, *Take Out* depicts the everyday desperation of an undocumented Chinese delivery bicyclist. Originally conceived because Baker and Tsou would talk to mainland Chinese restaurant workers who worked below their apartment, the pair shot *Take Out* during work hours and would pay interested customers five dollars to film them receiving food from protagonist Ming Ding (Murphy 2022). The film opens with two human traffickers and loan sharks knocking on an NYC apartment door calling Ming Ding, before breaking the door open, revealing a packed apartment with eight undocumented mainland Chinese immigrants. They tell Ming that he will need to obtain 800 dollars by the end of the day. Ming Ding goes to his restaurant workplace and doggedly begins to deliver food.

*Take Out* is filmed mostly in the Mandarin and Fuzhouese that is spoken amongst the restaurant workers but English and occasionally Spanish is heard whenever Ming Ding delivers food. There is a cruelty and frustration to the deliveries, as Ming Ding does not speak English. At best, there is the polite thanks or silence that might remind us of the opening scene between Grandpa Chu and Martha in *Pushing Hands*. Sometimes, there is racism like "No speakie English?" that Ming Ding endures. The bulk of the narration and background of Ming Ding's situation comes from conversations in the restaurant between fellow workers who discuss the cost of an illegal green card wedding (40,000 USD) or how to apply for an amnesty program in California. The scenes in the restaurant, fully in Chinese language, humanize his fellow Chinese American co-workers. As Ming Ding bikes across NYC in the pouring rain, bilingual speakers feel safety and camaraderie at their Chinese restaurant, where Ming Ding's boss and co-workers quietly support him. For Chinese-language listeners, *Take Out* provides a glimpse of how shared language humanizes and provides context that might otherwise be absent. In contrast to *Pushing Hands*, which demonstrates the negotiation between language and culture that biracial families must navigate because of unbreakable familial relationships, *Take Out* illustrates the everyday and more transient connections we make with colleagues, service workers, and customers through shared language. In this case, the Sino-American film category is demonstrated by the diversity of Chinese language within New York City Chinatown that is forced together by the shared experience of undocumented immigration. *Take Out's* portrayal of an underdiscussed form of diaspora is an important part of the First Generation. Through its independent production, it was able to focus on undocumented immigrants, a subject rarely taken up by Hollywood. However, it only played on film festival circuits and received minimal attention until its recent restoration and release by the Criterion Collection (Murphy 2022). Through streaming services and online discussion, underdiscussed films from the First Generation have been accessed by new audiences that would not have known about independently produced Sino-American films.

Alice Wu's screenplay for *Saving Face* was discovered through a cultural organization competition but the film was ultimately produced by Hollywood studios anticipating the Second Generation shift towards Hollywood production and distribution. Because of their depictions of LGBT-identifying Asian Americans, *The Wedding Banquet* and *Saving Face* have frequently been studied together (Ledru 2016; Han 2019). *Saving Face*, like *Pushing Hands* and *Take Out*, was filmed on location in New York City Chinatown and featured

Mandarin dialogue and extras. *Saving Face* received support from a cultural institution—the Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment. But instead of continuing as an independent film, it received financial backing from Will Smith’s production company Overbrook Entertainment (Leibowitz 2005). This meant that there was substantial pressure to change the film to fit Hollywood film preferences, including attempts to whitewash its characters (Leibowitz 2005). But Wu was ultimately able to retain her casting choices and story. The film follows the closeted Dr. Wilhelmina “Wil”, a second-generation Chinese American and her pregnant first-generation Chinese American mom Hwei-Lin. Hwei-Lin speaks to Wil in Mandarin throughout the film, with Wil responding mostly in English.

In a scene reminiscent of *Pushing Hands*, Wil’s African American friend Jay comes over to Wil’s house for dinner, but Hwei-Lin is visiting as well. As Jay walks in, Hwei-Lin yells “Xiezi” “his shoes!” In a moment of well-natured response, Jay shouts, “Hi, Ms. Pang!” Wil follows up by saying, “Ma, you remember my friend Jay”. Hwei-Lin points at Jay and repeats “Xiezi”. Wil now plays the role of Alex from *Pushing Hands*, responding to her Mom, “You don’t have to speak so loud”, while telling Jay, “You can leave your shoes by the door”. Jay obliges, tossing his shoes over to the door, and begins everyday conversation with Wil, “So I get a call from-” but Wil motions him to be quiet and eat his food. Jay again obliges but reaches for the soy sauce and begins generously dousing his food in it. A horrified Hwei-Lin looks on and converses with Wil in Mandarin. The scene is special for its inclusion of not just familial relationships but friendly neighborhood ones as well. In this case, Mandarin is used to speak Hwei-Lin’s unfiltered thoughts, while Wil mediates and selects what is ultimately translated. *Pushing Hands* uses a low-budget auteur rom-com production to subvert expectations of Chinese Americans. Filmed in the early 2000s, it is noteworthy for taking the Asian American negative tropes like food and self-hate and refashioning it into charming representation.

*Pushing Hands*, *Take Out*, and *Saving Face* illustrate how even before the recent highly visible and successful Hollywood films like *Shang-Chi* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* there was a rich independent culture of Sino-American films. While the three films have oftentimes been grouped together as examples of the independent Asian American cinema movement that provide nuanced and thoughtful portrayals and depictions of Asian Americans, their use of Chinese language enlivens and enriches their Sino-American aspects with language-specific wordplay like the *chengyu* in *Pushing Hands* or the cultural practice of taking off one’s shoes.

#### 4. Speaking Bad Chinese Is More Interesting—Second-Generation Sino-American Films

The Second Generation of Sino-American films includes *The Farewell* and *Tigertail*, which are characterized not only by their Hollywood production and distribution model but through their representation of the Sino-American experience and their inclusion of transnational filming styles. Both features empower them to engage with and represent Chinese language and Chinese-language film culture. The pair use spoken and visual Chinese language to explore two variations of the Sino-American experience. The Second Generation is being filmed during a new cultural moment, where representation is increasingly popular. Both films are noteworthy for shifting towards considering the implications of ethnicity and culture in relation to diaspora and travel. One could think of the Second Generation as depicting the experiences of young Sino-Americans from the First Generation. As characters like grandson Jeremy from *Pushing Hands* or Wil in *Saving Face* age, how will they engage and continue the legacy of their own childhood experiences and of their immigrant parents? The Second Generation employs an undercurrent of nostalgia in both *The Farewell* and *Tigertail* to bring this question into focus. *The Farewell* uses the A24 Hollywood model to depart from America and film in Changchun to examine the new phenomenon of Chinese Americans visiting mainland China to engage with Chinese culture<sup>14</sup>. While *Tigertail* employs a Hollywood distribution model to begin in Taiwan and tell a journey from Taiwan to America, and then back again. It creatively uses a vintage Taiwanese New

Wave film style to speak not only in Chinese language but in a Taiwanese film style. In both cases, the films capture a sense of incorporeal memories and relationships that are threatened by time and distance, whether in the case of grandma's terminal illness or a vacant childhood home filled with memories.

*The Farewell* was released in America in 2019 as well as Taiwan and China, reflecting A24's interest and intention in engaging with Chinese-language-speaking audiences. The film depicts the unsuccessful 30-something Billi, who shares a tenuous relationship with her family. Billi hears news that her grandma who lives in Changchun has a terminal illness. Billi's extended family in both the US and Japan come to Changchun under the auspices of their Japanese cousin's wedding, to see their grandma one last time. The central tension of the film is Billi's conviction, cultivated from her American upbringing, that she must tell her grandma that she is dying. This is contrasted by the presented Chinese perspective, which states that "One should not cause distress over an unsolvable problem". The film itself was filmed in Changchun, a distinct difference to the First Generation that filmed in America and New York City Chinatown. In this case, the reversal of diaspora, if only temporarily, reflects ongoing uncertainty surrounding how or even whether Sino-Americans should actively engage or even re-engage with their ancestral homeland. This uncertainty that comes from a generation removed from immigration suspends and reverses the traditional one-way flow of immigration.

Most of the film is spoken in Mandarin, with Billi speaking English to her parents when they are alone. Throughout the film, Billi is depicted as being out of place. In one conversation with her hotel doorman who asks, "Where are you visting from? *Ni shi cong guowai laide?*" "Yup. *Shi*" "Which country? *Na ge guojia?*" "America. *Meiguo*". "America? You don't look like an American. *Meiguo? Ni kan ye buxiang meiguoren*". Billi's short and abrupt conversation is not out of rudeness, but rather because of her difficulty in speaking Mandarin. The friendly doorman is touching upon all of Billi's insecurities. Billi may feel American but in China, she does not look American. Her awkward Mandarin further limits her ability to feel at home both in China and in her identity as a Chinese American. In an interview concerning the scene, Awkwafina explains, "Speaking bad Chinese is more interesting" (Mitchell 2019). In this case, the reverse diaspora, the visit to Changchun, offers an opportunity to explore the complexity of the American-born Sino-American experience.

The cinematic language of *The Farewell* employs familiar film techniques to illustrate Billi's discomfort. The mise-en-scène of Changchun as towering, changing, and blue-hued reflects Billi's feelings towards China. Upon Billi's arrival, she looks up at a towering U-shaped apartment complex, a sight ubiquitous and ordinary to those familiar with mainland China but overwhelming to Billi. Beginning with a few floors, the apartment complex zooms out to show the sense of emotional and cultural distance between Billi and her Chinese family. The blue-hued and imposing Changchun is contrasted by the inside of grandma's home that is vibrant, warm, and full of color. It is evident that Billi needs her connection to family in order to feel belonging and safety. While Billi is shown at the beginning to be uncomfortable in Changchun, the film ends with Billi back in America where she stops and yells "HA" like her grandma once taught her. In the Changchun apartment complex that seemed so intimidating to start the film, birds fly from nearby trees, reflecting Billi's intangible yet real connection with grandma and Changchun.

In contrast to *The Farewell's* A24 production, *Tigertail* was distributed by Netflix and is part of an international strategy by Netflix to produce non-English, international content for the Netflix library. Netflix has focused its production of Chinese-language films in Taiwan. It has helped produce successful Taiwanese films including *Dear Ex* (2018) and *A Sun* (2019). In a similar way to *The Farewell*, *Tigertail* is a Sino-American film that focuses upon immigration and diaspora between Taiwan and the United States. *Tigertail* is representative of the muddled and complex stakes of Asian American cinema and Sino-American films. Produced by Marco Studios and distributed by Netflix, it is directed by a proud POC-run studio that depicts experiences of POC. Directed by *Parks and Recs* writer Alan Yang and filmed in Taiwan and the United States, *Tigertail* is a biographical depiction

of Yang's father's immigration from *Huwei*, translated as *Tigertail*, to America. Reflecting the intimate and personal nature of the project, Yang's own father provides the Mandarin voice over for the bookends of the film (Jung 2020).

*Tigertail* benefited extensively from Netflix collaboration and distribution, and director Alan Yang uses not only Mandarin and Hokkien but Taiwanese film styles to color the film. The first half of the film begins in the 1950s and focuses on young Pin-Jui growing up in Taiwan with dialogue entirely in Mandarin and Hokkien. The film is shot in saturated colors and in 16 mm, evoking nostalgia and memory (Jung 2020). But it also evokes the Taiwanese New Wave from the 1980s, particularly Hou Hsiao-Hsien's works like *A Summer at Grandpa's* (1984) and *A Time to Live and the Time to Die* (1985), which are similarly shot in the Taiwanese countryside in saturated colors and on 16 mm film. In contrast, when Pin-Jui, now immigrated to the United States, and his estranged Taiwanese American daughter Angela try to reconnect in the present day, the film is shot on the more familiar and contemporary digital. By filming in two different styles, one deliberately speaking in Taiwanese New Wave and the other in contemporary Hollywood, Yang opens a space to include not just Chinese language within the Sino-American paradigm, but all Chinese-language film styles. This anticipates *Shang-Chi's* opening sequence that is filmed in both the Hollywood historical epic style and the Chinese-language *wuxia* film style.

*The Farewell* and *Tigertail* are two instances of Second-Generation Sino-American films focusing on nostalgia and looking to the past. In both cases, this manifests in the form of multigenerational families that momentarily return on visits to places where older generations immigrated from. The nostalgia of *The Farewell* is temporary as Billi builds a relationship with her grandma and family in mainland China. *Tigertail* is more uncertain with its remembered diaspora and melancholy contemporary visit to Taiwan. The last scene features a zoom-out shot of Pin-Jui and Angela framed through the ruined window frames and abandoned rooms of Pin-Jui's childhood home. Both films end on uncertain notes, but the Second-Generation's engagement with Chinese language strikes an optimistic note. Perhaps through Second-Generation films, Sino-Americans can engage with the identity, ethnicity, and culture of their elders.

## 5. Sino-American Blockbusters—*Shang-Chi* and the Legend of Ten Rings

While *Shang-Chi* is produced by Disney and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* was produced by A24, both are united in their use of the Hollywood production and distribution model. *Shang-Chi* serves as a representative case study of the blockbuster Marvel superhero film, while *Everything Everywhere All at Once* uses a differing independent film model with blockbuster characteristics. In both cases, Chinese language alongside a wide range of Chinese-language film genres are used throughout each film to elevate Sino-American stories.

Jason Coe's recent scholarship on *Everything Everywhere All at Once* has provided an important contribution by noting that the use of Chinese language illustrates code-switching between generations and spaces. In Coe's account, code-switching allows for adaptation, but also "multiple belongings and allegiances, each switch illustrates a shift in power dynamics" (Coe 2023, p. 39). Within *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, the shifts between Mandarin, Cantonese, and English are a strategy of power that allows code-switchers to move from a position of helplessness to one of power. Beyond language, there is a network of genres and narrative motifs drawn from popular Chinese-language films. In one example, Evelyn and Waymond recreate the rainy and overly saturated hues of Wong Kar-wai's films, while in another, Evelyn is seen training in a bamboo forest in a style reminiscent of *wuxia* films. For the Second Generation, there is an extensive engagement with cinematic language between both Hollywood and Chinese-language films. Coe reads this as "Asian America as a genre". Building upon his original intervention, I propose it is part of a Sino-American film genre that is part of both Hollywood and Chinese-language film histories.

*Shang-Chi* best exemplifies the tension between Asian American film and the necessary subcategory of Sino-American film. Awkwafina's character Katy does not speak any Mandarin during the film and presents a different experience to what has been previously portrayed. As Awkwafina puts it, "Any dash American will have that duality or sense of struggle when finding their identity, [Katy] is not against embracing her culture, but she knows she's a stranger to it"<sup>15</sup>. This was echoed by the audience during Simu Liu's reveal at the 2019 Comic-Con. To announce his casting for the part, Simu spoke in Mandarin to the audience. "Let me introduce myself first. May I? My name is Simu Liu. I was born in Harbin and raised in Toronto. I am very grateful to Marvel today for giving me the opportunity to play Shang-chi. [In English] Did you guys get that by the way? Not a damn thing, okay, that's cool"<sup>16</sup>. The confused and muted cheering to Simu speaking in Mandarin reveals the tension between *Shang-Chi* as a Sino-American film and a marketing campaign that presented *Shang-Chi* as an Asian American film.

*Shang-Chi's* original character Wenwu is a compelling refashioning of the original comic's Mandarin and Fu Manchu character. Originally conceived during the 1970s at the height of America's Kung Fu craze, the character is ill-conceived. As part of a larger cultural movement that has critiqued problematic characters, *Shang-Chi's* reworking comes through two avenues: firstly, the Mandarin is completely replaced by Wenwu; secondly, the original cinematic Mandarin character from *Iron Man 3* is revealed to be an actor named Trevor Slattery, who provides an explanation for the events that led him to impersonate the Mandarin. Speaking partly as Trevor and partly as the Marvel/Disney production team, Trevor apologizes for the "unflattering portrait of your father. We all got our just desserts". Trevor's inclusion could be interpreted as a welcome apology, but it can just as easily be seen as an awkward and unwelcome reminder of the Mandarin's racist past. Viewers are not left to dwell too long on Trevor's problematic inclusion, as a new friend from *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a *dijiang* named Morris, scurries past Trevor. The arrival of Morris and subsequent discovery of legendary creatures in Ta Lo represents a marked embrace of not only Chinese language but an explicit turn towards culture through the imagining of animals from *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*.

So, is Hollywood learning to speak Chinese? As we have seen from *Shang-Chi*, moments and reminders of past and present exoticism and Orientalism remain. Is Marvel simply reworking the Mandarin and filming *Shang-Chi* to add another diversity card to its Marvel superhero ensemble? Addressing past wrongs can be difficult and awkward, especially when conducted poorly as in the case with Trevor (Chaw 2021). The history of the Mandarin and Fu Manchu character is, to some, unforgivable. This was the case in mainland China. Before *Shang-Chi* was even released, there was considerable backlash and a ban on the film's release (H. Zhang 2021a). But the amount of Mandarin spoken in *Shang-Chi* is a welcome surprise, particularly for a film produced by Disney/Marvel that in many ways embodies Hollywood. While the Second Generation of films have not been successful in mainland China, this is because they are films for a separate Chinese-language audience, a Sino-American one, that has always spoken and is learning to speak Chinese language<sup>17</sup>.

## 6. Conclusions

This article has tried to give space for Sino-American films. By introducing the term Sino-American, we can cross pollinate between two historically separate disciplines—Asian American studies and East Asian studies. While Chinese language in American films is not new, as evidenced by the First-Generation Sino-American films that were developed through grants, awards, and independent film companies, the new Second Generation is exerting a stronger cultural influence through Hollywood. How the Second Generation represents the Sino-American experience remains to be seen. But like the First Generation, there is an authenticity manifested through language that speaks to real and genuine attempts to speak Chinese.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Ten Rings insignia first appeared in *Iron Man 3* and featured Mongolian script. In *Shang-Chi*, the Mongolian script was changed to Chinese characters that describe strength or power. For more, see <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/shang-chi-ten-rings-logo-controversy-1235044551> (accessed on 28 June 2023).

<sup>2</sup> This is part of the Iger Disney strategy that employs a Hollywood production model, substantial CGI use, and platformization of IP films.

<sup>3</sup> *Wuxia* films have a rich history that can be traced back to early Shanghai cinema. The genre features the themes and conventions of virtuous swordsman-errand and has been the most successful Chinese-language film genre that has adopted the Hollywood-style blockbuster and been successful throughout the world (Teo 2015).

<sup>4</sup> The transition is described this way in both the screenplay and in the director's commentary of *Shang-Chi*.

<sup>5</sup> *Mama dedao de geng baogui. Zhe ge gei ni. Ruguo ni you yitian milu le. Ta hui bang ni zhaodao huijia de lu.* 妈妈得到的更宝贵.这个给你.如果有一天你迷路了,它会帮你找到回家的路.

<sup>6</sup> I use Chinese language following Sheldon Lu and Emilie Yeuh's conception of Chinese-language film (Lu and Yeh 2005). I detail the term further on page 6 in Section 2. Chinese-language film covers a variety of forms including Mandarin and Cantonese and dialects like Hakka. It does not include separate languages like Mongolian, Formosan, or Malay.

<sup>7</sup> Sino-American does not make any demands upon Chinese-language-speaking ethnicities like Taiwanese Americans or Singaporean Americans. "Sino" provides an overarching connection that unites ethnic groups that share a language.

<sup>8</sup> World cinema is a related paradigm to transnational cinema that draws its origins from world literature (Dennison and Lim 2006, p. 2). Andrew Dudley's work has provided a rich network of critical terms to understand how East Asian cinema has "complex patterns of circulation and influence" (Dudley 2009, p. 61). The paradigm has been the site for compelling ongoing critiques of discourse surrounding power, nation, and translation. World cinema has long been part of conversations concerning Chinese-language film and its relationship and reception around the world. Miriam Hansen's article "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons" that traced vernacular modernism in 1920s and 1930s Shanghai cinema is one such example (Hansen 2000). In recent years, world cinema has been used to understand Ang Lee and his relationship to both Chinese-language film and Hollywood. Whitney Crothers Dilley's study of Ang Lee is particularly insightful and comparable for this article's negotiation between Chinese and Asian American (Dilley 2015, pp. 21–48). A recent intervention by Zhen Zhang has explored both Sinophone world cinema and "women's cinema in world cinema" (Z. Zhang 2023, p. 31). For Zhang, world cinema bypasses the national cinema model and is part of a broad mainstream cinema. This has rich and exciting implications for Sino-American films that speak to shared experiences and "flexible geographies" like in the case of US–Canada crossings like in *Turning Red* or with Simu Liu representing Shaun.

<sup>9</sup> *Huayu* is one of the official languages of Singapore and has widespread usage across Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Within this cultural and colloquial context, this line of thought comes across as quite academic. But within an Asian American context, where *huayu* and *huaren* can be absent from everyday conversation, the translation and explanation create serious complications.

<sup>10</sup> There is a relationship to Yunte Huang's theory of the transpacific that leaves a broad space for exchange and growth within its paradigm (Huang 2002, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> The full Chinese is *Meiguo jiao xiaohaier, haoxiang zuo maimai, shenme dou tan tiaojian. Zhe xiaohaier chifan dou bu zhuanxin. Haiyou shenme shiqing zhide zhuanxin de ne? Haiyou zhege meiguo donghua wanquan guaililuan shen weikong tianxia bu luan, na keyi gei haizi kan? jianzhi shi guidajia, zanmen guyou mingxun.* 美国教小孩儿, 好像做买卖, 什么都谈条件. 这小孩儿吃饭都不专心. 还有什么事情值得专心的呢? 还有这个美国动画完全怪力乱神唯恐天下不乱, 哪可以给孩子看? 简直是鬼打架, 咱们古有明训.

<sup>12</sup> *nin bie jieyi, shi pa cailiangle* 您别介意, 是怕菜凉了.

<sup>13</sup> While *Pushing Hands* has received minimal English-language scholarship, Ang Lee's screenwriter/collaborator Peng Guangyuan published an excellent background of the film and similarly notes the tensions of translation (Peng 1991, p. 44).

<sup>14</sup> One recent compelling example that welcomes comparison is *Joy Ride* (2023) that plays with this expectation through an adopted Asian American returning home to find her birth Mom.

- <sup>15</sup> *Assembled: The Making of Shang-Chi and the Legend of Ten Rings* (2021) features several interviews that oscillate between discussing the Asian American experience and the Chinese American one.
- <sup>16</sup> *Wo zi wo jieshao yixia, haobuhao? Wode mingzi shi liu simu, wo shi haerbin chusheng de, duolunduo zhangda de, jintian wo feichang feichang ganxie manwei gei wo zhege jihui banyan shangqi.* 我自我介绍一下, 好不好? 我的名字是刘思慕, 我是哈尔滨出生的, 多伦多长大的, 今天我非常非常感谢漫威给我这个机会扮演尚气 *Assembled: The Making of Shang-Chi and the Legend of Ten Rings* (2021).
- <sup>17</sup> Outside of mainland China, *Shang-Chi* performed well. In Singapore, it was the highest-grossing film of 2021, in Hong Kong, it was the second-highest-grossing film of 2021, in Malaysia, it was the third-highest-grossing film of 2021, and in Taiwan, it was the fourth-highest grossing.

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