

Racial Discrimination and Cultural Conflicts from the Perspective of Multi-narrative in the Film *Detective Chinatown 1900*

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Abstract: *Detective Chinatown 1900* is a film that blends detective suspense with multicultural conflict. Through a complex narrative structure, the film showcases diverse cultural backgrounds, character relationships, and social issues, particularly focusing on themes of racial discrimination and cultural conflicts. The film explores the friction between foreign cultures and local cultures, especially the Western stereotypes and prejudices toward traditional Chinese culture. Racial discrimination in the film is not only reflected in the interactions between characters but also portrayed through social structure, language differences, and historical context, revealing deeper cultural contradictions. Meanwhile, the film uncovers issues of interpersonal relationships and identity in the context of social change. Ultimately, it explores how understanding and reconciliation can be achieved when faced with racial discrimination and cultural conflict, thus contributing to cultural expression and national sentiment.

Keywords: Multi-Narrative; Racial Discrimination; Cultural Conflicts; Identity Recognition

1. Background of the Movie

Detective Chinatown 1900 is a Chinese suspense and detective film released during the 2025 Spring Festival. It is the third installment in the Detective Chinatown series. The movie introduces a more complex storyline and higher levels of reasoning challenges. The story takes place in Chinatown, USA, in the year 1900. At that time, China was in a state of internal and external turmoil, with the decaying and conservative Qing Dynasty on the brink of collapse. Revolutionary pioneers led by Sun Yat-sen established “A New China” to change the rule of the delicate Qing Dynasty.

The film uses this historical backdrop to tell the story of resisting foreign oppression and fighting for national survival, offering viewers a window into the struggles and unyielding resistance of Chinese laborers in foreign lands. It presents a profound historical narrative that spans time and space, transcending boundaries to resonate with the audience. At the same time, the film employs multiple narrative techniques to describe the bloody history of the massacre and displacement of Native American peoples (Indians), highlighting racial discrimination and cultural conflicts. The movie portrays not isolated phenomena, but the coexistence of two attitudes—racial discrimination and cultural conflict, where cultural conflicts inevitably escalate into racial discrimination. The film is a reenactment of history, a reflection on human nature, and an interrogation of racial issues with the purpose of emphasizing cultural conflict and deepening the exploration of racial problems.

2. Racial Discrimination and Cultural Conflict from the Perspective of Multi-Narratives

Commonly seen in literature, film, and historical studies, multi-narratives are a narrative approach that presents stories from multiple perspectives, voices, and experiences. It is one of the important means of cultural expression. This narrative style emphasizes the equal presentation of the stories and perspectives of different individuals, groups, or cultures, breaking away from traditional, single, and centralized narrative structures. This approach not only focuses on the stories of mainstream or dominant groups but also allows voices that have been marginalized or overlooked in history or society to be expressed and acknowledged. The core of multi-narrative lies in showcasing diversity within different cultural, gender, racial, and social class backgrounds, emphasizing the

multidimensionality and complexity of the story. Multi-narratives provide a more comprehensive reflection of the complexity and diversity of real life and also promote tolerance and respect for different cultures and experiences. Racial discrimination and cultural conflict are two common themes which are often addressed in various works, including literature, films, and even songs. Racial discrimination is a manifestation of racism, caused by societal political ideologies and institutionalized consciousness. The concept of “political correctness” allows unconscious racial prejudice to become a more common mentality and behavior [1]. Similarly, the adherence to “cultural correctness”, “identity correctness” or “economic correctness” can turn racial prejudice or discrimination into norms or behaviors recognized by certain groups. As a result, racial discrimination inevitably leads to cultural differences and cultural conflicts. Differences in cultural backgrounds, values, behavioral habits, and other aspects cause friction, misunderstanding, or opposition between individuals or groups. Cultural conflict can also occur in environments where cultural groups live together, and this conflict can take place on an individual level, or on a larger societal, ethnic, or national scale. Cultural conflict can manifest as differences in language, behavioral habits, values, economic interests, etc. “Their moral character is not even as good as that of black people, they worship the heavens and earth but do not believe in God, they are sly and deceptive, and their behavior is indulgent. They have their own set of beliefs and do not accept American beliefs and customs.” [2] This was an evaluation of Chinese laborers in California by a newspaper in 1853, which reflected that the growth environment, cultural beliefs, and behavioral habits of Chinese people were different from those of white people. This inevitably led to cultural conflict and racial discrimination.

Detective Chinatown 1900 uses racial discrimination and cultural conflict to demonstrate its multi-narrative approach, with a focus on the racial prejudice against Chinese people by whites, led by the United States, and the racial discrimination against indigenous Native Americans. The film also touches upon the conflict between the Tung Meng Hui and the Qing government, as well as the cultural

differences between collectivism, held by BAI Zhenbang, as a Chinese person, and individualism, adhered to by Alice as an Irish person. In the narrative process, the film unfolds the main story and subplots in parallel, telling them in accordance with the plot development. This allows the audience to reflect on and revisit this turbulent period of history while enjoying the film.

3. Racial Discrimination

Racial discrimination is an everlasting topic, with its roots traceable to the very early stages of human history. In the 20th century, particularly after World War II, as the civil rights movement and global decolonization advanced, the issue of racial discrimination began to attract people’s attention.

3.1 White People’s Discrimination against Chinese People

The phrase “Chinese are not mere supporting roles in history,” mentioned in the film, is not only the awakening of the characters but also a deep reflection on the oppressed Chinese people in history. In 1900, the Chinatown of San Francisco was under the period of the “Chinese Exclusion Act,” which had been implemented in the United States. The “Chinese Exclusion Act,” passed in 1882, was the only discriminatory law in American history targeting a specific ethnic group, prohibiting Chinese laborers from entering and denying foreign-born Chinese people U. S. citizenship. Despite the “Chinese Exclusion Act” being one of the most controversial immigration laws in American history, its background, impact, and results not only caused significant social repercussions at the time but also profoundly affected U. S.-China relations and had a far-reaching impact on the development of future immigration policies.

In the mid-19th century, the rapid development of the U. S. economy, especially in the western regions with the demand for labor in railroad construction and gold mining, led to a large influx of Chinese laborers, primarily male, as cheap labor. They participated in railroad construction, mining, and other jobs, particularly in California. Even though “people were surprised to see that Chinese laborers were particularly hardworking, with project progress exceeding expectations”, [3] as the economic situation changed and public fear of

foreign immigrants grew, many native American workers began blaming Chinese laborers for unemployment and wage reductions. Additionally, most Chinese immigrants were male, and their social life in America was somewhat isolated, with significant cultural differences, which further fueled white hostility toward the Chinese. By the 1880s, there was an increasingly strong sense of rejection toward Chinese immigrants in society. Especially in the western U. S., many white workers felt that Chinese laborers, with their low wages and high labor intensity, were taking their jobs, putting them in an economically disadvantaged position. Under the pressure of this societal sentiment, the government began to take action. In 1882, the U. S. Congress passed the “Chinese Exclusion Act,” which for the first time legally restricted Chinese laborers’ entry into the country and stipulated that no Chinese person could become a U. S. citizen.

In the film, the Chinatown community becomes the target of racial discrimination, with white prejudice and hostility toward the Chinese present throughout. The character BAI Xuanling, the head of the Xie Sheng Hall, was once an early Chinese laborer who came to the U.S. not only to survive but also to pursue the freedom in his heart. He was one of the 12,000 Chinese laborers who spent nearly six years building the first railroad connecting the American continent with their blood and sweat. However, the “Chinese Exclusion Act” erased the contributions of Chinese laborers and turned into slandering and expelling the Chinese. The Chinese were alienated and regarded as the “Others” in opposition to American whites. They were not only disparaged as “Chink,” but were also labeled as “heathens” and “inferior beings” [4]. In the film, the Chinese are referred to as the “Yellow Peril,” which is fundamentally no different from the notorious historical acts of slave trading and the expulsion of Native Americans. The rejection, hatred, and expulsion of Chinese people by white society stem not only from racial discrimination but also from factors of “ethnic” identity. The term “ethnic group” first appeared in the 1930s to describe the result of cultural contact between two groups [5]. The cultural conflict in the film can be divided into ethnic conflict, cultural

value conflict, and national conflict [6].

The passage of the “Chinese Exclusion Act” had a profound impact on the lives of Chinese immigrants. Firstly, it legalized discrimination against Chinese laborers, excluding thousands of Chinese laborers from entering the U. S. Secondly, the “Chinese Exclusion Act” intensified racial prejudice in American society, especially in the west. Chinese people were regarded as “inferior races” and became scapegoats for social and economic issues. Furthermore, the Act made it extremely difficult for Chinese immigrant families to reunite. Women and children could not join the male immigrants already in the U. S., leaving many Chinese immigrant communities with incomplete social structures. In the film, QIN Fu initially requests BAI Xuanling for a “residence certificate” as part of the investigation. This certificate represents legal identity, allowing one to live, work, or do business in the U. S. legally and freely.

The “Chinese Exclusion Act” was not repealed until 1943. The wait for this day spanned 130 years, and the long-delayed apology holds extraordinary significance, not only for Chinese Americans but also for Chinese people around the world. The film reveals the deep-rooted racial prejudices in American society at that time, which also influenced the direction of U. S. immigration policy. Although the law was eventually repealed, the traces of racial discrimination left in American society by the Act continue to have an unforgettable impact on later immigrant groups and ethnic relations.

3.2 Discrimination against Native Americans by White People

The issue of the expulsion and killing of Native Americans in American history is a complex and painful topic. During the period of American expansion, Native Americans underwent large-scale displacement, violence, and cultural extermination. The implementation of the “Indian Removal Act” (1830) forced many Native Americans to leave their homelands, and many died from hunger, disease, and violence during the migration. This process is closely tied to the westward expansion, a historical movement in the 19th century where the United States expanded its territory and established settlements in the western part of the country. This process not

only changed the geographical map of the U. S. but also deeply influenced the social, economic, and cultural development of the nation. Westward expansion intensified the conflict between the U. S. and Native Americans, forcing tens of thousands of Native Americans to migrate, with many dying from hunger and disease during the journey. This period, known as the “Trail of Tears,” resulted in the deaths of approximately 4,000 people. It brought about immense social inequality and racial conflict, leaving a lasting impact on Native Americans and other marginalized groups.

Some scholars suggest that “although the concept of “race” based on physical characteristics such as skin color began to emerge only in the late 18th century, the Puritans in New England referred to the skin color of Native Americans as “black,” viewing them as an inferior, degenerate, and irredeemable “nation.”[7] Although this history is not extensively discussed in films, through the killing of a Native American leader, their forced settlement in government-designated reservations, and the growth experiences of the orphan Ah Gui, the audience can feel the neglect, contempt, and discrimination white people held towards Native Americans. If it weren’t for the murder of Alice, the daughter of the Irish gang leader, the killing of the Native American leader would hardly be worth mentioning. Ah Gui’s growth experience in the Native American tribe can be seen as a narrative of memory, a crucial issue for any group or nation. Past events often hold different meanings for different individuals or groups, due to the selection of event details and the varying interpretations added to them. This suggests that memory itself is constructive or reconstructive [8]. In the narrative, the audience sees the blood and tears of Native Americans. The genocide, land loss, cultural assimilation, and unequal treatment they endured are an essential part of reflecting on the nation’s history and the inter-ethnic relationships in modern society. The film’s ambiguous memories allow the audience to recognize that, despite enduring numerous disasters, modern Native Americans are clearly making efforts to raise their “own” voices and requirements [9].

4. Cultural Conflict

The film’s multiple narratives not only address racial discrimination but also explore cultural differences and conflicts between the same and different ethnic groups. Cultural conflict refers to the tensions and oppositions that arise due to cultural differences between people, communities, or nations with diverse cultural backgrounds. This conflict typically occurs in communication and interactions, and when two or more cultures differ significantly in terms of values, customs, behavior norms, language, and ways of thinking, it can lead to misunderstandings, friction, or even conflict.

4.1 Conflict between the Tung Meng Hui and the Qing Dynasty

The film is set in 1900, during a time when China faced multiple crises both internally and externally. Domestically, there were anti-Qing revolutionaries, and externally, the Eight-Nation Alliance invaded China. The decaying Qing Dynasty was on the brink of collapse. The character FEI Yanggu in the film, an envoy sent to the United States to safeguard Qing interests, is tasked with conducting diplomatic activities in San Francisco while also eliminating Tung Meng Hui members. In contrast, the members of the Tung Meng Hui, led by BAI Zhenbang, are portrayed. Although they are both Chinese and belong to the same ethnic group, their viewpoints and ideologies are completely different. One side advocates for conservatism, while the other calls for reform, democracy, and freedom. This reflects a cultural conflict where differences span various aspects of life, politics, economics, and beliefs. The conflict between groups with different cultural backgrounds in the political domain is evident. Anthony Smith argues that “nearly 90% of the world’s nations are multi-ethnic, and half of them face serious ethnic division issues.” [10] These conflicts often arise from differences in cultural values, political ideologies, historical backgrounds, and other factors. Cultural differences and multiple identities are widely seen as obstacles to national integration [11]. The faith differences and identity issues depicted in the film create two opposing camps. Even within the same group, there can be differing understandings and recognition of collective identity, which can lead to internal divisions and conflicts. While group members often

share certain common traits or backgrounds, their differences in experiences, perspectives, values, and social status can influence their identification with the group.

However, when FEI Yanggu learns that the Eight-Nation Alliance has entered Beijing to suppress the Chinese people, he abandons his previous stance and switches sides, stabbing the Irish gang. In his final words to QIN Fu and A Gui, he says, “Save China!” FEI Yanggu’s character is complex and multi-dimensional. In the face of national duty, both the Tung Meng Hui and the royalists abandon their cultural conflicts and identity differences, uniting towards a common external goal, which maintains group cohesion.

4.2 Collectivism Vs. Individualism

Collectivism and individualism represent two distinct social and cultural values, each with different manifestations and impacts across various social, cultural, and philosophical contexts.

In the film, BAI Zhenbang and Alice belong to different cultures. Although BAI Zhenbang was raised in America and exposed to Western thoughts and culture, which are closely tied to his environment, the organization he is part of Xie Sheng Hall, shelters homeless Chinese. Under this influence, BAI Zhenbang is inherently a collectivist. Unlike eloping with Alice, BAI Zhenbang values the interests of the Tung Meng Hui members more because individual interests and needs often must give way to the collective good. The core of collectivism is the emphasis on cooperation, group responsibility, and shared goals.

Alice is a typical Western girl, brave and in pursuit of freedom, even willing to defy her father to elope with BAI Zhenbang. Individualism is a value system that emphasizes personal freedom, independence, and individual rights. Individualists believe that individuals should prioritize their rights and interests and that everyone has the right to pursue self-actualization and freedom. Its core values include independence, autonomy, creativity, and self-expression.

BAI Zhenbang’s love for Alice is not cold or indifferent but is determined by his cultural background. In a society that values white supremacy, their love transcends race, shedding all cultural constraints and bonds,

achieving cultural integration and recognition. The “Detective Chinatown” series of films uses the diversity of cultural texts and the fusion of genre elements to construct its own cinematic cultural identity through an open and uncertain meaning space during the process of cross-cultural communication. In this meaningful space, cultural differences are allowed to exist, embracing the involvement of “minority cultures” and marginalized cultures [12].

5. Conclusion

In *Detective Chinatown 1900*, the racial discrimination and cultural differences embedded in its multi-layered narrative become one of the key themes of the film. Through the interactions between the protagonists, the Chinatown detectives, and characters from diverse backgrounds, the film presents the collision and fusion of Eastern and Western cultures, revealing the racial prejudices and cultural misunderstandings that existed in society at the time. These differences are reflected not only in the characters’ words and actions but also in their approaches to problems and thought processes. The film portrays the confusion and adaptation of the characters when facing cultural barriers, while also exploring how racial discrimination impacts interpersonal relationships and personal identity in society. The film conveys that cultural differences are not insurmountable gaps but can be overcome through communication, tolerance, and identity recognition. Meanwhile, this theme not only prompts us to reflect on racial and cultural prejudices in contemporary society but also inspires us to recognize that respecting and embracing differences is the foundation for building harmonious relationships in a diverse world, thus writing national sentiment through cultural identity.

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