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Comparing Latino and Asian American Film Narratives

by Mario Barrera
University of California, Berkeley

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Comparing Latino and Asian-American Film Narratives

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The Julian Samora Research Institute is the Midwest's premier policy research and outreach center to the Hispanic community. The Institute's mission includes:

- *Generation of a program of research and evaluation to examine the social, economic, educational, and political condition of Latino communities.*
- *Transmission of research findings to academic institutions, government officials, community leaders, and private sector executives through publications, public policy seminars, workshops, and consultations.*
- *Provision of technical expertise and support to Latino communities in an effort to develop policy responses to local problems.*
- *Development of Latino faculty, including support for the development of curriculum and scholarship for Chicano/Latino Studies.*

Comparing Latino and Asian American Film Narratives

Introduction

The history of Asian American feature films in the United States is generally considered to begin in 1982 with Wayne Wang's *Chan is Missing*, in the same way that the history of American Latino film is usually dated from Luis Valdez's 1981 *Zoot Suit*.¹ Since that time a number of dedicated directors and screenwriters have added features to the list, some via Hollywood and others through an independent route. Still, it remains difficult for filmmakers in either group to find funding for their feature projects.

On the academic side, there has been a parallel growth in literature analyzing these films. However, thus far most analysts confine themselves to looking at one or more films within each ethnic grouping, rather than comparing works across ethnic lines. This article is intended as a preliminary exploration in that direction.²

Given that these two ethnic groups have significant commonalities as well as important divergences, we should expect such analysis to turn up both similarities and differences in the two film traditions. Both groups, for example, occupy the status of linguistic minorities in the United States. At the same time, their histories and the manner in which they became incorporated into this country vary considerably.

While generalizations are always risky, I would like to suggest that minority filmmakers have historically been engaged in six broad tasks as cultural workers:

1. **Moving ethnic minorities to center stage.**

While there is no shortage of minority representation in mainstream American films, there is no question that non-whites are generally marginalized in such films. The role of protagonist is largely reserved for "White," or European-American actors. Minority characters tend to occupy positions as sidekicks, allies, local color, villains, victims, and "others" in general. Minority filmmakers have therefore made the effort to center their stories around members of their own ethnic group. This is as true of Latino and Asian-American filmmakers as of their African-American and Native-American counterparts.

2. **Countering stereotypes.** One of the central complaints made about mainstream American films is the persistent stereotyping of non-Whites. Minority filmmakers have employed an array of strategies for countering this historical pattern. One technique employed by such filmmakers as Robert Townsend, *Hollywood Shuffle*³ and "Cheech" Marin, *Born in East L.A.*⁴ is to spoof these stereotypes through parody and exaggeration. More commonly, minority filmmakers combat stereotypes by revealing the diversity that exists within their particular communities. By showing a range of characters along dimensions of class, generation, sexual orientation, and specific cultural practices, these filmmakers seek to negate the notion that "they're all alike."

3. **Critiquing racism and ethnocentrism.** Many – though by no means all – features by minority filmmakers explicitly point out and critique racist and ethnocentric practices in society at large on both individual and institutional levels. From Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit*, to Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, to Peter Wang's and Shirley Sun's *A Great Wall*, these filmmakers are concerned with demonstrating the continuing effects of both historical and contemporary discrimination on ethnic minority communities.

4. **Reclaiming and reinterpreting history.** While the television series *Roots* is perhaps the best known example of this, minority filmmakers from all ethnic groups are aware that the histories of their peoples have been forgotten, neglected, or distorted in American schools and in the media. Many minority features are therefore concerned with rediscovering or reinterpreting these histories from the perspectives of their respective communities.

5. **Exploring non-mainstream cultures.** Sometimes minority filmmakers are concerned with exploring a particular ethnic culture not specifically for the purpose of countering stereotypes, but rather to elucidate the richness of that tradition, and lend clarity to the sorts of issues that people in these communities deal with on a day to day basis. One gets a sense of this endeavor by examining such films as Valdez's *La Bamba*, Wayne Wang's *Dim Sum*, and Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*.

6. **Contending with issues of assimilation.** One of the thorniest sets of issues facing Latino and Asian-American cultural workers is that having to do with assimilation, acculturation, cultural retention, and cultural self determination. Some filmmakers choose to champion a position explicitly encouraging cultural resistance, while others opt for a more ambiguous position. Often a filmmaker will present numerous characters from different generations in order to illustrate the types of intra-family and intra-community tensions engendered by the process of assimilation. This topic is explored in greater depth below, in connection with the analysis of specific films.

Social Themes in Latino and Asian-American Films

This section will present a case by case analysis of several Latino and Asian-American films, with the objective of showing both their similarities and their differences in treating some of the themes listed above. Given the limited number of cases described here, this study should be seen as a tentative and exploratory attempt to establish a basis for more wide-ranging discussions in the future.

El Norte. This 1983 independent feature was written and directed by Gregory Nava, and produced and co-written by Anna Thomas. It tells the story of a Guatemalan Mayan brother and sister who are forced to flee their highland village after government military forces kill their father and take their mother prisoner. With limited resources, Rosa and Enrique must undertake a risky passage across the length of Mexico before arriving at the California border, gateway to the fabled “north,” *el norte*.

After making their way to Los Angeles, they are able to secure low-level jobs – Enrique as a busboy, Rosa in a textile sweatshop, through the intermediary of a Chicano informal labor contractor. They enroll in English language classes, and appear to be settling in when both encounter problems at work. Following a raid by the immigration service on Rosa’s workplace, she and a Mexican co-worker are able to find jobs as maids in a wealthy woman’s house. Enrique is on the verge of being promoted at work when he is suddenly turned in to the INS by a jealous co-worker, and barely escapes being caught and deported. Through the Chicano labor contractor’s connections, Enrique is then offered a job as a foreman that carries

with it the prospect of a “green card” and legalization of his status in the United States, but it requires him to relocate to the midwest. Just as he is about to depart his sister falls gravely ill. Enrique chooses to give up the midwestern job and stay by his sister’s side, but she dies as the result of an infection contracted during their journey north. At the end of the film Enrique finds himself alone, trapped in a manual laborer’s temporary job, and still facing the prospect of eventually being caught and deported.

Within this straightforward yet compelling narrative structure, the filmmakers have incorporated a number of social themes. At one level, the story is a critique of class exploitation in both Central America and the United States. In both settings, the filmmakers have noted the connections between ethnic stratification and class relationships. In Guatemala, the system is portrayed as an unholy alliance of Latino plantation owners and government military, with the Mayan communities at the bottom of the work force. In the United States, the situation is seen as one in which the lower reaches of the labor force is populated by minorities who are often pitted against each other on the basis of ethnicity and legal status.

At another level, the story explores the excruciating dilemma faced by immigrants as they encounter the implications of assimilation in both its structural form (incorporation into the economic system) and its cultural form (loss of the original culture as it is slowly replaced by cultural patterns of the new setting). This dilemma is faced most crucially by Enrique, who must choose between the individualistic, economic mobility of the United States, and the collective, family-oriented cultural pattern of his Mayan background. In choosing the latter he sacrifices the former, and remains in a vulnerable and exploited social position. Had he chosen the former he would have abandoned not only his sister, but also the cultural moorings which served to sustain him and others in his situation.⁵

A third, implicit social theme in *El Norte* is the countering of stereotypes of Latinos. In their narrative, Nava and Thomas depict a broad range of cultural shadings, with positive and negative qualities intact. They include Mayan Indians, Guatemalan Latinos, Mexican workers and “coyotes” in Mexico, Mexicans in the United States, Mexican-Americans of different generations, and European-Americans.

No group has a monopoly on virtue or on vice, and they are depicted with exquisite attention to shadings in language usage, patterns of dress, mannerisms, attitude toward the world and each other, and spiritual orientation or lack thereof.

A Great Wall (1986). This independent feature was produced and co-written by Shirley Sun, based on her original concept. It was co-written and directed by Peter Wang, who also stars in the lead role of Leo Fang. Both filmmakers were born in China and immigrated to the United States.⁶

The story follows the life of the Fang family after Leo is passed over for promotion in favor of a less experienced White man at a Silicon Valley computer firm. Leo resigns in disgust, and leaves to visit his country of origin, China, with his wife Grace and his teenage son Paul. In Beijing, they stay with Leo's sister and her retired bureaucrat husband, the Chaos. The remainder of the film records a series of experiences that the Fang family has as they come into contact with a culture very different from their own. A great deal of the humor in the film comes from juxtaposing the two markedly different lifestyles and sets of attitudes.

For Leo in particular, who left China as a young adult many years ago, the homecoming is tinged with a bittersweet nostalgia. The film follows Leo through a series of experiences — observing his brother-in-law practicing Tai Chi, attending a performance of traditional Chinese music, visiting his father's grave site, touring the Great Wall — that bring back memories and a keen sense of what has been left behind.

A major subplot of the film involves Paul Fang and the Chao's teenage daughter Lili. Lili is studying for the exams which will determine whether she will be able to go to college, and is also involved in a developing romance with a young man, Liu. Both her study routine and her new romance are disrupted by the presence of the high energy Paul, who fascinates Lili with his Western trendiness and freer, less regimented lifestyle. Lili also comes into conflict with her mother, who is accustomed to reading all her mail, after Paul introduces her to the untranslatable Western concept of "privacy."

At the end of the film the Fangs return to California, and life returns to a semblance of normality. Paul again takes up with his non-Asian girlfriend;

Lili seems destined to repair her relationship with Liu; Mr. and Mrs. Chao resume their daily routine. Grace also returns to her routine, but finds that the acupuncture therapy she discovered in China has had significant health benefits. Leo is even more significantly changed — he has substituted Tai Chi for jogging, and has taken up the study of traditional Chinese drumming. The audience is left with the sense that Leo has established a new equilibrium in his life through his contact with Chinese culture.

One point of comparison with *El Norte* has to do with *A Great Wall's* acknowledging the impact of economic discrimination. While Leo occupies a very different class position from Enrique and Rosa, he also finds his aspirations unjustly restricted. In Leo's case, however, the discrimination appears to be more a matter of individual prejudice on the part of his boss rather than an institutionalized system of class exploitation. Were the story set in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the plight of Chinese immigrants was far more similar to that of present day Guatemalan refugees, the depiction would have had to be quite different.

A Great Wall bears an even stronger resemblance to *El Norte* in its counter-stereotypical range of characters. Each of the major characters and many of the minor ones are distinct personalities, each with their own set of strengths, weaknesses, and quirks. The Chinese characters are seen neither as doctrinaire Communists, nor as slaves to traditional Chinese culture, and the Chinese-American characters all have their own distinct ways of combining elements of both cultures to reflect their own particular generational status. Paul, for example, plays ping pong and know how to use chopsticks, but is lukewarm toward his Chinese language lessons, and is an avid San Francisco 49ers fan.

But it is with respect to questions of assimilation and attitudes toward the home country that the most interesting comparisons between these two films emerge. In *El Norte*, the contrasts between Mayan culture and that of the contemporary, urban United States are drawn starkly and moralistically. Mayan society is portrayed as peaceful, relaxed, collective, family oriented, and spiritual. American society is seen as exploitative, individualistic, materialistic, and soulless. The Mayan community is seen as a signifier of authenticity and life, while the American city

is the repository of superficiality and death. With these two cultures drawn in such a manner, the attitude toward cultural assimilation can only be one of rejection and resistance. Rosa's fate in such a society is one of physical death, while Enrique survives physically but faces the continuing prospect of spiritual death. In the last moments of the film, Enrique pauses from his manual labor to picture Rosa in his mind's eye, alive and back in their home community.

By contrast, the cultural attitudes expressed in *A Great Wall* are far more ambiguous and complex. It is clear that Leo Fang returns to China in need of spiritual renewal, and to a considerable degree he finds it. In the early part of the film, he is clearly restless and unhappy in America, but after his pilgrimage to China he seems to have achieved a new equilibrium and to be at peace with himself. At the same time, he does return to California, and he now seems quite capable of weathering whatever future storms may await him there. By drawing strength from his cultural home and its traditions, he is able to adapt more successfully to his new environment. China is not romanticized or idealized, but neither is it rejected or condemned.

Paul Fang's experience is distinct. As a representative of a later generation, Paul is more thoroughly acculturated, and seems more like an interested tourist in China than a pilgrim. If he is affected by his visit to the old country, one gets the feeling that any changes are so subtle as to be almost undetectable, at least in the short run. Paul seems unchanged, and the filmmakers convey the feeling that this is all right too. His parents would like for him to be more fluent in Chinese, and would be happier if his girlfriend was Chinese, but they appear to be prepared to accept the inevitability of acculturation. The sense of loss is present but subtle, more poignant than apocalyptic.

Whether the differences in attitudes expressed in these two films is a result of personal differences among the filmmakers or reflective of more generalized cultural patterns and historical experiences is impossible to say on the basis of such a limited comparison. A more systematic future analysis may provide more of an indication.

In the remainder of this paper I would like to present a briefer analysis of two other films that touch on issues of culture.

Crossover Dreams. Released in 1985, this film was directed by Cuban-American Leon Ichaso, and written by Ichaso, Manuel Arce, and Ruben Blades, who also stars. This was Blades' first film, and in it he portrays a New York salsa singer who wants to cross over to a mainstream audience with mainstream-type music, and, of course, mainstream money. The Panamanian-born Blades was already an acclaimed, internationally known salsa musician at the time this film was made.

At the beginning of the story Blades' character, Rudy Veloz, finds his musical career stalled. While his band is successful on the salsa circuit, the monetary rewards are small. When his musician mentor Cheo dies impoverished, Rudy becomes determined to escape a similar fate. Soon thereafter he is approached by a mainstream record producer who feels that Rudy can cross over with his new musical direction, a kind of *Latinoized* pop sound.

As Rudy prepares to record his new album, the allure of fame and fortune quickly turn his head. Before long, he has dumped his faithful Latino girlfriend Liz for a glamorous music industry groupie, and replaced his longtime Latino trumpet player Orlando with a White saxophone man. Unfortunately for Rudy, his album flops. Not only is he flat broke now, but the groupie won't return his phone calls, and Liz doesn't want to talk to him either. In desperation, Rudy makes contact with a drug smuggler in hopes of making some quick money. At the last moment, his memories of Cheo pull him back from the brink of disaster. At the end of the film Rudy has lost Liz, but has managed to regroup his salsa band, and returns to the Latino community which is ready to welcome him back.

One of the noteworthy aspects of *Crossover Dreams* is its use of a stunning sound track as a dramatic element. At one point Cheo sits down with Rudy and teaches him a Latino song, *Todos Vuelven*, which includes the lines *Todos vuelven al lugar en que nacieron* (everyone returns to the place of their birth), and *pero el tiempo del amor no vuelve mas* (but the moment of love can never be recaptured). The song performs multiple functions in the film: foreshadowing later events in the story, setting out the theme of community and cultural roots, and illustrating the beauty of the Caribbean musical tradition. It also serves as a lament for Cheo's death, and, in the form of a cassette recording, provides the psychological boost that Rudy needs to turn his life around.

In its attitude toward culture and in its presentation of the stark choices available to those in the Latino community, *Crossover Dreams* is somewhat reminiscent of *El Norte*. Here the phenomenon of crossing over is equated with inauthenticity and a betrayal of culture and community. Rudy's trajectory as a character is almost literally a descent into hell, portrayed visually through the use of red street lights and the steam rising from street vents as he goes to meet the drug dealer.⁷ The tone of the film presents an intriguing contrast with another, better known Latino film, **La Bamba**. In this latter film, writer/director Luis Valdez pictures a successful crossing over resulting from the hybridization of Mexican and American musical forms, with resulting appeal to both Latino and mainstream audiences. Another variation on the theme has recently appeared in the Hollywood feature **Selena** (1997), with its depiction of the Tejana musical icon on the verge of crossing over at the time of her violent death. Interestingly, the film *Selena*, with its idolization of its subject, was written and directed by Gregory Nava, the director of *El Norte*.

Living on Tokyo Time (1987) was the first feature by Steven Okazaki, a well known Japanese-American documentary film director. This film, shot in San Francisco on a shoestring budget with a mixed cast of professional and nonprofessional actors, centers on a love story between two characters, Ken and Kyoko.

Ken is a young third generation Japanese-American man who works at a boring warehouse job and dreams of making it big as a guitarist with a garage band that plays rock music. He has such a low-key personality that he barely reacts when his Asian girlfriend leaves him because "this relationship has been in neutral for a year."

Kyoko, on the other hand, is a Japanese woman visiting in the United States. She works in a small Japanese restaurant, but her visa has expired and she doesn't know how she will be able to prolong her stay. A fellow waitress comes up with the idea that her friend Ken should marry Kyoko in order to provide her with legal status in this country. After one movie date, Ken is apparently smitten, and agrees to the arrangement. Kyoko moves in with him, and the inevitable complications ensue, chiefly that Ken falls in love with Kyoko, but she doesn't fall in love with him.

At the conclusion of the story Kyoko returns to Japan, leaving Ken heartbroken. In a voice-over, Kyoko explains that Mr. Ken, as she calls him, can't understand her, because she cannot speak her feelings in English, and he cannot speak his in Japanese.

As with the other films examined in this study, *Living on Tokyo Time* is concerned with issues of assimilation, acculturation and interethnic contact, with the twist that the interethnic relationship here is between people who are ostensibly of the same ethnicity. Yet as Ken's waitress friend points out, he and Kyoko are from entirely different cultures — like John (Lennon) and Yoko (Ono). Ken has assimilated into American culture, but is still haunted by the echoes and pull of his cultural legacy. As in *A Great Wall*, there is a sense of acceptance of the inevitable here, with the same generalized feeling of poignancy.⁸ And as with Rudy in *Crossover Dreams*, Ken is left with his music as consolation for thwarted aspirations — the last image of the film is of Ken looking at an electric guitar in a pawn shop window, presumably a replacement for the one he smashed when he found that Kyoko had left him.

Conclusion

It should come as little surprise that Latino and Asian-American feature films share many common themes and concerns, given that the two groupings share histories of discrimination and immigration, and occupy parallel statuses as cultural minorities in the United States. Among the commonalities cited above are: the practice of putting minority characters center stage; the concern with countering traditional stereotypes; the critiquing of racist and ethnocentric patterns in the society; wrestling with issues of structural and cultural assimilation; and a tendency to see the country and culture of origin as sources of strength. While only four films have been studied in this article, it would not be difficult to find reinforcement for this argument by examining such films as *La Bamba*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Zoot Suit*, *Picture Bride*, *American Me*, *Born in East L.A.*, *Chan is Missing*, *Selena*, and *Dim Sum*, among others.

There is, however, some indication from this preliminary comparison that there are some differences between Latino and Asian-American filmmakers in their attitudes toward acculturation. The Latino films seem to take a somewhat harder line on this issue,

with greater emphasis given to a stance of rejecting or resisting incursions by mainstream cultural patterns. If this generalization turns out to be valid – and it must remain highly tentative at this point – it may be related to differences in the timing of immigration flows, or to the greater geographic proximity of the Latino homelands.

Endnotes

1. While there were some earlier low-budget, independent Latino features, *Zoot Suit* was the first Latino feature to be widely distributed.
2. The labels “Latino” and “Asian-American” are used for the sake of convenience in this article. Clearly, each term groups together people from various national origins whose primary ethnic self-identification may be quite distinct.
3. For a discussion of Townsend’s film, see Ed Guerrero’s *Framing Blackness*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.
4. Rosa Linda Fregoso dissects Marin’s comedic strategies in her book *The Bronze Screen*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993.
5. For an analysis of the underlying mythic substructure of this film’s narrative, see my article “Missing the Myth: What Gets Left Out of Latino Film Analysis,” in *Perspectives in Mexican-American Studies*. 1997.
6. For background on the making of this film, see Sally Swope, “Peter Wang and Shirley Sun: Bringing Worldwide Audiences Together,” in *Rice*, September, 1987, pp. 23-32.
7. For a discussion of the concept of “character arc” and its application to Latino films, see my “Story Structure in Latino Feature Films,” in Chon Noriega, ed., *Chicanos and Film*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1992, pp. 218-240.
8. Some of this sense is conveyed in a quote by Okazaki, when asked about how working on his films has affected his own attitudes: “I think it’s sort of helped me realize how Japanese I am. We really are Asian-Americans... the two have mixed together. I really love going to Tokyo, but I know I can never really fit in. I think that’s sort of the sad dilemma of being Asian-American. You don’t really fit in once you’ve left.” Quoted in Nancy Matsumoto, “Steve Okazaki: The Camera-Shy Filmmaker Who’s Living on Tokyo Time,” *AsiAm*, August, 1987, p. 31.