

# Analysis of the Chinese Elements in Freaky Friday from the Perspective of Orientalism

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**Abstract:** Based on the novel *Freaky Friday* by Mary Rogers, *Freaky Friday* is a comedy about a mother-daughter relationship. However, the racial issues shown in it are worth exploring. Based on the content of the film, this article will focus on the portrayal of Chinese culture and characters in the film and explore the Chinese elements in the movie from the perspective of Orientalism. It could contribute to arouse our awareness of cultural communication and establish an equal platform for cultural exchange.

**Keywords:** *Freaky Friday*, Race, Cultural Awareness, Orientalism.

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## 1. Introduction

Orientalism is the theory and practice of the “West” in defining and representing the “East” from the very beginning of the interaction between the West and the East, “the West has developed its own views, attitudes, and ideas to explain, describe, construct, and utilize ideas about the East.” In a sense, Orientalism is unrelated to the East. Orientalism is a product of the Western imagination about the East, a desired image that a part of the West wishes the East to present, a pre-existing fictional Western thought, an exaggerated and self-imagined projection onto the East, which is then imposed on the East.

*Freaky Friday* is a popular film that revolves around a mother and daughter swapping bodies, leading to various comedic situations and personal growth. While the movie has gained acclaim for its entertainment value, it is essential to critically examine its portrayal of race. This article aims to analyze the racial portrayal of Chinese elements in the movie from three aspects: the portrayal of Asian characters, scene setting, and special food culture in conjunction with the Orientalist perspective. It will explore the problematic aspects of Chinese elements in *Freaky Friday* concerning race and to guide the viewers to establish a correct cultural awareness, so as to realize an objective and equal cross-cultural communication.

## 2. Portrayal of Asian Characters

### 2.1. The Hostess with Exaggerated Behavior

In the movie, the protagonists, Tess and her daughter Anna, have a very tumultuous relationship. Tess is highly dissatisfied with Anna’s performance at school, while Anna is indifferent towards Tess’s impending remarriage. Until one day, when dining at a Chinese restaurant, the mysterious restaurant owner changes everything.

Of all the rude scenes in this movie, the Chinese restaurant scenes are the most glaringly embarrassing. Firstly, at a surface glance, there are some harmful stereotypes at play. All of the Chinese characters working at the restaurant are dressed in traditional, stereotypical clothes. They all speak very broken English and have an exaggerated accent. The hostess, called Peipei, is incessantly happy and eager to please,

aggressively trying to sell Tess on catering her wedding. Almond-shaped eyes, a flat nose, and thin lips - these typical East Asian facial features convey a striking Chinese beauty. This alluring image embodies the typical Western perception of the Chinese female, portraying her as graceful, delicate, and submissive - the docile Oriental woman. In most of the shots, she always had an exaggerated, boring smile on her face. When she said, “What about me?” she pointed her index finger at her nose and pressed it firmly against it. This gesture shows her currying favor with Tess and demeaning herself. The exaggerated smiles and attentive attitudes in the shots show the sycophancy and rudeness of the Oriental people, which is very different from the suits and elegant manners of the Westerners in the restaurant.

### 2.2. The Weird Chinese Traditional Woman

Another typical Chinese female character is the restaurant hostess’s “Mama”, who had a typical Asian face and wore a black Chinese cheongsam. When Peipei talked with the protagonists, “Mama” stared intently at Tess and Anna, and nodded her head mysteriously with a weird smile. Even though Peipei repeatedly reminded her not to “meddling in other people’s business”, “Mama” still insisted on “helping” the mother and daughter in her own way. In the follow-up shots, “Mama” butts into their argument, offers Tess the fortune cookies and acts like she doesn’t understand when they say no to her. This results in the mother and daughter brushing her off like an annoyance and finally taking the fortune cookies (which contains strange “Asian voodoo”) in order to get her to go away. All of these actions promoted stereotypes that show Asian people in specific racist and outdated ways that offend and reinforce prejudiced behavior towards them. Framing Asian characters with these stereotypes in movies and TV influences the public’s perception of Asian individuals as a whole and reinforces racism in real life.

A common feature of the two typical Chinese female characters is the wearing of cheongsams. The cheongsam has a strong intrinsic connection with oriental women, and is therefore given a second “life”, that is, it is not only a kind of dress, but also represents the Oriental ethnic attributes of women. In the context of Orientalism, when the East becomes the “other” in the eyes of the West, women also become the

“other” in the eyes of men. As a form of colonial discourse, Orientalism is a way of understanding the 'other', while also being a form of power in constructing the 'other', built upon the assumptions and biases of intellectuals, artists, critics, writers, and politicians, particularly Orientalist scholars. The relationship between the East and the West is a relationship of varying degrees of power, domination, and complex hegemony. “The strong West/male has the power to dominate the weak East/female.” Under such circumstances, Chinese women are definitely the weakest of the weak. Therefore, in Western movies, Chinese women wearing cheongsams are naturally labeled as underprivileged, and even become synonymous with “conservative and repressive” and “feudal and superstitious”.

### 3. Scene Setting

#### 3.1. Chinese Elements in Setting

Not only are the portrayal of the characters tinted with political colors, but even the scenes settings in the movie convey oriental elements; the movie's scenes involving the Orient are in the Old Chinatown. It is a place where people of Chinese descent live in cities in countries other than Chinese areas. When the movie switches to the Old Chinatown, it is accompanied by strange background music, hanging red lanterns and restaurant name House of Chang. The time is set at night, and the red lanterns all over the yard give the audience a signal - it's the dark, unknown, mysterious East.

In his book *Orientalism*, Said states that the West continues to place itself and the East under a dichotomous discursive paradigm and presupposes and then essentializes labels for their respective identities, thus entrenching the differences between East and West, with the West being the center of the world, progressive, rational, and civilized, and the East backward, irrational, and barbaric. This way of serving the hegemonic domination of the West over the East, which makes the East the Other and subordinate to the West, is the core of Said's theory of Orientalism. Thus as the magic happens, accompanied by a weird background music, an earthquake-like phenomenon occurs in the restaurant in the movie. The movie is set at night, where the dim lighting effects and the ancient and mysterious decorations in the restaurant give a very gloomy and “stormy” feeling, which paves the way for the later “Asian Witchcraft”.

#### 3.2. The Special Image “Dragon”

The restaurant is also full of traditional Chinese features. It is set against the backdrop of a grand mansion, surrounded by high walls that separate the life inside from the outside world, which is where the magic takes place. The red lanterns and tasseled curtains in it are the only touch of warm color in this slightly gray and heavy tone. The interior of the house is decorated with exquisite antique furniture, glittering murals and a red veil draped with tassels, giving off a rich traditional Chinese flavor. The most eye-catching of them are the murals hanging all over the walls, while most of which are elaborately carved dragons and auspicious clouds. In Chinese mythology, dragons have the ability to fly and hide from the world, and are often symbols of good fortune and auspiciousness. The dragon has always been a symbol of the emperor and the imperial power in ancient China. Nowadays, the dragon has become a mainstream symbol of national identity and a representation of the national community. In Western mythology, however, dragons are ferocious monsters

and symbols of evil, which is why the tradition of “dragon slaying” has long been popular in the Western world. In medieval states, the legitimacy of political power had to be validated by the authority of religious power. The triumph of religious power, in turn, was achieved through the motif of dragon-slaying. With the rise of Christianity, the dragon was depicted as the devil incarnate, and the hero's feats were shifted to the saints. As a result, the mysterious dragon murals also show the East as the “other” in the eyes of the West, while the west would never have utilized dragon carvings to display blessings.

As Said puts it in his *Orientalism*: “One culture always tends to make over another culture, not to accept it as it is; to accept it as it is for the benefit of the receiver.” Orientalism is a processing of the objective, a “reproduction”.

### 4. Special Food Culture

The most frequent and most expressive Chinese elements in American films are the colorful and diverse folk life customs, such as Chinese food culture. In the movie, Tess and Anna are inconsiderate of each other's lives. Tess, the mother, wants to remarry, but Anna is indifferent; and Anna's performance at school makes Tess very dissatisfied. To break the ice between mother and daughter during their argument, Tess's boyfriend asks “Who is up for Chinese?” - and the East makes its debut in the movie with this chaotic scene. In the restaurant, the hostess Peipei said “Chinese food good luck”. But why? What's in the dish? It seems to be a compliment to Chinese culture, but in fact it conveys the mystery of Chinese culture, which is to some extent demonized.

Besides, the fortune cookies, mentioned twice in the movie, play an important role in driving the plot. Fortune cookies are unassuming in appearance, with a meaningful note capturing the main idea of the movie embedded: A journey soon begins. Its prize reflected in another's eyes; what you see is what you lack, then selfless love will change you back. Fortune cookies are sold in Chinese restaurants in the U.S., Canada and some other Western countries, but in fact there are no such fortune cookies in China. The fortune cookie is a crisp cookie wrapped around a fortune, a piece of a paper with good sayings. Mr. Wong pointed out: “The Japanese may have invented the fortune cookie. But the Chinese people really explored the potential of the fortune cookie. It's Chinese-American culture. It only happens here, not in China.” This treatment expresses both the power of the West and the flaws and oddities of the East as seen through Western eyes.

Looking deeper at the scene, the fact that “Mama” has magical powers to put a curse on them through a fortune cookie is blatantly racist and implies chiefly that the writers and directors of the movie are racist and supports the assumption of Orientalism, that Eastern cultures are profoundly different and “backwards.” Hasia's conceptualization of Military Orientalism in *Zero Dark Thirty* similarly applies here, describing Orientalism as “used to promote the notion of Western superiority.” The main issue with this film is that it supports the making of non-western cultures to seem mystical and exotic and encourages the concept of Orientalism obvious in the fortune cookie bit.

### 5. Conclusion

The main themes represented in the movie *Freaky Friday* are spiritual connection and personal growth, with race being only a secondary factor. However, as a medium, the impact of

movies on culture cannot be underestimated. “we can better understand the persistence and the durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers and thinkers were productive, not unilaterally inhibiting.” The inclusion of Chinese elements in American films is both an exchange and dialog between Chinese and American cultures and an intense collision between two heterogeneous cultures.

While letting the western countries and the world understand the Chinese culture, China also needs to seriously look at the Chinese elements expressed by the western countries, which is conducive to the establishment of an equal platform for cultural exchanges and the correct dissemination of China’s excellent traditional culture.

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