Magic and mystery: Orientalism in the movie palaces of the 1920s

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Abstract

During the 1920s, the success of the film industry led to monumental movie theaters being built around the United States to accommodate the medium's growing popularity. These theaters, known as movie palaces, were often designed in historical architectural styles. Two movie palaces, Grauman's Chinese Theater and the 5th Avenue Theatre, were inspired by Chinese art and architecture. Their Chinese-inspired architecture is emblematic of late 19th and early 20th century American Orientalism and exoticism. In order to explore the context in which these theaters were designed and built, this paper offers a brief history of the movie theater form as it evolved from the 1890s into the 1920s as well as a brief history of American Orientalism and discrimination against East Asians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Through an analysis of both theaters' background, architecture, and response from the public, this paper presents Grauman's Chinese Theater and 5th Avenue Theatre as important pieces of film and architectural history that nonetheless perpetuate American Orientalism through their exoticized version of Chinese art and design.

Introduction

A soaring green roof and curving, arched eaves; massive red columns topped by elaborately carved capitals; twin obelisks framing the monumental entrance to a courtyard inscribed with handprints from countless Hollywood stars; the sight of the TCL Chinese Theater (fig.1) is an inexorable part of Los Angeles' history, and that of the American film industry as a whole. Intricately tied to the theater's legacy is its unique design, conceived of by Hollywood mogul Sid Grauman, inspired by Chinese architecture. The theater, initially known as Grauman's Chinese Theater, was officially opened to the public in a grand ceremony held in 1927.[1] Throughout the 20th century, it remained one of the most well-known and popular locations in American cinematic history and continues to be a major tourist attraction today. This was in part due to the unique tradition that developed, where honored guests are allowed to press their hands, feet, and other iconic traits into wet cement tiles laid in the theater's forecourt. The theater has remained in continuous operation since its grand opening, even as it passed hands between owners and titles. It was most recently branded as the TCL Chinese Theater as part of a deal with Chinese technology company TCL, which acquired naming rights in 2011.[2] Despite its rebranding, the theater is still referred to affectionately by many as Grauman's Chinese Theater, in no small part due to Sid Grauman's long-lasting legacy as a Hollywood figure. The 5th Avenue Theatre (fig.2) was designed in a similar fashion by architect Robert Reamer with Chinese architecture in mind,[3] referencing imperial buildings in Beijing for several spaces of the

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[1] "History | TCL Chinese Theatres," accessed August 7, 2023, http://www.tclchinesetheatres.com/tcl-chinese-theater-history/.

[2] "History | TCL Chinese Theatres."

[3] "The Story of the 5th \ 5th Avenue Theatre."

theater's interior.[4] The 5th Avenue Theatre's grand opening was less ostentatious than that of the Chinese Theater, and the theater's exterior was less grandiose in terms of ornament than its Los Angeles counterpart, but its Chinese-inspired interior nonetheless provided Seattle's movie-going audience with a similar extravagant experience. Unlike Grauman's Chinese Theater, the 5th Avenue Theatre briefly closed in the 1970s. Local efforts and community support allowed the theater to reopen in the 1980s, following an extensive renovation that restored the theater to its original design and making it suitable for stage productions, as opposed to simply being a movie theater. [5]

Both theaters were built during the 1920s, during a period in the film industry that introduced the medium of cinema to a wider-reaching audience than before. Film had been regarded as more of a novelty in the first two decades of its existence, but developments in film technology allowed for longer-form and more complex narratives that enticed audiences and allowed for certain actors to rise in popularity themselves.[6] By the 1920s, an entire industry had arisen around the production and marketing of films and their stars. This increase in popularity was reflected in the evolution of the architecture of movie theaters, which went from one-room general storefronts to monumental venues, built specifically for the exhibition of film. These luxurious, massive theaters were known as movie palaces; both Grauman's Chinese Theater and the 5th Avenue Theatre are examples of this type of theater, many of which were built around the United States. Not every movie palace built in the 1920s survived into the 21st century, but both

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[4] David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981), 88.

[5] "The Story of the 5th \ 5th Avenue Theatre," accessed August 9, 2023, https://www.5thavenue.org/about/about-the-5th/the-story-of-the-5th/.

[6] Wheeler W. Dixon and Gwendolyn A. Foster, *A Short History of Film, Third Edition*, *Rutgers University Press EBooks*, 2019, 22, https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813595160.

Grauman's Chinese and 5th Avenue Theatre remain in operation in some form and with their original designs mostly intact.[7]

It cannot be ignored that the film industry's growth at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries paralleled an increase in discriminatory practices towards and beliefs about Asian people in the United States. Specifically, Chinese men who emigrated to the U.S.A. in search of jobs and settled on or near the West Coast were targeted by the non-Chinese populations who lived there. The film industry's boom of the early 20th century was in part due to filmmakers' willingness to capitalize on various negative stereotypes that permeated the American consciousness about marginalized groups,[8] and East Asians were included in this. Many films were released in the 1910s and 1920s concerning the "Yellow Peril".[9] East Asians, and specifically Chinese people, were generally portrayed in popular culture at the time as untrustworthy foreigners, with the worst tropes of the time highlighting contemporary fears of miscegenation and integration into White American society.[10] White American audiences

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[7] For instance, contemporaries of Grauman's Chinese and 5th Avenue Theatre, the Metropolitan Theater in Los Angeles and the Orpheum Theatre in Seattle, were built in the 1920s and demolished in 1960 and 1967, respectively. The Metropolitan Theater was razed to make room for a parking lot. They were a few of many movie palaces that didn't last through the 20th century. "Paramount Theatre in Los Angeles, CA - Cinema Treasures," accessed August 11, 2023, https://cinematreasures.org/theaters/495, "PCAD - Orpheum Theatre #7, Downtown, Seattle, WA," accessed August 9, 2023, https://pcad.lib.washington.edu/building/3221/.

[8] D. W. Griffith's notorious 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation* perhaps provides the best example of this. The film was a box office smash, and its racist portrayal of African American men and heroic portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan in the Reconstruction-era South caused a resurgence of interest and membership in the hate group. Erin Blakemore, "'Birth of a Nation': 100 Years Later," JSTOR Daily, February 4, 2015, https://daily.jstor.org/the-birth-of-a-nation/.

[9] Richard A. Oehling, "Hollywood and the Image of the Oriental, 1910 - 1950 — Part I," *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 8, no. 2 (May 1978): 33–41, https://doi.org/10.1353/flm.1978.a402702.

[10] Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 123.

perceived East Asian people as mysterious and exotic, making them popular villains in media of all forms.[11] Film, however, became the major avenue through which these stereotypes proliferated. Grauman's Chinese Theater and the 5th Avenue Theatre, as prominent spaces of film exhibition, serve as physical manifestations of the prevalence of Orientalism in the film industry, as well as the general American consciousness at the time.

The term Orientalism rose to prominence during the 19th and 20th centuries as an area of study focused on Middle Eastern people and cultures, in the region which was then known to Western nations as the Orient. The term was for the most part redefined by academic Edward Said in his 1979 text of the same name, wherein he critiques the hyperbolized and one-dimensional beliefs about the Middle East it was perceived by the West. According to Said, Orientalism functioned "as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."[12] Western imperial powers like Britain and France studied and interpreted "Oriental" cultures, manufacturing their own idea of what the "Orient" was and reducing multiple nations and cultures into a single misunderstood monolith. Negative stereotypes pervaded literature, academia, and the arts at large; stereotypes which emphasized the timelessness, savagery, and mystery of the Orient. This understanding of the Orient was largely created by Europeans for other Europeans, as a contrast to what the West understood about itself. Through the creation of a savage, irrational East, the West could uphold itself as the progressive, rational counterpart, defining itself as a superior collection of nations and cultures against an imagined inferior culture, collected into one entity known just as the Orient. Said's definition of

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[11] Benshoff and Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies,* 123.

[12] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary edition (New York: Vintage Books : A division of Random House, 2003), 3.

Orientalism as a "systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient"[13] guides this paper, as it explores how Grauman's Chinese Theater and the 5th Avenue Theatre were Western interpretations of Chinese art and architecture. The architecture of these two theaters is a White American production of what White America generally believed about China during the silent film era.

Admittedly, Said's original text largely concerns the relationship between Western European nations, namely Britain and France, and the Middle Eastern cultures that these nations colonized and subjugated. Said argues that while the United States began to practice Orientalist thinking and policies in the post-World War II period, the colonial ties between Britain, France, and the Middle East are deeper than those of the United States. He is not wrong, but this paper will expand beyond the scope of Said's initial definition of the term to explore the similar, yet distinct Orientalist relationship between the United States and the "Far East". While the United States had not colonized East Asia by the 1920s the same way Britain and France colonized the North African and Middle Eastern regions, the discrimination that East Asian immigrants, in particular Chinese men, faced and the one-dimensional stereotypes that developed about them in the late 19th-century proliferated for the same reasons of defining their superior Western culture against the unknown, inferior Eastern culture. In short, the treatment that East Asian people received in the late 19th and 20th centuries, from discriminatory immigration practices to their portrayal in literature and film to the misrepresentation of their architecture, can and should be examined under Said's definition of Orientalism.

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[13] Said, *Orientalism,* 3.

Another important element of this paper is the discussion of exoticism in Western art and architecture, a stylistic trend which arose from European interest in non-European art forms.[14] Exoticism was another facet of Orientalism, by which Western powers defined themselves against their conception of the Orient through art which upheld reductive and exploitative views about non-Western cultures. Judy Sund, in her book on the subject, defines the exotic as a manifestation of the West's desire "to possess, engage, amend, [and] control."[15] Exoticized art wasn't necessarily critical of the culture from which it took inspiration. In fact, it was a prevailing belief of Western artists that "Oriental" art was actually more pure and less tainted than its Western counterpart.[16] Likewise, it's worth noting that neither Grauman's Chinese Theater nor the 5th Avenue Theatre were conceived of with malicious intent towards the Chinese population of the United States. Grauman and Reamer were appreciative of China and its culture, as both theaters were either celebrated by or worked on by Chinese people. But exoticism is the act of taking one culture's art and reinterpreting it to be palatable by another culture's standards. Grauman's Chinese Theater and the 5th Avenue Theatre were simultaneously expressions of interest in the foreign culture which inspired their architecture, as well as an encapsulation of stereotypes that were widely held by non-Chinese Americans. The idea of Chinese architecture that Grauman and Reamer incorporated into their theaters was highly exoticized, in order to appeal to a mass American audience that already held stereotypical views of the culture.

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[14] Sara J. Oshinsky, "Exoticism in the Decorative Arts | Essay | The Metropolitan Museum of Art | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History," The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, accessed June 29, 2023, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/exot/hd_exot.htm.

[15] Judy Sund, *Exotic: A Fetish for the Foreign* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2019), 14.

[16] Oshinsky, "Exoticism in the Decorative Arts | Essay | The Metropolitan Museum of Art | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History."

This paper uses Grauman's Chinese Theater and the 5th Avenue Theatre as case studies to explore Orientalism and exoticism in 1920s America, as they manifested in the nation's film industry and beyond. In order to understand the significance of these theaters and their impact as Orientalist, exoticized spaces, it is first important to establish the significance of the film industry and the evolution of how films were exhibited.

History of the Movie Theater

There's no definitive beginning to the medium of film. In the late nineteenth century, many different engineers, artists, and inventors were working separately towards the same goal: capturing motion in a visual format and displaying it for an audience. Various inventions had existed beforehand which were rudimentary forms of animation, like the Zoetrope. Inside this small device, a series of sequential images would rotate, and the viewer would peer through a single slit, only seeing one frame at a time. As the images moved quickly one after the other, they would blur together and create the appearance of movement. This phenomenon, that of the human eye to interpret individual images shown quickly and sequentially as one single action, is the basis of cinema. The Zoetrope was copyrighted in 1866 by William E. Lincoln, who had developed the device based on other similar inventions of the time, like Simon Stampfer's phenakistiscope.[17] These devices were popular, but they had their limitations. The Zoetrope was largely marketed as a novelty for individuals to purchase and display in their homes. Only one person could actually use it at a time to view the incredibly short scene within. There was no way for it to be displayed to a larger audience or for it to display more complex scenes, let alone narratives.

[17] Dixon and Foster, *A Short History of Film, Third Edition,* 2-6.

Initially, however, there wasn't much demand for long-form narrative content in film. The first commercial film exhibition spaces in the United States were made for individualized devices that were meant to be viewed one person at a time, known as peep show arcades.[18] As opposed to spaces which would show one film to a large audience all at once, these arcades would house several copies of a smaller device, such as Thomas A. Edison's Kinetoscope. The proprietor would then charge a fee per person, in exchange for letting them operate it and view the scenes. They were short, lasting less than half a minute, and featured vaudeville entertainers, dancers, or other oddities like trained circus animals. The peep show era lasted a relatively short time, only a handful of years in the mid-1890s. Across the Atlantic Ocean, the Lumiere Brothers had found success in France with their Cinematographe. Their invention combined a film camera with a built-in projector. By projecting their films onto a large screen, they were able to exhibit them to a wider audience in a larger space.[19] Instead of one person watching individually, an audience could gather to watch the same film at once. This exhibition method proved to be more popular than the peep show format, which only treated film as more of a curiosity than as a medium which could deliver longer and more complex narratives.

Early spaces for projected film exhibition were not grandiose. As projectors became more readily available, it was increasingly possible for entrepreneurs to purchase one and exhibit films in any space which would hold the projector, a screen for the film to be projected onto, and seating for the audience. It was a relatively low point-of-entry, as many spaces were able to meet these requirements. As a result of this low entry, traveling exhibitions became popular. To serve

[18] Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*, Wisconsin Studies in Film (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 4.

[19] Dixon and Foster, *A Short History of Film, Third Edition,* 7.

the rural populations of the United States, entrepreneurs could travel with their projector, screen, and films from town to town. While in the rural areas, they could screen their films outside at night, in temporary canvas tents they brought with them, or they could book local venues like the town hall for their exhibition. Films were also often exhibited in pre-existing entertainment industry spaces, like at amusement parks or at vaudeville theaters in-between live performances. It was this connection with vaudeville theatre that first brought film to the attention of the middle-class American market, which would continue to be the largest audience for the industry moving into the twentieth century.[20]

The peep show arcade, traveling exhibitions, amusement parks, and vaudeville served to introduce film to American audiences in the 1890s, but these venues were inadequate for the expansion into a large-scale industry, which film was rapidly becoming. Traveling exhibitions and amusement parks were impermanent, as amusement parks only operated seasonally and traveling exhibitions were only in town for a night or two. The peep show arcades were too small, and vaudeville theatre performances were slightly too expensive for most people and were not solely aimed at film exhibition. Beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century, savvy film exhibitors in urban areas would rent empty storefronts and use them as makeshift film theaters. Since all that was needed was a screen, a projector, and seating, practically any commercial space would do for these theatres, including former restaurants and pawnshops. They would screen films for a small fee; oftentimes they would charge five cents, thus the term "nickelodeon" was coined for these makeshift theaters.[21] Nickelodeons were some of the first permanent venues dedicated solely to film exhibition. As such, their owners were able to take

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[20] Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 8-16.

[21] Gomery, 18-22.

more liberty with the ornament as a result. While the interiors remained simple in terms of function and furnishings, nickelodeon exteriors began to take on more elaborate forms, mimicking the ornate styles of vaudeville theater architecture in order to draw larger audiences.[22]

Exhibition in vaudeville theaters and imitating their style helped the medium of film increase in popularity, and film soon overtook its live counterpart. Compared to vaudeville shows, films were less expensive to both produce and exhibit, making them more appealing to producers and distributors. On the consumer's end, nickelodeon prices were much lower than admission into a popular vaudeville performance, which might cost two to five dollars.[23] Nickelodeons were the primary form of film exhibition during the first decade of the 20th century, but the 1910s saw an increase in the construction of larger, film-specific theaters. The construction of spaces specifically dedicated to the exhibition of films allowed for more freedom in expression and ornament than previously allowed in the era of the peep show or nickelodeon. Even vaudeville theaters which shared space between live performance and film projection were more limited in terms of function than the film-specific theater, as these theaters had to cater to the necessities of a live performance. Playhouses and opera houses needed extensive backstage space, wings, dressing rooms, green rooms, fly towers, and storage for props, set, and costumes. In contrast, film screening required little more than the screen and a projection booth.[24] By the 1920s, many pre-existing vaudeville theaters in large cities were converted into movie-only

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[22] Naylor, *American Picture Palaces*, 13-17.

[23] Gomery, *Shared Pleasures,* 29.

[24] Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 29-39.

spaces. Eliminating the need for extensive backstage facilities allowed for the focus of movie theater design to remain purely on audience satisfaction and awe.

Drawing from and elaborating on the tradition of highly ornate opera and vaudeville theaters led to the form of movie theater that typified the 1920's decade and its explosion of the film industry: the movie palace. The name itself is apt for this style, which was characterized by opulence and monumentality. Each theater could hold an audience numbering in the thousands.[25] The movie palace was a form of movie theater which emphasized the audience's experience of the theater's space nearly as much as the experience of watching the film itself. John Eberson, an architect who designed movie palaces throughout the decade, described the process of designing these theaters as "creating and building super-cinemas of enormous capacities... on behalf of His Excellency - the American Citizen."[26] This quote encapsulates the romantic ideal that Eberson and other movie palace architects believed their structures to be. The average American could, and furthermore, deserved to experience lavishness and luxury offered via the movie palace. These monumental sites became commonplace in most American towns, and multiple movie palaces were built in larger cities like New York or Los Angeles. In a way, the form of the movie palace was a democratization of Old World extravagance, taking the opulent trappings of European palaces and outfitting them in spaces that the growing American middle class could access.

Movie palaces were designed in multiple styles. Most of those built in the late 1910s and early 1920s drew on European styles, like those utilized by preceding vaudeville architecture.

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[25] Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk,* 34.

[26] John Eberson, "New Theaters for Old," *Film Daily Year Book* 47, (1929), 931, quoted in Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk,* 34.

One of the premier movie palace architects, Thomas Lamb, drew inspiration from the 18th-century British classical architecture, specifically the work of Robert Adam. Lamb worked closely with film exhibitors like Marcus Loews and Samuel Rothafel to design movie palaces across the country.[27] Architects George and C. W. Rapp worked with exhibitors A. J. Balaban and Sam Katz to construct a series of movie palaces in Chicago, where Balaban and Katz had control of the practically the entire city's movie theater industry. Their flagship theater, the Chicago Theater (fig.3) designed by Rapp & Rapp and built in 1921, featured an exterior facade inspired by Paris' Arc de Triomphe and a main auditorium embellished by fluted Corinthian columns, organ screens, and French-inspired scrollwork. At the same time, John Eberson developed an even more immersive style of movie palace, which came to be known as the atmospheric theater. In 1923, he decorated the auditorium ceiling of the Hoblitzelle Majestic (fig.4) in Houston with a plaster night sky, complete with electric overhead lights that were arranged like constellations, sometimes covered by clouds made by a hidden projector. Eberson's goal was to "visualize and dream a magnificent amphitheater, an Italian garden, a Persian court, a Spanish patio, or a mystic Egyptian templeyard,"[28] His atmospheric theaters, as implied by their name, offered movie-going audiences the chance to set foot in detailed facsimiles of the exotic locales that many films depicted, and he utilized many global architectural styles. The Chicago Avalon Theater, built in 1927, was inspired by a Persian incense burner that Eberson had seen in a shop window. Its exterior mimicked that of a mosque with intricate tilework and towers reminiscent of minarets.[29] Other theater architects also designed movie palaces in global, historical styles. Not all of them directly followed Eberson's trend of atmospheric theater, wherein the main auditorium was

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[27] Naylor, *American Picture Palaces*, 44-47.

[28] John Eberson, quoted in Naylor, *American Pictures Palaces,* 69.

[29] Naylor, 74.

designed to appear like a different outdoor space, but they still capitalized on the audience's fascination with the exotic. Theaters were constructed with ornament inspired by ancient Egypt, Central America, Middle Eastern, South Asian and East Asian influences. Eberson believed that these fanciful theaters could "conjure endless tales of romance"[30] within his audiences.

In contrast with Eberson's more quixotic outlook, businessman Marcus Loews offered a more cynical take on the phenomenon of the movie palace, often quoted as saying "We sell tickets to theaters, not movies."[31] Film and its exhibition were as much as a business as they were an artform, and the form of the movie palace proliferated precisely because of how profitable it was to film exhibitors and to studios. If movie palaces hadn't been wildly successful from an economic standpoint, they would not have been built, regardless of the democratic and romantic ideals offered by their architects. It was around the turn of the decade that film exhibitors began to work closely with studio heads, acquiring the funding necessary and ensuring that their theaters would screen popular upcoming pictures. These film exhibitors, who operated as their theater's business manager, were often described in terms like "impresario" or "showman".[32] In some cases, like Marcus Loews, the role of studio head and impresario were one in the same. In addition to providing luxurious spaces through lavish ornament and monumental architecture, impresarios such as Loews, Samuel Rothafel (well-known by his mononymous nickname Roxy), and Sid Grauman provided their audience with high quality service in attentive ushers, doormen, and maids. Grauman in particular popularized his theaters by turning film premiers into extravagant social events and putting on intricate pre-film live performances called prologues.

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[30] Eberson, quoted in Naylor, 77.

[31] Marcus Loew, quoted in Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 37.

[32] Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk,* 35-38.

Impresarios extended the fantasy of film into real-life through the high-quality services that they offered, working in tandem with the fantasy that the architecture of movie palaces already offered.

Both the TCL Chinese Theater and 5th Avenue Theatre were designed and constructed in the mid-1920s and fall firmly within the trend of the exotic movie palace. However, these theaters weren't just the result of contemporary movements in movie theater design. Los Angeles-based impresario Sid Grauman and Seattle architect Robert Reamer's use of Chinese-inspired ornament fell in line with contemporary beliefs about East Asian people and cultures.

American Orientalism in the 19th and early 20th centuries

The choice to invoke Chinese-inspired imagery and ornament at the TCL Chinese Theater and 5th Avenue Theatre was not a random one. It was not uncommon to use highly ornate architectural styles when designing movie palaces, yet these theaters are a more specific example of Orientalism due to their exoticized portrayal of Chinese architecture. They reflect the shallow understanding that general American audiences had of Chinese culture, an ignorance that was evident in other facets of American popular culture at the time as well. These theaters were designed within the context of America's film industry, and Hollywood was particularly poor at representing Chinese people and cultures. Many films released in the 1910s and 1920s contained characters and storylines which perpetuated Orientalist stereotypes. While the TCL Chinese Theater and 5th Avenue Theatre didn't exactly portray the same harmful tropes as contemporary film, their architecture was nonetheless influenced by the same reductive Orientalist beliefs which were prevalent in the film industry.

Anti-Asian hate of the late 19th and early 20th centuries can be best expressed with the racist concept of the "Yellow Peril". This bigotry wasn't limited only to the United States. It was a general fear of Asian immigration present in Europe and countries like Australia and New Zealand, as well. The term was coined by sociologist Yakov Novikov in the titular essay "Le Peril Jaune!", wherein he described the hypothetical threat that Asian immigrants posed against Europe and North America. [33] The essay stoked fears that Asian immigrants would invade occidental nations, massacring and replacing White Western cultures with their own. Although the term "Yellow Peril" was only popularized towards the end of the 19th century, anti-Asian sentiment was present for decades beforehand. Chinese immigrants, in particular, were vilified by White Europeans and Americans for their tendency to work for lower wages than White laborers in the same countries.

The discovery of gold in California's Sierra Nevada mountains in 1848 prompted an influx of travel to the newly acquired American territory.[34] By 1849, news of the gold rush had crossed the Pacific and attracted Chinese laborers to California, hoping for a more prosperous life than what might be available to them in their country of birth. These workers, the majority of whom were men, faced immediate persecution at the hands of the White American population in California.[35] Camps set up by Chinese miners were likely to be overrun and taken by White

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[33] Yakov Aleksandrovich Novikov, "Le péril jaune," https://www.gutenberg.org/files/26350/26350-h/26350-h.htm, accessed July 31, 2023, https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/26350/pg26350-images.html.utf8.

[34] "Searching for the Gold Mountain | Chinese | Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History | Library of Congress," web page, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, accessed August 10, 2023, https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/chinese/searching-for-the-gold-mountain/.

[35] Very few Chinese women immigrated to the United States during the 1850s, and those who did enter the country were often brought against their will as enslaved prostitutes. Jean

miners, who initially used violence to drive the Chinese laborers away from profitable claims along Californian rivers.[36] Eventually, the White population of gold rush towns and counties passed local laws which outright forbade Chinese people from living and working alongside them. In 1854, the White miners of Placer County forbade Chinese men from mining anywhere in the region, and it was decreed that no White employer could hire a Chinese employee in Shasta County the following year. Things came to a head by the end of the decade, when in February of 1859, a convention of white miners in Shasta City declared that the Chinese population had three weeks to leave their claims peaceably, or they would be forcibly expelled. Riots between White miners and Chinese miners erupted over the next month, and most of the Chinese who had once lived and worked in Shasta County were displaced by 1860. As the gold rush came to an end, many Chinese immigrants switched from gold mining to other forms of labor like farming or industrial construction. They would work for lower wages than White laborers, prompting further backlash and violence.

The violence and discrimination that the Chinese faced were in part due to their being seen as economic competition by California's White population, but they were also undoubtedly the victims of white supremacy and the belief that the Chinese were an inferior race. Not only were they persecuted by unsanctioned mob violence and through local ordinances, but they faced discrimination from the state of California's legislative and judicial systems as well. The state legislature's Committee on Mines specifically defined Asian people as "not white" and sought to expel them on the basis that they were an "odious and degrading" race. Several taxes were levied

Pfaelzer, *Driven out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans* (Univ of California Press, 2008), 5.

[36] Pfaelzer, *Driven out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans*.

against the Chinese, including 1852's Foreign Miners' Tax which forced them to pay three dollars a month for the right to mine, a price which was raised each subsequent year it was in effect. The state's Civil Code was amended in 1880 to include an anti-miscegenation rule, forbidding interracial marriage between White people and people of color, including those of Asian descent. Chinese people faced extreme bigotry in the 19th century, a hatred perpetuated by White Americans in an effort to drive them away from the lives they built in America and to deter future immigration to the country. This bigotry is exemplified in 1882's Chinese Exclusion Act, which was the first major American law restricting immigration and the first to place these restrictions on the basis of ethnicity. The law banned Chinese laborers from entering the United States for ten years, was extended in 1892 as the Geary Act, and was made permanent in 1902. These exclusion acts were repealed in 1943 during the second World War, when China was a member of the Allied Nations.

While anti-Asian sentiment in 19th-century America was propagated through legislation and hate crimes, the use of Asian imagery in art, literature, and other media nonetheless proliferated. The general fear of the "yellow peril" didn't preclude White artists and authors from using the very cultures they disdained as inspiration for their work. In fine art, the European trend of chinoiserie serves as a pertinent example of the paradoxical appreciation that Western cultures held towards China’s art, while disdaining Chinese people.[37] In narrative media, like the performing arts and literature, the incorporation of Chinese characters and settings was less appreciative and more Orientalist. American genre fiction at the end of the 1800s was rife with

[37] “Chinoiserie,” Grove Art Online, accessed August 2, 2023, https://www-oxfordartonline-com.proxy1.library.virginia.edu/groveart/display/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000017240.

the fears of "yellow peril".[38] Multiple speculative fiction stories and novels were published in the 1880s and 1890s that hyperbolized the supposed that China posed towards the United States. These works, drawing on the same fears that Novikov outlined in his essay, presented fictional futures where the Chinese gained control over the United States. The methods by which the Chinese gained control varied. In some stories, they conquered the West Coast through direct military and naval action. Other stories depicted more insidious means of gaining control, such as a gradual assimilation into and takeover of White American culture through marriage.

These literary tropes eventually made their way into film as it became a more popular narrative medium. During the 1920s, forty films were released that dealt with "Oriental" subject matter in some way shape or form.[39] The prohibitive labor laws passed against Chinese workers prevented them from starting careers or getting employment outside of menial labor, resulting in the creation of stereotypes like the Chinese laundryman or "coolie" working the railroads[40]. This legislation also caused uptick in organized crime among some Chinese men. Unable to make an honest living in other careers, they turned to illegal means like gambling, drug dealing, and prostituting women. Hollywood capitalized on White American fears of Chinese organized crime, which was also sensationalized in journalism, and several films where this was the primary subject were released in the 1910s and 1920s.[41] Fascination and fear of Chinese

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[38] Stanford M. Lyman, "The 'Yellow Peril' Mystique: Origins and Vicissitudes of a Racist Discourse," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 13, no. 4 (2000): 683–747.

[39] Richard A. Oehling, "Hollywood and the Image of the Oriental, 1910 - 1950 — Part I," *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 8, no. 2 (May 1978): 35, https://doi.org/10.1353/flm.1978.a402702.

[40] Benshoff and Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies,* 125.

[41] These films include 1916's *The Yellow Menace,* 1919's *The Tong Man,* and 1929's *Chinatown Nights*. Benshoff and Griffin, 125.

populations extended to social spheres, as well. The subject of miscegenation, specifically the relationship between Asian men and White women,[42] was as titillating as organized crime in early Hollywood films. Twelve films were produced in the 1920s which concerned the topic of interracial Asian-White relationships. While some narratives were more sympathetic towards their characters' plight, the overarching message was that interracial relationships were doomed to fail. In several, the white women characters were in fact the victim of predatory Asian men, from whom they needed to be saved. These films exploited fears over miscegenation, but at the same they time capitalized on the exotic appeal of Asian actors.[43] The forbidden aspect of an interracial relationship held a certain appeal to White female audiences. Oftentimes, the Asian male wouldn't even be played by an actual Asian actor. Instead, white actors would simply be dressed in makeup that was meant to make them look Asian, a practice called yellowface.[44]

Towards the end of the silent film era, the portrayal of Asian characters had shifted somewhat. Films sensationalizing Chinese crime and vilifying Asian men had lost popularity. But stereotypes surrounding Chinese characters persisted in Hollywood. The first film featuring the character Charlie Chan was released in 1926.[45] Chan's character was that of a Chinese detective who used his brilliant intellect to solve crimes, and he appeared in over 50 films over

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[42] Hollywood producers and creators didn't much distinguish between ethnicities at this point. Asian characters, whether they were portrayed by Chinese or Japanese actors, were all considered to be equally foreign. Oehling, "Hollywood and the Image of the Oriental, 1910 - 1950 — Part I.", 34.

[43] Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa rose to stardom in the late 1910s and early 1920s as a romantic leading man, often in roles which were predatory yet appealing towards white women. He eventually left Hollywood to work abroad, tired of only being cast as a stereotype. Benshoff and Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies,* 126.

[44] Benshoff and Griffin, 123.

[45] Benshoff and Griffin, 127.

the next few decades. The character was wildly popular and is a good example of benign stereotypes about Asians that became prevalent in Hollywood. Chan, despite his intellect, spoke broken English. He offered cryptic advice that recalled the philosophies of Chinese scholars like Confucius. The character was never played by an actual Asian actor. Every iteration was played by a White actor in yellowface. The representation of Chinese characters in the 1920s was shallow and reductive of the actual Chinese people during this time, as these characters were being written, directed, and in many cases, played by White people.

White American fascination with Chinese culture also extended into the built environment. The Chinese population in cities tended to congregate in urban ghettos which were called "Chinatowns".[46] In the 1910s, Chinatowns became tourist destinations for White Americans who wanted to experience a way of living that seemed so alien yet existed within the same cities where they themselves lived.[47] In order to capitalize on White tourism, Chinese inhabitants of these neighborhoods played into the stereotypes and purposefully marketed themselves and their businesses according to what would appeal to a White American audience. They designed their buildings with "Chinesque"[48] aesthetics like dragon imagery, pitched curving roofs, and the frequent use of colors like red, green, and yellow. Whether this was accurate to actual Chinese architecture was negligible. What mattered was that it played into what White American tourists already thought about Chinese culture.

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[46] Benshoff and Griffin, *America on Film,* 125.

[47] Kim K. Fahlstedt, *Chinatown Film Culture: The Appearance of Cinema in San Francisco's Chinese Neighborhood* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 121-123, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/176/monograph/book/77091.

[48] Fahlstedt, 121-123.

One of Sid Grauman's early exploits as a showman was directly inspired by San Francisco's Chinatown. In 1915, the city hosted the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, a fair dedicated to celebrating and connecting nations on the east and west sides of the Pacific Ocean. The exposition offered an official display created by Chinese artisans and managed by the city's Chinese population, built to resemble Beijing's Forbidden City. In contrast, Grauman managed an unofficial display in the exposition's entertainment section called "Underground Chinatown".[49] His concession, which was a guided tour through a constructed version Chinatown, exploited Yellow Peril stereotypes. Non-Chinese actors performed in yellowface, and they depicted scenes which included trying to get into opium dens or inducting women into slavery. Grauman's display was so offensive that Chinese San Franciscans led organized protests against it. It was also more popular than the official Chinese pavilion and attracted more visitors. Grauman, as a White American, developed an experience that played into pre-existing stereotypes held about Chinese people in order to dazzle his White American audience.

The discrimination that Chinese people experienced in the 1920s was of a different sort than the outright hatred violence they faced during the late 19th century. By the silent film era, Chinese culture and characters were as intriguing to White American audiences as they were off-putting. Frankly, White Americans were more intrigued by the Orientalist beliefs they already held about Chinese culture, and less intrigued by stories or experiences that might have accurately represented it. Both Grauman's Chinese Theater and the 5th Avenue Theatre were constructed during this period and represent this fascination with Chinese culture. Similar to the stereotypes that were present in films of this time, their Chinese-inspired architecture was more

[49] Fahlstedt, *Chinatown Film Culture,* 129.

of a conception created by White Americans with the primary intention of fascinating a White American audience.

Grauman's Chinese Theater

Sid Grauman's fascination with Chinese culture, that began while he lived and worked in San Francisco, was ultimately realized with the pinnacle of his career: Grauman's Chinese Theater. It opened in 1927, but it was not the first of his Hollywood entertainment exploits. He made his name in the 1910s and 1920s film industry, opening and managing a handful of movie palaces in Los Angeles.[50] These theaters were characterized by their extravagant and exotic ornament, each one in a different style. His first movie palace, Grauman's Million Dollar Theater, opened in 1918 and featured Spanish Colonial ornamentation. It was designed by architect William Lee Woollett, who also designed Grauman's Metropolitan Theater, which was a mixture of Greek, Middle Eastern, and Spanish influences and opened in 1923. Prior to the Chinese Theater, however, the most overt exotic movie palace that Grauman opened was his 1922 Egyptian Theatre. He worked with architects Gabriel Meyer and Philip Holler to create a facsimile of ancient Egypt for an American audience fascinated by the civilization. The theater featured an elaborate forecourt (fig.5) that faced Hollywood Boulevard. Audiences would pass through this courtyard, which was made of ashlar masonry and decorated with larger-than-life hieroglyphics, to enter the theater proper through a loggia that was supported by columns with bell-shaped capitals. The auditorium was similarly bedecked, with more hieroglyphics lining the walls and columns of the proscenium and a winged scarab displayed on the sounding

[50] Naylor, *American Picture Palaces*, 83-86.

board, directly above the screen. The theater's elaborate decorative program created an immersive experience, allowing its audience to briefly step foot into a bygone and exotic culture.

Grauman ensured that the fantasy of his theaters extended beyond just their architecture, however. For instance, he employed a mock "Egyptian guard" at the Egyptian Theatre, to patrol along the parapet before matinee shows and during the evening shows. These "sentries" were costumed and highly visible from both the forecourt and Hollywood Boulevard itself. At night they were illuminated as well as any other part of the theater's architecture.[51] He also wrote and directed theatrical "prologues", which would be performed onstage ahead of the films as a sort of pre-show for the audience.[52] These prologues were complex pieces of drama in their own right, relating to the themes of the film being screened and requiring large ensemble casts and orchestration. Introducing elements of live performance to his audience, whether it was through casual, immersive observation with the sentries or as more entertainment with the prologues, further heightened the fantastic experience of being in one of his theaters.

Grauman was also close with many Hollywood personalities, including several movie stars, and knew how to market their films and his theaters in a way that would generate positive publicity for both. For his theaters, the publicity campaigns would start months or even years in advance. Journalists would publish positive articles prior to his theaters' grand openings describing their prospective size and ornament. Closer to the date of opening, he would purchase large ads in Los Angeles publications that included photographs of the theater. These generated excitement among Los Angeles' moviegoing public for the theaters' debut. Grauman would also

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[51] Charles Beardsley, *Hollywood's Master Showman: The Legendary Sid Grauman* (New York: Cornwall Books, 1983), 82.

[52] Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk,* 36.

schedule his theaters' openings in tandem with the release of highly anticipated films starring popular stars, further incentivizing people to come to his theater. The Egyptian Theatre's grand opening coincided with the world premiere of *Robin Hood*, starring Douglas Fairbanks, one of Grauman's many actor friends.[53] This event garnered much positive attention from the press. Attending a screening at a Grauman theater was an event, in and of itself. The experience of being in one of his theaters worked in tandem with the experience of actually watching films there. Both provided an avenue through which the average audience member could suspend their disbelief and enter a more fantastic world. Grauman's ability to craft a fantasy for his audience was evident with the Egyptian Theatre, but he perfected the craft in 1927 with his Chinese Theater.

Plans to build the Chinese Theater began in 1923, in a meeting held between Grauman, Fairbanks and his actress wife Mary Pickford, studio executive Joseph Schenck, and executives from West Coast Theatres, the first major movie chain in California.[54] Initially, the venue was planned to be used primarily for theatrical performance, but by the time they broke ground for construction in early 1926, the plans had been changed to the movie palace that still exists today. Even breaking ground for the theater was a production. Actresses Norma Talmadge and Anna May Wong turned the first shovel of dirt and riveted the first steel girder, respectively.[55] In order to focus on the construction and management of the Chinese Theater, Grauman stepped back

[53] Beardsley, *Hollywood's Master Showman,* 80.

[54] "PCAD - Grauman's Chinese Theatre, Hollywood, Los Angeles, CA," accessed August 7, 2023, https://pcad.lib.washington.edu/building/514/.

[55] Anna May Wong, like Sessue Hayakawa, was one of the few Asian actors that became famous during the silent film era. She was typically cast in roles that embodied the Dragon Lady stereotype, a female version of the Asian predator trope, wherein she would use sexual wiles to trick her White male victims. Like Hayakawa, she eventually left Hollywood to work abroad. Benshoff and Griffin, *America on Film,* 129; "History | TCL Chinese Theatres."

from his other ventures. He'd sold his interests in his other Los Angeles theaters, including the Egyptian, which had been continuously successful during his five-year run as manager.[56] Grauman worked with Meyer and Holler's architecture firm again, with architect Raymond Kennedy as the lead designer for the theater. As evidenced by its name, the movie palace used "the Chinese style as a source of inspiration"[57] for its architecture, the operative word being "inspiration". Similar to the Egyptian, the Chinese Theater was a monumental fantasy developed by Grauman and Kennedy, meant to conjure the feeling in its inhabitants that they had been transported across time and space to the "Orient", and it did so with lavish decoration and service. However, Kennedy's design was a conglomeration of what White America perceived this "Orient" to look and feel like; it was far from an accurate representation of actual Chinese architecture. This fell in line with Grauman's modus operandi concerning his other movie palaces. With the Metropolitan, Grauman and Woollett used an amalgamation of several architectural styles to create "the most magnificent theatre edifice in history",[58] as was advertised during its opening week. With the Egyptian, Grauman, Meyer, and Holler used decorative motifs associated with ancient Egypt. These motifs, like the bell-capital columns and hieroglyphs, were popularized through a westernized lens over the course of the 19th century and were less an

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[56] The Egyptian was so successful, that there were even talks of Grauman opening chain of Egyptian theaters across the country. These plans never materialized, in part because of Grauman's commitment to his new Chinese Theater. Beardsley, *Hollywood's Master Showman,* 105.

[57] "Chinese Theatre, at Hollywood, California," *The American Architect* 132, no. 2527 (August 20, 1927): 251, https://archive.org/details/sim_american-architect-and-architecture_1927-08-20_132_2527/page/251/mode/1up.

[58] "Grauman's Metropolitan Theater," advertisement, *The Los Angeles Times,* January 26, 1923, taken from Beardsley, *Hollywood's Master Showman,* 70.

accurate representation of an actual Egyptian archeological site like the Temple of Karnak.[59] Grauman theaters were meant to evoke the American idea of what was exotic, using disparate elements from cultures deemed exotic, without much attention paid to how accurately these elements were used. Kennedy's depiction of Chinese architecture was colorful, extravagant, and exotic. It suited Grauman perfectly as an impresario, who wanted to impress his audience with fantasy.

The Chinese Theater cost two million dollars and was under construction for seventeen months, opening in May of 1927.[60] Like the Egyptian, the theater proper was preceded by a forecourt. The Chinese Theater's forecourt was shaped like an ellipsis, with the street-facing entrance situated on its long side (fig.6). Walls with a height of 40-feet surrounded the courtyard. The walls flanking the entrance off Hollywood Boulevard were "imposing facades",[61] (fig.7) which were decorated with pilasters spanning the wall's height, that were topped with obelisks, which themselves were topped by ornate pieces of metalwork. Set into the street front walls were display cases designed to look like pagodas. The courtyard was intended to be a space of leisure, where audience members could spend time before the show and during intermissions. As such, it was elaborately decorated with Chinese artifacts like temple bells, bronze lanterns, and statuary that was either made by Chinese artisans or imported from China itself. In order to ensure

[59] The Egyptian Theater is another prime example of Orientalism in architecture. Said discusses Napoleon’s campaign in Egypt as a major turning point in Orientalism due to Napoleon’s efforts to conquer the country ideologically as well as militarily. He brought scientists, historians, botanists, and other academics to catalog and interpret Egypt; an interpretation that rested upon the country’s potential benefits to France as a colony. The Western conception of ancient Egypt, the conception that ultimately led to Grauman’s Egyptian Theater, has always been influenced by what benefits Western powers. Said, *Orientalism,* 81-87.

[60] “PCAD - Grauman’s Chinese Theatre, Hollywood, Los Angeles, CA.”

[61] “Chinese Theatre, at Hollywood, California,” 251.

accuracy, Grauman invited Chinese filmmaker and poet Moon Kwan as well as Chinese artist Liu Yu Chang to inspect the theater's sculptural program while under construction.[62] He also attained authorization from both the Chinese and United States government to import the Chinese artifacts.[63] The forecourt originally featured two fountains, set against the curving walls to the right and left of the street entrance, as well as a variety of greenery. Its intended effect was to simulate the experience of inhabiting a classical Chinese garden.[64]

The most prominent feature of the forecourt was the 90-foot tall entryway to the theater proper.[65] Located directly across the forecourt from the street front entrance, it was the forecourt's centerpiece (fig.8). Three sets of double doors housed beneath a pagoda embellished in gold and green provided entry to the theater's lobby. The pagoda was positioned between two octagonal red columns, decorated with wrought iron masks. The columns supported the entryway's towering roof, made of bronze and aged to look like green jade. The roof is characterized by its steep, curved hips and a dramatically arched lintel. The corners where the eaves meet are accentuated by metalwork that sprouts from the top of the columns, extending the roofline visually and contrasting the theater against the sky (fig.9). The effect, altogether, was eye-catching.

[62] "New Theater Makes Progress: Work to Be Finished Early in Year," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 1926.

[63] A notable example of aforementioned imported artifacts are the two Heavenly Dog statues, which still guard the Chinese Theater's entrance today. They were supposedly centuries old at the time of the Chinese Theater's construction, but there's no official documentation on their age or the veracity of this claim. "History | TCL Chinese Theatres."

[64] Qing-era classical gardens were urban spaces that offered respite to the Chinese literati, with highly curated water and landscape features that are only vaguely mimicked by the Chinese Theater's forecourt, which ultimately suggests the idea of a Chinese garden more than it accurately recreates it. Dorinda Neave et al., *Asian Art*, 2015, 198.

[65] Beardsley, *Hollywood's Master Showman,* 106-110.

The theater's interior was as extravagant as its exterior. The Chinese Theater's lobby wasn't as large as other movie palaces, as guests were intended to spend their time before or during shows in the forecourt instead of in the foyer like at other theaters.[66] It was elaborately decorated despite its smaller size, with painted walls that depicted Chinese gardens on an ebony background, imitating lacquered screens,[67] and tall red columns standing in the corners of the room. The foyer was replete with furnishings, including hanging tapestries, chairs, bronze light fixtures, and interestingly enough, life size wax figures dressed in Chinese clothing designed to look like Chinese people (fig.10). The lobby suited the rest of the theater's decorative program, but its undisputed main attraction was the auditorium.

The auditorium originally contained around 2,000 seats.[68] It departed from standard theater architecture of the time, in that all the seats were located on the main floor with no mezzanine level. The seats were positioned at an incline towards the back of the house and on a gentle curve centered towards the stage. This ensured that each seat could offer an unimpeded view of the screen, even if an audience member was seated on the far edges or in the back. There was a balcony positioned in the back of the auditorium, but at the time of the theater’s opening, access was reserved for employees and special guests. The balcony contained the projection

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[66] Beardsley, *Hollywood’s Master Showman,* 106-110.

[67] Chinese American actor Keye Luke, well-known for his role as Lee Chan, the son of Charlie Chan in the popular film series, started out in Hollywood as an artist and illustrator. He worked on the wall paintings for Grauman’s Chinese Theater, although it’s not specified which murals he painted. “Keye Luke, Actor and Artist | Oscars.Org | Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences,” May 20, 2015, https://www.oscars.org/news/keye-luke-actor-and-artist.

[68] The exact numbers are disputed. David Naylor puts the total at 2,258 in *American Picture Palaces*, Terry Helgesen estimated there were 2,400 in his 1968 monograph on Grauman’s Chinese, and Ross Melnick of CinemaTreasures.org says 2,200. 2,000 is the generally accepted amount at the time of Grauman’s opening. The auditorium underwent a renovation in 2013 and currently seats 932 people. “IMAX | TCL Chinese Theatres,” accessed August 10, 2023, http://www.tclchinesetheatres.com/imax/.

booth, Grauman's private viewing boxes, and administrative space like employee lockers and storage. General seating on the main floor was separated into four sections, split by three interior aisles. The far edges of the seating area were buffeted by large columns made of travertine and two side aisles on the far walls (fig.11). The stage measured 165 feet across and 48 feet deep.

The auditorium's size was impressive, but like the rest of the Chinese Theater, its real draw was its decoration. Every aspect of the auditorium's decor was as carefully curated as the rest of the site, from the carpets to the seats to the walls to the ceiling. The carpet was decorated with swirling clouds, while the walls featured extensive paintings of silver trees contrasted against a dark background. The seatbacks were made of red leather with three different alternating designs inspired by classical Chinese illustration decorating their faces (fig.12). Lighting fixtures included metal chandeliers shaped to look like lotus flowers hanging in the side aisles and paper lanterns illuminating the orchestra's pit. The ceiling was dominated by a massive central chandelier which was suspended over the general seating area. At the front of the house, the proscenium was just as ornate. The stage was flanked by two towering sculptures which stood in the pit, designed by Kennedy, made of bronze and crystal and designed to look like stacked pagodas. These were removed when the theater started screening films with sound, as they vibrated too much and distracted audience members (fig.13). Kennedy may have been inspired by various elements of Chinese art and architecture, but the decorative program he developed for Grauman's Chinese Theater was ultimately an amalgamation of disparate elements. Its style was "more Chinese Chippendale than a representation of traditional Chinese architecture."[69] As with the Egyptian Theater, the Chinese Theater's fantasy was more than just

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[69] Naylor, *American Picture Palaces,* 88.

visual splendor. Grauman's attention to detail extended even to the theater's scent; he ensured it smelled of sandalwood, so that audience members would feel as though they were inhabiting a Chinese temple. His service staff were then clothed in Chinese robes and headpieces, similar to how Grauman employed faux Egyptian sentries (fig.14).

Ever the showman, Grauman made sure his Chinese Theater's grand opening was Hollywood's social event of the season. Like with the Egyptian Theatre and *Robin Hood,* he scheduled the theater's debut for May 18th, 1927, in tandem with the world premiere of Cecil B. DeMille's biblical epic *The King of Kings*.[70] The film and the theater suited each other in terms of grandeur, as DeMille's latest picture featured the "largest exterior set ever constructed"[71] and a cast of highly acclaimed actors and actresses. Securing the rights to premiere a highly anticipated film at his new theater ensured that whenever *The King of Kings* was mentioned, in print or via word of mouth, that the latest Grauman movie palace was mentioned alongside it, and vice versa. The closer to the date of the premiere, the more articles were published in local papers offering details on what that night of nights would entail. Excitement beget excitement, as people awaited the opening night. Tickets for the event sold out two weeks ahead of the premiere.[72] Celebrities from across the nation traveled to Los Angeles to attend the premiere, as did California's governor and San Francisco's mayor.[73] Grauman even arranged a publicity stunt with Los

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[70] Interestingly enough, Grauman and his new theater held such clout in the film industry that *the King of Kings*' premiere date hinged on when the Chinese Theater's construction was completed, not the other way around. "Theater Named for Premiere," *The Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 1927.

[71] "Film Epic Opens New Theater: De Mille and Grauman Sign Contract," *The Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1927

[72] "Throngs to See Chinese Theater," *The Los Angeles Record*, May 16, 1927.

[73] "Society Will Attend Big Chinese Opening," *The Los Angeles Record,* May 13, 1927.

Angeles' Mayor, Fire Chief, and Chief of Police, costuming them in the "gorgeous mandarin robes" [74] they would wear to the premiere and publishing a photograph of them in The Los Angeles Record, a week in advance. The grand opening was a success by every measure. An article published the following day even called it the "Greatest of all Premieres".[75]

One of the most famous pieces of history associated with Grauman's Chinese Theater concerns its tradition of stamping handprints in the forecourt's wet concrete. There's are several apocryphal stories circulating as to the origins of this tradition. One claims that Norma Talmadge accidentally stepped in wet concrete during construction, with gave Grauman the idea for stars to do so purposefully. Another says that Fairbanks and Pickford, while renovating their own home, sat beside fresh concrete, pressed their hands in it and signed their names, which was the sentimental inspiration for Grauman's popular publicity stunt. Another possibility was that one of the stonemasons who worked on the site left a handprint as a sort of signature to his work; a handprint that Grauman saw and liked. The veracity of these stories, or lack thereof, doesn't much matter, or at least it didn't to Grauman, who let all of these stories circulate as possible explanations behind the tradition. What mattered was that each story was a good story. So long as it was entertaining, worthy of being repeated, and drew attention to his work, he'd let it stand. His theater was no different. Accuracy didn't much matter; what entertained his audience did.

As Grauman developed and marketed his new theater, he essentially treated Chinese culture and design as a sort of window dressing. His primary goal was to entertain and dazzle his

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[74] "Mandarins Just for a Night," *The Los Angeles Record,* May 6, 1927.

[75] Sadie Mossler, "Greatest of All Premieres at New Chinese Theater," *The Los Angeles Record*, May 19, 1927.

audiences, as it always had been. To do so, he crafted a space which emphasized the "magic"[76] and the "mystery" of the Orient. Grauman's idea of China was rooted in the exaggerated "Chinesque" aesthetics that were evident in his "Underground Chinatown" experience from over a decade before. Grauman's Chinese Theater was an instant success and remains beloved today. It was always a fantasy, however, never an accurate portrayal of Chinese culture.

5th Avenue Theatre

Along with Grauman and Kennedy's Hollywood creation, Seattle's 5th Avenue Theatre provides another example of a Chinese-inspired movie palace built during the silent film era. Its grand opening occurred on September 24th, 1926, in the heart of the city's downtown district, located in the newly built Skinner Building.[77] The 5th Avenue Theatre wasn't Seattle's first movie palace,[78] but upon opening was considered to be the premiere movie theater in the city (fig.15).

The Skinner Building was developed as part of a series of commercial buildings built in Seattle's Metropolitan Tract, under the supervision of the Metropolitan Building Company. The Metropolitan Tract had formerly belonged to the University of Washington and had been part of its original campus and was redeveloped into a business and financial district during the 1910s

[76] Don Roberts, "Grauman's Newest Is True Magic," *The Los Angeles Record*, May 19, 1927.

[77] "PCAD - Metropolitan Building Company, Skinner Building, 5th Avenue Theatre, Metropolitan Tract, Downtown, Seattle, WA," accessed August 7, 2023, https://pcad.lib.washington.edu/building/5086/.

[78] The Coliseum Theater, located one block up 5th Avenue from the Skinner Building, opened in 1916 and was Seattle's first film-specific theater. It closed in 1990 and re-opened four years later as a Banana Republic. The clothing store closed in 2020, and there are currently plans to make the building an arts space. "Coliseum Theater Opens in Seattle on January 8, 1916.," accessed August 9, 2023, https://www.historylink.org/File/2538.

and 1920s.[79] The project was announced in September of 1925, a year before the theater opened, with Harry C. Arthur at its helm. He had been an executive in the California-based movie theater chain West Coast Theatres, and returned to Seattle to be president at Pacific Theatres, Inc. He managed over 40 theaters during his tenure there, and it had been his idea to include a new movie palace as the Skinner Building's prime attraction.[80] Construction began in October of 1925 and cost approximately $1.5 million. When the theater was first announced, the theme for its architecture had not yet been decided, although its architect had.[81] Robert C. Reamer was given charge over 5th Avenue Theatre's design, and it was to be his first movie palace. His most prominent work before moving to Seattle in the late 1910s was in Yellowstone, designing hotels and recreation areas for the national park.[82] After moving to Seattle, he designed a handful of commercial buildings in the city while working for the Metropolitan Building Company. The Skinner Building was a large undertaking, as it occupied a full city block and contained spaces for business, retail, and entertainment. While Reamer may have had more experience with the business and retail side of the project, he was as attentive to developing the theater space as he was to the rest of the building. He studied other movie palaces of the time and consulted a contemporary art book published in 1925 by Ernst Boerschmann, *Chinesiche Architektur*, [83] as

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[79] "IX. The Metropolitan Tract (the Original Campus) — UW Libraries," accessed August 9, 2023, https://www.lib.washington.edu/specialcollections/collections/exhibits/site/metro.

[80] Eric L. Flom and John Caldbick, "5th Avenue Theatre (Seattle)," HistoryLink.org, March 17, 2012, https://www.historylink.org/File/3750.

[81] "30 Days to See Work Under Way," *The Seattle Daily Times*, September 17, 1925.

[82] "PCAD - Robert Chambers Reamer," accessed August 11, 2023, https://pcad.lib.washington.edu/person/2427/.

[83] Reamer even traveled to Los Angeles to study other movie palaces prior to designing his own. Although no specific theaters were mentioned, it's likely that he would have visited Grauman's movie palaces. "New Fifth Avenue Theatre Distinctive," *The Seattle Daily Times*,

his primary inspiration to choose Chinese motifs for the theater's theme. Seattle's reputation as an American city with many ties to China, with its moniker as the "Gateway to the Orient", [84] was another contributing factor in the theater's design.

Reamer brought on design consultant Gustav Liljestrom to help with the theater's distinctive interior.[85] Liljestrom was an artist who'd spent four years, 1905 to 1909, in China studying Chinese art. Upon his return to the United States, he settled in San Francisco and was hired by Gump's, a department store known for the importation and sale of fine Asian goods. Liljestrom was hired due to his experience with Chinese art and architecture, and he worked with the lead designer in Reamer's firm, Joseph Skoog, to develop the theater's elaborate decorative program.[86] The 5th Avenue Theatre featured architectural elements that were directly copied from three specific sites of Ming-era imperial architecture in Beijing: the Forbidden Palace, the Temple of Heaven, and the Summer Palace. The theater's entrance was located on the Skinner Building's southwest side, where the ticket boxes and doors were directly accessible via 5th Avenue's street. The rest of the Skinner Building's exterior was designed in the relatively more sedate Italian Renaissance style, but the theater's entrance was entirely designed in a classical Chinese style (fig.16). It was recessed in the building's façade, with coffered ceilings and a three-

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August 18, 1926; Ruth Quinn and Robert C. Reamer, *Weaver of Dreams: The Life and Architecture of Robert C. Reamer*, 1st ed (Gardiner, MT: Leslie & Ruth Quinn, 2004), 125.

[84] National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form for the Skinner Building (78002756) [Electronic Record], November 28, 1978, Record Group 79: Records of the National Park Service 1785-2006, NRHP Program Records 2013-2017, NRHP Records: Washington, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, 5, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/75612544.

[85] Quinn and Reamer, *Weaver of Dreams,* 125.

[86] National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form for the Skinner Building, NRHP Records: Washington, 5.

tiered series of curving support brackets decorated with cloud patterns. The ceiling and brackets, as well as the lintel above the doors were painted to look like wood,[87] imitating the timber construction used in the referenced sites. Four sets of double doors decorated with gold knobs, as doors were decorated in Beijing's Forbidden Palace, welcomed audience members into the foyer.

The foyer was a double height space, dominated on its southern side by a large split staircase leading to the foyer's mezzanine (fig.17). Like the theater's recessed entrance, the foyer mimicked Chinese raised beam construction.[88] Its 30-foot high ceiling imitated the curving pitched roofs of Chinese timber architecture, designed to look like bamboo, and was inspired by the Forbidden City's Temple of Heavenly Peace.[89] Two rows of five columns supported the mezzanine level and a series of beams which spanned the room, all of which were painted with intricate designs like in the theater's entrance. The foyer's walls were decorated with raised plaster designs that originally framed murals, and the room also featured wall tapestries and hanging lantern chandeliers. The doors to the theater's auditorium were on the foyer's north side, opposite the split staircase. The ground level doors led into the auditorium's orchestra level, while the doors on the foyer's mezzanine level provided access to the auditorium's balconies (fig.18).

The auditorium seated a total of 2,130 people.[90] If the foyer impressed an audience member, then 5th Avenue Theatre's main space would have astounded them. Like the entrance

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[87] *The 5th Avenue Theatre of Seattle*, Annual (Theatre Historical Society (U.S.)) (San Francisco: Theatre Historical Society : The Fifth Avenue Theatre, 1984), 12.

[88] Fred S. Kleiner and Helen Gardner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages: A Global History*, Sixteenth edition (Boston, MA, USA: Cengage Learning, 2020), 470.

[89] National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form for the Skinner Building, NRHP Records: Washington, 2.

[90] *The 5th Avenue Theatre of Seattle,* 19.

and the foyer, it was designed based off of imperial architecture in the Forbidden City, with painted plaster support brackets, faux beams, and engaged red columns. Notably, the auditorium's ceiling was dominated by a massive, recessed lighting fixture, 90 feet above the ground floor. The 5th Avenue Theatre's ceiling was a near exact replica of the dome above the imperial throne in the Forbidden City's Palace of Heavenly Purity (fig.19). The theater's version, remarkably, was twice the size of the original. The center of the lighting fixture was a large plaster dragon, coiled within a complex series of tiered circles and stars, all of which were elaborately painted in hues of gold, red, green and blue. The hanging chandelier (fig.20), suspended from the dragon's mouth, was known as the "Pearl of Perfection" which the dragon "is compelled to eternally seek but never grasp."[91] It was fashioned after the veil a Chinese bride would wear at her wedding. The rest of the auditorium was decorated with as much intricacy as its central lighting fixture (fig.21). Most surfaces were painted in the aforementioned colors, with green appearing most often to emphasize the Pacific Northwest's forested landscape,[92] using traditional Chinese imagery like dragons, phoenixes, lotuses, and chrysanthemums.[93] Authenticity in design was important to Reamer, Skoog, and Liljestrom. They hired artisans from Seattle's Chinese population to complete the theater's plasterwork and based many of the decorative patterns on Boerschmann's text, which contained color prints and black and white photographs of architectural interiors from Beijing and elsewhere in China.[94]

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[91] Naylor, *American Picture Palaces,* 97.

[92] Naylor, 97.

[93] National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form for the Skinner Building, NRHP Records: Washington, 3.

[94] Naylor, *American Picture Palaces*, 97; National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form for the Skinner Building, NRHP Records: Washington, 3.

5th Avenue Theatre's opening, like Grauman's Chinese Theater, was lauded by the press. Articles were published in the months leading to its opening, detailing the theater's progress for Seattle's public.[95] Much attention was paid to the accuracy and authenticity of its interior design. Two weeks before the theater opened, Liljestrom provided a guided tour of its interior to a group of Chinese exchange students who had arrived in the United States at Seattle's port. One of the students even commented that the theater's design was "what you'd find in [China's] ancient palaces."[96] An editorial written in the Shanghai China Press was explicitly complimentary of the theater's dedicated recreation of Chinese architecture.[97] Its grand opening was a citywide celebration, as thousands gathered in the streets surrounding the Skinner Building to participate in the festivities. Bands were hired to play for the crowd, with dancing and singing taking place in the streets which were illuminated by strings of lanterns and flags.

The comfort of the patrons was one of the theater's priorities. In addition to its lavish foyer and auditorium, the theater also offered a waiting room furnished with recreations of Chinese antiques on its mezzanine level, a staffed kitchen and tearoom, as well as a women's lounge.[98] 5th Avenue Theatre's staff were outfitted in Chinese robes, like at Grauman's Chinese

[95] "New Fifth Avenue Theatre Distinctive."; "Decorators Speed Work on New Theatre," *The Seattle Daily Times*, July 25, 1926; "They're Making Antiques Now: Rare Pieces of Period Furniture Are Being Copied," *The Seattle Star*, July 29, 1926.

[96] This event further attests to Seattle's importance as a 'gateway to the orient'. The exchange students arrived in the city aboard the President McKinley Admiral-Oriental ocean liner and spent two days touring, including its new movie palace, before departing to several different cities across the nation. "168 Chinese Students Reach Seattle: Come to Enter Colleges in the United States," *The Seattle Daily Times*, September 7, 1926.

[97] "Chinese Feel Flattered by 5th Avenue Theatre," *The Seattle Daily Times*, September 24, 1926.

[98] The women's lounge was the one area of 5th Avenue Theater untouched by Chinese design. It was instead made up in the French style. Flom and Caldbick, "5th Avenue Theatre (Seattle)."

Theater. The attention to detail even extended to the usher's footwear and hair color. Black satin shoes were ordered for every female member of staff, which were then hand painted with Chinese designs. The female ticket takers who worked in the box office were scheduled accordingly: blondes would work in the morning when the sunlight would best highlight their hair, brunettes would work in the afternoon, and those with black hair worked at night.

Until Grauman's Chinese Theater premiered eight months later, the 5th Avenue Theatre held the unique distinction of being the nation's grandest Chinese-inspired movie palace. It was so beloved upon its opening, that the theater owners received gifts from Chinese organizations in Seattle and from China itself.[99] Reamer was given the Highest Honor Award by the Washington State Chapter of the American Institute of Architects for his work on the Skinner Building. Even after Grauman's opened, 5th Avenue Theatre remained the nation's most authentic Chinese-inspired movie palace. Sid Grauman and Raymond Kennedy developed an invented "Chinese Chippendale" style for their movie palace; Robert Reamer and Gustav Liljestrom drew from specific sites and sources to outfit theirs.

Conclusion

In the introduction to Sund's *Exoticism*¸ she makes a point to delineate between what may be considered simply "foreign" and what ascends to be considered "exotic". This distinction is made when what's "foreign" is imported into the dominant culture which will eventually consume it as art.[100] When a "foreign" object, style, or ideal is taken from its origins and imported, both literally and ideologically, the culture taking it in can selectively choose which

[99] Quinn and Reamer, *Weaver of Dreams,* 126.

[100] Sund, *Exotic,* 6-7.

aspects they want to include versus which aspects they want to exclude. Through this process of selection, the culture importing the art assumes a position of dominance via their consumption and creation of a market which only somewhat represents the authenticity of the original culture whose art has been taken. That which remains "foreign" isn't well-understood and can be easily misconstrued as a threat, falling into what Said calls the Other. However, this threat is minimized when the dominant culture is able to pick and choose what aspects they deem acceptable for consumption in artistic settings.

According to Sund, "by uprooting the alien and transforming it into user-friendly ornament, purveyors of the exotic declare mastery by making light of unsettling or distasteful difference."[101] Authenticity of "foreign" art, style, or ideals isn't prioritized, at the risk of importing more than just visual intrigue or splendor. If "foreign" art were to be recreated authentically, then the dominant culture stands to recreate the values associated with that art, thus treating it and its original culture as a peer. To treat another culture authentically, as a peer, fundamentally conflicts with Orientalism which is predicated on the act of ideological dominance as much as it is militaristic dominance. Western powers have imagined and perpetuated reductive understandings of "Oriental" cultures for centuries, in part through the importation and consumption of art which perpetuates these reductive beliefs.

Both Grauman's Chinese Theater and the 5th Avenue Theatre are pieces of exoticized, Orientalist architecture. Admittedly, Grauman's Chinese Theater is a far more blatant example, with its invented "Chinesque" style and Grauman's prior experience of misrepresenting and exploiting Chinese culture for entertainment. Yet the 5th Avenue Theater, for all of its authenticity

[101] Sund, 10.

in design, was still ultimately conceived of and led by a team of White individuals, for an audience mainly comprised of White individuals. Both theaters celebrate Chinese art and architecture, in a way, and both theaters were appreciated by Chinese people and Chinese Americans upon their opening.[102] But it's telling that they were designed specifically to be spaces of fantasy and conjure feelings of "magic" and "mystery" in their audiences.

Orientalism is a tool which privileges Western cultures, as they define themselves as "progressive" and "rational" against Oriental cultures which they deem to be "childlike" and "irrational". The Orient, as defined by the West, exists in a state of timelessness. Even though the 5th Avenue Theatre was a faithful recreation of Ming-era Chinese architecture, the very fact that architecture from 15th century China was used for a 20th century movie theater is indicative of White Americans misconception of the culture as a whole. Essentially, their idea of China was one rooted in its imperial past, not necessarily in its present-day. The architecture of Grauman's Chinese Theater represents even more of a misconception, as it was based piecemeal on different aspects of Chinese art and design brought together to form an inaccurate, if opulent, whole. Grauman's Chinese Theater and the 5th Avenue Theatre took Chinese culture, which had been considered "foreign" for decades, and turned it "exotic" through their interpretation of Chinese art and architecture. Through these sites, Chinese culture was made palatable to a White American audience precisely because of the fact it was recreated by White American artisans.

Both theaters astounded their audiences upon opening and have been restored to their original designs in an effort to preserve an important part of film history. Very few movie palaces are in operation today, and it's undeniably important that there are efforts made to save and

[102] Grauman's Chinese Theater did not, at the very least, experience organized protests the way his "Underground Chinatown" concession did.

respect the ones still around. But it would be shallow to simply praise Grauman's Chinese Theater and the 5th Avenue Theatre without acknowledging their Orientalist influences and impact. In *Orientalism,* Said urges against trying to find "correspondence between the language used to depict the Orient and the Orient itself, not so much because the language is inaccurate but because it is not even trying to be accurate"[103]. These movie palaces are hardly pieces of text, but the same rule should be applied to their visual language. Grauman's Chinese Theater and the 5th Avenue Theatre represented a fantastic version of China, and they did so well. But it's best to chalk up their architecture as just another piece of effective movie magic; a fiction best interpreted as entertainment, not education.

[103] Said, *Orientalism,* 71.

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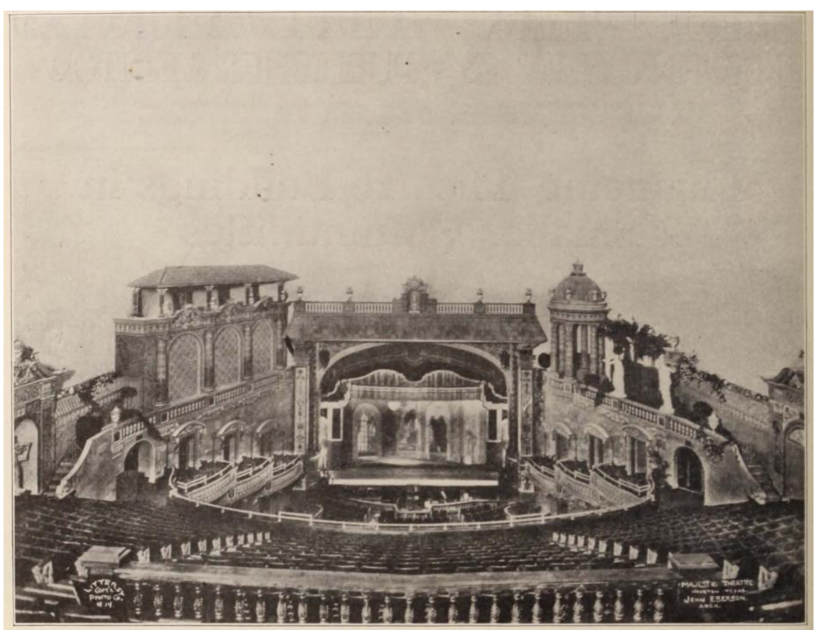

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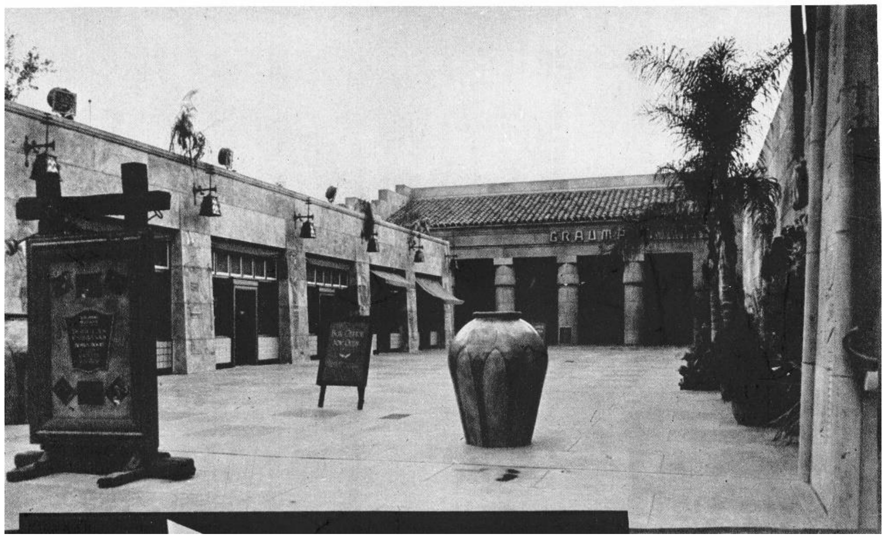

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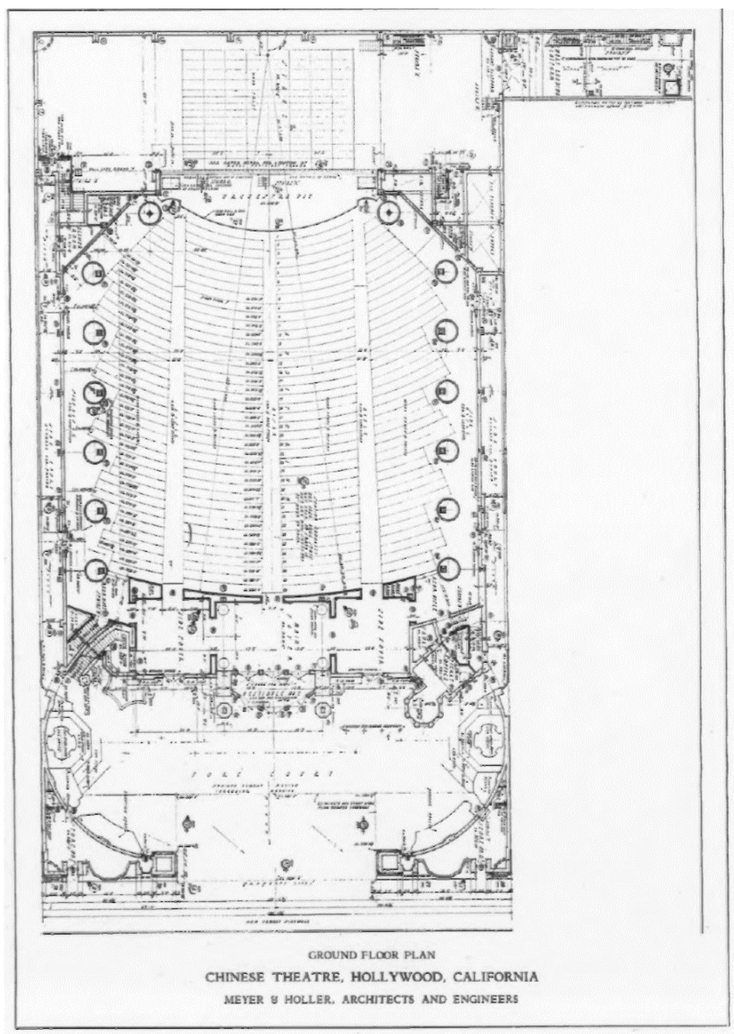

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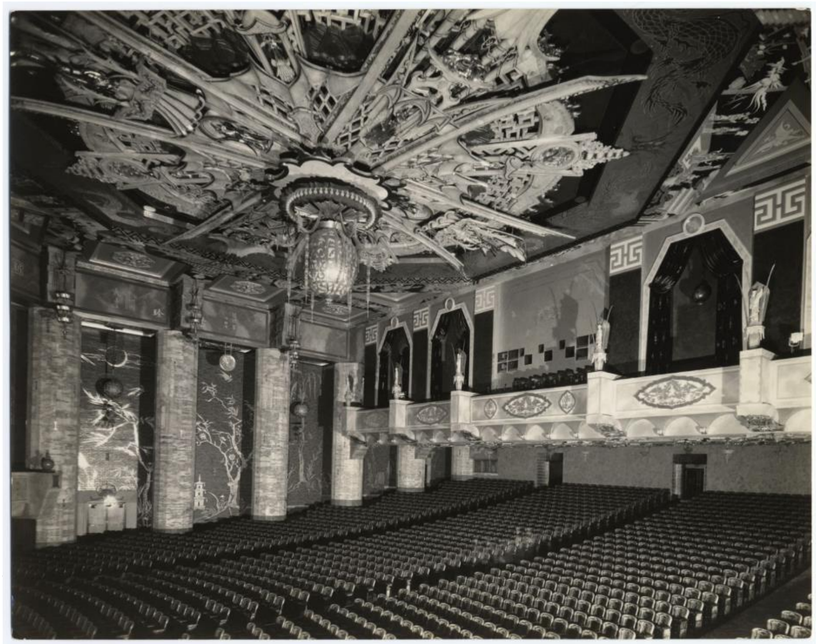

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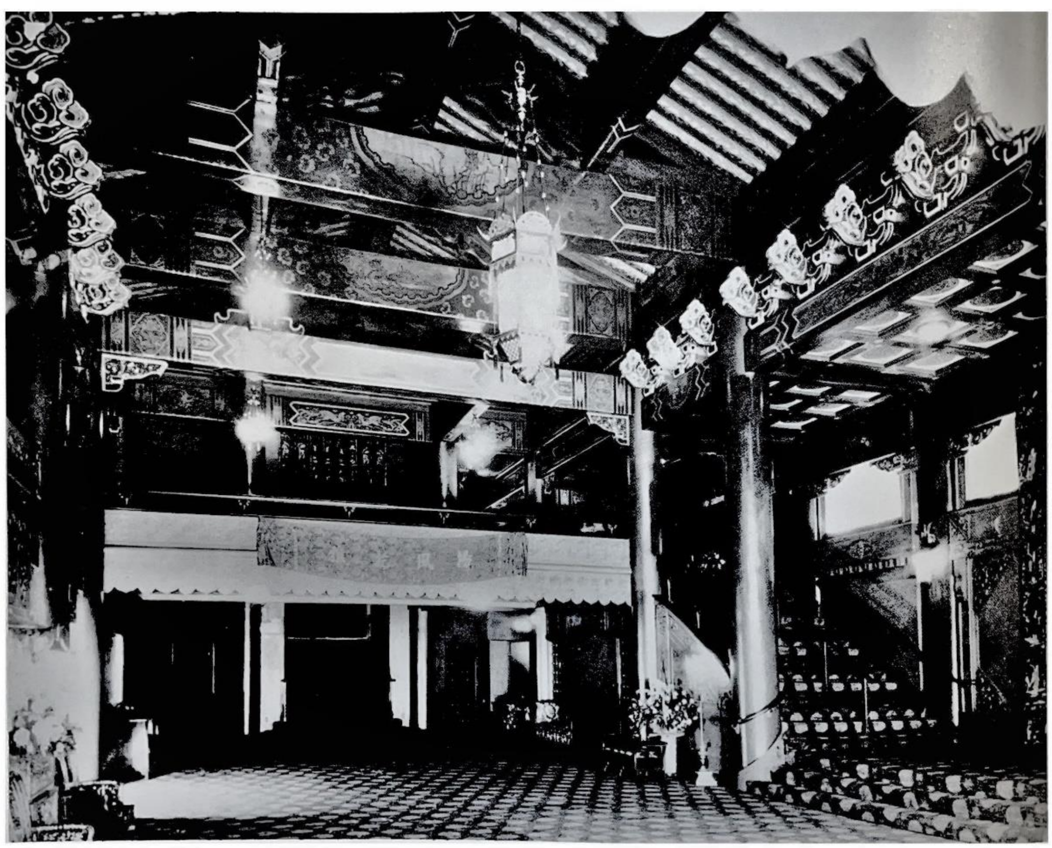

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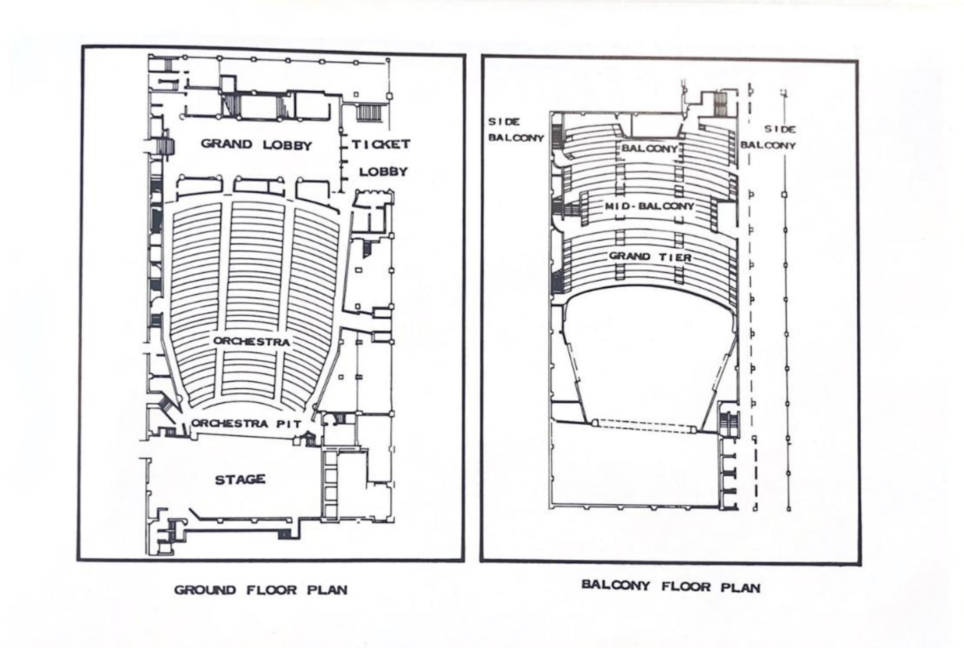

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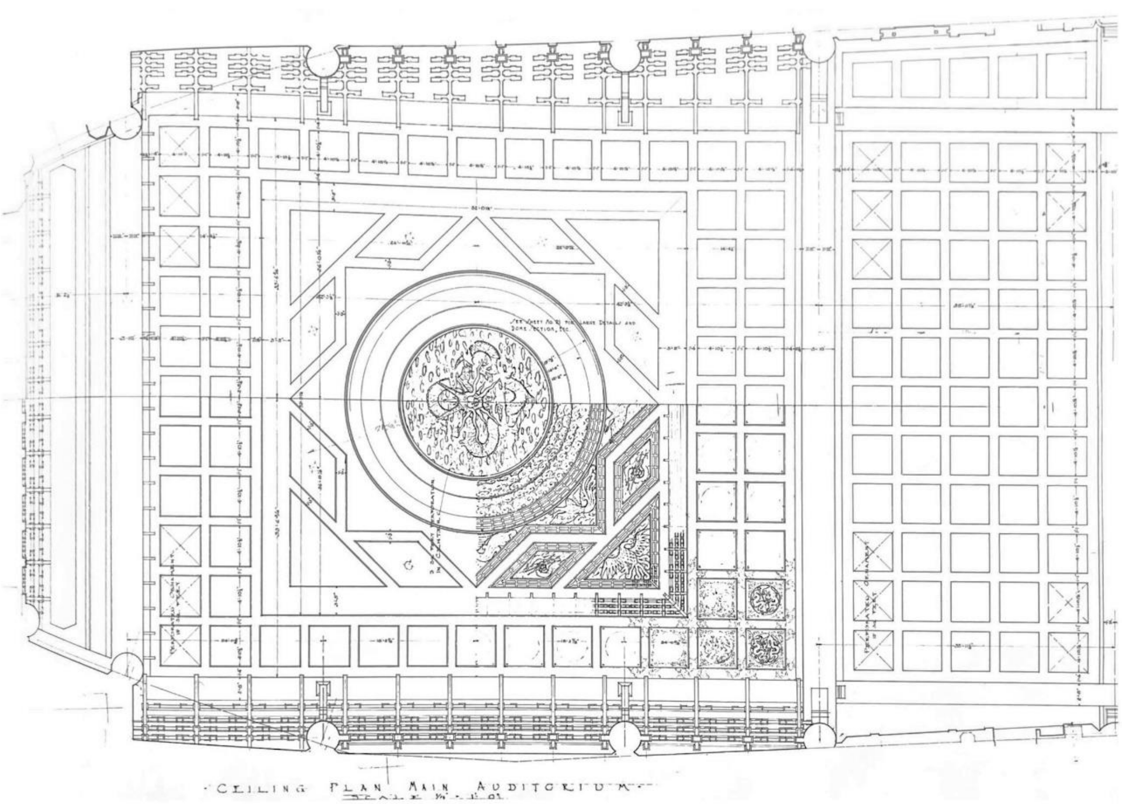

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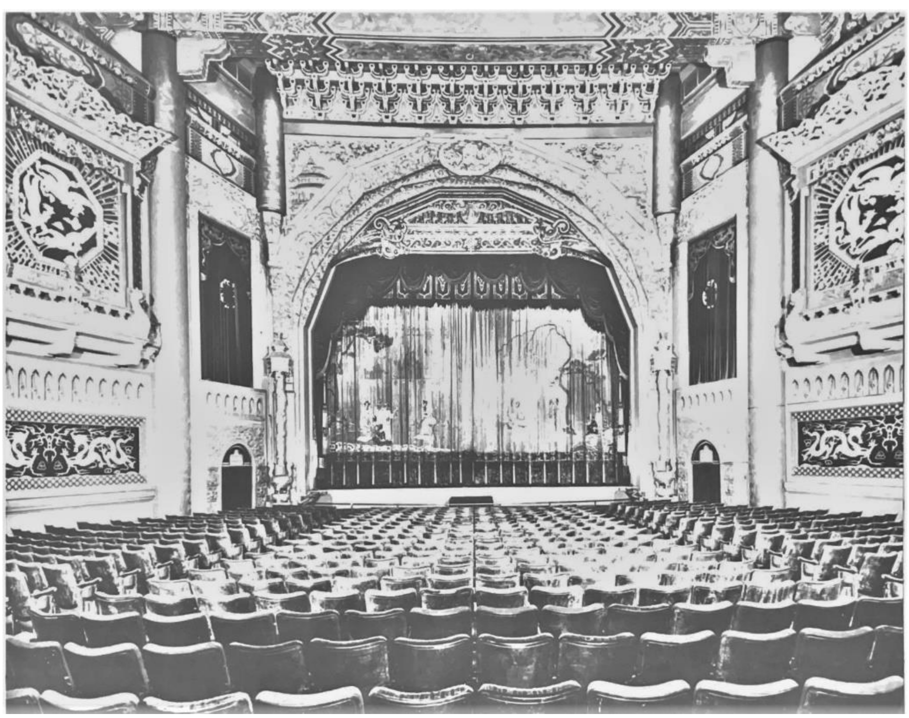

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