

Yellow

That bunch from high school

Yellow

Director: *Chris Chan Lee*

101 minutes

1997

Not Rated

When was the last time you saw more than one Asian American on the big screen? How about eight of them? In Chris Chan Lee's *Yellow*, we watch the story of eight Asian Americans (playing Korean Americans) who live in Los Angeles. Lee's characters are so real and accessible that it's easy to forget that it's a movie, not people you might know in real life, that you're watching.

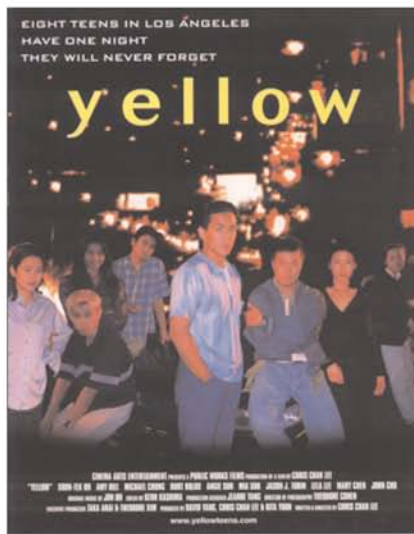
Lee has been quoted as saying he wanted to make this movie to see eight Asian Americans just "hanging out." Indeed, this concept is a novelty to American moviegoers. It's not that *Yellow* is such a complicated, intriguing story, or that the acting is so excellent, but it's the sheer element of surprise and ensuing comfortable pleasure of seeing eight interesting, likeable Korean American characters that makes it a fun movie to watch.

Yellow tells the story of Sin (Michael Daeho Chung), a graduating high school senior who is

hounded by his father (Soon-tek Oh) to work and study hard so that he can attend a good college and make the family proud. Sin's father owns a grocery store in South Central L.A., where conflicts with African American clientele are everyday occurrences. Sin feels trapped by his father's demands, and longs to break out of the Korean grocer mold by joining his friends in partying or by moving up to the Bay Area for college.

On the big "grad night," Sin's father announces to him that he must work at the store, closing up late at night. Sin is hurt and angry that he is stuck at the store once again, but as the dutiful Korean son, he agrees. What happens later that night at the store sets off a string of bad luck and deep trouble which his group of ultra-loyal friends try unsuccessfully to get him out of. It's funny but sad to watch their attempts at raising money and then promptly losing it.

Yellow showcases some fresh new talent, most notably Burt Bulos as Alex, Sin's best friend. Bulos has had experience acting in "Beverly Hills Ninja" (with Soon-tek Oh), as well as in smaller feature films. Alex is the kind of loyal friend that everyone needs but whose reckless



attitude every parent fears. Alex tells Sin that he needs to get out of his father's store, and risks his life to prove this to him.

Michael Daeho Chung, as Sin, projects both physical strength and emotional insecurity. Chung does a fine job of showing his confidence and carefree attitude in early scenes, but as troubles arise, Sin begins to shrivel, gritting his teeth and hunching over in fear. Soon-tek Oh, as the father (who played a similar overbearing Korean father

in *Penumbra Theatre's* recent production of *Canned Goods*) is a worthy source of Sin's trembling. Oh never seems to smile, barking out orders and threats, but somehow we can sense his protective love for his son.

Sin begins to crack under the enormous pressure of his father's expectations. It's like

watching a thriving plant wither away due to harsh elements. Sin's older girlfriend Teri (Mia Suh) also sees this in him, and begins to doubt the relationship, further expediting Sin's self-destruction.

Several other main characters flesh out the story, a welcome distraction to Sin's heavy traumas. Another budding romance is sweet and touching, between nice guy Yo-Yo (Jason J. Tobin) and the flirtatious Mina (Mary Chen). From among all of these

various characters, each viewer is bound to find someone who is a favorite because of a memory of someone like that, a refreshing response to feel in these days of overhyped, unbelievable characters (think *Armageddon*).

One of my favorite characters is Grace (Angie Suh), a strong young woman who rolls her eyes at Korean traditions but also embraces them, recognizing the wisdom in her mother's friends' advice, including that of the hilarious, melodramatic Snake Ajima (Amy Hill of television's *All American Girl*). Grace is a wise character, one who stays an arm's length away from the chaos but who is willing to step in and help when needed. They're not out to win the Nobel Prize (or an Oscar), but they're her lovable friends. She's just enjoying the ride, as we do, watching these crazy but fun characters up on the screen.

Yellow is distributed by Phaedra Cinema Inc., and will be shown in Minneapolis as part of the *New Asian American Cinema* series, along with *Shopping for Fangs and Strawberry Fields*, in early 1999 – times and dates to be announced. ●