

 **PRAGDA** | SPANISH FILM CLUB

DISCUSSION GUIDE



CHINAS

A film by Arantxa Echevarría

Spain / 2023 / 119 min
Spanish and Chinese with English subtitles

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM:

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before watching a film, it is important to know the current events and history of the country that film comes from. Learning about the filmmaker is also a relevant way to gain insight on the context in which the film was produced. You can learn more about Arantxa Echevarría at <https://pragda.com/film/chinas/>

CONTEXT

The Chinese community in Madrid has grown significantly over the past 20 years, becoming one of the largest immigrant groups in the city. The number of Chinese residents in Madrid has nearly doubled since 2008, reaching nearly 36,000 in 2022. Usera, which has been nicknamed Spain's "Chinatown", is home to about 25% of Madrid's Chinese population. This growth reflects a dynamic migration pattern that began with labor-driven migration and, in recent years, shifted towards middle-class families and students. Today, Madrid's Chinese residents maintain their vibrant cultural traditions while contributing to the city's multicultural identity.

INTRODUCING THE FILM

A **film synopsis** is a piece of text designed to summarize the film's narrative, genre, style, and key participants in a way that appeals to a wide audience. The synopsis is part of the film's marketing process and tends to follow a traditional format. Read this synopsis for *Chinas*

Chinas tells the story of Lucía, Xiang, and Claudia—three girls of Chinese origin living in Madrid, but with completely different realities. Lucía, the 9-year-old daughter of Chinese immigrants, dreams of celebrating her birthday at Burger King. However, her parents, who don't speak Spanish and work over 14 hours a day in a bazaar to give their daughters a better future, believe that such things are only for Spaniards. Claudia, Lucía's teenage sister, is beginning to experience firsthand the cultural differences and racism among adolescents. Xiang is a 9-year-old adopted girl who starts to question her biological family. The three stories intertwine and separate, but they all share a common goal: the search for their own identity.

Nominated for four Goya® Awards, this drama with comedic touches offers a nuanced exploration of the dual identity experienced by young Chinese communities in Spain. The film boldly challenges European paternalism and the racism faced by the Chinese community across various countries.

From the film synopsis, can you imagine the genre and tone of the film?
From this same text, try to identify the main events of the film's plot and the socio-political context of the film.

- Do you think that the film will have a political message? Cite specific language from the synopsis to support your answer.
- How do the trailer, poster, and still images encourage you to watch the film?
- Viewing the marketing materials alone (i.e. trailer, poster, and still images available at <https://pragda.com/film/chinas/>) without the aid of the synopsis, can you make any assumptions regarding what the film is about?



AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

NARRATIVE

- > The film starts with Xiang celebrating her First Communion, then entering a Chinese bazaar for some celebratory ice cream. This is the first time she encounters Lucia and is overwhelmed by Lucia and her mother's reactions to her beautiful dress in Mandarin. How does the opening scene establish what the relationship is like between the two main characters?
- > At the beginning of the film, how is Xiang's family's social situation portrayed? What visual or narrative elements illustrate it? How is Lucia's family's social situation portrayed?
- > What is the relationship between Lucia and her older sister, Claudia? How does the film show the impact of racism at different ages?
- > Why does Xiang reject Lucia's many offers to be friends despite Lucia's welcoming and kind demeanor?
- > What role does Lucia's friend Susana play in the story? How does she help us understand Lucia's inner world and desires?
- > How does Claudia's life with her friends contrast with her life at home? Why do you think she desires such a different life than what she has at home?
- > What differences do you see in the parenting styles of Xiang and Lucia's parents? How do you think these differences impact the characters' understanding of themselves and how they fit into Spanish society?
- > Why do you think Wang continues to help Claudia sneak out of the house?
- > Do you think it was a good idea for Xiang to meet her biological family? To start Chinese school? How would you feel in a similar situation?
- > What does the film reveal about life in contemporary Spain? How do supporting characters like Sol, Xiang's therapist, and Lucia's teacher help to reveal that?
- > How are the three stories in conversation with each other? Do you think that Claudia's difficult journey is foreshadowing of what's in store for Xiang and Lucia as young Chinese girls who just want to fit in?
- > What do you think of the ending? How does it make you feel about Xiang and Lucia's future?



CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

- > The film's director, Arantxa Echevarría, said in an interview: *"The casting process was very challenging because I didn't have much knowledge of Chinese, and it involved street casting and searching within the community [. . .] I work to ensure that the characters are true to themselves. I don't ask them to do something unfamiliar. For example, the parents of the little girl who plays Lucía own a bazaar, and she grew up in one. The teenage girl also had a similar crisis with her parents because she was tired of being the one taking the kids to school, handling paperwork, translating Spanish, and working in the restaurant. The mother also owns a bazaar. It was about extrapolating their lives and incorporating them into the film."*
- > What do you think of Echevarría's choice of casting both professional and nonprofessional actors? What did you think of the acting styles of Ella Qiu, who played Xiang, and Siman Yang, who played Lucia?
- > How do you think this affected the mise-en-scène¹?
- > How does the cinematography reflect Xiang and Lucia's inner worlds? Can you identify specific camera angles, compositions, or movements that emphasize his/her emotional state?



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¹ "Mise-en-scène" is a French term referring to the deliberate arrangement of everything that makes up the frame of shot. This includes everything from the lighting to the props used in order to carefully convey mood and meaning.

CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES *continued*

- > What role does color play in the film's visual storytelling? Are there recurring color schemes or contrasts that underline certain themes or characters?
- > Why do you think the scenes in the bazaar have a darker color palette, but Lucia and Susana's dream scenes are bright with vibrant colors?
- > Do the filmmakers use artificial light or natural light for most of the scenes? Explain how this decision might inform the film's themes.
- > The film relies on ambient sounds rather than a musical score to subtly impact the film's tone and audience's emotion. What does that suggest about the director's style? Do you think this choice is effective, or do you think some scenes should've been accompanied by a score?
- > How does the film use silence to convey meaning? Can you identify scenes where silence speaks louder than words?
- > How do the different sets (ie. Xiang's family house, Lucia's family's bazaar, the school, and the parks where Claudia's friends party) reflect the themes in the film? Analyze the scene's mise-en-scène.
- > How does the editing rhythm affect your experience of the story? Do you think it was effective for the film to switch between the characters' perspectives as often as it does?

THEMES

- > What do you think is the central message of *Chinas*?
- > Luis Martínez, a film critic for *El Mundo*, wrote: *"Echevarría jumps into the fight--a fight where identity, racism, condescension, shame, and assimilation all clash. It's not so much bravery that drives her, as we've said, but the certainty that there is nothing to lose. Her cinema stirs and pushes forward, unconcerned with stylization or grand statements, moving instead through the terrain of what feels true—always blending in with, even becoming indistinguishable from, the very story it tells."*
- > *Her films are about girls and teenagers searching for themselves and their identities—and the films themselves are on the same quest, stumbling, hesitating, getting lost. It's adolescent cinema about adolescents. But it's also a kind of filmmaking that, in its urgency to capture what we vaguely call truth, isn't afraid to blur—or outright tear down—the often artificial line between fiction and reality."*
- > What do you think of that statement? Do you agree with him?
- > Analyze the film's title and its connotations. What is its meaning to you? Do you think it is meant to shed light on the derogatory use of the word, or be endearing?
- > How would you describe the tone of the film? Is it more hopeful or critical?
- > In the film, Xiang's parents continue to call her by her given Chinese name despite her wanting a typical Spanish name. Additionally, Lucia and Claudia give themselves Spanish names that their parents refuse to call them by. How else does the film explore themes of assimilation?
- > How does the film use the varying ages of the characters to make an argument about racism and immigration in Spain?
- > What generational differences appear in Lucia and Claudia's family dynamic? How do they impact their assimilation efforts, social interactions, and lifestyle mindsets in general?
- > How does the film draw attention to the intersectionality of contemporary issues in Spain (ie. the immigrant experience, the lack of sexual education, gender injustice, and racism)?



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