

Chinatown Encyclopedia Article

Chinatown

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Roman Polanski directed this 1974 classic film portraying the mystery and intrigue of Raymond Chandler's fascinating novel. Jack Nicholson played Jake Gittes, a private detective trapped in the odd Asian-immigrant culture of the desert West. Hired to investigate the murder of the chief engineer for the Los Angeles Power and Water Authority in 1930s California, Gittes finds himself pulled into the unique political and economic power structure of the arid region: water politics with all its deceptions and double dealings dominates planning and development.

The film acquired a cult following because of its dark, intriguing story—seemingly based in another world and era—and the enduring popularity of Jack Nicholson. *Chinatown's* film noir setting places it in a long line of fine films deriving from the 1940s mysteries of Alfred Hitchcock. The defining characteristic of such films is uncertainty—of character and plot. Gittes repeatedly appears as the trapped character searching in vain for truth; indeed, the viewer searches with him. In the end, the evil is nearly always exposed. However, typical to film noir, *Chinatown's* conclusion leaves the viewer strangely unsure if truth actually has emerged victorious.

Jack Nicholson in a scene from the film *Chinatown*.

In 1990, Nicholson starred in and directed *Chinatown's* sequel, *The Two Jakes*, set in 1948 California. Oil has replaced water as the power source for regional wealth, creating a fine backdrop for another dark mystery based on adultery and intrigue.