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Who is Josie Packard?
Joan Chen, Lucy Liu, and the uncommon sense of pleasure

By Mila Zuo

Actress Joan Chen once remarked to *Time* magazine, “The only thing I achieved going to the States was that I became an *exotic beauty*, I did my best to give a version of Chinese-ness that the West was looking for. But I also understood that that version of me was *worthless*.” Are the cinematic and televisual representations of “exotic beauty” indeed worthless? Or can we find value in the subversive pleasures invoked by such representations? In this paper, I argue that the erotic over-investment in Chinese (American) women like Joan Chen and Lucy Liu produces an affective surplus of desire that challenges, in American media productions, the common sense of what it means to be “American.” Moreover, I assert that identification with such a figure of exoticism can open a space of *becoming*, a transformative state wherein radical possibilities exist.

Jacques Lacan’s concept of the “mirror stage” has inspired film theories contending that spectatorial pleasure arises from the illusory power and mastery of the male gaze fixing on a (female) object.¹ However, I argue that the “exotic” representations of Asian American women avoid such subject/object positions, instead apprehending pure *becoming*, in which contradictory and slippery states co-exist to elude the fixity of

common sense and of the gaze.² The uncommon pleasures that arise in the spectatorship of these images are compounded by the enigmatic performances of actresses like Joan Chen and Lucy Liu. Despite their contemporary fame, both Chen and Liu have been criticized for their portrayals of exotic femme fatales. I will recuperate such portrayals as forms of embodied resistance against the sexual objectification of the gaze.³ Through the performances of indecipherable desires, Chen and Liu's performative bodies elide visual domination and invoke *jouissance*—the “excessive, transgressive and boundary-breaking” pleasure that edges the frontier between pain and pleasure.⁴ As Rosi Braidotti points out, “Fantasies, desires and the pursuit of pleasure play as important and constructive a role in subjectivity as rational judgment and standard political action,” I contend that these representations are especially important for Asian American women who are still seen as *becoming* American, in the larger historical context.⁵ After all, the master narrative of citizenship is contingent upon the passage through gendered, sexualized, and racialized states of becoming.⁶

Joan Chen: Diasporic exoticism

Born on January 3rd, 1961, a 14-year-old Joan Chen was scouted by Mao Zedong's wife and cast two years later in her first film, *Qingchun* [Youth] (Xie Jin, 1977). She became a national celebrity after starring in the 1979 *Xiao Hua* [Little Flowers] (Qian She, 1980). Chen refers to her then-fame as a “nuisance,” choosing to leave China to study film production in the U.S, where film producer Dino De Laurentis discovered the bilingual actress and cast her as a sexually submissive “barbarian queen” in *Tai-Pan* (Duke, 1986).⁷ That role led to her casting as Empress Wan Jung in Bernardo

Bertolucci's award-winning *The Last Emperor* (1987). Chen has since become an American citizen, continuing to work as both actress and director in the U.S. and China.

Chen's most visible role in the U.S. is as Josie Packard in David Lynch's critically-acclaimed television series, *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991). *Newsweek* magazine declared the show a cultural phenomenon, stating, "trendiness had become as simple as turning on the TV each Thursday evening—and then, at work the next day, pretending you understood what the hell was going on."⁸ Superficially, the plot follows Detective Dale Cooper in his attempts to solve the murder of the town's beloved Homecoming Queen, Laura Palmer. However, beneath the face of normalcy lurks dark and sinister truths, one of which is that the man who raped and murdered Laura was none other than her own father, possessed by an evil spirit simply called BOB. More than a detective story, the surrealist serial drama performs an allegorical autopsy on small town American lives and secrets—with a metaphysical bent. Among the preternatural events taking place in *Twin Peaks* is a series of doubles that emerge: BOB and Leland Palmer; BOB and Dale Cooper; Laura and her identical cousin, Maddy (both played by actress Sheryl Lee); and as I will illustrate, Laura, the blond white teenager and Josie, the young Chinese American woman.

A key character, Josie was a Hong Kong prostitute who immigrated to the U.S. to live with her husband in Twin Peaks, Washington. After her husband dies in a boating accident, Josie takes ownership of Packard Sawmill, becoming an influential member of the township. Vain and beautiful, Josie plays the role of exotic "foreigner" in a predominantly Caucasian town. Also an exotic foreigner in Hollywood, Chen was only the second Asian American actress since the 1950s to have a significant recurring role on

American primetime television.⁹ The Asian American body, little seen in public media during the early 1990s, lacked the public recognition and identification as “American” — and I would argue that the same is true today. When a performer of Asian descent appears on-screen, her visible difference strains commonsense notions of “American” embodiment, producing excess in the form of un-common or non-sense.

Intimately related to the sensorium of the body, sense-making is not only a cognitive, but also *affective*, event. Thus the uncommon sense provoked by viewing an Asian actor is felt as an affective jolt, which registers the actor’s *startling* Asian ethnicity (as embodiment) before an assessment of character is made, an autonomic response “in excess of consciousness.”¹⁰ In his work, Lynch persistently challenges logic and sense by cultivating actors’ histrionic performances and displaced affect, dream-like sequences, and surreal mise-en-scene. Therefore in order to destabilize, unsettle, and provoke *sense* itself, Lynch introduces *Twin Peaks* with the “exotic” face of Joan Chen in the pilot’s opening sequence. However, for Asian Americans, who do not have the common pleasure of seeing many Asian people in American media, the sight of another Asian face simply *makes sense* as a kind of self-recognition.



Josie Packard is the first person we see in *Twin Peaks*

Whereas Deleuze offers the image of the “man without name...without family...without qualities...without self or I” as a shattering or effacing of individuality within the realms of non-sense, Lynch manifests this radically unknowable being of transformation in the evil spirit of BOB, as well as with Josie, who transmorphs into a wooden knob by the end of the series.¹¹ In a parallel storyline to the investigation of Laura’s murder, Twin Peaks residents probe into Josie’s murky Hong Kong past, trying to understand this mysterious woman. “*Who was Laura Palmer?*” and “*Who is Josie Packard?*” are questions juxtaposed, as both women represent epistemological limitations about what *can* be known about them. While Laura’s identical-looking cousin, Maddy is a reference to Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, Josie conjures up an even more disturbing notion of the double. Like the opening shot of Josie’s mirrored image, Josie is also a reflection of Laura, the impossible object of male desire around which the series pivots. As Laura’s student, both figuratively and literally (Laura was Josie’s English tutor), Josie is the exotic embodiment of Laura’s returning gaze from beyond the grave, one that is unapproachable yet is endlessly pursued. By the end of the series, Josie, like Laura, meets a tragic demise as a consequence of her indecipherable desiring nature. She literally becomes *object*-ified, her soul trapped in a wooden bedside table knob after she “dies” from fear, thus foreclosing all further understanding of her character. Josie’s inexplicable death invokes the hysterical performances of grief and unfulfilled desire by the men who continue to love her in her absence. Nevertheless, despite the narrative foreclosure of Josie’s own *jouissance*, for Asian American women, Josie’s embodiment provokes self-recognition and an uncommon sense of pleasure.

Todd McGowan writes, “[Lynch’s] films...allow for a momentary experience of the gaze that occurs when the worlds of fantasy and desire intersect.”¹² An embodiment of the undomesticated gaze, *Blue Velvet*’s Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini) is “irreducible to any fantasmatic identification.”¹³ Similar to the speculations surrounding Dorothy’s passions and the posthumous unearthing of Laura’s secrets, inquiries into Josie’s desires are spurred by her death. Her lover, town sheriff Harry S. Truman (Michael Ontkean), asks Josie’s sister-in-law, “What made her do the things she did? What was she after?” to which Catherine (Piper Laurie) replies, “...early in her life she must have learned the lesson that she could survive by being what other people wanted to see, by showing them that. And whatever was left of her private life, she may never have shown to anyone.” It is precisely *that* which is never shown to anyone, in other words, the object of desire’s returning gaze that produces *jouissance*, “excessive and transgressive” pleasures. Just as *Twin Peaks* “strews enigmas like pine needles, savoring pocket after pocket of peculiarity while deferring resolution indefinitely” (*Film Comment*’s Richard T. Jameson’s description of the show), the enigmatic embodiment of Chen-as-Josie illustrates the deferred resolution on the Asian American woman.¹⁴ The idea that Josie “survived” by being what other people wanted to see echoes the assimilative demands on Asian American women—whether to conform to the “model minority” stereotype or to pressures of sexual assimilation via hypersexual performativity, to name two. Indeed, the unresolved narrative of Josie’s mysterious demise is an unconscious analogy for the indefinite reconciliation of the foreign “Other.” Commonly asked, “Where are you from?” Asian Americans are viewed as “foreigners,”

suspended in *becoming* (a notion uncannily invoked by the term for citizenship, “naturalization”).

Be that as it may, there are pleasures to be found in the state of becoming, as Josie demonstrates. In the show’s second season, Josie’s in-laws force her to become their maid as punishment for her complicity in the assassination attempt on her husband. In addition to the un-maid-like decoration of her long, fake red nails, Josie’s performance subversively refutes her demoted station in the household. When Josie serves breakfast for the first time as her in-laws’ maid, Catherine calls for her and Josie ambles over, ostentatiously licking her fingers. When Catherine tells Josie that she intends to show her all the respect and affection she deserves despite her new position in the household, Josie responds sarcastically, “Thank you, Catherine, and I will try to do the same,” flashing her an insincere and dispassionate smile. When Catherine reminds her to put on her little maid’s cap, Josie pouts her lips, puts on the cap and saunters away, “modeling” the outfit as a self-aware spectacle for Catherine’s (and the spectator’s) viewing pleasure.



Josie’s resistance of her demoted household station

In Douglas Sirk’s maternal melodrama *Imitation of Life* (1959), white actress Lora Meredith (Lana Turner) and her black live-in maid, Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore) raise difficult daughters who resent them for different reasons. Acutely aware of society’s

racial hostilities towards blacks and ashamed of her own blackness, Annie's daughter Sara Jane chooses to pass as white. In one scene, Sara Jane spitefully greets Lora's guests with the caricatured affectations of a Southern mammy to the distress and confusion of Lora and Annie. Elena del Rio asserts that Sara Jane's performance of "the gestures and speech of both whiteness and blackness—is perhaps the film's most subversive statement regarding the impermanence of identity, its openness to reinvention, and the non-essential ties between the body's vocabulary of gestures and movements and the particular meanings these signs mobilize in a given culture."¹⁵ Whereas Sirk's film historicizes the relationship between ethnic performance and service, Lynch's re-vision in *Twin Peaks*' maid scene is a self-conscious parody. Chen-as-Josie performs subservient and hypersexualized "Chinese-ness," and puts the "white fantasy of exotic femininity" on display.¹⁶ However, her over-performance reveals pride and pleasure in her impermanent position: between whiteness and Chineseness, between the U.S. and China—a liminal space that allows for infinite reinvention. Whereas Sara Jane finds her liminality unbearable, Josie embraces the thresholds of the in-between.

Although the presence of a Chinese American girl-next-door in small town America may seem to collapse difference, other media outlets, such as magazines, maintain much more conventional imaginary and commensensical ethno-nationalist boundaries. The deferred resolution on the Asian American woman is no more evident than the October 1990 issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine, featuring "The Women of Twin Peaks." The glamorous cover photo captures Lara Flynn Boyle, Sherilyn Fenn, and Madchen Amick tightly embracing one another in identical beige tank tops and jeans. In explaining the technological, cosmetic, and discursive constructions celebrating "the

glow of white women,” Richard Dyer writes, “Idealised [sic] white women are bathed in and permeated by light. It streams through them and falls on to them from above. In short, they glow.”¹⁷ This *Rolling Stone* cover is no different in its attempts to show how the white women of *Twin Peaks* radiate. Despite Josie’s significance on the show, no less prominent than the roles of these women, Chen is missing from the photo as well as from the feature article inside titled: “Babes in the Woods.”¹⁸



Chen’s absence from the *Rolling Stone* cover

In media interviews, Lynch has resisted against the impulse to explain the “disease” of Dorothy Vallens and Laura Palmer, stating, “It’s so beautiful just to leave it abstract.”¹⁹ As he points out, pleasure and incomprehensibility are inextricably linked. As an incomprehensible “foreign” body, Chen disrupts the homogenous fantasy of idealized white women. Nevertheless, as an embodiment of abstraction, Chen-as-Josie represents the point in the Other that eludes the gaze, an object *and* subject of desire that provokes pleasure precisely *because* it is missing. As with her fatal *objectification*, the consequent deprivation of pleasures offered by Josie’s body only increases pleasures for the Asian American spectator, who knows her subjectivity cannot be anchored to any single, comprehensible representation.

Conclusion: Lucy Liu and the “New” American

The spaces of reinvention opened up by actresses like Joan Chen have, in part, enabled performers like Lucy Liu to enter into mediated realms of desire and fantasy. Liu became famous from television shows and Hollywood blockbusters like *Ally McBeal* (FOX, 1997-2002), *Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2000) and *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (McG, 2003) and *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (Tarantino, 2003). Despite her successes, however, comments like those made by actor Martin Freeman calling Liu “very charming but very ugly,” and likening her to a “dog,” reveal that encounters with un-common sense produce un-ease and distress.²⁰ Liu’s disruptive ethnic appearance in otherwise dominantly white casts, and her recent casting as Watson in the Sherlock Holmes American television remake, *Elementary* (CBS, 2012-present), do not *make* sense—rather, these interventions challenge it.

In one of her first film roles, Liu plays the role of a Chinatown dominatrix in the neo-noir film, *Payback* (Helgeland, 1998). Pearl is impervious to death and pain—in fact, taking pleasure in administering and receiving corporeal punishment. Often giggling, and unable to contain her glee as participant and voyeur in scenes of violence, Liu-as-Pearl’s squirming, ecstatic body exceeds common sense notions of pain. Elaine Scarry suggests that the inability to vocalize or express pain indicates a person’s debased power, whereas the visibility/vocalization of pain coincides with the recognition of another person’s sentient existence.²¹ Pearl’s experience of pain is shockingly inhuman insofar as her expressions of pain are powerful utterances of satisfaction, enjoyment and pleasure. It is not that she is *unable* to vocalize pain, she challenges the phenomenological nature of pain through an empirical expression of enjoyment. Thus, as an aberrant being who neither *makes* sense nor *perceives* it, Pearl undergoes trials of pain as a kind of neophyte,

similar to ones described in mythical-ritualistic rites of passage. Victor Turner writes, “The subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, ‘invisible.’”²² As an embodiment of *becoming*, Pearl is “betwixt and between” human and non-human, Chinese and American. She and her bodily sensations are structurally “invisible,” even while her body (tightly wrapped in latex and fishnet), becomes a hypervisible display of exotic and deviant Chinese-ness.



Pearl's performance of pleasure in pain

As a liminal figure, Liu-as-Pearl represents the “new” American. Accented through imperfect American speech and hyper-exoticized appearance, she is marked as an immigrant Other. As discriminatory immigration laws stemming from the late 1800s prohibited significant volumes of immigration from Asian countries until the repeal of such acts in the 1950s and 1960s, I suggest that contemporary “Asian Americans” are still suspended within ethno-nationalist rites of passage within the *longue durée*. As such, Asian Americans are subjected to a liminal or transitional period—one that ascends from a “passage from lower to higher status” through a “limbo of statuslessness.”²³ I read both Josie and Pearl as caught in a “limbo of statuslessness,” televisually and cinematically rendered as inscrutably desiring and desired women.

Nevertheless, the enigmatic performances of liminal Asian American bodies produce a kind of pleasure or *jouissance* for the always-already lost object of desire. By challenging and destabilizing common sense ideas through corporeal performance, Josie and Pearl resist the mastery of the gaze, creating a space for inventive and fluid subjectivities. Such characters and their desires can never be known. But it is exactly this incomprehensibility that opens up a space of radical alterity, transformation, and finally, pleasure.

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- " : Martin Freeman Dishes on Sherlock & Meeting Lucy Liu." http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDg2NzUzNjcjcy.html.

1 Conceived by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the “mirror stage” is a vital moment in infancy during which the Ego is constructed through the recognition of oneself in the mirror. It was deduced that an imaginary sense of mastery, and by extension, *pleasure*, results from the illusory power of the commanding gaze at one’s reflected body. Lacanian film theory, especially popular in the 1970s and ‘80s, rigorously mined the symbolic meaning of the mirror through which to analyze film. Film scholars like Christian Metz argued that film spectatorship was analogous to the mirror stage, and that the spectator’s mastering gaze over the screen distracted him/her from the film’s underlying symbolic structure. Most famously in feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey expanded on the sexual mastery of the male gaze over film’s female objects.

2 My definition of “becoming” emanates from, but elaborates upon Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense.*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 77-78. Deleuze analyzes Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* novels to describe Alice’s states of pure becoming. Deleuze describes these moments as Alice eluding the present as a fixed quality, and surrendering her self-identity to the verbs (“growing” and “shrinking”) that undermine it. Deleuzian feminists like Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Grosz have also recognized the potential for feminist thought in Deleuze’s notions of “becoming.”

3 Pointing to the legacy of hypersexuality of Asian (American) women, Celine Shimizu theorizes a “bondage of subjectivity” that connects Asian American women in Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race : Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007). To completely reject the racialized sexuality that has inflected the Asian American woman’s self-recognition is insufficient and unproductive, according to Shimizu. Thus she recuperates the authorship and agency of Asian American performers and filmmakers to demonstrate a political posturing towards “race-positive” embodiments of Asian American female sexuality beyond subjugation. Likewise, I argue that Joan Chen and Lucy Liu (through and beyond their “Chinese-ness”) have authored significantly “race-positive” embodied representations of Asian American beauty, even within roles that seem to subjugate them as being merely Orientalist fantasy or fetish. In my dissertation, I contend that they are not only active negotiators of their own image through their performances, they are also active collaborators with the film and television directors with whom they work.

4 Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, vol. 10 (Cambridge: Polity Press Cambridge, 2002).

5 Ibid, 39.

6 Many thanks to Kathleen McHugh and Dougal Henken for their helpful suggestions and feedback on this talk.

7 Mathew Scott, “Little Flower in Full Bloom; at 51 Joan Chen Is Reaping the Benefits of Maturity and Experience in Both Her Private Life and as an Actress and Director,” *South China Morning Post*, March 3 2013.

8 qtd. in David Lavery, “Introduction: Twin Peaks’ Interpretive Community,” in *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*, ed. David Lavery (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 3-4

9 The first Asian American actor with a recurring American primetime television role was Anna May Wong in a leading role in *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong* (DuMont Television Network, 1951).

10 Patricia Ticineto Clough, “Introduction,” in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007). Clough’s notion of “autoaffection” is influenced by Brian Massumi’s work in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002).

11 Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*.

12 Todd McGowan, “Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes,” *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 3 (2003): 40.

13 Ibid., 42.

14 Jameson qtd. in Lavery, “Introduction: Twin Peaks’ Interpretive Community.”

15 Elena Del Rio, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

16 Ibid.

17 Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 122.

18 B. Zehme and M. Rolston, “Babes in the Woods. (Cover Story),” *Rolling Stone*, no. 588 (1990).

19 Lynch qtd. in Diana Hume George, “A Feminist Reading of *Twin Peaks*,” in *Full of Secrets*, ed. David Lavery (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 111.

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21 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

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23 Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” *The Ritual Process: Structure and anti-structure* (1969): 97.