

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Trans/national Chinese Bodies

Performing Sex, Health, and Beauty in Cinema and Media

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Film and Television

by

Mila Zuo

2015

© Copyright by

Mila Zuo

2015

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Trans/national Chinese Bodies

Performing Sex, Health, and Beauty in Cinema and Media

by

Mila Zuo

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Kathleen A. McHugh, Chair

This dissertation explores the connections between Chinese body cultures and transnational screen cultures by tracing the Chinese body through representation in contemporary cinema and media in the post-Mao era. Images of Chinese bodies participate in the audio-visual manufacture of desire and pleasure, and ideas of “Chineseness” endure through repetitive, mediated performance. This dissertation examines how representations of sex, health, and beauty are *mediated by* social, cultural, and political belief systems, and how cine/televisual depictions of the body also, in turn, *mediate* gender, cultural, racial and ethnic identifications within and across national boundaries.

The bodily practices and behaviors in the quotidian arenas of sex, health, and beauty reflect the internalization of culture and the politics of identity construction. This dissertation is interested in how the pleasures of cinema relate to the politics of the body,

and how the pleasures of the body relate to the politics of cinema. *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* focuses in particular on images of the Chinese female body that participate in worldly constructions of “Chinese-ness.” Each chapter is a situational exploration of a facet of Chinese embodiment in contemporary cinema and media: the erotics and affects of cinematic war bodies, the hygienic body in compassionate melodrama, the touching politics of China’s first HIV/AIDS film, the politics of beauty in regards to post-Mao Chinese female film stars, and the exotic/erotic-ization of Chinese American actresses. By framing the performer as the central author in film and television, this project suggests an alternate hermeneutics to understanding the accented Chinese body as cine/televisual phenomenon. Anchored by discussions of affective, sensorial, and phenomenological spectatorship, this project explores the Chinese body as a fictive text that powerfully elicits feelings of cultural belonging. This study mobilizes the concept of carnal spectatorship in an attempt to answer the question: How do Chinese audiences make *sense* and *senses* of their own histories and identities through their imaginative, bodily contact with onscreen Chinese bodies? As *Trans/national Chinese Bodies Performing Sex, Health, and Beauty in Cinema and Media* illustrates, China and Chinese-ness are themselves performances inextricable from bodily systems of desire, pleasure, and well-being. As a construction of film and media, the Chinese body enables access to a diversity of erotics and pleasures that elucidate Chinese-ness as an affective condition of being-in-the-world.



The dissertation of Mila Zuo is approved.

Sue-Ellen Case

Chon Noriega

Jasmine Nadua Trice

Michael Berry

John T. Caldwell

Kathleen A. McHugh, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

For

Mom, Dad, and Dougal, whose love and support give me strength

In memory of

Zhu Jianqiu, Cao Huaiwei, and Zuo Yingpu

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Notes on Romanization	1
<b>Introduction:</b>	
<u>Trans/national Chinese Bodies Performing Sex, Health, and Beauty</u>	2
Bibliography	37
<b><i>SEX</i></b>	
Chapter One	
<u>Lust, Caution, and Shame: The Erotics and Affects of Cinematic War</u>	41
Bibliography	114
<b><i>HEALTH</i></b>	
Chapter Two	
<u>Uncivilized Displays: Hygienic Bodies and Suzhi</u>	119
Bibliography	153
Chapter Three	
<u>Bodies, Blood, and Love: The “Touching” Politics of HIV/AIDS Media</u>	155
Bibliography	207
<b><i>BEAUTY</i></b>	
Chapter Four	
<u>Chinese Star Bodies and a Trans/national Politics of Beauty</u>	211
Bibliography	258
Chapter Five	
<u>Chinese American Actresses and the Un-common Senses of Beauty</u>	262
Bibliography	340
<b>Conclusion:</b>	
<u>Acting Chinese</u>	344
Bibliography	353
Filmography	354

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is not customary within these pages to acknowledge what it is like to work on a PhD degree. The affective labor and performance anxiety that goes into a dissertation are unseen. The solitary, sometimes melancholy, nature of thought production and writing are invisible. Even the joys and thrills of coming upon a great idea, and then sharing it with others, are hidden. It is not customary to recognize here the structures of feeling in academia, because we all know them intimately. We also realize that the rewards of academic work are immense. My gratitude of the people who supported me during this process can only be appreciated within this context of highs and lows. They helped lift me up when I most needed it.

I am very grateful to have been financially supported in my graduate career by the Cota-Robles Fellowship, Edna and Yu-shan Han Endowed Fellowship, UCLA Dissertation Year Fellowship, Joel Siegel Fellowship, UCLA Fellowship support, and the Harold Leonard Fellowship. Without the support of the Teshome Gabriel Memorial Award and the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television Executive Board Award, I would not have been able to conduct field research in China. Thank you to the trustees and donors of all of the awards I was fortunate to receive. I am especially appreciative of our forward-thinking Dean, Teri Schwartz, who not only supported me but also advocated for our student organization, Elevate, dedicated to celebrating multiculturalism in film, theater, and television.

The completion of this dissertation would not be possible without my committee. I am deeply grateful to a true champion of her students, my dissertation chair Kathleen McHugh, who always encouraged and inspired me to push my ideas further into the

unknown. She helped me locate and express my critical voice, and I will always be humbled by her incredible intellect and thoughtfulness. John Caldwell always shared his brilliant observations, singular kindness, and generosity of spirit with me. Jasmine Nadua Trice has given invaluable and immeasurable encouragement and feedback on my work. Chon Noriega's unique insight, levity, and wit have and continue to be an inspiration. Michael Berry's work is essential for Chinese film scholars and his influence shows in my own research. Sue-Ellen Case is an intellectual force who has shared great ideas with me, and Nick Browne gave me helpful tips and suggestions.

Other scholars and colleagues who have impacted and influenced my life and work include Vivian Sobchack, for whose humanity and work I hold deepest admiration. She is an inspirational role model in every sense. I am appreciative of Greg Cohen, one of the most benevolent and decent individuals I've met on this path, for his recommendation and advice. Renee Tajima-Peña generously met with me to discuss academic and creative goals, giving me a much-needed dose of optimism at the time. Linda Williams, Marilyn Fabe, and Chris Berry introduced me to the world of film studies and inspired me to study cinema in the first place. I was fortunate to have known the late Teshome Gabriel and his incomparable gentleness and good will. Several Asian film scholars and colleagues who continually energize and inspire me include Brian Hu, Sean Metzger, Jason Coe, Valerie Soe, Feng-Mei Heberer, Kevin Lim, Vincent Pham, Mike Dillon, Ken Provencher, Brian Bernards, Ada Tseng, Aynne Kokas, and my good friend and collaborator in China, Li Li. I am glad to have met Gina Marchetti and Yiman Wang, two scholars whose work with Chinese women and women's cinemas are invaluable. I am

indebted to the individuals who allowed me to interview them for this project: Chen Xiaoyun, Marilyn Tokuda, Zhang Jianyong, Sarah Munroe, and Han Yue.

I credit much of my emotional health throughout this journey to my friends and cohort. Samantha Sheppard, you're a bright light in the darkness and one of the strongest people I've ever known. You and Allen have been so supportive, and you'll always have a good friend in me. Ben Sher, your great intelligence and knowledge of film are matched only by your outstanding charm and humor. I am so proud of what we've gone through together. There's no one else I would rather go through this process than with you two, Dennis Lo, Phil Wagner, and Bryan Hartzheim. I'll always cherish fond memories of our cohort. Chera Kee met with me at a critical time and gave me great professional advice, and Diana King kindly assisted me with my bibliography. A special thanks to the accomplished and generous Ross Melnick, who is the best unofficial mentor a graduate student could ask for. I would also like to thank other talented individuals who helped make this experience unforgettable: Allyson Field, Denise Mann, Steve Ricci, Stephen Mamber, Janet Bergstrom, Bill McDonald, Mark Quigley, Zareh Arevshatian, Steven Foley, Melissa Melpignano, Amanda Rossie, Michelle Ton, Jaimie Baron, Jonathan Cohn, Dawn Fratini, Jen Moorman, Maya Smukler, Jennifer Porst, Lindsay Giggey, Julia Wright, Morgan Woolsey, Brenda Johnson-Grau, Kimberlee Granholm, Pamela Crespin, Thomas Harrison, Jason Gendler, Ben Sampson, Drew Morton, David O'Grady, Alice Royer, Daniel Steinhardt, Karrmen Crey, Bess Matassa, Brian Clark, Cheri Smith, James Rhys Edwards, and Heather Collette-VanDeraa.

I am so lucky to know the warmth and affection of my extended transnational family in the U.S. and in China, and secondary family members like Sara Graham, Julie

von Wettberg and Jonathan Henken, Elissa Henken, Mariamne Whatley, and Eric von Wettberg. Finally, for those souls who know me best. Dougal Henken, thank you for being you. There's no one else I'd rather be by my side through all this. And last but not least, thank you to my mom and dad, Yumei Wu and Yingxue Zuo, who lived through a Revolution and carried me here with inexhaustible love, hope, and dreams.

## VITA

### ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS:

**Oregon State University**, Assistant Professor of Film Studies, School of Writing, Literature, and Film, September 2015

### EDUCATION

**University of California, Berkeley**

B.A. *magna cum laude*, Film Studies, and English, June 2004

**University of California, Los Angeles**

M.A. Cinema and Media Studies, June 2009

Asian American Studies Concentration Certificate, June 2011

### PUBLICATIONS

“Bodies, Blood, and Love: The Touching Politics of *Love for Life*, China’s First Commercial Film about HIV/AIDS,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* (forthcoming 9.3 Autumn 2015).

“Sensing ‘Performance Anxiety’: Zhang Ziyi, Tang Wei, and Female Film Stardom in the People’s Republic of China,” *Celebrity Studies*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1080/19392397.2014.1001416

“*Darao de yishu — daoyan Li Yu zhuanfang*” ‘打扰’的艺术——导演李玉专访 [An Art that Disturbs: An Exclusive Interview with Director Li Yu]. Written in collaboration with Li Li. *Dangdai dianying 当代电影* [Contemporary Cinema journal] 218, no. 5 (May 2014): 73-76.

### FELLOWSHIPS, GRANTS, AWARDS

UCLA Dissertation Year Fellowship, 2014-2015

Joel Siegel Fellowship, 2013

Cota-Robles Fellowship, 2009-2013

Dean’s Distinguished Service Award, 2013

Teri Schwartz Friends and Family Award, 2012

Teshome Gabriel Memorial Award, 2011

Edna and Yu-shan Han Endowed Fellowship, 2011

School of Theater, Film & Television Executive Board Award, 2011

Nobu McCarthy Memorial Prize, 2010

UCLA Fellowship support, 2007-2009

Harold Leonard Fellowship, 2007-2009

### PRESENTATIONS AND TALKS

“(Almost) Famous: The Asian Performing Body as De/reterritorializing Agent.” Society for Cinema & Media Studies (SCMS Conference), Montreal, March 28, 2015.



- “Becoming and Un-becoming a Chinese Woman: ‘Failed’ Femininities in *The Song of the Exile* and *Double Exposure*.” Asian Cinema Studies Society (ACSS) Post-Asia Film, Media and Popular Culture Conference, Macau, July 22, 2014.
- “Liminal Celebrity: Lucy Liu as (Post-)Racial, (Post-)Feminist Fantasy.” Celebrity Studies Journal Conference, London, June 20, 2014.
- “A ‘Touching’ Story: China’s First Commercial Film about HIV/AIDS and the Politics of Compassion,” Cinema & Media Studies Colloquium, UCLA, April 11, 2014.
- “Who is Josie Packard? Joan Chen, Lucy Liu, and the Uncommon Sense of Pleasure.” SCMS Conference, Seattle, March 20, 2014  
Thinking Gender plenary panel: “Somatic Pleasures and Traumas: Seductions, Senses, and Sexuality,” Thinking Gender International Graduate Student Conference, UCLA, February 7, 2014.
- “Uncivilized Displays: Representations of Hygiene in China’s ‘Main-Melody’ Film.” Thinking Gender, UCLA, February 1, 2013.
- “Lust, Caution, and Exile: The Body Politics of Sexual Performance by Mainland Chinese Actresses.” Celebrity Studies Journal Conference, Melbourne, December 12, 2012.
- “Restless Bodies Exciting Terror in Lou Ye’s *Summer Palace*.” Thinking Gender, UCLA, February 11, 2011.  
SCMS Conference, New Orleans, March 12, 2011.
- “Banned in China: The Necessary S-exile of Chinese Cinefeminism.” Thinking Gender, UCLA, February 5, 2010.  
SCMS Conference, Los Angeles, March 19, 2010.
- “Yellow Peril, Yellow Fever: Fetishization, Colonization and Assimilation Through ‘Asian-Fetish’ Pornography.” Altered States annual graduate Critical Studies conference, University of Southern California, March 29, 2008.

#### ACADEMIC SERVICE

ELEVATE, UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television, Co-founder and Co-chair, 2011-2015

UCLA Center for the Study of Women (CSW), Conference Coordinator, Thinking Gender international graduate student conference, 2013-2014.

## **Notes on Romanization**

The politics of language when discussing China and the Sinophone are complex. In an attempt to be as simple and clear as possible, this dissertation uses the pinyin romanization system but also occasionally uses simplified Chinese characters for purposes of clarification and further elucidation. English translations of Chinese words and phrases are always provided, however the order in which the Chinese word or English translation appear may change depending on context. For instance, Chinese quotations will feature the Chinese term first, however, an authorial argument or description may use an English word followed by the Chinese term in pinyin. With regard to names and places, the default mode uses the more recognizable and familiar English designation if it exists, for instance Ang Lee rather than Li An. If one does not exist, traditional Chinese names are provided. With regard to individual names, the surname is followed by given name.

## INTRODUCTION:

### **Trans/national Chinese Bodies Performing Sex, Health, and Beauty**

When I am in China, friends and family members say that strangers can tell, even before I speak to them in my American-accented Mandarin, that I am not a Chinese person (*bushi zhongguoren*). What they mean is that, although I look ethnically Chinese, people can discern that I grew up elsewhere and that I am a foreigner (*waiguoren*). When I press them for an explanation, some cite the clothes I wear, others cite the way I walk and navigate space, and a few mention *qizhi*, a Chinese term that refers to one's temperament gleaned from outward appearance and roughly translates to "disposition." I became curious about these observations. How does one embody culture through decoration, gesture, and movement? Is there such thing as Chinese *qizhi* and American *qizhi*, and how are differences between the two gleaned from observations of the body?

Reconciling this curiosity with my academic interests in the constructed images of Chinese bodies in transnational cinema and media, I turned my attention to the idea of social performativity in visual culture. If I unconsciously embody "foreignness" to Chinese people, I wondered if and how Chinese actors embody and perform "Chinese-ness" through their kinesthetic behaviors, mannerisms, and aesthetic appearances in cinema and media. Within the critical scholarship of feminist poststructuralism and its project to denaturalize gender, Judith Butler's groundbreaking *Gender Trouble* argues that the concept of biological essentialism of the gendered body was a flawed assumption developed during the Enlightenment, and continues to be reinforced in contemporary society by powerful and pervasive discourses like

psychoanalysis.<sup>1</sup> Demonstrating how gender and sexuality are sites of cultural legibility and illegibility through generic, obligatory, and repetitive performance, Butler advocates for illegible bodies (those that do not re-signify heterosexuality) to rupture and alter the dominant conceptions of gender.<sup>2</sup> Does Butler's concept of gender and sexuality signification through corporeal performance apply to other kinds of performative cultural signification? How does the theatricality of daily life through the embodiment of contemporary normative ideals of sex, health, and beauty also involve generic, obligatory, and repetitive performances that render Chinese-ness legible? Can we similarly regard the bodily practices of sex, health, and beauty as learned cultural behaviors rendered critically legible through embodied performance?

This dissertation explores the material experiences of the Chinese lived body through representation and affective spectatorship. Two decades ago, Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow's 1994 anthology, *Body, Subject and Power in China* was one of the first scholarly works to broach embodiment in a Chinese context, using a "poststructuralist framework of investigating and contesting common sense."<sup>3</sup> The essays rethink "questions of power, subjectivity, and bodiliness in Chinese contexts" and situate Chinese bodily practices in their own histories.<sup>4</sup> Since then, the subject of Chinese bodies and body cultures have largely been analyzed by anthropologists like Susan Brownell, Judith Farquhar, Ann Anagnost, and Fran Martin who discuss the materiality of Chinese embodiment in greater detail. However, in cinema and media studies, despite the abundant literature on Chinese and Sinophone cinemas, we have yet to fully explore the relationships between Chinese body cultures and transnational screen cultures.

---

<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> See also *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow, *Body, Subject, and Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

The lack of literature on this subject can be partially attributed to the complexities of language and definition concerning the topic of Chinese bodies and cinemas. Indeed, there are a few troublesome terms in this study, which are problematic insofar as the words themselves signify and generate a constellation of diverse and complex meanings and understandings. For instance, the term “body” can refer to one’s biological composition, distinct personhood, or aesthetic appearance. In Chinese, there are at least three different root words that mean body: “*shen*, animate body; *ti*, inarticulate body; and *shi*, dead body or corpse.”<sup>5</sup> These root words can be combined with other words to form a variety of compound words and phrases, for instance, *shenti* (body health), *tiyu* (physical culture), and *shenfen* (class status). The linguistic proliferation of the word for “body” suggests that embodiment plays a significant role in Chinese culture and society, and that notions of corporeality inflect the understanding of different experiential spheres of livelihood (body health, physical culture, and class status, to name a few). In this project, the polyvalence of the Chinese language to describe the body motivates an understanding of the body as diverse cultural phenomena in representation, whose physical and aesthetic qualities can be critically observed and analyzed. As such, *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* consists of precise and diverse situational explorations of the Chinese body.

Another challenge of this study is the necessary use of fraught terms like “China,” “Chinese cinema(s),” and “Chinese-ness” (often placed in scare-quotes), each of which can be interminably disputed, problematized, and mystified. As a social construct, the “Chinese” body is both self-determined and perceptually defined, ambiguated by fluctuating ideas of nation and race. However, to be clear, the comparative framework of this project largely focuses on the ways in which the mainland Chinese body and the Chinese American body in transnational film

---

<sup>5</sup> Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 16.

and media author contemporary visions of Chinese-ness. A Chinese person living in the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC) and a Chinese American citizen are both considered to possess a "Chinese body," however global ethno-racial orders determine that the Chinese American body, his/her *qizhi* for instance, is regarded differently than the PRC body or the non-Chinese American body. Thus, when I visit China, I am considered an "outsider" (*waiguoren*), but I am not as foreign as a white or black American (*laowai*, "old outsider," the slang word reserved for foreigners not of Chinese descent). Notions of the inside(r) and outside(r) will be revisited throughout this study, as these concepts help to both clarify and complicate understandings of the transnational Chinese body.

The mediated Chinese body challenges the conception of self and nation as bounded, discrete entities whose interior and exteriors are distinct and separate. Discourses about the Chinese medical body offer an instructive approach to think about the ambiguities about the transnational body: "boundaries between interior and exterior are conceived dynamically as the point or interface where internal and external processes engage, and this changes according to point of view or function."<sup>6</sup> This dissertation explores the dynamic engagements and points of interaction that are struck between the inside and outside of both body and nation. Concepts like the indigenous and the foreign, and the native and the immigrant, are analogized when discussing viruses that enter the body, or "national affects" that cross many bodies and nations. The notion of the abject, defined by Julia Kristeva as an aversion to boundary-crossing, becomes a

---

<sup>6</sup> Angela Zito, "Silk and Skin: Significant Boundaries," in *Body, Subject, and Power in China*, ed. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 110.

generative concept in this project, further illuminating the affective dimensions of troubling bodily phenomena.<sup>7</sup>

In the U.S., a Chinese American's ethnicity and racial identity are collapsed under the politicized umbrella identity "Asian American," which further demonstrate the slippages and ambiguity of ethnic and racial terms. Nevertheless, by focusing on representations of the "Chinese" body, this project demonstrates the extent to which "Chinese" identity is reactive, performed, and mediated within a transnational framework. Just as there is no essential nor singular "Chinese-ness," the definition of a "Chinese body" eludes fixity because of multifarious cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversities marking the manifold "Chinese" populations living throughout various geopolitical regions throughout the world. Nevertheless, each case-study in this dissertation will discuss how the "Chinese" (hereafter used without scare-quotes) body performs an ever-fluctuating, unstable idea of Chinese-ness.

In order to account for these kinds of paradigmatic complexities, scholars studying Chinese cinemas have sought new conceptual schemas with which to historicize and contextualize Chinese cinematic production. The study of "transnational Chinese cinemas" was precipitated by the 1997 publication of *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* edited by Sheldon Lu, who argued that Chinese cinemas have always been transnational in nature, because there have always been three Chinese cinemas: that of mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.<sup>8</sup> Chinese diasporic cinemas beyond these three regions may also be considered within the transnational Chinese cinemas category. Since the publication of Lu's anthology, other transnational studies focusing on the interconnectedness and disparities between

---

<sup>7</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

different Chinese territorial cinemas have emerged.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile predominant scholars of Chinese cinemas including Chris Berry, Mary Farquhar, and Yingjin Zhang continue to problematize the “national cinema” framework. Zhang, for instance, strategically uses “the national” to discuss the cultural and historical constructions of Chinese-ness, which he admits presents a kind of conceptual “messiness.”<sup>10</sup> Embracing the messiness as an opportunity to challenge disciplinary boundaries, this project, rather than positing the national and the transnational as two neatly separate conceptual paradigms, demonstrates that “trans/national” frameworks converge in analyses of Chinese body cinemas. Although the forward slash “/” is commonly used to denote “either/or,” this study will use it strategically to suggest “both/and” in order to suggest a more relational contact between the national and the transnational. More simply put, the trans/national considers both national *and* transnational contexts side-by-side, enabling discussions of media, body, and affect circulations in both the national and transnational realms.<sup>11</sup> As this dissertation explores, Chinese bodies in motion provoke feelings of *transnational* cultural belonging even as they challenge and reassert the notion of a discrete *national* entity. By focusing on Chinese bodily representation in Chinese and Western cinemas and media, both trans/national frameworks are simultaneously considered when discussing affective spectatorship. Moreover, by visually separating out the “trans” prefix in

---

<sup>9</sup> See Sheldon Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, eds., *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005); Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Ching-kiu Chan, *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005); Gary G. Xu, *Sinascapes: Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> Another instance of the conceptual use of the “trans/national” is Caren Kaplan’s description of the mystification of desired globalized economic and social process through emphases on national and cultural difference in media and marketing for multinational corporations. See Caren Kaplan, “A World without Boundaries!: The Body Shop's Trans/National Geographics,” *Social Text*, no. 43 (1995).



“trans/national,” I am able to focus on other kinds of *transformative*, *transgressive*, and *transcendent* qualities in Chinese mediated embodiment, for instance to apply Song Hwee Lim’s notion of the “trans-gender” wherein Chinese actresses attempt to “pass” for other nationalities in film.<sup>12</sup> This project further expands upon Lim’s concept by revealing how Chinese actors are also “passing” for Chinese in accordance with guidelines of social performativity and body politics. As such, *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* further expands upon the transnational paradigm by shifting the domain of authorship away from filmmakers and national film production and unto the trans/national bodies that perform ethnic, racial, and national identities through embodiments of sex, health, and beauty.

A critical investigation of the trans/national circulations of Chinese mediated bodies also necessitates a diasporic global framework. Drawing upon the notion of a global “Sinophone,” a term created by Shu-mei Shih to denote Chinese language-speaking communities outside of the PRC, this project considers the ways in which both PRC and Sinophone audiences consume representations of Chinese body cultures vis-à-vis mediated bodily contact with onscreen performers.<sup>13</sup> Internationally-circulated, trans/national films like Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Last Emperor* (1989) and Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* (2003) prominently feature Chinese bodies and comment on Chinese body culture (however distorted or fantastic), thereby creating carnal contact and access to visible, authoring Chinese bodies. Thus, this project considers a diverse array of texts under the rubric of diasporic Chinese and Sinophone cinemas through its critical analysis of the performer’s authorship. As a trans/national ethnic subject (born in China but raised in the U.S. by immigrant parents), I measure my own Chinese-ness against onscreen

---

<sup>12</sup> Song Hwee Lim, "Is the Trans-in Transnational the Trans- in Transgender?," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 5, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>13</sup> Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

Chinese bodies, attempting to make sense of their cultural being-in-the-world while negotiating my own. *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* investigates the diasporic politics of belonging to an imagined cultural identity through the processes of embodied viewing and spectatorship.

Images of Chinese bodies have permeated cultural imaginations in both China and in the West. One of China's most visible bodies of the past century, former leader of the Chinese Communist Party and founder of the PRC (1949-present) Chairman Mao Zedong lays embalmed and monumentalized in a mausoleum in Tiananmen Square in the nation's capital city—his immortalized corpse the bodily equivalent to the ubiquitous “red, bright, and shining” (*hong, guang, liang*) Mao portraiture that reinforced the leader's cult status and omnipresence throughout his rulership, images which still persist in deification today.<sup>14</sup> Whereas this mummified preservation of Mao's body conveys a fallacious narrative about a static and rigid nation-state, this project examines the Chinese body in movement, traveling between and beyond regions, nations, and hemispheres vis-à-vis cinema and media. How do we make sense of the persistence of “Chinese-ness” through bodily performance while understanding the complexity of the trans/national, mobile nature of Chinese identity?

As mentioned above, a trans/national framework enables the critical discussion of a Chinese body that exists not in isolation, but in interaction. Western encounters with Chinese bodies are re-imagined through Western media, producing affective vectors with which to interact with ideas of Chinese embodiment, historically pre-determined by colonial experience. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, images of the pre-modern “Sick Man of East Asia” (*dongya bingfu*) were transmitted in “early medical rhetoric and iconography of medical missionaries” to the West,

---

<sup>14</sup> It is estimated that the number of images produced of Chairman Mao during his lifetime exceeded 2.2 billion, which surpassed three times the population at the time. Joanna Wardęga, "Mao Zedong in Present-Day China: Forms of Deification," *Politikologija Religije* 6, no. 2 (2012).

imparting a bodily image of the Chinese as pathologically ill, as well as providing a rich metaphor for the the “Chinese cultural body nearly beyond repair.”<sup>15</sup> In the U.S., early silent and classical Hollywood cinema refracted these discourses of the Chinese body through polarized representations of the Chinese, from self-sacrificing, innocent Chinese victimized by their own culture (often played by actors in yellowface) to the depictions of depraved and pathological Chinese bodies engaging in cheating, prostitution, and murder.<sup>16</sup> In the past five decades, with the increased visibility of Chinese American actors like Bruce Lee, Nancy Kwan, Joan Chen Lucy Liu, Ming-Na Wen, and B.D. Wong working in Hollywood, the American cinematic and televisual landscape has featured more diverse Chinese bodies. This project discusses how contemporary female stars Chen and Liu in particular are able to negotiate their own mediated racialized representation and provoke un-common senses through their affective embodiments in American film and television. Through an investigation of both contemporary Western and Chinese cinema and media, this study seeks to contextualize present-day mediated fantasies about the Chinese body as a trans/national phenomenon.

Further exploring the complexities and ambiguities of the Chinese body and its cultural signification, this dissertation investigates the constructedness of the Chinese body and of Chinese-ness by exploring the relationships between actor’s body, film body, and social body. These relationships are especially illuminated when considering the representations of “body cultures,” which involve situational contexts that reveal the body as both source and interpreter of cultural meaning. *Trans/national Chinese Bodies Performing Sex, Health, and Beauty in*

---

<sup>15</sup> Ari Larissa Heinrich, *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body Between China and the West* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>16</sup> A few notable examples include *Broken Blossoms* (D.W. Griffith, 1919); *The Toll of the Sea* (Chester M. Franklin, 1922); *Shanghai Express* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932); *Daughter of the Dragon* (Lloyd Corrigan, 1931); *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Charles Brabin, 1932); and *Chinatown After Dark* (Stuart Paton, 1931)

*Cinema and Media* investigates the cinematic imaginings of these three areas of human livelihood, all of which are related to notions of “well being” and “being well.” Through an examination of representations of Chinese bodies, particularly women’s bodies, in films and television programs that narrativize corporeal wellness and dysfunction, this study examines the relationship between “body cultures” and screen cultures. Susan Brownell, who has written on the sporting body in the PRC, offers an instructive definition of “body culture”:

Body culture is a broad term that includes daily practices of health, hygiene, fitness, beauty, dress and decoration, as well as gestures, postures, manners, ways of speaking and eating, and so on. It also includes the way these practices are trained into the body, the way the body is publicly displayed, and the lifestyle that is expressed in that display.

*Body culture reflects the internalization and incorporation of culture. Body culture is embodied culture [emphasis added].*<sup>17</sup>

Sex, health, and beauty are not only daily practices that express lifestyle and culture, they are also displayed and performed for various audiences in public and private spaces as embodied accomplishments. In other words, a sexy, healthy, and beautiful body is the idealized visualization of being well, happy, and successful. Michel Foucault’s concept of “bio-power” and the development of the study of biopolitics refer to the regulation, policing, and disciplining of bodies towards maintaining capitalist and neoliberal systems. Foucault asserts that in fact, capitalism is only possible because of the “controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes.”<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Jan Wright and Valerie Harwood use the term “biopedagogies” to describe systems of

---

<sup>17</sup> Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic*, 10-11.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1. An Introduction*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (New York: Random House, 1978), 141.

control surrounding obesity, and specifically those “normalising and regulating practices in schools [which are] disseminated more widely through the web and other forms of media.”<sup>19</sup>

Although not explicitly pedagogical in nature, films and television programs also normalize and regulate “phenomena of population” like sex, health, and beauty body cultures.

Many are familiar with the classic Hollywood urban myth that claims the sale of men’s undershirts in the United States sharply declined after a bare-chested Clark Gable seduced audiences in *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934). In modern-day China, photos of big-eyed actress Fan Bingbing, popularly considered one of the most beautiful women in China, are frequently used by women seeking cosmetic surgery to enlarge their eyes and slim their chins to look more beautiful.<sup>20</sup> By design, cinema and media deliver beautiful people to us on larger-than-life projections and domestic digital screens with the best vantage points from which to admire their faces and bodies. Actors are powdered to perfection and artificially lit to ostensibly embody the best and most interesting specimens of the human race, and we take great pleasure in our gaze. By giving pleasure, cinema produces desire.

The desire to mimic the glorified images of sex, health, and beauty we see in cinema and media is understood to be so commonsensical that it may seem a banal observation. Indeed three primary conceptualizations of spectatorship have been explored in cinema and media studies: the mimicry/adulation model that is the basis for psychoanalytic film theory (as well as the production of advertising); cult studies which emphasize the spectator’s agency and resistance; and studies of state policy and regulation in relation to spectatorship. The shift to cultural studies,

---

<sup>19</sup> Jan Wright and Valerie Harwood, eds., *Biopolitics and the 'Obesity Epidemic': Governing Bodies*, Routledge Studies in Health and Social Welfare (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Wen Hua, *Buying Beauty: Cosmetic Surgery in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 115; Peter Ford, "My, What Big Eyes You Have: Young Chinese Drive Korea's Plastic Surgery Boom," *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 1 2011.

which emphasizes the spectator's agency, resistance, and negotiation with media representation, is a significant development in the academic humanities that has obviated the development of critical studies of media effects in the film studies field. Nevertheless it is important to understand how beliefs about spectator impressionism have dictated state policy and affected film and media production. In the U.S., Hollywood's Hays Production Code of 1930 enforced a censorship code for nearly four decades based upon assumptions of spectatorship and the deleterious consequences of viewing immoral narratives about sex, violence, and criminality. In China, the establishment of censorship criteria governing film and media production coincided with the establishment of the PRC in 1949 and continues to be in effect today.

For this project, the PRC state censorship of film and media through the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (hereafter SARFT) reveals the state's explicit concern with Chinese bodies. Regulating representations of sex and sexuality, criteria dictates that any Chinese film or television show with the following acts are cut or altered: "obscene and vulgar content, exposing scenes of promiscuity, rape, prostitution, sexual acts, perversion, homosexuality, masturbation and private body parts including the male or female genitalia."<sup>21</sup> Despite these guidelines, however, some contemporary mainland Chinese filmmakers use the actor's body, in conjunction with cinematic techniques, to produce critical interventions into regulated, official Chinese body cultures. Additionally, some filmmakers attempt to move and circulate their films without being seen or screened by SARFT.

For instance, independent Sixth Generation filmmaker Lou Ye's *Summer Palace* (2006) is the most extensive narrative representation depicting the June 4<sup>th</sup> Tiananmen Incident to date, re-presenting the violent suppression of China's 1989 student democracy movement. The film

---

<sup>21</sup> "SARFT Reiterates Film Censor Criteria," Hong Kong Trade Development Council (HKTDC), April 1, 2008, accessed May 21, 2010, <http://info.hktdc.com/alert/cba-e0804c-2.htm>.

was banned in mainland China and the filmmaker banned from making films for five years after exhibiting *Summer Palace* at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival without proper Chinese authorization. Both film and filmmaker were viewed as ideological instruments of corruption by SARFT. Although SARFT's official reason for the ban cited Lou's lack of an international exhibition permit, *Summer Palace* would not have passed censorship guidelines anyway, not only because of its depiction of the June 4<sup>th</sup> Incident (a subject which is strictly forbidden in public media), but also for its full-frontal nudity and graphic sex scenes.

A state official confirmed Lou's transgressive attempts to circumvent the official film approval process. When I interviewed Zhang Jianyong, film deputy director of SARFT, in Beijing, he stated that the 20 or so sex scenes in Lou's film submission to SARFT contained only sound and no image. As a result, Zhang recalls that many on the censorship board felt "*fennu* (indignantly angry)" at what they perceived as Lou's "*mieshi* (contempt)" towards them and a clear intention to "*shuang* (deceive)" the state.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Zhang expressed his opinion that these 20 or so sex scenes were "*taiduole, mei biyao* (excessive and unnecessary)." What is excessive about the pornographic nature of *Summer Palace* extends to both its taboo depictions of sex and to its representation of the June 4<sup>th</sup> Incident, although Zhang did not explicitly make this connection. Violating Chinese censorship criteria, *Summer Palace* "divulges state secrets" and "defames the superiority of national culture" through its depiction of state terror against its own people.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the intimate sightings of the body spectacle inscribed in both the film's sex and politics shows too much skin, so to speak. What is perhaps more radical, however, is that

---

<sup>22</sup> Zhang Jianyong (film deputy director of SARFT), in discussion with the author, November 1, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> "SARFT Reiterates Film Censor Criteria."

*Summer Palace* uses graphic sexual representation to dramatize this politically tumultuous period, subsequently repressed in mainland Chinese media to the present day.

A similar situation with SARFT occurred with Taiwanese-American filmmaker Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* (2007), a film that emerged one year after *Summer Palace* and was also banned by SARFT for mobilizing graphic sexual representation to historically re-member a painful period in Chinese history—in this case, the Second Sino-Japanese War. Because of her sexually explicit role in *Lust, Caution*, actress Tang Wei was banned from working in the mainland for two years. Tang's ban not only motivated her movement across national boundaries and imaginary hemispheres but also informed her subsequent acting choices and roles in overseas productions, demonstrating an overt causation between body politics and bodily performance. The disciplinary measure Tang received from the state to abstain from work in the PRC directly affected the subsequent roles and performances that would define Tang's trans/national (domestic and international) acting career.

While the Chinese state executes the consequences of producing unsanctioned performances of the body, popular media outlets are also invested in generating sanctioned and culturally legible depictions of Chinese body culture and lifestyle. Internationally-celebrated Chinese filmmakers have even been commissioned for the cause. Fifth Generation filmmaker Zhang Yimou, who was once celebrated by the international art-film circuit for his allegorical melodramas critiquing the Chinese state in the 1980's-1990's, offers a salient case-in-point. Banned for films *Judou* (1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), and *To Live* (1994), all which in some fashion or another remark upon the dark and oppressive aspects of Chinese body cultures,



Zhang has since been “rehabilitated” by the Chinese Communist Party government.<sup>24</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, Fifth Generation filmmakers like Zhang, Chen Kaige, and Tian Zhuangzhuang were interested in creating new modes of self-representation in their films, while knowingly appealing to Western audiences. In a sense, they intended to upset the epistemological entitlement of Western anthropologists studying their culture. Self-orientalism thusly manifested in the cinematic search for China’s “own others” and pre-modern “primitive passions,” often enacted within, across, and unto the woman’s body.<sup>25</sup> However, Zhang’s more recent productions of grand spectacles are concerned with flaunting China’s muscular prowess and national health (recall Western spectators’ simultaneous awe and horror at the spectacular conformity of bodies in motion during Zhang’s directorial contribution in the 2008 Olympics Games Opening Ceremony). Once fixated on the brutalized and abject female body enacting and allegorizing national trauma in his earlier banned films, Zhang’s interests turned to the mythical and air-borne bodies that populate his later commercial films *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006). The shift from realistic to transcendental bodies not only reveals Zhang’s own ideological shift through “rehabilitation” but also a greater ideological change in China’s self-imagining, and even self-Orientalizing, as the nation becomes increasingly powerful on the global stage.

---

<sup>24</sup> In addition to the ban on the mainland exhibition of Zhang’s films, Zhang’s rehabilitation involved a five-film “probation,” during which he was prohibited from working with foreign companies. He was also instructed to write a letter of “self-criticism” that was publicized overseas in which Zhang asked “that the great and good would overlook the errors of a humble and insignificant individual like [myself].” Zhang’s punishment evokes Foucault’s notion that the technology of modern punishment has moved away from violence enacted onto body and towards internalized discipline. Vincent Brook, “To Live and Dye in China: The Personal and the Political in Zhang Yimou’s *Judou*,” *CineAction* (2003): 223.

<sup>25</sup> Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

This dissertation discusses the performing body as author, focusing primarily on the representations of Chinese women and women's body cultures in trans/national cinema and media because cultural standards of sex, health, and beauty inscribe themselves most legibly on women's bodies. Moreover, there is a dominant cinematic tradition of using Chinese women's bodies to allegorize historical and national trauma, as Rey Chow points out: "Women are here the prototype of 'the primitive' in all the ambiguities of that word—they are the bearers of the *barbaric* nature of a patriarchal system that has outlived its time and place; their abuse is a sign of China's *backwardness*; through them we come to understand the *fundamental* horrors about a culture" [original emphases].<sup>26</sup> Although Chow's analyses of Fifth Generation Chinese films still apply to contemporary Chinese cinemas, including Sixth Generation films like the aforementioned *Summer Palace* (2006), women's bodies also bear the fantasies, hopes, and dreams of Chinese people.

Indeed as this project demonstrates, images of beautiful Chinese women's bodies carry symbolic and ideological connotations, demonstrating China's participation in cultural globalization. The changing discourses and beauty valuation of skin, breasts, feet, and eyes reveal the cultural and social signification of specific aspects of the Chinese female body. By contextualizing the evolution of Chinese beauty standards within geopolitical processes, larger trans/national and global cultural flows, *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* examines the cultural consumption of female film stardom in the PRC as it relates to trans/national beauty politics and screen cultures. Iris Marion Young conceived of the feminine as "a set of normatively disciplined expectations imposed on female bodies by male-dominated society" and elaborates upon the ways in which feminine discipline seeks to "mask or subordinate the raw facts of

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 146.

embodiment” (i.e. manipulating the body for beauty).<sup>27</sup> Young examined Western women’s lived body experience, while this study examines cultural dimensions of Chinese women’s embodied state of being-in-the-world.

Ideals about sex, health, and beauty are interwoven and mutually-reinforcing, and discourses about virtue and morality surround issues of sex, health, and beauty. Moreover, as they provoke mimetic engagement, these embodied images of “well-being” become mediated conditions through which to imagine progress and modernity, as well as re-member lived accounts of historical events. As such, they become rich sites (and sights) of body politics that inherently prescribe conditions of “being well.” Thus this dissertation examines how representations of sex, health, and beauty are *mediated by* social, cultural, and political belief systems; and analyzes cinematic cultures to understand how such cine/televisual depictions of the body also, in turn, *mediate* gender, cultural, racial and ethnic identification across national boundaries.

Images of trans/national Chinese bodies are regulatory and prescriptive, disciplining bodies through the visual manufacture of desire. Endeavors to comprehend how the Chinese body in the PRC and in other global contexts signifies meaning in visual culture illuminate how the Chinese body is not a monolithic or essential entity, but rather a social fabrication of mediation, interaction, and consumption. The following section explains the dissertation’s primary conceptual interventions in four academic literatures: transnational media, contemporary Chinese cinemas, body studies, and performance studies.

---

<sup>27</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 5.

## Transnational Media

The study of transnational media situates local cultural productions within broader contexts, while considering the political, economic, and social implications of media and producers that literally and figuratively travel beyond the framework of the nation-state. Three predominant approaches within this field of study include: evaluations of political economies that shape transnational industries; conceptualizations of transnational aesthetics; and investigations into the cultural consumption of transnational media. This project is concerned with the second and third approach in its focus on how Chinese-ness is constituted through a mediated aesthetics of behavior, appearance, and gesture, and how global Chinese audiences consume these images. The feminist study of “carnal aesthetics,” which emphasizes the “cultural formation of the senses” appends studies of aesthetics and cultural consumption.<sup>28</sup> Making use of the multiple implications of the word “consumption,” a “term suggesting both consumerism and sensorial experience,” *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* investigates various economies within trans/national carnal spectatorship in an attempt to answer the questions: What are the aesthetics of the mediated body, and what are the aesthetic experiences provoked by the Chinese body?<sup>29</sup>

Aesthetic experiences involve affective and sensorial engagement. Expanding upon Hamid Naficy’s notion of a transnational “accented cinema” created by displaced filmmakers, this project interrogates the ways in which a body can be *accented*.<sup>30</sup> The Chinese concept of *weidao*, for instance, which roughly translates to “flavorful embodiment” or “embodied style” can be used to describe the embodiment of Chinese film actresses. For instance, as the first

---

<sup>28</sup> Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka, *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics* (London: IB Tauris, 2012), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Mila Zuo, "Sensing 'Performance Anxiety': Zhang Ziyi, Tang Wei, and Female Film Stardom in the People's Republic of China," *Celebrity Studies*, ahead-of-print (2015): 3.

<sup>30</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

female Chinese star in the post-Mao period, Gong Li's *weidao* is accented to the extent that her particular embodiment lends itself to playing earthy, peasant women, as seen in the many celebrated Fifth Generation films in which she stars. Conversely, the lack of *weidao*, as with actress Zhang Ziyi's perceived cultural odorlessness, produces negative spectatorial perception vis-à-vis affect and sensation. This project considers the ways in which common *sense*, a communal belief system, involves the sensorium. Moreover, in line with the study of "carnal aesthetics," this project understands the aesthetic experience to include "perception, sensibility or sensation," all of which are intimately inextricable from affect and emotion.<sup>31</sup>

Theorization about the cultural consumption of transnational media hinges on the concept of imagination, which *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* explores within the Chinese diasporic context. Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* defines a "plurality of imagined worlds" through which individuals and groups imagine themselves into the global network.<sup>32</sup> However, Appadurai's optimism in the transformative "postnational" possibility of everyday subjectivities does not leave enough room for a consideration of the minor, nor to the "politics of location" that reveal that modernity is still far from being a universal experience.<sup>33</sup> Scholars writing on transnational Chinese and Sinophone cultures have attempted to redress this issue. Shih's study on "Sinophone articulations" recognizes that the implicit utopianism of the "trans" prefix in transmedia studies to transverse national boundaries has its limitations, and Aihwa Ong's application of James Clifford's term "discrepant

---

<sup>31</sup> Papeburg and Zarzycka, *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> The term "politics of location" appears in studies of transnational feminism, such as the essays collected in Ella Shohat ed., *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001). This idea is concerned with recognizing there are multiple oppressions and resistances taking place within the Third World, and that liberation, as well as global movements of capital impact men and women in different ways.

cosmopolitanisms” identifies the class disparities made prominent in migration and travel.<sup>34</sup> In recognition of these concerns, this project demonstrates that mediated representations of dissonant Chinese modernities are unevenly embodied and perceived. The PRC’s own Others—for instance, their rural inhabitants whose *qizhi* (disposition) is inextricable from social judgments about their *suzhi* (personal quality)—demonstrate how regional and class disparities are marked by embodied difference. This trans/national study investigates how difference is marked unto Chinese bodies in cinema and media, particularly through two interrelated processes I refer to as “abject-ification” and “object-ification” in which Chinese bodies perform liminality through abject boundary-crossing and becoming less-than-human. By mobilizing a trans/national framework that considers both the national and transnational, notions of inside and outside become problematized through the representations of embodied Chinese-ness.

### Contemporary Chinese Cinemas

The scholarship of contemporary Chinese cinemas most relevant to this dissertation can be parsed into two analytical approaches: socio-political allegory and representational politics. The allegorical analyses in this study center on the performing body as the manifestation of film’s geopolitical unconscious in terms of the politics of daily life vis-à-vis body culture. By examining the bodily gestures and movements engaged in sex, health, and beauty representation, this study seeks a critical understanding of the ways in which the Chinese body undergoes both cultural and cinematic discipline. Earlier socio-political analyses of Chinese cinemas, including the 1996 edited anthology *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, are influenced by the work of cultural critic Fredric Jameson, who has written on film texts as political fantasies

---

<sup>34</sup> Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*; Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

which articulate “both the actual and potential social relations which constitute individuals within a specified political economy.”<sup>35</sup> Acknowledging the polemical nature of representation studies, Jameson orients the discussion to issues of “representability [sic],” which uses allegory to “function as a figurative machinery in which questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall.”<sup>36</sup> *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* locates these questions about power through the corpo-*realization* of bodily desire, pleasure, and pain through fantasies of sex, health, and beauty.

This project looks at film form and body politics as embodied interruptions and/or assertions of pre-socialist, socialist, and post-socialist ideologies. Because of the long and complicated history of Chinese body politics, this study necessarily engages with the production of bodily cultures from the dynastic era to the present. Although the object of study is Chinese and American cinema and media in the post-Mao contemporary era (1976-present), the broader epistemological timeline informing this study spans hundreds (and even thousands) of years in order to give a fuller account of how the Chinese body has undergone social transformation, as these radical changes impact the modern and contemporary formations of the Chinese body we see today.

Chinese film scholars have noted that women in Fifth Generation films (1980s-1990s) are often used as metonym for the suffering body politic as a result of the PRC’s disastrous national experiments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for instance the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). National trauma is allegorically performed through the

---

<sup>35</sup> Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Esther Yau ed., *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), xi.

<sup>36</sup> *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, 5.

simulated brutalization of women's bodies, simultaneously evoking sympathy and eroticizing the sensational pain we see onscreen. In China's post-WTO cultural landscape, women's bodies are also used to allegorize contemporary social problems that result from China's rapid economic and industrial development. To truly appreciate the human costs of China's 21<sup>st</sup> century modernization, however, one must see its effects on the human body. The intersubjectivity between onscreen body and spectator body sutures the sense of concern and urgency about Chinese modernization. As editor Zhen Zhang of the 2007 anthology, *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* contends, Chinese films constitute an intersubjective space where humanist concerns about the effects of Chinese urbanization are induced through the spectator's phenomenological experience of the films' hyperrealistic portrayals of everyday life.<sup>37</sup>

How do Chinese people understand their own histories and identities through their imaginative interaction with onscreen Chinese bodies? This project is interested in a kind of identity politics that looks at representation and spectatorship in a trans/national context. In terms of representational analysis, the work of Rey Chow is a significant influence on this dissertation because of her critical attention to issues of gender, sexuality, and affective dimensions of Chinese cinemas. Chow's notion of female bodies as the focal object of the ethnographic gaze, as well as the filmmakers' and Chinese audiences' self-gazing, is an idea that this study further explores. Writing in the mid-1990s, Chow's concept of "primitive passions" describes the

---

<sup>37</sup> For instance, Zhen Zhang argues that the dictates of low-budget filmmaking and *xianchang* (on-location shooting) allows for the "conventional boundaries that separate documentary and fiction, video and celluloid film, and professional and amateur practice [to be] challenged and transgressed" (p. 19). Moreover, as Zhang argues, such quasi-documentary methods lays bare the "oscillation between representation and actuality" (p. 18). Zhen Zhang, ed. *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).



cinematic manifestations of Chinese self-obsessive autoethnography as attempts to address the nation's position between First World imperialism and Third World nationalism, as well as its own anxieties towards modernization.<sup>38</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, after China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, "primitive passions" also become "civilized passions" insofar as ideals of becoming a civilized, First World nation drives the embodied performances in commercial productions of Chinese-ness. By examining the embodied representations of "civilization," *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* investigates how the ideal Chinese body is presented, stylized, and narrativized in cinema and media.

The reciprocal relationship between author and the spectator is grounded in fascination and desire, which therein produces cinematic meaning. This idea informs the exploration of desirous bodies performing sex, health, and beauty in cinema and media, and this project is particularly interested in the pleasures and displeasures provoked by the Chinese female performing body as author. Also building upon the work of Shuqin Cui's *Women through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema*, which seeks to understand how the gendered category of woman participates in the cinematic representation of the nation, this project adapts the perspective of transnational feminism outlined by Gayatri Spivak who wrote that, "the task of transnational feminist cultural studies is to negotiate between the national, the global, and the historical as well as the contemporary diasporic."<sup>39</sup> Through a negotiation between the various considerations of trans/nationalism, *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* proposes that images of Chinese women's bodies participate in worldly constructions of "Chinese-ness."

### Body Studies

---

<sup>38</sup> Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*.

<sup>39</sup> Shuqin Cui, *Women through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2003); Spivak qtd. in *ibid.*, xx.

Within the humanities, “Body Studies” is composed of multiple fields including phenomenology, affect, embodiment, and kinesthetic studies. *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* is in dialogue with these academic fields, as all are interested in the lived body as both source and interpreter of social, cultural, and political meaning. To date, these theoretical frameworks have not been utilized in any extensive manner to analyze contemporary Chinese cinema; however, it is precisely through a corporeal engagement with these films that a political affectivity and an affective politics are invoked. In other words, the performances within the films articulate a political discourse that is not spoken, but rather, embodied. The methodological application of body studies in cinema and media studies relies on the scholar to make sense of her corporeal experience of audio-visual media, in order to understand how moving images and sounds move, touch, and affect spectators. *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* adapts the notion of “mediated body contact” through the implications of “touching” to make sense of the intersubjective connection between onscreen and spectator bodies.

While phenomenology examines the experiences of the lived body towards a construction of subjective consciousness, embodiment and kinesthetic studies provide useful theoretical models towards understanding gendered corporeality and cultural embodiment. Although there is no such thing as an *essential* Chinese or Western body, the idea of Chinese-ness endures through repetitive performance. Because the bodily iterations of Chinese gender and cultural embodiment differ from those of the West, social, cultural, and historical contextualization necessarily inform the analyses in this study, enabling deeper understandings of Chinese cinematic embodiment and spectatorship.

This project is interested in understanding corporeal knowledge as a way to present the self to itself, and how subjective consciousness is shaped by the body’s interaction with the

material world. While existential phenomenology seeks to understand the transformative yet irreducible nature of “being-in-the-world,” this project strives to understand the phenomenal experiences of ‘being-in-the-*film*-world’ or inhabiting a secondary body through “character.” Film scholars like Vivian Sobchack, Linda Williams, Laura Marks, and Jennifer M. Barker analyze spectatorial sensory experience and interaction with film. Similar inquiries can be posed to engage with the phenomenology of performance. In other words, what does it take to *become* a body on film? How exactly do filmmakers direct and manipulate actor bodies? What kinds of physical training animate the cinematic bodies we see?

In addition to investigating the representational politics animating trans/national Chinese bodies, this project is also engaged with the actor’s offscreen, or star body, and the ways in which it ruptures or enhances the film text. However, it becomes necessary to use a new conceptual framework and vocabulary in order to account for an actor’s multiple bodies. Sobchack’s essay, “Being on the Screen: A Phenomenology of Cinematic Flesh, or the Actor’s Four Bodies,” is the first to posit a phenomenological schematic of acting.<sup>40</sup> In the essay, Sobchack accounts for the visible surplus of the onscreen body by positing that the actor is seen as being and having as many as four bodies, and it is the active play of differences between these bodies that creates what Jean-Louis Comolli has called “the bodily supplement,” a conflation of an actor’s onscreen character with his offscreen persona which invariably “disturb[s] the spectator’s look.”<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, Sobchack’s articulation of a “semiotic phenomenology” lays the groundwork for a phenomenological understanding of acting, and her theoretical work in

---

<sup>40</sup> Vivian Sobchack, “Being on the Screen: A Phenomenology of Cinematic Flesh, or the Actor’s Four Bodies,” in *Acting and Performance in Moving Image Culture: Bodies, Screens, Renderings*, ed. Jörg Sternagel, Deborah Levitt, and Dieter Mersch (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2014).

<sup>41</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*, 429.

deciphering the actor's four bodies (the prepersonal, the personal, the impersonated, and the personified) inform this project's discussions of the multiple intersections and collusions between bodily performance and in the actor's on- and off-screen movements and posturing. By understanding the relations between biology, self-consciousness, performance, and star presence, we better understand the valuation of acting and ultimately the "intersubjective social collectivity that, from the first, makes actors—and audiences—of us all."<sup>42</sup> Moreover, China's strict media censorship renders acting into a *political* act, illuminating the ways in which the actor's body undergoes both cinematic *and* political regulation and discipline.

How do Chinese body cinemas affect the spectator? The pleasures of contemporary Chinese cinema are arrested insofar as they are often tempered by sensational representations of pain and displeasure. One such arrested pleasure—representations of sex—constitute a sight that simultaneously provokes the ire of the Chinese state and attracts domestic and international appeal. As Marks has written, spectatorship is "an act of sensory translation of cultural knowledge."<sup>43</sup> In order to consider how sexual representation affects spectators, it is important to understand how spectators make sense of cinematic depictions of sex via sensorial and affective engagement, based in cultural knowledge. For instance, the discourses of outrage and shame that arose from viewings of *Lust, Caution* (Ang Lee, 2007), demonstrate how critics specifically focused on the film's graphic sex scenes in order to express their disapproval of the film's historiography, especially its representation of China's colonization through the sexual conquest of the film's female character. While Linda Williams' work examines how the spectator body *feels* and what it *does* when she screens sex, this project further develops the notion that the

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 443.

<sup>43</sup> Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 153.

body produces carnal knowledge and sensations leading to “mimetic play” by understanding how political *sense* and foreplay can also be constructed through the mimetic bodily engagement with representations of sex.<sup>44</sup>

As the case-studies in this dissertation demonstrate, two prominent affects emerge in encounters with contemporary Chinese body cinemas: anxiety and shame. By exploring specific Chinese dimensions of shame, premised on Confucianist frameworks of collectivist social behavior, this project situates critical receptions of films in specific cultural contexts. In the West, studies of shame are grounded in ideas about Freudian drives and other psychoanalytic concepts. In their 1995 volume on psychoanalyst Silvan Tomkins’ work, for instance, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank define shame as “the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation,” and contend that shame and humiliation are one and the same affect.<sup>45</sup> Sedgwick and Frank also define guilt as a distinct form of shame insofar as it is more concerned with “moral matters” and is a shame that “has also been internalized.”<sup>46</sup> In more recent years, affect studies pioneered by scholars like Brian Massumi, Sara Ahmed, Elspeth Probyn, Lauren Berlant, Patricia T. Clough, and Kathleen Stewart are increasingly concerned with the ontology of affects, revolving around questions of what they are and how they are.<sup>47</sup> However, whereas *shame* is often believed to be a negative or harmful affect in Western contexts, in the Chinese context, it is regarded as a healthy and moral affect. Thus, throughout this project, discussions of the anxiety and shame, which orbit Chinese films and bodies, are

---

<sup>44</sup> Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>45</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 133.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>47</sup> For a good overview of contemporary affect studies and selections from each of these authors, see Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

analyzed in terms of understanding affects as distinct social and cultural formations—especially as they cluster around the female body.

Chinese woman's cinematic body may bear the traces of China's barbarism, backwardness, and fundamental cultural horrors — however, the affective excess of “woman” represented also produces an erotic charge premised on shifting subject-object identifications between spectator and onscreen bodies. By examining these shifting identifications, *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* critically analyzes the cultural “performance anxiety” expressed towards representations of sexuality, health, and beauty.

In consideration of such films' provocative displeasure, this study draws upon affect studies that theorize film's emotional effect in conjunction with its sensory effect on the spectator. Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* interrogates the complex, often ironic political engagements provoked by the lesser passions of “aesthetic emotions” like envy, irritation, anxiety, paranoia, and disgust.<sup>48</sup> Forms of “ugly affectivity” such as anxiety, shame, and guilt are the affective by-products with mediated encounters with trans/national Chinese body cinemas. In films centering on body cultures, squeamish-ness surrounding certain kinds of body performance reveal the threshold of social decency and comfort.

Chinese embodiment is a dynamic, ever-changing process, even as cinematic embodiment is apparently fixed and immortalized. China's own knowledge production of the body stems from a longstanding Chinese traditional idea of mind-body holism, a concept further explored in this project's investigation into health and beauty representations. In recent traditions of Western feminist theory, Deleuzian feminists like Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti also aim to implode the binary of mind and body in theorizing subjectivity. Grosz, for instance, is

---

<sup>48</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

concerned with the corporeality of the body to explore the multiple facets of sexuality as desire, activity, identity, and gender.<sup>49</sup> Drawing on notions of sexual difference, she provides a challenging ethical reconceptualization of the material body as always “becoming.” With its focus on Chinese women’s bodies, this project also explores the ways in which “becoming-woman” and “becoming-Chinese” intersect through sexual representation, provoking “performance anxiety” both within the film text and within a culture of consumption.

In regards to examining the body in motion, the intersection of embodiment studies and kinesthetic studies enables a further exploration into the specific bodily themes of this dissertation. Carrie Noland and Iris Marion Young study the ways in which kinesthetic movements of the body perform culture and gender, providing productive examples of how to interpret gesture and movement as text. In *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*, Noland investigates how bodies are acculturated entities and explains that corporeality both expresses and resists cultural conditionings through kinesthetic experiences.<sup>50</sup> By drawing upon an array of scholarship from the social science and science fields, Noland seeks to understand conformity and resistance through bodily gestures. Historicizing the genealogy of phenomenological theories as well as embodiment itself as historical condition, Noland ultimately theorizes an agency of the body through performative gesture. I echo Noland’s optimistic tone when she asks, “How does embodying socialized gestures produce an experience of movement—its texture and velocity—that ends up altering the routine, the body that performs the routine, and eventually, perhaps, culture itself?”<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>50</sup> Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Trans/national Chinese performing bodies produce a visible cultural Chinese-ness, influencing and affecting spectatorial bodies to feel, act, and behave in distinct ways. As the conclusion of *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* reveals, new pedagogies of corporeal performance within the Chinese performance institution seek to alter “the routine, the body that performs the routine, and eventually....culture itself.”<sup>52</sup>

### Performance Studies

Finally, *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* is in dialogue with performance studies, and specifically the growing field of cinematic acting studies (as opposed to theater acting and dance studies). Not only is performance an embodied ideology, it is also an epistemology, as it offers a way of knowing about the performance of daily life through social roles. As Diana Taylor writes, performance betrays a “truer truth.”<sup>53</sup> Cinematic performance, then, can be read as a conglomeration of multi-layered epistemologies concerning social roles, as the actor’s corporeality consists of multiple, simultaneous, and competing embodied ideologies. James Naremore, who combines phenomenological description with analyses of cinematic behavior, gesture, and movement, writes that, “the very technique of film acting has ideological importance. After all, one purpose of ideology (as defined by most contemporary theory), is to seem the most natural thing in the world, understandable only in terms of common sense.”<sup>54</sup> Ideology is cloaked in common sense, and body politics in small movement and gesture

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>54</sup> James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 1.



illuminate the ideologies and belief systems from which actors and audiences unknowingly act, perform, and behave.<sup>55</sup>

This study contributes to the growth of scholarship about Chinese performance by closely analyzing the on- and off-screen performances of well-known trans/national Chinese actors like Gong Li, Zhang Ziyi, Lucy Liu, Joan Chen, and Tang Wei in addition to national actors and celebrities in the PRC like Ni Ping and Pu Cunxin who are lesser known in the West. In recent years, more attention has been paid to Chinese and Chinese American film actors and actresses in the cinema and media studies field. For instance, Yiman Wang's work on Anna May Wong as a border-crossing star, for instance, interrogates Wong's "yellow yellowface performances" in classical Hollywood, while Sabrina Qiong Yu and Tony Williams respectively evaluate the transnational stardoms of Jet Li and Maggie Cheung.<sup>56</sup> Asian American studies and media scholars like Celine Parreñas Shimizu and Peter X. Feng recuperate the creative labor of Chinese American actors and actresses like Lucy Liu and Nancy Kwan who have been charged with playing stereotypical and racist Hollywood roles by Asian American audiences.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile

---

<sup>55</sup> The three codes Naremore defines that I find most useful to my project are:

1. A set of rhetorical conventions, controlling the ostensiveness [sic] of their players, their relative positions within the performing space, and their mode of address to the audience.
2. A series of expressive techniques governing such matters as postures, gesture, and voice, and *regulating the entire body as an index of gender, age, ethnicity, and social class* [emphasis added].
3. A logic of coherence, enabling the players to seem more or less in step with changes in the story, more or less in character, and more or less true to themselves,' Ibid., 5.

<sup>56</sup> Yiman Wang, "The Art of Screen Passing: Anna May Wong's Yellow Yellowface Performance in the Art Deco Era," *Camera Obscura*-60 20, no. 3 (2005); "Anna May Wong: A Border-Crossing 'Minor' star Mediating Performance," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 2, no. 2 (2008); Sabrina Yu, *Jet Li: Chinese Masculinity and Transnational Film Stardom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Tony Williams, "Transnational Stardom: The Case of Maggie Cheung Man-Yuk," *Asian Cinema* 14, no. 2 (2003).

<sup>57</sup> Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007). Peter X Feng, "Recuperating

edited anthologies such as Mary Farquhar and Yingjin Zhang's *Chinese Film Stars* and Louise Edwards and Elaine Jeffrey's *Celebrity in China* demonstrate the growing interest in Chinese star and celebrity bodies.<sup>58</sup> The contribution of this work is the contextualization of stardom and performance in larger cultures of consumption and within histories and discourses of Chinese body culture.

Chapter breakdown:

Chapter One entitled, “*Lust, Caution*, and Shame: The Erotics and Affects of Cinematic War,” examines how mediated bodies performing sex articulate the uncertain state of a nation under occupation. Cinematic re-presentations of the Second Sino-Japanese War in the films *Lust, Caution* (Ang Lee, 2007) and *The Flowers of War* (Zhang Yimou, 2011) feature controversial sexual performances and spectacularize the female body and her (hetero)sexuality in order to mobilize a politics of recognition toward the un-representable traumas of the Nanjing Massacre. I employ textual and discursive analysis with particular attention to historical context, in order to analyze the film's reception within China and the Sinophone. Focusing specifically on the cultural politics of “shame,” the dominant trans/national structure of feeling that emerged within discourses surrounding the film, I analyze the uneven and impassioned criticisms launched at *Lust Caution*'s leading actress, Tang Wei. This chapter illuminates the ways in which modern “Chinese-ness” is defined in part by triggering reactivity to China's recent histories of trauma.

Chapter Two, “Uncivilized Displays: Hygienic Bodies and *Suzhi* (personal quality)” and Chapter Three, “Blood, Bodies and Love: The ‘Touching’ Politics of HIV/AIDS Media”

---

Suzie Wong: A Fan's Nancy Kwan-Dary," in *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*, ed. Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).

<sup>58</sup> Mary Ann Farquhar and Yingjin Zhang, eds., *Chinese Film Stars* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Louise Edwards and Elaine Jeffreys, *Celebrity in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).

investigates how healthy bodies are the capital upon which national *suzhi* (quality) is judged, specifically examining how modern-day ideologies of health surrounding hygiene and HIV/AIDS in China are perpetuated in film and visual culture. After providing a historical contextualization of the cultural formation of contemporary ideas of hygiene, I analyze how a television program and a “main-melody” film draw on ideals of hygiene to envision Chinese modernity. Moreover, close analyses reveal the underlying classist undertones of health ideology. In Chapter Three, I turn to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in China and analyze the state’s recent media efforts in de-stigmatizing this illness. China’s first commercial film about HIV/AIDS, as well as several documentary and new media projects about people living with HIV/AIDS reveal how the aesthetics of compassion and sentimental storytelling are deployed to encourage sympathy and understanding, even as such mechanisms rely on rendering the rural, impoverished body abject.

Chapter Four, “Chinese Star Bodies and a Trans/national Politics of Beauty” and Chapter Five, “Chinese American Actresses and the Uncommon Senses of Beauty,” examine the historical, biopolitical, and neoliberal dictates of “beauty” as a social construct to better understand how beauty politics function as a fundamental aspect of the politics of belonging in the Sinophone world. Through analyses of culturally significant films and investigations of female film star consumption surrounding two of China’s most visible star bodies (Gong Li and Zhang Ziyi), Chapter Four reveals the intersection of affective-sensorial and politico-cultural dimensions of contemporary Chinese star-gazing and celebrity beauty politics. In Chapter Five, I focus on Chinese American actresses, Joan Chen and Lucy Liu, to understand how their embodied, often exotic-erotic representations in American film and television programs provide enigmatic and fluid identification points for spectators. In this chapter, I explore the notion of

“common sense” through sensorium and affect, and contextualize public criticisms and praise of both actresses within ideologies of sense. Throughout Chapters Four and Five, I analyze the bodily dimensions of spectatorial interaction with film stars via sensorial faculty, affect, and phenomenological engagement.

### Methodology and Summary

Throughout the past half-century, we have witnessed the radical transformation of the Chinese body, from the militarized, gender-neutral bodies of the Cultural Revolution to the cosmopolitan, highly-gendered bodies today. As practices of social livelihood, the performances of sex, health, and beauty accompany fantasies of history and modernity. As bodily practices and behavior in these quotidian arenas reflect the internalization of culture and the politics of identity construction, this dissertation is invested in how the pleasures of cinema relate to the politics of the body, and how in turn, the pleasures of the body relate to the politics of cinema.

*Trans/national Chinese Bodies Performing Sex, Health, and Beauty in Cinema and Media* is an investigation into the intimate connections between Chinese body cultures and trans/national screen cultures.

This study draws upon diverse theoretical and methodological approaches, including those from phenomenology and affect, performance, feminist studies, and ethnography and anthropology in order to track circulations of bodies and media in global cultures of consumption. Textual and discourse analysis enable discussions of the structures of feeling that emerge in and through narratives of corporeal well-being and un-wellness. In addition to analyzing trans/national art-house films, this project also explores post-socialist Chinese representations in independent narrative cinema, “main-melody” commercial films, documentaries, television programs, and online media. Aiming to understand how “Chinese-

ness” as a global “intimate public sphere” becomes accessible through the expressive embodiment of trans/national Chinese actors, this work focuses on issues of embodiment and representation in media in order to approach larger epistemological questions about the sense- and meaning-making of bodies within the productions of “Chinese-ness” in visual culture. As this dissertation on body screen cultures reveals, contemporary Chinese identity remains in flux. Nevertheless, trans/national representations of Chinese bodies in cinema and media, through the performances of body culture, provoke powerful feelings of belonging, as the gestures, movements, and aesthetic appearances of Chinese actors prescribe and narrativize corporeal well-being.

Introduction Bibliography:

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Brook, Vincent. "To Live and Dye in China: The Personal and the Political in Zhang Yimou's *Judou*." *CineAction* (2003): 21.
- Browne, Nick, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Esther Yau. *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Brownell, Susan. *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Chow, Rey. *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- Cui, Shuqin. *Women through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2003.
- Edwards, Louise, and Elaine Jeffreys. *Celebrity in China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010.
- Farquhar, Mary Ann, and Yingjin Zhang, eds. *Chinese Film Stars*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Feng, Peter X. "Recuperating Suzie Wong: A Fan's Nancy Kwan-Dary." In *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*, edited by Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu, 40-56. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Ford, Peter. "My, What Big Eyes You Have: Young Chinese Drive Korea's Plastic Surgery Boom." *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 1, 2011.
- Gregg, Melissa and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1. An Introduction*. Translated by Alan Sheridan-Smith. New York: Random House, 1978.
- Grosz, Elizabeth A. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994.

- Heinrich, Ari Larissa. *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body Between China and the West*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Hua, Wen. *Buying Beauty: Cosmetic Surgery in China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Kaplan, Caren. "'A World without Boundaries': The Body Shop's Trans/National Geographics." *Social Text*, no. 43 (1995): 45-66.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Lim, Song Hwee. "Is the Trans-in Transnational the Trans- in Transgender?" *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 5, no. 1 (2007): 39-52.
- Lu, Sheldon Hsiao-peng. *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997.
- Lu, Sheldon, and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, eds. *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005.
- Marks, Laura U. *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Morris, Meaghan, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Ching-kiu Chan. *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005.
- Naficy, Hamid. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Naremore, James. *Acting in the Cinema*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Noland, Carrie. *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Ong, Aihwa. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Papenburg, Bettina, and Marta Zarzycka. *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*. London: IB Tauris, 2012.

- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank. *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Shih, Shu-mei. *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007.
- Shimizu, Celine Parreñas. *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Shohat, Ella. *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.
- Sobchack, Vivian. "Being on the Screen: A Phenomenology of Cinematic Flesh, or the Actor's Four Bodies." In *Acting and Performance in Moving Image Culture: Bodies, Screens, Renderings*, edited by Jörg Sternagel, Deborah Levitt and Dieter Mersch, 429-46. Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2014.
- Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Wang, Yiman. "Anna May Wong: A Border-Crossing 'Minor' Star Mediating Performance." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 2, no. 2 (2008): 91-102.
- . "The Art of Screen Passing: Anna May Wong's Yellow Yellowface Performance in the Art Deco Era." *Camera Obscura*-60 20, no. 3 (2005): 159-91.
- Wardęga, Joanna. "Mao Zedong in Present-Day China: Forms of Deification." *Politikologija religije* 6, no. 2 (2012): 181-97.
- Williams, Linda. *Screening Sex*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Williams, Tony. "Transnational Stardom: The Case of Maggie Cheung Man-Yuk." *Asian Cinema* 14, no. 2 (2003): 180-96.
- Wright, Jan, and Valerie Harwood, eds. *Biopolitics and the 'Obesity Epidemic': Governing Bodies*, Routledge Studies in Health and Social Welfare. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Xu, Gary G. *Sinascape: Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006.
- Young, Iris Marion. *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Yu, Sabrina. *Jet Li: Chinese Masculinity and Transnational Film Stardom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.



- Zhang, Jianyong (film deputy director of SARFT). In discussion with the author, November 1, 2012.
- Zhang, Yingjin. *Chinese National Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Zhang, Zhen, ed. *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Zito, Angela. "Silk and Skin: Significant Boundaries." In *Body, Subject, and Power in China*, edited by Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow, 103-30. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Zito, Angela, and Tani E Barlow. *Body, Subject, and Power in China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Zuo, Mila. "Sensing 'Performance Anxiety': Zhang Ziyi, Tang Wei, and Female Film Stardom in the People's Republic of China." *Celebrity Studies*, no. ahead-of-print (2015): 1-19.

CHAPTER ONE:

***Lust, Caution, and Shame: The Erotics and Affects of Cinematic War***

“[The sex scenes in ‘Lust, Caution’ are] like the fight sequences in ‘Crouching Tiger.’ It’s life and death. It’s where they really show their character. And it’s part of the plot, since it’s all about acting, levels of acting. You’re performing when you have sex.”  
-Ang Lee<sup>59</sup>

“We have an image of the bear as an animal *to be feared*, as an image that is shaped by cultural histories and memories. When we encounter the bear, we already have an impression of the risks of the encounter, as an impression that is felt on the surface of the skin.”  
-Sara Ahmed<sup>60</sup>

China’s official submission for the 2012 Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film was Zhang Yimou’s *The Flowers of War* (2011) about the self-sacrifices of Nanjing prostitutes who offer themselves as “comfort women” to the Japanese Imperial Army, in place of virginal convent students. With a reported budget equivalent to nearly \$100 million, the film, shot on-location in Nanjing, China, was allegedly the most expensive Chinese film production to date ever undertaken by a mainland Chinese filmmaker. Adapted from the novel, *13 Flowers of Nanjing*, written by Chinese female writer Geling Yan and inspired by American missionary Wilhemina (Winnie) Vautrin’s diary, *The Flowers of War* addresses the Nanjing Massacre of 1937, the most brutal and violent 8-day episode (many regard it as a genocide with an estimated 300,000 killed) during the six-week Japanese capture of Nanjing during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Unlike other contemporaneous Chinese narrative films that represent the Nanjing Massacre, most notably Lu Chuan’s critically-acclaimed *City of Life and Death* (*Nanjing! Nanjing!*) (2009), Deng Jianguo’s *Qixia Temple 1937* (2004), and Wu Ziniu’s *Don’t*

---

<sup>59</sup> Lee qtd. in Dennis Lim, "Love as an Illusion: Beautiful to See, Impossible to Hold," *The New York Times*, August 26, 2007.

<sup>60</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 7.

*Cry, Nanking* (1995), *The Flowers of War* is uninterested in historical realism. In his film review, Brian Hu observes that, “with its jangled, circus-like take on ethics and realism, [*The Flowers of War*] completely rethinks the terms of the Nanjing Massacre narrative. In fact, by so indulging in artifice, the film comes closest to the kind of experimental representation an unrepresent[able] trauma like Nanjing deserves.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, full of provocative colors and sensual depictions of prostitutes, *The Flowers of War* is as sexual as it is violent, as erotic as it is melodramatic—thereby visually rendering what is, for the Chinese, arguably the most traumatic event in the past century into a highly-stylized visual arousal from beginning to end. What is interesting and ironic about the film’s approach in representing an unrepresentable trauma like Nanjing, and moreover in garnering sympathy for its victims, is that the historical truth of *sexual crime* (the systematic rape and forced sexual slavery of Chinese women by the Japanese Imperial Army) undergoes sublimation vis-à-vis erotic solicitation through *sexual performance* (a seduction of Western audiences by Chinese actresses). Although other films, like the aforementioned *City of Life and Death*, also use sexual performance by actresses to re-present the experience of comfort women during the war, the sexual performativity in *The Flowers of War* is distinguished by its broadly commercial sex appeal.

I open and close this chapter with discussions of *The Flowers of War* to contrast the official sexual performance in this “main melody” film (financed and promoted by the Chinese state) as a counterpoint to the censored and controversial film, *Lust, Caution* (Ang Lee, 2007), which also uses sexual performance to depict the Second Sino-Japanese War. Although set in different parts of China, both films deal with the Japanese occupation of China through the choreography of sex, seeking to understand history through gesture and movement. Susan Leigh

---

<sup>61</sup> Brian Hu, "Necrophilia, Perversion, and Zhang Yimou's Ultimate High-Wire Act," *Asia Pacific Arts Magazine*, January 20, 2012.

Foster writes, “To choreograph history, then, is first to grant that history is made by bodies, and then to acknowledge that all those bodies, in moving and in documenting their movements, in learning about past movement, continually conspire together and are conspired against.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, as re-presentations of historical bodies, cinematic bodies must continually contend with the epistemological and traumatic limits of understanding the past as well as with widely accepted or official versions of history. Posing particular epistemological limitations, the Second Sino-Japanese War is an especially difficult history to understand since most documentation on the Chinese side was destroyed during the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) post-liberation purges. Thus, in *making sense* of this history, filmmakers addressing this subject have relied on corporeal performance to solicit a phenomenological engagement with the viewer that exceeds narrative, and even logical, comprehension. Using the case studies of *Lust, Caution* (2007) and *The Flowers of War* (2011), this chapter focuses on the body politics of sexual performance in recent Chinese cinematic re-presentations of history, specifically the War between the Chinese and Japanese in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Second Sino-Japanese War, also known by the Chinese as the War of Resistance, provides the historical backdrop for *The Flowers of War* and *Lust, Caution*. A reoccurring topic in films, books, and other media, the Second Sino-Japanese War has provided a dramatic background for imagining one of the most traumatic events in contemporary Chinese history. However, any attempt to invoke or represent the war is met in China and the Sinophone world with public controversy and outcry due to the combined pressures from the burden of

---

<sup>62</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 10.

representation and the emotional intensity these texts typically provoke.<sup>63</sup> I am not interested in the historical accuracy of the films, nor do I believe that they are concerned with claiming historical authenticity, unlike the spate of Nanjing Massacre films produced during the late 1980's through the mid-1990's (around the fiftieth anniversary of the tragedy), films which Michael Berry reads as attempts to authenticate history in response to a 50-year political silence and continual Japanese denial of the events.<sup>64</sup> Rather, I am interested in the *erotics* of historicization employed by both films to vastly different effects and affects, to further explore Berry's observation that an "important subtheme [of the traumatic imagination] is the intersection of sexuality and ecstasy with violence and pain."<sup>65</sup> Both films feature sexual performances and the spectacularization of female (hetero)sexuality in order to call attention, or interpellate viewers, to the politics of war, where "sex alternately provides a means of subverting, supplanting, superseding, or serving as a stand-in for various forms of violence."<sup>66</sup>

In sexual and/or violent activity wherein bodies are intimately entangled, the body acts as the threshold of individual subjectivity where one both touches and is touched. In the traumatic imagination, the sexual body becomes an apt metaphor for the occupied or colonized national body, as conceptual ideas about violence, power and penetration are interpreted through the sights of corporeal entanglement.

---

<sup>63</sup> While I regret not being able to fully address the historiography of the Nanjing Massacre, which is outside the scope of this dissertation, I believe that the suicide of historian Iris Chang, author of *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* significantly illustrates the potential affective and material consequences of studying this subject. Because of the lack of concrete facts and figures of the Nanjing Massacre, details of what actually happened on the ground (save for some first-person testimonials and photographic evidence) are heavily disputed by the Japanese. Similar to Holocaust deniers, despite the existing evidence, many Japanese nationalists and officials continue to deny that the Massacre ever took place.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Berry, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

While both films use “perversity to pervert history,” to draw upon Hu’s observation of *The Flowers of War*, this chapter will focus primarily on the more controversial and widely-viewed of the two films, the polarizing and censored trans/national film, *Lust, Caution* directed by internationally acclaimed filmmaker Ang Lee. *Lust, Caution* is the centerpiece of this chapter on sexual performance not only because it is an extraordinary internationally-circulated film by a Taiwanese-American auteur and defies categorization (both in terms of genre and in terms of defining the film’s nationality), but also because the film’s sexual performances disrupt official accounts of history—upsetting, troubling, and destabilizing painful memories of the Second Sino-Japanese War. *Lust, Caution*’s sex scenes, to quote Meaghan Morris, “make political discourse ‘stammer’” because they provide neither cathartic resolution nor intellectual interpretation on wartime events.<sup>67</sup> As evinced by the widespread critical fury it provoked, Lee’s controversial film roused heated discussions about history, nationalism, and what it means “to be Chinese” through spectators’ cinematic identification with war bodies. As the editors of the 2014 publication of the anthology, *From Eileen Chang to Ang Lee: Lust/Caution* claim, the significance of this film within China and the Chinese diaspora cannot be overstated.<sup>68</sup> This chapter contributes to this recent scholarship on the film by focusing specifically on the sexual performances of the film and the body politics surrounding actress Tang Wei’s participation in the film. The film’s collapse of sex and politics provokes a carnal engagement with the spectator that, rather than glorifying political collaboration with “the enemy” illustrates the complex, nuanced layers of complicity, provoking “performance anxiety” and shame around the act(ing) of sex itself.

---

<sup>67</sup> Meaghan Morris, *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), xv.

<sup>68</sup> Hsiao-yen Peng and Whitney Crothers Dilley, "Introduction," in *From Eileen Chang to Ang Lee: Lust/Caution* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

The intersubjective, culturally-determined experience of *shame* is embedded within the film's viewing experience, revealing how the personal spectator body becomes affectively cathected to a body politic. As John Protevi argues in his exploration of political affect: "Affect is inherently political: bodies are part of an ecosocial matrix of other bodies, affecting them and being affected by them: affect is part of the basic constitution of bodies politic."<sup>69</sup> In this case, the bodies politic at large are the Chinese and Sinophone communities.

*Lust, Caution* and the discourses surrounding it illuminate Chinese attitudes towards sex and memories of war. An analysis of the film and its discursive responses reveal the affective consequences of sexual performance in contemporary Chinese cinema as well as the sexual politics of historiographical re-presentation of war and war bodies in film. An evaluation of the trans/national receptions of *Lust, Caution* in and outside of the PRC reveals how "the 'nation' becomes a shared 'object of feeling,' through the 'orientation' that is taken towards it."<sup>70</sup> The film problematizes the notion of a national identity by re-membering and re-presenting an era of Chinese occupation during which the Chinese national narrative was threatened. A country is not a "nation" under occupation. In fact, by the time of the Japanese Occupation, China had already been experiencing a national identity crisis, as the Guomindang Nationalist government of the Republic of China (1912-1949) had been fighting with the Chinese Communist Party for sovereignty over China since 1927. The CCP would eventually win the civil war and establish the modern nation-state of the PRC (1949-present). Despite these historical and political complexities of modern China's national origins, Chinese and Sinophone viewers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century nevertheless share trans/national and diasporic *feelings of attachment* towards that

---

<sup>69</sup> John Protevi, *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 50.

<sup>70</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 13.

history, and through their feelings of attachment project the Chinese nation as a shared object of feeling. This chapter discusses how feelings of shame and humiliation in particular generate these attachments. Finally, in examining the affective and material limits and consequences of sexual performance, I illustrate how the burden of sexual performance in *Lust, Caution* falls onto the woman's body—in this case, unto the body of actress Tang Wei and her character in the film. Although the anxieties of sexual performance expressed in everyday conversation and popular psychology are typically portrayed in masculinist terms of stamina, athleticism, and virility, the burden of cinematic sexual performance is projected on the female figure, who must suffer the consequences of her participation in these roles. Harriet Evans argues that, “Without clothes, the female body must be banned...; it is the perpetrator of depravity and danger. Such a position makes no distinction between hard pornography, in which women's bodies are subjects of physical brutality as well as sexual titillation, and images of the female body which are constructed for aesthetic purposes.”<sup>71</sup>

### Re-membering the Second Sino-Japanese War

In order to understand the cultural significance of Chinese films about the Second Sino-Japanese War, we first need to acknowledge the contentious present-day politics and feelings surrounding historiographic efforts to confront this aspect of China's past. Many Chinese people agree with comparative politics scholars James C. Hsiung and Steven I. Levine's statement that, “the Chinese people endured what was probably the most brutal war ever fought in the Pacific region, but the story of how they survived has not yet been fully told.”<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, many East Asians regard the Japanese imperial conquests during the Pacific War to be an “Asian

---

<sup>71</sup> Harriet Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China: Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 181.

<sup>72</sup> James C. Hsiung and Steven I. Levine, eds., *China's Bitter Victory: The War with Japan, 1937-1945* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), ix.



Holocaust” that has claimed as many or more lives than the concurrent European Holocaust.<sup>73</sup>

Hsiung and Levine explain that the lack of literature and “authoritative assessments” on this war is the result of limited access to archives governed by different political interests. Indeed, the primary participants of the War (Japan, the CCP, and the Guomindang Nationalist Government) each has its own nationalist stake in recounting wartime events in China from 1937-45.

Revisions of Japanese textbooks have sought to “play down the aggressive war launched by the Japanese militarists of the 1930s as a mere ‘forward advance’ in China,” attempting to mitigate, even erase their war crimes.<sup>74</sup> By contrast, discussions in China, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines discuss a lack of or insufficient apology for Japan’s Pacific War crimes. Meanwhile the strained relationship between the Nationalist Guomindang government (which relocated to Taiwan) and the CCP governing China since 1949 has also resulted in political and social hostilities within the greater Sinophone region, especially in the wake of the Taiwan independence movement, which rejects the “One Country, Two Systems” model and continues to seek sovereignty from mainland China.<sup>75</sup>

In the most thorough study of Chinese collaboration during the war, Timothy Brook offers reasons why Chinese historiography on this particular war is still lacking, citing aggrieved feelings that Japan has never “clarified its responsibility for the Pacific War” nor provided

---

<sup>73</sup> The dedication in the book reads, “To the countless victims, many of them nameless, of what was in effect an Asian Holocaust, probably on an even grander scale.”

<sup>74</sup> Hsiung and Levine ed., *China's Bitter Victory: The War with Japan, 1937-1945*, ix.

<sup>75</sup> As stated in the Introduction, I use the term “Sinophone” to refer to all regions of the world in which Chinese (including Mandarin, Cantonese, and all accents/dialects) is the primary language, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and the Chinese diaspora in Western countries. This term is credited to scholar Shu-mei Shih who has expanded the field of postcolonial studies to include Chinese history and culture. See Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

compensation for its acts of aggression.<sup>76</sup> In addition “many Chinese are unprepared to look behind their collective memory of suffering and resistance to ask what most people in the occupied zone did during the war.”<sup>77</sup> Articulating a more impassioned rationale for the apparent historiographical amnesia, Wu Ziniu, Fifth Generation filmmaker of *Don't Cry, Nanking* (1995) critiques China's wartime response: “The Rape of Nanjing is China's national shame; the Chinese people there were slaughtered without even putting up any kind of resistance.”<sup>78</sup> Consequently these “suppressed memories” as Brook describes it, continue to rise to the surface in mainstream films and television. Such narratives typically represent the Chinese during wartime as victims and resistant heroes under uncontested Japanese villainy and cruelty, a myth that *The Flowers of War* reaffirms. Like a Freudian trauma, the Second Sino-Japanese War is a wound that has never healed and continues to resurface and manifest in perverse ways, even within reductionist re-presentations of history and even more than half-a-century past the fact—demonstrating “the phenomenon of the belated response” that Berry observes about Chinese self-reflection on its historical traumas.<sup>79</sup>

Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* (2007)

---

<sup>76</sup> Timothy Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Qtd. in Berry, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*, 129.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 6.



On August 30, 2007, Taiwanese American director Ang Lee premiered his film adaptation of *Lust, Caution* at the Venice Film Festival, based on a short story with the same title written by Chinese author Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing) first published in Chinese in 1977.<sup>81</sup> After gaining recognition for nostalgic immigrant films and subtle family dramas that took place in both the U.S. and Taiwan (*Pushing Hands* [1992]; *The Wedding Banquet* [1993]; *Eat Drink Man Woman* [1994]), Lee was invited by Hollywood to make art-house period films (*Sense and Sensibility* [1995]; *The Ice Storm* [1997]; *Ride with the Devil* [1999].) Shortly thereafter, Lee's *wuxia* (martial arts) homage *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) received international acclaim and huge box-office returns. Next, the director's critically-acclaimed film about the homosexual romance between two cowboys in Wyoming, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) earned an Academy Award for Best Director (the first directorial Oscar given to a person of Chinese descent), and cemented Lee's status as a versatile global auteur. Lee's film about an Indian man recounting his unbelievable survival story at sea, *Life of Pi* (2012) garnered Lee his second Academy Award for Directing. As an "accented filmmaker," to use Hamid Naficy's term, Lee's

---

<sup>80</sup> Reflecting the fascination with *Lust, Caution* among some cultural tastemakers, artists, and critics in Beijing, this impressionistic painting, entitled "Movie Series-Lust Caution" by He Wenjue [何汶决] hung in Yang Gallery in 798 Art District, Beijing. Photo by the author taken on June 23, 2012.

<sup>81</sup> Chang first wrote the original story in the 1950s, but continued to revise it for more than two decades while she lived in Hong Kong and in the United States.

films “signify and signify [sic] upon exile and diaspora by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions...”<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Lee’s ability to make critically celebrated films in Taiwan, mainland China, and the U.S. illustrates his success in “forcing the dominant cinema to speak in a minoritarian dialect.”<sup>83</sup> An international co-production between American, mainland Chinese, and Taiwanese companies, Lee’s following film *Lust, Caution*, like his earlier films, produced meanings that were simultaneously local and global, indigenous and foreign. Lee’s keen ability to complicate human relationships and ambiguate character motivations is skillfully reflected in the suspenseful *Lust, Caution*, enabling a multitude of critical interpretations.

The film opens in Japanese-occupied Shanghai in 1942 and centers on a group of wives who frequently play mahjong together in the residential compound of the Chinese collaborationist government. Polite yet aloof, the youngest wife, Mai Tai Tai (Tang Wei) seems to be hiding something from the other women. She also appears to be intimately familiar with Mr. Yi (Tony Leung Chiu-wai), the mahjong hostess’s husband and high-ranking collaborationist official. Mai Tai Tai excuses herself from the game of mahjong to go to a café where she makes a coded phone call to a group of armed young men and women. A dissolve edit introduces a long flashback to four years prior when Mai Tai Tai and the other young people are revealed to be students at Ling Nan University in Hong Kong. Mai Tai Tai, whose real name is Wang Jiazhi, is asked to join the students’ theater troupe led by a charismatic and politically impassioned young man named Kuang Yu-min (Leehom Wang). After putting on a patriotic play for the sake of raising funds for the resistance movement, Kuang asks the others to “do some real

---

<sup>82</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

acting” with him in order to infiltrate the household of Mr. Yi, a high-ranking traitor of the Republic of China (1912-1949), and kill him. In the film’s first act, the main themes of the *Lust, Caution* lay bare: performance, politics, and betrayal.

The group exploits Kuang’s hometown connection in order to gain introductions to Mr. and Mrs. Yi (Joan Chen). Mr. Yi tortures spies and resistance fighters on behalf of the collaborationist/puppeteer Wang Jiwei-led government under the Japanese. The group rents out an apartment and each plays a role in masquerading as Mr. and Mrs. Mai and their household of servants. Wang Jiazhi plays the role of Mrs. Mai, who must lure Mr. Yi into an assassination trap. One night after the two have dinner together, Wang makes progress and manages to seduce Mr. Yi into nearly coming up to her apartment, but he backs out at the last minute. In preparation to become Mr. Yi’s mistress, Wang agrees to lose her virginity to one of the other male students so that she will seem sexually experienced when she and Mr. Yi finally consummate their affair. However, a few days later, Mr. and Mrs. Yi abruptly announce that they’re moving to Shanghai, and the discouraged group gives up their mission. As they are cleaning the apartment, an unexpected visit from Kuang’s liaison comes by the apartment and blackmails the group with his newfound discovery of their undercover mission. The male students respond by brutally killing the liaison, Tsao (Kar Lok Chin). Wang runs away from the apartment in horror, never returning.

A three-year flashforward reveals a destitute Wang Jiazhi in line for food rations in a war-torn, Japanese-occupied Shanghai. At Shanghai University, Wang continues her studies and is living with her aunt. After a chance meeting with Kuang, who mentions that he had been looking for Wang, Kuang persuades her to finish the mission as Mai Tai Tai to entrap Mr. Yi, who has since been promoted to head of secret service for the Japanese. Wang transforms back into Mai Tai Tai and pays a visit to the Shanghai home of Mr. and Mrs. Yi, rejoining the

mahjong group as if little time has elapsed. After Wang is invited to stay at the Yi house, Mr. Yi arranges to take her to a secluded apartment where the two have long and intense sexual encounters. While Wang continues to seduce Mr. Yi, she grows impatient with the resistance group and their inaction. Meanwhile, Wang as Mai Tai Tai shares more intimate conversations and sexual experiences with Mr. Yi. After Mr. Yi sends Mai Tai Tai on a covert mission, which turns out to be choosing a diamond ring as a gift, the film returns back to the present, where the film opened in the café.

Mai Tai Tai and Mr. Yi go into the jeweler's to pick up her ring, and as they are sitting there admiring it, Wang suddenly panics and whispers to him, "Go, now!" Mr. Yi narrowly escapes his assassination by Wang's resistance group and Wang, in a daze, leaves the store. Yi orders the execution of the entire theater group of resistance fighters, including Wang. The final sequence of the film reveals that life resumes its course with the collaborationist wives' mahjong group playing with a new replacement for Mai Tai Tai while Mr. Yi silently ruminates on Mai Tai Tai's empty bed upstairs in the dark.

#### Exhibition and controversy

After the Venice Film Festival premiere of *Lust, Caution*, the prestigious Gold Lion winning film gained international distribution, but different versions of the film were cut depending on the geographic and political boundaries inscribed around its various national exhibitions. While audiences in the U.S., Taiwan, and Hong Kong viewed the full-length 157-minute version, edited-down versions of *Lust, Caution* played in mainland China and Singapore. As Robert Chi explains in his essay, "Exhibitionism: *Lust, Caution*," "the release of *Lust, Caution*, differentiated according to place, timing or release schedule, censorship and regulation system, and technical format, uniquely revealed both material and symbolic fault lines in the

world.”<sup>84</sup> In China, these fault lines were determined by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) who approved the film only after several minutes were edited out from the film (various reports claim anywhere between seven minutes to thirteen minutes)—cuts which Lee made himself. Additionally, all publicity of the film in the mainstream Chinese press was banned. According to one journalist in Chi’s findings, the mainland version showed less of the street scenes depicting wartime suffering during the Second Sino-Japanese War; the otherwise brutal and long killing scene of Tsao was abbreviated to a single knife thrust; and finally, a change in wording created ambiguity around the female protagonist’s failure to carry out her political mission within the Chinese resistance movement (from *kuai zou* [go quickly] to *zou ba* [let’s go]). Despite these appeasing gestures to SARFT, passionate criticisms were still launched at the film because it attributed the failed assassination attempt of a high-ranking Chinese political collaborator during the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-45 to an intensely sexual affair between the undercover female agent and male collaborator.

The film’s re-vision of history shatters what Brook refers to as “the myth of resistance,” a “powerful moral weapon in the arsenals that political elites on both sides of the Taiwan Strait have used to sustain their postwar dictatorships,” particularly as the film blames the bungled operation on the apolitical folly of lust.<sup>85</sup> As Hsiang-yin Sasha Chen points out, the film was so controversial and popular that Sinophone media channels referred to the unprecedented box office returns and concurrent polarized debates about the film as “the *Lust/Caution* phenomenon.”<sup>86</sup> Chen also explains that the film was the most globally successful in China,

---

<sup>84</sup> Robert Chi, "Exhibitionism: Lust, Caution," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 3, no. 2 (2009): 179.

<sup>85</sup> Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China*, 6.

<sup>86</sup> Hsiang-yin Sasha Chen, "Eros Impossible and Eros of the Impossible in *Lust/Caution: The Shanghai Lady/Baby* in the Late 1930s and Early 1940s," in *From Eileen Chang to Ang Lee*, ed. Hsiao-yen Peng and Whitney Crothers Dilley (New York: Routledge, 2014), 81.

South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong because each of these regions were occupied by Japan in WWII, “which united them in intricate historical relationships and social developments.”<sup>87</sup>

The most infamous and colorful criticisms launched at the film were made by deputy editor, Huang Jisu, of the Chinese publication, *Journal of International Social Science*. At a Beijing University film salon meeting, Huang compared the film to a sexually transmitted disease and condemned *Lust, Caution* as an insult to the women of China. After publishing an article entitled, “China Has Stood Up, But Ang Lee and Company are Still Kneeling” (a posture Chang Hsiao-hung suggests gives a “vivid gendered contrast of phallic erection/feminine suppleness”), Huang also wrote on his personal blog on December 5, 2007 that the film’s conception of the bed is that it is no longer a stage for human love but rather a brutal arena.<sup>88</sup> As Chi points out, such reactions stem from highly politicized and defensive nationalistic discourses surrounding the Second Sino-Japanese War. Huang vocalizes a common protest from Chinese critics against the film, which is that *Lust, Caution* employs *meihua* (glorification, beautification, aestheticization) of *hanjian* (Chinese wartime traitors). Indeed, as the *hanjian* in question is played by Hong Kong actor Tony Leung Chiu-wai, one of the most popular leading men in Sinophone cinemas, such criticisms are not completely unfounded. Moreover, rather than celebrating the heroic efforts of resistance fighters or garnering sympathy around the victims of Sino-Japanese conflicts (common tropes in nationalistic Chinese cinema dealing with the subject matter), the film reveals the fissures and failures within a political movement—namely that an

---

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Hsiao-hung Chang, “Transnational Affect: Cold Anger, Hot Tears, and Lust/Caution,” in *From Eileen Chang to Ang Lee: Lust/Caution*, ed. Hsiao-yen Peng and Whitney Crothers Dilley (New York: Routledge, 2014), 186; Huang Jisu, “Lust, Caution shreds humanity, explodes art,” “黄纪苏的博客 (Huang Jisu’s blog), December 5, 2007, [http://blog.voc.com.cn/blog\\_showone\\_type\\_blog\\_id\\_411306\\_p\\_1.html](http://blog.voc.com.cn/blog_showone_type_blog_id_411306_p_1.html).



individual's sexual desires can interrupt and even sabotage the interests of an occupied national body and the body politic.

What is the identity of an occupied country? It is a confusion of the inside and outside, wherein the outsiders, Japanese in this case, penetrate and violate Chinese national boundaries. However, the film does not directly show this condition, as all the main characters are Chinese. It is not a film like *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959) wherein a French filmmaker comments on the unrepresentable trauma resulting from the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Whereas Resnais is an outsider looking in, Lee is a Chinese diasporic person whose family migration was a direct consequence of the Chinese Civil War and Second Sino-Japanese War. Whereas *Hiroshima* is interested in exploring the grief, loss, and trauma of war, *Lust, Caution* is interested less in aesthetic explorations of victimology and more with the complexities, ambiguities, and complicities of occupation and war. Because “the enemy” in this case is a Chinese *hanjian* (traitor) rather than a member of the Japanese Imperial Army, the film becomes doubly provocative in its sexually explicit nature and in its insinuation about the enemy within China. It draws attention to the uneasy politics of collaboration that Brook contends Chinese people are “unprepared” to examine, as well as displaces war crimes committed by the Japanese military (i.e. rape and torture) unto a Chinese character. Indeed the film spectacularizes the female protagonist's repeated experiences of sexual abuse at the hands of Chiu-wai's character as an oblique, albeit perverse, metonym for the rape that Japanese soldiers widely performed during the war “as a gesture of conquest” and “an act of humiliation.”<sup>89</sup> Lee himself

---

<sup>89</sup> Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China*, 23.

stated that the first sex scene was meant to evoke “the brutal Japanese rape of the Chinese.”<sup>90</sup>

Here is it worth quoting the differences in the ways in which male and female bodies received differing violent treatments from the Japanese Army:

During the first assault, both sexes are equally vulnerable to aerial attack, bombardment, and fire. Thereafter gender mattered, for Japanese soldiers treated the bodies of Chinese men and women differently. Both could be damaged, but for different symbolic purposes. Men of fighting age were shot or conscripted for labor because they were, or stood in for, the soldiers of the nation. Women of childbearing age were raped or forced into prostitution because they were, or stood in for, the body of the nation.<sup>91</sup>

Representing “the body of the nation,” women suffered a distinct punishment during the war premised on sexual submission and humiliation. *Lust, Caution* narrativizes this distinction through its depiction of a woman who is first seemingly raped by (although she initiates the encounter, Yi forcibly pushes her into the bed, hits her with his belt, ties her hands together, and proceeds to penetrate her before unbinding her hands), then sexually submits to a high-ranking Chinese collaborator of the Japanese who she is attempting to entrap for assassination. Lee departs from author Chang’s indirect and de-eroticized account by taking directorial liberty in graphically depicting the sexual relationship between the two characters. As many reviewers and critics have pointed out, Lee apparently embellishes Chang’s only overt reference to sexual intercourse, found in the line: “Somewhere in the first decade or two of the twentieth century, a well-known Chinese scholar was supposed to have added that the way to a woman’s heart is

---

<sup>90</sup> Qtd. in Cecile Chu-chin Sun, "Two Versions of *Sejje*: Fiction and Film-Views from a Common Reader," in *From Eileen Chang to Ang Lee: Lust/Caution*, ed. Peng Hsiao-yen and Whitney Crothers Dilley (New York: Routledge, 2014), 46.

<sup>91</sup> Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China*, 23.

through her vagina.”<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, the three sexual performances in the second half of the film (after the first half’s “rehearsal” of both sexual and political performances, which I explain later) provoke vastly different interpretations of the film’s narrative, leading to wildly different conclusions. For example, some spectators believe the female protagonist Wang is in love with the collaborator Mr. Yi, while others believe she despises and pities him to the end.

The first sex scene is a “rape” of Wang by Mr. Yi (some scholars contest the use of the word “rape” to describe this scene); the second scene illustrates a montage of pain and pleasure through sexual acts of domination; and the third and final sex scene shows Wang attempting to suffocate Mr. Yi during sex and ends with her desperately crying. I will give depth to the superficial arguments that the film is art porn by its critics by complicating the understanding of the film’s use of sex. In particular I investigate *why* this film, and particularly the sexual performances within the film, are so profoundly unsettling for Chinese and Sinophone audiences.

An ambivalent text, *Lust, Caution* provokes a masochistic spectatorship that suggests a perverse pleasure in shaping and contesting Chinese national and communal ethnic identity through a confrontation with the horrors of the Second Sino-Japanese War. By consuming and reacting to *Lust, Caution*, spectators and critics from mainland China and the rest of the Sinophone world participate in discursive contestation over reconstructed images of Chinese history. Moreover they engage with representations of heteronormative and hetero-perverse sexual practices, reflecting their own historiographic and epistemological anxieties about war and sex, two forms of corporeal entanglement and intimacy which test the limits of subjectivity as identity—both on national and individual scales. The engineering of affective confusion is also present in John Woo’s *Bullet in the Head* (1990), as James Steintrager points out. *Bullet in the*

---

<sup>92</sup> Eileen Chang, "Lust, Caution': A Story by Eileen Chang," in *Lust, Caution: The Story, the Screenplay, and the Making of the Film* (New York: Random House LLC, 1983; 2007), 36.

*Head* is an ambivalent meditation on the trauma of the Tiananmen June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989 Incident which “forces the viewer into a disturbing—yet potentially masochistically enjoyable—encounter with identification and its disintegration.”<sup>93</sup> Unlike *Bullet in the Head, Lust, Caution*’s “suturing” and unstitching does not “turn the guns on us,” however the film achieves this same affective effect through a continual vacillation between identification with Wang and a suspicious dis-identification with her. Drawing on Freud’s reading of a child’s *fort-da* game as a pleasure in releasing oneself from “community, identity, and ultimately from life itself,” Steintrager reads such ambivalence in Woo’s work as an expression of Hong Kong’s liminal identity and anxiety towards its impending return to the PRC after witnessing the horrors of the 1989 Tiananmen Incident. In *Lust, Caution*, the representation of China’s liminal national identity as a country under Japanese occupation (1937-1945) is expressed through Mr. Yi’s repeated penetrations into Wang’s body and heart. War and occupation disrupt national identity, and representations of the Second-Sino Japanese War provoke anxiety in audiences who are emotionally invested in an untroubled national narrative. Lee’s refusal to provide such a narrative provokes what I will describe and define as “performance anxiety,” an affective orientation shaped by cultural expressions of shame, directed specifically at the film’s sexual performances.

#### The labor of sexual performance

When examining *sexual performance*, it is productive to parse the term out into its various components. The film text draws parallels between theatrical/cinematic *performance* and political action, political action and sexual *performance*, and sexual behavior and the *performativity* of “love.” Performance means “the accomplishment or carrying out of something commanded or undertaken,” as well as “an individual performer’s rendering or interpretation of a

---

<sup>93</sup> James Steintrager, "Bullet in the Head: Trauma, Identity, and Violent Spectacle," in *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, ed. Chris Berry (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 23.

work, part, role.”<sup>94</sup> Both definitions collude in and multiply within lead actress Tang Wei’s body and through her dual characters, resistance fighter Wang Jiazhi and seductress-collaborator Mai Tai Tai. As Susan Daruvala suggests, Wang’s performance of lust and love towards Mr. Yi would eventually “bring its own reality into being,” in other words, cause Wang to truly fall in love with Yi.<sup>95</sup> The film’s interest in performance, and especially in *sexual performance*, demonstrates a means through which to examine the historical event through lived, bodily intimacies between individuals. Moreover, *Lust, Caution*’s multiple metatextual layers of performativity conjoin as a kind of rhizomatic, rather than hierarchical or linear, structure. In other words, the analysis of performativity in *Lust, Caution* includes entry into multiple layers of interpretation functioning simultaneously in the text including Eileen Chang’s performative fiction of the original short story, seemingly based on her autobiographical experiences; Lee’s cinematic adaptation of Chang’s literary work; the diegetic performances of the students in their dramatic thespian troupe; the performances of the students as resistant agents including Wang as Mai Tai Tai; Wang and Yi’s sexual performances; Yi’s performance as a political collaborator; and Yi’s performance as a dutiful husband; among others. An analytical focus on the sexual performances in *Lust, Caution* illuminates the film’s allegorical treatment of war, seen only in the film’s background and periphery. Consequently, sexual performances become the focal point for questions and concerns about historical memory, nationalism, and “Chinese-ness” as an affective attachment to cinematic war bodies.

---

<sup>94</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Performance,” accessed December 10, 2011, <http://oed.com/view/Entry/140783?redirectedFrom=performance#eid>.

<sup>95</sup> Susan Daruvala, “Self as Performance, Lust as Betrayal in the Theatre of War,” in *From Eileen Chang to Ang Lee: Lust/Caution*, ed. Hsiao-yen Peng and Whitney Crothers Dilley (New York: Routledge, 2014), 117.

The film's three highly graphic and explicit sex scenes in the film leave little to the imagination, apparently intending to provoke an ambivalent spectatorial position of being simultaneously "turned on" by the prurient and highly realistic nature of the scenes and "turned off" by the ugly grittiness and violence of the same scenes—thereby putting us in the very same morally ambivalent position as the female resistance spy Wang, who at one point exclaims, "What is this trap? My body? He's like a worm that gets deep inside my heart." Wang's experience of Yi's occupation of her body is a penetration into her emotional existence. Describing her insights on "embodied screening and mimetic play," Linda Williams writes that, "As a 'porous interface between the organism and the world,' my body before the screen is not simply excited then numbed, or numbed and then excited; rather, over time and with more screenings, it becomes habituated to diverse qualities and kinds of sexual experiences, including those which I may never have but with which I can feel and play."<sup>96</sup> Whereas Williams writes about the synesthetic engagement of a sexual solicitation through a type of promiscuous screen-*play* with many different types of cinematic sexual experiences, I focus on the intersection of sexual solicitation and the activation of the "national affect" of shame. The film exploits mimetic engagement with the explicit representations of sex in order to suture our own phenomenological experience of the film to the conflictual and complicated consequences of *sexual performance*—in all its polyvalent meanings and implications.

Production details of the camera rolling for 154 hours to capture the film's sexual performances illuminate the bodily labor of representing the sexual acts. Meanwhile, the excitement of watching the intense, graphic sex scenes is complicated by the anxiety and other

---

<sup>96</sup> Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 19.

affects that arise from relating onscreen representations to offscreen, historical traumas.

Explaining the intersubjective nature of film spectatorship, Vivian Sobchack writes:

Watching a film is both a direct and mediated experience of direct experience as mediation. We both perceive the world *within* the immediate experience of an ‘other’ and *without* it, as immediate experience mediated by an ‘other.’ Watching a film, we can see the seeing, hear the hearing as well as the heard, and feel the movement as well as see the moved. As viewers, not only do we spontaneously and invisibly perform these existential acts directly for and as ourselves in relation to the film before us, but these same acts are coterminously given to us *as* the film, as mediating acts of perception-cum-expression we take up and *invisibly perform* by appropriating and incorporating them into our own existential performance; we watch them as a *visible performance* distinguishable from, yet included in, our own.<sup>97</sup>

Applying Sobchack’s arguments about the existential experiences of spectatorship allows us to understand not only how *Lust, Caution* sutures a sensory engagement with its provocative sex scenes but also how the perception-cum-expression creates a performative act taken up by the spectator. As evinced by the discourses surrounding the film, the performative act taken up by the critical trans/national spectator is one of “national affects” vis-à-vis embodied performances of shame.

The extratextual discourses of the film, including the reviews and criticisms from Chinese critics, and the subsequent banning of lead actress Tang Wei from working in films in the PRC are manifestations of the *performance anxieties* commonly associated with *sexual*

---

<sup>97</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 10-11.

*performance*, as affects that tend to gather and collect around the sexualized adult female body in patriarchal societies. Anxieties surrounding women's bodies reveal the masculinist contours and insecurities of the contemporary imagined national community of China. In film, the female body becomes "a narrative site for the projection of national trauma and collective memory," for instance in the Fifth Generation films made by Beijing Film Academy graduates in the 1980s-1990s which brought unprecedented international acclaim and attention to Chinese cinema.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, the contemporary history of China's schizophrenic gender construction within the past century, discussed in more detail in Chapter Four, has resulted in a particular and gendered *sexual anxiety*.

#### Public outcry over *Lust, Caution*'s sexual performances

Various criticisms of the film from viewers in China, Taiwan, and the U.S. reveal that extratextual discourses are as much a part of understanding *Lust, Caution* as the film text itself, as they illuminate the social politics that make this film a significant cultural work in mainland China and the Sinophone world. Scholars like Barbara Klinger, Lea Jacobs, and other film historians place film texts within their historical reception contexts, treating the discursive environments around a film text or performing body as that which acts on the film "to negotiate the structure and signification of its most intimate internal features."<sup>99</sup> Klinger writes, "The contextual factors that accompany the presentation of a film, including such materials as film reviews and industry promotions as well as specific historical conditions, serve as signs of the vital semiotic and cultural space that superintend the viewing experience. Further, these factors are not just 'out there,' external to the text and viewer; they actively intersect the text/viewer

---

<sup>98</sup> Shuqin Cui, *Women through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), xi.

<sup>99</sup> Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), xiv.



relation, producing interpretative frames that influence the public consumption of cultural artifacts.”<sup>100</sup> Because such contextual materials surrounding *Lust, Caution* are readily available on the Internet, active intersections between text and viewers can be examined as evidence of the kind of “common sense” ideologies that frame the consumption of this film, at least for the middle-class demographics that readily access and use the Internet. Particularly because Chang’s short story has been interpreted by readers as being based on actual wartime incidents (specifically a conflation of two separate events: one, the female undercover agent Zhang Pingru’s failed assassination attempt on secret police chief, Ding Mocun, in Shanghai in 1939; and secondly, an assassination plot by Beijing students that later surfaced), the significance of analyzing *Lust, Caution*’s reception as an insight into contemporary and public contestations over history and of Chinese self-identity cannot be understated.<sup>101</sup> For instance, Chang Hsiao-hung observes significant distinctions in the film’s reception between China and Taiwan, describing two “affective discharges” of “cold anger” in mainland China and “hot tears” in Taiwan. This affective split in the film’s reception demonstrates China’s (post-)Cold War mentality towards the Japan-Taiwan-U.S. alliance and contrastingly, Taiwan’s identification with Ang Lee as a diasporic or “Overseas Chinese” (who immigrated twice, from the PRC to Taiwan and to the U.S.). Lee’s works in Taiwan are perceived as reflecting his simultaneous feelings of *displacement* and sense of *patriotism*, which together generate a passionate attachment towards nostalgic remembrances of “youth lost and reclaimed.”<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>101</sup> Many have also read Chang’s short story as autobiographical, because she was a student at the University of Hong Kong, previously married and eventually divorced to Hu Lancheng, who served in Wang Jingwei’s government as a collaborationist to the Japanese.

<sup>102</sup> Chang, "Transnational Affect: Cold Anger, Hot Tears, and Lust/Caution," 190.

Without question, the graphic sex scenes involving Tang and Chiu-wai are the most heavily-discussed and controversial topic among critics and scholars. Even discussions and essays written about the film's politics reveal that the sexual affair is inextricable from understandings of narrative and character motivations. Many public critics like the aforementioned Huang and writers in both Taiwan and the mainland rallied against the film, calling it "pornography." Chinese American scholars have also more-or-less called the film pornographic. Rey Chow, for instance, contends that the sex scenes are "virtually indistinguishable from conventional pornography," and argues that *Lust, Caution* predicts the hypervisible forms for 21<sup>st</sup> century self-Orientalism.<sup>103</sup> She writes, "In particular, critical interest tends to settle on the fatefulness of Wang's apparent enjoyment of her dangerous liaison with Yi. Intended as the bait, Wang ends up caught in the snare of Yi's desire (for her); *jouissance*, in the sense of a rapturous loss of control over oneself, proves Wang's undoing. For many, the appeal of *Lust, Caution* lies in the scandal—and truth—of this liberation of the flesh on the part of the woman, which brings about a fatal reversal of her patriotic act."<sup>104</sup> Drawing upon Michel Foucault's notion of the repressive hypothesis, Chow argues that it is precisely the insistent and brutal visual spectacularization of Wang's rapturous loss of control over herself, that reveals the film to be a masochistic object of *scientia sexualis*, a concept Foucault defines as "procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power..."<sup>105</sup> In other words, the film takes pleasure in Wang's sexuality insofar as it reveals a kind of truth, a "will to knowledge" geared towards loss of self and sexual confession. Indeed, the narrative

---

<sup>103</sup> Rey Chow, "Guest Column—Framing the Original: Toward a New Visibility of the Orient," *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (2011): 559.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1. An Introduction*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (New York:: Random House, 1978), 58.

understanding and suspenseful intrigue of *Lust, Caution* hinges on Wang's sexual confession and the question of whether she truly enjoys her intimate relationship with Yi or if it is all part of her scheming political performance. It is not pleasure for the sake of pleasure; rather, Wang's sexuality becomes discursively objectified as a part of a political economy of knowledge-power (i.e. who is "on top" in the greater socio-political hierarchy: resistance fighter or Japanese collaborator). As Chen insightfully suggests, Yi "shifts his body through various near-impossible sexual maneuvers to penetrate Wang, which can be seen as analogous to an interrogation involving cruel torture."<sup>106</sup> With a broader psychological interpretation, Jon Eugene von Kowallis describes the characters' sado-masochism as "a reflection of the characters' inner fears" which allows Yi to confront his fears of becoming a victim and Wang to confront her fears of discovery.<sup>107</sup>

While the film's sexual performances are graphic, and we do see much of Tang and Chiu-wai's naked fronts, Chow's claim that these scenes are "virtually indistinguishable from conventional pornography" is not entirely accurate. Hidden from view by the camera's strategic positioning and pubic hair, Leung's erect penis and Tang's vagina are never shown. Nevertheless, short of a penetration shot and "money shot," as Williams has defined the visual signifiers of the phallic economy of hardcore, *Lust, Caution* does attempt to fully disclose and/or at least approximate the pleasures (and pains) of the "genital event" as much as possible through sexual acrobatics, distortions of bodies and facial expressions, and the involuntary, physiological markers of pleasure/pain on the actors' bodies, such as Tang's flushed red face and the visible

---

<sup>106</sup> Chen, "Eros Impossible and Eros of the Impossible in *Lust/Caution: The Shanghai Lady/Baby in the Late 1930s and Early 1940s*," 87.

<sup>107</sup> Jon Eugene von Kowallis, "Sado-Masochism, Steamy Sex, and Shanghai Glitter: What's Love Got to Do with It? A 'Philologist' Looks at *Lust/Caution* and the Literary Texts That Inspired It," in *From Eileen Chang to Ang Lee: Lust, Caution*, ed. Hsiao-yen Peng and Whitney Crothers Dilley (New York: Routledge, 2014), 55.

sweat beads on both actors' bodies.<sup>108</sup> Even though Williams, and to some extent, Chow, are Western-based scholars writing about and referring to traditions of pornography in the U.S., mainland Chinese and Taiwanese critics and scholars writing about the film use similar terms to criticize the film's sexual performances. Before turning to such criticisms, however, a brief history of pornography and the consequences of sexual image production in mainland China follows.

#### A brief history of "pornography" in China

The oldest "sex handbooks" in the world, dating from around 200 B.C. (during the Han dynasty) were discovered in the Ma-wang-tui Han Tomb in the Hunan Province. Chinese sexologist Fang Fu Ruan has written that, "Broadly speaking, Chinese attitudes toward human sexuality were open and positive during the Formative (Prehistory-206 B.C.) and Early Empire ages (206 B.C.-A.D. 960), but increasingly closed during the Later Empire period (960-1850)." Ruan continues by arguing that since 1850 to present-day, "negative sex attitudes and policies continued under three radically different regimes: the late Ching dynasty, the Republic of China, and the People's Republic of China."<sup>109</sup>

A few years after the Second Sino-Japanese War, after the CCP defeated the Guomindang Nationalist government and established the PRC in 1949, a strict ban on erotic fiction and pornography was implemented.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, the abstraction of terms such as

---

<sup>108</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>109</sup> Fang Fu Ruan, *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture* (New York: Plenum Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>110</sup> The newest law passed in April 1985 and which is still in effect is called "The State Council's Regulations on Severely Banning Pornography." It states:

Pornography is very harmful, poisoning people's minds, inducing crimes...and must be severely banned. The items which must be severely banned include: any kind of video-tape, audio-tape, film, TV program, slide, photography, painting,

“pornography” or *huang* (yellow) books/films/videos/songs has enabled arbitrary political uses and appropriations of the term with widely fluctuating consequences throughout the past century. For example, during the 1989 democratic movement, the government launched a campaign to eliminate “the Six Evils,” one of which was *sao huang* [“the yellow”], the Chinese term referring to pornography.<sup>111</sup> In 1990, the Supreme People’s Court decreed that the death sentence was a proper penalty for traffickers in pornography. 20 people were subsequently executed under the charge. Currently, every kind of sexual behavior besides heterosexual intercourse within a monogamous, legal marriage is legally proscribed. However, citing a survey conducted by the Shanghai Sex Sociology Research Center in 1989-1990 of 23,000 people in 15 provinces, Ruan points out that, “these policies are at odds with recent changes of attitude among the Chinese people,” pointing specifically to the survey’s findings that 86% of respondents said they approved of premarital sex.<sup>112</sup> Today, in 2015, there is an even greater disparity between official/institutional policies and prescriptions, and actual sexual behavior. Sociologist Joanna McMillan states a common description of the discrepancies between Chinese medical discourses and social discourses: “Chinese medical discourse, in line with global convention, does not formally classify the use of sexualized images as pathology, but consumption is widely portrayed as

---

book, newspaper, magazine, and hand-copied material which contains explicit descriptions of sexual behavior and/or erotic pictures; any kind of toy or article with instructions for use which were printed above erotic pictures; and any kind of aphrodisiacs and sex-toys. The person who smuggled, produced, sold, or organized the showing the pornography, whether for sale or not, shall be punished according to the conditions, by imprisonment or administrative punishment. [qtd. in *ibid.*, 100).

<sup>111</sup> The other five “Evils” are: prostitution, the sale of women and children, narcotics, gambling, and profiteering from superstition.

<sup>112</sup> Ruan, *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture*, 162.

depraved and dangerous, and production and distribution is criminal.”<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, political complications arise because of the lack of a hard definition of pornography, or what is “yellow.” As Harriet Evans points out in her study of women and sexuality in China, “Official texts commonly apply the term ‘yellow’ to all visual, written and audio materials that explicitly describe sexual behavior....Works of art that contain sexually explicit images may also be condemned as pornographic; as far as the censors are concerned, aesthetic distinctions do not apply to representations of the human body.”<sup>114</sup> Indeed, the extratextual discourses around a film like *Lust, Caution* illustrate the contradictory and ambivalent politics around sex and sexualized images. Moreover, as Evans points out, the “official objection to representations of the sexualized body depends on a simple categorization of the images of the naked, invariably female, body as a source of moral corruption and shame.”<sup>115</sup> Thus the burden of pornographic representations of the human body rests on the female performer, a point I will return to when analyzing lead actress Tang Wei’s sexual performance in *Lust, Caution*.

#### Sex as political praxis as performance in *Lust, Caution*

In the diegetic world of *Lust, Caution*, sexual ignorance yields political consequences. As Wang begins seducing Yi, the group is concerned that her inexperience in the bedroom (it is assumed correctly that she is a virgin) would raise suspicions about her identity. After Wang as Mai Tai Tai nearly leads Yi into the group’s apartment (he backs out at the last minute), the exasperated and frustrated group discuss their next move. A chubby male student who pretends to be Mr. Mai (Johnson Yuen) in the group’s charades asks her sincerely, “Did he try anything?” Before Wang has a chance to answer, another young man in the group who seems uncomfortable

---

<sup>113</sup> Joanna McMillan, *Sex, Science and Morality in China*, Routledge Contemporary China Series (New York: Routledge, 2006), 99-100.

<sup>114</sup> Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China: Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949*, 181.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

even with the innuendo, quickly cuts him off, half-joking that, “Mr. Mai is jealous.” Then, continuing Lee’s red herring romantic storyline between the handsome resistant group leader Kuang Yu Min (played by Taiwanese pop star, Leehom Wang) and Wang, the next shot is a close-up of Kuang with a look of consternation, suggesting that in fact, *he* is the jealous one. Wang reports: “I knew what was on his mind, otherwise he wouldn’t have seen me to the door.” She explains that once Yi calls again, he will be serious and she will have to become his mistress. She then asks the group, “Have you thought about what we will do next?” Then, beginning with Kuang, each of the four men slowly gets up and walks out to the patio for a smoke. As Wang searches her girlfriend Lai’s (Chih-ying Chu) face for answers, Lai asks her, “Do you know what to do? The thing between men and women?” Suddenly realizing that her cohort has already made specific arrangements so that the discursively vague *nannüshi* (the “man-woman-thing”) would not be so obscure and vague in practice, Wang responds with a note of resignation, “So you’ve all discussed this. Which one?” Because of the previous point-of-view shots of Wang looking at Kuang, Lee sets up the expectation that he will be the one who takes her virginity, but in fact, the one elected is Liang (Lawrence Ko), because, as Lai explains, “he is the most experienced,” after which Wang angrily finishes her sentence, “with prostitutes.” Lee follows this conversation with another close-up of Kuang’s furrowed expression, which can be read as guilt, shame, regret, or of course, a combination of the three. Despite any gestures to his interiority, however, Kuang, as an archetypal “Chinese intellectual, whose desire for/of the body is repressed by the thousand-year-old Confucian superego,” cannot act on his sexual desires—in spite of his dashing good looks and desirous physicality.<sup>116</sup> In contrast, Liang’s skinny and wimpy body starkly contrasts with the toned muscularity of Kuang, a hollowed shell versus a

---

<sup>116</sup> Chen, “Eros Impossible and Eros of the Impossible in *Lust/Caution*: The Shanghai Lady/Baby in the Late 1930s and Early 1940s,” 92.

dense mass, a visual poetics of the body that illustrates Liang's depravity and dalliances with prostitutes. In Chang's short story, this event is framed as a kind of performance staged for public view. She writes:

And that evening, while she basked in the heady afterglow of her success, even Liang Junsheng didn't seem quite as repellant as usual. One by one, the others saw the way the thing would go; one by one they slipped away, until the two of them were left alone. *And so the show went on* [emphasis added].<sup>117</sup>

Although Wang's sexual performance was not intended as a spectacle to be witnessed by the other revolutionary students, the deliberate maneuvering around Wang to create the sexual scenario between she and Liang was part of a broader performance, a "show" that must go on.

This kind of staging around the sexual act has also been documented in Judith Farquhar's ethnographic work as she lived in Guangzhou, China throughout the 1980s. Farquhar argues that in the postsocialist era (after 1978), "private love and sex were constructions, laboriously formed as a reaction against the regime that had made such a success of collective love [propagated by the collectivist ideologies of the Chinese Communist Party during Mao's regime]."<sup>118</sup> Consider the similarities between Chang's description and Farquhar's observations of the deliberate staging around romantic and sexual scenarios:

It was an institution at the time for many who lived in my work unit to take a stroll after dinner. Among the elderly people and families on the oval drive in front of the campus's main building, one always saw some very small groups of

---

<sup>117</sup> Chang, "Lust, Caution": A Story by Eileen Chang," 21.

<sup>118</sup> Judith Farquhar, *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 171.



college students, looking nonchalant but nevertheless seeking to stay far from the largest crowds and keeping their voices low as they talked. *Sometimes one of three students would casually depart, leaving, as if by accident, two people together to continue their private exchange. All of this, I feel sure, was carefully planned* [emphasis added].<sup>119</sup>

Understanding is implicit, unspoken yet understood by all involved in the staging of this type of “mundane and inclusive eroticism.” As if following a script, this “slipping away,” as Chang puts it and “casually departing, leaving, as if by accident” as Farquhar puts it are all part of the broader sexual performance of helping create sexual opportunities between two people in a repressive, sexually-conservative environment. Although Farquhar’s observations were made in regards to a post-socialist experience of privatized love and sex, the mundane staging of sexual opportunity is pervasive throughout the Sinophone world and is a type of social performance that Lee, having grown up in Taiwan, would also be familiar with. Moreover, this ethnographic insight about the theatrical staging of sexual performance articulates the collectivist politics of sexuality in Chinese cultures and illuminates the ways in which *Lust, Caution* engages with ideas of body cultures and sexual *performative* embodiment. Wang’s body and her sexuality belonged not to herself, but to the group; her sexual performance a staged act within a larger political narrative in order to trap Yi for assassination. She says at one point to Kuang and the hard-headed resistance cell leader, Old Wu, “I play this part faithfully so that I can get to his heart.” Moreover, one act is undone by another act, as it is possible that Yi, having been set up by two previous female agents previously and assassinated both, had been suspicious of Wang all along. Wang herself describes Yi: “He knows better than you [speaking to Wu] how to put on an act.”

---

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 172.

Parallels between theatrical performance and sexual performance throughout the film illuminate its preoccupation with issues of authenticity and different kinds of performance. Significantly, the resistance group is forged from a student theater troupe. Moreover, sexual politics dictate the terms of Wang's recruitment into the troupe. A point-of-view shot during the first sequence in the flashback depicts Wang gazing at the handsome Kuang as melodramatic music swells. Sexual interest, romantic possibility, and political concern collude in this scene as Lai yells out to the Chinese troupes carrying Guomindang Nationalist flags, "Beat the Japanese and when you come back, we'll marry you." As Lai continues, "With all the men off to war, who'll be left for us to marry?" the camera pans down and frames Kuang from Wang's point of view, pursuing the red herring romantic storyline which Lee uses to ambiguate the narrative and emphasize Wang's self-sacrifices for her country. She will forego a potentially loving, and understanding marriage with a man who shares her values and passions in order to ensnare Yi. As an actress, Wang's *performance* of sexual interest in Yi supersedes and supplants her authentic romantic feelings for Kuang.

In the scene when Wang and other students have first arrived at the Hong Kong university, Kuang approaches both women and recruits them for a new drama society, which would be the training grounds for the group's eventual political act. When Lai tells Kuang that she has never performed with men before, his apparent progressiveness emerges when he states that because there are fewer thespians at school, they must all work together. However, when Lai suggests doing "A Doll's House," Kuang quickly shuts down the idea, saying that, "In times of such political factionalism, who would be interested in that kind of bourgeois drama?" echoing a prevalent concern in feminist postcolonial studies that observes the ways in which women's

issues have been systematically subordinated to revolutionary causes.<sup>120</sup> A second voyeuristic point-of-view shot frames a sequence when Wang watches Kuang rehearse onstage. Lee crosscuts between Kuang and Wang, whose expression is one of trepidation and desire as she gazes upon the dramatically-lit Kuang in the center of the stage. Both Wang and Lai wear drab, dark clothing and no makeup—a remarkable contrast from the previous sequences set in the diegetic future in which Wang as Mai Tai Tai is heavily and meticulously made up with white powder, cat-lined eyeliner, and red lips, a feminine masquerade with political intent. Indeed, the film’s gesture to Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* foregrounds the film’s preoccupation with disguise, performance, and authenticity. By playing the role of the dutiful and submissive wife, Nora affirms Torvald’s manhood, as he states, “I should not be a man if this womanly helplessness did not just give you a double attractiveness in my eyes.”<sup>121</sup> However, Nora’s awakening arrives when she realizes that her performance as a plaything for her father and now her husband comes at a price of individual freedom and authentic self-expression. In Wang’s case, the situation is reversed wherein she must sacrifice her authentic self for the sake of performance. Masculine disguise also belies characters’ true desires: Kuang’s dedication to his role as the upstanding Confucian intellectual precludes him from a romantic and sexual relationship with Wang, and Yi’s role as a collaborator necessitates that he executes Wang after the assassination plot is exposed—however his distraught, teary expression at the end of the film reveals his regret. Chiu-wai’s performance as Yi indicates that although Wang dies, Yi will live

---

<sup>120</sup> *A Doll’s House* was a play written by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen in 1879, and it was widely interpreted as a critique of middle-class European gender and marriage norms. Later it was widely adapted as a popular Chinese revolutionary play in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century after Hu Shi adapted the play into a Chinese story entitled, “The Greatest Event in Life” (*Zhongshendashi*). Under the guise of equality of the sexes, or “state feminism,” although Chinese women achieved a certain level of legal equality, their everyday social lives did not necessarily improve as a result.

<sup>121</sup> Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll’s House: Unabridged* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1992), 64.

with the pain of his loss. This subtle performance suggests that the condition of occupation adversely impacts both sides, and that victim and perpetrator both suffer losses in the end.

Lee's longtime producer and screenwriter partner, James Schamus, has also commented on the performative nature of lust and its relationship to caution, which scholars have connected to Schamus' familiarity with the work of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek. In the "Introduction" to *Lust, Caution: The Story, the Screenplay, and the Making of the Film*, Schamus writes:

For the performer always, by definition, performs *for* someone. And that audience, no matter how entranced, is always complicit: it knows deep down that the performance isn't real, but it also knows the cathartic truth the performer strives for is attainable only when that truth is, indeed, *performed*. Yi doesn't simply desire Mak [sic] Tai-tai while suspecting she is not who she says she is; it is precisely *because* he suspects her that he desires her. In this sense his desire is the same as hers: he wants to *know* her. And so lust and caution are, in Zhang's work, functions of each other, not because we desire what is dangerous, but because our love is, no matter how earnest, an *act*, and therefore always an object of suspicion.<sup>122</sup>

The tension between lust and caution is not only what attracts the protagonists in *Lust, Caution*, it is also what sustains erotic interest in Tang the actress, of whom audiences know little yet see participating in the most intimate of human interactions. We are complicit in the film's highly graphic and realistic sex scenes, knowing that the 'cathartic truth' of the intensely fraught connection between enemies can only be achieved through the film's sexual performances. However, as previously discussed, complicity with the Japanese during the War is not a truth

---

<sup>122</sup> James Schamus, "Introduction," in *Lust, Caution: The Story, the Screenplay, and the Making of the Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), xii.

many Chinese people wish to face. There is no cathartic release in such representation for many Chinese, as they view it as a shameful history. The intimate violence of occupation and war, metaphorized through bodies engaging in sexual power play, is simply too uncomfortable for many Chinese to face. Thus Chinese critics have publically called the film a “sexually transmitted disease” and have charged it with “using pornography to attack humanity,” and even respected American critics are baffled at what they may see as “Mr. Lee’s newfound flirtation with kink.”<sup>123</sup> Similar criticisms were launched at Liliana Cavani’s 1974 film, *The Night Porter* in which an ex-Nazi officer and a concentration camp prisoner have a sado-masochistic love affair after the war (Roger Ebert wrote that the film was “as nasty as it is lubricious, a despicable attempt to titillate us by exploiting memories of persecution and suffering”).<sup>124</sup> Cavani was also interested in understanding the psychological binding of victim and perpetrator together, as the characters in *The Night Porter* attempt to make sense of their experiences through various kinds of sexual performance. *Lust, Caution*’s sexual performances are unsettling and unnerving, precisely because as Schamus says, “the cathartic truth the performer strives for is attainable only when that truth is, indeed, *performed*.”<sup>125</sup> In this case, the cathartic truth involves the uncomfortable realities of sexual colonization both between a man and a woman and within imperial interests. Indeed, the film asks the questions, “What kinds of truths are possible under occupation?” and “How can performed truth be true?” Truth is disengaged from authenticity and becomes embodied as staged and scripted interpretation. Wang *performs* the role of Mai Tai-tai who lusts and desires Yi, however, through their performative relationship, a truer truth emerges from their entangled bodies which relates to the collaborative intimacies between the Japanese

---

<sup>123</sup> Manohla Dargis, "A Cad and a Femme Fatale Simmer," *The New York Times*, September 28, 2007.

<sup>124</sup> Roger Ebert, "The Night Porter (Review)," *The Chicago Sun-Times*, February 10, 1975.

<sup>125</sup> Schamus, "Introduction," xii.

and the Chinese during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Moreover, it is precisely because we do not have access to the entire truth of the extent of the Japanese brutality towards the colonized Chinese that a perpetually unsatisfied *desire* to know will persist.

Furthermore, what Schamus says about lust and love (which he conflates) can also be said of cinema itself. A film is also “an object of suspicion” precisely because of its confusion of truth and fiction—its representational and artificial nature. That is to say, there is an ontological truth about images captured through the apparatus of the camera, even as the images are used to construct a fictional story. To quote André Bazin, “The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it.”<sup>126</sup> Characters kissing onscreen records an authentic moment of actors kissing one another, freed from time and space and immortalized via celluloid or digital image. Moreover, Wang’s sexual performance involved the ability and skill to sexually please Yi and to convey her own sexual pleasure and interest to him. To convey their multiplied sexual performances in *Lust, Caution*, Tang and Chiu-wai engaged in intense bodily contact, their bodies creating a visible surplus, or, quoting Jean-Louis Comolli a “bodily supplement,” described by Sobchack as the interplay of the actor’s multiple bodies which involve their biological and physiological makeup; their self-conscious sense of identity and personhood; their performative body; and their star body.<sup>127</sup> Therefore, Schamus’s observation, “And that audience, no matter how entranced, is always complicit: it knows deep down that the performance isn’t real, but it also knows the cathartic truth the performer strives for is attainable only when that truth is, indeed, *performed*” can also be applied to understanding

---

<sup>126</sup> André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967; 2005), 14.

<sup>127</sup> Vivian Sobchack, "Being on the Screen: A Phenomenology of Cinematic Flesh, or the Actor's Four Bodies," in *Acting and Performance in Moving Image Culture: Bodies, Screens, Renderings*, ed. Jörg Sternagel, Deborah Levitt, and Dieter Mersch (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2014).

how the film audience is complicit in the performed truths within a film. We see Wang, Mai Tai-tai, and Tang Wei as one *person*, even though her *body* generates a surplus of meaning.

The same structure of truth obfuscation that underlies the lust/love between two people (to love is to never truly know one's partner) is also duplicated in the structure of an active and interested spectatorship premised on suspicion and caution. In *Lust, Caution*, we suspect every character's intentions and motivations. In terms of the ontological phenomena of cinema, truth and fiction are always confused in cinematic re-presentation (what was seen is always "real" in the Bazinian sense), and it is the obscurity between real and un-real that sustains the romantic relationships between lovers, as well as the relationship between viewer and film. The enduring desire *to know* and the persistence of suspicion thus underlies both love/lust relationship and the spectatorial experience. Moreover, the idea of *erotics* as an aesthetic experience relating to the passion of love or lust can be further theorized upon in terms of our relationship with actors and performers. It is not accidental that fans often express their admiration for film stars by using the word "love." The nature of this love relates back to the experiential structures of spectatorship. Laura U. Marks' conception of the erotics of being in the world as both subject and object is derived from her observation of an oscillation that engages with the material and sensuous world through a constant shifting between distance and closeness.<sup>128</sup> This observation can also describe the erotics of spectatorship, as identification with film characters relies on a constant shifting of embodied and impassioned relationality. It can be said that the relationship between the spectator and screen is one of *erotic suspicion*.

Intercultural filmmakers, like Lee, move between cultures and are interested in the *limits* of visuality rather than the representational qualities of moving images, because diasporic and

---

<sup>128</sup> Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

exilic experiences “cause a disjunction in notions of truth.”<sup>129</sup> Thus, their films, which challenge the ideological notion that cinema *can* represent reality, best exemplify other kinds of knowledge production, such as those produced by the senses of the body. These films demonstrate how vision is tactile, and exploit the materiality of objects in order to create “sensuous geographies” evocative of place and memory. Marks reveals an interesting tension in intercultural films, insofar as they display both a *suspicion* of visuality and *reliance* on the image to evoke a sensual engagement. In order to reconcile this tension in her own arguments, Marks deploys Gilles Deleuze’s cinematic theories on the image and Henri Bergson’s theories on perception, which hold that visual perception is both embodied and incomplete. Thus, intercultural cinema approximates memories “between the gaps” of the cinematic image through abstracted appeals to the sensorium via material recreation rather than narrative representation. In *Lust, Caution*, it is “between the gaps” of images of Tang and Chiu-wai’s coiled bodies that we can *make sense* of the truth of occupation as a penetrating, intimate corporeal experience. It is through an embodied spectatorship attuned to the affective, sensorial, and phenomenological dimensions of this film that we can begin to understand how it may *feel* to be a Chinese person living under the threat of Japanese occupation through Tang’s performances of hatred, passion, and finally surrender.

Furthermore, sexual *practices* (as activities and acts) must first be *practiced* (repeatedly applied and exercised). The premise of the group’s assumptions is that only by practicing the physical mechanics of sex can one perform it. As if a kind of sport, in order to “get good” at sex, one has to put in the time to practice. In the second scene showing Wang and fellow resistance member Liang having sex, Wang is shown writhing on top of Liang. While the lower half of Wang’s body is engaged in sexual intercourse, her facial expression reveals mild irritation. The

---

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.



shot-reverse-shot structure between Wang and Liang captures a brief coital conversation between the two as Liang tries to tease Wang by telling her, “I think you’re getting the hang of it.” An annoyed Wang answers, “I do not wish to discuss these matters with you.” What is especially striking and peculiar about this scene, however, is the message of physical interest, or at least *commitment*, conveyed through Tang’s legible physiology and labor, in stark contrast to her verbal denial of interest. In other words, although she acts as if merely performing a perfunctory task, Tang’s flushed red cheeks and matted down hair conveys an intense bodily engagement and perhaps even interest, even if she is morally or otherwise repulsed by the situation. As this scene demonstrates, the body itself confounds notions of truth and authenticity. Such visible signifiers of bodily engagement are recreated throughout the sex scenes with Yi, contributing to the ambiguity of Wang’s true intentions and desires, which creates a sustained, intriguing and *suspicious* inaccessibility to her interiority and true intentions.

Finally, metatextual information that the performers, first-time film actress Tang and veteran transnational Chinese actor Chiu-wai were *acting* sex in a highly-realistic manner produces an additive spectatorial layer of knowledge about the sexual performances. Roseanna Ng (First Assistant Director) explains in an article entitled, “Eleven Days in Hell,” that only three other people (the cameraman, his assistant, and the sound assistant) were allowed to be in the room with the actors and Lee when they filmed the sex scenes.<sup>130</sup> Other than the information Ng provides about the walls being fully padded (like in action films), and that, “scores of *qipao* [body-hugging traditional Chinese dress] and underwear were ripped apart violently,” little else is revealed about the production of the sex scenes.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, notwithstanding its

---

<sup>130</sup> Roseanna Ng, "Eleven Days in Hell," in *Lust, Caution: The Story, the Screenplay, and the Making of the Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007).

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

melodramatic flair, Ng recounts that, “To stay alive, they had sworn eternal silence” in regards to what they saw during those eleven days of shooting the sex scenes.<sup>132</sup> Ironically, this kind of austere discretion around the performance did not apply to the depicted acts themselves, graphically exhibited in the film. Ng also recounts that Chiu-wai “was close to collapse when he emerged from the small room eleven days later” and that even Lee “was subdued for quite a while after finishing these scenes.”<sup>133</sup> Meanwhile Ng, monitoring behind the walls through earphones, describes the experience as “days spent in hell” due to the intensity required from the performers to portray “not only lust, but the struggle between lust and passion, and between love and hate by extension.”<sup>134</sup> From Ng’s comments, we deduce that the simulation took an actual physical toll on the actors’ bodies, a testament to the labor of cinematic performance.

Assuming that they did not actually have penetrative sex, and even if they did so, 11 continual days of the physical simulation of sex is undoubtedly taxing. Furthermore, with no coital release, a building pressure and tension in the actors’ bodies is conveyed through the intensity of the onscreen performances. Lee’s directorial techniques with these sex scenes, of pushing his actors’ bodies to the limit, are not accidental or incidental to the impassioned responses the film received. Building pressure and tension, which were communicated through the actors’ bodies, were duplicated in frustrated *feelings* of hyper-nationalism in reaction to the film. Referring back to Huang’s essay entitled, “China Has Stood Up, But Ang Lee and Company are Still Kneeling,” Huang’s defense of the nation is felt in his frustrated, vitriolic rhetoric. Indeed, it could be said that the nationalism that manifested around the film is a result

---

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 257-58.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 257.

of pent-up frustration over a fifty-year silence and continuous denial on the part of Japanese politicians and historians over the events of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

This section addressed the nature of *Lust, Caution*'s sexual performances and how these sequences relate to both theatrical and political performances within the film's diegesis. I also argued that questions of authenticity and suspicion contribute to the erotics within the film between characters, as well as to the erotic relationship between spectator and film. In other words, it is the instability of sexual performance that produces both excitement and interest, however, as "an object of suspicion" it produces affective anxiety. This *performance anxiety* attaches itself to feelings of nationalism, particularly as the film deals with a sensitive history in China's recent past.

"National affects" and the trans/national reception of *Lust, Caution*

In Berry's exploration of traumatic representation in Chinese literature and film, he asks, "Who is the true keeper of historical memory? At what point can the atrocity experienced by another person become one's own?"<sup>135</sup> In regards to *Lust, Caution* and its representation of the Second Sino-Japanese War, addressing this question involves tracing the responses and spectatorial experiences throughout the Sinophone world, as they illuminate a trans/nationally shared sensitivity towards the subject matter. Author of the first Chinese-language academic monograph on *Lust, Caution*, well-known trans/national Chinese cultural critic and scholar Leo Ou-fan Lee notes the different factions of the film's Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong supporters and critics.<sup>136</sup> Ou-fan Lee observed that while Eileen Chang fans were critical of the film adaptation because it did not retain the *jingshen* (spirituality) or *yishu* (artistry) of the

---

<sup>135</sup> Berry, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*, 9.

<sup>136</sup> Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Kan Sejie* (Watching *Lust, Caution*) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2008).

original story, intellectuals were critical because they felt Lee neglected to capture the *lengku wuqing* (coldness, without affection) of the original story, opting instead for a *langman de aiqing gushi* (romantic love story). Furthermore, Ou-fan Lee notes that some historians are highly critical of the details depicted during the historical timeframe of Wang Jingwei's collaborationist government (1940-1945), some even questioning the accuracy of the mahjong gameplay. The loudest protests, however, had to do with the humanizing, and *shanggan* (sentimental) portrait of the political collaborator, Yi.<sup>137</sup> Ou-fan Lee himself is more critical of author Chang than of Lee for her avoidance of addressing the everyday experience under Japanese colonization and oppression since she herself never directly experienced it (although, of course, neither did Lee). He accuses Chang of a certain amount of complicity because of her ex-husband's involvement with the collaborationist government in addition to Chang's ongoing professional work for *qingri* (Japanese sympathizing) publications throughout her career. However, Ou-fan Lee's most potent criticism of the short story is that the Japanese do not even exist within the story, thereby seemingly erasing their involvement and mitigating their responsibilities in the war. Ou-fan Lee also argues that because Lee was born and raised in Taiwan (his father was a Guomindang Nationalist refugee who relocated to Taiwan at the end of the war), like Chang, Lee never experienced the brutality of everyday life under the Japanese occupation, and hence cannot do the historical period "justice." Ou-fan Lee believes that Lee's affective attachment to this history

---

<sup>137</sup> Similar criticisms from Chinese spectators and critics were also launched at Lu Chuan for *City of Life and Death* (also known as *Nanjing! Nanjing!*) for his relatively humanizing portrait of a Japanese soldier. According to a *Newsweek* article, Lu responded by saying "I don't want to tell lies. I do believe Japanese people are human beings. It's a basic truth." Isaac Stone Fish, "Remembering Nanjing; A Generation of Chinese Artists are Grappling with One of the Nation's Greatest Tragedies," *Newsweek* (International Edition), January 19, 2012. In Chinese media, however, Lu suggests that one of the principle themes in his film is to show Chinese *dikang* (resistance) during the Rape of Nanking. See *Huiju shidai fengmang de boke* Blog, "Lu Chuan: Nanjing Nanjing," December 31, 2008, [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4fc23dd20100byvo.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4fc23dd20100byvo.html).

was not *authentic* or *true* enough. Indeed, there is a sense that because justice has never been served vis-à-vis official Japanese apology and compensation for their war crimes, that cinematic representations of wartime China bear the burden of historical revelation and designated grievance.<sup>138</sup>

Ou-fan Lee also notes the geographical distinctions and nuances within the trans/national discourses surrounding the film. Within the critical circles of the East Asian Sinophone, Taiwan bestowed the film with its highest honor of the 44<sup>th</sup> Golden Horse Award; several Beijing critics and filmmakers publically denounced Lee as a traitor; Shanghai intellectuals were critical yet a bit more receptive than their Beijing counterparts; and the film became a popular hit in Hong Kong. Among the viewing population, he states that while Beijing mainlanders and Taiwanese have protested loudest against the film, Shanghai residents are more open to the film, and Hong Kong viewers are primarily interested in the film's three sexual performances, jokingly referring to them as *roubozhan* (literally "meat battles" which mean "hand to hand struggle"). Perhaps because of the violent nature of the sex scenes, some have even described the scenes as "heterosexual sex hiding under what appears to be homosexual sex," an illuminating comment about the perceived mechanics of normal heterosexual practices and "deviant" sexual behavior.<sup>139</sup> As Farquhar notes in her investigation of food and sexual appetites in post-socialist China, homosexuality and other forms of non-reproductive sex practices such as "sadism, masochism, exhibitionism, cross-dressing" are widely regarded by Chinese sexologists as

---

<sup>138</sup> As Ou-fan Lee points out, the Shanghai occupation by the Japanese is a "shady chapter in the 'master narrative of modern Chinese history that has seldom been explored by Chinese historians.'" Ou-fan Lee points out that only one book written by a Chinese scholar addresses this subject, Po-shek Fu's book, *Passivity and Collaboration: Intellectual Choices in Occupied Shanghai, 1937-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). However, Lee argues that Fu's research "fails to explore the 'collaborationist' mentality." Leo Ou-fan Lee, "Ang Lee's Lust, Caution and Its Reception," *boundary 2* 35, no. 3 (2008).

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

sexually deviant and “inconsistent with nature.”<sup>140</sup> Although homosexuality was taken off the official list of mental disorders in the latest edition of *Chinese Standards for Classification and Diagnosis of Mental Disorders* in 2001, Farquhar argues that homosexuality is still discussed “with varying degrees of disapproval,” even despite the occasional publication of gay and lesbian texts out of Beijing.<sup>141</sup> The sex scenes in *Lust, Caution* are sado-masochistic in nature, with power play enacted across the sexual performances by the seemingly naked actors. The film’s collapse of sadism, masochism, and exhibitionism with perceived homosexual practices provocatively challenges conservative scientific discourses around sex in post-socialist China. Moreover, as Chi argues in his investigation of the exhibition history of *Lust, Caution*, “Thinking through exhibitionism reveals how the display or visualization of politics, sex and violence that made *Lust, Caution* such a protean and sensational artefact also offered spectators a way to participate in the contestation over national affects and images, not as interlocutors per se but as consumers.”<sup>142</sup> Both the discussions around *Lust, Caution*’s various national exhibition practices and the sexual exhibitionism within the film revolved around concealment and revelation—whether referring to how many minutes and which scenes were cut out, or what the “meat battle” scenes conceal and reveal of the human body. Moreover such conversations about the “exhibitionist” qualities of the film became a way to manage “national affects and images” and to establish communal social responses to the cinematic displays of both heterosexual and historical perversities.

Conservative Chinese diasporic communities in the U.S. also vocalized their disapproval of the film, using similar rhetoric to that of mainlander and Taiwanese critics. As Arjun

---

<sup>140</sup> Farquhar, *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China*, 236.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>142</sup> Chi, "Exhibitionism: *Lust, Caution*," 185.

Appadurai points out, “Although modern ethnicity is in this sense culturalist and intimately linked to the practices of the nation-state, it is also worth noting that an important group of culturalist movements is today *transnational*, given that many mobilized national ethnicities, because of international migration, operate beyond the confines of a single nation-state.”<sup>143</sup> Within the present state of globalized migration, such “diasporic public spheres” are nevertheless often affectively linked to the native nation-state and to its histories, thereby creating a *felt* trans/national ethnic politics. As *South China Morning Post* reported, a Chinese American group based in Sunnyvale, California, called the Traditional Family Coalition issued a press release written in both English and Chinese urging all Chinese people around the world to boycott the film.<sup>144</sup> In the press release entitled, “Boycott: *Lust, Caution*. An [sic] Lee: Cultural Traitor,” executive director of the coalition, Bill Tam, condemns the film on moral grounds:

In the current pop culture, the mentality of some female singers and movie stars is worse than that of prostitutes. Most prostitutes are being forced unwillingly into the profession by poverty, coercion, or drug addiction. Most have some sense of shame or the conscience to know not to lure young teens or children. The opposite is true for the movie stars and singers. Many of them are millionaires and they have no need to sell their bodies like common prostitutes. Yet they prey on young teens and children with their seductive acts of simulated sex onstage and onscreen without any shame or remorse. Not even a prostitute would commit such immoral crimes. This analogy finds a parallel in the movie *Lust Caution*, which was directed by the famous Chinese movie director An [sic] Lee and was recently

---

<sup>143</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 147.

<sup>144</sup> Alex Lo, "Ang Lee, Loved by Most, Hated by Group of Chinese in California," *South Morning China Post*, October 6, 2007.

awarded at the Venice Film Festival. The movie's prime selling point was the prolonged explicit sex scene of a Chinese actress and actor, and was only included for the shock-value.<sup>145</sup>

First indirectly attacking Tang, Tam uses no uncertain terms to suggest that she is worse than a prostitute. In line with other critics and the Chinese state, Tam's gendered critique of "female singers and movie stars" excuses Chiu-wai from his responsibility in the simulated and reciprocal sexual acts, revealing that there remains a disproportionate surveillance on the female body in Chinese societies. Furthermore, by conflating "acts of simulated sex" with prostitution, Tam argues that cinematic performance is ontologically equivalent to prostitution—a Bazinian argument taken to one logical extremity. In the second half of his critique, Tam continues condemning the film, but turns his attention to Lee. Tam accuses the filmmaker of being a traitor, not unlike the *hanjian* character of Yi in the film. In a similar rhetorical stroke seen in his critique of Tang, Tam first compares Lee's use of Tang to the ways in which the Japanese Imperial Army forcibly enslaved Chinese women, along with Korean and (to a much lesser degree) Japanese women, into sexual slavery. Then Tam claims Lee's actions are even worse than the Japanese war crimes:

The award-winning news reminded me of the atrocities during the Japanese invasion of China in the Second World War. Chinese women were captured by the Japanese army to become unwilling prostitutes, or "comfort women," for the entertainment of the Japanese soldiers. There are no Chinese I know that would not feel humiliated by the brutalization and exploitation of Chinese women. Now

---

<sup>145</sup> Bill Tam, "Boycott: Lust, Caution. An [Sic] Lee: Cultural Traitor," Traditional Family Coalition, September 29, 2007, [http://tfcus.homestead.com/boycott\\_lust\\_caution.pdf](http://tfcus.homestead.com/boycott_lust_caution.pdf).



sixtyfive [sic] years later, we have a renowned Chinese movie director, An [sic] Lee, ordering the Chinese actor and actress to strip and perform explicit sex on the big screen to entertain the western audiences, begging for a foreign film award. Such pimping of Chinese movie stars to the western audience is even worse than the “comfort women” case during the Japanese invasion. Like the comfort women, the movie should bring humiliation and rage to any conscientious Chinese. To add insult to the injury, this movie depicts the events happening at the same years when “comfort women” were exploited by the Japanese. Some Chinese movie critics call him a “national pride” for winning foreign film awards. To me, An [sic] Lee uses a national shame to further his personal career ambition. He is simply a shameless modern-day traitor to the Chinese culture.<sup>146</sup>

Similar in argumentation and rhetoric of other criticisms coming from mainland China and Taiwan, Tam’s histrionic rhetoric indicates that Chinese diasporic communities are just as concerned with notions of nationalism and loyalty. Moreover, he insinuates that in order to be properly patriotic and conscientiously *Chinese*, one must have the ability to use affective feelings of shame and remorse as a kind of moral gauge, feelings which Tang and Lee supposedly lack. Tam consistently returns to shame, remorse, and humiliation to punctuate his critique, ultimately suggesting that “national shame” is contingent on an individual ability to experience such “national affects.” He states, “There are no Chinese I know that would not feel humiliated by the brutalization and exploitation of Chinese women.” To be Chinese is to identify with these affective positions of shame and humiliation towards the film. Moreover, it is not just *national* shame that is at stake here. The fact that Tam’s tirade was republished in a Hong Kong

---

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

newspaper indicates that trans/national interests are forged together by the threat of shaming a communal Chinese social identity. Tam's tirade suggests that part of the cultural practices of a global Chinese identity involves the policing of representations of Chinese historical events. As Brook explains, "The misgovernment of China during the postwar decades has only deepened the sense of national humiliation that many Chinese have carried with them since the occupation...." this trans/national humiliation becomes projected unto *Lust, Caution*, specifically cathected to the film's bodily performances.<sup>147</sup>

### Shame as a trans/national structure of feeling

This section lingers on an affective-theoretical discussion of shame, as it is the most prominent structure of feeling that emerges from the critical reception of *Lust, Caution*.

Expressions of shame surrounding the sexual performances in *Lust, Caution* reveal the extent to which a personal spectatorial body is affectively cathected to the idea of Chinese-ness through discursive contestations surrounding re-presentations of Chinese bodies.

By invoking the shared and painful history of the Second Sino-Japanese conflicts in WWII, spectators and critics of *Lust, Caution* across Sinophone communities around the world vocalized a shared and collectivist feeling of shame. Writing about the radical depersonalization of shame in Deleuze's analysis of T.E. Lawrence's writings, Elspeth Probyn offers a description that, "Shame cannot be conceived of as an external object that could be dispassionately described, nor is it a purely personal feeling. Shame is subjective in the strong sense of bringing into being an entity or and an idea through the specific explosion of mind, body, place, and history."<sup>148</sup> In agreement with Deleuze, Probyn writes, "Shame is an affect that crosses many different orders of

---

<sup>147</sup> Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China*, 6.

<sup>148</sup> Elspeth Probyn, "Writing Shame," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 82.

bodies. In this way, Lawrence is not a mere cipher for the shame of what the English were doing to the Arabs, nor is he a personification of a shameful history. Rather, Deleuze seems to be arguing that a new idea of shame was produced out of the dice throw that is Lawrence. It is a shame that is intimately connected with the character of empire at that time: haughty and proud, and deeply filled with shame.”<sup>149</sup> As a character trait, not of an individual, but of an empire, the character of postsocialist China has also been described in similar terms as “haughty and proud, and deeply filled with shame.” Notably, Chinese political scholar Perry Link defines the “two kinds of truths” structuring value systems in contemporary China as “materialism” and “nationalism,” describing the “narrow nationalism” of China as that which is a “thin, chauvinistic nationalism that carries a rivalrous edge to it, based not so much in genuine pride but in insecurity.”<sup>150</sup> Political science scholar John W. Garver concurs, writing that, “Modern Chinese nationalism arose from a sense of shame, born of the humiliation that the West and Japan inflicted upon China in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”<sup>151</sup> Thus in order to understand modern-day “Chinese-ness,” it seems imperative to understand the cultural and historical significances of shame.

Deleuze and Chinese critics write about shame in terms of national betrayal. Whereas Deleuze diagnoses Lawrence’s self-shame arising from fraudulent and dishonest political dealings between the Middle East and the British Empire, critics of *Lust, Caution*, like Tam, project their shame of ethno-nationalist association with onscreen images of Chinese sex and politics unto Tang and Lee. As a self-described “conscientious Chinese” person living in the U.S.,

---

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>150</sup> Perry Link, “The Quest for Moral Values in Contemporary Chinese Popular Thought,” talk delivered at UCLA Center for Chinese Studies, May 6, 2010.

<sup>151</sup> John W. Garver, “China’s Wartime Diplomacy,” in *China’s Bitter Victory: The War with Japan, 1937-1945*, ed. James C. Hsiung and Steven I. Levine (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), 3.

Tam is humiliated and enraged at the depictions of Wang's exploited body, revealing how cinematic representations of bodies reconstitute affectivity within spectator bodies. Affect, after all, is "sticky," as Sara Ahmed points out, and as such is "what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects."<sup>152</sup> In this case, a connection between perceived like-bodies through a shared sense of ethnic identity and cultural values creates sticky affects like shame, rage, and humiliation.

As shame is an important cultural construct in Chinese tradition and politics, it is important to identify the thing-ness, or object-ness of this particular affect. By placing shame in a specific cultural context, we may better understand how this affect circulates within individual Chinese bodies and throughout Sinophone bodies politic, "cross[ing] many different orders of bodies."<sup>153</sup> While in Judeo-Christian Biblical accounts, shame is the result of Adam and Eve's deviation from God and is experienced as a sexual shame in conjunction with the awareness of their naked flesh, classical Chinese notions of shame are rooted in Confucianist teachings of self-perfection. As harmonious group relations are emphasized in the pursuit of *ren* (the ultimate manifestation of a perfect self), Confucianism "conceptualises shame as an emotion as well as a human capacity that directs the person inward for self-examination and motivates the person toward socially and morally desirable change."<sup>154</sup> In the developmental psychology study, "The Organization of Chinese Shame Concepts," researchers expound on this emotion:

When one has done something wrong or socially inappropriate, admitting one's misconduct and desiring to change oneself is also believed to be an act of

---

<sup>152</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 29.

<sup>153</sup> Elspeth Probyn, "Writing Shame," *ibid.*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 82.

<sup>154</sup> Jin Li, Lianqin Wang, and Kurt Fischer, "The Organization of Chinese Shame Concepts," *Cognition and Emotion* 18, no. 6 (2004): 769.

expiation requiring personal courage (Fung, in press; Wu & Lai, 1992). It is this very function and power of shame that Confucianism values and fosters. The Western association of shame as being harmful to a person's health (Schneider, 1977; Wurmser, 1981) does not appear to be part of the Confucian aspiration. In Chinese culture, if a person is perceived as having no sense of shame, that person may be thought of as beyond moral reach, and therefore is even 'feared by the devil.' Thus, shame to the Chinese is not a mere emotion, but also a moral and virtuous sensibility to be pursued (Fung, in press; Hu, 1944; Hwang, 1987; Schoenhals, 1993; Zhai, 1995)."<sup>155</sup>

Shame is thus part of a person's moral fiber and is considered a healthy affect. Moreover, after collecting 113 different "shame terms" in Chinese, researchers identified key components in the concept of shame: the concept of "face" (as in *diulian*, "losing face"); physiological signs of shame which include "blushing and desires to hide"; and social attempts to encourage wrongdoers to make amends.

Physiological bodily (and facial) cues of shame and social reintegration coalesce in onscreen cinematic representation, foregrounding the collective consequences that arise from individual feelings of shame. In other words, the viewing experience of onscreen bodies forges intersubjectivity between the audience and the actor's body. When watching a spectacle that induces shame, our bodies also recreate similar physiological sensations (i.e. "blushing and desires to hide"). Thus the type of embodied screening elicited by *Lust, Caution* is neither a type of sexual play nor a rite of humiliation—rather, it is a collusion of multiple affects that can best be abbreviated as a *libidinal shame* that is historically and culturally situated—libidinal in the

---

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

sense that desiring identifications are steeped in issues of gender and sexuality. Affective confusion becomes linked with historical confusion, and is bonded to the feared amnesia and erasure of the traumas of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Furthermore, although many Sinophone journalists reportedly sensationalized the naked display of certain body parts like Tang's unshaven armpits and Chiu-wai's unconcealed hips, it is the confusion of *shame* with *sexual pleasure* in actress Tang's inscrutable *face* that becomes most unsettling for Chinese viewers.

#### "Structure of emotion" and Tang Wei's face

This section elaborates on the "structure of emotion" in the Chinese context in order to further develop the discussion on affect as culturally shaped and expressed. In describing the somatization of Chinese emotion discourses, I particularize the discursive body politics that surround representations of the Chinese body. Furthermore, as the face is the most expressive component of the body, I elaborate on Chinese social and theatrical traditions of face-reading. Finally, I tie these general discussions to an analysis of *Lust, Caution*'s lead actress, Tang Wei and the ways in which her face played a pivotal role in provoking intrigue, shame, and ire.

In *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Psychology*, Michelle Yik attempts to distinguish "what is universal and what is unique about Chinese emotion," an ambitious, albeit potentially essentializing endeavor.<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless, Yik's scientific examination into the "structure of emotion" underlying everyday feelings among Chinese people does offer useful research towards culturally-inflected affect studies. In fact, there is a body of "emotion research" social science studies revolved around finding out what, if anything is "unique" about Chinese emotion.

---

<sup>156</sup> Michelle Yik, "How Unique Is Chinese Emotion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Psychology*, ed. Michael Harris Bond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 205.

However, what is particularly germane about Yik's study to this present chapter is her notion of Chinese somatization. Yik writes:

In Chinese societies, emotions are thought to be associated with physiological events. Somatization refers to the experience of bodily or somatic symptoms in place of an emotion and this has been said to be common among the Chinese in their reactions to emotional states. Some writers argued that the phenomenon reflects the lack of a working vocabulary on emotion in Chinese, although Russell and Yik (1996) have demonstrated otherwise. Still other writers have suggested that somatization implies the lack of psychologization (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1985; Tseng, 1975). Wu (1982) suggested that culture-specific expression of an emotion in Chinese is dependent upon the situation. As Ots (1990) argued, 'Chinese are culturally trained to 'listen' within their body' (p. 26)."<sup>157</sup>

Despite the divergent explanations on the origin of the somatization of Chinese emotion, Yik's summary conclusion (based on various social science studies on affect and emotion using Chinese participants), reveals that when Chinese people self-report their emotions, the language construction and deployment they use tends to describe a somatic, bodily orientation in the place of an emotional state.<sup>158</sup> Furthermore, a discussion on Chinese bodies and the somatization of

---

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>158</sup> Notwithstanding the problematic assumptions made about how Chinese *actually feel*, which is as difficult an object of study as studying the ontology of any interior state or being, Yik and other emotion social scientists offer productive research on the discursive framing of affective states specific to Chinese sociality and culture. Yik also cites a study by Tsai, Simeonova, and Watanabe (2004) showing that "the Chinese group deployed more somatic (e.g. dizzy) and social (e.g. friends) words when they talked about their emotions." Furthermore that another study conducted by Mak and Zane (2004) "found that reports of somatic symptoms (e.g. dizzy, hot/cold spells) were not related to the length of their stay in the USA; rather, they were related to negative emotions reported, such as anxiety and depression," 214.

emotion necessarily includes a discussion of the “face,” possessing both visual and emotional properties. In fact, the ability to read facial expressions has long been vital to the understanding and enjoyment of cinema, and face-reading also has a long tradition in Chinese culture and medicine as a means of understanding an individual’s personality as well as his/her “fate.” Bearing broad and superficial similarities to Nazi eugenics philosophies and physiognomy, Chinese physiognomy is little understood and even less studied in the West, possibly due to negative associations with racist appropriations of Western philosophies of physiognomy during WWII, which were employed by German and Japanese armies. Nevertheless, the principles of the first comprehensive handbook on physiognomy written in China, the *Shenxiang Quanbian* (Complete Guide to Spirit Physiognomy), written by Yuan Zhongche during the early Ming dynasty (1367-1458) have been widely adapted and applied by Chinese health practitioners and “body divination” or “somatomancy” body analysis experts in the Sinophone world, as well in as other East Asian countries, including Japan and Korea.<sup>159</sup> As the primary point of social contact and legibility, the face as the manifestation of “a person’s character and fate” must be considered a key component to the Chinese spectatorial experience. Moreover, the ability to read a face does not necessarily rest on a specialist’s knowledge of Chinese physiognomy. Rather, along with the metaphysical divinations and theories on the face, commonly-used colloquialisms surrounding *lian* (face) and *mianzi* (literally meaning outer appearance, but referring to face and reputation),

---

<sup>159</sup> For more on the original text as well as on other texts and practitioners of classical Chinese physiognomy, see Livia Kohn, “A Textbook of Physiognomy: The Tradition of the *Shenxiang quanbian*,” *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (1986), pp. 227-258. Daoism historian scholar Livia Kohn explains the basic metaphysical principles of Chinese physiognomy still being practiced today: “1. It presupposes a theory on the interaction of body and spirit. 2. It gives detailed rules for analysis of body types and features according the theory of the five phases [*wuxing* 五行 theory to explain interactions between phenomena using wood, fire, earth, metal, and water] as well as according to animal types. 3. It uses facial complexion analysis, again in accordance with the five-phases-theory.” *Ibid*, 227-228.



also indicate that observations of the face are used as a kind of social gauge of status and emotion. For instance, when one is describing another person's emotional state, physical descriptions of the face are often given, for example, describing a red or green face denotes that a person is angry, a glowing red face (*hongguang manmian*) means a person is happy and/or healthy, a red face with red ears (*mianhong'erchi*) means embarrassed or angry, observing that "eyebrows are horizontal, eyes are vertical" (*hengmeilimu*) means someone is extremely outraged, and a frightened person is described as "without human color" (*mianwureuse*), etc.<sup>160</sup>

Furthermore, the ability to read *lian* also relates to Chinese theatrical performance and the understanding of characters within narrative:

In Chinese drama, painting the faces of theatrical actors according to formal convention is known as *lianpu*. It has two components: *lianxing* (facial shape) and *lianse* (facial color). *Lianpu* signifies the identity of individual characters. By looking at the painted faces, the audience can tell the approximate age, social position and moral character of each. Inner emotions find expression only through painted faces, and must in addition conform to role requirements. Portrayal of individuality and characterization are thus constrained. All these are formidable barriers an actor has to transcend to demonstrate his unique artistry. The implication of *lianpu* boils down to this: just as identity is defined by *lianpu* on stage, it is inseparable from the social position one occupies and the role one

---

<sup>160</sup> There are many more colloquialisms such as these that are used in everyday conversation. Another term to describe a frightened person is "without dirt color" (*mianrutuse*) with the implication that the "human color" should be the same color as dirt or clay.

plays in real life.”<sup>161</sup>

Thus, the reading of *lianpu* in a theatrical setting and the ability to read one’s social position and “the role one plays in real life” are interrelated and in fact “inseparable.” Because the ability to read *lianpu* in cinema is just as significant as in a theatrical context, a critical engagement with the physical and facial qualities and expressions of actors/actresses ought to be practiced in analyses of Chinese cinema and especially of its cinematic bodies.

What can be said about the actress Tang Wei and her face in *Lust, Caution*? Why was it frequently said that she “lost face” with her sexual performances in the film, and what does this mean? It is precisely the *inability* to read Tang’s face that produces the suspenseful *erotics of spectatorial suspicion* discussed earlier. Indeed, her inscrutable *lianpu* was carefully selected by Lee and the production team. First Assistant Director Ng recounts that during pre-production, Lee’s parting instruction for what he was looking for in the lead actress was, “What others don’t want, I’ll take,” suggesting that the lead character’s face must be undesirable, at least in the commercial sense, and therefore unfamiliar.<sup>162</sup> This quote also suggests that Tang’s unrecognizable *lian* (face) was crucial to the telling of this particular story. A Singapore reporter from *The Straits Time* noted Lee’s remark: “I don’t know if audiences will take to her. I just felt like she looks like someone who would do such as thing as Wang Jiazhi did....She has a face that doesn’t sell here.”<sup>163</sup> Lee reveals a lack of concern for whether audiences sympathize or identify with the lead character. He is also uninterested in garnering a commercial appeal

---

<sup>161</sup> David Yau-Fai Ho, Wai Fu, and SM Ng, "Guilt, Shame and Embarrassment: Revelations of Face and Self," *Culture & Psychology* 10, no. 1 (2004): 68.

<sup>162</sup> Roseanna Ng, "'Mai-Tai-Tai, Pleased to Meet You!'," in *Lust, Caution: The Story, the Screenplay and the Making of the Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 249.

<sup>163</sup> Tan Dawn Wei, "Caution: Lee Ang at Work; a Stickler for Detail," *The Straits Times*, February 6, 2007.

through his female lead casting (“a face that doesn’t sell here”). Ng continues with a recollection that, “Odd though it may sound, I understood what he meant. His Wang Jiazhi would not be a cookie cutter of the current movie stars: no oval face, no big-eyed Barbie, no long-limbed willowy mannequin.”<sup>164</sup> Tang, who was a student at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing at the time, looked “simple and plain” to the production team during auditions, and yet, her face was chosen from more than 1,000 aspiring actresses by Lee not as much for what it *was*, but for what it *was not*. *New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis describes Tang as “whose pretty bow mouth and gentle, hothouse manner feel terribly ill suited to a role that calls for cunning, for the emotional violence of sacrifice, betrayal, fanaticism, lust,”—however it was precisely her “terribly ill suited” physical comportment and unfamiliar facial beauty that added to the affective confusion of her cinematic performance, and thus to the erotic suspicion that sustains both the interest of Yi as well as our interest in her as spectators.<sup>165</sup> As a kind of violation of social norms, Tang’s face sustained critical fury both as inscrutable illegibility in the conventions of *lianpu* and within the conventional standards for budding female stardom. Tang had not yet achieved a level of stardom through which a “structured polysemy” across different texts (which consists of promotion, publicity, film roles, and criticism/commentary) could be formed.<sup>166</sup> The unfamiliarity of Tang thereby added to the narrative suspense of the film and the affective confusion over the nature of Wang Jiazhi’s *true character*. As the “face” of a resistant China at the time of Japanese colonization in the war, Tang’s character does not save national face. She betrays the resistance in order to save Yi’s life—and perhaps even more infuriating to the film’s critics, given Tang’s illegible and unrecognizable face, her character likely *enjoyed* her intimate

---

<sup>164</sup> Ng, “‘Mai-Tai-Tai, Pleased to Meet You!’,” 249.

<sup>165</sup> Dargis, “A Cad and a Femme Fatale Simmer.”

<sup>166</sup> Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 3.

relationship with Yi—an inflammatory insinuation of an enjoyable Chinese collaboration with the Japanese. Recall scholar Ou-fan Lee’s criticisms of author Chang and what he argues are her *qingri* (Japanese sympathizing) politics, pointing out that Chang’s first husband, Hu Lancheng, was a writer who served in the Wang Jingwei collaborationist government. As Brooks writes in the introduction of his study, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China*, the story of collaboration between the Japanese and mid-high level Chinese elites during the Second Sino-Japanese War “is not a story many Chinese wish to hear, or even to recognize as their own” as it indicates national moral failure.<sup>167</sup> Therefore Dargis’s observation that Tang’s pretty, gentle appearance was ill-suited to the role is also *felt* by Chinese viewers and critics who hoped to see a symbolic face that could demonstrate the condemnable qualities of “sacrifice, betrayal, fanaticism, lust” to underwrite a reductive yet morally righteous vision that denounced the evils of collaboration.

Because the role of the face is not specific to Chinese traditions of thought, sociality and theatergoing, the analysis of faces in the critical practices of cinema and performance studies should be further explored. Deleuze writes about the face and the close-up as the “affection-image” in film, however much more could be written on the matter.<sup>168</sup> “The face,” for instance, appears in continental philosophy traditions of Western phenomenology. As Emmanuel Levinas has argued in his philosophical treatises on the ethical encounter with the Other, “the face” solicits and summons others, commanding an ethical response from another person.<sup>169</sup> Furthermore “the face” is a naked call for responsibility from other people, despite being

---

<sup>167</sup> Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China*, 3.

<sup>168</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

<sup>169</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1979).

ultimately mysterious and unknowable. As Sara Heinämaa explains in her phenomenological exploration of sexual difference: “In erotic encounters, Levinas pointed out, the other is not experienced as a contrary will or an other self [*alter ego*] but as mysterious and unattainable. For him, the mystery, the ‘essentially other,’ was the feminine.”<sup>170</sup> Although Levinas’ conceptualization of consciousness and humanity, like other European male philosophers at the time (including Jean-Paul Sartre and Merleau Ponty), was unquestionably malecentric, it is this “radically and forever unreachable” notion of woman’s mystifying powers that both alienate and attract audiences to Tang and her doubled diegetic performances as Wang Jiazhi/Mai Tai Tai in *Lust, Caution*. In fact, Tang’s body and face are three different people consisting of Tang as an actor, and the two characters she plays—she was effectively *all* of these people, her body populating three personas. On the notion of self and Other as binary sexes of male and female, Levinas wrote:

Neither is the difference between the sexes the duality of two complementary terms, for two complementary terms presuppose a preexisting whole. To say that sexual duality presupposes a whole is to posit love beforehand as fusion. The pathos of love, however, consists in an insurmountable duality of beings. It is a relationship *with what always hides*. The relationship does not *ipso facto* neutralize alterity but preserves it [emphasis added].<sup>171</sup>

Sexual difference, according to Levinas, is analogous to the basic binary of Self and Other. Rather than a union of souls and bodies, then, sex accentuates the alterity of difference. In the case of *Lust, Caution*, the *political* differences between Wang and Yi, respectively embodying

---

<sup>170</sup> Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 89.

<sup>171</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*

the resistance movement and the collaborationist puppet government under the Japanese, produce sexual conflict. Indeed their *sexual* difference, made apparent by their starkly naked bodies, are just as insurmountable as their political allegiances. Despite all the desperate physical contortions and insistent brutal penetrations into one another's bodies, the relationship can only survive because of what it conceals. Returning to Schamus' comment that, "lust and caution are . . . , functions of each other, not because we desire what is dangerous, but because our love is, no matter how earnest, an *act*, and therefore always an object of suspicion," it is precisely the suspicious alterity and irreconcilable (sexual) difference that sustains their hetero-perverse relationship. Once Wang reveals who she really is, a resistance fighter sent to entrap Yi, the sexual and possibly romantic relationship must conclude, with the finality of her execution ordered by her lover, proving that the "pathos of love" is a relationship not merely "with" but wholly dependent on "what always hides."

#### The banning of Tang Wei and the government of her body

After her first film role in *Lust, Caution*, Tang was banned from working in the mainland for two years, only making her return in a Hong Kong production in 2010. She also became a Hong Kong citizen a year after the film's release. Although web reports claim Tang was banned because she was an "unhealthy influence" on young people as her fame arose from "taking off her clothes," there are also speculations circulating on the Internet that the real reason was ideological in nature. Tang's profile on the popular search engine Baidu states that relevant authorities who have analyzed the situation argue that the real reason for the ban was that the film's historical representation was found to be severely inconsistent with the *guanfang*

*yishixingtai biao zhun* (government ideological criteria).<sup>172</sup> The fact that these statements are made on widely accessible and popular mainland Chinese websites reveals the complexity of state policies on “banning,” which are not so much premised on erasure and exclusion as they are on public shaming and example-making out of wrongdoers, displaying the aforementioned Confucian tendency to conceptualize shaming as an important process of civilization. During an interview I conducted with film deputy director of SARFT, Zhang Jianyong called the banning of *Lust, Caution* and Tang a “special circumstance” and explained that the film passed the censorship administration and was only pulled out of theaters after negative reactions to the film’s subject matter, specifically to how it humanized, and even glamorized *hanjian* (traitors during wartime).<sup>173</sup> Zhang also elaborated that Tang was not banned for her sexual performances in the film. He elusively remarked that it was for attending an event that was “possibly” held in Taiwan which “she was not supposed to attend,” during which Tang said “something that she should not have said.” Notwithstanding Zhang’s equivocation, his account of Tang’s banning suggests that the Party’s disapprobation of the actress stems from larger political insecurities and sensitivities surrounding the Second Sino-Japanese War, the event which historian Brook argues constitutes the main source of cross-strait (between Taiwan and the mainland), as well as Sino-Japanese tensions today.

Seeking sanctuary in the West, Tang shot the South Korean film *Late Autumn* in Seattle, Washington in 2009, and it was also reported that she briefly attended acting classes at the University of Reading in the U.K. Furthermore, Tang’s subdued and carefully constructed persona after the film’s release illustrates the extent to which her body was governed by the

---

<sup>172</sup> "汤唯 (Tang Wei)," *Baidu*, <http://baike.baidu.com/view/355019.htm#1>.

<sup>173</sup> Zhang Jianyong, in discussion with the author, November 1, 2012.

politics of the film's controversial reception even years after the film's debut. An article in *China Daily* reports that Lee asked investor and film mogul Bill Kong to watch over the actress: "He made sure Tang kept a low profile and was seen at just a few charity campaign events, working as a volunteer without any makeup, or in bookstores, and at several top brands' fashion shows overseas. Additionally, she attended drama courses in London and hired a teacher to learn ancient Chinese at home. As such she has won favor for being a woman who has maintained her dignity and self-restraint."<sup>174</sup> It is revealing that in order to give the impression of "dignity and self-restraint," Tang was asked to perform different kinds of roles accentuating her altruism and selflessness, as well as her high-brow cultural clout. In demonstrating her cultural capital vis-à-vis her charitable activities, learning ancient Chinese, and attending luxury brand fashion shows, Tang's post-film performance, perhaps just as constructed as her role in *Lust, Caution*, was apparently intended to counter the mainland criticisms that the film was little more than a pornographic glorification of *hanjian* (traitors). Although performance is generally received, perhaps moreso in the West than in China, as an artistic achievement disassociated with the authentic personhood of the actor, the banishment and public condemnation of Tang reveals the consequential stigma from a sexual performance that continues to govern the actor's body long after she constructs her cinematic performance.<sup>175</sup> Although Tang's media visibility in the

---

<sup>174</sup> Liu Wei, "Back Better Than Ever," *China Daily*, April 1, 2010, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-04/01/content\\_9672216.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-04/01/content_9672216.htm).

<sup>175</sup> It is also worth mentioning that the actress who plays Mrs. Yi, the internationally known Chinese film star Joan Chen, has also experienced her share of being blacklisted by SARFT as a consequence of sexual performance. After approving the script for Chen's directorial debut, *Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl*, and giving Chen permission to shoot in China, the Film Bureau, an arm of SARFT, became incensed at the finished product and banned the film and Chen from working in film and television in China indefinitely, and fined her \$50,000. Urged by officials before the film's completion to eliminate "sexual and pessimistic scenes," Chen smuggled her film out of China and ultimately chose to appeal to the international market with her uncensored



mainland has dramatically increased since 2007, including the proliferation of her image on covers of magazines and billboards, these signs of public affection and attention are, in part, a result of the public's fascination with the taboo. In other words, her body and face still carry the stigma, however this taboo is sublimated within the sexual drive and interest towards her. The same cycle of shaming-banning-rehabilitation occurred with China's most beloved post-Mao film star Gong Li, for instance, after her earlier collaborations in celebrated Fifth Generation films with Zhang Yimou.



176

Coda: *The Flowers of War* and sexual comfort

Both *Lust*, *Caution* and *The Flowers of War*, mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, exploit an erotics of historization in order to re-imagine and re-present the Second Sino-Japanese War. However, a critical difference lies in the films' affective products, yielding two different political meanings. As illustrated throughout this chapter, *Lust*, *Caution* invokes *performance*

---

version. See Seth Faison, "China Bans a Filmmaker For Eluding Censorship," *The New York Times*, April 29, 1999. I discuss focus on Chen in Chapter Four.

<sup>176</sup> A glamorous magazine cover poster featuring Tang Wei hangs in 798 Art District, Beijing. Photo taken by the author on June, 23, 2012.

*anxiety* through its graphic sexual performances. The story of a resistance plot gone wrong because of a female resistance spy's confused sexual feelings towards her target would not necessarily upset Chinese officials—take for instance, Sixth Generation filmmaker Lou Ye's *Purple Butterfly* (2003) in which a female resistance member falls in love with a Japanese secret police officer during the war. However, *Lust, Caution*'s specific provocation of *shame* through a phenomenological engagement with graphic sado-masochistic sexual representation incited critical fury from the Chinese and Sinophone world. Analyses of criticisms surrounding the film illustrate how the Chinese viewer's affective experience of sexual titillation becomes *confused* with “national affects” like shame, humiliation, and rage—particularly given the sensitive politics surrounding a perceived lack of apology and redress from the Japanese government for the crimes of the war. Pleasures are tempered by shame, and by affective extension and relation, by guilt. A kind of *guilty pleasure* then, *Lust, Caution* offers cinematic pleasures, including exciting representations of the human body, in order to negotiate its re-presentations of historical collaboration. Furthermore, the female performer's body shoulders the burden of sexual performance, as evinced in the public banning and criticisms of Tang. The actress' specific embodiment and inscrutable physical performance frustrated Chinese spectatorial expectations, based in narrative and commercial standards. Because of the film's body politics which counter official ideologies of history, *Lust, Caution* “is not a story many Chinese wish to hear, or even to recognize as their own” as it indicates national moral failure.<sup>177</sup> However, sexual performance is not always stigmatized in contemporary Chinese cinema. It can also be used to advance official ideologies and historiographies. In contrast to Lee's film and its morally and sexually ambiguous

---

<sup>177</sup> Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China*, 3.

imagining of collaborationist politics is Fifth Generation filmmaker Zhang Yimou's 2012 Academy Award submission, *The Flowers of War*.

One of the most widespread criticisms of Zhang Yimou by critics and scholars alike is the accusation that the filmmaker panders to Western audiences by spectacularizing Chinese society and women in neo-Orientalist fashion. Rey Chow's theoretical engagement with Zhang's 1990s films in *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* remains applicable to Zhang's more recent films, including *The Flowers of War*.<sup>178</sup> Preoccupied with a primitive exhibition of the female body and sexuality as "a way to localize China's 'barbaric cultural institutions, from which she seeks to be set free,'" *The Flowers of War* mobilizes the seductive female figure against which to contrast with the barbaric politico-militarism of the Japanese.<sup>179</sup> Zhang's extraordinary talent in aestheticizing trauma through sensuous and seductive spectacle, best seen in his acclaimed Fifth Generation films throughout the 1990's, paired with his lack of interest in the psychological depth of his characters (most overstated in his martial arts films of the 2000's) creates a palpable neo-Orientalist exoticism that has once more "captured the gaze of the foreigner." In recent years, however, criticisms of Zhang presently revolve around the notion that he sold out his political views in order to make films that please the Chinese government.<sup>180</sup> *The Flowers of War* certainly seems to tow official

---

<sup>178</sup> Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>180</sup> Zhang himself confessed in an in-depth interview with Michael Berry that such accusations of either making films for foreigners or for the Chinese government has become "a big source of uneasiness." Zhang's response to Berry was, "They say that I'm trying to kiss either foreigners' asses or the Chinese government's ass. I always jokingly respond that I'm actually kissing my own ass! (*Laughs*) But what can you do in the face of this? You are helpless. After so many years, all of these critical voices seem to have evolved into a hardened point of view....If you repeat a lie enough times, it becomes true. In the end no one knows what is real," in Michael

versions of history insofar as it depicts the Chinese as victims and heroes, and the Japanese as one-dimensional, brutal villains in the war. However, there is also a subversive quality in the film insofar as it refuses to tell a realistic, historical story. Instead, rather than creating *performance anxiety* around the sexual act, the film exploits *sexual comfort* and the *erotic capital* of its female performers in order to invoke sympathy for Chinese victimhood. The film actively cultivates a simultaneous sexual desire *for* and sympathetic identification *with* the female prostitutes, a coterie of beautiful, vivacious, and sensual women with painted doll-like faces, adorned in vividly colorful swaths of body-hugging *qipao* (a traditional style of Chinese dress).

The film is narrated by one of the female convent students who has survived the war and is reflecting back on her wartime experience as a child. At first distrustful of the prostitutes who have sought refuge in the monastery, Shu becomes mesmerized and enchanted with them over time, succumbing to their colorful world as do we, the film's spectators. When the women first arrive, Shu and the other girls cautiously watch them through a broken stained-glass window, a moment Hu suggests visually represents the fantastic sensuality of the women as well as Shu's budding adolescent sexuality:

Shu, figuratively, sees the world grimly as black and white. Trapped in the sexless church, abandoned by her parents, and now thrust in the horror of war with her peers turned against her, Shu finds in the prostitutes something as far from war and chastity as she could ever imagine. She doesn't quite know what the prostitutes do professionally, but as we gather through a recurring slow-motion scene of the laughing women from behind the church's colorful stained glass, the prostitutes allow Shu to literally see the world through rose-colored lenses. The

---

Berry, *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 126.

slow-motion laughter and peppy sisterhood, bathed in pinks and yellows, temporally transport Shu to another place, where warmth and sensuality run rampant. In the midst of spiritual and literal death, sex blooms, and we see it in the colors.”<sup>181</sup>

In *The Flowers of War*, sex and sexual desire, diffused in the warmth of bright colors and paired with the beauty and convivial homosociality of the women, attempts to solve the problem of death and trauma. After the women arrive, they take over the space of the cellar, “the *dark entity* of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces,” transforming it from a “filthy, messy place into Qin Huai River,” Nanjing’s largest river, the banks of which once hosted the city’s infamous red light district.<sup>182</sup> Like the stained-glass window shot, the camera is once more conflated with Shu’s point-of-view as she peers down at the women through a hole in the wooden planks of the floor. A voyeuristic montage of the women in their lingerie show how they represent both “subterranean” sexuality as well as high culture, and includes shots of one woman playing the traditional stringed Chinese musical instrument *pipa*, another drinking from a bowl, and the leader of the group, Mo, flipping through a magazine. As she watches them with curious detachment, Shu describes how the women carried with them a scent of rouge and perfume.<sup>183</sup> In this particular moment, the imagery combined with Shu’s description of the women’s scent forges a phenomenological engagement of proximity to the sensual and beautiful women, all the more erotic because of the voyeuristic gaze through which the camera frames them.

---

<sup>181</sup> Hu, "Necrophilia, Perversion, and Zhang Yimou's Ultimate High-Wire Act."

<sup>182</sup> The first citation is from Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 18. The second citation comes from Shu’s voiceover narration within the film.

<sup>183</sup> The English subtitles here, “The fragrance of rouge and perfume danced up through the air” does not exactly convey the same rhetorical meaning as the original Chinese “...好像也被她们带来了,” which suggests that the smells are somehow carried by their bodies.

The 12 good-hearted prostitutes from the Qin Huai River agree to take the place of the 13 virginal convent girls, including Shu, at a Japanese “celebration party” for the successful occupation of Nanjing at which the convent girls are asked to perform and where they would likely be brutally raped and murdered. To trick the Japanese, the prostitutes must undergo a physical transformation into the pubescent students. First, the women tease one of the bigger prostitutes, telling her she looks more like a wet nurse than a student because of her large breasts. Then the women decide to bind their breasts down with curtains so that they can fit into the asexual convent uniforms. Then, in front of an audience of young girls whose bodies have not yet sexually matured, the prostitutes bind one another’s breasts, a feminine castration Zhang fetishizes through cinematic technique. Medium close-ups of the women’s bodies during the bondage are intercut with shots of the girls gazing upon them, while the film’s nondiegetic theme music, an orchestral score featuring a sentimental violin solo played by Joshua Bell, plays in the background. An extreme close-up of Shu’s face with slight parting of her lips reveals an expression of awe and sexual curiosity, suggesting a pleasure in her homoerotic voyeurism, as previously established in the aforementioned stained-glass window and cellar shots. Afterwards, the mortician-cum-priest American rogue with a good heart, played by Christian Bale, cuts off the women’s hair into chin-length bobs and makes up the women’s faces to look younger. After turning Mo (played by sweet-faced newcomer Ni Ni), the most beautiful and tragic of all the prostitutes into an adolescent, Bale’s character has consensual sex with her. As Hu points out, the scene “evokes necrophilia and pedophilia, and it plays out like a transaction: as a sexual favor owed to him. The scene feels grotesquely inappropriate, like pornography set during the Holocaust.”<sup>184</sup> However, this kind of “perversity to pervert history” is precisely the film’s vested

---

<sup>184</sup> As mentioned earlier, *The Night Porter* also uses graphic sexual performances (and the

and ironic interest in providing sexual comfort to its viewer, despite the sexual violence committed towards hundreds of thousands of Chinese women at the hands of the Japanese Imperial Army. Moreover, the film's greatest narrative ellipsis, the dreadful Japanese "celebration party" is perhaps the film's greatest feat in providing sexual comfort.

Despite the film's apparent aestheticization of the horrific circumstances of the Nanjing Massacre, there is one scene in *The Flowers of War* that does attempt to represent the widespread sexual crimes of the Massacre. The traumatic and traumatizing scene involves a rape sequence during which one of two prostitutes who temporarily left the church to retrieve *pipa* strings is brutally bayoneted in her midsection until death because she bites one of the Japanese soldier's ears during rape. Although the camera is positioned behind the chair in which she is bound, we can see that the binding of the prostitute's arms and legs to the chair is a re-enactment of a famous photograph of a Nanjing woman who was bound, raped, and killed in the same manner.<sup>185</sup> The historical knowledge of such cruel and violent sex crime looms over the film like a specter, complicating the erotic charge of much of the rest of the film and its seductive characters. Truly a "perversity to pervert history," Zhang's film posits a historiography that attempts to solve the problems of historical memory and trauma by invoking a sympathy of eros premised on the exoticism of Chinese femininity and sexuality.

The self-commodification of exoticism through eroticism signifies an aspect of China's participation in modernity, however uneasy and tenuous the participation may be. As Olivia Khoo explains:

---

multitude of meanings of "sexual performance") in an attempt to understand the undisclosed bodily interactions that occurred between Nazi and concentration camp prisoner.

<sup>185</sup> This archival photograph can be seen in the HBO Documentary film, *Nanking* (dir. Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman, 2007).

The Chinese exotic is able to create a distance from itself as that which is outside (ex-centric and ventriloquial), and in doing so can question the underlying assumptions and bases of power by negotiating with its preceding colonialist representations. The main dimension to these representations that requires interrogation is the ‘interest’ paid to Chinese femininity, which is most often invoked in sexual terms. The exotic is consistently marketed as a sexual encounter whereby difference is collapsed into and experienced as a heterosexual encounter, either violent or subliminal.<sup>186</sup>

Khoo points out that the image of Chinese femininity is a negotiating point within colonialist power dynamics. On the one hand, the exotic as portrayed as heterosexual encounter collapses difference between the dominant and the submissive, the colonizer and the colonized. On the other hand, the feminine as that which “spreads, reproduces, multiplies, and procreates” as “carriers of tradition, culture, as well as disease” travels globally while challenging former colonialist representations vis-à-vis Orientalist tropes.<sup>187</sup> Chinese women, as all colonized women, were regarded as freely available objects for the sexual taking by foreign colonizers, and their sexual capital has since accrued “interest” both in terms of fixation and fetishization as well as in the increase of “desirability.” Thus, as diasporic Chinese modernity is tethered to the image of the exoticized, sexualized Chinese female body, the consumption of such an image becomes a social practice that allows for the re-imagining of Chinese modernity, which in this case, is premised on the erotics of historicization. The consensual heterosexual encounter between John Miller (Christian Bale) and Mo (Ni Ni) can thus be read as a reconfiguration of colonialist power

---

<sup>186</sup> Olivia Khoo, *The Chinese Exotic: Modern Diasporic Femininity*, Transasia: Screen Cultures (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 19.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.



dynamics that levels out the power between Western imperialism (represented by John Miller's Christianity) and Chinese women, the object of conquest. The film is uninterested in collapsing the difference between the Japanese colonizer and the Chinese colonized, as that would threaten historiographic and political interests in continuing to hold the Japanese responsible for their role in the Second Sino-Japanese War. However, by forging a Chinese and American alliance through Mo and John's heterosexual encounter, the film simultaneously references and reinterprets previous Orientalist representations of the West and the East as respectively dominant and submissive, as well as interpellating the West into the Chinese historiographic perspective.

Ultimately *The Flowers of War* attempts, even if unsuccessfully, to mobilize the power of Chinese female sexuality towards a politics of recognition around the historical trauma of the Nanjing Massacre. Chow writes about the perseverance of illusion and its interpellating function for the ethnic spectator: "overlapping with the pain of historical awareness is another, equally intense feeling, describable only partly by phrases like 'mesmerization,' 'nostalgia,' and 'a desire to be there, *in the film.*' All these phrases belong to 'illusion' as de Lauretis would understand it, that is, perceptive operations that are, regardless of their so-called falsity, vital to a continual engagement with what is culturally available."<sup>188</sup> Regardless of "their so-called falsity," films like *Lust, Caution* and *The Flowers of War* are the contemporary films available to the Chinese viewer, using sexual performance and eroticization of historical events in order to make sense of the national trauma of the Second Sino-Japanese War—however perverse and perverted the end result. This chapter argued that the intensities of sexual desire provoked by such films commingle with trans/national affects of anger, shame, and humiliation. Nevertheless, as Chow

---

<sup>188</sup> Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 25.

suggests, these “perceptive operations” are vital to a continual engagement with China’s past and present national and ethnic identity, an act that reverberates throughout China and the Chinese diaspora. Through the embodied spectatorship of these war texts, Chinese-ness is felt, sensed, and performed through historiographic reaction.

Chapter One Bibliography:

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

———. "Happy Objects." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 29-51. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994.

Bazin, André. *What Is Cinema?* Translated by Hugh Gray. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967; 2005.

Berry, Michael. *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

———. *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

Brook, Timothy. *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Chang, Eileen. "'Lust, Caution': A Story by Eileen Chang." In *Lust, Caution: The Story, the Screenplay, and the Making of the Film*, 1-48. New York: Random House LLC, 1983; 2007.

Chang, Hsiao-hung. "Transnational Affect: Cold Anger, Hot Tears, and Lust/Caution." In *From Eileen Chang to Ang Lee: Lust/Caution*, edited by Hsiao-yen Peng and Whitney Crothers Dilley, 182-96. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Chen, Hsiang-yin Sasha. "Eros Impossible and Eros of the Impossible in *Lust/Caution*: The Shanghai Lady/Baby in the Late 1930s and Early 1940s." In *From Eileen Chang to Ang Lee: Lust/Caution*, edited by Hsiao-yen Peng and Whitney Crothers Dilley, 81-100. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Chi, Robert. "Exhibitionism: Lust, Caution." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 3, no. 2 (2009): 177-87.

Chow, Rey. "Guest Column—Framing the Original: Toward a New Visibility of the Orient." *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (2011): 555-63.

———. *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

- . *Woman and Chinese Modernity : The Politics of Reading between West and East*. Theory and History of Literature. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Cui, Shuqin. *Women through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2003.
- Dargis, Manohla. "A Cad and a Femme Fatale Simmer." *The New York Times*, September 28, 2007.
- Daruvala, Susan. "Self as Performance, Lust as Betrayal in the Theatre of War." In *From Eileen Chang to Ang Lee: Lust/Caution*, edited by Hsiao-yen Peng and Whitney Crothers Dilley, 101-20. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- Dyer, Richard, and Paul McDonald. *Stars*. London: British Film Institute, 1998.
- Ebert, Roger. "The Night Porter (Review)." *The Chicago Sun-Times*, February 10, 1975.
- Evans, Harriet. *Women and Sexuality in China: Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949*. New York: Continuum, 1997.
- Farquhar, Judith. *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Foster, Susan Leigh. *Choreographing History*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1. An Introduction*. Translated by Alan Sheridan-Smith. New York:: Random House, 1978.
- Garver, John W. "China's Wartime Diplomacy." In *China's Bitter Victory: The War with Japan, 1937-1945*, edited by James C. Hsiung and Steven I. Levine. London: M.E. Sharpe, 1992.
- Heinämaa, Sara. *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003.
- Ho, David Yau-Fai, Wai Fu, and SM Ng. "Guilt, Shame and Embarrassment: Revelations of Face and Self." *Culture & Psychology* 10, no. 1 (2004): 64-84.
- Hsiung, James C., and Steven I. Levine, eds. *China's Bitter Victory: The War with Japan, 1937-1945*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1992.
- Hu, Brian. "Necrophilia, Perversion, and Zhang Yimou's Ultimate High-Wire Act." *Asia Pacific Arts Magazine*, January 20, 2012.

- Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House: Unabridged*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1992.
- Khoo, Olivia. *The Chinese Exotic : Modern Diasporic Femininity*. Transasia: Screen Cultures. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007.
- Klinger, Barbara. *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Lee, Leo Ou-fan. *Kan Sejie (Watching Lust, Caution)*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . "Ang Lee's Lust, Caution and Its Reception." *boundary 2* 35, no. 3 (2008): 223-38.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1979.
- Li, Jin, Lianqin Wang, and Kurt Fischer. "The Organization of Chinese Shame Concepts." *Cognition and Emotion* 18, no. 6 (2004): 767-97.
- Lim, Dennis. "Love as an Illusion: Beautiful to See, Impossible to Hold." *The New York Times*, August 26, 2007.
- Link, Perry. "The Quest for Moral Values in Contemporary Chinese Popular Thought." In *UCLA Center for Chinese Studies*. UCLA 2010.
- Lo, Alex. "Ang Lee, Loved by Most, Hated by Group of Chinese in California." *South Morning China Post*, October 6, 2007.
- Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000.
- McMillan, Joanna. *Sex, Science and Morality in China*. Routledge Contemporary China Series. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Morris, Meaghan. *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998.
- Naficy, Hamid. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Ng, Roseanna. "Eleven Days in Hell." In *Lust, Caution: The Story, the Screenplay, and the Making of the Film*, 255-58. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007.
- . "'Mai-Tai-Tai, Pleased to Meet You!'" In *Lust, Caution: The Story, the Screenplay and the Making of the Film*, 248-50. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007.

- Peng, Hsiao-yen, and Whitney Crothers Dilley. "Introduction." In *From Eileen Chang to Ang Lee: Lust/Caution*. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Probyn, Elspeth. "Writing Shame." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 71-92. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Protevi, John. *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
- Ruan, Fang Fu. *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture*. New York: Plenum Press, 1991.
- Schamus, James. "Introduction." In *Lust, Caution: The Story, the Screenplay, and the Making of the Film*, xi-xv. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007.
- Shih, Shu-mei. *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007.
- Sobchack, Vivian. "Being on the Screen: A Phenomenology of Cinematic Flesh, or the Actor's Four Bodies." In *Acting and Performance in Moving Image Culture: Bodies, Screens, Renderings*, edited by Jörg Sternagel, Deborah Levitt and Dieter Mersch, 429-46. Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2014.
- . *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.
- Steintrager, James. "Bullet in the Head: Trauma, Identity, and Violent Spectacle." In *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, edited by Chris Berry, 23-30. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Sun, Cecile Chu-chin. "Two Versions of Sejie: Fiction and Film - Views from a Common Reader." In *From Eileen Chang to Ang Lee: Lust/Caution*, edited by Peng Hsiao-yen and Whitney Crothers Dilley, 35-50. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Tam, Bill. "Boycott: Lust, Caution. An [Sic] Lee: Cultural Traitor." Family Coalition, September 29, 2007, [http://tfcus.homestead.com/boycott\\_lust\\_caution.pdf](http://tfcus.homestead.com/boycott_lust_caution.pdf).
- von Kowallis, Jon Eugene. "Sado-Masochism, Steamy Sex, and Shanghai Glitter: What's Love Got to Do with It? A 'Philologist' Looks at Lust/Caution and the Literary Texts That Inspired It." In *From Eileen Chang to Ang Lee: Lust, Caution*, edited by Hsiao-yen Peng and Whitney Crothers Dilley, 51-63. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Wei, Liu. "Back Better Than Ever." *China Daily*, April 1, 2010, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-04/01/content\\_9672216.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-04/01/content_9672216.htm).

Wei, Tan Dawn. "Caution: Lee Ang at Work; a Stickler for Detail." *The Straits Times*, February 6, 2007.

Williams, Linda. *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999.

———. *Screening Sex.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.

Yik, Michelle. "How Unique Is Chinese Emotion." In *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Psychology*, edited by Michael Harris Bond, 205-20. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### **Uncivilized Displays: Hygienic Bodies and *Suzhi***

“Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick.”  
-Susan Sontag, *Illness as metaphor*<sup>189</sup>

What are the politics of health and illness in the PRC, and how do images of health and un-wellness perpetuate in cinema and media? This chapter addresses the representational embodiments of health and illness in contemporary Chinese film and television, and their trans/national implications. Whereas Chapter One discussed the ways in which trans/national receptions of *Lust, Caution* reveal the affective attachments and structures of shame towards representations of the Second Sino-Japanese War, this chapter focuses how humiliation (the public display of shame) and compassion are aestheticized in Chinese commercial cinema. Moreover, while Chapter One discusses the body under political occupation, the two following chapters on health will reconfigure the concept of occupation by discussing the “invisible” threats of germs, dirt, and viruses that occupy the physical body on microscopic and symbolic levels. *Lust, Caution* complexifies understandings of Chinese national identity through history, while the films discussed in Chapter Two and Three ambiguate pervasive ideologies about health and the Chinese body as articulations of modern Chinese nationhood.

“Health” (addressed in Chapters Two and Three) and “beauty” (addressed in Chapters Four and Five) are interdependent and mutually-enforcing identity constructs. Performances of health and beauty also inflect the embodiment and perception of *suzhi* (“personal quality” or

---

<sup>189</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador USA, 1977, 1988), 3.



“personal value”), a biopolitical concept that describes a Chinese individual’s social status. Sean Macdonald writes about the muscular, athletic, and lively performances by the *jianmei* (healthy and beautiful) female star type like Li Lili in 1930s-40s Chinese cinema, however the analytical focus on “health” in this project involves investigations of bodily practice as it involves hygiene and representations of the diseased body, specifically the HIV/AIDS afflicted body, in contemporary Chinese cinema.<sup>190</sup> Writing about post-WWII French culture and society, Kristen Ross poses three productive questions in relation to hygiene, which this chapter attempts to answer in the Chinese context: “What is the relation between cleanliness and modernization in postwar France? Why would such a national desire express itself at this historical moment? How does the culture of cleanliness contribute to a new conception of nation?”<sup>191</sup> In the Chinese context, trans/national politics, and specifically Western influences, play an important role in the shaping of Chinese bodies towards health ideals in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially during China’s various transitional stages from a traditional feudal state into a modern nation-state. In order to understand the contemporary trans/national Chinese body and body cultures, it becomes necessary to discuss the phenomena of globalization and transcultural flows of influence on China’s conception of nationhood.

One explanation about the origination of *suzhi* in modern-day China suggests that the concept arose as a result from the movement from a planned economy to a market economy, coinciding with the beginning of the PRC’s opening in economic, cultural, and social practices to the rest of the world beginning in the late 1970s. Anthropologist Ann Anagnost contends that,

---

<sup>190</sup> See Sean Macdonald, "Li Lili: Acting a Lively Jianmei Type," in *Chinese Film Stars*, ed. Mary Farquhar and Yingjin Zhang (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>191</sup> Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 74.

“the representation of value has undergone a reorganization in the realm of the biopolitical in which human life becomes a new frontier for capital accumulation.”<sup>192</sup> Tracing the discursive genealogy of the term *suzhi*, Anagnost explains that it first appeared alongside discussions of economic reforms beginning in 1976, emerging specifically around concerns of raising the *quality*, as opposed to the *quantity*, of *renkou* (population). In China’s current sociopolitical climate of market privatization and a rapidly expanding middle-class, *suzhi* also takes into account the “minute social distinctions defining a ‘person of quality’ in practices of consumption and the incitement of a middle-class desire for social mobility.”<sup>193</sup> While Anagnost examines the formation of *suzhi* through educational value and lack thereof, the following chapters focus on the “practices of consumption” toward *suzhi* building, specifically in relation to constructing the middle-class body vis-à-vis globalized ideals of health and beauty as represented in contemporary Chinese films and television.

### Chinese popular media

Popular media in the PRC plays an important social role in dispensing myths and narratives about power and social legitimacy in modern-day China. The television set, found in more than 89% of all Chinese households (statistics gathered in 2002), has been used by the government to “unify the people, preserve the authority of the party, and fulfill the promises of the reformation,” even as television has also become “a central agent of popular resistance” in which “democratizing and agitating mediations interact in the public mind.”<sup>194</sup> Wanning Sun argues in her ethnographic study on rural migration in post-Mao China that television series are

---

<sup>192</sup> Ann Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi)," *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004): 189.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>194</sup> James Lull, *China Turned On: Television, Reform and Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1-3.

“important cultural texts which, in the decades of economic reform, face the double-edged imperative of answering to both the state and the market....provid[ing] an integral part of an image- and myth-making machinery that works ceaselessly to (re)produce a meta-language of social power and legitimacy in the post-Mao reform era.”<sup>195</sup> Although Chinese television has been accused of being the “mouthpiece of the government” because state policy places television (as well as film) under direct political control, media scholars also acknowledge that, especially in the past decade, it “plays a significant role in accelerating the very process of developing pluralistic democracy in China.”<sup>196</sup> Investigative journalism and news, for instance, which are considered a “derivative companion of modern democratic politics and the development of a market economy” has become increasingly popular on Chinese state and regional television.<sup>197</sup> Despite the cautious optimism of Chinese television scholars who regard Chinese television as a democratizing domestic apparatus, mainstream television and film productions nevertheless still work to instate, insist, and reiterate the images and discourses of social power and legitimacy. Focusing specifically on the conceptual mythmaking of health, this chapter demonstrates how television programs and “main-melody” films “work ideologically as a regime of representation through which subjects recognize their positions within the larger social order,” while these myths of health also generate desire and affect through moving images.<sup>198</sup> Before introducing the televisual and cinematic case-studies anchoring this chapter however, it is important to first

---

<sup>195</sup> Wanning Sun, *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 30.

<sup>196</sup> Li Xiaoping, "'Focus' (Jiaodian Fangtan) and the Changes in the Chinese Television Industry," *Journal of Contemporary China* 11, no. 30 (2002): 18.

<sup>197</sup> Yu Guoming, director of the Public Opinion Research Institute of People's University qtd. in *ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>198</sup> Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi)," 191.

explain how contemporary health and hygiene ideologies in the PRC have become shaped by trans/national interactions, events, and influences.

The sociopolitical construction of *weisheng* (hygiene)

The sociopolitical construction of hygiene constitutes one of the fundamental aspects of modern-day global health. In developed countries, the lack thereof is widely believed to be a major cause of disease as well as an indication of low socioeconomic status. Ruth Rogaski's extensive investigation of the development of *weisheng* (hygiene/health) in the port city of Tianjin, China during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, provides a crucial historical context to the modern development of health and hygiene consciousness in China.<sup>199</sup> Rogaski explains that prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and to the imperialistic advances from Europe and Japan, health concerns revolved around protecting the internal vitalities of the body and preventing disease. However, as imperial concerns began to collude around modernizing China, the meaning of *weisheng* "shifted away from Chinese cosmology and moved to encompass state power, scientific standards of progress, the cleanliness of bodies, and the fitness of races," becoming tethered to the very images and implications of modernity itself.<sup>200</sup> The classical term *weisheng* in self-cultivation canonical literatures evolved in meaning alongside China's trans/national encounters with various imperial powers from Europe and Japan, all of whom began to exploit China's markets, land, and resources beginning with the First Opium War (1839-1942). Unequal treaties imposed on China by Western imperialist powers and Japan forced China to make great concessions, becoming a quasi-colony throughout the next hundred years, a period of time commonly referred to in China as the *Bainian guochi* ("Century of Humiliation"). During this

---

<sup>199</sup> Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

time, China (transitioning from the feudal dynastic era to Republican China to Communist China) took the identity of an abject, liminal country that “limped along in the international system, neither one thing nor the other.”<sup>201</sup> Moving from the *shame* of the colonized body to the *humiliation* of the body politic, this chapter discusses how ideologies of hygiene are structured by the sense of historical humiliation, and how public displays of Chinese failure are symbolically written upon the Chinese body in commercial television and film.

In an effort to redeem the Chinese state and body politic on the worldwide stage during China’s “Century of Humiliation,” founder of the Republic of China (1912-1949) and Guomindang Nationalist Government Sun Yat-sen spoke about the salvation of China and how China must become a sovereign and powerful nation. Prior to the Second-Sino Japanese War and the establishment of the Communist state, the Western-educated, bilingual Sun even included issues of personal hygiene in his 1924 lectures on Nationalist party ideology. In his critique of “the Chinese failure to cultivate personal virtue,” Sun included an anecdote about a minister of the Chinese government blowing his nose and spitting all over an American ship’s carpets with the captain’s condemnatory question, “how could an ill-mannered official so patently incapable of controlling his olfactory organs be expected to manage a whole country?”<sup>202</sup> Subsequently, in a series of lectures on The Three Principles (nationalism, democracy, and people’s livelihood) also given in 1924, Sun further recounted anecdotes about foreigners reacting to bad Chinese table manners, clearly aligning his own political ideology with that of the West (Sun was also a Christian) insofar as he also believed that “the private and the public converged around a code of

---

<sup>201</sup> David Scott, *China and the International System, 1840-1949: Power, Presence, and Perceptions in a Century of Humiliation* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>202</sup> John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1996), 10.

decorous conduct that applied equally to the body, to the family, and to the state.”<sup>203</sup> The Three Principles lectures would thereafter become the guiding ideology for the Guomindang government. As these lectures indicate, after 2,000 years of imperial rule, the government of Republican China (China’s first modern nation-state) was borne from a transformation, not only of state but also of body—under the trans/national influence and scrutiny of the West, who supported the notion that personal hygiene was “a necessary condition for competent government.”<sup>204</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that China has undergone further identity crises, transformations, and national “cleanses” throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century after the end of the Republic of China, during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945); the Maoist Communist era (1949-1976); the post-Mao era (1976-1989); and the reform new era (1989-present), the notion of the hygienic body has persisted in accordance with Western standards, although not in any direct or straightforward timeline. In present-day China, Sun’s notion of the decorous and hygienic Chinese body remains a visible political and social concern. The Ministry of *Weisheng* (hygiene/health) as well as Bureaus of *Weisheng*, responsible for overseeing the institutional functions of the medical profession, are found at both the national, and municipality and county levels. The term *weisheng* is also heard in contemporary, everyday vernacular, referring to such practices as domestic cleaning as well as being used to refer to public bathrooms (*weisheng jian*). As a stand-alone adjective, it is also used to state whether a place is clean, as in “*Zhege canguan bijiao weisheng*” (This restaurant is clean). The idea of *weisheng*, which Rogaski defines as “hygienic modernity,” developed in conjunction with China’s 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century modernization, continues to structure daily Chinese life. Rogaski contends, “It is perhaps its

---

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

frequent conjunction with ‘the people,’ cities, and even the nation that *weisheng* reveals itself as a central part of contemporary China’s struggle to achieve what seems to be an ever-elusive state of modernity.”<sup>205</sup>

A recent campaign that exemplifies contemporary China’s struggle to achieve and maintain hygienic modernity is the national etiquette campaign enacted to clean up Beijing and elevate the city to international First World standards of cleanliness and *weisheng* in preparation for the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. Along with the hopes of reducing public littering, one measure intended to eliminate spitting in the streets, which, in anticipation of welcoming international guests, was thusly deemed to be illegal, and a 50-yuan fine was given to anyone caught spitting. According to the Chinese online publication, *Xinhuanet*, “Spitting, littering and barbecuing in the street were identified by Beijing residents as the most intolerable bad manners to be stamped out ahead of the Olympics, according to a government survey of more than 200,000 people in the capital.”<sup>206</sup> However, some netizen defenders of the act cited in the article made various claims, some in part-jest, that China had a tradition of spitting (citing a 5,000 year old proverb); that even foreigners like to spit (citing the scene in the 1997 film *Titanic* [James Cameron] when Jack teaches Rose how to spit); and that Beijing’s bad air quality created the physical need to spit (stemming from traditional Chinese medical beliefs that phlegm stored in organs causes diseases and should be summarily expelled). The double-sided reactions cited in the article, including the self-criticism conveyed in the survey and the defensiveness around spitting reveals the cultural sensitivity surrounding issues of *weisheng*, a discourse concerned with defining corporeal modernity vis-à-vis perceived international standards. Furthermore,

---

<sup>205</sup> Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*, 2.

<sup>206</sup> "No Spit: Beijing's Latest Etiquette Campaign Draws Mixed Reactions," *Xinhuanet*, February 29, 2008, <http://en.beijing2008.cn/news/olympiccities/beijing/n214259657.shtml>.

Beijing Municipal Bureau of Health official, Liu Ying, is quoted in the article as stating, “The latest hygienic drive aims to eradicate the bad habit of spitting and promote a more civilized life style.” Such personal bodily habits are portrayed as uncivilized behavior, which reflects poorly on the body politic, the PRC state and China as a nation within the global community.

Moreover, this was not the first time the Chinese government promoted *weisheng* as a means to show patriotism and love of one’s country. The *Aiguo weisheng yundong* (Patriotic Hygiene Campaign) during the Korean War in 1952 compelled all citizens to be hypervigilant about cleanliness under threats of America’s use of biological warfare. The external threat of biological warfare was equated to an internal domestic counterpart: omnipresent dirt and germs in and around the home. Rogaski writes, “Through the Patriotic Hygiene Campaign, consciousness of dirt and germs became manifest through an official language that became part of daily life, and *weisheng* became inextricably locked into association with cleanliness,” explaining that millions of urban residents became involved in the daily activities of killing flies, dredging sewers, and picking up trash.<sup>207</sup> National threat (the U.S. government during the Korean War) was rendered into the ever-present and quotidian threat of germs, as the private body and its surroundings became a synecdoche for the national body. To possess an unclean body and home was thus to aid the U.S. in harming China. During this uneasy time, the Communist Party “sought ways to modernize and rationalize urban society—to make it transparent and more permeable and to bring individuals into direct contact with the state. The Communist goal was aided by the powerful metaphor of germs as invisible enemies.”<sup>208</sup> Provoking fears around the unhygienic, contaminated body, the Communist government created a direct experiential link between the state and the individual body. Potential consequences of the

---

<sup>207</sup> *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*, 286.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.



war were described as the threat of germs and the abstract threat of biowarfare, compelling patriotic acts of *weisheng* from Chinese citizens. Similarly, the aforementioned 2008 Olympics etiquette campaign and others following it were enacted to help put forth an image of China's modernity to an international audience. These campaigns utilized patriotic rhetoric in order to demonstrate how engaging in public spitting and other unhygienic acts were un-patriotic, in Chinese terms, *bu aiguo* (not loving one's country). Not loving one's country is an open defiance of the prescribed affective/affected state of *aiguo* (loving one's country), the obligatory script "in mainland public discourse as the 'natural attitude' of any Chinese person."<sup>209</sup>

### Hygienic histories

*Weisheng* is not only invoked to encourage patriotic-hygienic acts in the present, but is also linked to historical sensitivities and patriotic remembrances of the past. In 2012, after the Beijing Olympic handoff to London, a broadcast aired of the Beijing television program, *Dang'an* (Public Records), entitled *Ye jianying wei beiping da saochu* (Ye Jianying's great Beijing clean-up).<sup>210</sup> A middle-aged male host speaks directly into the camera about the unsanitary state of a garbage-filled Beijing at the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1945) and Chinese Civil War (1949), a politically and environmentally messy five-year span. Using newsreels, audio recordings, photographs taken during this era (including *Life* magazine photos taken of Tiananmen Square in 1948), the host describes the condition of *laji biandi* (garbage everywhere) prior to the 1949 Liberation by the Chinese Communist Party. The host walks seamlessly throughout the noir-lit soundstage, parts of which appear as recreations of bygone

---

<sup>209</sup> Gloria Davies, *Harvard University Press Author Forum: Off the Page*, May 28, 2008, [http://harvardpress.typepad.com/off\\_the\\_page/2008/05/should-we-worry.html](http://harvardpress.typepad.com/off_the_page/2008/05/should-we-worry.html).

<sup>210</sup> "Ye Jianying Wei Beiping Da Saochu (Ye Jianying's Great Beijing Clean-up)," *Dang'an* (Public Records), aired August 23, 2012 (Beijing, China: Channel BTV, 2012).

government offices or desolate spaces. Enlarged to match the host's physical stature, official documents are reproduced on a large scale, foregrounding the authenticity of the public records in question. As the host walks from one piece of evidence to the next, he puts on white gloves in a deliberate manner to handle the material and preserve the cleanliness of old records—this itself is a performative gesture of hygiene with which to preserve China's *clean* and *pure* recollection of history. Ostensibly a television program about former Communist general Ye Jianying and how he mobilized the masses to clean up Beijing during a 91-day campaign, the aim of *Dang'an* is clearly to memorialize this former leader, and by proxy, celebrate the accomplishments of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The general's declaration of war on garbage is also an indirect denouncement of the enemies of the CCP: the Japanese Imperial Army and the Guomindang Nationalist government, who are not so subtly blamed for the literal mess left behind in Beijing after they left China.<sup>211</sup>

Contrasting with the ambiguous sexual politics re-presenting Chinese collaboration with the Japanese in *Lust*, *Caution*, *Dang'an* takes an accusatory tone towards the Party's enemies (both the Guomindang government and the Japanese). While the affective reception of *Lust*, *Caution* centers around anxiety and shame, *Dang'an* aims to generate pride and admiration for Ye Jianying's great job in cleaning up Beijing, both literally and figuratively. Setting a stage for a new Chinese national purity after a period of occupation and war, this clean-up act echoes the attempts in post-WWII France, wherein "France was being regenerated, it was being washed of all the stains left behind by four years of Occupation."<sup>212</sup> Unlike the invisible threat of germs that aptly symbolized China's offshore and unseen conflict with the U.S. in Korea, the solid waste

---

<sup>211</sup> According to the host, Ye famously decried, "Old city of Beiping, we declare war on garbage." (*Gucheng Beiping xiang laji xuanzhan*, 古城北平向垃圾宣战).

<sup>212</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, 74.

left behind by the Japanese and Guomindang suitably metaphorized the PRC's visible enemies in this television show.

What is perhaps most impressive about the televisual presentation on this subject matter is its use of multimedia to show the viewer how daunting the problem was. Similar to sand tables used by military generals to plot their strategies, the show utilizes CGI technology to provide aerial views of a newly-liberated yet garbage-riddled Beijing, with trash piled in front of every major gate to the city and every *hutong* (alleyway) inside the city. In conjunction with the host's matter-of-fact narration, peppered with dramatized facial expressions ranging from mildly angry to quietly proud, the television show's use of digital technology illustrates the idea that bad *weisheng* is not only a political enemy, it is also an issue of surveillance that requires the most technologically advanced militaristic strategizing and planning. The host even appropriates and literalizes a Mao Zedong quotation at the climax of the show: "Where a broom does not reach, dust will not vanish of itself," a quote originally intended as an analogical message about the importance of organization in order to overthrow reactionary elements.<sup>213</sup> Celebrating the CCP's efforts to clean up Beijing, the show is aligned with the ideological implications of "hygienic modernity," premised on the patriotic complicity of its citizens, which is anecdotally narrated and sentimentally described. An oral testimonial by a common peasant who participated in this campaign bookends the program and infuses it with sentimentality. Apparently Mr. Zhang loved his country so much that he even used his family's passenger rickshaw in order to transport trash out of Beijing.

---

<sup>213</sup> The full quote from Mao is, "It is up to us to organize the people. As for the reactionaries in China, it is up to us to organize the people to overthrow them. Everything reactionary is the same; if you do not hit it, it will not fall. This is also like sweeping the floor; as a rule, where the broom does not reach, the dust will not vanish of itself."

As earlier discussed, the period between 1840-1949 is widely regarded by the Chinese as China's "Century of National Humiliation" (*Bainian guochi*), and since the founding of the PRC, a politics of humiliation has driven both foreign and domestic policies, including those governing *weisheng*.<sup>214</sup> Whereas *shame* and "performance anxiety" gather around sexual bodies (and particularly women's bodies) in historical representation, China's public *humiliation* surrounding its major political defeats has also led to ambivalent and impressionable body politics. China has sought to both resist its former foreign enemies and to follow in their paths in many areas of life, including in public policy issues like health and hygiene. The Japanese occupation after the first Sino-Japanese War significantly impacted the Chinese population both through its violent consequences, as well as its effects of instilling mimetic desire. Rogaski argues that, "Modernizers embraced *weisheng* as the basis for a discourse of Chinese deficiency: it was that which the Chinese lacked, and that which the foreign Other possessed."<sup>215</sup> Indeed, China's pre-modern contact with the West after the Opium War was persistently marked with foreign criticisms of Chinese hygiene and manners (such as the aforementioned anecdotes in Sun Yat-sen's speeches), helping to portray China as the "Sick Man of Asia"—an image that Chinese political elites have since tried to dispel as they exploit their own mediating status between the foreign Other and the Chinese public as "awakeners of the people."<sup>216</sup> Furthermore, the continued existence of hygiene and etiquette campaigns, and television news programs which re-envision the PRC's birth as both a symbolic cleansing of foreign bodies (Guomindang nationalists and the Japanese) and a literal cleansing of the city's trash, illustrate that a century

---

<sup>214</sup> For a discursive history of the politics of humiliation in Chinese nationalism, see William A. Calahan's "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29 no. 2 (Mar.-May 2004), 199-218.

<sup>215</sup> Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*, 301.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

later, *weisheng* remains a significant socio-political concept that shapes people's quotidian lives and their historical perceptions.

### *Weisheng* and the rural body

Just as public sanitation becomes a political event, as seen in *Ye Jianying's Great Beijing Clean-up*, an individual's *weisheng* and personal bodily practices also constitute a form of body politics scrutinized and dictated by the government and public. However, while Chinese urban cities campaign for patriotic-*weisheng* practices, residents in Chinese towns and villages simply cannot afford to maintain the hygienic standards of city residents. To give an example of how these hygienic disparities are visible and apparent, many who have travelled in rural and small towns in China can attest to the unhygienic and dirty conditions of public squat toilets. As *weisheng* became identified with cosmopolitan citizenship vis-à-vis hygienic modernity, rural towns and villages reveal China's increasingly uneven developments and the great disparity between urban wealth and rural poverty. Furthermore, as rural citizens are significantly poorer than urban residents, their socio-economic status materializes through the physical body itself.

Urban, middle-class perceptions of China's rural Others are informed by observations of difference. Differences from urban citizens in skin tone, clothing, and differing grooming and cleanliness habits mark China's rural inhabitants as poor in quality of life and body (*suzhi*). By modern, international standards, the rural body is simultaneously invisible and hypervisible as "Chinese deficiency" is rendered unto the body. Economic and material conditions are legibly translated into observable hygienic practice or lack of practice.

Perceived as lacking in good *weisheng* habits and practices, rural citizens and migrant workers are viewed as an impediment to China's participation in modernity, stuck in a temporal time-lag. These so-called unclean bodies are, to use Homi Bhabha's term, the "culture's 'in-

between,” which only “emphasizes the internal differentiations, the ‘foreign bodies’ in the midst of the nation—the interstices of its uneven and unequal development, which give the lie to its self-containedness.”<sup>217</sup> There are several kinds of equations within this conceptualization of health: good citizenship equals a clean body, and a clean body equals urban citizenship. Presenting a kind of challenge to hegemonic standards of hygienic modernity, the rural body is a domestic “foreign body” whose marginalization threatens national interest on a symbolic level.<sup>218</sup> These internal domestic threats are synonymous with the external, national threats that marked China’s humiliating political defeats during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as both interior and exterior trans/national threats challenge notions of Chinese nationalism and purity.

The contribution of contemporary Chinese films within the discourse of *weisheng* cannot be underestimated, as they are ideological products circulating to reinforce and/or resist official ideas of *weisheng* (hygiene) and *suzhi* (personal quality). One salient commercial film production that both reinforces and resists official body politics is Yang Yazhou’s dramatic 2002 *Meili de dajiao* (hereafter referred to as *Meili’s Big Feet*; the film is also distributed in English under the title *For the Children*). After quitting the medical profession, former surgeon Yang Yazhou began studying acting at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing before transferring to the directing department. Little known outside of mainland China, Yang has nevertheless worked

---

<sup>217</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Culture’s in-Between,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 1996), 57.

<sup>218</sup> However, it is also important to note that, “wherever there is oppression, there is resistance” and the rural body has found ways to resist such discourses. Mao Zedong famously remarked, “Wherever there is oppression, there is resistance. Countries want independence, nations want liberation and the people want revolution—this has been the irresistible trend of history.” As Sun Wanning’s ethnographic work has shown, migrant workers who find work as domestic workers in cities use many methods of discursive resistance and disobedience against their urban employers, even turning the discourse of *weisheng* around to gossip about their urban employers of having “impossibly dirty” apartments. Sun, *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries*, 137.

since 1981 as an actor and director in both television and film, receiving a fair amount of critical domestic acclaim. In 2002, Yang worked with actress/CCTV host/member of the Chinese Communist Party Ni Ping on *Meili's Big Feet*. Recognized as a *zhuxuanlü* film (“main melody” or “leitmotif” film) with an ideological function supporting the Chinese Communist Party through its many state awards, the Golden Rooster-winning film depicts the dichotomies of clean/unclean and urban/rural, while simultaneously using a politics of humiliation and an aesthetics of compassion to visualize issues of *weisheng*.<sup>219</sup> In this film, public displays of humiliation are intended to shame the unclean rural bodies both within and outside the film text. Rather than employing dignity and restraint, the filmmaker uses a politics of humiliation in the hopes of invoking a compassionate response. Indeed, the film’s heavy-handed ideological and moral emphasis on compassion and pity is in line with contemporary commercial melodramatic Chinese media, which seeks to elicit empathy for the less fortunate members of Chinese society.

*Meili's Big Feet* was given many state awards after its release, and can be considered what I term “soft propaganda” in Chinese commercial cinema. Unlike the garbage left behind by China’s external political enemies (Guomindang and the Japanese), China’s new *weisheng* problem, as represented in the film, consists of its unclean rural, domestic bodies. Released the year after China’s entry into the World Trade Organization, this time, China needed to purge *economic* ideologies no longer useful by symbolically washing the bodies of those left behind by China’s shift to global capitalism.

On the film’s online encyclopedic *Baidu* page (China’s equivalent to Wikipedia), the synopsis states that the film is about “an ordinary village woman’s hopes and pursuit of her destiny, revealing the needs to completely change the backwards living conditions of people

---

<sup>219</sup> The Golden Rooster Awards are the PRC’s equivalent of the Academy Awards in terms of cultural significance and domestic visibility.

living in ignorance and poverty.”<sup>220</sup> The film revolves around the friendship between a rural schoolteacher, Zhang Meili (Ni Ping), and young Beijing teacher Xia Yu (Yuan Quan). Meili, whose name means “beautiful,” lost both her husband and only son. Her husband was executed as a result of stealing and selling railroad spikes, resulting in a train crash and two deaths, and her young son died from an illness shortly thereafter. Xia Yu arrives from Beijing to help Meili teach the village schoolchildren, and after a period of rough adjustment for the young urban woman, the two women become friends and confidants. After a trip to Beijing with the schoolchildren in tow, Xia Yu and her husband arrange a business meeting to help Meili start a potato exporting business in her village. After Meili is given a 50,000 RMB investment, the women bid each other farewell and Meili returns to the village to begin her work. En route one day from transporting potatoes, Meili is involved in a train accident and is left in critical condition. Xia Yu returns to see her friend one final time, and the film ends by showing various characters’ expressions of loss and grief over Meili’s death.

Lead actress, Ni Ping, who plays Meili, is best known for being a CCTV host and member of the Chinese Communist Party. Far from her onscreen fictional character, the otherwise visibly composed and self-possessed Ni Ping occupies the highest socio-economic tier in Chinese society and has great influence over the nation through her media and political presence. Nevertheless, Ni Ping gives a convincing performance as a rural woman, which may be attributed to the Stanislavsky acting method she learned at the Shandong University of Arts. Ni Ping explained the method in her own words: “The basis of this system is to really listen, to really see, to really feel. All your performance skills come from observation of life. Only through

---

<sup>220</sup> The original Chinese synopsis: “该片它通过一位普通山村妇女对自身命运价值与情感的寄托与追求，揭示出若要彻底改变落后的生存状态需要人们从愚昧和贫瘠中彻底觉悟” “美丽的大脚 (Meili's Big Feet),” *Baidu*, <http://baike.baidu.com/view/298295.htm>.



true observation and understanding of life will your performances be persuasive.”<sup>221</sup> When Ni Ping began shooting *Meili's Big Feet*, it had been over a decade since she last appeared in a film, however it is reported that the actress accumulated observations for her character from her annual interviews of rural teachers in some of the poorest rural regions for China's national holiday, Teachers' Day. In 2012 Ni Ping used her persuasive skills to pitch three proposals to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CCPCC), one of which concerned the rural children of migrant workers. According to *China Daily*, she stated, “Although the left-behind children may not have a shortage of material supplies, such as clothes and food, they are in need of spiritual care from their parents. Many children in rural areas *don't have good manners and behave rudely*, but their parents should also be blamed.”<sup>222</sup> In stark contrast to her gentle maternal character in *Meili's Big Feet*, Ni Ping's blunt criticisms and blaming tone reveal the rhetoric of persuasive discourse in Chinese political theater.

Similar to a romantic comedy film, another populist genre besides melodrama in modern-day China, *Meili's Big Feet* is a difference and reconciliation tale, as the narrative is concerned with establishing the many differences between the two women, and by extension, between rural and urban people. The opening black-and-white sequence is a flashback from the trial of Meili's husband, publically condemned to execution by gunfire for his crime of theft that indirectly caused two deaths. Yang crosscuts between the public condemnation of the 23-year-old “illiterate and ignorant” farmer, and of Meili, introduced with a long tilting shot from her (big) feet. She is frantically chasing a pig with a knife in order to prepare her husband's last meal: red-

---

<sup>221</sup> “倪萍：放下是为了未来的拿起 (Ni Ping: Picking up the Future),” 人民网—人民日报海外版 (People's Daily Overseas Edition), 新浪 (Sina.com), January 27, 2011, <http://eladies.sina.com.cn/qg/2011/0127/14491049431.shtml>.

<sup>222</sup> Ruixue Zhao, “Ni Ping to Speak up with Three Proposals for CPPCC,” *China Daily*, March 26, 2012, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012npc/2012-03/06/content\\_14772105.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012npc/2012-03/06/content_14772105.htm).

cooked pork. Disturbing sounds of various bodies converge to create a highly unsettling atmosphere: high-pitched squeal of the pig as it dies, cries of their young son in the background, sounds of the police siren, and Meili's laborious breathing as she runs to deliver the pork to her husband with her child strapped to her back. The overwhelming soundscape of animal, baby, state, and labor coalesce to dramatize the rural environment in which Meili must survive.

However, the trauma and intensity of this scene is quickly dispelled through a cross-dissolve match-cut into the film's present, conveyed with a sudden saturation of color. A tracking shot follows Meili's big feet once again as she traverses the scorched earth, this time to lead a group of village schoolchildren to welcome the new teacher from Beijing. Meili instructs her students to be aware of their manners, and tells one student not to pick his nose, after which the film's triumphant musical theme accompanies a dramatic crane shot showing the group singing and running.

In contrast to the exuberant, even if badly-mannered young students, the following shot makes a somber and enigmatic introduction of Xia Yu, the schoolteacher from Beijing, who is transported to the village on the back of a motorcycle. She is dressed entirely in black clothing with her face obscured by sunglasses, a black hat and a black scarf. As Meili approaches with the children, she is stunned by Xia Yu's bizarre appearance, but slowly begins to warm up to her out-of-town guest as Xia Yu takes off her sunglasses and unravels her scarf, revealing a big toothy grin. The immediate contrast in the women's physical appearances not only sets up the film's urban and rural dichotomy, it also signifies the complex aesthetics of compassion and politics of *suzhi* which will follow. While Meili is always adorned in simple, utilitarian linen clothing with her ponytailed head exposed to the air, Xia Yu's body is covered and protected from the harsh elements from head to toe. The coarse rural village in Western China becomes a

physically hostile environment to Xia Yu's body during her stay, not only externally with its dust and dirt, but also internally, as she violently expels the village water she drinks. The invisible and unseen germs wreaking havoc within Xia Yu's body mark her as foreign Other. Not even her clothes survive the rural treatment, as Meili washes and ruins all of Xia Yu's delicate dry-clean-only clothing, much to her anger and distress.

Nevertheless, Xia Yu's sense of compassion compels her to stay and help the illiterate village schoolchildren. The duality of Xia Yu's experience, the physical misery and discomfort, and the warm and compassionate friendship she forms with Meili, suggests a particular contemporary middle-class Chinese sensibility. This is one that prefers and indeed, cannot live without certain standards, such as modern practices of *weisheng* and dry-clean-only clothing, and yet, has the self-awareness that the disparities between living standards across the socioeconomic strata *ought* to be equalized, in keeping with the ideological promises of Communism, even as those promises are quickly fading into the ether of historical memory. Xia Yu's embodied difficulties and challenges in the rural village illustrate how class is articulated through Chinese bodies. The rural landscape is not a suitable place for Xia Yu's urban, middle-class body and hygienically modern standards. Yingjie Guo contends, "Class poses a daunting dilemma to the CCP for the simple reason that it was central to its ideology of the past, but has now become an obstacle to reform and the construction of a 'harmonious society.'"<sup>223</sup> As such, Guo argues that the CCP government, left with a "dissynchronized [sic] ideology and a dissynchronized [sic] ideology-practice nexus," has deliberately obfuscated the conversation about class.<sup>224</sup>

Nevertheless, mainstream media representations continue to represent the difficulties faced by

---

<sup>223</sup> Yingjie Guo, "Classes without Class Consciousness and Class Consciousness without Classes: The Meaning of Class in the People's Republic of China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 77 (2012): 729.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 738.

the peasantry and the proletariat (the two classes in the CCP's current socio-economic map). Moreover, Sun Wanning argues that in the Chinese genre of "compassionate journalism," her term for the "manufacture of love...mobilizing an array of cultural technologies to imagine the nation as a country full of compassionate people....," that these generic excesses of love and compassion in fact betrays a deep-seated anxiety about the lack of these qualities in everyday life.<sup>225</sup> *Meili's Big Feet* is a cultural product in this vein, betraying anxieties about the lack of compassion for rural people and their health, while simultaneously reinforcing hegemonic and classist notions of *weisheng* and health.

The concept of "being civilized" or "having culture" (*you wenhua*) continually appears throughout the film, and is linked to education and *weisheng* (which are themselves conflated in the concept of *suzhi*). In the aforementioned scene of Xia Yu's arrival to the village, the man driving the motorcycle explains that Meili's now-deceased husband committed the crime of theft because he "lacked culture" (*meiyou wenhua*). In contrast, the man giving Xia Yu a ride into the village, who is also Meili's secret married lover, is considered one of the culturally sophisticated members in the village, because his exposure to films and ability to tell stories are perceived as a sophisticated form of knowledge. In one scene, Wang Shu (Sun Haiying) projects a Soviet film about Lenin for the villagers.<sup>226</sup> When the speaker breaks, Wang must sing and improvise the voice-over: "I, Lenin, am sitting in the Kremlin. I ask Shilga to listen. Several days ago I ordered Vasily to buy some food. Why hasn't he come back home?" suggesting his broad, even if basic transnational knowledge. By importing other national films into the village, Wang Shu becomes the transcultural middle-man and cultural interpreter for his community. Despite his role as

---

<sup>225</sup> Sun, *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries*, 57.

<sup>226</sup> The film is quite probably *Lenin in 1918* (Mikhail Romm, 1939), although this is unconfirmed.

cultural liaison, however, Wang's value in the village is unacknowledged, as he is belittled by other villagers for his ineptness at manual labor. An emasculated "Film Wang" is even brutally beaten by his wife, refusing to divorce her (a gendered twist on the conventional domestic abuse narrative), leading to his and Meili's eventual split. A feminized intellectual, Film Wang is also out-of-place in the rural village, figuratively acting in the film as Xia Yu's male counterpart/foil and revealing the gendered implications of possessing a civilized male body.

In contrast to Film Wang's imported culture and knowledge, forms of "uncivilized behavior" seen throughout the film primarily involve the schoolchildren, establishing their youthful naiveté and innocence on one hand, while demonstrating their unrefined, "uncivilized" and unhygienic behavior on the other. One sequence in the film in particular exemplifies the film's interest in demonstrating differences in urban and rural bodies. After Xia Yu offers Film Wang's son, Da He (Yang Jiahe), a drink from her Coca-Cola bottle, the child politely declines, then suddenly grabs the two-liter beverage and runs away. He begins to run with all the schoolchildren chasing after him. As the children begin running and sliding down a dirt hill into a valley of more dirt, Xia Yu looks at the children from above with an expression of puzzlement. She is confused why anyone would deliberately dirty one's body and clothing, even in play. However, by the end of the film after Meili's death, the empathetic Xia Yu would plummet herself down this very hill, mirroring herself in dirt and despair.

After Xia Yu returns to her room, Meili provides her with a basin of fresh water with which to wash her face. Xia Yu accepts and replies, "It's very dusty outside," handing Meili her black knitted hat to hold. The next shot shows the children carrying newspaper and explaining to one another that it was intended for Ms. Xia's toilet paper. One child asks, "Well, what do we use then?" to which another student matter-of-factly replies, "We use corn skin." Insisting on

marking the differences in hygienic practice between the urban and rural body, the film is concerned with material difference, both in terms of the availability/scarcity of material, as well as in the fundamental differences in bodily *matter* and how bodies themselves *matter*. While the children and other rural people use corn skin to wipe themselves after using the bathroom, the implicit understanding is that Xia Yu must use paper because she is *different* and *superior*—thus the concerted effort to collect newspaper around the village for her bathroom use. Indeed the casual assumption that the middle-class city guest is too delicate to use what the rural Others must use out of poverty is unchallenged by the film’s characters and by the film itself.

When the film cuts back to Xia Yu and Meili, Xia Yu has just finished washing her face and hat in the water. She says to Meili that she is embarrassed because the water has turned muddied and dirty, and is about to toss the water outside when Meili intervenes, “Don’t dump it.” We later learn that water is a scarce commodity in this village, as it has not rained in three years. In what happens next, the filmmaker visualizes differences in “bodies that *matter*” and bodies that matter *less* through a performance of class and trickle-down economy. Illegible rural bodies, such as those represented in this film, and many other films like it which represent the lives of poor rural citizens, rupture nationalist images of hygienic modernity. Similar to the way in which the rural peasants’ accented dialect ruptures the nationalist standard *putonghua* (Mandarin), rural bodies clothed in dull, poor clothing and engaging in “uncivilized” behavior disrupt hegemonic images of modern China. The gaze of the camera, however, often converges with Xia Yu’s own urban gaze, looking at the practices of these illegible bodies as baffling and curious. As Meili brings the dirtied basin water out to the children, happily announcing that Ms. Xia has given the children water to wash their faces, Xia Yu stands in the frame of the door and looks on, a symbolic image of her mediating status between the indoor (civilization) and the

outdoor (the uncivilized). A cutaway of a donkey approaching the scene is followed by a medium close-up of the proxy middle-class spectator who looks both baffled and touched at the impoverished scene before her. The final shot in this sequence shows the donkey drinking out of the basin of water on the ground after the children have used it.

This sequence is significant in the ways it establishes a clear hierarchy of how bodies matter. In a town in which clean water is difficult to come by, Xia Yu, the urban outsider is not only first to receive it, but is also deemed to be the cleanest already. This is reiterated in a later scene when Xia Yu does not have to queue in the long line waiting for water from the well, because she *matters* the most. In the rural village, there is a different trickle-down economy and alternate economic logic at work. Moreover, what would normally be seen as waste or dirt is not perceived as such here, as everything is used and recycled. Thus Xia Yu's dirtied, used water is deemed to be clean enough for the schoolchildren to use. Finally, after the human children are finished with it, it is deemed fit for animal use, whose life holds the least value in this schematic. As the self-sacrificing maternal character in this melodrama, Meili abstains from using the water altogether. Indeed, a circulatory economy of water and liquid waste is used here to represent the distinct uncleanliness of those Others who China cannot expel outside of itself, but can *re-cycle* and *re-form*: China's rural citizens.

In a second scene that literalizes the class logics of trickle-down economies, Xia Yu dresses Meili in her urban chic clothing after Meili has ostensibly ruined many of Xia Yu's clothes by washing them. This sequence is a visualization of Georg Simmel's trickle-down fashion theory, which contends that lower social classes will mimic the fashion trends of upper classes in order to achieve social mobility, after which upper classes will promptly abandon such

trends.<sup>227</sup> Meili self-effacingly submits to being dressed up like a doll, “As long as you’re happy, I’ll do whatever you say,” after which the two women embrace and cry. The film’s humanistic politics merges with the moral aesthetics of “compassionate journalism” in this hierarchical representation of bodies, demonstrating both “a capacity for compassion for the weak and disenfranchised, and a clear sense of class differences and boundaries, on the other.”<sup>228</sup> Indeed, this compassion-at-arm’s-length sensibility and class difference are manifested in the film through representations of *weisheng* and health, as well as in the depiction of Meili’s naïve ignorance about matters in bodily health and hygienic maintenance. Seemingly trivial behavior, like Xia Yu taking vitamins and brushing her teeth are viewed as odd behavior by Meili, as she repeatedly asks: “Are you sick?” (believing that the vitamins are medicine); and “Oh, you’re brushing your teeth *again*?” When the group goes to visit Beijing, Xia Yu’s husband, who begrudgingly hosts them, tells Xia Yu that he will arrange to send the children to a public bath to get rid of their bad bodily odor. Although he helps Meili by introducing her to a friend who agrees to invest in her potato harvesting business, Xia Yu’s husband illustrates the paradoxical middle-class sensibility that is simultaneously compassionate and patronizing, maintaining clear ideas of class and bodily differences.

In the film’s schoolroom sequence, differences in Meili and Xia Yu’s pedagogical skills and *weisheng* habits are made evident. Meili begins by reviewing a proverb phrase, *qianlitiaotiao*, meaning, “from distant parts” (although she mistakenly reads *tiaotiao* as *zhaozhao*, a mistake which will soon be corrected by Xia Yu). Meili then asks the students to

---

<sup>227</sup> Sociologist Georg Simmel argued that, among other things, fashion is a demonstration of class status, and that lower classes will attempt to imitate styles and status symbols as a way to climb up the social ladder. See Georg Simmel, *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>228</sup> Sun, *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries*, 59.



construct sentences using the phrase to welcome Xia Yu, who is of course “from distant parts.” One student begins by constructing a sentence about how Ms. Xia came from the far-away Beijing and how newspaper is collected to give to Ms. Xia to use as toilet paper. He adds, “We still use corn skins to wipe our bottoms,” echoing the matter-of-fact statement made earlier by another student. Xia Yu bursts out laughing, then self-consciously covers her mouth as Meili looks disappointed and briefly drops her head in shame. Meili then reprimands the boy, explaining that while the student simply wished to welcome Ms. Xia, it was *bu wenming* (not civilized) to talk about bathroom matters. Then, in another re-narration of events just seen by the film spectator, the boy who stole the Coke bottle, Da He stands up and recounts how Ms. Zhang (Meili) ladled water for Ms. Xia to wash her face, how then Ms. Xia gave the children water to wash their faces after a long time has passed since they last washed their faces, concluding with “We are very happy. The donkey is happy too.” Again flushed with embarrassment, Meili instructs him not to say anything else, and corrects Da He’s statement about the donkey feeling happy. She says, definitively, that, “a donkey doesn’t know how to feel happy,” to which Da He insists otherwise and proceeds to do an impression of a donkey braying. Xia Yu bursts out laughing once more while Meili admonishes the class, prohibiting them from laughing and mentioning the donkey again. These repetitions serve as displays of humiliation, reinforcing the notion that shame in the Chinese cultural context is performative, public, and requires an audience. Moreover, these repetitions are also stories that are told and re-told in order to share a moral message. In this sense, the students are participating in an affective economy of oral storytelling wherein moral messages about how to behave are told through shameful stories.

Although the moment is brief, the women’s differing reactions are revealing. Aware of the socioeconomic differences between herself and Xia Yu, Meili is sensitive to the implications

of equating animals with rural humans. As uncivilized creatures, animals are perceived as both ignorant and dirty, assumptions that are also made regularly by the urban public about China's rural population, and historically, by foreigners about Chinese people as a race. Chinese vernacular also contains many references to animals when talking about sanitation, for example, a dirty room is called a *gouwo* (dog kennel) and a person who is dirty is often called *zhu* (pig). Xia Yu laughs because she is amused by Da He's accurate donkey impersonation, and has never been personally affected by such degrading insinuations. Moreover, Xia Yu and her husband own a dog, reported to have developed depression since Xia Yu left Beijing. In Xia Yu's world, animals can and do have emotions and feelings like human beings, and are even part of the family, unlike the work animals populating the village. This distinction between animals, for instance, mimics the distinction between urban and rural human bodies. The aforementioned scene with the donkey drinking the leftover water is juxtaposed by a later shot of Xia Yu's pet Dalmatian leisurely taking up an entire apartment sofa.

As Meili struggles to elevate her students' lives, however, the students do not understand the class implications of their behavior. When the class visits Beijing for the first time, Da He attracts the attention from a wealthy Beijing man who insists that he does his donkey impression into his cell phone. Meili immediately drags him away, although the camera lingers on the wealthy man who makes an ironic proclamation that she's "more stubborn than a mule," a cinematic cue that, regardless of the film's apparent narrative sympathy for the rural people, the camera's gaze is aligned with the middle-class spectator, who nevertheless has the last word and joke. Meili reprimands Da He and launches into an impassioned speech to the children about studying hard and moving to Beijing one day. In another public display of humiliation, she tearfully pleads with the children:

One day, we will make our hometown the same beautiful place as Beijing and we won't have to get a free tour like this, being pitied and looked down upon. Look at you, mimicking a donkey. They already take us as stupid...Look at how big the differences are between us and city people.

A dramatic point in the film with the swelling orchestration of the film's thematic score, Meili articulates the implicit, even if unrecognized class consciousness that structures both the rural characters' lives as well as the film's own ethnographic indulgences into the lives of the poor Others. The melodramatic excess of this scene, which cuts away from Meili's speech to close-up shots of the apparently nonprofessional child actors with tears streaming down their faces, is constructed to tug at heartstrings and elicit sympathy. Mirroring the precious commodity of water, the flowing of tears invoked by pathos becomes another circulatory resource in the world in and outside the film. Unlike the unhygienic liquid product of spitting, crying becomes a shared, even if wasteful, expression of the need to purify and re-subjectify rural identity.

As discussed in Chapter One, shame is a sticky affect that implicates others who come in contact with it, and within the Chinese context, the politics of shame and humiliation are crucial to the processes of self-awareness and national recovery. The sense of self-shame and humiliation conveyed by Meili's speech is infectious, allowing the middle-class Chinese spectator to emotionally feel the pathos and plight of the film's disadvantaged characters.

With a small video distribution by Allumination Fireworks based in South Carolina, the film even travelled beyond Chinese boundaries. As one IMDb review of the film indicates, a self-professed Chinese-language student living in the U.S. and his fiancée were so touched by the film that he wrote, "It changed my fiancée's life, gave her a goal in life that we will fulfill together: to move to an impoverished village and teach, hopefully helping reinforce the

importance of education.”<sup>229</sup> As a trans/national product, *Meili’s Big Feet* consistently exploits moments of embarrassment and insecurity on the part of its rural characters in order to infect spectators with shame and guilt.

Shame and guilt, as interrelated affects, are regarded as “self-conscious” and “moral” types of emotions because they require the ability to see one self as “an object of evaluation” in terms of social expectations of what is “good, right, appropriate, and desirable.”<sup>230</sup> However, the cultural formation and inflections of affect differ between Western and non-Western cultures. While the American commentator may have felt guilt (associated with not living up to one’s own moral standards) and not necessarily shame (associated with fear of exposing one’s defects to others), Chinese spectators expressed shame in their reflections on the film.

As social science researchers Ying Wong and Jeanne Tsai point out, the prevailing Western models of shame and guilt that describe shame as an external orientation (oriented to others’ standards) and guilt as an internal orientation (oriented to self standards) do not take into account culturally-specific, and especially Confucian-based models of shame and guilt.<sup>231</sup> In Confucian-based societies, such as in China, Korea, and Japan, internal expectations of the self mirror the collectivist expectations of society, and thus the understandings of shame and guilt are relatively similar. What is more important than the distinction between shame and guilt is the belief that shame is a positive value and an “appropriate emotional response to failure” in many non-Western contexts. Furthermore, the idea of performance plays an important role in

---

<sup>229</sup> Brainfertilizer, October 12, 2005, user review of *For the Children* on IMDb, “Giving Up Comfort to Teach the Poor Children,” *Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0361634/reviews?ref\\_=tt\\_urv](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0361634/reviews?ref_=tt_urv).

<sup>230</sup> Ying Wong and Jeanne Tsai, “Cultural Models of Shame and Guilt,” *The Self-Conscious Emotions: Theory and Research* (2007): 210.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

understanding Chinese affective states, and shame in Chinese cultures is believed to be, “the ability or tendency to...*take delight in the performance of one’s duty*.”<sup>232</sup>

One Chinese netizen critic on popular online cultural forum, *Douban*, writes about the film, “Sometimes contrast can make you feel inferior, sometimes it can encourage progress, and sometimes make you feel *ashamed*.”<sup>233</sup> His/her subject heading is titled, “In the city, I don’t have any reason to complain about life,” a comment intended to express appreciation for the advantages and privileges he experiences as an urban resident. The user, along with many other commenters, gives accolades to the film and writes that it moved him/her to tears, but only one Chinese commenter writes that the film nearly moved him/her to consider action. Another user writes that the film allowed him/her to reconsider volunteering, however, s/he is also plagued by doubts that teaching students a proverb like *qianlitiaotiao* is even useful for such students. S/he writes, “The current China is not like China in the past. Even if a student is admitted to university, the expensive tuition becomes a burden for the family. They need not only the ability to get into college, but also a practical knowledge that could help change their [financial] circumstances.”<sup>234</sup> Although this user’s doubts express the realities of the situation, particularly the material disparities between the wealthy and the poor in China, it is no surprise that

---

<sup>232</sup> Anthropologist David Jordan qtd. in *ibid*.

<sup>233</sup> Laputa, February 12, 2012, user review of 美丽的大家 (Meili’s Big Feet), *Douban*, “在城市的我没有任何理由抱怨生活 (No reason to complain about life in the city),” *Douban Movies*, <http://movie.douban.com/subject/1438689/reviews>.

<sup>234</sup> Arwen, December 30, 2008, user review of user review of 美丽的大家 (Meili’s Big Feet), *Douban*, “志愿者 (Volunteers),” *Ibid*.

responses to his/her comment only reassert the film's naïve optimism and reductive solution that "all knowledge starts from abc."<sup>235</sup>

Another example of how the film mobilizes a politics of humiliation involves the aforementioned scene when Xia Yu takes over for Meili in the classroom. Xia Yu's first order of business is to correct two *cuowu* (mistakes) from Meili's instruction. First, she corrects Meili's misreading of the term *tiaotiao* (from distant regions) as *zhaozhao*. Meili embarrassedly stands up from her seat and tells the class to thereafter defer to Ms. Xia. Xia Yu then informs the class that the second mistake is the unsanitary habit of putting a finger in the mouth in order to turn book-pages. As soon as she says this, a hard cut reveals Meili doing exactly that, with a sheepish, infantilized expression as she is caught by both film and student audiences. Although perhaps well-intended, the filmmaker's insistence on the differences between urban and rural people becomes, at mildest, an ethnographic gaze that turns rural livelihood into a curiosity, and at worst, an excessive ideologue that further emphasizes irreconcilable difference, rather than a common humanity between the two. Furthermore, this scene illustrates how education and *weisheng* are pedagogically conflated. A reading mistake becomes equated with an unsanitary habit, both of which Xia Yu, the civilized urbanite, urgently corrects as the new schoolteacher's first order of business to teach the village schoolchildren about progress and responsibility.

As the altruistic urban heroine, Xia Yu sacrifices her marriage and urban comforts in order to improve the lives of the children. She even has an abortion in the village so that she can stay, much to the distress and visible pain of Meili, who curses her for being "stupid, because having a baby is the most important job for a woman." As Meili carries a weeping Xia Yu on her

---

<sup>235</sup> 游荡荡@Now, January 5, 2009, user comment to Arwen, <http://movie.douban.com/review/1601529/>.

back up to the house after her operation, Meili continues to impassionedly lecture her, “And you are so quick to get rid of it as if going to the toilet,” a sanitation reference used to criticize Xia Yu, not unlike Sun’s observation of the reverse discourse utilized by rural maids who critique the messiness of their urban patrons.<sup>236</sup> Moreover, this scene again reinforces that urban and rural people hold radically different ideas about waste. Whereas Xia Yu rids of her unwanted pregnancy without any emotion or sentiment, Meili takes offense at Xia Yu’s easy disposal of her baby as if a kind of bodily waste.

When Meili returns from Beijing with the 50,000 yuan deposit secured by Xia Yu’s husband to start her potato business, she meets with the village mayor who announces in front of a small audience that with the potato business, the village will finally be able to afford to build an aqueduct. He happily announces that, “like city people, husbands and wives can take a shower and go to bed clean and dry every night.” This promise indicates the extent to which “*weisheng* [is] an instrumental discourse informing the Chinese elite’s vision of a modern ideal, a vehicle through which they hoped state, society, and the individual would be transformed.”<sup>237</sup> In this scene, the village mayor conveys his vision of modernity and how the village can catch up to “city people,” translated concretely as the quotidian opportunity for village residents to bathe daily. Promises of *weisheng* accompany fantasies of modernity, and, as the award-winning, commercial film *Meili’s Big Feet* illustrates, the two are inextricable.

Setting an ideological example, Xia Yu demonstrates how the compassionate middle-class urban sensibility ought to be put into practice. Conveying the moral economy of China’s socialist ideology, popular PRC media has consistently played a significant role in creating spectacles of compassion. In her examination of television human-interest news programs

---

<sup>236</sup> Sun, *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries*.

<sup>237</sup> Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*, 300.

featuring disadvantaged groups of people, Sun argues that such televisual presentations are exploitative, particularly towards the poor and displaced, as they satisfy middle-class curiosities about the Other while managing anxieties about issues of social injustice.<sup>238</sup> Similar to television news programs, the very anxieties raised by the film in regards to social injustice are ultimately contained by generic comforts and sentimental aesthetics of the film, thereby rendering the motivation for real action obsolete. Just as the *Douban* comments indicate, most Chinese spectators felt a sense of satisfaction in their emotional involvement with the film, experiencing catharsis and release, however, only one netizen commented on the actual value of volunteer work in small rural villages. Furthermore, the film's melodramatic conclusion is surprisingly lacking in ideological implication and duty, and instead, like many Chinese melodramas, it emphasizes tragic helplessness and suffering. After Meili's death scene, a montage shows the expressions of grief by three characters, Da He, Xia Yu, and Film Wang. In a grating screaming style, a frustrated and grieving Da He sings a song he invented about the futility of effort: "If we knew that the Yellow River would be dry, what's the point in building the dam? If I knew the teacher would never come back, what's the point in learning 'Good-bye'? What are you going to do, my teacher? Take all the kids to school. We'll be waiting for you, my teacher so we won't have to grow potatoes in the future." As he sings the last line, the camera cuts to Xia Yu who plummets herself down the very dirt hill Da He and the children are earlier seen happily jumping down. A close-up at the bottom of the hill shows tears streaming down her dirt-covered face, a helpless and vulnerable final portrayal of the urban schoolteacher, who could not lift the village children and her dear friend from poverty, so instead, symbolically joins them in the dirt. Finally, Film Wang is shown grieving and shining his film projector from a distance unto the

---

<sup>238</sup> Sun, *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries*.



side of the small village, a self-referential final shot that reveals the filmmaker's own intention in casting light on the subject of rural poverty. Ultimately, however, the film is contradictory in its ideological message. The humanistic politics in its representation of the two women's strong homosocial bond is in direct contradiction to the sub-narrative exposing the ignorant and unclean lifestyles and bodies of the rural people. The film's final narrative emphasis on *failure* and tragedy suggest an affective orientation premised on cultural upbringing—that “feeling bad about the self is not only normal, but to some degree expected because it serves the larger goal of self-improvement.”<sup>239</sup> Just as “Chinese parents readily discuss and disclose children's transgressions in front of strangers to induce shame and socialize children to behave properly,” the film's paternalistic pedagogical ideology uses cinematic displays of shame and humiliation in an attempt to inspire Chinese viewers to “catch up to city people” and become hygienic modern citizens.<sup>240</sup> Despite this intention, there is no reconciliation of difference in the film's narrative, as the titular character dies and leaves three immobilized, grieving characters in her wake. As Da He's song suggests, they are left in a state of “waiting” for a solution to end their poverty and wretched uncleanliness.

---

<sup>239</sup> Wong and Tsai, "Cultural Models of Shame and Guilt," 212.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

## Chapter Two Bibliography

- Anagnost, Ann. "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi)." *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004): 189-208.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "Culture's in-Between." In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, 53-60. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 1996.
- Davies, Gloria. "Should We Worry About Chinese Patriotism?" *Harvard University Press Author Forum: Off the Page*. May 28, 2008.  
[http://harvardpress.typepad.com/off\\_the\\_page/2008/05/should-we-worry.html](http://harvardpress.typepad.com/off_the_page/2008/05/should-we-worry.html).
- Fitzgerald, John. *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1996.
- Guo, Yingjie. "Classes without Class Consciousness and Class Consciousness without Classes: The Meaning of Class in the People's Republic of China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 77 (2012): 723-39.
- Lull, James. *China Turned On: Television, Reform and Resistance*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Macdonald, Sean. "Li Lili: Acting a Lively Jianmei Type." In *Chinese Film Stars*, edited by Mary Farquhar and Yingjin Zhang, 50-66. London: Routledge, 2010.
- Rogaski, Ruth. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.
- Ross, Kristin. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.
- Scott, David. *China and the International System, 1840-1949: Power, Presence, and Perceptions in a Century of Humiliation*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008.
- Simmel, Georg. *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Picador USA, 1977, 1988.
- Sun, Wanning. *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries*. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Wong, Ying, and Jeanne Tsai. "Cultural Models of Shame and Guilt." *The Self-Conscious Emotions: Theory and Research* (2007): 209-23.

Xiaoping, Li. "'Focus' (Jiaodian Fangtan) and the Changes in the Chinese Television Industry."  
*Journal of Contemporary China* 11, no. 30 (2002): 17-34.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### **Bodies, Blood, and Love: The “Touching” Politics of HIV/AIDS Media**

If clean, healthy bodies are the capital upon which the national *suzhi* (quality) can be judged, then it is important to consider how unhealthy bodies, and specifically bodies afflicted with illness play a role in envisioning modern China. Another important facet to bodily representations of health includes the cinematic portrayals of disease and bodies afflicted by illness. Accordingly, this chapter examines the cinematic and media representations of HIV/AIDS, a relatively new disease in China with its first diagnosis in 1985. Through an analysis of Gu Changwei’s *Zui Ai* (hereafter *Love for Life*), China’s first AIDS-themed theatrical commercial film, released in 2011, we can better understand the efforts of the Chinese government to “re-author a....less threatening narrative of the virus and its transmission paths,” a paradigm shift Johanna Hood traces to the early 2000s.<sup>241</sup> Afterwards, I examine the role of documentary and online media within the state’s de-stigmatization efforts. This chapter is particularly interested in the ways in which *huxiang guan’ ai* (love and care) are encouraged through visual media, particularly towards the rural Chinese bodies afflicted with HIV/AIDS. Rather than examining the systemic politics of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in China, which would include “considerations of patriarchy and gendered relations, sexual identity, the status and role of civil society, popular disturbance, and discursive freedom,” this chapter focuses on the

---

<sup>241</sup> Johanna Hood, "Celebrity Philanthropy: The Cultivation of China's HIV/AIDS Heroes," in *Celebrity in China*, ed. Louise Edwards and Elaine Jeffreys (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 91.

cultural productions of ideology and affect surrounding HIV/AIDS de-stigmatization in visual culture.<sup>242</sup>

The HIV/AIDS master narrative in China is premised on stories of transmission: the biomedical discourses of viral transmission; the transnational transmission of news about China's AIDS epidemic; and perceptions of the disease as the consequence of foreign trespass. Correspondingly, this chapter uses a conceptual approach based on "transmission" in order to analyze the "touching," or affecting, aspects of *Love for Life*, as the phenomenon of transmission calls for a border-crossing perspective that is analogously *trans/national*. In order to explore blood, illness, and the affective impact of onscreen mediated bodies, I draw from the work of Susan Sontag, Julia Kristeva, and film phenomenologists.<sup>243</sup> This chapter considers Kristeva's concept of the abject and Sontag's insights on illness for how they function to articulate and ambiguate Chineseness and the Chinese body as ill. Finally, this chapter explores the various economies of *touch*: in terms of affect, influence, and cinematic production. Embracing the fuzzy contours of "transmission" and "touching" as acts that do not implicitly clarify agent/receiver positions, and taking a cue from the loanword (a word "adopted or borrowed from another language"), encounters with the "loan-theory," or the cross-cultural application of theory—can produce new understandings of Chinese cinema through bidirectional, transnational analysis. Transmission need not always result in infection, and donation can be a generative reciprocated process in academic pursuits of knowledge.

---

<sup>242</sup> Jing Gu and Neil Renwick, "China's Fight against HIV/AIDS," *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 54 (2008): 87.

<sup>243</sup> Phenomenological, affect, and sensory theories do not play a significant role in existing scholarship on contemporary Chinese cinema, but they can inform generative new directions as illustrated by the recent *Cinema Journal* publication Man-Fung Yip, "In the Realm of the Senses: Sensory Realism, Speed, and Hong Kong Martial Arts Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 4 (2014).

Although the film can be interpreted as a cultural “manufacture of love” towards people living with HIV/AIDS, *Love for Life* also generates an affective account of suffering and disease as consequences of post-reform China’s “cruelly optimistic” fantasies of economic mobility. The concept of “abject-ification” as a representational mode crystallizes several different ideas in understanding HIV/AIDS representation, while the term accounts for the affective dis-ease from viewing representations of *disease*.

#### Transmitting China’s HIV/AIDS epidemic

In 2000-2001, the *New York Times* reported that countless people in Chinese rural villages were dying of AIDS as a result of illegal blood-selling operations. Painting a harrowing portrait of “doomed” farmers, all of whom “share[d] a hollow, desperate look in their eyes,” Elisabeth Rosenthal, a reporter and medical doctor who lived and worked in China at the time, described the cause and devastation of HIV/AIDS she observed first-hand in these regions, the political denial surrounding the epidemic, and the efforts of local Chinese doctors to help the villagers.<sup>244</sup> The first news publications to discuss the blood black market in China, Rosenthal’s stories about the “blood pool of death” broke news of the “silent plague” of HIV/AIDS outbreak to an international audience, garnering sensational news headlines and public outcry from around the world. Demonstrating anthropologists Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow’s contention that analysts are “historical actors shaping the very formations they ‘study,’” the global transmission of Rosenthal’s articles helped catalyze changes in Chinese health policies and international perceptions of China.<sup>245</sup> Following the international media spotlight on China’s HIV/AIDS crisis

---

<sup>244</sup> Elisabeth Rosenthal, "In Rural China, a Steep Price of Poverty: Dying of AIDS," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2000, 12; "Silent Plague: A Special Report.; Deadly Shadow Darkens Remote Chinese Village," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2001.

<sup>245</sup> Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow, *Body, Subject, and Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6.

throughout the early 2000s, the Chinese government expended greater efforts to shut down illegal blood-selling centers and implement safe screening, testing, and blood procuring practices.

In addition to changes in state policy and practice, social discourses surrounding 艾滋病 *aizibing* (HIV/AIDS) in the PRC also underwent significant change in the new millennium. In tandem with the unchallenged belief that HIV/AIDS was introduced into China by foreigners around 1985, the Chinese term for AIDS (艾滋病 *aizibing*) was borrowed through the act of linguistic transmission and exposure to the English-language acronym “AIDS” (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome).<sup>246</sup> After the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, the Communist Party mobilized “linguistic engineering” to warn citizens against 爱资病, *aizibing* (“love-capitalism disease”), a homonym for 艾滋病 *aizibing* (HIV/AIDS). The *homonymic*, rather than *homophobic*, slur, was attached to a foreign economic system and not to the paradigmatic HIV/AIDS stigma associated with sexual practices. Binding “love” to economic rather than sexual transaction, “love-capitalism disease” implicitly denounced the *sale* of blood, rather than the *sharing* of bodily fluids, as the manifestation of a contaminated political-economic ideology. Comparative literature scholar Perry Link explains:

The official press warned, for example, against ‘love-capitalism disease,’ a term that combined a surface vagueness with a devastatingly negative connotation. . . . Apart from its negative political connotations, the term in Chinese,

---

<sup>246</sup> In 1985, a foreigner died of AIDS in China, becoming the first documented case of the disease in the country, while the first indigenous cases of HIV/AIDS were recorded of needle-sharing heroin users in the Yunnan Province in the late 1980s.

*aizibing*, was a homonym of the word for AIDS. No citizen could miss the cruel associations of “catching the disease.”<sup>247</sup>

As with capitalism, the disease *aizibing* was perceived to be “something remote and foreign both geographically and morally.” The government believed outbreak in China could be prevented by “banning HIV-infected persons from entering the country,” an act that only further drove the disease underground where it spread at alarming rates, including in poverty-stricken provinces such as Henan and Yunnan where poor farmers and villagers sold their blood via unsanitary collection processes.<sup>248</sup> According to a 2002 leaked health report, 35-45% of the donors in some areas in Henan had contracted HIV/AIDS.<sup>249</sup>

Stemming from Deng Xiaoping’s reform regime of the 1980s, decollectivization, privatization and commercialization policies thrust the challenges of capitalist livelihood upon previously state-controlled agrarian communities. Although generally successful at first, these challenges created increasing regional inequalities and the conditions for blood to become a “form of venture capital” as provincial authorities “found in biotechnology the illusory promise of big profits that could revitalize a devastated landscape.”<sup>250</sup> Money earned by poor farmers and peasants from selling blood was typically spent on housing, education, dowries, taxes and fines. Ann Anagnost notes that under such circumstances, “the balance sheet of a farming household is

---

<sup>247</sup> Perry Link, *Evening Chats in Beijing: Probing China's Predicament* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1993), 78-79.

<sup>248</sup> See Shao Jing, "Fluid Labor and Blood Money: The Economy of HIV/AIDS in Rural Central China," *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 4 (2006): 535; and Zunyou Wu, Keming Rou, and Haixia Cui, "The HIV/AIDS Epidemic in China: History, Current Strategies and Future Challenges," *AIDS Education and Prevention* 16, no. A (2004): 10.

<sup>249</sup> See Anna Hayes, “AIDS, Bloodheads & Cover-ups: The ‘ABC’ of Henan’s Aids Epidemic,” *Australian Quarterly*, 77:3 (May - Jun., 2005), pp. 12-16; and Bates Gill, Jennifer Chang and Sarah Palmer, “China's HIV Crisis,” *Foreign Affairs*, 81:2 (March- April 2002), pp. 96-110.

<sup>250</sup> Ann Anagnost, "Strange Circulations: The Blood Economy in Rural China," *Economy and Society* 35, no. 4 (2006): 516.



driven into a deficit that can only be repaid with blood, as if blood were another form of ‘agricultural produce.’”<sup>251</sup>

Blood merchants called *xuetou* (bloodheads) paid poor farmers and villagers in the Henan and Yunnan provinces for their blood and plasma (their bodily produce), which was resold in both urban and international markets.<sup>252</sup> As a means of supplementing their meager incomes, many villagers were eager to participate. With the complicity of county officials, some bloodheads even managed to entice near-entire villages of adults into selling their blood and/or plasma, rarely testing for blood-borne diseases and re-using syringes. Furthermore, blood was often pooled and re-injected into plasma donors for quicker recovery so that they could donate again. Such villages were referred to as blood donation villages, and later as the HIV/AIDS outbreak grew, were also called *aizibing cun* (HIV/AIDS villages).

The turning point in state response began with the passing of several laws in 1998, one of which, *Principles for STD/AIDS Education and Prevention Messages*, was jointly issued by the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television Administration in an effort to prioritize educational and preventative intervention. Moreover, with the recognition that social stigma surrounding the disease constituted a significant barrier for effective HIV/AIDS programs in China, the state began instrumenting mass media to dispel discrimination against HIV/AIDS victims while reinforcing the government’s commitment to fighting the disease. Their efforts ramped up over the years, and especially in the aftermath of *The New York Times* articles, which blamed local

---

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 518.

<sup>252</sup> According to a 2002 leaked health report, 35-45% of the donors in some areas in Henan had contracted HIV during the blood-selling process. See Anna Hayes, "AIDS, Bloodheads & Cover-Ups: The ‘ABC’ of Henan's Aids Epidemic," *AQ: Journal of Contemporary Analysis* (2005): 12-40; and Bates Gill, Jennifer Chang, and Sarah Palmer, "China's HIV Crisis," *Foreign Affairs* (2002).

governments for the epidemic. For instance, the *Xinhua News Agency of China* coverage of President Hu Jintao's 2004 visit with HIV/AIDS patients sought to demonstrate "the caring attitude shown by the Chinese government," and the government's "commitment to the people."<sup>253</sup> Concern over China's HIV/AIDS epidemic also became publically recognized as a transnational affair, with international dignitaries like U.S. President Bill Clinton and former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan arriving in China in 2003-2004 to promote anti-discrimination and HIV prevention programs.

Other public relations projects in the new millennium focused on eliciting compassion and understanding towards people living with HIV/AIDS (hereafter PLWHA) through the enlistment of celebrity spokespeople known as *kang'ai yingxiong* ("HIV/AIDS heroes") to help "reduce moral panic about the disease by re-authoring a biomedically-oriented and less threatening narrative of the virus and its transmission paths," a group which includes actor Pu Cunxin and singer Peng Liyuan (who became the "Chinese First Lady" in 2013).<sup>254</sup> Despite state efforts to propagate HIV/AIDS awareness and education, however, restrictions placed on filmmakers prevent exploration of the full historical truth about the disease's spread in mainland China, a history that involves local governmental complicity with the underground blood market and political cover-up of the extent of HIV/AIDS devastation throughout the 1990s.

Nevertheless, as news of the HIV/AIDS outbreak in poor, rural villages began to spread informally in the mid-2000s, independent documentaries like Zhuang Kongshao's *Huri* (Tiger Day) (2002); Chen Weijun's *Hao si buru lai huozhe* (*To Live Is Better Than to Die*) (2005); Ai Xiaoming's *Zhongyuan ji shi* (The Epic of Central Plains)(2006) and *Guan'ai zhi jia* (Love and

---

<sup>253</sup> Min Wu, "Framing AIDS in China: A Comparative Analysis of Us and Chinese Wire News Coverage of HIV/AIDS in China," *Asian Journal of Communication* 16, no. 3 (2006): 265.

<sup>254</sup> Hood, "Celebrity Philanthropy: The Cultivation of China's HIV/AIDS Heroes," 91.

Care)(2007); and Chinese American Ruby Yang's Academy Award-winning *The Blood of Yingzhou District* (2006) revealed the death, suffering, and desolation in blood donation villages.<sup>255</sup> According to film scholar Shuqin Cui, independent documentarians working under the threat of sanction and arrest in China attempt to reconstruct erased histories "willfully ignored by mainstream screens."<sup>256</sup> Despite the domestic and international attention such documentaries brought to the subject however, due to political restrictions, the blood-selling industrial complex itself became a structuring "absent presence" in cultural efforts to address China's blood economy. Although the documentaries "may display the diseased body," they are "unable to expose the illegal and invisible social entity responsible for it."<sup>257</sup>

In the past decade, official media outlets no longer warn Chinese citizens of "love-capitalism disease," and focus instead on increasing public knowledge and concern about HIV/AIDS. Health anthropologist Johanna Hood indicates that, "in their everyday experiences Chinese citizens now find themselves encouraged to 'love and care' (*huxiang guan'ai*) for the HIV positive."<sup>258</sup> Cultural studies scholar Sun Wanning contends that the "manufacture of love [in the Chinese genre of 'compassionate journalism']...mobiliz[es] an array of cultural technologies to imagine the nation as a country full of compassionate people....," in fact betraying a deep-seated anxiety about the lack of compassion in everyday life.<sup>259</sup> Indeed, noting

---

<sup>255</sup> Meanwhile in television, an educational film about HIV, *Jiaru you mingtian* (If There's Tomorrow) starring Pu Cunxin aired on CCTV television stations in 2001. Pu then went on to star in two more commercial TV drama series about HIV/AIDS *Yileyuan* (Losing Paradise), which aired in 2003 and *G zianshang de yongtandiao* (Aria in G), which aired in 2004.

<sup>256</sup> Chen was arrested and warned four times by local authorities to cease filming. Shuqin Cui, "Alternative Visions and Representation: Independent Documentary Film-Making in Contemporary China," *Studies in Documentary Film* 4, no. 1 (2010): 19.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>258</sup> Hood, "Celebrity Philanthropy: The Cultivation of China's HIV/AIDS Heroes," 91.

<sup>259</sup> Wanning Sun, *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 57.

that “cultural technologies” in narrative cinema differ from documentary and news-oriented media, this chapter examines the aesthetics and politics of compassion in *Love for Life*, the first (and to date only) state-supported cinematic acknowledgement of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.<sup>260</sup>

What does the transmission of *huxiang guan'ai* (love and care) through cinematic fiction look like, and how does it betray deep-seated anxieties about everyday life in post-reform China?

*Love for Life* (Gu Changwei, 2011) is an attempt to re-narrativize and un-stigmatize the disease through the use of sensual tactility and melodramatic narration to convey the impact of the illness on Chinese social and individual bodies. In *Lust, Caution*, stigma was affixed to actress Tang Wei’s face and body, provoking public expressions of *shame* and *anger* directed at her sexual performances in the film. The stigma of HIV/AIDS is a metaphorical mark of disgrace that invokes moral judgment and fear, provoking abject affects stemming from discomforting confrontations with the abject, bodily threshold and other liminal economies of borderlessness. What kinds of affective bodily representations are depicted in HIV/AIDS narrative films? How do such representations produce new understandings of the nation and national identity?

Gu’s film is the first Chinese commercial film to address China’s illegal blood economy in rural blood donation villages, cinematically portraying the communal manifestations and symptoms of “love-capitalism disease.” *Love for Life* conveys dual ideological meanings: a surface concern about PLWHA and the social discrimination they face, and a subterranean critique of “loving capitalism” in modern-day China. The film begins with the posthumous voiceover of a 12-year-old boy introducing his town, Goddess Village, situated high in an undisclosed mountain range. The boy explains that his father, Qiquan (Pu Cunxin) brought a

---

<sup>260</sup> There are limited records of a Chinese film produced by the Beijing Film Academy Youth Film Studio entitled, *Aizibinghuanzhe* (AIDS Patient) in 1988 by Xu Tongjun, however, the distribution and exhibition of this film are unknown to the author.

mysterious disease to town with his blood-selling enterprise, and that the boy was poisoned as retribution. Wishing to alleviate the burden of care from their healthy family members, a dozen or so villagers who contracted *rebing* (“the fever,” as they refer to HIV/AIDS) relocate to an abandoned school campus run by the deceased boy’s grandfather, Lao Zhu (Tao Zeru). While the first half of the film focuses on the communal life of the HIV exiles, the second half pivots towards the romance between Deyi (Aaron Kwok) and Qinqin (Zhang Ziyi), two cousins-in-law who are dropped off at the schoolhouse by their spouses, and fall in love. After a difficult and expensive process of obtaining marriage licenses, Deyi (who is also the narrator’s uncle) falls very ill to the disease on his wedding night. Qinqin keeps Deyi’s fever down by continually dunking herself into a vat of cold water and pressing her body against his. In the morning however, a recovered Deyi discovers that Qinqin has died in the night. He commits suicide by carving fatal incisions into his thighs with a large butcher knife. The film ends with a flashback of Qinqin tearfully reading their marriage license aloud, after which the posthumous narrator explains that he is with his aunt and uncle “on the other side where life resumes as it did on earth.”

#### A methodology of transmissional agency

I encountered a DVD of *Love for Life* with English subtitles in a Beijing market catering to foreign customers interested in bootleg luxury and Westernized products, a bustling commercial space for cultural transmission and cross-pollinating tastes. The seductive cover photo, showing simple but beautiful close-up images of the two famous lead actors, Zhang Ziyi and Aaron Kwok, was captured by the film’s cinematographer and long-time Wong Kar-wai collaborator, Christopher Doyle. After watching the film and reading Rosenthal’s *New York Times* articles and other English-language news stories about the preventable tragedy that

became China's contaminated blood economy, I became interested in the trans/national discourses surrounding the Chinese AIDS epidemic, as well as the socio-political function of *Love for Life* as a trans/national film that, in a way, represents China's artistic response to the internationalizing of its domestic AIDS problem.<sup>261</sup>

The concept of transmission raises concern about dubious health practices and academic practices alike. The transmission of Western ideas to the study of non-Western subjects has long caused anxiety in the field of film studies. In a 1991 issue of *boundary 2*, film scholar Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto summarized several important debates in the "meta-discourse [academic] industry" with regard to the study of non-Western films by Western scholars.<sup>262</sup> Noting the justifiable tentativeness, hesitation, and ideological skepticism about cross-cultural exchange by many scholars across disciplines (Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhaba, and E. Ann Kaplan, to name a few), Yoshimoto observes that the fundamental problem is the implicit self/Other dichotomy that assumes that the Other is the "sole bearer of difference." Therefore, the "perennial epistemological question, 'Can we ever know the Other as the truly Other?' .....does nothing but conceal the fundamentally problematic nature of the identity of the self."<sup>263</sup> Yoshimoto asks that we go further in the recognition of our positionality as Western scholars and the construction of "a new position of knowledge through a careful negotiation between the self and the Other."<sup>264</sup>

Yoshimoto's criticism that cross-cultural analysis is often undertaken as a monodirectional endeavor with a Western subject studying a non-Western object correlates with

---

<sup>261</sup> My remark that *Love for Life* is a transnational film refers both to the above-the-line production role of Australian cinematographer, Christopher Doyle, as well as to the fact that *Love for Life* was distributed internationally. Moreover, the embedded English subtitles on the DVD suggests that the film was packaged for international consumption.

<sup>262</sup> Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, "The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Film Studies and the Postcolonial World Order," *Boundary 2* 18, no. 3 (1991).

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

the frameworks of “transmission” and “touching” that this chapter explores. Issues of who *touches/transmits* and who *receives* also speak to questions of power. In postcolonial studies, scholars charge institutionalized Western knowledge vis-à-vis speech and discursive acts as reconsolidation of the Western Subject who speaks on behalf of those who do not have a public platform from which to speak.<sup>265</sup> Touching, like speech, also denotes embedded power relationships of who *can* and *cannot* touch, a fact concisely disclosed by Hollywood actress Esther Williams’ advice on greeting fans: “You touch them, they don’t touch you.”<sup>266</sup> Power differentials also affect “the places of touch,” wherein “status and social role unquestionably affects how we come into contact with the spaces brought into being.”<sup>267</sup> In the foreigner’s market where I found the DVD of *Love for Life*, there was a clear sense of the power dynamics between the vendors and the non-native buyers, even as the vendors’ aggressive selling tactics constitute an intense and powerful kind of interaction with their clientele. When I came into the contact with *Love for Life*, it was through an engagement within this space of touch as a foreign consumer. Situated with ethnographic privilege in relation to the indigenous Chinese DVDS for sale, foreign buyers take visual and economic command of the stock, satisfying their curiosity for the Other through media consumption.

Despite the differentials of power within economies and spaces of touch, “transmission” and “touching” are fuzzy words that do not implicitly enunciate the giver/receiver and agent/recipient roles, illuminating the idea that acts of “transmitting” and “touching” raise

---

<sup>265</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1988).

<sup>266</sup> Qtd. in Richard Schickel, “Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity in America,” (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 5.

<sup>267</sup> Mark Paterson, Martin Dodge, and Sara MacKian, “Introduction: Placing Touch within Social Theory and Empirical Study,” in *Touching Space Placing Touch*, ed. Mark and Martin Dodge Paterson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2012), 8.

questions about the definitional contours of subjectivity and the subjective. In film studies, scholars like Vivian Sobchack, Laura Marks, and Jennifer M. Barker engage with questions about how bodies make meaning and sense of cinema by investigating reciprocal, rather than monodirectional, corporeal contact between screen and spectator.<sup>268</sup>

Notions of reciprocity and unidirectional contact between bodies are also complicated by the blood donation process, as medical anthropologist Kathleen Erwin indicates that the concept of blood donation challenges the “obligations of reciprocity embedded in Chinese kin and *guanxi* relations.”<sup>269</sup> *Guanxi* (Chinese social relationships) hinges on the continual exchange of gifts and favors. In Chinese culture, gifts and favors are continually exchanged to maintain balance and connection in social relationships. When one is given a gift, the implicit expectation is that s/he will be called upon for a favor, according with Marcel Mauss’ argument that the gift is never free and always comes with obligations.<sup>270</sup> Blood donation, however, because it is *anonymous*, confounds and obscures the reciprocal obligation between giver and recipient. The process illustrates the indefinite boundaries between self/Other, subject/object, and giver/recipient—particularly as the “gift of life” turns into a “commodity of death” in dangerous and unsafe blood donation.<sup>271</sup> Moreover, concerns about *who* is touching/transmitting and *where* they are touching/transmitting lie at the heart of China’s HIV/AIDS epidemic. During the 1990s Chinese

---

<sup>268</sup> See Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004); Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); and Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>269</sup> Kathleen Erwin, "The Circulatory System: Blood Procurement, AIDS, and the Social Body in China," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (2006): 150.

<sup>270</sup> See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

<sup>271</sup> Erwin, "The Circulatory System: Blood Procurement, AIDS, and the Social Body in China," 139.



blood economy, the majority of blood donors/givers were impoverished women, and the sites of contaminated blood donation were predominantly rural villages in China's poorest provinces. Through unsanitary and illegal blood-selling operations, healthy *donors/givers* become HIV *receivers/recipients*, while the recipients of the healthy blood are unknown and untraceable.<sup>272</sup>

Returning to Yoshimoto's compelling call to return to that "true spirit of radicalism that once made film studies such an exciting space for critical thinking," it should be remarked that his essay does not clarify the role of the transnational ethnic scholar who is always-already engaged in negotiation between self and Other in his/her liminal subject position. E. Ann Kaplan's suggestion that "cross-cultural analysis" is "fraught with danger" because we "are forced to read works produced by the Other through the constraints of our own frameworks/theories/ideologies" may not easily apply to those, like myself, who unsettle categorical identities of Western and non-Western.<sup>273</sup> I was born in China but immigrated to the U.S. as a young child where I have since received exclusively Western institutional education, including Chinese language classes. I frequently seek out trans/national exchanges and encounters with my birthplace, but the fact that I am not a native Chinese speaker is easily recognized. This means that whether in China or the U.S., I am a foreigner, marked by embodied and linguistic difference. Nevertheless, analyses about trans/national Chinese bodies, those traveling and circulating both within and outside of national boundaries via film and media, can benefit from a diasporic view and dual identity framework, particularly as we consider trans/national audience reception contexts.

---

<sup>272</sup> Many healthy individuals who received blood transfusions during the height of the blood economy in the 1990s were also infected with HIV, although the exact numbers are not known. This is the subject of Ai Xiaoming's documentaries *The Epic of Central Plains* (2006) and *Love and Care* (2007).

<sup>273</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, "Problematizing Cross-Cultural Analysis, the Case of Women in the Recent Chinese Cinema," *Wide Angle* 11, no. 2 (1989): 42.

In a 1998 special issue of *boundary 2* entitled, “Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field,” cultural studies scholars including Rey Chow and Ien Ang address the challenges of defining a new era of Chinese cultural studies that departs from the Cold War area studies disciplinary model, which introduced political agendas into higher education. Ang writes, “What I call the view from the diaspora, which will be my starting point, is necessarily unstable. After all, the spirit of diasporic thought, motivated as it is by notions of dispersal, mobility, and disappearance, works against its consolidation as a paradigm proper.”<sup>274</sup> The diasporic view thereby enables a fluidity of position and non-commitment that could offer valuable perspectives. Therefore, from a place of radical instability and indeed, *transmission*, this chapter addresses the cultural significance of China’s first commercial film about HIV/AIDS.

#### A “touching” framework

*Love for Life*’s sensual, sentimental, and spatial qualities constitute a form of “telling” through *touch* that functions as an important cinematic mode of address, especially for Chinese filmmakers who must work under state censorship. In the Chinese language, the adjective for feeling emotionally touched or moved, *gandong* (感动), is the combination of the words: “emotion” plus “movement.” A similar connection between emotion and physicality has also been identified by Western theorists in affect studies and phenomenological film studies. Queer studies scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes that “a particular intimacy seems to subsist between textures and emotions...the same double meaning, tactile plus emotional, is already

---

<sup>274</sup> Ien Ang, "Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm," *Boundary 2* 25, no. 3 (1998): 227.

there in the single word ‘touching’; equally it’s internal to the word ‘feeling.’”<sup>275</sup> In relation to film, Sobchack elaborates on the spectatorial experience of touching: “The cinesthetic subject both touches and is touched by the screen—able to commute seeing to touching and back again *without a thought* and, through sensual and cross-modal activity, able to experience the movie as both here and there.”<sup>276</sup> While Sedgwick’s quote addresses the *emotive* effects of sensual and tactile interaction (*gan* 感), Sobchack observes the relationship between cross-modal *movement* and perceptual transposition (*dong* 动). Both theoretical conceptions of “touching” are salient frameworks in analyzing a cultural text about HIV/AIDS for a number of reasons.

First, as the contact point between two people, touch simultaneously reinforces and challenges the autonomy of self-contained bodies (I can both *touch* and *be touched*). The fear of contracting HIV rests on a conception of *touch* as a potentially lethal transgression of corporeal boundaries. In a film that deliberately attempts to dispel such fears, representations of intimacy offer positive images of bodies afflicted with HIV/AIDS (kissing, making love, giving comfort through touch). Secondly, social beliefs that HIV/AIDS are the consequence of unsafe, indulgent, and delinquent lifestyles preempt narratives of compassion and sympathy—emotionally “touching” stories. Director Gu Changwei stated his own intentions for making China’s first commercial film about characters with HIV/AIDS: “I just hope that audiences share in the emotions of my characters, and that the film helps cut down discrimination in China.”<sup>277</sup> Gu’s melodramatic film invokes compassion and empathy by narrativizing the life difficulties of

---

<sup>275</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 17.

<sup>276</sup> Vivian Sobchack, "What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh," in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 71.

<sup>277</sup> Nicola Davison, "The Men Who Gave AIDS to Rural China," *The Independent*, May 23, 2011.

HIV/AIDS sufferers. Demonstrating the conventions of the “recurrent sentimental” that Chow identifies in contemporary Chinese films, *Love for Life* provokes “an affective orientation/tendency, one that is often characterized by apparent emotional excess, in the form of exaggerated grief or dejection or a propensity toward shedding tears.”<sup>278</sup> Third, Sobchack’s notion that cinematic spectatorship is “both here and there” offers a profound conceptualization of touch vis-à-vis embodied vision as an inhabitation of space. A film that was largely seen by urban, middle-class Chinese, *Love for Life* transports, or *moves*, the audience to a poor, rural Chinese village, a seemingly pre-modern place arrested in time and space.<sup>279</sup> The cinesthetic commute between the urban viewing spaces of a modern theater or an urban apartment to the film’s impoverished and neglected rural village perceptually closes the gap between contemporaneous manifestations of Chinese modernity. The cinematic representations of a forgotten place echo the representations of neglected bodies, inviting spectators to inhabit and experience both through cinesthetic touch.

#### Production background of *Love for Life*

Based on Yan Lianke’s 2006 novel, *Ding zhuang meng* (Dream of Ding Village), *Love for Life* is set during the height of the Chinese boom economy in the 1990s when new economic

---

<sup>278</sup> Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 15.

<sup>279</sup> Theatrical releases of the film in the PRC, Hong Kong, and in Taiwan were held only weeks apart in 2011. Due to the wide income gap between China’s middle and lower classes, the fact that “Chinese [ticket] prices represent a significantly larger chunk of the country’s average income relative to the United States,” and the fact that Chinese movie theaters are still concentrated in cities rather than towns and villages, I conclude that the majority of audiences were middle-class and urban. The only other possibilities for viewing the film are either purchasing a pirated DVD/VCD or streaming the film online (both of which imply a middle-class cost barrier). See “China May Curb Movie Ticket Prices,” *Deadline Breaking News*, January 9, 2012, <http://www.deadline.com/2012/01/china-may-curb-movie-ticket-prices/>.

reforms and capitalist ventures incentivized the sale of blood.<sup>280</sup> Yan researched the topic as an anthropologist's assistant for three years, but exercised self-censorship and deliberately wrote the book as fiction in order to ensure publication. Initially published by Shanghai Wenyi in 2006, the book was subsequently banned from being printed, sold and advertised in the PRC, but its English translation is published by Grove Press in the U.S. and has been widely reviewed. Recognized as an important transnational work, the book was nominated for the 2011 Man Asian Literary Prize. In the novel, Yan describes the rise of *aizibing cun* (HIV/AIDS villages) in the 1990s and writes about one such fictionalized community in the Henan Province. In the novel, the author describes the initial hesitancy of the farmers and villagers to sell their blood and their eventual seduction by government cadres who gave tours of prospering blood donation villages while assuring them with the false promises that, "blood is like a natural spring: the more you take, the more it flows"—a statement which indicates the false premises of an unreciprocated gift economy.<sup>281</sup>

Unlike the aforementioned independent documentary films about China's HIV/AIDS epidemic, *Love for Life* was made with the participation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), funded by the Ministry of Health and produced by Beijing Forbidden City Film Company. The production team reportedly took four years to rework and de-politicize the narrative, while post-production took one year to cut the original 150-minute film down to 100 minutes.<sup>282</sup> Director Gu stated his own intentions for the film, "I just hope that audiences share in the emotions of my characters, and that the film helps cut down discrimination in China. When you only have a short

---

<sup>280</sup> Yan Lianke, *Dream of Ding Village*, trans. Cindy Carter (New York: Grove Press, 2005).

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>282</sup> Tang Hongfeng, 《最爱》：异托邦与魔术时代 (*Love for Life: Heterotopias and the Magical Era*), *电影批评* (Film Criticism) 339 (2011).

time left in the world, your core humanity is magnified. I want my characters' humanity to shine through; to show that everybody fights for life, everybody loves, and every individual has the right to live with dignity."<sup>283</sup> Similar to Yan's reported unhappiness about his novel's final product, however, Gu also expressed frustration over state pressures about his film.<sup>284</sup> Nevertheless, *Love for Life* was released in the PRC in 2011 and earned 55 million RMB, a considerable success, during a three-week exhibition run.

A companion documentary to the film, *Zai yizi* (Together), made by once-banned independent documentarian Zhao Liang, was also commissioned by the Ministry of Health as a public service announcement to air on state-run television. Despite the fact that evidence points to a government cover-up of corruption and blood contamination, neither *Together* nor *Love for Life* addresses any kind of state involvement. The only representations of blood-selling in *Love for Life* occur during a public argument between the bloodhead character Qiquan, and his father Lao Zhu, after Qiquan refuses to repent for infecting villagers' blood. Intercut within this scene are a dozen black and white flashback shots (each less than a second long) that show the bloodhead conducting his crude, lone enterprise with steel collection buckets and a dirty, broken megaphone. Although the flashback sequence also reveal the villagers' "love-capitalism" enthusiasm to participate in Qiquan's blood business, the film cannot and does not reveal the underlying economic and political structures that enabled the privatized and unsafe sale of blood. However, tension between the social obligation to inform the public about the blood economy scandals and the appeasement of the government is no more clearer than the textual disclaimer at the beginning of *Love for Life*. Following the production credits, a textual shot states that, "The

---

<sup>283</sup> Davison, "The Men Who Gave AIDS to Rural China."

<sup>284</sup> Johanna Hood, "Peng Liyuan's Local and International Public Health Ambassador Roles: Considering Soft Power and Political, Moral and Plasma Economies" (paper presented at the Celebrity Studies Conference, Melbourne, Australia, December 13, 2012).

film is set during the early 1990s,” only to be followed with, “The story is purely fictional.” A historical context is given, only to be eschewed in the next shot—this is a cinematic gesture that many cynical and media-savvy Chinese would subversively interpret as the film paying lip service to the state.

#### HIV/AIDS, blood, and the politics of abjection

As Susan Sontag wrote in 1988, HIV/AIDS trumped all other diseases in its “capacity to create spoiled identity,” and this continues to be true in countries around the world.<sup>285</sup> Although Sontag focuses on Western conceptions of HIV/AIDS, PLWHA are also turned into social “pariahs” subject to moral judgment and discrimination in China.<sup>286</sup> As *The Blood of Yingzhou District* reveals, villagers avoided those with HIV, referring to them as the “living dead,” as if they were not fully human. Meanwhile young infected children were quarantined in separate living quarters from their relatives. Attempting to counter social stigmatization towards PLWHA, *Love for Life* takes a different approach from its documentary predecessors. Rather than a presentation of “reality,” Gu mobilizes sensuality and sentiment to *touch* the viewer in a communicative mode that exceeds verbal language. As Sobchack suggests, “to understand movies figurally, we first must make literal sense of them.”<sup>287</sup> In the film, sensorial and sentimental aspects of Chinese melodrama are activated in order to invoke compassion for people living with the persistent crisis of AIDS. Most importantly, in fulfilling Gu’s own intention to “cut down [HIV/AIDS] discrimination,” the film must confront the abjection that lies

---

<sup>285</sup> Susan Sontag, "Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors," (New York: Macmillan, 2001), 104.

<sup>286</sup> Social scientists working in China have conclusively agreed that those with HIV/AIDS face discrimination from “the general public, the health professionals, and government officials.” Yurong Zhang et al., "Impact of HIV/AIDS on Social Relationships in Rural China," *Open AIDS Journal* 5 (2011).

<sup>287</sup> Sobchack, “What My Fingers Knew,” 59.

at the heart of HIV/AIDS stigmatization.

The “abject” is an embodied, metaphysical aversion to the collapse of boundaries (and hence meanings) that separate subject from object, self from Other.<sup>288</sup> Objects like excrement, corpses, body fluids, and the skin on the surface of milk invoke feelings of repulsion because they materially visualize the thresholds and borders between life and death. Something is alive when it is inside the body and dead when it leaves the body. Julia Kristeva understands the abject in a more metaphorical sense as the point in which the ego confronts its boundaries with the world and with death.<sup>289</sup> Kristeva’s critical paradigm of the abject and abjection provides a productive framework through which to address both HIV/AIDS as a blood-borne *disease* and the sentimental text as a *medium of feeling*, a point I will elaborate upon later.<sup>290</sup>

Transmitted by abject body fluids that challenge the boundaries of the self (blood, semen, vaginal fluid, pre-ejaculate, breast milk), the HIV virus thrives on a lack of definition, its stealthy invisibility to the naked eye (as with all disease transmission particles), and our inability to *objectify* it. Infecting the body’s own vital immune system cells, HIV attacks and makes use of host cells to replicate itself over and over—a viral immigration of the non-native to permanently settle and proliferate in the body. In China, HIV/AIDS has been understood to be transmitted by the West, an immigrant virus. As Sontag points out, the language used to describe the process of an “infectious agent that comes from the outside” is itself “the language of political paranoia,

---

<sup>288</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>289</sup> A classic text on the subject of abjection, philosopher Julia Kristeva’s 1980 essay *Pouvoirs de L’horreur* (translated and reprinted in 1982 in English as *The Powers of Horror*) examines the role of abjection in modern Western literature (specifically by Dostoyevsky, Lautreamont, Proust, Artaud, Kafka, and Céline). Kristeva traces the sociocultural genealogy of the abject from Biblical Christian mysticism to its function as a modernist literary device.

<sup>290</sup> An incidental fact related to my use of the “loan-theory”: a translation of *The Powers of Horror* exists in Taiwan but does not yet exist in the PRC.



with its characteristic distrust of a pluralistic world.”<sup>291</sup> In the Chinese media, coverage of AIDS “had been infused with consistent themes including denial and blame attribution,” as media claims that “AIDS was imported into the country through contact with Westerners” continued until the early 2000s.<sup>292</sup> Moreover, warnings of “love-capitalism disease” implied that the transmission of Western capitalist economic models was responsible for “infecting” China with the desires for material wealth, indirectly resulting in the contaminated blood economy.

In the film and in the novel, HIV/AIDS exceeds naming and imagination. It is simply “the fever” that “*snuck* into [the] village softly” like an imperceptible enemy Other with a malicious intention. In the film, only the posthumous 12-year old narrator utters the words for *aizibingdu* (HIV/AIDS disease)—and only once. His surviving relatives, just like the villagers in the aforementioned documentaries, are unable to name the terrorizing disease. In *To Live is Better than to Die*, Chen ends his documentary posing a question to the eldest child of HIV parents. When asked if she knows what disease killed her mother, the young girl softly replies, “爱死病 *aisibing* (“loves death illness”) a second homonym for the disease that reinforces HIV/AIDS as an unspoken and unspeakable reality that is understood by its victims as something so terrible that it “loves death.” The abject brings us to the threshold of death, the other side of the worldly border. As the confrontation with the worldly boundary invokes repulsion, fear, and disgust, those who are afflicted with the “loves death disease” are thusly shunned, treated abjectly as “the living dead,” as one healthy villager in *Blood of Yingzhou District* confesses to the camera.

Furthermore, it is not the “lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what

---

<sup>291</sup> Sontag, "Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors," 106.

<sup>292</sup> Jingwen Zhang, "The Rhetorics of Constructing HIV/AIDS in the United States and China: A Comparative Analysis of Two Online Discussion Forums" (Clemson University, 2011), 71.

disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.”<sup>293</sup> As a homogenous fluid that can exit and enter *anybody* with biotechnological intervention, blood does not respect the “borders, positions, rules” of the contained vessel of skin, tissue, and muscle that we identify as our material selves. The notion of toxic fluid is also invoked in descriptions of rural migrants. For instance, a Sichuan report compared the “floating population of paid blood donors” to “rivulets of blood joined to form a river that carried the viruses of uncountable number of disease carriers.”<sup>294</sup> Anagnost contends that an “image of flow” is attached to the rural migrant population, and the *liu* (flowing) *dong* (movement), aka the floating population is perceived as “a moving source of contagion (of social disorder, incivility, and now disease) from the country to the city.”<sup>295</sup> Meanwhile descriptions of flowing, contaminated “pooled blood” in Chinese underground blood markets echoed throughout Western journalism—turning the events into a sensational international scandal.<sup>296</sup>

Despite the abject potential of blood to violate boundaries of self, body, and region, blood also serves as a “‘dense transfer point’ for meanings about self, family, life, and social relations.”<sup>297</sup> Traditional Chinese medicine, still practiced today, advocates that *xue* (blood) is an essential life force like *qi*, and is directly connected to physical health and vitality. One reason voluntary donation rates in China has been, and continues to be low is because it is believed that

---

<sup>293</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 4.

<sup>294</sup> Qtd. in Anagnost, "Strange Circulations: The Blood Economy in Rural China," 519.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Many reports cited the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report that stated that, “blood was often pooled prior to returning red cells to plasma donors.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Report of an HIV/AIDS Assessment in China," (Washington, DC: National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention, 2001).

<sup>297</sup> For more on the symbolic meanings of blood in Chinese culture, see Erwin, "The Circulatory System: Blood Procurement, AIDS, and the Social Body in China."

the loss of blood leads to frailty and sickness.<sup>298</sup> Moreover, there is a gendered dimension to the understanding of blood in Chinese culture. Erwin explains: “The giving and loss of blood clearly fall within the women’s domain. Women contribute blood to the development of the fetus, and men contribute bone. . . .It is also considered a *yin* (female, cool, dark) manifestation, complementing the *yang* (male, hot, bright) manifestations of qi.”<sup>299</sup> Although blood was seen as a renewable resource, more women than men sold their blood. Whereas women lose blood during menstruation every month anyway, the loss of male blood “presumably pose[d] a threat to male vitality and by extension their ability to support their households through agricultural labour.”<sup>300</sup>

Blood is also related to Chinese folklore beliefs about the compatibility of lovers and spouses, as it is believed that blood types dictate personality traits. Thus blood in traditional Chinese culture symbolically constitutes gendered, sexual, and familial relations—yet still contains within it certain abject powers. As health scholars Eleanor Holroyd and Alexander Molassiotis contend, “for Chinese populations, the act of body fluid donation cannot be isolated from Confucian notions of the body, the power of body fluids to pollute, the importance of blood and bones as sources of vital energy, and the process of bodily transference into the afterlife.”<sup>301</sup> Commensurate with Kristeva’s notions of the abject as the confrontational threshold between life and death, blood in the Confucian body is capable of both polluting and energizing *and* crossing thresholds between individuals and between life and death.

---

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>300</sup> Anagnost, "Strange Circulations: The Blood Economy in Rural China," 518.

<sup>301</sup> Eleanor Holroyd and Alexander Molassiotis, "Hong Kong Chinese Perceptions of the Experience of Unrelated Bone Marrow Donation," *Social Science & Medicine* 51, no. 1 (2000): 29.

Given Chinese mythological conceptions of blood, and the presence of abjection framing perceptions of HIV/AIDS, filmmakers like Gu are challenged to present touching stories that counter the abject-ification of HIV/AIDS and refigure blood-borne disease in human and humane ways. One approach undertaken by *Love for Life* is its “erotic touch,” mobilizing the physical beauty of its leading star actors and depictions of their characters’ sensual quality of life to attract, move, and touch viewers.

#### Casting an “erotic touch”

Hong Kong actor Guo Fucheng, better known in the West as Aaron Kwok, is one of Cantopop’s “Four Heavenly Kings” and is an unlikely choice to play mainland peasant Deyi. However, Kwok was likely chosen for the role so that the film would appeal to a greater Sinophone audience.<sup>302</sup> Although the actor’s bedraggled appearance and forced mainland Shanbei accent in the film were “laughable” to some mainlanders, many others praised his hard work in adapting to a role so dissimilar to his cosmopolitan Hong Kong persona.<sup>303</sup> Playing opposite Kwok as his lover is Zhang Ziyi, the most controversial Chinese female film star of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who, at the time of the film’s public announcement, had been under heavy public scrutiny for several sequential scandals.

One scandal, *Zha juan men* (Donation Hoax Gate), invoked the public ire of many who took to the Internet to direct their anger, rage, and disappointment at the actress, who failed to deliver charity funds she promised to 2008 Sichuan earthquake victims. On the English-language Chinese news website *People’s Daily Online*, an anonymous user wrote, “Zhang Ziyi is a VIRUS, a social DISEASE in China, clean up and do disinfections urgently required [sic]”

---

<sup>302</sup> The film’s exhibitions in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan were held only weeks apart.

<sup>303</sup> “最爱编辑 (*Love for Life* Encyclopedic Entry),” *Baike*, <http://baike.baidu.com/subview/24383/5335714.htm>.

[original emphases].<sup>304</sup> The *People's Daily* user's caustic rhetoric correlating disease with a lack of ethics and virtue is emblematic of Sontag's description of the metaphorical appropriation of illness, which *Love for Life* attempts to counter. Ironically the cleansing of Zhang's public image (her "disinfection") involved taking the role of a socially discriminated-against, self-sacrificing victim infected and "spoiled" by HIV.

Despite Zhang's bad reputation and Kwok's inauthenticity, the casting of two physically attractive celebrities is integral to the film's destigmatizing efforts, and particularly in order to give *mianzi* (a face of dignity) to those living with HIV. Sontag observes that, "Our very notion of the person, of dignity, depends on the separation of face from body, on the possibility that the face may be exempt, or exempt itself, from what is happening to the body."<sup>305</sup> In *To Live is Better than to Die*, the documentarian cannot help but comment on the physical beauty of his subjects, a young couple suffering from HIV/AIDS. In an interview with Lei Mei before she becomes fatally ill, Chen remarks to her that she and her husband must have been *haokan* (good-looking) when they first met. After Lei Mei dies, Chen sits with her husband to gaze upon her inert corpse. With his camera's confrontational gaze fixed on Lei Mei's face and upper torso, the documentarian remarks to her husband, "She still looks pretty after death."

The casting of attractive subjects as an aesthetic choice in both documentary and narrative films can profoundly impact a viewer's perception of story, his/her empathy for the subject, and moral judgment. Sontag suggests: "Underlying some of the moral judgments attached to disease are aesthetic judgments about the *beautiful and the ugly*, the clean and the

---

<sup>304</sup> PD User, March 7, 2010, "Superstar Zhang Ziyi Dogged by Scandals," *People's Daily Online*, [http://posts.people.com.cn/bbs\\_new/filepool/htdoc/html/28b4f6cd66b661f05f0311f8aa1f1b1cfc93bc8/b3803680/1\\_3803680\\_1.html](http://posts.people.com.cn/bbs_new/filepool/htdoc/html/28b4f6cd66b661f05f0311f8aa1f1b1cfc93bc8/b3803680/1_3803680_1.html).

<sup>305</sup> Sontag, "Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors," 128.

unclean, the familiar and the alien or uncanny” [emphasis added].<sup>306</sup> Analogous to Chen’s statements about Ma’s pretty wife, Gu applies his expert cinematographic talent, honed from working as cinematographer on some of the most celebrated Fifth Generation films, to exempt, for aesthetic reasons, his actors’ beautiful faces from the ravages of HIV/AIDS.<sup>307</sup> Through a visual displacement of the disease unto their cinematic bodies, subtly marked with red and purple lesions, Gu not only separates the face from “what is happening to the body,” he also draws on the beauty of his actors to aesthetically moralize their plight. They are the good, innocent sufferers doubly of HIV/AIDS and social discrimination.

The “separation of face from body,” rendered into cinematic decapitation through editing, is best exemplified in the scene depicting Deyi’s suicide. After Deyi discovers that Qinqin has died in the night, illustrated by a close-up on Zhang’s pale and immobile face with eyes closed (but still beautiful!), a fade-in shows Deyi’s unclothed backside as he sits on the edge of their marital bed. His right arm moves swiftly downwards and the unmistakable sound of a blade cutting through flesh is confirmed in the following close-up shot of a butcher knife pierced through Deyi’s thigh. This brutal image lingers briefly for two seconds, while the next four shots intercut between a medium close-up of Deyi’s pained and disbelieving expressions and a medium shot of Deyi’s back as he lifts his arm up again for another cut into his flesh. Demonstrating an aesthetic quarantine of Kwok’s chiseled, handsome face from the severe act of amputation, this sequence formally visualizes Sontag’s concept of dignity premised on “the possibility that the face may be exempt...from what is happening to the body.”<sup>308</sup> Nevertheless, as film scholar Jennifer M. Barker suggests, “Watching a film, we are certainly not *in* the film,

---

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>307</sup> Gu worked on *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1987); *Ju Dou* (Zhang Yimou, 1990); *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993).

<sup>308</sup> Sontag, "Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors," 128.

but we are not entirely *outside* it, either. We exist and move and feel in that space of contact where our surfaces mingle and our musculatures entangle.”<sup>309</sup> Deyi’s self-directed violence is also an act of violence towards the spectator body, whose musculature is plaited with that of Deyi’s through relational empathy and the phenomenological experience of film spectatorship. Thus, we *sense and feel* Deyi’s traumatic loss through his bodily suffering, even as we cannot assimilate this brutal act as *sensible*.

Despite this enactment of cruelty against flesh, the film not only beautifies the image of HIV/AIDS by casting attractive celebrities as leads, it also offers the erotic images of corporeal redemption through sex. Faithful to Yan’s novel, the film conceives sex as a carnal demonstration of the characters’ “love for life” in spite of their illness. In both the novel and film, Deyi tells Qinqin about a reoccurring dream in which his deceased mother calls out to him, telling him she feels cold and asks him to warm her feet. Attempting to distract him from his thoughts on death, Qinqin playfully, yet tentatively says, “From now on, I’ll be your mom. Whenever you think of her, think of me. Call me mom, and I’ll love you like your mom.” Deyi quickly turns the offer into sexual solicitation: “I want to breastfeed,” with his melancholic expression quickly turning into a devious smile. Qinqin responds: “I want to call you Daddy.” A now cheerful Deyi gives tells her to “Come to Daddy,” an instruction received by Qinqin with squeals of delight. For Yan and Gu, erotic touch serves as an affirmation of life, emphasizing the materiality of flesh, the sensations of living, and the performative transgressions of Oedipal desire.

In another scene, a suicide pact forged between the lovers is dissolved by the promise of sex. After their near-suicide, a static close-up shows a calmly smiling Qinqin looking downward

---

<sup>309</sup> Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 12.

and offscreen, followed by a medium shot of Qinqin “breastfeeding” Deyi. Although Zhang’s breast is obscured by the camera position and her frilly pink nightgown, this particular shot is particularly prurient and scintillating, an example of “haptic visuality” which Laura Marks defines as film’s capability to draw on both a *suspicion* of visuality and *reliance* on the image to evoke spectator’s sensual engagement.<sup>310</sup>

Whereas Western stigmatization of HIV/AIDS is rooted in homophobia and religious doctrine, *Love for Life*’s representation of Oedipal desires enables the prurient sight of a perversely *heterosexual* intimacy. Literary scholar Ming Dong Gu suggests that Oedipal themes in Chinese literature are “restructured according to the dynamics of Confucian morality, taking the disguised forms of parental demands for filial piety and children’s fulfillment of filial duties.”<sup>311</sup> Ming and Chow have separately pointed to an intensification of the Oedipal motif in Liu Heng’s 1988 novella *Fuxi Fuxi* (English translation: *The Obsessed*), which was adapted by Zhang Yimou’s 1990 film *Judou*.<sup>312</sup> Likewise, *Dream of Ding Village* and its film adaptation *Love for Life* also “make full use of the modernist conceptual method that many have called after Freud, *Oedipalization*,” a trend that emerged after the 1970s and 1980s during which Freud and psychoanalytic theory became intensely and popularly debated among Chinese scholars across disciplines.<sup>313</sup>

The maternal figure that Qinqin becomes and her self-sacrifice are also referential of modern Chinese intellectual thought, particularly the “idealized maternal figure [who] became a

---

<sup>310</sup> Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>311</sup> Ming Dong Gu, "The Filial Piety Complex: Variations on the Oedipus Theme in Chinese Literature and Culture," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2006): 168.

<sup>312</sup> Zhang has vigorously denied that the film is about incest.

<sup>313</sup> Rey Chow qtd. in Gu, 180.



modernist staple of China's New Literature" during the May Fourth movement.<sup>314</sup> Desire for the mother figure, often a displaced maternal character like the *shumu* (concubine), emerged in literature of the 1920's and 1930's. Literary scholar Sally Taylor Lieberman points out that the bodies of women in the stories often ultimately "bear the brunt of the repressive return of patriarchal power," thereby betraying the underlying conservative misogyny of May Fourth intelligentsia despite their ideological overtures to gender equality.<sup>315</sup> In Yan's story and Gu's cinematic adaptation, Qinqin becomes Deyi's displaced erotic mother figure who sacrifices her mortal life in an attempt to save Deyi. This narrative containment of the self-sacrificing woman/mother figure therefore returns to the May Fourth-era false consciousness of female liberation under the guise of monumentalizing feminine suffering. Nevertheless, the film's ending wherein Deyi awakens to find Qinqin's dead body may also seem to a Western observer as a gesture to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (an observation that demonstrates the transcultural literacy of cinema as a transmissional art-form).

In *Love for Life*, the use of parental appellations as lovers' pet names and the acting of Oedipal performative desire not only displaces and subverts filial piety, it also "perverts" Confucianist principles upon which the Chinese family and government are founded, namely the authority of parents over children. Reproductive sex is placed after the fact, as sexual congress becomes parental. The symbolic reorganization of family hierarchy through nomenclature reinstates family members that Deyi and Qinqin have lost as a result of death, but it also insists on maintaining a family structure in spite of the culture of shame around HIV/AIDS that has led to other family members' abandonment of the two. As the film shows, Deyi's wife and child

---

<sup>314</sup> Sally Taylor Lieberman, *The Mother and Narrative Politics in Modern China* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 19.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

leave him after he moves into the HIV schoolhouse, where Qinqin's husband also abandons her. In fact, the two are cousins by marriage, another gesture to film's flirtation with incest. By eroticizing parental nomenclature, the cousins-in-law redefine the society that has rejected them, scrambling the roles of the Confucian family in order to act out their erotic fantasies. By playing with sameness and difference within a familial framework, the characters use erotic fantasy to overturn social conventions and abjectly blur familial boundaries.

Structures within the familial, economic, and political all undergo radical re-organization within the world of the film. Lieberman determines in her investigation of the mother figure in modern Chinese literature that the Oedipal drama utilized by May Fourth authors represents, in part, the revolutionary "father-son conflict" that marked the period's intellectual break from China's traditional past.<sup>316</sup> Qinqin and Deyi's Oedipalized desires also mirror the perverse upheaval of China's once-communist ideals in favor of the consumerist fantasies of post-socialism—China's second ideological struggle of sons overcoming their fathers in the past century. Beginning in the late 1970s, the patriarchal state traded in socialist ideals for China's eventual post-reform mantras: "To get rich is glorious" and "Some must get rich first."<sup>317</sup> After all it was the pursuit of "the good life," imagined through visions of material wealth that drove

---

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Both phrases are popularly credited to Deng Xiaoping, China's "paramount leader" during the reform era. However, it is debated whether or not he actually said "to get rich is glorious." In fact, as Maurice Meisner observes, Deng and his Party officials did not view market-socialism or capitalism as the end goal, rather, they "saw the mechanism of the market as a means to eventual socialist ends, as the most efficient way to break down the stifling system of centralized state planning and to speed up the development of modern productive forces, thereby creating the essential material foundations for a future socialist society." Nevertheless, China's adoption of 'market-socialism' has resulted in great prosperity for China, albeit unevenly. As Meisner writes, "Chinese cities thus began to resemble large cities in most of the world, displaying those stark and painful contrasts between ostentatious wealth and grinding poverty that mark most contemporary capitalist societies." Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 455.

the blood market.

In the film's most potent statement about abjection, blood, and bodies, Qinqin admits to Deyi that she sold blood in order to buy an expensive shampoo that city girls use to make their hair "as smooth as silk," which she saw advertised in a television commercial. Qinqin wishes to engage in abject transaction to sell her internal blood—her *life* force—to order to beautify her externally *dead* hair follicles. Moreover, silk represents one of the exotic exports of the Chinese textile industry, as well as one of its earliest transnational connections to the rest of the world vis-à-vis the Silk Road. Qinqin's desires to transform her body into silk betray her "love capitalism disease" and abject desires to cross the life-and-death threshold. Moreover, Qinqin's sale of blood is a metonymy of China and Chinese material production. China produces silk, which returns as an aspirational material with which to market the benefits of expensive shampoo. In Zhou Xiaowen's 1994 film *Ermo*, the titular character sells her blood with the intention to buy the largest television set in the village in order to increase her social position. Transforming their bodies into material equivalents of Chinese exotic exports, both Chinese women abject-ify themselves to embody a transnational product in order to pursue a consumerist fantasy.<sup>318</sup> Like *Ermo*, Qinqin becomes "infected" with desires to participate in China's "liberated" economy, although Qinqin's attachment to commoditized femininity comes at a fatal price.

#### The sentimental touch

As an object of cultural transmission and distributed worldwide by Hong Kong-based EDKO Film, *Love for Life* was received unevenly across cultural borders. For instance, a review

---

<sup>318</sup> For a close reading on *Ermo* in regards to the spectacularization of the Chinese urban-rural divide, see Ping Fu, "Ermo: (Tele)Visualizing Urban/Rural Transformation," in *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 2005).

in the U.S. publication, *The Hollywood Reporter*, referred to the aforementioned sex scenes as “torrid” and “salacious,”<sup>319</sup> while a mainland Chinese netizen also claimed that the film “*fanmai ruan seqing* (peddles soft-core pornography).”<sup>320</sup> A second Chinese netizen, however, insisting upon a more meaningful connection between the film’s sexual content and its sentimental worth, wrote: “Zhang’s naked performance *touched* people, *moved* people to tears, and it was worth taking off her clothes for this performance.”<sup>321</sup>

Demonstrating that there is an affective use-value (“worth”) in a “naked performance,” this user suggests that the film *touched* people in the right way, by “moving people to *tears*” rather to other physiological responses (a “tear jerker” as opposed to other “sensations of the jerk,” as Linda Williams puts it).<sup>322</sup> Despite the generic boundaries that separate melodrama and pornography, however, both operate in the “realm of the ‘gross’” wherein they exploit sensations that are “on the edge of respectable” and center upon “the gross display of the human body.” Williams writes, “Alone or in combination, heavy doses of sex, violence, and emotion are dismissed by one faction or another as having no logic or reason for existence beyond their power to excite.”<sup>323</sup> Williams, however, redeems the value in the apparent gratuity of these genres by suggesting that pornography, horror, and melodrama attempt to “function as cultural problem-solving,” even if “recast[ing] the nature of these problems.”<sup>324</sup> In *Love for Life*, the

---

<sup>319</sup> Maggie Lee, "Love for Life: Film Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 8, 2011, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/love-life-film-review-209353>.

<sup>320</sup> Xiaoyun Ding, April 3, 2013, user review of 最爱 (Love for Life), 豆瓣电影 (Douban Movies), [http://movie.douban.com/subject/4843637/comments?start=23&limit=20&sort=new\\_score2011](http://movie.douban.com/subject/4843637/comments?start=23&limit=20&sort=new_score2011).

<sup>321</sup> Youyishi de jianmin, May 13, 2011, user review of 最爱 (Love for Life), 豆瓣电影 (Douban Movies),

[http://movie.douban.com/subject/4843637/comments?start=23&limit=20&sort=new\\_score2011](http://movie.douban.com/subject/4843637/comments?start=23&limit=20&sort=new_score2011).

<sup>322</sup> Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991).

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

melodramatic excesses attempt to function as “cultural problem-solving” in relation to HIV/AIDS social discrimination and China’s newfound capitalist problems. The excesses of sentimentality and sex are both present in *Love for Life* touching the viewer affectively and physiologically.

Abject-ification as that which “disturbs identity, system, order...does not respect borders, positions, rules” also applies to the film’s blurring of generic conventions. The aforementioned *Hollywood Reporter*, Hong Kong-based Maggie Lee, was as repulsed by the film’s erotic touch as she was by its melodramatic performances. Lee writes, “Thrust into calamitous dramatic contrivances that lurch from melodrama and earthy peasant humor to soft-core sex and half-hearted magic realism, Zhang and Kwok resort to some of the most clamorous, histrionic acting in their careers.”<sup>325</sup> Lee took offense at the film’s generic bleeding between melodrama, soft-core sex, earthy peasant humor, and magic realism—a “blood transfusion gone wrong,” to use Lee’s simile. Curiously though, Lee saves her strongest criticism for the embodied performances in *Love for Life*, strongly disparaging the actors’ “dramatic contrivances,” “clamorous, histrionic acting,” and “over-heated...grating shrillness.”

Spurning the dis-ease of spectators like Lee, the modernist (and post-modernist) revulsion at sentiment and obvious appeals to pathos in cultural work has in turn led to the abject-ification of films like *Love for Life* and many other contemporary Chinese films. Historically associated with women and motherhood, the sentimental text offends refined sensibilities and arouses revulsion because it suggests human weakness and fragility. As Lieberman contends, sentimentalism is “a ‘radically excluded’ ‘other’ from which modernism can never entirely

---

<sup>325</sup> Lee, "Love for Life: Film Review."

extricate itself.”<sup>326</sup> Moreover, the sentimental “behaves like a fragmentary memory of the preoedipal mother, an unwelcome reminder of the fragility and constructedness of our individuated selves and the power others exercise over our inner worlds.”<sup>327</sup> Qinqin embodies and performs the preoedipal mother to Deyi, making explicit the uncomfortable affect and “behavior” of the sentimental through her literal and figurative nursing of her lover.

The performative excesses Lee describes as “histrionic” are conventions of Chinese “melodramatic realism,” a genre that has been a “major strain” in Chinese filmmaking, according to Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar.<sup>328</sup> Far from its pejorative implications in Western intellectual circles, Chow explains that the “sentimental” in the Chinese context constitutes “the modes of human relationships affectively rooted in this imagined inside—an inside whose depths of feeling tend to become intensified with the perceived aggressive challenges posed by modernity.”<sup>329</sup> The narrative politics of the sentimental mode represent the individual confronted by the challenges of modernity as experienced within the interior theater of the home, the domestic sphere. When confronted by the aggressive challenges of modernity “at one’s door,” the interior depths of feeling become *intensified*, exploding across the body into expressions of excess and discomposure (i.e. crying, flailing around, screaming). Unlike Douglas Sirk’s representations of “out of kilter” bodies which impact one another in displaced ways, for instance, Marylee’s “dance of death” visually conflated with the concurrent falling death of her father in *Written on the Wind* (1956), the affective bodies in *Love for Life* hyperbolize the inner

---

<sup>326</sup> Lieberman, *The Mother and Narrative Politics in Modern China*, 12.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 82.

<sup>329</sup> Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 19.

depths of their emotional anguish and suffering.<sup>330</sup> The cinematic embodiment of the abject through the loss of control of one's body (a "gross" display of the human body)—for instance, Zhang and Kwok's violently quivering chins as Qinqin repetitively recites their marriage license in the film's flashback ending—is explosive, excessive, and intensely affecting, and even moreso because the expression seems out of proportion and "histrionic" in its context.

The most touching moment in the film features peripheral minor characters, proving that "being touched" by a film can sometimes have little to do with narrative or character investment. In fact, the instant of "being touched" is the "psychic transaction between pain and pleasure," and a moment that forges "a certain identification with suffering."<sup>331</sup> In the film's first half, an old peasant named Gede is caught having stolen Qinqin's red silk jacket while the HIV exiles are living together in the schoolhouse. After the HIV/AIDS community has dispersed, Gede re-emerges to plead with village patriarch and guardian of the HIV exiles, Lao Zhu, for the red silk jacket once again. He explains that when he married his wife, he promised her a red silk jacket but had little time left to deliver on his promise. To fulfill his wish, Lao Zhu walks dozens of kilometers to Qinqin's village to borrow her jacket. The next sequence shows Gede on his deathbed, smiling wearily at the sight of his chubby wife struggling to fit into the petite jacket.

A scene without dialogue, the images of the wife's self-conscious smiles, Gede's surrendering smile, paired with sounds of metal buttons that refuse to stay clasped tell of the love and despair shared by husband and wife. Just as the false promises of the blood economy failed to turn China's villages into wealthy communities, Gede's promise to his wife falls short. Not only does he have to steal and borrow the jacket to fulfill his marriage promise but the

---

<sup>330</sup> Elena Del Rio, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 53.

<sup>331</sup> Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*, 122.

constricting coat fails to accommodate its new owner. The garment is ill-fitting and looks out-of-place on his peasant wife. Nevertheless, as the sequence reveals, the *illusions* of wealth and beauty, however unrealistic, remain powerful sources of “cruel optimism” for China’s rural inhabitants—such that they will sacrifice greatly in order to attain them, like Qinqin’s sale of blood for expensive shampoo.

Such illusions are the cause of rural inhabitants’ suffering and the source of the “cruel optimism” which stems from capitalist fantasies of mobility, according to cultural studies scholar Lauren Berlant.<sup>332</sup> She defines and describes “cruel optimism” as, “a *deictic*, a phrase that points to a proximate location: as an analytic lever it is an incitement to inhabit and to track the affective attachment to what we call ‘the good life,’ which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it.”<sup>333</sup> The fictionalized Goddess Village points to the real locations of provincial donation villages in China wherein inhabitants became cathected to fleeting images of “the good life” in television commercials and sold blood in pursuit of such imagined possibilities. Indeed, Qinqin’s dying wish to Deyi is to be buried with two outfits for the afterlife and a pair of red high heels so that she can walk around heaven like a “city doll,” a fantasy as unrealizable as the false promise of “the cure” for the villagers’ “fever.”

The fulfillment of Gede’s promise is “too late!” and even “too little,” as the too-small jacket is given to his wife moments before he dies. After all, as Williams explains, the temporality of the melodrama fantasy is such that the moment of pathetic recognition of our loss

---

<sup>332</sup> Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). And *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2011).

<sup>333</sup> *Cruel Optimism*, 97.



is always “too late!”<sup>334</sup> The buttons, straining to do their mechanistic best to contain Gede’s wife’s body in the garment, are poignantly matched by the couple’s last efforts to please and comfort one another. In this moment, Sobchack’s observation of a “deep and passionate recognition of ourselves and the objective world filled with ‘things’ and ‘others’ as immanently together in the flesh” is conveyed in a touching moment in which Gede, his wife, and little metal buttons are at once struggling to fulfill human and non-human promises, even if failing to deliver.<sup>335</sup> Indeed, the notion of unfulfilled promises befits the film’s perspective on China’s rapid modernization and the neglected, but still optimistic, rural villages left in its wake.

#### Touching heterotopic spaces

The film’s fictional Goddess Village represents an increasingly extinct space in China, as the government strives to migrate 70% of the country’s population to urban cities.<sup>336</sup> In *Love for Life*, emptied out spaces left behind by the great urban migration are re-occupied by the exiled villagers with HIV/AIDS. In the schoolhouse where the exiles recreate a kind of Maoist collectivist lifestyle, the members sleep, eat, assemble, and live together on public school property. Treated as contaminated bodies that the healthy villagers are afraid of touching, the HIV exiles are forced to recreate—in a space far removed from the village center, and without nostalgia or ideological incentive—the ways of Chinese livelihood during its 20<sup>th</sup>-century socialist experiments.

As urban audiences watch this film, they are compelled to face the abandoned rural spaces where China’s own Others dwell. Returning to Sobchack’s notion of cinesthetic experience as being both “here and there,” the touching spaces of “there” in the film are counter-

---

<sup>334</sup> Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," 11.

<sup>335</sup> Sobchack, "The Passion of the Material: Toward a Phenomenology of Interobjectivity," 318.

<sup>336</sup> Ian Johnson, "China's Great Uprooting: Moving 250 Million into Cities," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2013.

sites wherein dominant cultural values are “represented, contested, and inverted”—heterotopic spaces wherein the HIV exiles recreate the motions of an anachronistic socialist life.<sup>337</sup> In an act of transmissional academic practice, mainland Chinese film scholar Tang Hongfeng draws on Foucault’s notion of “heterotopia” to suggest that the schoolhouse represents a forgotten and abandoned “crisis heterotopia,” wherein the exiles recreate the social norms of both socialist and post-socialist China, juxtapositions of “several sites that are themselves incompatible.”<sup>338</sup> As such, the schoolhouse is a synecdoche for the rural Chinese village, caught between traditional agrarian society and urban modernization. I would add to Tang’s discussion an observation of two consequential shots in Gu’s film that captures the geopolitical pressures of rural Chinese space: two low angle shots of a bird’s nest built on a telephone pole. Like the birds, the villagers must learn to adapt to ever-changing demands of Chinese modernity in order to survive. But at what cost? It was the capitalist demand for the agricultural “produce” of blood generated from rural bodies that caused hundreds of thousands of AIDS-related deaths in the 1990s.

As the link between heterotopia and the rest of society, the character of the bloodhead moves between the village and city. Having built his wealth on the blood and wood of Goddess village, Qiquan tells his father that he hopes one day to turn the rural landscape into a high-class graveyard for city people, the film’s most scathing metaphor for urbanization and the urban vampirism of Chinese society. Indeed, Qiquan’s adept responses to the logic of supply-and-demand are matched only by his quick disregard for the quality of life of his victims/customers. After the villagers begin dying of HIV/AIDS, Qiquan quickly turns to coffin-making to provide services newly in demand. Qiquan becomes so rich, in fact, that not only does he relocate to a larger town, he is also able to spend money in gratuitous and ridiculous ways, as seen in the

---

<sup>337</sup> Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 3.

<sup>338</sup> Tang, 《最爱》：异托邦与魔术时代 (*Love for Life: Heterotopias and the Magical Era*), 6.

lavish wedding ceremony he arranges for his deceased son and the deceased daughter of a neighboring town's governor.

The posthumous narrator explains that they had to “move his bones far, far away,” as Gu shows the spectacle of the dozens of well-dressed valets in a long procession, walking the ornately-decorated coffin gaudily covered in faux gold embellishments and fat cherubs. Qiquan reveals to his father that his motivation behind the posthumous wedding is to secure a real estate business partnership with the governor so that he may turn the pristine land into a “high-class cemetery.” The absurdity of the ceremony is highlighted through a juxtaposition with Deyi and Qinqin's modest marriage celebration, which consist of the newlyweds going around the village and their unsuccessful attempts to hand out candy, a sequence that occurs right before the posthumous wedding. Confronting the abjection of life in the rural villages, as this sequence reveals through the conflation of rituals of beginnings and endings (weddings and funerals) that there is no distinct boundary between life and death, and urban and rural. As the blood of living villagers are siphoned out and the bones of its children are relocated, the bones of dead urban citizens are imported to occupy the rural land.

Meanwhile, a series of petty robberies that occur in the schoolhouse illustrate modernity's interpersonal effects (and affects). As aforementioned, Gede steals Qinqin's red silk jacket. After an assembly is called, Lao Zhu demands that the jacket be returned no-questions-asked to the center of the school grounds in the middle of the night. Both Deyi and Qinqin sneak off to see the culprit, and it is this clandestine attempt to catch a thief that leads to their first sexual encounter, the activity that “recaptured what it meant to be alive.”<sup>339</sup> More thefts followed—a man's notebook and some of his money, then a sack of rice goes missing. Finally

---

<sup>339</sup> Yan, *Dream of Ding Village*, 79.

the villagers discover that the Cook was hoarding rice in her pillow. Liang Fang (Jiang Wenli) makes an impassioned speech, appealing to post-reform ethics of “some must get rich first” by stating that she is up at dawn before anyone else, cooking and cleaning. She states, “If I were working, I’d not only get this rice but also hundreds of *yuan!*” Finally, under the weight of postsocialist desires, this heterotopic “Elsewhere” cannot be sustained as two greedy villagers sell off all of the school’s property and the exiles are forced to return home to unsympathetic family members.

In summary, this section discussed various implications for a “touching” film, China’s first commercial film about HIV/AIDs, *Love for Life*. The sentimentality and pathos evoked by a “touching” story constitute a powerful tool to garner sympathy for PLWHA, as evinced by one viewer’s response that the film “touched” and “moved people to tears.” In another sense, the tactility of the film and its corporeal engagement with the viewer, productively engages through eros and “interobjectivity” what philosopher Maurice Hamington describes as “embodied care,” an affective and bodily orientation that fulfills the radical moral imperative “that we experience one another, particularly those who are unfamiliar to us.”<sup>340</sup> Finally, the inhabitation of neglected space through film allows for an exploration of a geopolitical place that is continually asked to interact with Chinese modernity and post-socialist economy without reaping its benefits. As the blood of villages is funneled into cities (in literal and symbolic ways), narratives about the HIV/AIDS epidemic in China are also stories about the limits of modernization. Touching films, like *Love for Life*, advocate for an ethics of a compassionate spectatorship necessary to make sense of a changing world and its cruel promises.

#### The production of “touching” images

---

<sup>340</sup> Maurice Hamington, *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press 2004), 7.

Physical connotations of “touching” are also instituted in the labor practices and production of *Love for Life*, as Zhao Liang’s aforementioned making-of documentary *Together* reveals. The Ministry reportedly contributed 500,000 RMB for funding, half of the documentary’s production budget, a gesture with personal repercussions for Zhao who has since lost supporters like art dissident Ai Weiwei for compromising with state officials. According to Zhao, however, “The propaganda department only cares about the general tone of the film and has no problem with it as long as it is not counterrevolutionary. The film bureau would not be so strict once the health ministry said to them in the letter that they had made this film for public service.”<sup>341</sup>

The documentary follows Zhao’s communications with people living with HIV/AIDS found in QQ chatrooms (China’s most popular social media platform), including in-person interviews in their homes. Six of the interviewees took various roles in the production, including a nine-year-old boy who plays Xiao Xin, the posthumous narrator who dies at the beginning of the film from eating a poisoned tomato. Furthermore, the principal star actors Kwok and Zhang do not appear until an hour into the documentary, which seems to give credibility to Zhao’s statement that, “this film has no commercial aims at all.”<sup>342</sup> An explanatory title at the beginning of the documentary explains:

In 2009, director Gu Changwei reached out to the public, seeking HIV-positive people to participate in the making of the film *Tale of Magic* [the original title of *Love for Life*]. By having HIV-positive people working and living with members

---

<sup>341</sup> Edward Wong, “Ex-Foe of the State Carves Space for His Art; Filmmaker Gains Access to Chinese Market by Working with Officials,” *The International Herald Tribune*, August 14, 2011.

<sup>342</sup> Dan Edwards, “Zhao Liang on his new documentary *Together*,” *Screening China Blog*, December 11, 2010, <http://screeningchina.blogspot.com/2010/12/zhao-liang-on-his-new-documentary.html>.

of his cast and crew, he hoped it would strengthen the public's understanding of AIDS, and reduce discrimination against HIV-positive people.

The exact nature of the discrimination is explored in a brief exchange at the beginning of the documentary with one of the film's extras, local villager Xue Zhulai. When Zhao asks him whether he knows of anybody in the village with HIV/AIDS, Xue smiles deferentially and replies, "I wouldn't know that. That's a secret." Zhao follows up, "How do you know it's a secret?" to which Xue responds, "Anyone with this sickness knows he would never tell anyone, because if he told others they would keep their distance from him. It would be very painful for him. No one would go near him." Zhao finally asks if Xue knew who had the illness, whether he would keep his distance from him/her, to which Xue admits that he would. Another local extra, upon learning that a member of the production crew had HIV/AIDS, could not even look at him, illustrating the extent of an embodied vision so fearful of the illness that he could not even bear to *look*.

Notwithstanding Zhao's accusatory tone and lack of hesitation in shamefully exposing poor villagers who hold fearful, discriminatory beliefs about those with HIV/AIDS, the sequences reveal that preoccupation with physical proximity, the danger of touching those afflicted is a "problem" for the non-afflicted. The practices implemented by Gu's team to actively recruit those with HIV/AIDS, to work in close quarters with the crew and actors, was an act intended to counter this fear and hesitation of being physically close to someone with HIV/AIDS. One of the medical experts hired to give the crew information about HIV/AIDS transmission reassured them, "Never mind touching [a person with HIV], you could hug and strongly rub yourself against him and still not be infected," a comment that prompted laughter. Out of more than 60 people Zhao interviewed overall, six people living with HIV/AIDS joined

the cast and crew, and three agreed to reveal their identities and faces to the camera. When asked about the more upbeat tone of *Together* compared with his previous documentaries, which have been banned, Zhao stated that “the more important thing is that the film gives hope to other people,” highlighting the documentary’s affective intention.<sup>343</sup>

Indeed there is a soft *touch*—a hopefulness—at work in both *Together* and *Love for Life* that indicates the kind of politico-cultural soft power driving both productions. Joseph S. Nye’s definition of “soft power” is “the ability to get what you want through *attraction* rather than coercion or payments,” and this idea can apply to the affective and sensorial realms, as well.<sup>344</sup> It is precisely the technique of drawing upon physical contact as a form of physical attraction that each film mobilizes to spread a sympathetic message to and about PLWHA. *Love for Life*’s cinematic investment in the erotic, Oedipal attraction between Deyi and Qinqin is a corporeal affirmation of their lives, illustrating embodied values vis-à-vis pleasures of life, even for bodies afflicted with a terminal illness. Although both protagonists die in the film, the ending with Xiao Xin’s voiceover narration about their family reunion on the other side, is distinctly hopeful. Meanwhile, *Together* reveals the “touching” agenda of the production team to minimize the distance created and maintained by prejudice, in order to physically integrate HIV/AIDS afflicted individuals with the rest of the crew, their families, and society at large. As the sequence with Hu Zetao (who plays the 12-year-old Xiao Xin) at home reveals, even his family members, including his father and step-mother, are afraid of catching the disease from the nine-year-old, who was himself infected via mother-to-child transmission (his mother had since passed).

---

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>344</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs [Perseus Books Group], 2004), x.

Zhao films the family having a hotpot dinner, in which he notices that the child, rather than using his chopsticks in the communal pot to retrieve food, waits for his father to serve him. Zhao asks the family who is responsible not allowing him to serve himself, and the father and step-mother (whose face is blurred) say that they are afraid he will spill food on the table. Sensing Zhao's accusatory tone and perhaps feeling ashamed, they then tell the boy to retrieve his own food from the hotpot, which he proceeds to do so tentatively. In the following scene, Zhao determinedly continues to expose the discrimination within Hu's own home. In the kitchen where the boy's paternal grandmother is washing dishes, she points out that the boy's utensils and bowl are kept separate from the others. Zhao asks, "Who said to separate his utensils?" and the grandmother whispers, "His father," while humbly gesturing to Zhao to keep quiet. Hu is then shown washing his own bowl and utensils outside in the family's snowy courtyard, a symbolic image, if any, of the boy's domestic estrangement and alienation. In portraying the fear of touch and transmission, this sequence juxtaposes with an earlier scene, which shows the boy having a splinter taken out by the film's costume designer. Hu's anxiety is palpable when he tells her that his finger is bleeding, afraid of transmitting the disease to her. Undaunted, the woman Song Fengru continues to remove the splinter from his finger without saying a word.

The *touching agenda* is even more apparent in a sentimental montage showing the boy interacting with different members of the cast and crew. Among the various activities and situations shown during the two-minute montage, Hu is shown holding hands with cast members, being caressed on the face, horsing around with cast and crew, having makeup put on his face, feeding a crew member, having his hair ruffled by Zhang Ziyi, and his arm playfully grabbed and examined for muscles by Aaron Kwok. A close-up shot of Hu's hand holding another hand of a crew member makes evident Zhao's explicit intention to dispel the fear of touching someone



with HIV. After production wrapped, Hu Zetao returned home and informed Zhao, “I no longer need to eat separately from my family,” a seemingly happy domestic resolution Zhao shares via intertitle.

The ending of the documentary exits the production of *Love for Life* and returns to the real world. Titles are placed over a video of the first time scientists photographed the process of the AIDS virus spreading inside a human body, a microscopic vision of the abject. The text slides cite statistics about HIV/AIDS and the government’s new policies in addressing the epidemic, including the “Four Free One Care” policy, which aims to provide free antiretroviral treatment for rural and urban persons living with HIV with financial difficulties; free voluntary HIV antibody testing, HIV testing of newborns, and HIV testing and counseling for pregnant women; free schooling for children orphaned by HIV; and, care and economic assistance to the households of persons living with HIV.<sup>345</sup>

The final sequence, however, returns to the soft-*touch-soft-power* of the documentary’s HIV/AIDS anti-discrimination project. A man stands on a city sidewalk, carrying a red sign and wearing a matching red banner that reads “Hug AIDS.” He talks to various passersby about HIV/AIDS and asks them, “Did you know you cannot get AIDS from hugging?” He then asks if they would like to hug him, explaining that he would like to “use the means of hugging to transmit warmth for life.” In this sequence, one young woman remarks that only homosexuals and sexually promiscuous people have HIV/AIDS after the man asks her for a hug. Hurriedly walking away from him, she replies, “I’ll think about it.” One 80-year-old woman hugs him and tells him, “Science is improving, keep hope.” After the man declines the money one woman

---

<sup>345</sup> Karen I. Frederiksen-Golsen et al., “‘You Must Take the Medications for You and Me’: Family Caregivers Promoting HIV Medication Adherence in China,” *AIDS Patient Care STDS* 25, no. 11 (2011).

gives him, another woman suddenly comes from behind him to give him a hug. Zhao ends the film on this uplifting sight of compassion between two strangers, emphasizing the role of touch as an expression of love, sympathy, and a means of transmitting “warmth for life.”

This chapter discussed several conceptual implications for “touching” in relation to the production of *Love for Life*. Physical and sentimental agendas intersect in the political project of destigmatizing HIV/AIDS, a larger project the Chinese government has committed to in its broader efforts to encourage HIV/AIDS awareness, epidemiological studies on the disease, and to commit to their pledges to contain the spread of HIV. For further evidence of the soft-touch-soft-power of the government’s campaigns, one need look no further than its mobilization of celebrity philanthropy, the phenomenon that utilizes the touching implications of the public power of “intimate strangers,” to use Richard Schickel’s term denoting the illusory nature of celebrity consumption.<sup>346</sup> Celebrities are the uncanny representatives of humankind, and their bodies are at once familiar and strange. In terms of celebrity philanthropy, celebrity bodies are the conduit through which bystanders and spectators can project their own good intentions. Through celebrity humanitarian efforts, we bear witness to spectacularized acts of kindness and generosity to less fortunate peoples. Referring to “HIV/AIDS Heroes” (*kang'ai yingxiong*) or “aid celebrities” in the PRC, Hood argues that, “Despite the fact that there are several more infectious and more prevalent diseases in China, such as hepatitis and tuberculosis, only HIV/AIDS has attracted carnival-like publicity and only HIV/AIDS has designated celebrity heroes mobilizing the population to its cause.”<sup>347</sup> Part of the appeal for these celebrities, of course, is the international credibility that accompanies the global focus on the illness. Tracing the phenomenon of aid celebrities back to the rise of celebrity politics in the US and “to the rise

---

<sup>346</sup> Schickel, "Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity in America."

<sup>347</sup> Hood, "Celebrity Philanthropy: The Cultivation of China's HIV/AIDS Heroes," 89.

of celebrity diplomacy internationally,” Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte suggest that, “Celebrity has become a way of mediating between proximity and distance in the global as well as the specific contact. As the paradigms of ‘people we know so well’ that are simultaneously ‘just like us’ and ‘exemplary,’ celebrities have become proxy philanthropists, statesmen, executives, and healers.”<sup>348</sup> Celebrities also act as affective conduits through which appeals to emotion and affect are mobilized to garner support for a cause.

The first public health HIV/AIDS celebrity in China was Pu Cunxin, a film and theater star and Communist Party member, who was plucked by the Ministry of Health in 2000 to become involved in the HIV/AIDS awareness campaign and appear in its first public awareness poster. Pu also starred in several made-for-television movies and drama series about HIV/AIDS before the actor was rendered unrecognizable through costuming and false teeth in his villainous bloodhead role in *Love for Life*, a role that might appear to undermine his “HIV/AIDS hero” status. Meanwhile Pu himself justified the disparity between the role and his real-life AIDS advocacy by saying that “there is a variety of ways to publicize the fight against AIDS.”<sup>349</sup> When he asked the Ministry of Health for permission to take the role, he was told that because it was art, it would be fine. Gu’s decision to cast against type by putting Pu in the role complicates the simplistic heroism of Pu’s celebrity philanthropy, illustrating that, from the state’s perspective, Pu’s artistic embodiment of a villain who infected people with HIV did not compromise his commitment to fight the disease.

---

<sup>348</sup> Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte, *Brand Aid: Shopping Well to Save the World* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota Press, 2011), 25-26.

<sup>349</sup> "濮存昕解《最爱》被删戏：所有人都说我演得好 (Pu Cunxin Interprets Deleted Scene in 'Love for Life': Everyone Praised My Acting)," *新浪* (Sina.com), May 20, 2011, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2011-05-20/10303313033.shtml>.

Another highly-visible “HIV/AIDS hero(ine)” is Peng Liyuan, China’s First Lady beginning in 2012. In fact, Peng became the Minister of Health ambassador for HIV/AIDS prevention in 2006 and the World Health Organization’s (WHO) Goodwill ambassador for tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS in 2011. Before her husband became China’s president in 2012, Peng was a well-known military major general and folk singer, best known for hosting the annual Spring Festival gala. On December 1, 2012, Peng appeared in a widely-seen and well-received HIV/AIDS awareness public service announcement (PSA) video entitled *Yongyuan zai yiqi* (Together Forever), broadcast on CCTV television stations and quickly uploaded onto the Internet. The video shows Peng with a group of orphaned children afflicted with HIV/AIDS. The seven-minute-42-second video shows Peng engaged in various activities with the children, teaching them to play piano, painting with them, singing a song together, kicking around a soccer ball with them, and walking and running with the children. Her role as “Peng Mama,” as one of the children refer to her, is evident in her behavior: she ties one child’s shoes, and playfully teases another boy by telling him, “I hear that a lot of girls really like you.” Furthermore, she is always shown using physical touch to comfort the children. Just as Zhao mobilized the close-up of hand-holding to show the physical integration of Hu with the rest of the *Love for Life* crew, this PSA also focuses on hands as a physical symbol of outreach, comfort and care. As a kind of updated variation on the highly-publicized photos of Princess Diana holding HIV/AIDS-afflicted children (some of the first visual images of high-profile celebrities physically touching those afflicted with the illness), it is the focus on Peng Mama’s *hands*, not *arms*, that reveals the cultural distinction between the two women’s touching politics. Hands instruct while arms hold.

Close-ups of hands abound in this PSA. To name a few prominent instances: Peng places her hand gently over a 14-year-old boy’s hands as she teaches him how to play the song, “People

Who Love You” on the piano; she grasps the hand of another young boy as they watch a playback of the boy singing the song; she caresses the face of the 14-year-old boy who sees himself crying while singing the song and gently squeezes his forearm; she plays a game involving her hand and another boy’s hands; and a boy touches Peng’s forehead with his finger.<sup>350</sup> The visual image of hands touching bodies has an ideological function in the texts discussed throughout this chapter. Barker, drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “flesh,” writes, “The skin is a meeting place for exchange and traversal because it connects the inside with the outside, the self with the other.”<sup>351</sup> In the case of HIV/AIDS representation, the touch between two people is itself a meeting place for the healthy and the un-healthy, the well and the sick. As an equivocating gesture of reciprocity and reversibility, it eschews the difference between someone living with HIV/AIDS and someone who is not. However, in Peng Mama’s case, she is not just cradling and caressing children afflicted with HIV/AIDS, she is also using touch to engage the children in social and cultural activities, instructing them in music and games.

Despite this tactile function of sympathy, as with *Meili’s Big Feet*, difference is reinscribed with the visible markings of class difference. With the exception of a few of Zhao’s interviewees, most of the people shown in all three texts afflicted with HIV/AIDS are poor rural residents who were infected via blood donation or through mother-to-child, thereby alleviating them of carrying the guilt and stigma of an “immoral” transmission means such as sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, or drug use.

#### Coda: The sentimental health narrative and the role of the mother

---

<sup>350</sup> The song ‘People Who Love You’ has become the HIV/AIDS awareness theme song. In this particular campaign, Peng’s singing is prominently featured, while in Zhao Liang’s *Together*, the song is apparently sung by a choir of young children.

<sup>351</sup> Barker, *Tactile Eye*, 27.

The “touching feelings” that *Love for Life, Together*, and the PSA *Together Forever* invoke are related to the sentimental Chinese text, and in the case of *Love for Life* and *Together Forever*, it is also thematically tied to the maternal figure and teacher. In her study, *Sentimental Modernism*, Suzanne Clark describes the modernist and Western attitudes of revulsion and contempt towards sentimentality. She suggests that:

Sentimental discourse participates in the psychology of abjection, a psychology related to the formation of social and cultural groups, as Julia Kristeva defines it. The abject is involved in rejecting the maternal....At the level of psychoanalytic narrative, this creates the abject, which appears in conjunction with the sublime, in a borderless state logically prior to Oedipal cuts, where the process of delineating borders between an undifferentiated self and the maternal other is marked by horror and disgust.....The sentimental is the representation of an abject struggle over female emotion.<sup>352</sup>

Nevertheless, the sentimental has persisted in the political unconscious of Chinese cultural production. If the sentimental discourse is inherently abject and “involved in rejecting the maternal,” then what do Chinese sentimental health narratives reveal about Chinese cultural responses to female emotion? The re-figured maternal figure appears as an erotic object in Gu’s *Love for Life*, and “Peng Mama” as a maternal teacher has become the new HIV/AIDS poster figure promoting tolerance and love. In *Meili’s Big Feet*, Meili is the symbolic and self-sacrificing rural mother to the village schoolchildren. The maternal figure has not, in fact, been rejected, but rather embraced and re-figured as teacher. Returning to Chow’s notion that “at the heart of Chinese sentimentalism lies the idealization of filiality,” it seems the sentimental “in the

---

<sup>352</sup> Suzanne Clark, *Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 10-11.

enigmatic form of an intensity” serves an ideological function in contemporary Chinese narratives about hygiene and health.

Cultural displays of the unhygienic body and the HIV/AIDS afflicted body, as examined throughout Chapters Two and Three, demonstrate two dominant tropes in the sentimental health narrative. First, woman, particularly the maternal teacher, is the domestic housekeeper of bodily concerns. She *teaches* “unhealthy” bodies how to engage in social, artistic, and cultural activities through touch and sympathy. Second, a maternal compassion directed towards the rural body is mobilized to generate affect around corporeal predicament. Although the narrative text and production practices attempt to close the distance between urban and rural (*Meili’s Big Feet*) and between “healthy” and “unhealthy” bodies (*Love for Life; Together*), ultimately, this conceit is contingent on illusions of intimacy, to return to Schickel’s cautionary perspective on false intimacy fostered by media and to what he calls the “fascism of fame.”<sup>353</sup> Indeed, the illusion of intimacy between two people onscreen, the illusion of intimacy between viewer and film body, and the illusion of intimacy between viewer and celebrity accounts for the most *touching* aspects of HIV/AIDS cultural re-narrativization. It is in this very collusion of private representation and re-enactments with the very public nature of celebrity that creates the emotional capital of intimacy and compassion, however temporary and fleeting such an affective economy might be.

---

<sup>353</sup> Schickel, *Intimate Strangers*, 311.

### Chapter Three Bibliography

- Anagnost, Ann. "Strange Circulations: The Blood Economy in Rural China." *Economy and Society* 35, no. 4 (2006): 509-29.
- Ang, Ien. "Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm." *Boundary 2* 25, no. 3 (1998): 223-42.
- Barker, Jennifer M. *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2011.
- . "Cruel Optimism." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Berry, Chris, and Mary Ann Farquhar. *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Chow, Rey. *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- . *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*. Theory and History of Literature. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Clark, Suzanne. *Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Cui, Shuqin. "Alternative Visions and Representation: Independent Documentary Film-Making in Contemporary China." *Studies in Documentary Film* 4, no. 1 (2010): 3-20.
- Davison, Nicola. "The Men Who Gave AIDS to Rural China." *The Independent*, May 23, 2011.
- Del Rio, Elena. *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.
- Erwin, Kathleen. "The Circulatory System: Blood Procurement, AIDS, and the Social Body in China." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (2006): 139-59.
- Foucault, Michel, and Jay Miskowiec. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22-27.
- Frederiksen-Golsen, Karen I., Cheng-Shi Shiu, Helene Starks, and et. al. "'You Must Take the Medications for You and Me': Family Caregivers Promoting HIV Medication Adherence in China." *AIDS Patient Care STDS* 25, no. 11 (2011): 735-41.



- Fu, Ping. "Ermo: (Tele)Visualizing Urban/Rural Transformation." In *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, edited by Chris Berry, 73-80. London: British Film Institute, 2005.
- Gill, Bates, Jennifer Chang, and Sarah Palmer. "China's HIV Crisis." *Foreign Affairs* (2002): 96-110.
- Gu, Jing, and Neil Renwick. "China's Fight against HIV/AIDS." *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 54 (2008): 85-106.
- Gu, Ming Dong. "The Filial Piety Complex: Variations on the Oedipus Theme in Chinese Literature and Culture." *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2006): 163-95.
- Hamington, Maurice. *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Hayes, Anna. "AIDS, Bloodheads & Cover-Ups: The "ABC" of Henan's Aids Epidemic." *AQ: Journal of Contemporary Analysis* 77, no. 3 (2005): 12-40.
- Holroyd, Eleanor, and Alexander Molassiotis. "Hong Kong Chinese Perceptions of the Experience of Unrelated Bone Marrow Donation." *Social Science & Medicine* 51, no. 1 (2000): 29-40.
- Hood, Johanna. "Celebrity Philanthropy: The Cultivation of China's HIV/AIDS Heroes." In *Celebrity in China*, edited by Louise Edwards and Elaine Jeffreys. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010.
- . "Peng Liyuan's Local and International Public Health Ambassador Roles: Considering Soft Power and Political, Moral and Plasma Economies." Paper presented at the Celebrity Studies Conference, Melbourne, Australia, December 13, 2012.
- Jing, Shao. "Fluid Labor and Blood Money: The Economy of HIV/AIDS in Rural Central China." *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 4 (2006): 535-69.
- Johnson, Ian. "China's Great Uprooting: Moving 250 Million into Cities." *The New York Times*, June 15, 2013.
- Kaplan, E Ann. "Problematizing Cross-Cultural Analysis, the Case of Women in the Recent Chinese Cinema." *Wide Angle* 11, no. 2 (1989): 40-50.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Lee, Maggie. "Love for Life: Film Review." *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 8, 2011.
- Lieberman, Sally Taylor. *The Mother and Narrative Politics in Modern China*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1998.

- Link, Perry. *Evening Chats in Beijing: Probing China's Predicament*. New York: WW Norton & Company, 1993.
- Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000.
- . *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000.
- Meisner, Maurice. *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999.
- Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs (Perseus Books Group), 2004.
- Paterson, Mark, Martin Dodge, and Sara MacKian. "Introduction: Placing Touch within Social Theory and Empirical Study." In *Touching Space Placing Touch*, edited by Mark and Martin Dodge Paterson. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2012.
- Richey, Lisa Ann, and Stefano Ponte. *Brand Aid: Shopping Well to Save the World*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- Rosenthal, Elisabeth. "In Rural China, a Steep Price of Poverty: Dying of AIDS." *The New York Times*, October 28, 2000.
- . "Silent Plague: A Special Report.; Deadly Shadow Darkens Remote Chinese Village." *The New York Times*, May 28, 2001.
- Schickel, Richard. "Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity in America." Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Sobchack, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.
- . "The Passion of the Material: Toward a Phenomenology of Interobjectivity." In *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, 286-318. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

- . "What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh." In *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, 53-84. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Sontag, Susan. "Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors." New York: Macmillan, 2001.
- Sun, Wanning. *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries*. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Tang, Hongfeng (唐宏峰). 《最爱》：异托邦与魔术时代 (*Love for Life: Heterotopias and the Magical Era*). "电影批评 (Film Criticism) 339 (2011): 38-41.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "Report of an HIV/AIDS Assessment in China." Washington, DC: National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention, 2001.
- Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2-13.
- Wong, Edward. "Ex-Foe of the State Carves Space for His Art; Filmmaker Gains Access to Chinese Market by Working with Officials." *The International Herald Tribune*, August 14, 2011.
- Wu, Min. "Framing AIDS in China: A Comparative Analysis of Us and Chinese Wire News Coverage of HIV/AIDS in China." *Asian Journal of Communication* 16, no. 3 (2006): 251-72.
- Wu, Zunyou, Keming Rou, and Haixia Cui. "The HIV/AIDS Epidemic in China: History, Current Strategies and Future Challenges." *AIDS Education and Prevention* 16, no. A (2004): 7-17.
- Yan, Lianke. *Dream of Ding Village*. Translated by Cindy Carter. New York: Grove Press, 2005.
- Yip, Man-Fung. "In the Realm of the Senses: Sensory Realism, Speed, and Hong Kong Martial Arts Cinema." *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 4 (2014): 76-97.
- Yoshimoto, Mitsuhiro. "The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Film Studies and the Postcolonial World Order." *Boundary 2* 18, no. 3 (1991): 242-57.
- Zhang, Jingwen. "The Rhetorics of Constructing HIV/AIDS in the United States and China: A Comparative Analysis of Two Online Discussion Forums." Clemson University, 2011.
- Zhang, Yurong, Xiulan Zhang, Tamara Hanco Aleong, and Esme Fuller-Thomson. "Impact of HIV/AIDS on Social Relationships in Rural China." *Open AIDS Journal* 5 (2011): 67-73.
- Zito, Angela, and Tani E. Barlow. *Body, Subject, and Power in China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### Chinese Star Bodies and a Trans/national Politics of Beauty

“Beauty is a form of Genius—is higher, indeed, than Genius, as it needs no explanation. It is one of the great facts of the world, like sunlight, or springtime, or the reflection in the dark waters of that silver shell we call the moon. It cannot be questioned. It has divine right of sovereignty. It makes princes of those who have it.”

-Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

“Moth-feeler eyebrows are in truth belles’ blades/They kill all the dandies in the world.”

-Zheng Ao (936-946)

In September 2012, popular US-based news and entertainment websites like *The Huffington Post*, *NY Daily News*, and *Gawker* published a story about the rigorous anatomical criteria a Chinese beauty pageant in Hubei province used to judge its college contestants.<sup>354</sup> The required standards dictated that the nipples on a contestant’s body should be no more than 20 centimeters apart, and that the distance between pupils should be 46 percent of the distance between each pupil and ear. Although a handful of women reportedly filed applications, as news about the competition spread online, Chinese netizens began posting scathing criticisms and sarcastic comments on various online forums. Online blog and *Weibo* (China’s equivalent of

---

<sup>354</sup> "Chinese University Beauty Pageant Organizers Mandate Contestants' Nipples Be at Least 7.8 Inches Apart," *NY Daily News*, September 7, 2012, <http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/health/chinese-university-beauty-pageant-organizers-mandate-contestants-nipples-7-8-inches-article-1.1154271>; "Perfectly Spaced Nipples Required in Chinese College Beauty Contest," *Huffington Post*, September 7, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/07/perfectly-spaced-nipples-chinese-beauty-contest\\_n\\_1865298.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/07/perfectly-spaced-nipples-chinese-beauty-contest_n_1865298.html); Neetzan Zimmerman, "Chinese Beauty Contest for College Students Demands Contestants Have Perfectly Spaced Nipples," *Gawker* (online), September 7, 2012, <http://gawker.com/5941377/chinese-beauty-contest-for-college-students-demands-contestants-have-perfectly-spaced-nipples>.

Twitter) comments included, “Check out what the brain-dead college people spend all day doing, then you’ll know why China can’t produce a Harvard, [or] Oxford!” and, “When we select the most handsome boy, we’ll measure his dick length and width.”<sup>355</sup> A staff member for the website that organized the contest and prepared the winning prizes of 10,000 RMB and “the chance to act in online dramas,” explained to the *Global Times*, “We want the winners to be extremely good-looking. We have based our criteria both on the traditional Chinese and more modern Western aesthetic values.”<sup>356</sup> Responding by flexing nationalistic superiority, *Huffington Post* editorialized that American beauty pageants “have moved away from being strictly about physical beauty” and that Miss America has refrained from publishing contestants’ bust, hip, and waist measurements since 1985.<sup>357</sup>

What is salient about this story in regards to body politics is twofold: first, the Chinese beauty pageant’s attempts, even if misguided, to update beauty standards by merging traditional Chinese standards with “more modern Western aesthetic values” (where were unspecified by the staff member) reflects China’s post-World Trade Organization (WTO) entry, neoliberal, consumerist desires at large. Beauty is a visual signifier of China’s 21<sup>st</sup>-century participation in globalization. Secondly, *Huffington Post*’s response reveals the national and moral investments in beauty economies, demonstrating that judgments of beauty are intertwined with conceptions of progressive or regressive civilization. As discussed in Chapter Two, modern-day Chinese corporeal concepts of civilization are forged from encounters with foreign ideals of health and hygiene. Synonymously, China’s celebration of feminine beauty and its visual export of Chinese

---

<sup>355</sup> Anthony Tao, "College Beauty Contest in Hubei Has Some Very Unique, Nipple-Specific Requirements," *Beijing Cream*, September 7, 2012, <http://beijingcream.com/2012/09/college-beauty-contest-in-hubei-has-some-very-unique-nipple-specific-requirements/>.

<sup>356</sup> Chen Xiaoru, "Beauty Contest Rules Called Disrespectful, Humiliating," *Global Times*, September 7, 2012, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/731693.shtml>.

<sup>357</sup> "Perfectly Spaced Nipples Required in Chinese College Beauty Contest."

female film star bodies represent the PRC's global participation in modern aesthetic cultures and practices. Feminine beauty is an image-based vehicle of modernity.

Celebratory and public displays of feminine beauty are internationally ubiquitous. Beauty interpreters and gate-keepers, like beauty pageant judges and fashion editors and writers, manage the affective economy of feminine beauty as a form of biopolitical control, while the festive cheer and excited atmosphere at beauty competitions reinforce feminine beauty as an exalted quality. Moreover, fashion and beauty commentators, such like the aforementioned *Huffington Post* writer, substantiate national interests in beauty performance. The orchestration of events like beauty contests and fashion shows wherein beautiful specimens are placed on public display supports what Naomi Wolfe calls "the beauty myth," the false idea that "the quality called 'beauty' objectivity and universally exists."<sup>358</sup> Oscar Wilde articulates this belief in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* wherein he refers to beauty as a "form of genius" that "needs no explanation."<sup>359</sup> In fact, "Chinese beauty" as both a socio-cultural phenomenon and an affective pleasure economy can in part be explained by the phenomena of globalization.

A politics of beauty involves discipline, labor, and affect. The body is territorialized by both local and global beauty standards, and women labor to achieve such standards. Beauty politics shape women's bodies through a social system of rewards and benefits. For instance, according to popular scientific studies on the advantages of beauty, beautiful people are often rewarded by various forms of material gain such as better employment and higher earnings.

---

<sup>358</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (New York: Random House, 1991), 12.

<sup>359</sup> Oscar Wilde, "The Picture of Dorian Gray," in *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), 18.

Beauty thereby grants its possessors a higher quality of life.<sup>360</sup> Freud philosophized that, “Beauty has no obvious use; nor is there any clear cultural necessity for it. Yet civilization could not do without it.”<sup>361</sup> Although he asserted that feelings were difficult to assess in a scientific manner, Freud also made note of the “peculiar, mildly intoxicating quality” one experiences in contact with beauty.<sup>362</sup> Visions of female beauty, as embodied by Chinese film stars, access Chinese-ness through national ideologies and cultural notions of common sense. These mediated images of beauty also provokes the “peculiar, mildly intoxicating quality” which involve not only the pleasures of the visual gaze, but the entire sensorium, including touch, taste, smell, and sound. By utilizing the Chinese notion of *weidao*, which roughly translates to mean “flavorful embodiment,” this chapter analyzes female star bodies and reveals the ways holistic sensory engagements are activated in the embodied experiences with female beauty.<sup>363</sup>

In an effort to understand the idealization and corporealization of Chinese feminine beauty in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup>-century, Chapters Four and Five investigate the trans/national (simultaneously local and global) politics of beauty that govern the consumption of PRC Chinese and Chinese American female film stars. Film actors participate in an industry of stardom, which is “dependent on outputs of affective labor such as caring and emoting,” affects

---

<sup>360</sup> There are many examples of these studies readily found on the Internet. For one representative sample that allegedly presents multiple scientific studies, see Joss Fong, "The Economics of Beauty," *Vox* 1, no. 3 (2014), <http://www.vox.com/2014/7/16/5905533/the-benefits-of-beauty>.

<sup>361</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 62.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>363</sup> A fascinating intersection with Western phenomenological film theory (although traditional Chinese frameworks of beauty predate these kinds of studies), scholars like Vivian Sobchack, Linda Williams, Laura Marks, and Jennifer Barker demonstrate how the pleasures of cinema are not restricted to the visual. In writing about cinema’s “sensual address” to its viewer, they demonstrate how film spectatorship engages all our bodily senses.

also intimately related to the perception and affectivity of beauty.<sup>364</sup> Case-studies of PRC Chinese and Chinese American female film stars whose work circulates internationally reveals the trans/national beauty appeals within star *consumption*, a term that suggests both consumer purchase *and* the sensory faculties of carnality and affect—the “peculiar, mildly intoxicating quality” provoked by contact with beauty.

“Star-gazing” not only involves vision and sight, but other carnal faculties as well. This project’s discussion of specific female stars: Gong Li, Zhang Ziyi, Joan Chen, and Lucy Liu follows a progression that is not chronological, but rather moves from center outwards within concentric circles of a Chinese, or Sinophone, diaspora in order to accumulate an understanding of the trans/national, de/reterritorializing, and hybridizing nature of global and local beauty politics. Examinations of the historical, biopolitical, and neoliberal dictates of “beauty” as a social construct reveal modern-day Chinese conceptions of beauty and how beauty is deeply involved in China’s politics of belonging in the world. Beauty labor and the affective economy of beauty in the Chinese context are also intimately related to the concept of *suzhi*, which determines a person’s social value and worth, in place of what is traditionally termed “class consciousness” in Marxist theory.<sup>365</sup>

---

<sup>364</sup> Elizabeth Wissinger, "Always on Display: Affective Production in the Modeling Industry," *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (2007): 235.

<sup>365</sup> Although outside the scope of this dissertation, I wish to further interrogate the operations of beauty, specifically whether the use-value of the labors of beauty give women agency, a question that has been continually debated by feminist scholars since the 1960s. A second critical approach could be undertaken towards understanding what I call “beauty habitus,” which will reveal the repetition of certain beauty practices which form beauty habituation, beauty labor, and finally characterize a contemporary Chinese beauty lifestyle as a “systematic product of habitus” that reflects a social identity “defined and asserted through difference,” to use Bourdieu’s formulation. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 172.



How do modern-day conceptions of Chinese beauty illuminate historical and contemporary tastes, as well as local and global tastes? How do beauty culture and beauty embodiment become *common sense*? Laura Miller writes in her study on Japanese body aesthetics and beauty culture, “Beauty culture and how it changes provide an excellent example of the way cultural values and attitudes shape and are discursively shaped by consumerism, and how rapidly and readily they become entrenched as ‘natural’ and ‘good.’”<sup>366</sup> Moreover, as Ben Highmore reminds us that, “the very idea of ‘taste’ to signify discernment is already flirting with distaste by invoking the ‘lower senses.’”<sup>367</sup> “Taste” is fickle when it comes to idealizations of beauty, as feminine beauty is slippery in the eyes of the beholder/spectator. Nevertheless, the management of beauty affect by ordinary people and spectators constitutes a form of pleasure agency in the gaze.

#### China’s history of beauty in brief

This section discusses the evolution of Chinese beauty politics from the dynastic eras, the pre-modern Confucian era, the Republic of China and Occupation of China, Maoist era, and the post-Mao era. Necessarily compressing these timelines, this section provides broad informative strokes on the history of beauty in China to illuminate the ways in which beauty politics have drastically changed in the *longue durée* of China’s history.

Throughout the dynastic eras, Classical Confucian and Taoist texts described in detail the physical qualities of a *meiren* or *meinü* (beautiful woman) accompanied by prescriptions of proper decoration and bodily adornment:

Young; small; slim but fleshly; soft bones; drooping shoulders; smooth white skin

---

<sup>366</sup> Laura Miller, *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>367</sup> Ben Highmore, "Bitter after Taste," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 124.

under colorful and tight silk underwear; clean slender fingers; long neck; broad and white forehead; long ears; dark and thick hair with stylish hairpin; thick and bluish-black eyebrows; clear and sentimental eyes; charming smiles; tall and straight nose; red lips exposing seashell-white and small teeth; relaxed and elegant bodily gestures; and finally, gentle behaviors.<sup>368</sup>

Female beauty was valued for both its aesthetic appreciation and sexual engagement, as the beauty of a female mate was believed to have direct impact on the personal virtue and health of men, particularly impacting a man's *qi* or *chi* (vital life essence). However traditional dictates of Chinese feminine beauty, specified in classical texts and paintings, differ from Western standards of physical beauty because they are simultaneously precise but open to poetic and sensual interpretation (unlike the mathematical dictates of the beauty contest mentioned above). In a text written in the Han Dynasty in 108 B.C., Taoist text *Hsiu-chen yu-lu* (Record of Cultivating the True Essence) states that a man should avoid five types when choosing a partner to "mount":

Women who have manly voices and coarse skin, yellow hair and violent dispositions, and are sneaky and jealous constitute the first avoidance. Those with evil appearances and unhealthy countenances, bald heads and underarm odor, hunched backs and jutting chests, and who hop like sparrows or slither like snakes constitute the second avoidance. Those who are sallow, thin, frail, and weak, cold of body and deficient of *chi*, and whose channels of circulation are out of harmony constitute the third avoidance. Women who are mad, deaf, or dumb, who are lame or blind in one eye, who have scabies, scars, or are insane, who are too

---

<sup>368</sup> Qtd. in Eva Kit Wah Man, "Female Bodily Aesthetics, Politics, and Feminine Ideals of Beauty in China," in *Beauty Matters*, ed. Peggy Zeglin Brand (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 170.

fat or too thin, or whose pubic hair is coarse and dense constitute the fourth avoidance. Women who are over forty, have borne many children and whose *yin* is weak, whose skin is loose and breasts are slack, these are harmful and confer no benefit. This is the fifth avoidance.<sup>369</sup>

A woman's beauty, or lack thereof, is described in several ways: through zoomorphic description (sparrows, snakes); personality traits ("sneaky" and "jealous" women); and biological qualities ("coarse skin," "yellow hair," "course and dense pubic hair"), all of which are all related to a woman's moral character, her physical and mental health, and her age. The above prescriptive advice was based on the belief that a man should have sex with a beautiful, young woman in order to energize his *qi*. Moreover, a sexual event with a beautiful woman would ensure that both partners receive health benefits through the sacred harmonizing of *Yin* and *Yang* elements. Although Confucian texts were more prescriptive of inner beauty and behavioral control than that of Taoist literature, both classical ideologies shaped conceptions of female beauty for hundreds of years in traditional, pre-modern China. Furthermore, Chinese epistemology refutes the notion of mind-body dualism. Rather, the Chinese face and body provides a kind of physiognomic mapping of a person's mind, character, and virtue.

If the face and body provide visual clues to a person's character, it followed that bodily modification would lead to behavioral modification. In a Confucianist society wherein women were subordinate to men, women occupied the *nei* (inside) domestic sphere, while the men worked in the *wai* (outside) public sphere. Any kind of abject blurring of these boundaries of inside/outside, was strictly prohibited. As a kind of domestic aestheticization of the female body, the Chinese began to bind the feet of women. One of the most long-lasting and extreme

---

<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 174.

manipulations of the Chinese female body in pursuit of “beauty” was to bind the female feet to resemble a *sanchun jinlian* (a three-inch “golden lotus”). The foot-binding tradition, which began in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), is retrospectively viewed by scholars as either a Confucianist, patriarchal aesthetic perversion that caused irreparable trauma to female body (especially for those between the ages of 5-7 and 13-15, when the pain finally subsides), or a distinctly feminine world-making through pain that created a mindful body reacting to and participating in the male-dominated Neo-Confucianist world.<sup>370</sup> Still other scholars have considered this painful beauty practice in relation to labor, either as a means to mask women’s labor or as a visualization of virtuous work requiring patience, skill, and seclusion centered in the home. Another point to consider in terms of labor also includes the labors of embodiment and movement that accompany such a severe bodily modification.<sup>371</sup> My mother, for instance, when remembering her grandmother, has the strongest affective memory of my great-grandmother trying to run after her with great difficulty on her tiny, bound feet. Beauty as defined through such great labor rejects the natural female body, instead offering an embodied aestheticization of pain-as-beauty.

Attempts to ban foot-binding throughout Chinese history were precipitated by contact with the outside world and transnational contact, but Chinese people’s resistance to ban the practice over the course of 250 years is a testament to the resistant nature of tradition and the stronghold of beauty politics. Beginning with the Manchu conquerors in 1665, efforts to ban the

---

<sup>370</sup> For more on traditional Chinese conceptions of beauty, see Man, “Female Bodily Aesthetics, Politics, and Feminine Ideals of Beauty,” *Beauty Matters*, 169-196. For more on foot-binding, see Angela Zito, “Bound to Be Represented: Theorizing/Fetishizing Footbinding,” *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation, and Chinese Culture*, eds. Fran Martin and Larissa Heinrich, 21-41; Fred Blake, “Foot-Binding in Neo-Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labor,” *Signs* 19:3 (1994), 676-712; and Christena L. Turner, “Locating Footbinding: Variations across Class and Space in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century China,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 10:4 (December 1997), 444-479.

<sup>371</sup> See Blake and Turner for these distinctions.

practice were ineffectual until the Chinese Guomindang Nationalist government's legal ban in the early 1900's. Moreover, Christena Turner writes that, "Anti-footbinding initiatives came from native Chinese scholars, reformers, emerging capitalists, and political leaders anxious to build contacts with western nations and global industry and from foreigners anxious to open, reform, and save China and the Chinese. The elimination of footbinding became part of a general code for modernizing China."<sup>372</sup> A symbol of China's modernity and worldly participation, footbinding became prohibited and women with bound feet were asked to unbind their feet, as painful a process as the binding itself. Many women in poor, rural communities resisted, as they held tightly to beliefs that daughters would otherwise be un-marriageable. Similar to the trickle-down economies from urban to rural in regards to hygiene and clothing, lower and poor classes are also the last social group to implement changes in longstanding beauty practices.

Other aspects of women's beautification also came under scrutiny in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century as a result of the challenging intellectual paradigms brought forth by the May Fourth movement (1919), the Nationalist government (1927-1948), and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (1949-present). Mao Zedong, for instance, made his thoughts on the feminization and beautification of women's appearance known as early as 1919, when he stated, "I think women are regarded as criminals to start with, and tall buns and long skirts are the instruments of torture applied to them by men. There is also their facial make-up, which is the brand of a criminal; the jewelry on their hands, which constitutes shackles; and their pierced ears and bound feet, which represent corporal punishment."<sup>373</sup> In other words, beauty practices are a crime against women. Although Mao's Communist followers regarded the feminization of appearance as counter-

---

<sup>372</sup> Christena L. Turner, "Locating Footbinding: Variations across Class and Space in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century China," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 10, no. 4 (1997): 455.

<sup>373</sup> Qtd. in Eileen Otis, *Markets and Bodies: Women, Service Work, and the Making of Inequality in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 18.

revolutionary, Yunxiang Gao observes that during the era of China's *guonan* (national crisis) when Japan invaded and occupied China throughout 1931-1945 during the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Guomindang Nationalist government advocated women to uphold the ideals of *jianmei* (robust beauty).<sup>374</sup> They also promoted and campaigned for women's participation in *tiyu* (sports and physical culture). Guo situates this cultural phenomenon within the international "life reform movement" popular in the West, especially in Germany. As symbols of the nation's strength, an athletic woman's body with bare legs and feet became the vision of beauty. Chinese magazines featured Western women "in miniskirts, bathing suits, and gym shorts, ice skating, doing gymnastics, standing on their hands, and dancing in order to show that 'Western women have gained *jianmei* physiques through athletic exercise.'" <sup>375</sup> Even Hollywood actresses like Greta Garbo, Jean Harlow, Marlene Dietrich, and Joan Crawford appeared in Chinese lifestyle magazines of the 1930s to reinforce the desirability of the international *jianmei* modern woman (Harlow being the most exemplary of the *jianmei* prototype).

Despite the focus on the athletic physical body in the 1930s, however, there remained a tension between corporeal displays of health and sexual modesty, as explicit sexual appeal remained taboo. The first and most visible Chinese *jianmei* film star, Li Lili, showed off her muscular legs in *Queen of Sports* (Sun Yu, 1934), and often appeared in magazines in a swimsuit and shorts. Sean MacDonald contends that, "In *Queen of Sports* Li acts the part of the sprinter, with close-ups of her athletic legs as metonyms for national competition and the sexuality of a young actress."<sup>376</sup> In a 1936 special "Swimming" issue of *Linglong*, a journal dedicated to

---

<sup>374</sup> Yunxiang Gao, "Nationalist and Feminist Discourses on *Jianmei* (Robust Beauty) During China's 'National Crisis' in the 1930s," *Gender & History* 18, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, 552.

<sup>376</sup> Sean MacDonald, "Li Lili: Acting a Lively *Jianmei* Type," in *Chinese Film Stars*, ed. Mary Farquhar and Yingjin Zhang (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 56.

physical fitness and celebrity, Li appeared on the cover in a bathing suit. A high-angled camera captures the joyful and carefree actress with arms outstretched in a swimming pool. However, in a “cautionary article” inside the issue, “movie stars, stage actresses, and taxi-dancers” are mentioned as being vulnerable in “this pornography mad-society.”<sup>377</sup> As MacDonald suggests, the article “collapses sports celebrity and other types of celebrity by linking both to the position of women in society under the gaze of men.” It illustrates that despite the overtures to gender equality in the intellectualism and political rhetoric of the time, female beauty was operationalized for male voyeuristic pleasure.



Cover of 1936 *Linglong* issue no. 243 featuring film star Li Lili<sup>378</sup>

After the CCP established the state of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, female

---

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>378</sup> *Linglong Women's Magazine* no. 243 (1936), available through Columbia University C.V Starr East Asian Library collection (online), <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/linglong/>.

beauty norms continued to evolve according to the socialist ideologies of gender equality and the necessities of egalitarian efforts in labor and revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, sexual discourse and education were nearly nonexistent, leading to the collapse of gender and sexuality as distinct categories. Some Chinese feminists even refer to this period as “an era of ‘genderless ideology’ (*yishi xingtai wuxing zhen*) and “asexual” (*feixinghua*) consciousness.”<sup>379</sup> Moreover, even the “gaze of desire” and sexual longing were politicized. Dai Jinhua, a leading cultural scholar and feminist in mainland China, argues that:

...in the “worker, peasant, soldier” orientation and artistic policy, class narratives constantly negated gender; within these negative dynamics, an important ideological discourse, or self-evident truth, was that desire, the gaze of desire, the language of bodies, and the signification of gender were all designated as trademarks of the class enemy, as contrasted with the proletariat, the revolutionary, and the Communist.<sup>380</sup>

“The language of bodies” became codified in genderless Maoism, and “female beauty was displaced from external appearance to the love of labor, the party, and the nation.”<sup>381</sup> Women dressed in plain gray or blue party uniforms and either had chin-length hair or up-dos. Women wearing makeup or accessories were heavily scrutinized, and would be accused of indulging in bourgeois ideologies. In Ban Wang’s investigation of the intimate relationship between Chinese modern politics and the aesthetic experience, he argues that “overcoming and sublimating the

---

<sup>379</sup> Li Xiaojiang, "With What Discourse Do We Reflect on Chinese Women? Thoughts on Transnational Feminism in China," in *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 269.

<sup>380</sup> Jinhua Dai, "Gender and Narration," in *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua*, ed. Jing Wang and Tani E. Barlow (New York and London: Verso, 2002), 116.

<sup>381</sup> Man, "Female Bodily Aesthetics, Politics, and Feminine Ideals of Beauty in China," 190.



feminine” became an aesthetic concern which manifested in revolutionary politics and media as a libidinal identification with the motherland and a symbolic release of psychic energy to the sublime order of law, the father.<sup>382</sup> Libido was thus sublimated and displaced unto the symbolic political realm, while a sublime, militarized, and desexed body was perceived to be the Communist corporeal ideal of strength and beauty.

The post-Mao era in China, however, witnessed the aggressive return of femininity and the enormous capitalistic opportunities it yielded. As Jie Yang asserts that in modern-day China, “the female body, feminine beauty, and feminine youth [are essential] in developing consumer capitalism in China.”<sup>383</sup> Noting that the beauty and fashion industries constitute the fastest growing consumer sectors in a developing economy, Eva Kit Wah Man contends that, “when the country’s power structure became fluid and economic classes appeared again, fashion and looks became the necessary symbols of identity and classification.”<sup>384</sup> Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping beginning in 1978, China transitioned into a market economy while retaining its paternalistic Party government, and markets responded quickly to women’s newfound consumer identity. As Mayfair Mei-hui Yang explains, “After a hiatus of four decades in the Maoist era, the male gaze returned again in the 1980s, along with consumer culture from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and the United States, foregrounding male sexuality and subjectivity, and positioning women as the expressive means for operationalizing an active male desire.”<sup>385</sup> As

---

<sup>382</sup> Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

<sup>383</sup> Jie Yang, "Nennü and Shunü: Gender, Body Politics, and the Beauty Economy in China," *Signs* 36, no. 2 (2011): 335.

<sup>384</sup> Man, “Female Bodily Aesthetics,” 190.

<sup>385</sup> Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, "From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women's Public Sphere in China," in *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 50-51.

Yang's quote suggests, other variants of Chinese-ness, including those of Hong Kong and Taiwan, were further along the path of Westernized consumer modernity, while the gender-neutral PRC body under Mao was isolated and disciplined. This national isolation was also reflected in the PRC's undeveloped film industry under Mao, which solely focused on propaganda and revolutionary operas. Consequently, the PRC lagged behind other forms of Chinese modernity and needed to "catch up." To overcompensate for its lagging modernity, women's bodies became the surfaces upon which overcompensation was written.

In breaking with the gender erasure of the past, the PRC female body became increasingly feminized and sexualized in short skirts, long hair, and high heels beginning in the 1980s. Signifiers of what once was regarded as bourgeois crimes against women have fueled the world's fourth largest market for beauty products. Beauty industry researcher Geoffrey Jones explains that, "During the 1980s China's consumption of beauty products other than toiletries was close to zero...During the following decade, as [China] began to experience rapid economic growth, [its] urban middle class began spending [its] rising incomes on beauty products. In China and Russia, in particular, the industry's products provided symbols of individualism and aspiration which had been denied to consumers by past regimes."<sup>386</sup> Cosmetics, which were previously denied to Chinese women by the Communist government, began to accrue in symbolic capital as tools with which to showcase a woman's social mobility and individualism.

With the opening of China's marketplace, strengthened by China's WTO entry in 2001, globalized beauty products and ideals, as well as a newfound desire for them, were successfully introduced to the PRC Chinese. Beauty contests, which were forbidden since the Communist Party established the PRC in 1949, began to flourish in China, beginning with one of the first

---

<sup>386</sup> Geoffrey Jones, *Beauty Imagined: A History of the Global Beauty Industry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6.

held in Guangdong Province in 1988. In 2003, China became a first-time host to the Miss World pageant on the island of Hainan, funded and supported entirely by the Chinese government. Although three decades earlier, attention to female beauty was considered signs of counterrevolutionary ideology and bourgeois decadence, Chinese officials now believed that beauty pageants held propagandistic value as “symbols of women’s liberation and modernization, rather than as tools of sexual repression and women’s oppression.”<sup>387</sup> As images of women’s bodies are increasingly overvalued for their erotic capital, bodies of women also began circulating as physical commodities in rampant prostitution and sex trafficking rings.<sup>388</sup> Although prostitution has existed in China for over 2,000 years, it was strictly forbidden during the Mao regime and “disappeared from Chinese society” between the years 1949-1976.<sup>389</sup> However, in the post-Mao era, both the visual and market economies enforce woman as a sex object which stands in place of “a concomitant feminization of the body politic and national space,” leaving women “especially vulnerable to scapegoating as the causes and carriers of moral decline.”<sup>390</sup> Part of the reason is the return to neo-Confucianist intellectual thought in modern-day China, which is not altogether comfortable with the sight of highly-accomplished women working in the *wai* (outside) public sphere. This secularized philosophy has had a “daunting effect on women’s relationship to the power, and has allowed and even fostered poor relationships between the sexes.”<sup>391</sup> Thus, women in the PRC public eye are scrutinized more heavily and are more vulnerable to moral judgment and blame.

---

<sup>387</sup> Gary Xu and Susan Feiner, "Meinü Jingji/China's Beauty Economy: Buying Looks, Shifting Value, and Changing Place," *Feminist Economics* 13, no. 3-4 (2007): 314.

<sup>388</sup> See Elaine Jeffreys, *China, Sex and Prostitution* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>389</sup> Jinghao Zhou, "Chinese Prostitution: Consequences and Solutions in the Post-Mao Era," *China: An International Journal* 4, no. 02 (2006): 238.

<sup>390</sup> Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, "Tang Wei Sex, the City and the Scapegoat in *Lust, Caution*," *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 4 (2010): 48.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*

On the ideological front, however, beautiful Chinese women also became signifiers of China's participation in the global exchange of communication and ideas. Towards this end, and as a result of the increasing exposure to foreign media and culture (from the West, and also from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan), Chinese beauty ideals began to conform to hegemonic Anglo-European standards of beauty. Gary Xu and Feiner explain, "The most desirable physiognomy in early twenty-first century China mimics the Western ideal," aesthetic preferences now leading to 589,000 plastic surgery procedures per year, the third highest statistical average after the U.S. and Brazil.<sup>392</sup> Certainly, there are also local, regional, and generational disparities that maintain and hold diverse perceptions of attractiveness. Anna Lora-Wainwright, for instance, observes in her ethnographic fieldwork in Baoma village that, "Eating and fatness...were synonymous with well-being and lack of appetite synonymous with illness," widely-held beliefs for rural elders who have lived during famines and food shortage during The Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution.<sup>393</sup> Nevertheless, in their attempts to embody international standards of feminine beauty, Chinese women in urban cities began fashioning themselves in Euro-American brands and styles.

The contemporary *meinü jingji* (beauty economy) is an inextricable part of China's post-WTO neoliberal economy. *Meinü jingji*, which includes beauty pageants, the cosmetic industry, plastic surgery centers, fitness centers, and weight loss products, is regarded by Chinese officials as one of two of the "most successful and most productive economic sectors in China," with real

---

<sup>392</sup> Xu and Feiner, "Meinü Jingji/China's Beauty Economy: Buying Looks, Shifting Value, and Changing Place," 316-17.

<sup>393</sup> Anna Lora-Wainwright, "Fatness and Well-Being: Bodies and the Generation Gap in Contemporary China," in *The Body in Asia*, ed. Bryan S. Turner and Zheng Yangwen (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 119.

estate being the other.<sup>394</sup> Furthermore, more than 16 million of China's labor force, mostly in the 18-24 age range, work in the beauty industry. Therefore *meinü jingji*'s place in China's society holds not only ideological importance but also material significance.

During my fieldwork for this project in 2012, I visited a spa several times after succumbing to the purchase of a beauty package during a haircut I received at an adjoining salon.<sup>395</sup> My esthetician, a beautiful 24-year-old named Wenwen tried to convince me that after ten *gua sha* medicine sessions (an East Asian healing technique involving surface frictioning), the bags under my eyes would disappear. Although my under-eye bags never disappeared, the soothing hour-long facial massage was nearly worth the 20-30 minutes of unrelenting hard-sell of various beauty products that would follow each session. Brochures explaining in detail the beauty benefits of the products were adorned with pictures of beautiful Western Caucasian women (no Chinese or Asian women were pictured), and the English translations of product descriptions (although not always with correct spelling and grammar) demonstrated the products' international credibility and ensured reliability. I later discovered that all the mid-upscale brightly-lit beauty salons throughout Beijing had beauty spas attached, filled with young, beautiful women like Wenwen, a member of the "floating population" who almost certainly migrated from their small town or village to an urban center in order to work in the flourishing *meinü jingji* (beauty economy).<sup>396</sup>

#### Beauty value and star quality

---

<sup>394</sup> Chen Jie qtd. in Xu and Feiner, "Meinü Jingji/China's Beauty Economy: Buying Looks, Shifting Value, and Changing Place," 309.

<sup>395</sup> In 2012, I conducted fieldwork in Beijing, China for six months for this project. During this time, I interviewed Chinese film industry, performance instructors, and film scholars; used ethnographic and auto-ethnographic methods in performance research at the Central Academy of Drama and Beijing Film Academy; and collected literature and materials.

<sup>396</sup> Sixth Generation filmmaker Jia Zhang-ke focuses especially on the "floating population" in modern-day China in his extraordinary body of films.

How does the PRC's relatively new market-oriented recognition of beauty value affect the circulation of images of female film stars, whose beauty is held in the highest esteem by Chinese and international audiences? How does beauty value and star quality function both within the PRC and outside of it? Acknowledging the difficulties in writing about "attractiveness" within film performances, Alan Lovell and Peter Kramer write, "Even if the importance of physical attractiveness in acting is recognized, there are great difficulties in the way of intelligent discussion. It's an elusive concept."<sup>397</sup> Although beauty is an elusive concept, it is perhaps most visibly recognized and acknowledged in the actors and actresses of cinema and television. These "intimate strangers" are both familiar and strange to us, and their physical presence, even if mediated, seems to captivate us in ways that people in our everyday lives, even loved ones, do not. Case-studies of trans/national Chinese film stars demonstrate how they have managed to captivate international audiences, and specifically how their embodied beauty and presence allows for the imaginative creation of "a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern."<sup>398</sup> Chinese star bodies become sights/sites of aspirational beauty embodiment and modern lifestyle within trans/national screen cultures.

#### Gong Li: The PRC's first transnational female film star

The conflict between Gong Li's natural physiognomy and her embodied performances creates a specific and particular star charisma, which this section explores in terms of the sensory engagement provoked by her star body. Adapting Max Weber's political concept of "charisma" to the star body, Richard Dyer contends that, "charismatic appeal is effective especially when the

---

<sup>397</sup> Alan Lovell and Peter Kramer, eds., *Screen Acting* (London: Routledge, 1999), 7.

<sup>398</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

social order is uncertain, unstable and ambiguous.”<sup>399</sup> Gong’s rise to stardom correlates with China’s political and social instability during what Chinese academics have called the “post new-era,” the period immediately following the 1980s Deng era of reform and opening, a time of radical economic and social change. Gong’s own apparent corporeal ambiguity, her “soft” and traditionally beautiful exterior paired with a seemingly “hard” interior produces a dialectic that resonates with the contemporaneous, contradictory politics of a new market economy with Chinese socialist characteristics. Moreover, Gong embodies the symbolic break with China’s past on two different fronts: the ideological front related to the androgynous body politics under Mao and especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and the aesthetic front related to traditional conceptions of feminine grace and beauty—even as her physical beauty reinforces some aspects of traditional Chinese beauty aesthetics. The total sensory engagement with Gong’s face and body, however, demonstrates how she nevertheless became the ideal performer to retrospectively embody traditional, rural Chinese culture and society in cinema.

On the Chinese website *Baidu* (China’s equivalent to Wikipedia), the entry on Gong states that among Chinese female stars, she has achieved the highest achievements in world cinema in terms of status and influence.<sup>400</sup> A summary of the star’s achievements notes multiple “firsts” for the actress; she was the first Chinese actor ever to grace the cover of U.S.’s *TIME* magazine; the first and only Chinese actor who has won acting awards at the three major European film festivals (Berlin, Cannes, and Venice); and the first to be included in *People* magazine’s list of 50 most beautiful people in the world. Many of these “firsts” are achievements validated by the West, securing the actress’s international star cache vis-à-vis her body (and

---

<sup>399</sup> Richard Dyer, "Charisma," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 59.

<sup>400</sup> "功利 (Gong Li)," *Baidu*,

<http://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%B7%A9%E4%BF%90?fr=aladdin>

body of work) as symbols of China's post-Mao participation in global aesthetics. Best known for her roles in Fifth Generation films directed by Zhang Yimou in the late 1980s and '90s including *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990), *To Live* (1994), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), and *Shanghai Triad* (1995), Gong is as much credited for having brought Chinese cinema to the world as is Zhang, who discovered the actress while she was a third-year drama student at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. Dealing with sensitive politics, three of Zhang and Gong's films were reportedly banned in China (*Ju Dou*; *Raise the Red Lantern*; *To Live*).<sup>401</sup> Gong is also credited for having introduced Chinese glamour to modern-day Western audiences, or as *Baidu* states, for "conveying the Asian woman's grace," a pan-Asian claim speaking as much to Gong's widespread influence as to neocolonialist beauty politics.<sup>402</sup> In her essay on mainland Chinese and Hong Kong actresses, Bérénice Reynaud argues that what makes Gong remarkable is, "her ability to signify Chineseness, femininity and mystery outside her own culture."<sup>403</sup> Gong's transcendently beautiful face, repeatedly fetishized by Zhang's close-up lens in her early career, became the first major face of mainland Chinese stardom and the first face of mainland Chinese cosmopolitanism in the post-Mao era.

Gong's public appeal also has much to do with her traditional femininity and hard work ethic, qualities which still have a stronghold in contemporary Chinese values. She is reported to

---

<sup>401</sup> However, when I recently spoke with State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT's) Deputy Director, Zhang Jianyong, he told me the films were initially permitted for exhibition, then due to *fanying* (reactions) partly from the audience, the films were taken out of theaters. Although this explanation was vague, Zhang did dispute the term *beijin* (banned or forbidden) for these earlier films. Zhang Jianyong, in discussion with the author, November 1, 2012.

<sup>402</sup> The full quote is: "不言自美、妆扮出东方女性的神韵" (Gong Li doesn't say she herself is beautiful, yet she has the ability to convey the Asian woman's grace). "功利 (Gong Li)".

<sup>403</sup> Bérénice Reynaud, "Gong Li and the Glamour of the Chinese Star," *Sight & Sound* 3, no. 8 (1993): 15.



go to her home in Shenyang to ask her mother for advice, “claims to dislike portraying sex sirens, does not watch Western films with female stars, and works practically every day.”<sup>404</sup> She also conveys a certain middle-class domestic sensibility with her reported hobbies (“cooking and watching celebrity biographies”), assuredly shared by many middle and upper-class Chinese women. Despite rumors of her ill-temper and indifference towards journalists, Gong has nevertheless maintained a very positive reputation and her body of work represents an ambivalent and complex romanticism of China’s pre-Communist days in the cinema of the early post-Mao era in Fifth Generation films.

The first celluloid images of Gong appeared in *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1987), the public debut of the 22-year-old actress who captivated Zhang so much that he allegedly spied on Gong for three days before approaching her. Various scholars have since quoted Lu Tonglin’s remarks about how Mo Yan’s novel and Zhang’s adaptation of *Red Sorghum* have rendered the female body into a “stage and not an agent,” upon which masculine authority and violence plays out (first the violence of rape, then the violence of the Japanese occupation).<sup>405</sup> However, in Gong, we also see an active and strong character, whose responsive face has the ability to simultaneously convey pain and erotic desire. Gong’s face is distinctly Han Chinese with flat cheekbones, small upturned eyes, and a small roundish mouth. The red palanquin that holds the actress in the film’s first long sequence wherein her character is being carried to her pre-arranged marriage ceremony has the effect of a diffused light filter, flattening out the shadows on her face, allowing the spectators to gaze upon her features as if in broad two-dimensional strokes: the extraordinarily wide distance between her eyebrows and eyes, large high-set ears, and

---

<sup>404</sup> "功利 (Gong Li)."

<sup>405</sup> Lu Tonglin, *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism & Oppositional Politics: Contemporary Chinese Experimental Fiction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 71.

downturned full lips, parting occasionally to reveal the-then uneven corn-kerneled teeth, which were soon fixed and straightened to meet Hollywood standards of beauty before she became the first Chinese star to be photographed for a Western fashion magazine (*Elle* magazine). The frontal view of Gong is the most visually pleasing, as the space beneath her cheeks is concave and does not give her face a strong profile image. Moreover Zhang, having begun his film career as a cinematographer, realized how to fully showcase Gong's beauty in a new light. Preferring to bathe her in the color red, Zhang distinctly uses this technique in both *Red Sorghum* and *Raise the Red Lantern* to arouse "sensory excitement" and encourage "unrestrained lust for life."<sup>406</sup>

What are the kinds of "sensory excitement" and peculiar, intoxicating qualities provoked by visual contact with Gong's face and body? Gong's best acting is conveyed through the use of her distinctly high-set eyebrows paired with the expressive yet tense movements of her mouth, often parted to convey fear, anticipation, and erotic feeling (sometimes all three at once). Gong's facial features accord with *some* traditional aesthetics of Chinese beauty, possessing "narrow eyes" with "bright irisies," small mouth like a "peach blossom," and thick "moth-feeler" eyebrows.<sup>407</sup> However, Zhang himself has stated that he chose Gong for the role, not because of her beauty, but because of her *weidao*, translated roughly as flavor, taste or smell but referring to

---

<sup>406</sup> Zhang says he uses the color red because, "We Chinese have been too moderate, too reserved... the boundless red of sorghum fields arouses sensory excitement... it encourages unrestrained lust for life." I would also add that, along with other of Zhang's techniques, it also conveyed his own unrestrained lust for the actress herself with whom he subsequently and simultaneously had an eight-year working relationship and love affair. As Vincent Brook argues, many of Zhang's cinematic techniques reveal an intersection of the "biographical and the ideological," especially in regards to his then-scandalous relationship with fifteen-year younger, Gong Li. Vincent Brook, "To Live and Dye in China: The Personal and the Political in Zhang Yimou's *Judou*," *CineAction* (Winter 2003): 21.

<sup>407</sup> For more on classical and traditional Chinese beauty standards as depicted in art and literature, see Cho Kyo, *The Search for the Beautiful Woman in China and Japan: A Cultural History of Japanese and Chinese Beauty* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

a person's embodiment in terms of charm and taste.<sup>408</sup> As Man has pointed out in her study of feminine beauty in classical Confucian and Taoist texts, "it is the vitality of the body that counts, the sensuous qualities and curve of which must be perceived by the integration of all our senses," beauty should be perceived holistically through a total engagement of the senses.<sup>409</sup>

How do mainland Chinese people engage with Gong's sensorial beauty? In mainland Chinese scholar Zhang Caihong's book-length investigation, *Body Politics: Analysis of a hundred years of Chinese female film stars* (*Shengti Zhengzhi: Bainian zhongguo dianying nümingxing yanjiu*), Zhang argues that Gong is *not* beautiful in terms of the aesthetic beauty that defined Chinese traditional beauty in the way of the dynastic beauties. However, like filmmaker Zhang, the scholar insists that she possesses *xiangtu qi'en* (an earthy, native soil-like vitality), and what I would call a "visual fragrance," in contrast to Koichi Iwabuchi's concept of the "culturally odorless" Japanese export product intended for global consumption.<sup>410</sup> Thus Gong convincingly plays the character of a rural peasant wife and mother or feudal bride, but her performances as a modern woman in a city setting, for instance in *Operation Cougar* (Yang Fengliang and Zhang Yimou, 1989), *Chinese Box* (Wayne Wang, 1997), or more recently in the Chinese adaptation of *What Women Want* (Daming Chen, 2011), simply fail to capture the same kind of critical acclaim and public attention. According to one of China's own leading star studies scholars, Chen Xiaoyun, Gong became a "visual representation of the traditional Orient"

---

<sup>408</sup> Zhang Caihong, *身体政治：百年中国电影女明星研究* (Body Politics: Analysis of a Hundred Years of Chinese Female Film Stars) (Beijing, China: *Zhongguo guangbodianshi chubanshe* [China Broadcast and Television Publishing Society], 2011), 228.

<sup>409</sup> Man, "Female Bodily Aesthetics, Politics, and Feminine Ideals of Beauty in China," 170.

<sup>410</sup> See Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

through Zhang's cinematic styling.<sup>411</sup> Chen argues that although Zhang's strong use of symbolism might have theoretically transformed any East Asian woman into a kind of Orientalist representation ripe for Western consumption, he believes that the *qizhi zai tade guzili* (the innate qualities in her bones), makes Gong both "very China" and a compelling Orientalist fantasy of traditional China able to provoke nostalgia and longing from the Chinese public.<sup>412</sup> The notion of abject-ification discussed earlier is here deployed in a positive way. The body's interior (Gong's bones) give her the bodily structure with which to embody the ideal fantasy of China's feudal past.

Although most of Gong's notable film roles are those of suffering women, inspiring some like Rey Chow to argue that, in the hands of a filmmaker like Zhang, "women's stories...are a means for putting on display both the glorious and barbarous aspects of Chinese culture," Gong's performances reveal a strength in suffering and political powerlessness, which many Chinese film scholars have allegorically analyzed as a post-Mao China's narratives about Cultural Revolutionary trauma.<sup>413</sup> From Gong's lazy bravado playing quick-witted, hypersexual women, to the emotionally wrought wives and mothers, her characters' behavior and mannerisms in these films are often anything but helpless. From her languid, arrogant strut in *Shanghai Triad* (Zhang Yimou, 1995) to her composed haughtiness towards men and women alike in films like *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang Yimou, 1991) and *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Rob Marshall, 2005), Gong does not convey the "relaxed and elegant bodily gestures" and "gentle behaviors" traditionally revered

---

<sup>411</sup> Chen Xiaoyun, *中国电影明星研究编辑* (Analysis of Chinese Film Stars) (Beijing, China: 中国电影出版社 (China Cinema Press), 2012).

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>413</sup> Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 213. Gong herself is also quick to assert that women's condition has changed in China, disassociating herself from the feudal characters she often played.

in the temperament of beautiful Chinese women.<sup>414</sup> Zhang's own impression of the actress was that she was "*hen shou* (very skinny), *qingxiu* (delicate and pretty), *congming* (smart), had eyes with a highly expressive quality," but that she was not suitable for the role of Jiu-er in *Red Sorghum*.<sup>415</sup> It was only after a period of getting to know Gong that Zhang realized, "although her outer appearance was pure and simple, not showy or overstated at all, her inner spirit and personality had a kind of *pola* (bold and forceful quality) that could be outwardly expressed."<sup>416</sup> Meanwhile, the Shandong-born Gong describes herself as being "very China, very Northern," suggesting that she is a stereotypical Northern Chinese woman—blunt, direct, and masculine. Even as Gong's surface appearance accords with Chinese beauty standards, the expression of her bold and forceful personality creates an intense charisma based on contradiction of interior and exterior.

We congruently touch, taste, and smell while seeing and hearing a film. We also desire cinematic figures, not only through scopophilic engagement but also because we can "sense" what they feel/smell/taste like. By choosing Gong for her *weidao*, Zhang recognized that Gong's particular charisma is one that engages a sensuous spectatorship in accordance with traditional Chinese frameworks of beauty. Gong's body not only produces a fragrant image of earthiness, but like her namesake, *Gong* (secure and solid), the actress stands at 5'5", and is much taller and more curvaceous than most other popular Chinese actresses. Her body seemingly carries with it a tactile weightiness and sense of gravity that is both grounded on earth and able to resist both physical and other types of pressure.

For instance, in *Red Sorghum*, on the way to her wedding, Jiu-er's bridal palanquin is

---

<sup>414</sup> Man, "Female Bodily Aesthetics, Politics, and Feminine Ideals of Beauty in China," 170.

<sup>415</sup> Chen, *中国电影明星研究编辑* (Analysis of Chinese Film Stars), 213.

<sup>416</sup> The Chinese quotation is, "她在外表上很纯，不张扬、不夸张，但内心和性格里却有一种泼辣可以表达出来，这样在戏里出现会更好。"

raided by a bandit who intends to rape her. After the bandit removes her red veil, a close-up of her stoic face is followed by a hard cut to a close-up shot of her large right foot, which the bandit impulsively grabs and caresses. She looks defiantly at the bandit, and then, inexplicably unafraid, she smiles at his brutish behavior. Zhang Caihong argues that this cinematic moment contains within it the explosive power to overturn traditional notions of female beauty, specifically of the aforementioned small, bound “golden lotus” feet that defined desirable femininity in China for nearly ten centuries. He contends that this shot powerfully conveys the erotic sensuality of a woman from the part of her body most connected with the earth, and the site/sight of China’s most extreme and long-lasting bodily modification in the name of feminine beauty. Furthermore, the crosscutting between Gong’s face and foot collapses the two principal bodily sites/sights upon which femininity and beauty have been judged in Chinese beauty history. Zhang argues that Gong was the first film star to convey *bodily* feminine beauty, both within her film roles as well as through her red carpet fashion, which typically consists of a variation on the *qipao*, a tight and long dress first made fashionable in the 1920’s by the wealthy and upper-class Shanghainese.<sup>417</sup>

Gong’s self-stylization often draws attention to her ample bosom, an ideologically contested area of the Chinese female body. Breast-binding was practiced in feudal China and then again during the 1950s and 1960. A short-lived “natural breasts movement” in the 1920s discouraged the practice of tightly wrapping breasts up in order to prevent full development, however, the ideal de-sexed militaristic body re-emerged with Mao’s revolution of China. My mother, who was an adolescent during the 1960s, grew up believing that *rufang* (breasts) were

---

<sup>417</sup> Because of the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Shanghai in the 1920s, wealthy women fashioned themselves upon trans/national beauty standards and aesthetic tastes decades before the rest of China.

ugly, and that revealing them would be shameful and even criminal. She told me that she even made *qidao de yuanwang* (prayers of wishes) to wish that she never grew big breasts. Moreover, bras were made in the “bando” style rather than the cup fashion in order to flatten breasts under layers of baggy clothing. One of my mother’s most vivid memories from her teenage years was when a young man commented to her and her female friends that he was baffled that women used to have two mounds on their chest but now only appeared to have one large mound. Upon hearing this false revelation, my mother gleefully reminisced that she “laughed until she peed her pants.”<sup>418</sup>

In contrast to the historical perception of breasts as shameful, in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, web articles, such as one entitled “How Big is Gong Li’s Bust?” proudly places Gong’s breasts on display, reflecting the changing social mores and carnal valuation on women’s breasts.<sup>419</sup> Beginning after the political reform of the 1980s, breasts began to be perceived as “associated with the West, civilization, modernity, and naturalness.”<sup>420</sup> Nowadays, the exposure of breasts and cleavage, which is referred in half-jest as *shiyexian* (“career line,” as in palmistry) in popular vernacular, is encouraged by popular media and advertisements as a way for young women to become successful, as in another trendy online neologism, *yougou bihuo* (“with cleavage comes popularity”). The analogy between reading lines in palmistry and reading cleavage lines indicate the extent to which there is a symbolic connection between hands, breasts, and bodies. These holistic concepts of the body indicate the extent to which bodies are read as signs in the cultural physiognomic Chinese context.

---

<sup>418</sup> Yumei Wu, in discussion with the author, July 7, 2013.

<sup>419</sup> “巩俐的胸围究竟有多大? (How Big is Gong Li’s Bust?),” *Netease Women*, November 1, 2011, <http://lady.163.com/09/1101/06/5N0V1VID00263SHG.html>.

<sup>420</sup> Perry Johansson, “White Skin, Large Breasts Chinese Beauty Product Advertising as Cultural Discourse,” *China Information* 13, no. 2-3 (1998): 71.

In 2015, Gong is 49 years old, and her brand of earthy sensuality has been sublimated into a childless maternal vision. Despite not having children of her own, Gong previously expressed in interviews that she would like to give birth to a child but has been too busy.<sup>421</sup> No longer a *nennü* but a *shunü*, to use Jie Yang's observation on the discursive constructions of the "tender" young woman (*nennü*) and the "ripe" older woman (*shunü*) in Chinese popular culture, Gong's star image has adapted according to the implicit danger that her mature beauty will crest past "ripe" into "rotten," her earthy *weidao* no longer able to be *consumed*. As the aforementioned web article focusing on Gong's breasts illustrate, "the gaze" on Gong, once intently fixated on her face through Zhang's camera lens, has in more recent years shifted downwards towards her breasts, a highly provocative site that suggests erotic sexuality and procreative fecundity, provoking entangled affects from its viewers. In Perry Johansson's study on beauty product magazine advertisements in 1990s China, he suggests that, "What we see in [bust enhancer] ads is actually an internalization or a destabilization of the male gaze, expressing a female narcissistic pleasure of body-as-self."<sup>422</sup> Proudly displaying her breasts in tight *qipao* on the red carpet, Gong represents the new female beauty consumer of China's 21<sup>st</sup>-century, one who has internalized the male gaze and demonstrates a female narcissistic pleasure of body-as-self. Moreover, Gong's on and off-screen body-revealing gestures, or "techniques of the body" to use Marcel Mauss' term, accords with the turn in consumer consciousness.<sup>423</sup> Underlying this new consciousness is a kind of neoliberal awakening believing that, "on disposing of traditional Chinese morality when it comes to the beautification of their bodies, Chinese women will

---

<sup>421</sup> "率真巩俐：我还是想生个孩子 (Outspoken Gong Li: I Still Want to Give Birth to a Child)," *Sina.com*, October 18, 2003, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/2003-10-18/1401216784.html>.

<sup>422</sup> "White Skin, Large Breasts Chinese Beauty Product Advertising as Cultural Discourse," 73-74.

<sup>423</sup> Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1973).



liberate their ‘true selves.’”<sup>424</sup>

Zhang Ziyi: Beautifying modernity and embodying modern anxiety

In contrast with Gong’s sensuous star image and contradictory charisma, Zhang Ziyi’s star body provokes anxiety from PRC Chinese audiences. Similar to Tang Wei (discussed in Chapter One), Zhang’s provocative and hypervisible sexuality paired with a perceived hyper-ambitiousness provoke a range of sensorial discomforts and un-easy engagements.

As a child, Zhang Ziyi was sent to learn dance in order to strengthen her small and seemingly weak body. Discovered by Zhang Yimou at the Central Academy of Drama as a student, and cast in her first onscreen film role in the 1999 film *Wode fuqin muqin* (The Road Home), Zhang’s screen debut took place a decade after Gong’s film debut. Nicknamed “Little Gong Li” because of her facial likeness to Gong and having also started her career as a “Mou” Girl (*mou nülang*), Zhang would eventually replace her progenitor as China’s most internationally recognizable female star, setting new standards for global Chinese female stardom and ambition. In order to understand Zhang’s fulfillment of the double-meaning of *mou*, which refers both to Zhang Yimou and which literally means “scheming or seeking,” it is important however to consider her differentiated embodiment from the female film stars who

---

<sup>424</sup> The relevant passage from which this argument is derived comes from *Nuyou* (Female friend) magazine from 1995. Qtd. in Johansson, "White Skin, Large Breasts Chinese Beauty Product Advertising as Cultural Discourse," 76.

The passage in full:

Whether it is in the sunlight of the day  
Or the floating shadows of the night,  
In those moments that belong to yourself,  
Take off your traditional Chinese skirt (*hua chang*).  
Let your true self (*zhenshide ziwo*)  
Roam freely  
On the vast earth.  
An intoxicating woman:  
The ripe logic of beauty.

came before her and rose to fame throughout the 1980s and 1990s, which includes actresses such as Joan Chen, Ning Jing, Xu Qing, and Xu Fan.

Unlike Gong's perceived down-to-earth nature and earthy body, Zhang, like her namesake, *Ziyi* (child of harmony and pleasure), conveys a sense of ethereality and ephemerality in her thin and small body. Spectacularized in Ang Lee's weightless bamboo forest *wu xia* sequence in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), Zhang's transient body drifts, sways, and glides in a manner contrary to Gong's grounded physicality, and it is precisely Zhang's rootlessness and unstable relationship with the ground that separates her from Gong and other female stars. In fact Zhang was even controversially quoted in 2000 in an article stating that although she recognizes why the public would associate her with Gong Li and Zhang Yimou, the young actress would eventually *tuoli tamen* (separate herself from them)—not only suggesting that her success and fame need not piggyback off of China's most famous star-and-director-team of the post-Mao era, but that she may one day exceed them.<sup>425</sup> Interpreted by Chinese audiences as an implicitly arrogant statement, Zhang's words were nevertheless prophetic. In the next decade, Zhang would embody both post-WTO China's cosmopolitan ideal and also the cultural embodiment of *yexin*, ambitiousness that is often discussed with ambivalence and anxiety, as in the ancient proverb *langziyexin*, a warning that “ambitiousness is a ruthless quality belonging to rapacious wolves.”

In an interview I conducted with the aforementioned scholar Chen, he explained that while most Chinese people perceive Gong as *zhongcheng* (loyal and faithful) because of her long-term collaboration with Zhang Yimou, Zhang Ziyi is perceived as a promiscuous

---

<sup>425</sup> Zhang, *身体政治：百年中国电影女明星研究* (Body Politics: Analysis of a Hundred Years of Chinese Female Film Stars, 230.

personality by academics and the public alike.<sup>426</sup> Chen remarked that because she has worked with various directors and has become intimately involved with many different romantic partners in the public eye, Zhang Ziyi is not perceived to be a loyal person. Chen's rhetoric was telling: "Gong Li's loyalty is very strong, *whether it's towards performance or to a man,*" suggesting that public performance and sexual performance are unconsciously linked, a notion earlier explored in Chapter One.

Although similar to Gong in facial bone structure, unlike Gong's tawny skin-tone, Zhang's *bai* (white) skin conforms to the aesthetics of China's beauty standards, both past and present. Although certain Anglo-European beauty aesthetics have become absorbed into China's beauty culture (big breasts, for example), coveting of white or pale skin, in fact, pre-dates Western influence. Cho Kyo's investigation into the practices of traditional Chinese and Japanese beauty practices reveal an "adoration of white skin," which may have begun as early as 1100 BCE when women began using powder on their faces as well as bosoms, according to *Shiwu jiyuan* (The Origins of Things) written by Gao Cheng in the Song period (960-1279).<sup>427</sup> Classical poetry also reveals a fondness towards skin as white as snow, as Shi Jianwu's poem "Viewing a Beauty" (780-861) reveals: "Long keeps the white snow present before the breast."<sup>428</sup> Moreover, pale skin was associated with aristocracy and refinement, as it indicated that the bearer did not laboriously toil in the sun, as did peasants and farmers. This ancient and classical beauty preference, however, would be eschewed for the "dark-tanned face, symbolic of

---

<sup>426</sup> Chen Xiaoyun, in discussion with the author, November 10, 2012.

<sup>427</sup> Kyo, *The Search for the Beautiful Woman in China and Japan: A Cultural History of Japanese and Chinese Beauty*.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

the peasants and workers...the politically correct ideal” during the Mao era.<sup>429</sup> Nevertheless, in the post-Mao era, in tandem with the accelerated return of femininity, fondness for fair skin has also returned to mark the middle-class, urban body as sophisticated, desirable, and beautiful. Skin whitening cosmetics from Japan began to infiltrate the Chinese market in the 1990s, inspiring competing and conflicting discourses surrounding white skin, and racialized notions of beauty. One particularly self-contradictory magazine editorial from 1994 reveals the implicit bias towards white skin and the perception of dark skin as a deficiency in terms of beauty, charm, and attractiveness:

There are no fixed rules to define black as ugly and white as pretty. Ideals like these are subject to change. In our country we have a popular saying, “a white skin overshadows three ugly qualities,” but we also share an appreciation for “dark beauty” (*heiliao*). This is exactly the same as in the rest of the world. There are different races of people: white, yellow, red, brown, and black. Among every race there are those who are beautiful and those who are ugly. You cannot possibly say that all white people are beautiful! [...] To date, there are still no medicines or cosmetics that can permanently change dark skin into white. But this does not mean that dark-skinned women are destined to remain unable to become beautiful. Dark girls can make themselves charming and attractive in other ways. They can, for example exercise their bodies to become healthy and good-looking.<sup>430</sup>

---

<sup>429</sup> Johansson, "White Skin, Large Breasts Chinese Beauty Product Advertising as Cultural Discourse," 61.

<sup>430</sup> Zhou Fanlin, "*Hei fuse ren de meihua jiqiao*" (Beauty Techniques for Dark-Skinned People), *Nuyou* (Female Friend) qtd. in Johansson, 63.

Not only are the semiotics of white skin related to ancient Chinese class distinction, the figure of the white woman in post-Mao China is also an embodied fixture of “imagined cosmopolitanism,” invoking desires to possess “the wealth, power, and civility of whiteness.”<sup>431</sup> Thus the pamphlet that I received during my spa visits, which never included any Chinese women but was always decorated with images of Caucasian models, was, in part, an attempt to validate the spa’s own modern, cosmopolitan self-image. Chinese cosmetic efforts to *look white* are also successful in securing a certain “position of privilege and power” in Chinese society that Richard Dyer argues is conferred upon white people in the West.<sup>432</sup> For instance, the popular tautological phrase *baifumei* (white, rich, beautiful) has entered the popular lexicon to describe the most desirable and ideal female candidate for marriage, a description Zhang certainly fulfills.<sup>433</sup>

Emerging from the consumerist beauty culture of the late 1990s, Zhang debuted in Zhang Yimou’s 1999 film, *Wode fuqin muqin* (The Road Home). Her fair, adolescent face left an indelible impression of purity and innocence, as bereft of the suntan her rural peasant character would likely had as the film was of overt political content—despite its flashback setting to be the highly politically-charged 1950s and the film’s gestures to the sensitive subject of the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, a movement engineered to persecute and purge hundreds of thousands of “rightists” who criticized the Maoist regime. In 2000, on Zhang Yimou’s recommendation, Ang Lee cast Zhang in the aforementioned immensely successful, trans/national co-production, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* wherein she played a defiant and independent young aristocrat, opposite to her debut role as a sweet, naïve girl in *The Road Home*. A “symbolic act of diasporic return” to mainland Chinese locations and cultural traditions for

---

<sup>431</sup> Louisa Schein, “The Consumption of Color and the Politics of White Skin in Post-Mao China,” *Social Text* (1994): 144.

<sup>432</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 9.

<sup>433</sup> The discursive male counterpart is *gaofushuai* (tall, rich, handsome).

filmmaker Lee (whose family immigrated from the PRC to Taiwan), the film also inversely catapulted Zhang (the only principal actor from mainland China) into the Chinese diasporic and Sinophone imaginary.<sup>434</sup> Since the enormous worldwide success of *Crouching Tiger* (which had dismal box-office numbers in the PRC), Zhang's international film career has maintained its momentum. Pairing again with the director who launched her career, the young actress continued to star in extravagant and sumptuous period dramas and modern *wu xia* (martial arts) films like *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, 2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (Zhang Yimou, 2004), as well as historical dramas like *Purple Butterfly* (Lou Ye, 2003) and diasporic art-films like *2046* (Wang Kar-wai, 2004). She has even starred in Hollywood films such as *Rush Hour 2* (Brett Ratner, 2001) and *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Rob Marshall, 2005), imprinting her presence in the Western imagination as a beautiful, exotic Chinese woman.

Zhang's beauty captivated Western audiences, who until *Crouching Tiger*, was only known to art-house critics and enthusiasts. Consider *Washington Post* writer Stephen Hunter's sensual praise of the actress:

The extraordinary clarity of her beauty....cuts through fog and light and buzz to assert itself. The neck has vasselike grace; the skin must be silk, the face, with its fine porcelain bones, suggests another tiny perfect dynamo, Audrey Hepburn, though intensified by virtue of the Asian DNA information at play throughout.

Who knew they made waists that tiny, limbs that smooth?<sup>435</sup>

Hunter's description of the tactility of Zhang's beauty is further objectified by his use of the article "the": "*the neck*" and its "vasselike grace" and *the skin* as soft as "silk." Both objectifying

---

<sup>434</sup> Christina Klein, "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: A Diasporic Reading," *Cinema Journal* 43, No. 4, Summer 2004, 22.

<sup>435</sup> Stephen Hunter, "This 'Crouching Tiger' Tames Her Audience," *The Washington Post*, April 23, 2006.

and abject-ifying, Hunter's reduces Zhang's body to immaterial objects (vase, porcelain, silk), and comments on her physical interiority, her "fine porcelain bones." Indeed, the motif of bones continually surfaces in discourses surrounding the Chinese woman's body. Gong's "innate qualities in her bones" (*qizhi zai tade guzili*) made her the perfect embodiment of feudal China, while sexual intercourse with the "soft bones" of traditional Chinese women in Confucian and Taoist texts could energize a man's *qi*. With regard to Zhang, her "fine porcelain bones" are the perfect accompaniment to her silky skin, and the silky hair her *Love for Life* character purchased with her blood (see Chapter Three).

Mentioning Zhang's "tiny" waist and "smooth" limbs, Hunter's description betrays the "haptic" pleasures of star-gazing wherein eyes "function like organs of touch," consequently painting an image of Zhang as a delicate Asian doll who exists to be caressed.<sup>436</sup> Furthermore, aside from the Orientalizing fascination Hunter holds for Zhang, such a poetic tribute attesting to the actress's sublime beauty reaffirms Louis Althusser's notion of the "always-already" subject, who "even before he is born, is nevertheless the plain reality, accessible to everyone and not a paradox at all."<sup>437</sup> Zhang is the product of biosocial determinants and culturally determined standards of beauty, standards which those perfect, small-boned actresses like Audrey Hepburn have always-already set in motion through international stardom with their size ("tiny"), value ("perfect"), and energy ("dynamo"). Transnational references to Western stars are not uncommon with marketing Chinese film stars, a discursive phenomenon that illustrates the dialogic value of feminine beauty as a standard of global modernization.

---

<sup>436</sup> Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>437</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 119.

As for self-branding, Zhang has fashioned a distinctly high-brow and glamorous persona through her carefully curated global endorsements and advertising campaigns of luxury brands like Omega watches, Mercedes-Benz and Emporio Armani. In contrast, Gong who was once the face of L’Oreal in China in 1997, has in more recent years settled into the earthy and sensual homebody persona, for instance, endorsing a range of domestic products, including kitchen appliances, scooters, and even a brand of Chinese biscuits. Not only has Zhang achieved a global visibility that has exceeded Gong or any of her contemporaries, her extratextual persona seems uninterested in representing ordinary Chinese women, who simply cannot afford the products she advertises. Arjun Appadurai writes about the regime of fashion, “the body is the site for the inscription of a generalized desire to consume in the context of the aesthetic of ephemerality.”<sup>438</sup> The ephemeral aesthetic is found in the “tension between nostalgia and fantasy, where the present is represented as it were already past.”<sup>439</sup> In fashion, the pleasure in the ephemeral is evinced by the rapidly-changing seasonal and yearly aesthetic trends continually marketed by the industry.

Zhang’s adorned body represents the pleasures of global fashion consumption, as ephemeral and fleeting as the fashion-industrial complex necessitates. She is a high-fashion chameleon. Thus while Gong represents the *local* and material realities of such middle-class women through her commercial endorsements, Zhang’s fantastic commercial persona represents both their fantasy as well as China’s neoliberal *global* fantasy of First World cosmopolitanism, illustrating the truism that “fashion advertising shows us our own desires, plays on our sense of

---

<sup>438</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 84.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.



lack, invites us to imagine possible future selves.”<sup>440</sup> Moreover, “the very idea of ‘taste’ to signify discernment is already flirting with distaste by invoking the “lower senses” (smell and taste).”<sup>441</sup> As such, the sublimation of Zhang’s luxury *tastes* in watches, cars, and fashion into the “higher sense” of visual pleasure manufactured in her highly-stylized advertisement campaigns elevates her body as a symbol of odorless globalization, in stark contrast to the “lower sense” appeal of Gong’s low-end, albeit fragrant, advertisements promising home-cooked meals and biscuits. Ultimately, however, it is Zhang’s lack of a native and local *weidao*, reflecting the dilemma of China’s increasing “odorless” globalization that is responsible for the star’s simultaneous *international* appeal and *domestic* castigation.

Gary Xu argues that *Newsweek*’s May 2005 cover endorsement of Zhang as “the face of a new China” illustrates that “Zhang’s star power and beauty” might embody the merging of old and new China, marking her as both “the quintessential Oriental woman” and a “representative of the turn-of-the-millennium generation: youthful, energetic, confident, cosmopolitan, and entrepreneurial.”<sup>442</sup> However, what Xu overlooks in his optimistic and hopeful interpretation of the magazine cover is the domestic skepticism and suspicion towards the star’s apparently hyper-ambitious career. Her professional life has been ridden with much controversy, particularly as much of her ambition and behavior off-screen has been directed towards satisfying what many people believe is the Western gaze. A group of Zhang’s online critics, self-proclaimed as the *Zhang Hei* (Zhang Black), has continued to attack the star throughout her scandal-speckled career, and an anxious and critical public opinion of Zhang quickly accumulated as each scandal

---

<sup>440</sup> Eugénie Shinkle, "Uneasy Bodies: Affect, Embodied Perception and Contemporary Fashion Photography," in *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, ed. Bettina Papanburg and Marta Zarzycka (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2013), 85.

<sup>441</sup> Highmore, "Bitter after Taste," 124.

<sup>442</sup> Gary G. Xu, *Sinascapes: Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 1-2.

further tarnished her career.<sup>443</sup> To further make sense of Zhang's arousal of anxiety through her star body, a brief description of the scandals involving the actress with the most traction follows.

In 2005, the American film production *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Marshall) starring Zhang in the lead role was released internationally. It was banned in China because SARFT decided the film was too "complicated and sensitive" for the Chinese public, particularly on the heels of 2005 protests over the perceived downplaying of Japan's occupation of China in Japanese history textbooks.<sup>444</sup> Nevertheless, although the Chinese public could not officially watch the film in theaters, pirated DVDs flooded into the underground market, and netizens took to the Internet to criticize the all-Chinese leading female cast (which also included Gong) for unpatriotically playing Japanese geishas. Saving their strongest criticisms for Zhang, one netizen, for instance, posted that she should be "deprived of Chinese citizenship," and another wrote that the lead actress "deserves to be chopped up into a thousand bits" (referring to the Chinese execution practice, *lingchi*, reserved for the most heinous of criminals and traitors until its ban in 1905).<sup>445</sup> Not only do these comments suggest that Zhang is a national traitor, but the latter comment provokes an image that is both grotesque, and conjuring of cannibalism and food preparation, particularly as the practice of *lingchi* involved butchering the victim into an "incoherent scattering of body parts."<sup>446</sup>

Song Hwee Lim argues that the "passing" of Chinese actresses as Japanese geishas speaking English represents a kind of "reterritorialisation" of transnational agency and "right to

---

<sup>443</sup> Zhang, *身体政治：百年中国电影女明星研究* (Body Politics: Analysis of a Hundred Years of Chinese Female Film Stars), 230.

<sup>444</sup> Song Hwee Lim, "Is the Trans-in Transnational the Trans- in Transgender?," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 5, no. 1 (2007): 45.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

<sup>446</sup> Timothy Brook, Jérôme Bourgon, and Gregory Blue, *Death by a Thousand Cuts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 1.

penetration—of both markets and sex.”<sup>447</sup> However, mainland Chinese audiences did not uniformly celebrate the actresses’ transnational agency. On the popular user-generated forum *Douban.com* (with over 54 million registered users), more than 11,000 comments are posted about *Memoirs of a Geisha* with users giving the film a cumulative score of 6.8/10. Like those found on IMDb, *Douban* users are “refreshing, frank, often impolite, and don't seem to be worried about how they might be perceived by others.”<sup>448</sup> Their public comments offer an important resource for scholars who wish to understand the ways in which films and film stars affectively impact Chinese audiences. For instance, among the criticisms of the film, one comment conveys the affective insecurities surrounding the transnational passing: “Americans filming Japanese culture, leading roles played by Chinese women, (this is) *embarrassing*.”<sup>449</sup> In the film’s most popular *Douban* review (with 495 people finding the review “useful” and 108 replies), the commentator criticizes the *huangdan* (absurd) and *guijue* (treacherous) Japanese sexual practices depicted in the film, and uses the opportunity to condemn Japan as a “delusionary race of people.”<sup>450</sup> By no means singular or exceptional, rather, these two reviews are representative of many criticisms about *Memoirs of a Geisha*, as Lim confirms that, “the Chinese actresses [in *Memoirs*] are seen in some quarters as unpatriotic for choosing to play Japanese geishas,” and Zhang’s “national standing has undoubtedly been dealt a blow as a consequence of this saga.”<sup>451</sup>

Blurred lines between the bodies of actors and their characters are at the base of the

---

<sup>447</sup> Lim, "Is the Trans-in Transnational the Trans- in Transgender?," 48.

<sup>448</sup> Vivian Sobchack, "Why I <3 IMDb," *Film Comment* 49, no. 2 (2013): 40.

<sup>449</sup> 181 cm, user review of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, February 27, 2010, *Douban*, [http://movie.douban.com/subject/1309059/comments?start=84&limit=-20&sort=new\\_score](http://movie.douban.com/subject/1309059/comments?start=84&limit=-20&sort=new_score)

<sup>450</sup> *Xiaoyao shou*, user review of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, July 15, 2007, *Douban*, <http://movie.douban.com/review/1180274/>.

<sup>451</sup> Lim, "Is the Trans-in Transnational the Trans- in Transgender?," 45.

commentators' embarrassment, as this abject boundary-crossing led to confusion and uneasiness. As Vivian Sobchack contends, the actor is perceived as having as many as four bodies (the prepersonal, the personal, the impersonated, and the personified), and it is the confusion of the "impersonated" (the role) and the "personified" (the star image) that creates affective disturbance.<sup>452</sup> The actresses were viewed as not only re-territorializing Japanese-ness through performative embodiment, but also perceived as *being* re-territorialized and re-occupied *by* the Japanese. Given the Second Sino-Japanese and its sensitivities in the present day, any notion of re-occupation, even through performative abstraction is simply unacceptable for many Chinese spectators (as was the case with *Lust, Caution*). When nationalism resurges in the public sphere, visual representation often becomes scapegoated for *acts* of un-patriotic behavior.

In 2009, Zhang created another public stir when she was secretly photographed sunbathing partially nude with then-fiancé Aviv Nevo, an Israeli-American venture capitalist. While some netizens complimented her figure and found the photos to be sexy and charming, many others used vulgar language to demean and accuse her of harming China's moral image. Meanwhile Chinese news outlets used a subtler and more ideologically insidious approach. *Sina.com* (2009), for instance, consulted a Hong Kong behavioral psychologist who claimed that the intimacy between the couple was not of rational people but rather reflected animal behavior lacking in self-awareness.<sup>453</sup> Moreover, judging from Zhang's brightly and diversely-colored

---

<sup>452</sup> Vivian Sobchack, "Being on the Screen: A Phenomenology of Cinematic Flesh, or the Actor's Four Bodies," in *Acting and Performance in Moving Image Culture: Bodies, Screens, Renderings*, ed. Jörg Sternagel, Deborah Levitt, and Dieter Mersch (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2014).

<sup>453</sup> "章子怡陷沙滩门逾 80 张艳照被传上网 (Zhang Ziyi's Beach Door Trap Captured by More Than 80 Amorous Photos Now on Internet)," *Sina.com*, January 6, 2009, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/s/m/2009-01-06/07342329807.shtml>.

toenails, the psychologist further deduced that Zhang's latent desires were "varied" and "colorful" read *perverse*, in nature. Just as palmistry lines and cleavage lines can be analyzed, so too can an actress' choice in toenail polish. Unlike the "odorlessness" of Zhang's luxury persona, one which, like silk and porcelain looks exotic but carries no scent, *Sina.com*'s scathing criticisms of the star became a discursive scent marking of animal lust and fetor, demoting the star's appeal to the "lower sense" of smell, the sense most aligned with "the primitive, erotic and uncontainable—and hence with animals, savages and women."<sup>454</sup> Zhang's evocation of animalistic smell, however, is distinct from Gong's *weidao*, the earthy and sensuous embodied flavor that enabled her to poignantly characterize the poor mistresses and peasants she played in Fifth Generation films. Whereas Zhang's smell is hormonal and reeking of sex, Gong's *weidao* seeps into her extratextual image of an average middle-class housewife who smells faintly of biscuits and home-cooked meals.

A third media scandal followed in 2010 when Zhang misreported the financial donations raised for her 2008 Sichuan earthquake charity, causing many people to believe she had embezzled the money. In fact, she had exaggerated the donations by \$500,000, alleging it was difficult to track down many foreign donations. Most recently, in May 2012, headlines such as "Zhang Ziyi investigated for prostitution" and "Zhang Ziyi Might Be a Hooker, Though Probably Not By Choice" splashed across English-language entertainment news websites.<sup>455</sup> The news stories claimed that the 34-year-old actress was a high-end prostitute who had been

---

<sup>454</sup> "The Dream Olfactory: On Making Scents of Cinema," in *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, ed. Betinna Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2013), 122.

<sup>455</sup> Casey Lee, "Zhang Ziyi Investigated for Prostitution," *Yahoo! News*, May 30, 2012, <https://sg.entertainment.yahoo.com/news/zhang-ziyi-investigated-prostitution-040200059.html>"; Zhang Ziyi Might Be a Hooker, Though Probably Not by Choice, Yeesh," *The Superficial*, May 31, 2012, <http://www.thesuperficial.com/zhang-ziyi-prostitution-china-communist-party-hong-kong-05-2012>.

servicing top Chinese Communist Party government officials for years. The story first appeared on *Boxun.com*, an overseas “alternative” Chinese news website, and the allegations quickly disseminated through international news and tabloid sources. Equally implicated in the story is Bo Xilai, former member of the Central Politburo of the CCP, who is claimed to have paid Zhang a total of a hundred million RMB for ten sessions between 2007 and 2011. In fact, the prostitution scandal, which Zhang has vehemently and angrily denied, constitutes only a small fragment in the complicated narrative of Bo Xilai’s political mire. Nevertheless, the star used her own *Weibo* account (China’s equivalent to Twitter) to repost a 12-minute video of comments that she delivered to backstage press at the annual Chinese Film & Media Awards ceremony about her pursuit of legal justice on the matter. Posting three Weibo comments, an angered Zhang muses that, “although justice may be late, it will come nonetheless,” as her team prepared to sue *Apple Daily*, the Hong Kong newspaper responsible for disseminating the rumors in the greater China region, as well as the US-based website, *Boxun*, responsible for starting the rumors.<sup>456</sup> In 2013, Zhang reached an undisclosed settlement with *Boxun News* and its parent company, China Free Press, Inc., after which *Boxun* issued a public apology on its website and retracted its previous stories.<sup>457</sup>

Taken together, all of these scandals pivot on two foci of Zhang’s power: one, Zhang’s on- and off-screen sexual performances (her sexual capital), and two, her financial misgivings (her economic capital). With public criticisms against Zhang gaining momentum and accusatory power, the third and latest prostitution scandal illustrates how both her sexual and economic capital are perceived as threatening to Chinese audiences. Wolf conjectured in *The Beauty Myth*,

---

<sup>456</sup> Zhang Ziyi Weibo (blog), "Xitu Budui (Rare Earth Forces),"

<http://www.weibo.com/u/1914100420?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=infdomain>.

<sup>457</sup> The Associated Press, "Zhang Ziyi Reaches Settlement with U.S.-Based News Site after Libel Suit," *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 18, 2013.

“the beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance,” and despite Zhang’s physical beauty, her lack of modesty about her body and her hyper-ambitious careerism has rendered her unbeautiful in the eyes of many Chinese, who see these as “un-Chinese” qualities.<sup>458</sup> When I spoke to scholars, professors, and friends in China about Zhang, nearly all of them mentioned these attributes in regards to Zhang’s “un-Chinese” personality. This sentiment is also indicated by the numerous and popular web postings attempting to reveal Zhang’s ugliness. A simple search on Baidu, for instance with the words “Zhang Ziyi ugly (*nankan*) will produce immeasurable posts that scrutinize the star’s body for any defect, however small, with which to degrade Zhang’s star image.

Moreover, all of Zhang’s scandalous capital power is related to a foreign Other. In the first, Zhang’s “trans-gendered [sexual] performance” (Lim’s conceptual term borrowing from the notion of transgender “passing”) in *Memoirs of a Geisha* was primarily intended for Western audiences, her silk Kimono-wrapped body a kind of exotic (pan-Asian) Oriental feast for the eyes.<sup>459</sup> She “passed” as a Japanese woman, but only to Western audiences. In the second scandal, Zhang’s semi-nude beach romp was with her white fiancée, provoking disquietude with their interracial romance and implicitly violating the image of Chinese purity and solidarity. In the third, it was Zhang’s “foreign” friends and benefactors who failed to donate the money as promised; and in the latest prostitution scandal, not only did the story originate overseas in the U.S., it quickly appeared on every major Western news source and garnered more international attention than domestic, as the PRC media strictly censored the details of the scandal. Nevertheless, the fact that a Hong Kong tabloid published the rumors exemplifies Hong Kong’s ambivalence, anxieties and suspicions towards the mainland. Furthermore, Zhang’s aggressive

---

<sup>458</sup> Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*, 14.

<sup>459</sup> Lim, "Is the Trans-in Transnational the Trans- in Transgender?."

response of calling the scandal a “mental masturbation” between *Apple Daily* and *Boxun.com* (a comment later blocked from public view) betrays the “common attitude of cultural defensiveness” that some scholars suggest is a fundamental component of modern Chinese identity, especially as the attack on Zhang was perceived to be coming from the “foreign” Chinese diaspora.<sup>460</sup> In fact, it was Bo Xilai’s own corrupt involvement with foreigners, including a murdered British businessman whose death is now being linked with Bo, that caused his downfall. Although sex, death, and politics is a well-worn equation, the parenthetical objection concerning China’s relationship with the foreign Other implicates both Bo and Zhang in this latest prostitution rumor.

Responsible for China’s “Century of Humiliation,” the foreign Other hovers as an ominous presence in the PRC imagination. Rong Cai’s analysis of Nobel Prize winner Mo Yan’s 1995 novel *Fengru Feitun* (Large Breasts and Full Hips) illuminates how Mo Yan uses sexual politics as a representational strategy to address the anxieties of Chinese selfhood towards the foreign Other. Cai argues that:

...the continual reimagining of the foreign Other proves that the alien Other has never stopped haunting and teasing the Chinese imagination: it is a permanent reference point that makes reflection on and discussion of the national self more meaningful.<sup>461</sup>

As the post-Mao era has been marked with continual political and intellectual discussions of how the PRC should negotiate its national self-identity while simultaneously modernizing along the

---

<sup>460</sup> Gloria Davies, “Should We Worry about Chinese Patriotism,” Harvard University Press Author Forum: Off the Page, May 28, 2008, [http://harvardpress.typepad.com/off\\_the\\_page/2008/05/should-we-worry.html](http://harvardpress.typepad.com/off_the_page/2008/05/should-we-worry.html).

<sup>461</sup> Rong Cai, “Problematizing the Foreign Other: Mother, Father, and the Bastard in Mo Yan’s ‘Large Breasts and Full Hips’,” *Modern China* 29, no. 1 (2003): 112.



path paved by the West, the foreign Other who has been both witness of, and participant in China's past century of humiliation has never ceased to "haunt and tease" the Chinese imagination. From the theatrical import of Hollywood blockbusters to the illegitimate black market circulation of DVDs of Western films and TV shows, to the fictional Western characters that haunt the Chinese literary imagination, there is no shortage of the elusive foreign Other (an identity that includes Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong), whom mainland Chinese people feel simultaneously attracted and apprehensive.

Zhang, however, is in a sense, China's own alien Other, as the occasional self-exiled and glamorous star, often leaving the country to act in foreign films, attend foreign film festivals, or to simply relax on foreign beaches. Cai describes the bastard character in Mo Yan's novel as a "dubious hybridization of the native with the foreign."<sup>462</sup> She adds, however, "Yet the birth of the bastard has improved Mother's position and power in the novel, just as China has undeniably benefited from Westernization."<sup>463</sup> Zhang has also undeniably benefited from the attention paid to her at Western film festivals and by Western critics and audiences. Nevertheless, it is the star's perceived un-Chinese qualities, that is to say, her hyper-ambitiousness, her professional and personal promiscuity, and her international scandals that have turned her celebrity body into a suspicious marker, not of actual prostitution, but of *cultural* prostitution in the Chinese imagination. She has sold her body for global fame, and by metonymic extension, the PRC social body. As the most famous Chinese female film star of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, Zhang embodies little of traditional Chinese values. The confrontational, yet odorless brand of global beauty associated with cosmopolitanism and international luxury seen in Zhang's fashion advertising campaigns seem to strip traditional qualities from the star's body. However, criticisms about Zhang's

---

<sup>462</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

interracial romantic affairs and sexual practices evoke pungent bodily smells of toenails and animal lust. These contradictions in perceptions of Zhang's odorless/smelly body demonstrate that Chinese-ness is not a stable, locatable quality, but rather an interactive and reactive consequence of trans/national and trans/historical forces. Moreover, Zhang's detractors couch their anxieties towards her in carnal and quasi-cannibalistic terms, simultaneously betraying their own performance anxieties towards China's unavoidable cultural miscegenation and "bastardization" on its path of modernization. Many Chinese believe that Zhang is the symbol and standard of China's recent speedy growth, ambivalently and anxiously viewing her prolific and continuing success as affirmation of the persistence of Chinese global ambition and modernization.

## Chapter Four Bibliography

- Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Brook, Timothy, Jérôme Bourgon, and Gregory Blue. *Death by a Thousand Cuts*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Brook, Vincent. "To Live and Dye in China: The Personal and the Political in Zhang Yimou's *Judou*." *CineAction* (Winter 2003): 21.
- Cai, Rong. "Problematizing the Foreign Other: Mother, Father, and the Bastard in Mo Yan's 'Large Breasts and Full Hips'." *Modern China* 29, no. 1 (2003): 108-37.
- Chen, Xiaoyun. in discussion with the author, November 10, 2012.
- . *中国电影明星研究编辑* (Analysis of Chinese Film Stars). Beijing, China: 中国电影出版社 (China Cinema Press), 2012.
- Chow, Rey. *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- Dai, Jinhua. "Gender and Narration." In *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua*, edited by Jing Wang and Tani E. Barlow. New York and London: Verso, 2002.
- Donald, Stephanie Hemelryk. "Tang Wei Sex, the City and the Scapegoat in *Lust, Caution*." *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 4 (2010): 46-68.
- Dyer, Richard. "Charisma." In *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, edited by Christine Gledhill, 58-61. London: Routledge, 1991.
- . *White*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2005.
- Gao, Yunxiang. "Nationalist and Feminist Discourses on Jianmei (Robust Beauty) During China's 'National Crisis' in the 1930s." *Gender & History* 18, no. 3 (2006): 546-73.

- Highmore, Ben. "Bitter after Taste." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 118-38. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Iwabuchi, Koichi. *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Jeffreys, Elaine. *China, Sex and Prostitution*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Johansson, Perry. "White Skin, Large Breasts Chinese Beauty Product Advertising as Cultural Discourse." *China Information* 13, no. 2-3 (1998): 59-84.
- Jones, Geoffrey. *Beauty Imagined: A History of the Global Beauty Industry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Kyo, Cho. *The Search for the Beautiful Woman in China and Japan: A Cultural History of Japanese and Chinese Beauty*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012.
- Lim, Song Hwee. "Is the Trans-in Transnational the Trans- in Transgender?" *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 5, no. 1 (2007): 39-52.
- Lora-Wainwright, Anna. "Fatness and Well-Being: Bodies and the Generation Gap in Contemporary China." In *The Body in Asia*, edited by Bryan S. Turner and Zheng Yangwen, 113-28. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009.
- Lovell, Alan, and Peter Kramer, eds. *Screen Acting*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Lu, Tonglin. *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism & Oppositional Politics: Contemporary Chinese Experimental Fiction*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- MacDonald, Sean. "Li Lili: Acting a Lively Jianmei Type." In *Chinese Film Stars*, edited by Mary Farquhar and Yingjin Zhang, 50-66. New York and London: Routledge, 2010.
- Man, Eva Kit Wah. "Female Bodily Aesthetics, Politics, and Feminine Ideals of Beauty in China." In *Beauty Matters*, edited by Peggy Zeglin Brand, 169-96. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Marks, Laura U. *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Mauss, Marcel. "Techniques of the Body." *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1973): 70-88.
- Miller, Laura. *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006.

- Otis, Eileen. *Markets and Bodies: Women, Service Work, and the Making of Inequality in China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011.
- Reynaud, Berenice. "Gong Li and the Glamour of the Chinese Star." *Sight & Sound* 3, no. 8 (1993): 12-15.
- Schein, Louisa. "The Consumption of Color and the Politics of White Skin in Post-Mao China." *Social Text* (1994): 141-64.
- Shinkle, Eugénie. "Uneasy Bodies: Affect, Embodied Perception and Contemporary Fashion Photography." In *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, edited by Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka, 73-88. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2013.
- Sobchack, Vivian. "Being on the Screen: A Phenomenology of Cinematic Flesh, or the Actor's Four Bodies." In *Acting and Performance in Moving Image Culture: Bodies, Screens, Renderings*, edited by Jörg Sternagel, Deborah Levitt and Dieter Mersch, 429-46. Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2014.
- . "The Dream Olfactory: On Making Scents of Cinema." In *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, edited by Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka, 121-43. London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2013.
- . "Why I <3 IMDb." *Film Comment* 49, no. 2 (2013): 38-40.
- Turner, Christena L. "Locating Footbinding: Variations across Class and Space in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century China." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 10, no. 4 (1997): 444-79.
- Wang, Ban. *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Wilde, Oscar. "The Picture of Dorian Gray." In *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, 1-154. London: Wordsworth Editions, 2007.
- Wissinger, Elizabeth. "Always on Display: Affective Production in the Modeling Industry." *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (2007): 231-60.
- Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*. New York: Random House, 1991.
- Wu, Yumei. Phone conversation, July 7, 2013.
- Xiaojiang, Li. "With What Discourse Do We Reflect on Chinese Women? Thoughts on Transnational Feminism in China." In *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, edited by Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, 261-77. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

- Xu, Gary, and Susan Feiner. "Meinü Jingji/China's Beauty Economy: Buying Looks, Shifting Value, and Changing Place." *Feminist Economics* 13, no. 3-4 (2007): 307-23.
- Xu, Gary G. *Sinascape: Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006.
- Yang, Jie. "Nennü and Shunü: Gender, Body Politics, and the Beauty Economy in China." *Signs* 36, no. 2 (2011): 333-57.
- Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. "From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women's Public Sphere in China." In *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, edited by Mayfair Mei-hui Yang. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Zhang, Caihong. *身体政治：百年中国电影女明星研究* (Body Politics: Analysis of a Hundred Years of Chinese Female Film Stars. Beijing, China: *Zhongguo guangbodianshi chuban she* (China Broadcast and Television Publishing Society), 2011.
- Zhou, Jinghao. "Chinese Prostitution: Consequences and Solutions in the Post-Mao Era." *China: An International Journal* 4, no. 02 (2006): 238-62.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### **Chinese American Actresses and the Un-common Senses of Beauty**

If Gong Li and Zhang Ziyi embody China's past and present for Chinese spectators, what kinds of cultural hermeneutics can be interpreted in the embodiments and performances of Chinese American stars? How might they also author "Chinese-ness" for trans/national audiences? Chinese American women have often been represented in Western media as exotic, hypersexual beings. However, Celine Shimizu and Peter X. Feng's recuperative scholarship of such representations locates productive resistance for both the Asian American performer and the Asian American spectator in media texts.<sup>464</sup> An affective mode of identification emerges through a spectatorship of Lucy Liu and Joan Chen's bodies of work that does not discount but rather *includes* discomfort and unease within its politics of pleasure. This chapter mobilizes the notion of common sense as both cultural system and sensorial-affective complex to analyze Liu and Chen's film and television performances, illustrating that homosocial and homoerotic frameworks are often used to articulate trans/national Chinese-ness in Western media. Liu and Chen's bodies both confound common sense in terms of their unexpected casting in "colorblind roles" in Hollywood films, and provoke the common *sensorium* through which spectators corporeally experience their performances.

When societies bestow titles of beauty upon women, whether in literal ways through pageantry and ceremony or via celebrity status, general consensus is typically assumed. Clifford Geertz conceived of common sense as a cultural system that is commonly believed to be the

---

<sup>464</sup> Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007); Peter X Feng, "Recuperating Suzie Wong: A Fan's Nancy Kwan-Dary," in *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*, ed. Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

“immediate deliverances of experience, not deliberated reflections upon it.”<sup>465</sup> In predominantly Anglo-European societies, Caucasian beauty is naturalized as common sense, and becomes the un-deliberated standards by which all beauty is judged. The totalizing Western perspective on beauty often occludes non-Western conceptions of beauty—what could be considered to be beauty’s un-common sense in the West. If, affectively speaking, common *sense* is that which feels easy and comforting, then it would follow that un-common or non-common sense—precisely by jarring and unsettling common sense—feels uneasy and discomforting, an affective orientation which marks the consumption and politics of identification with beautiful Chinese American actresses. For instance, both in terms of her un-common ethnic looks and the un-common sense to cast Liu in the part of Watson in the American television re-make of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* stories, Liu does not so much *make* sense, but rather challenges it.<sup>466</sup> Beauty is both distinction and universal, exotic and common, anomalous and same. The tension between such polarities generates strong affect, and women like Liu and Chen embody these ambivalences in ways that often make them vulnerable to criticism.

Both actresses have been criticized in the Chinese diaspora for their cinematic and televisual portrayals as exotic, ornamental figures. However, a critical engagement with film and television performances by the Chinese American actresses reveals how they embody enigma, exoticism, and irony. How do their embodied beauty and performances offer crucial imaginative

---

<sup>465</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System," *The Antioch Review* 33, no. 1 (1975): 7. Of course, the resistant and equally-powerful discourse against what many people see as beauty hegemony is the argument that beauty is subjective, the “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” argument.

<sup>466</sup> Thus comments like those made by English actor Martin Freeman (who plays Watson in BBC’s *Sherlock*) calling Lucy Liu “very ugly” and likening her to a “dog” reflect a broader unease and affective distress (which permeates both majoritarian and minoritarian spectatorships) in the encounter with un-common sense. Of course, as Liu is playing his American counterpart, Freeman’s sense of rivalry and threat are also being channeled through these remarks.



points of entry into nostalgic and fantastic “homecomings,” as well as enigmatic and fluid identification points for American spectators? Through the mediated bodily contact with Chinese American performers, American spectators are able to imaginatively inhabit cinematic fantasies of East *and* West.

The emergence of visibility of Chinese American actresses like Chen and Liu produces alternate productions of knowledge and uncommon senses about the condition of Asian American identity. Moreover, the erotic over-investment in Chinese (American) women produces an affective surplus of desire that challenges, in American media productions, the common sense of what it means to be “American.” In *A Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*, Kara Keeling’s investigations into common sense cinematic representations of “the black (figure)” reveal that the black femme “imago” becomes a productive site/sight through which to challenge dominant sexist, racist and homophobic hegemonies.<sup>467</sup> Keeling reinvigorates the field of identity politics by borrowing from Gilles Deleuze’s theories on cinema, burrowing deep inside the visual text in order to unearth “identity as a cinematic phenomenon.”<sup>468</sup> Examining the time-image from the cinematic production of the black figure, Keeling reveals ambidextrous modes of consent and rejection of dominant historical hegemonies that construct common sense cultural knowledge about black Americans. Keeling’s critical innovation suggests that under the thumb of common sense, everyone is a cultural laborer in the image of “the black,” and is therefore responsible for it. The institutional mechanisms of film and TV accumulate “common-sense memory-images,” forming a collective cinematic perception, which in turn informs a collective common sense. Using Gramsci’s

---

<sup>467</sup> Kara Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

optimistic socio-political theories on counterhegemonic force, Keeling also insists that common sense is “the condition of possibility for the emergence of alternate knowledges that are capable of organizing social life and existence in various ways.”<sup>469</sup> Similarly, just as common sense is capable of re-organizing social life and existence, the common sensorium of bodies can provoke new spectatorial positions based on sensational and affective experiences. As a cinematic phenomenon, Chinese American identity goes beyond the visual image, as case-studies of Liu and Chen reveal.

#### Asian American women and their perverse spectatorial pleasures

The emergence of the pan-ethnic term “Asian American women” emerged from the intersectional practices of feminist, civil rights, and anti-imperial movements in the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>470</sup> Consolidating around coastal universities in particular, student collectives and activists strove to “create roles as Asian women” as resistance to “the traditional Asian roles, the white middle-class standards, or the typical Asian women stereotypes in America.”<sup>471</sup> Asian American scholars have long criticized the history of stereotyped images of Asian women in American film and media history and its effects on Asian American women. Marina Heung suggests that the deleterious effects include what she terms “internal colonization,” whereby Asian women not only accept the stereotypes projected unto them as truth, but internalize them so as to transform their own self-image and consciousness of self.<sup>472</sup> Other scholars including Gina Marchetti have written about the ideological implications of white man-Asian woman

---

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>470</sup> For more on the Asian American women’s movement, see Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>471</sup> “Asian Women,” 1971 UC-Berkeley student collective publication, qtd in. *Ibid.*

<sup>472</sup> Marina Heung, “Representing Ourselves: Films and Videos by Asian American/Canadian Women,” in *Feminism, Multiculturalism, and the Media: Global Diversities*, ed. Angharad N. Valdivia (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1995).

heterosexual coupling that often accompanies the cinematic representation of Asian women.<sup>473</sup> However, what may be remiss in these discussions is the attention to the complex affects and pleasures imparted from the images of Asian (American) women and their resistant performances as exotic-erotic beautiful women. In many instances, exotic Chinese beauty becomes an entry point for “homecoming” through which an exotic yet familiar feminine body gestures to the imagined *faraway* as well as the accustomed and domestic *nearby*. Moreover, beauty performance elicits fluid and empowering identifications for American spectators, and it is through *beauty consumption* that spectators are able to construct senses of self and home through the known and unknown.

Within the star discourses that frame popular Asian American film stars like Anna May Wong, Nancy Kwan, Joan Chen, and Lucy Liu, we find a self-narration of awareness and resistance. Their cinematic performances are often played with camp and irony, and their agency is articulated across paratextual discourses, i.e. magazine, newspaper, television, and radio interviews. Feng recuperates the 1960 film *The World of Suzie Wong* (dir. Richard Quine), a film largely regarded as a racist cultural production for its cartoonish depiction of a Chinese hooker with a heart of gold. In fact, Feng suggests that “it is precisely at the intersection of the supposedly monolithic narrative structure of *The World of Suzie Wong* and the structured polysemy of Nancy Kwan’s star discourse that Asian American spectatorial pleasure can be located.”<sup>474</sup> Asian Americans’ spectatorial pleasure towards “bad” representations is grounded in a campy awareness, provoked by the actresses’ self-aware performances. Moreover, the actresses’ agency emerges precisely through their autographic star discourses, constructed

---

<sup>473</sup> Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>474</sup> Feng, "Recuperating Suzie Wong: A Fan's Nancy Kwan-Dary," 41.

through interviews through which they emerge from their character and present their “true selves,” often in contrast to their one-dimensional characters.

Psychoanalytic film theory in the 1970s and 1980s was dominated by the trope of cinema as a mirror.<sup>475</sup> However, these theoretical conceptions on mastery through the mirror and the gaze overlook the *becoming* nature of the gaze as an event. In contrast to the “mirror stage,” the term “looking-glass” is a compound word, which, by definition contains a “pure event”: the act and process of looking. A consideration of the gaze as an event enables a discussion of the pleasurable approximation of self that occurs when viewers are actively looking at, and attempting to identify with representation. As Todd McGowan points out, Lacan suggested that the real pleasure or *jouissance* derived from the gaze is *not* mastery over its specular object at all; rather, it stems from the desire for a point in the Other that resists and eludes domination: a blank spot.<sup>476</sup> In fact, it is the point at which the Other sees the subject, an ever-elusive gaze that is not visible. It is the reason Alice chases the white rabbit down the rabbit hole, as the pleasure in the pursuit is the possible consequence of traumatic *jouissance* through an encounter with the Real.

---

<sup>475</sup> Lacanian film theory, especially popular in the 1970s and ‘80s, rigorously mined another symbolic meaning of the mirror through which to analyze film. 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. 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.

<sup>476</sup> Todd McGowan, "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes," *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 3 (2003).

Like Alice's looking-glass journey, film is a medium always constructed by another's imagination through which we project ourselves.<sup>477</sup> Lewis Carroll's term "looking-glass" opposed to the temporal determinism implied by "mirror stage" is an apt paradigm through which we can analyze how Americans view the cinematic representations of "Chinese (American) women." These representations are suspended in pure becoming, in which contradictory and slippery states co-exist to elude the fixity of common sense and identity politics. The uncommon senses of pleasure that arise in such spectatorship are compounded by the enigmatic performances of actresses like Chen and Liu. I am particularly interested in these actresses, not only because they are two of the most famous and visible Chinese American performers in the contemporary era, but also because both have been criticized in Chinese and Asian diasporas for their fetishistic portrayals of sexy and exotic femme fatales. I will recuperate such portrayals as forms of resistance against the mastery of the gaze, invoking *jouissance* and eliding domination through their performances of indecipherable desires. Moreover, the fluid identifications they elicit are forged through affect, creating an especially intense spectatorial position for Asian American women who are themselves still *becoming*. 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." Such fantasies, desires, and pleasure are important for Asian American women who are still seen as *becoming* American in the larger historical

---

<sup>477</sup> In *The Logic of Sense*, Gilles Deleuze identifies the contestation of Alice's personal identity and loss of her proper name as the definitive adventure in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and its sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). As Alice drinks and eats the substances that enlarge and shrink her body, she is suspended in a state of pure becoming, eluding the present as a fixed quality, and surrendering her self-identity to the verbs ("growing" and "shrinking") that undermine it. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice's curiosity about the world in the mirror's reflection leads her into a distorted parallel universe. After awakening from her elaborate dream, Alice muses that her adventures could have taken place in another character's imagination—a kind of proto-cinematic prophecy.

context.<sup>478</sup> After all, the master narrative of citizenship is contingent upon the passage through gendered, sexualized, and racialized states of transformation. As this chapter reveals, the trans/national performances of Chen and Liu center around articulations of gendered and sexual bodies in non-normative frameworks of assimilation and transformation.

Cinematic and televisual representations of Asian Americans convey the paradoxical state of pure becoming wherein notions of Asian American subjecthood are continually ruptured and rebuilt. Contradictory and paradoxical states, such as those in *Alice of Wonderland*, are co-present in pure becoming wherein surface effects (divorced from causes) and sense-making are intertwined. The surfaces of Asian faces are a type of “floating signifier” (that which is expressed), which allude to the foreign and exotic places of the Oriental signified, which always presents an ontological lack because these imagined places do not actually exist. Nevertheless, the excess of such signifiers like Joan Chen’s face, or more broadly, the surfaces of Asian skin texture, facial features, hair, and bone structures produce an excess of meaning that challenges the common sense of “American” embodiment.

Common sense is a mental faculty that recognizes and identifies diverse things to conform to an always-already repetitive and repeated knowledge of the Same. Deleuze writes, “In common sense, ‘sense’ is no longer said of a direction, but of an organ. It is called ‘common,’ because it is an organ, a function, a faculty of identification that brings diversity in general to bear upon the form of the Same. Common sense identifies and recognizes, no less than good sense foresees.”<sup>479</sup> The Asian American body, however, confounds recognition and identification, and provokes an alternative sense-making that emphasizes distinction and

---

<sup>478</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press Cambridge, 2002), 39.

<sup>479</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense.*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 77-78.

difference. As trans/national stars, Chen and Liu are racialized anomalies, occupying the space in-between the U.S. and China. Meanwhile, Chen and Liu's onscreen characters provide a sensorial and affective identification that is *accented* through sexuality. The performances of Chen and Liu, in particular, are articulated through non-normative sexualities including bisexuality, homosociality, and sadomasochism. Beauty and agency become intertwined in their performances of non-normative sexual identities, as their onscreen bodies produce vectors of alternate identifications, especially for women and Asian American audiences.

#### Joan Chen: Diasporic exoticism

Born in Shanghai on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1961, Joan Chen (Chen Chong) is older than Gong Li, and more prolific in her career than either Gong Li or Zhang Ziyi with 73 acting credits in film and television to date (in contrast with Gong's 30 credits and Zhang's 28 credits). However, there is little academic writing on Chen, if at all, despite the fact that she is arguably the first and most successful actress born in China who later became an American citizen. As her career arc indicates, she is an emblematic figure of "modern ethnicity" due to her diasporic identity, trans/national career in the U.S. and China, and fluid politics of identification. She is one of China's most visible "flexible citizens" (a middle-class, transnational embodiment of Chinese cosmopolitanism), and also a successful bilingual Asian American working in the American film industry.<sup>480</sup>

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*. I wanted to do

---

<sup>480</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

something more serious.”<sup>481</sup> Chen’s frustrations with Hollywood’s racialized token casting are ironically validated and confirmed in the next few sentences as *Time* relegates her back to an ornamental function: “Clearly, Chen’s striking beauty—searchlight eyes, long, strong neck and, it must be said, the most luscious mouth on either side of the Pacific—is merely the wrapping for surpassing talent and drive. Hollywood’s favorite *China doll* wanted to direct [emphasis added].”<sup>482</sup> Describing Chen’s beauty as mere “wrapping” containing her “surpassing talent and drive,” this statement belies racialized and gendered assumptions surrounding her body. Chen *surpassed* and *exceeded* the expectations inscribed around her beauty with ambitions to direct a film, even as the news article insists on turning her into the inanimate: a China doll.

This chapter interrogates whether or not the constructions of “exotic beauty” as they relate to performances of “Chinese-ness” are indeed “worthless” as Chen says, or whether they contain and impart value. Shimizu’s concept of “productive perversity” enables Asian American women to critically look upon the, typically hypersexualized, cinematic representations of other Asian American women with pleasure, pain, and ultimately, empowerment.<sup>483</sup> This chapter furthers Shimizu’s project to reclaim the *worth* in American media representations of Chinese beauty by interrogating the values in pleasure, displeasure, and the rupture of common sense. By pointing to the legacy of hypersexuality of Asian (American) women, Shimizu theorizes a “bondage of subjectivity” that connects Asian American women.<sup>484</sup> To completely reject the racialized sexuality that has inflected Asian American women’s self-recognition is insufficient and unproductive. Thus she recuperates the authorship and agency of Asian American

---

<sup>481</sup> Richard Corliss, "Joan of Art," *Time Magazine*, April 5, 1999.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>483</sup> Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.



performers and filmmakers to demonstrate a political posturing towards “race-positive” embodiments of Asian American female sexuality beyond subjugation. Both Chen and Liu (through and beyond their “Chinese-ness”) have authored significantly “race-positive” embodiments of Asian American beauty, even within roles that seem to subjugate them as Orientalist fantasy or fetish. Moreover, Chen and Liu 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.

To understand the racialized “erotic over-investment” of Chinese American actresses in cinema and media, this section focuses on Chen as a Chinese “export” of beauty and femininity, analyzing her film and television roles in Western productions. In response to Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Kaja Silverman observes that one strategy Mulvey proposes in order to neutralize anxieties caused by the female lack in classical narrative cinema is to “negotiate [the female subject’s] erotic over-investment.”<sup>485</sup> “Wrapped” in beauty, Chen’s body articulates sexual desire and romantic opportunity, creating the possibility of spectatorial pleasure through a negotiation with her erotic over-investment. As Susan Koshy argues, while the Asian man-white woman dyad suggest the impossibility and danger of assimilation, the white man-Asian woman couple in both film and literature “has historically been more serviceable” to assimilation and integration efforts, for better or worse.<sup>486</sup> In other words, although the assimilation of Asian American women has largely been contingent on perceptions of their racialized sexuality, the increased visibility of the Asian American woman as

---

<sup>485</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 225. The other representational strategy “involves an interrogation calculated to establish either the female subject’s guilt or her illness.”

<sup>486</sup> Susan Koshy, *Sexual Naturalization: Asian Americans and Miscegenation*, Asian America (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 22.

a romantic possibility cannot be discounted in the continued integration and assimilation of Asian Americans into American society. Chen's most famous and acclaimed roles as exotic temptresses in *The Last Emperor* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987) and David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991) bring to the fore diasporic beauty politics and their impact on Asian American identity politics.

Excellent marksman and 14-year-old Chen was famously scouted at her school's rifle range to train as an acting student at the Shanghai Film Studio by Mao Zedong's wife Jiang Qing. She was subsequently cast in her first film, *Qingchun* (Youth)(Xie Jin, 1977). Chen remarked to a Chinese interviewer that her sudden fame felt "dangerous" because people began to regard her as a different person. She recalls that the adoration and admiration she began receiving evoked a sense of dread and aversion, and she began to re-evaluate her long-term career choice in acting.<sup>487</sup> The following year, she was admitted to the Shanghai International Studies University, a difficult feat especially at that time. Within half a year of university attendance, she was again selected to audition for the titular character in *Xiao Hua* (*Little Flowers*)(Zhang Zheng, Huang Jian-zhong, 1979). She admits that, although she had sworn off acting after *Qingchun*, she was taken with the script, and moreover, she realized in retrospect that she did enjoy acting even if she could not admit it to herself then.<sup>488</sup>

The now-classic 1979 film directed by Zhang Zheng is a nostalgic story about a rural family's warm relationship with a People's Liberation Army soldier during the Chinese Civil War, based on the novel, *Tongbei Yingxiong* (Tongbai Hero). Evocative of the cherubic and

---

<sup>487</sup>“名人面对面 2008-07-20 陈冲 — "小花"绚烂依旧“ (Celebrity Face-to-Face, July 20, 2008, Joan Chen: "Little Flower" as Dazzling as Before),"名人面对面 (Celebrity Face-to-Face), YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RchXY\\_LQLEI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RchXY_LQLEI)

<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

pink-cheeked Cultural Revolutionary posters of ruddy, smiling peasant women whose idyllic faces were shaped like *pingguo* (apple), Chen's youthful, "babyfat" face also evokes the desirable *jianmei* (robust beauty) of the 1930s.<sup>489</sup> Although according to state ideological guidelines at the time, a romantic relationship could not be overtly depicted in film, performative clues such as a PLA soldier's histrionic enthusiasm and overt physical demonstration of love and care towards his adopted sister, played by Chen (and vice versa) allowed Chinese audiences to infer romantic love between the two.<sup>490</sup> The first film after the end of the Cultural Revolution that was not strictly intended or received as propaganda, it earned Chen the first post-Revolution Hundred Flowers Best Actress Award, and the young star was nicknamed "the young Elizabeth Taylor of China." Similar to the way in which Zhang Ziyi was compared to Audrey Hepburn, trans/national comparisons with American actresses demonstrate the significance of Hollywood as a structuring and validating influence in Chinese reception contexts. Meanwhile it also reveals how stardom is always articulated through trans/national common sense. Stars are variations on the Same, and circulations of new celebrities in visual media generate an never-ending supply of bodies with which we are both familiar *and* unacquainted.

Although she recalls feeling happy about winning the state-sanctioned, populist award, Chen did not care for the attention and fame, as before. She states in a newspaper interview:

The fame was a nuisance. It didn't really bring me anything else other than crowds and crowds. In those days I had to ride a bus which was already crowded, but people would crowd me even more. I never thought that when I played Xiao Hua

---

<sup>489</sup> For more on Cultural Revolutionary era posters, see Lincoln Cushing and Ann Tompkins, *Chinese Posters: Art from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007. Also Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald, eds. *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999.

<sup>490</sup> My mother, who saw the film in China, recalls that everyone she knew interpreted a romantic relationship between Xiao Hua and the brother of the family into which she was adopted.

that the whole country would fall in love with her. I didn't know how to perform so that was just me as my innocent self. People felt great affection for that and I became "Little Flower." I'm 51 and people still see me as 'Little Flower.' It's really not a person anymore—it's a cultural symbol.<sup>491</sup>

Although she was primed to become a big star in China, twenty-year-old Chen chose instead to move to the U.S. to study filmmaking at California State University at Northridge during the height of the Reagan era, following her parents and grandparents in studying abroad.<sup>492</sup> Chen describes her early, idealistic arrival in the U.S.: "I was clueless when I arrived. The cultural shock—even the toothpaste tasted different! My desire to go to the States was so vague, yet so strong. It's like going to heaven: you don't plan what happens after you enter." Spurned by vague affects and desires she could not articulate or explain ("vague, yet so strong"), Chen's transnational movement was motivated by the imagined processes Appadurai suggests is embedded in the cultural economy of the "shifting world" of ethnoscaples, comprised of "tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals."<sup>493</sup> Chen's vague affect and desire to discover America soon led her to Hollywood, America's dream factory.

A new resident of a world she only previously imagined as a kind of "heaven," Chen quickly learned what the Western film industry was looking for in casting a Chinese actress. Recalling one of her first auditions, she says, "They told me I didn't look Chinese enough, and I was the only Chinese there. I was trying so hard to look like a white woman," revealing a

---

<sup>491</sup> 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, Writes Mathew Scott," *South China Morning Post*, March 3, 2013.

<sup>492</sup> They attended Harvard and Oxford, respectively.

<sup>493</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33.

common minoritarian desire to assimilate according to dominant standards.<sup>494</sup> Nevertheless, Chen did not need to try very hard at all to get an acting job, as she was “discovered” by film producer Dino De Laurentis in a Los Angeles parking lot for her first major role as the desirable and exotically beautiful “China Lady” in *Tai-Pan* (Daryl Duke, 1986), a film that received generally negative reviews and did not fare well at the box office. Despite the bad reviews, however, Chen was pleased about getting any acting job, because in Hollywood at that time, there were very few roles for Asian actresses. Although the film was never released in China, news about the film’s nude scenes with actor Bryan Brown became widely publicized in China, causing ordinary Chinese people to curse that she brought shame to the nation. Chen recalls, “I feel bad that I hurt so many people by doing it so innocently. I was just trying to be an actress.”<sup>495</sup> In a recent interview from 2013, Chen states, “When I left, it was deemed as a betrayal because I had left all this adoration behind. It happened again in ‘Tai Pan’ because I played a mistress and she seemed to like being a mistress. I understand that antagonism now because people love you. It was a lonely time. But looking back I know where it came from now.”<sup>496</sup> Aware of her role as a national symbol and ability to “hurt so many people” through her actions, Chen justified her decision to comply with Hollywood expectations, claiming, “I was just trying to be an actress,” a comment that implicitly eschews the national or ethnic burden of representation within the realm of performance. Chen also entertained the notion of returning to China where she would have had been given more complex roles. Nevertheless, she was rewarded for her perseverance to live and work abroad when, because of her role in *Tai-Pan*, she was subsequently cast as the last Empress, Wan Jung, in Bernardo Bertolucci’s Best Picture

---

<sup>494</sup> Corliss, "Joan of Art."

<sup>495</sup> David Dale, "China's Doll Grows Up," *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 24, 1987 1987.

<sup>496</sup> 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, Writes Mathew Scott."

Oscar-winning, internationally-acclaimed epic *The Last Emperor* (1987).

Although many have written about the fetishizing Orientalism and celebrated essentialism of *The Last Emperor* as a kind of Western exploitative gaze of China, the film's place in the Sinophone imaginary as a *self*-Orientalist navel-gazing appropriation cannot be discounted in an analysis of the film's critical social function within China and the Sinophone diaspora. One *Douban* reviewer writes of the *The Last Emperor*, "The most authentic and remarkable Chinese film ever made, and surprisingly, made by an Italian."<sup>497</sup> Rey Chow's mother also remarked on the film: "It is remarkable that a foreign devil should be able to make a film like this about China. I'd say, he did a good job!"<sup>498</sup> My own parents echo this kind of praise of the film, as well. Chow explains that the allure of the film for Chinese spectators is the overlapping of "the pain of historical awareness" and "another, equally intense feeling, describable only partly by phrases like 'mesmerization,' 'nostalgia,' and 'a desire to be there, *in* the film.'" Even if directed by a cultural outsider or a "foreign devil," fantastic-historical films like *The Last Emperor* are "vital to an continual engagement with what is culturally available."<sup>499</sup> Moreover, the imaginative appropriation of cultural resources, such as film and media, is a social practice that forges diasporic identity through collective fantasy.

A desire to be *in* a fantastic film that paints a mythological picture of one's ethnic homeland is the desire for a genesis story of oneself. Chen's participation in constructing a particular fantasy of China's transition from imperialism to a "modern" nation-state represents a symbolic act of diasporic return. Moreover, these comments illustrate that Chinese bodies author

---

<sup>497</sup> Over5, user review of *The Last Emperor*, February 24, 2007, *Douban*, [http://movie.douban.com/subject/1293172/comments?sort=new\\_score](http://movie.douban.com/subject/1293172/comments?sort=new_score).

<sup>498</sup> Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 24.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

“Chinese-ness” in powerful ways that surpass the auteur framework, which assigns a film the same nationality as its director. The diasporic Chinese actors in the film, including Hong Kong-born John Lone, Chinese American Maggie Han, and trans/national Chinese actress Vivian Wu, captured the means of representation through their embodied performances—and it is through the displaced Chinese bodies of performers in a Western film that we understand diasporic and/or exilic subjectivity. Only through these layers of displacement, can we truly make sense of the story of the internally-exiled last emperor of China. Hamid Naficy defines “accented cinema” through the authorship of “accented filmmakers” who are displaced from the margins to the centers.<sup>500</sup> However, this framework also generates another question: What would it mean to possess an “accented body”? Can we similarly think about a diasporic performer’s linguistic accent, corporeal behavior, and bodily stylization as accented formal qualities in film?

After all, although they may *reproduce* the bodies we see onscreen, film technology and cinematic technique do not *produce* the living bodies that perform in front of the camera. As scholars like Carrie Noland and Susan Leigh Foster have pointed out, culture “is both embodied and challenged through corporeal performance,” and as such, is revealed through bodily rhetoric and gestural vocabulary.<sup>501</sup> Furthermore, the cinematic human body is an ontological index that *authenticates* human experience and imbues films with meaning. As Cynthia Baron eloquently states, “twentieth-century film and media technology actually confirmed the centrality of corporeal bodies—for bodies became the only ‘authentic’ ground for mediated and typically heightened displays of beauty and grace, physical pain and emotional torment, quotidian

---

<sup>500</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>501</sup> Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3.

naturalness and arch inhumanity.”<sup>502</sup> Thus Chen’s embodiment as the last Empress of China, while not historically or literally “authentic,” does *authenticate* the mediated images of “beauty and grace, physical pain and emotional torment, quotidian naturalness and arch inhumanity” for the spectator who desires to inhabit and be affected by historical fantasy and revisionist memory. Furthermore, Chen’s beauty provides one of the fantastic visual points of entry through which Chinese and Chinese American spectators receive the pleasurable aspects of “homecoming” and a nostalgic longing and pride in heritage.

However, not all Chinese American scholars agree on the film’s positive value. Focusing on emperor Pu Yi’s characterization in the film, Chow argues that he is erotically (re-)presented through the camera apparatus as “China-as-woman,” making the film an exemplary illustration of the uneven gender and racial politics in “seeing” China from a Westernized viewpoint. She argues that, ergo, the women in the film “are pushed to...an astructural outside, the ‘other’ of the other, as it were, that wavers between the ontological statuses of ‘nature’ and ‘hysteria.’”<sup>503</sup> Chow describes the film’s taxonomy of female perversion and what she perceives to be their hysterical representation in the film:

The wet nurse, the high consorts of the court, the empress, the Second Consort, and ‘eastern Jewel’ all appear as either objects of pleasure or addicts to pleasure, strung together through a narrative that remembers them as gratifying female breasts, partners in sex games, perverse lesbians, and opium smokers....The film thus corroborates the commonsense feeling that for a woman to make a sensible point, she must first become a spectacle and show herself to be “out of her mind.”

---

<sup>502</sup> Cynthia Baron, Diane Carson, and Frank P. Tomasulo, *More Than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>503</sup> Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*, 15.



As the bearer of truthful political understanding, the empress survives only as an invalid.<sup>504</sup>

Along similar lines of criticism, another feminist critique of the film published in a 1992 issue of *Cinema Journal* argued that the film “symbolically annihilates” its female characters, whom the narrative treats as “objects of desire and signifiers of castration threat rather than sovereign subjects participating in history.”<sup>505</sup> While I do not entirely disagree with these critical feminist assessments, it is important to understand how the spectacle of the eroticized female characters also adds a disruptively powerful aspect to the film’s overarching narrative about masculine failure and crisis. Although fetishized through Bertolucci’s apparatus, the images of women engage a much more complex affective realm of imagination, desires, and pleasures within the Sinophone ethnoscape than is credited in academic disavowals of the film. When examining the film’s affective register, it is evident that the women characters generate the most emotional investment in the narrative. Moreover, their lavish and detailed costuming and makeup command and attract visual attention, drawing an alignment between the film’s spectacular *mise-en-scène* and the women’s heavily adorned bodies. Rather than being pushed to the “astructural outside,” the women are deeply historicized, occupying the film’s imaginative center and drawing in the spectator’s imaginative identification. Moreover, the film’s representation of “hysteria” and lesbianism are manifestations of female resistance vis-à-vis the undisciplined corporeality of the politically powerless—a queering of power. Chen’s participation in the film is an especially self-aware, critical, and active performance that negotiates her own erotic image-as-spectacle. Through her performances of *becoming* Empress of China, Chen reveals and criticizes the

---

<sup>504</sup> Ibid.

<sup>505</sup> Yosefa Loshitzky and Raya Meyuhas, "Ecstasy of Difference: Bertolucci's 'The Last Emperor'," *Cinema Journal* 31, no. 2 (1992): 36.

destabilizing systems of power surrounding the Chinese female body. In the narrative, Chen's character is revealed to be one of the few who were on the "right" side of Chinese history—that is, in resistance to Japanese occupation.

*The Last Emperor* is a biographical-historic epic film based on the autobiography of China's last Imperial Emperor, Puyi (John Lone).<sup>506</sup> Words like "lavish," "sumptuous," and "elegant" are often invoked in critical reviews of the film, and the film is easily identifiable as a Bertolucci film with its sweeping tracking shots, extravagantly detailed mise-en-scène, use of prominent color palettes to denote theme and mood, explorations of (bi)sexuality and sexual "perversion," masculinity in crisis, and Freudian inquiries into the lives of marginalized men. Much of the two-hour-42-minute film is a cross-cutting narrative between the rehabilitation of Pu Yi as a war criminal at the detention center of Fushun Bureau of Public Security from 1950-1959, and flashbacks beginning from three years of age when Pu Yi is crowned as the new Imperial Emperor in 1908 to the fall of his reign of Manchukuo and the Japanese WWII surrender in 1941. Pu Yi is depicted as a prisoner and political pawn of his environment, whether innocuously by clucking eunuchs constantly chasing the small, naughty Emperor-child in the Forbidden City, or by the machismo Japanese Army generals and Communist prison guards who, at separate times, imprison Pu Yi and make symbolic use of him for their own political and ideological purposes. In the final scene of the film, when Mao's Cultural Revolution is underway, an aged Pu Yi, now a simple gardener, returns to the Forbidden City as a tourist and enters the Hall of Supreme Harmony where he was once crowned as Emperor. Pu Yi proves to a Forbidden City guardian's young son that he was once Emperor of China by pulling out an old wooden cricket gourd behind the golden throne, given to him by his High Tutor. The boy opens

---

<sup>506</sup> Pu Yi and W. J. F. Jenner, *From Emperor to Citizen: The Autobiography of Aisin-Gioro Pu Yi* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1989).

the gourd, from which a browned and aged cricket emerges, and Pu Yi subsequently vanishes from view. The cricket is a not-so-subtle zoosemic symbol of Pu Yi's endurance as a life-long prisoner and final liberation through death. Finally, a seamless continuity cut pans into the "present-day" as an English-speaking Chinese tour guide leads dozens of Western tourists into the Hall where she explains that Pu Yi was the last Chinese emperor, crowned at three-years-old who died in 1967. Bertolucci pans back to the golden throne, a *mise-en-scène* that, although emptied of people, remains rich with theatrical-historical decor, leaving our gaze to linger on the opulent signifier of China's romanticized past.

In the film, Chen plays the last Empress of China, re-named Wan Jung, and is indeed, the "bearer of truthful political understanding." As an Asian American actress, Chen is also a "bearer of truthful political understanding" in regards to the politics of racial casting in Hollywood, often mentioning it in interviews. For instance, a 26-year-old Chen candidly remarked, "'The Last Emperor' has given me the chance to show off my acting ability and show casting directors that I can do more than appear as the token Oriental whenever they need one."<sup>507</sup> Although Chen is stunningly dressed in exotic "Orientalist" clothing imagined by British costume designer James Acheson, her performances of bisexual desire and embodied resistance allows Chen to transcend the role of the "token Oriental" and escape the patriarchal confines of tradition. Moreover, Chen's beauty is interwoven with the nostalgic aesthetics of the film, and her lavishly adorned body transports the viewer into an Imperial fantasy that is as much visual as it is a cross-synesthetic conjuring of silk and satin textures, sheer and diaphanous fabrics, and perfumed and powdered bodies and faces—giving resurrected flesh to descriptions of the beautiful Chinese women in the aforementioned traditional and historical Chinese texts on beauty.

---

<sup>507</sup> Rebecca Tyrrel, "Look: China Wear - the Empress's New Clothes," *The Sunday Times*, February 28, 1988.

In Pu Yi and Wan Jung's first meeting, Wan Jung demonstrates self-assuredness, charm, and maturity, characteristics that would enable her to hold a certain power over her husband. In the film's introduction to her character, it is also clear that Wan Jung is the more reasonable and sensible partner. Previous to meeting her on their wedding day, the Emperor is unhappy about the arranged marriage because he determined from looking at her photograph that the 17-year-old was "too old" and looked "old fashioned." He expresses his desire to his Western tutor Johnston (Peter O'Toole) that he wishes to marry a modern girl who can dance the quickstep, and speak English and French. In response, Johnston suggests to Pu Yi that his desires to leave China would be sublimated and fulfilled within the institution of marriage, in which he would no doubt "become master of [his] house." Wan Jung fulfills all of Pu Yi's glibly expressed requirements for a wife, but Pu Yi's status as "master of his house" becomes a questionable point throughout his life, not least of which with his Empress, as well as with his Secondary Consort (Vivian Wu) who leaves him. Furthermore, Pu Yi's poor judgment of Wan Jung from the photograph is a cue of his poor judgment, foreshadowing his later political misstep in becoming the ruler of Manchukuo under Japanese rule. Pu Yi's failure to become the master of his own house thereby mirrors his failure to become the master of China.

A closer examination of Pu Yi and Wan Jung's wedding further illustrates Wan Jung's agency and foresight in relation to Pu Yi. After Wan Jung starts the conversation by asking Pu Yi what he is thinking, he complains to her that it is humiliating not to be able to choose whom to marry. She responds by saying that she was also unable to choose, breaking Pu Yi out of his solipsistic misery. While she is still veiled, she pulls him up and makes them stand back-to-back. Attending to his masculine pride and self-consciousness, she assures him that he will be taller than her in another year or two. Giving hint to her own transnational ambitions, Wan Jung asks

Pu Yi if he would take her with him to Oxford University. Before he answers, she says, “Perhaps he would like to see my face before he decides,” and after positioning herself back on the bed, she instructs him that, “it is the Emperor who must remove the *gai tou* (veil).” She is both sexual initiator and director with the passive Pu Yi, instructing him to unveil her face and guiding him through the theatrics of their first wedding night. With the percussive Chinese opera festivities continuing in the palace beyond the bedroom walls, Wan Jung begins to kiss and leave red lipstick marks all over Pu Yi’s face, marking him as her possession. Pu Yi, with eyes closed and hands crossed in his lap, does not return the kisses but acts only as passive receptor (an erotic precedent figuratively anticipating his ineffectual and passive leadership as China’s Emperor). In a state of heightened and hypnotic eroticism, a pacified Pu Yi softly asks her, “Will you teach me?”—a question that applies both to the quickstep and to the intimate bedroom matters that would follow. Soon, the anonymous hands of ladies-in-waiting and eunuchs begin to undress the young couple to guide them into sexual activity, when suddenly Wan Jung stops and orders them to leave. As she modestly puts her robe back on, she says to Pu Yi, “If your majesty thinks it’s old fashioned to make the rain and the wind with a stranger, we can be like a modern couple to begin with.” Clearly, the thought did not occur to Pu Yi, rather, Wan Jung’s insight of his sexual ineptness and unfamiliarity inspires the suggestion. She not only influences his decision to slow down their erotic dalliance, the new Empress demonstrates that she is precisely the modern woman that the young Emperor previously described as his ideal marriage partner. She leads the couple back into a standing position and platonically shakes his hand, telling him “Good night.” An erotically-intoxicated Pu Yi then stumbles out of the room in a hormonal haze of adolescent longing, after which a composed Wan Jung says aloud in a prophetic and determined manner to her ladies-in-waiting, “I like him. I am sure I will like him and he will grow up.”

If Pu Yi, as Chow insists, represents a weak and feminized China throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then Wan Jung foreshadows the 21<sup>st</sup> century self-determined China that breaks with tradition and emerges as a world leader. The young Emperor continues to seek guidance from his Empress in their early marriage. When Pu Yi announces in front of his court that he has decided to cut off his queue, he glances at Wan Jung for approval as he proceeds to cut it off. The following shot is a close-up zoom of Wan Jung's smiling and pleased face, a cinematic gesture that gives primacy to her opinion on her mate's modern corporeal act of defiance against tradition. Furthermore, Wan Jung plays an active role in their marriage as bisexual initiator, embracing the polyamorous nature of their arrangement. In one scene, after she crawls into bed with Pu Yi, she instructs him, "Kiss me." After a few moments, the Secondary Consort (Vivian Wu) also creeps into their bed and Wan Jung affectionately caresses her head. Then, with Wan Jung in the middle, the three begin an erotic game with one another in a tactile scene featuring bodies in a moving sculpture of insinuated pleasure under silken bed sheets.

The aforementioned scenes are important because it establishes Wan Jung's agency, power, and intelligence as a sexualized woman and political Empress. Despite the patriarchal social structure of China's imperial government, these scenes illuminate the kinds of power women wielded through charm, sex, and feminine manipulation within this male-dominated environment. Furthermore, production details of the particular aforementioned bedroom scene, which Chen has relayed in interviews, demonstrate how she sought to control and negotiate her own representation as an actress. As a result of the Chinese public's outrage over *Tai-pan*'s nude scenes, Chen became hesitant about revealing her body onscreen. According to the actress, during the filming of the wedding scene, as her character was being undressed, her outerwear and intimates were both accidentally taken off. Bertolucci, thinking that this was a beautiful

mistake and an inspired moment, wanted to keep filming, but Chen refused. Despite Chen's assertion that she trusted Bertolucci and "liked him very much," when this occurred, she immediately stopped the filming and asked the director to sign a contract stating that he would not use any of the shots wherein she was stripped to the nude. In a popular Hong Kong and Taiwanese syndicated television program, *Mingren mianduimian* (Celebrity Face-to-Face), Chen recalls to the host that Bertolucci was *shangxin* (heart-broken) about her abrupt distrust of him and remarked self-effacingly that he must have wondered what kind of medicine she mistakenly took that day.<sup>508</sup> Nevertheless, Chen's management of her own representation as an erotic spectacle not only suggests that she is an active participant in the filmmaking process, but also reveals a larger phenomenon I call "diasporic conscience," a doubled consciousness aware and sensitive of both home and host, or native and home perceptions of the diasporic figure. A diasporic conscience can influence an individual's life choices and/or public behavior as s/he knows s/he carries the dual burden of representation. Aware and sensitive to the fact that for the Chinese public, she is an "embodiment of affect," Chen was determined not to disappoint the audiences who continued to affectively invest in her cinematic representations and career, and who, as she stated earlier, "love her," a socialized communal notion of love that is often used to describe affect(ion) towards celebrities.<sup>509</sup> Indeed, as P. David Marshall explains, the celebrity "represents a site for the housing of affect in terms of both the audience and the institutions that have worked to produce the cultural forms that have allowed the celebrity to develop."<sup>510</sup> In other words, audiences invest and assign affect and affective meanings like "love" in their

---

<sup>508</sup> "名人面对面 2008-07-20 陈冲 — "小花"绚烂依旧 (Celebrity Face-to-Face)

<sup>509</sup> P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>510</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-74.

consumption of celebrities, while diasporic stars like Chen are guided to behave in certain ways by their diasporic conscience.

As a model and force of conscientiousness in the film, Wan Jung provides the voice of reason while Pu Yi cowers further and further into Japanese protection. She is the first to tell Pu Yi she does not trust the Japanese, and then later protests his Manchukuo coronation and shows her contempt through what Chow observes as her “‘crazy’ behavior at the inaugurating banquet.”<sup>511</sup> A clearly opiated Wan Jung makes a spectacle at the banquet with her corporeal refusal to behave like a proper lady. Unlike the beautiful and restrained Japanese princess Hiro Saga who is framed as her foil in this scene, Wan Jung does not abide by the implicit behavioral prescriptions of her beauty. When Amakasu (Ryuichi Sakamoto), a macho and stoic Japanese general points his propagandistic camera at her, she defiantly gazes back with a contemptuous look. Using her body as an instrument of un-cooperation, Wan Jung seats herself next to a vase of white gladioli, a symbol of “white prosperity” befitting the Japanese Imperialist ideology, and begins to eat the flower petals as tears silently stream down her face. Perhaps “insanity” or “hysteria” as Chow suggests, her seemingly illogical actions befit what can only be seen in hindsight as an illogical and destructive period in Chinese history—particularly through the lens of Chinese collaboration with the Japanese in regards to the Second Sino-Japanese War, the eventual outcome of many illogical political mistakes. Wan Jung’s protest, seen as “insane” in this environment draws attention to the absurdity of Chinese collaboration with the Japanese; as she uses the only instrument (her body) over which she has control to object to the damaging and destructive political theatrics taking place around her. When Pu Yi asks her to acknowledge that he is once again Emperor, Wan Jung replies, “You are blind.” When Pu Yi brings up her opium

---

<sup>511</sup> Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*, 15.



addiction, Wan Jung enters into a performatively chatty, glib mode, “You can buy opium anywhere in Manchukuo. Anywhere,” sarcastically implying to Pu Yi that the “country” over which he reigns is corrupt and poisonous. After telling him she would never go to Japan, Wan Jung then raises a sarcastic toast to “10,000 years to his majesty, the emperor” as the other guests follow along, failing to intuit her insincere sarcasm and performance.

Because Wan Jung cannot change the world through her limited capacity as Empress, she decides instead to alter her experiences of *being* in the world. After she retreats back into her room for the night, Eastern Jewel (Maggie Han), a hypersexualized Chinese opportunist who works as a spy for the Japanese, follows her with opium. As Wan Jung smokes, she reasserts that she hates Eastern Jewel, after which Eastern Jewel takes off her stockings and begins to erotically kiss Wan Jung’s feet. Although helpless in this moment, Wan Jung’s anger, contempt, and moral center are nevertheless conveyed clearly through Chen’s facial expressions of disgust, sadness, and frustration. Finally, Wan Jung does not abandon attempting to secure her and her husband’s political power. She schemes to produce an heir to secure a patrilineal authority, however, the Japanese kill her baby and she is forced to take up residence in mental asylum. After the Japanese surrender, however, an aged, hobbling, and mute Wan Jung returns to their Manchukuo residence. Upon entering, she begins spitting on all the Japanese soldiers, a final performative gesture of contempt and defiance using her body as instrument.

Chen’s beauty functions in *The Last Emperor* as a visual manifestation of the Kantian notion that beauty is the symbol of morality.<sup>512</sup> In her defiance of Chinese collaboration with the Japanese, the beautiful Empress was, retrospectively, on the “right” side of Chinese history. Through her attempted dominance over Pu Yi and by extension China, Wan Jung demonstrates

---

<sup>512</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Prometheus, 2000).

how the social occupation of a non-normative sexual and gender identity situates the Chinese female body in the center of power, as spectacular resistance against the Japanese.

*Twin Peaks*

Although Chen has led a fairly successful career in Hollywood, starring in films like Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth* (1993) in which she played a Vietnamese mother during the Vietnam War, and *Judge Dredd* (Danny Cannon, 1995), her most visible American role 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."<sup>513</sup> Superficially, the plot follows Detective Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) in his attempts to solve the murder of the town's beloved Homecoming Queen, Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee). 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, Leland Palmer (Ray Wise), possessed by an evil spirit simply called BOB (Frank Silva). 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 Sheryl Lee); and Laura, the blond white teenager and Josie (Joan Chen), the young Chinese American woman. In typical Lynchian fashion, affective entanglements between people are communicated through emotional charges and intensities shaped through cinematic

---

<sup>513</sup> 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.

techniques like long lingering shots and extreme close-ups on inanimate objects, non-diegetic music and reoccurring musical motifs, soap opera-like performances, and expressionistic mise-en-scène.

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.<sup>514</sup> The Asian American body, little seen in American television during the early 1990s, lacked the public recognition and identification as “American.” However, given the extensive coverage of the Vietnam War in American television throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Asian faces within a mediated domestic environment were familiar but generated specific affects related to remembering America’s protracted, failed war with the Eastern Other.<sup>515</sup> *Twin Peaks* was the first television show to process these images through the melodramatic genre, using Chen’s face to repurpose and re-narrative the image of Asian-ness within a surreal, domestic context. Straining commonsense notions of “American” embodiment, Chen’s body produced excess in the form of un-common or non-*sense*.

In his work, Lynch persistently challenges logic and sense by cultivating actors’ histrionic performances and displaced affect, dream-like sequences, and surreal mise-en-scène. Therefore in order to destabilize, unsettle, and provoke *sense* itself, Lynch introduces *Twin Peaks*

---

<sup>514</sup> 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).

<sup>515</sup> Thank you to Kathleen McHugh for making this observation.

with the “exotic” face of Joan Chen in the pilot’s opening sequence. In conceptualizing the “exotic,” Henry Yu writes, “In migrating, and in imagining the differences between the places we have come to and the places we have left behind, new forms of knowledge are created. Often, this knowledge is predicated on a definition of the exotic, of what is absolutely foreign and different about one place or the other.”<sup>516</sup> Further elaborating on the cultural significance of exoticism in terms of globalization, Olivia Khoo writes, “Exoticism emerges as a fascination with (gendered) difference whereby the breakdown of boundaries through globalization allows differences to appear closer than they ever have.”<sup>517</sup> Both Chen and Josie’s transnational movements from East to West demonstrate the fluidity of flexible citizenship in a global world, and their living presence in the West allows “differences to appear closer than they ever have.” That is, Josie initially appears as the beautiful stranger next door as a fantasy of assimilation vis-à-vis heterosexual encounter, a remnant of European imperialism and colonialism. Likewise, as a film actor, Chen embodies the prospects of assimilation into an industrial system that has both excluded and stereotyped Asian Americans in accordance with centuries-old socio-political discrimination and racism against people of Asian descent in American society. However, for Asian American spectators, 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.

---

<sup>516</sup> Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals : Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>517</sup> Olivia Khoo, *The Chinese Exotic: Modern Diasporic Femininity* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 9.



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

Despite being the exotic “girl-next-door,” however, Josie’s foreign-ness is conveyed not only through the visibility of her body but also through her accented English and malapropisms. Moreover, her exotic signification juxtaposes with another foreign “Chinese” presence, what Dale refers to as the “Tibetan method,” a deductive process based on transcendental Zen Buddhism practices and mind-body holism. Dale repeatedly muses that he would like to visit Tibet, and a map of Tibet is prominently displayed at the Twin Peaks police station. Implying an analogy between the physical locales of Twin Peaks and Tibet, Lynch’s transnational reference allows “differences to appear closer than they ever have,” forging what John Tomlinson calls, “a certain ‘unicity’: a sense that the world is becoming, for the first time in history, a single social and cultural setting” through media.<sup>518</sup> Although Tibet may be geographically distant, Dale is imaginatively proximate to the region and its practices. Even as he lays ostensibly dying after being shot (by Josie, in fact), he records his dying wishes to visit Tibet and hopes for the Dalai Lama’s peaceful return. Perhaps betraying Lynch’s personal political ties with what has become popularly known in the West as the “Free Tibet” movement, this character detail about Dale also

---

<sup>518</sup> John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 10.

leads to an ironic, extradiegetic juxtaposition between Chen's trans/national Chinese body and the government of Tibet by the Chinese state. As a deterritorialized agent, Chen's star body eschews the burden of national representation, as also seen in Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth* in which she plays a Vietnamese villager. A sophisticated viewer however may be keenly aware of the dichotomy Lynch sets up in terms of an Asian imaginary: the spiritual haven and pure spirituality of Tibet in contrast to cosmopolitan Hong Kong from which Josie originates. At the time of the show, Hong Kong was still a British colony, therefore both East Asian regions (Tibet and Hong Kong) invoked by the show were colonized by greater imperial interests: the PRC and Great Britain. Analogously, Josie is colonized by the different men in her life, each of whom has a different vested interest in her body. The logics of assimilation in the historical *The Last Emperor* and the contemporary *Twin Peaks* indicate that sexuality is a key component of assimilating Chinese women's bodies into the American multicultural imagination.

Themes of becoming are present in *Twin Peaks*, analogizing the indeterminate and unstable status of the Chinese body in trans/national cultures. 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.<sup>519</sup> Exceeding paradigms of humanity, Josie can only be described as eternally *becoming*.

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

---

<sup>519</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum, 2004), 112.

represent epistemological limitations about what *can* be known about them. The hermeneutics of narrative and of trans/national assimilation converge to pose questions about Josie's identity. While Laura's identical-looking cousin, Maddy is a reference to Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), 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. Laura and Josie are the figural "Twin Peaks," the breasts on a woman's body. By the end of the series, Josie, like Laura, meets a tragic demise as a consequence of her indecipherable desiring nature. She literally becomes *objectified*, 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*, Josie's embodiment provokes self-recognition and an uncommon sense of pleasure, especially for Asian American women.

Similar to the speculations surrounding the passions of *Blue Velvet*'s (David Lynch, 1986) Dorothy and the posthumous unearthing of Laura's secrets, inquiries into Josie's desires are incited by her death. Todd McGowan writes, "[Lynch's] films...allow for a momentary experience of the gaze that occurs when the worlds of fantasy and desire intersect."<sup>520</sup> An embodiment of the undomesticated gaze, Josie, like *Blue Velvet*'s Dorothy Vallens (Isabella

---

<sup>520</sup> McGowan, "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes," 40.

Rossellini) is “irreducible to any fantasmatic identification.”<sup>521</sup> Josie’s 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.” Josie survived by always *becoming* in the logic of the other. However, 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,” the enigmatic embodiment of Chen-as-Josie illustrates the deferred resolution on the Asian American woman.<sup>522</sup> 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 persistent stereotypes. The unresolved narrative of Josie’s mysterious demise (“Where did she *go*?”) is a logical inverse of the indefinite question of origin for the foreign “Other” (“Where are you *from*?”). Asian Americans are commonly viewed as perpetual foreigners in American society, suspended in *becoming* (a notion uncannily invoked by the term for citizenship, “naturalization”) and questions of origin.

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

---

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>522</sup> Lavery, “Introduction: Twin Peaks’ Interpretive Community,” 13.



demoted station in the household. When Josie serves breakfast for the first time as her in-laws' maid, Catherine calls for her and she 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

Notions of service and servitude in relation to Chinese bodies are refigured here. Reinterpreting the desexualized maid's uniform which makes visible class difference, Josie subversively wears and embellishes the uniform as sexualized costume, using her beauty and sexuality to re-classify her body on her own terms. In Douglas Sirk's maternal melodrama *Imitation of Life* (1959), a young black woman Sara Jane (Susan Kohner) chooses to pass as white. In one scene, Sara Jane spitefully greets Lora's (Lana Turner) white guests with the caricatured affectations of a Southern mammy to the distress and confusion of Lora and her mother, Annie (Juanita Moore). 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."<sup>523</sup> 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.<sup>524</sup> Moreover, Chen's short boyish haircut further undermines the conventions of these fantasies, as she performs male and female genders through her body. Revealing the double artifice of "Chineseness" and gender, Chen-as-Josie's embodiment provokes identification with her masquerade as a form of empowerment. Moreover, her over-performance reveals pride and pleasure in her impermanent position: between whiteness and Chinese-ness, between male and female, and 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 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 Mädchen 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 white women are

---

<sup>523</sup> Elena Del Rio, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 41.

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*

bathed in and permeated by light. It streams through them and falls on to them from above. In short, they glow.”<sup>525</sup> 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.”<sup>526</sup> By the logic of this article, Josie is neither woman nor is she of Twin Peaks, revealing the hermeneutic complexities of Laura’s “living” double. In other words, her ethnicized, racialized, and gendered differences are being managed via exclusion.



Chen’s absence from the *Rolling Stone* cover

Chen’s outstanding Asian beauty is not only disruptive to the visual homogeneity of glowing Caucasian beauties, it is also destructive within Lynch’s narrative. As the series continues, particularly in the second season, Josie’s image changes from innocent, assimilable Chinese girl-next-door to dangerous femme fatale whose beautiful exoticism becomes an instrument with which to obscure the deadly secrets of her enigmatic foreign past. In accordance with Renee Tajima’s taxonomy of the racist images of Asian women in the history of American film and media, Josie turns from an innocent and self-sacrificing “Lotus Blossom baby” to a

<sup>525</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 122.

<sup>526</sup> B. Zehme and M. Rolston, "Babes in the Woods. (Cover Story)," *Rolling Stone*, no. 588 (1990).

treacherous and cunning “Dragon lady” involved in multiple plots of betrayal, murder, and seduction.<sup>527</sup> Her lover, Sheriff Harry S. Truman (Michael Ontkean) remarks to Josie’s sister-in-law and nemesis, Catherine Martell, that it is difficult to hate someone so beautiful, even as he learns of several of Josie’s assassination attempts.<sup>528</sup> Likewise, young rebel Bobby Briggs (Dana Ashbrook) shares with his lover, waif-y waitress Shelly Johnson (Mädchen Amick) the secret to success: “beautiful people get everything they want.” This “beautiful people’s conspiracy,” as Bobby puts it, will culminate in the climactic Miss Twin Peaks beauty competition, during which Dale Cooper’s ultimate nemesis, Windom Earle (Kenneth Walsh) kidnaps Dale’s love interest, Annie Blackburn (Heather Graham) and winner of the Miss Twin Peaks title. Despite the fact that Josie is ineligible to enter as she is presumed dead, her figure hangs as a specter over the town and the competition, as she leaves “good” men like Sheriff Harry Truman and benevolent father figure, Pete Martell, longing to “see a girl as lovely as Josie” again.<sup>529</sup> Indeed, the “Twin Peaks” Laura/Josie double articulates the affective consequences of feminine beauty, fulfilling a quasi-noir femme fatale convention. Just as Laura left a line of men who were in love with her in the wake of her death, so too does Josie leave behind a string of men both alive and dead (Harry Truman, Pete Martell, Andrew Packard, Thomas Eckhardt) in love with her and entranced by her exotic beauty. As with Laura, the grief over Josie’s death becomes hysterically performed by the men who loved her.

---

<sup>527</sup> Renee E. Tajima, "Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed: Images of Asian Women," in *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women*, ed. Asian Women United of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

<sup>528</sup> The legacy of President Truman’s approval of the use of atomic weapons against Japan constitutes another gestural layer Lynch provides in terms of invoking the West’s entangled history with the East.

<sup>529</sup> In season two, episode 19, Pete Martell laments about Josie’s passing with a poem that expressed that when she walked into a room, the flowers stood up. He says, “I think I shall never see a girl as lovely as Josie.”

In media interviews, Lynch resisted the impulse to explain the “disease” of Dorothy Vallens and Laura Palmer, stating, “It’s so beautiful just to leave it abstract.”<sup>530</sup> As he points out, pleasure and incomprehensibility are inextricably linked, and this was part of the allure all along. 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 Asian American and female spectators, who know their subjectivity cannot be anchored to any single, comprehensible representation. Moreover, the narrative objectification of Chen’s character becomes a melodramatic variation on her extradiegetic persona as Hollywood’s “China Doll,” revealing Chen’s liminal corporeal status outside of a humanist common sense and inviting the question: Is there a space of empowerment outside of common sense?

Chen-as-Josie dons many masks, and performs various roles in the complex diegesis of *Twin Peaks*. Producing multiple vectors of identification and dis-identification, Chen’s bodily distinction and difference produces both pleasure and incomprehensibility. As illustrated by *The Last Emperor* and *Twin Peaks*, a trans/national politics of Chinese beauty, which, although may shape and discipline women’s bodies, also offers crucial imaginative points of entry into nostalgic homecomings, as well as enigmatic and fluid identifications for the spectator. Chen and her prolific trans/national, bilingual career demonstrates the agency of performative fluidity granted to the flexible citizens of the Chinese diaspora. Although analyses of Chen’s work in some of the best and most interesting contemporary Chinese films to date, including Jiang Wen’s

---

<sup>530</sup> 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.

*The Sun Also Rises* (2007) and Jia Zhangke's *24 City* (2008) fall outside the scope of this dissertation, suffice it to say that Chen's active career in the U.S., China, and Chinese diaspora is an incredible (cross)cultural accomplishment of an accented actor who has largely remained under-recognized and under-valued. Moreover, Chen's involvement in films with cogent feminist overtures such as Hong Kong filmmaker Clara Law's *Temptation of a Monk* (1993) and Chen's own directorial debut in *Tian Yu* (*Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl*) in 1998 demonstrate Chen's interest and concern in the lives of Chinese women.<sup>531</sup>

### *Saving Face*

Chen's involvement in Asian American cinema is also worth discussing, particularly in terms of (re)defining trans/national beauty vis-à-vis embodied affects and pleasures. The 2004 film *Saving Face*, written and directed by Alice Wu, is a semi-autobiographical rendering of her own life and experience of coming out as a gay Chinese American woman. After winning a script-writing contest sponsored by the Hollywood advocacy group, Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment, Wu was given the opportunity to meet with studio executives to develop her screenplay into a film. After turning down suggestions to cast white actresses like Ellen Burstyn

---

<sup>531</sup> Chen's directorial work in *Xiu Xiu* led to her appointment as director to Hollywood film, *Autumn in New York* (2000), a dramatic love story, starring Winona Ryder and Richard Gere. In *Temptation of a Monk*, female sexuality, embodied by Chen's beguiling double roles, is cast as a potent and primitive temptation that interrupts masculine myths of nation-building, homosociality and religious devotion. In *Xiu Xiu*, a film that was banned in the PRC and cost Chen a fine of \$50,000, Chen forcefully enunciates a previously silenced narrative about sexual crime during the Cultural Revolution through the techniques of affective suturing also found in Chinese scar literature. To borrow from Meaghan Morris' statement that "feminism makes political discourse stammer," Chinese history "stammers" in its erasure of gendered crimes during the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, *Xiu Xiu*, based on Yan Geling's fictional novel *Tian Yu*, represents a split from Chen's earlier diasporic conscience, which motivated her to stand up to Bertolucci and ask him not to use any of her topless shots in *The Last Emperor*. No longer concerned with losing the "love" of mainland Chinese audiences, Chen, who was accused of using "abominable means to deceive the government," simply remarked to *The New York Times*, "There's a price. I don't regret it."

and Reese Witherspoon as mother and daughter, along with suggestions to turn the lesbian relationship into a heterosexual one, Wu finally found financing opportunities from producers Teddy Zee and high-profile Hollywood actor, Will Smith. Zee, also a Chinese American, stated that the film was “an awakening for me about the Asian-American experience in Hollywood, because I was always such a part of the studio system. Everyday there are actors coming in who are Chinese-American, who don't get an opportunity except to play prostitutes or waiters.”<sup>532</sup>

Zee's comments corroborate statements made by the Arts Education Director of “the nation's pre-eminent Asian American theater troupe” and Hollywood advocacy organization, East West Players. Marilyn Tokuda, an actress who has appeared in small roles in numerous television shows like *The Roller Girls* (NBC, 1978) and *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987), expressed that during her early acting career: “I'm guilty of playing—I don't want to say guilty because that was part of my training, I was offered a lot of those geisha roles, those silly roles. Of course now I think completely differently, but I'd be lying if I didn't say I did those, too. But those were the kind of roles that were offered to us at that time.”<sup>533</sup> She explained that East West Players was founded in 1965 by a group of Asian-American actors who, limited to “very stereotypic roles: the waiter, the gang member, the drug lord,” hoped to perform more complex characters. Locating “progress” in Hollywood by the increase of substantial “three-dimensional roles where [characters] actually have private lives and we see much more dimension,” Tokuda elaborated that “meatiness” and “dimensionality” are found in female characters played by Sandra Oh and Asian men like Daniel Dae Kim, who are shown in “masculine, virile roles.” A film that certainly fits with the organization's conceptualization of progress, *Saving Face* is an important Asian American film about the “processes of negotiation that characterizes identity

---

<sup>532</sup> Ed Leibowitz, "Kissing Vivian Shing," *The New York Times*, May 29, 2005.

<sup>533</sup> Marilyn Tokuda, in discussion with the author, November 16, 2008.

production,” re-orienting and re-directing generic pleasures found in the common senses of beauty and genre.<sup>534</sup>

Wu “construct[s] Asian American cinematic identity by locating their subjectivities in relation to dominant cinematic discourses, signifying on cinematic conventions by repeating them ironically or ‘splitting’ them.”<sup>535</sup> The filmmaker thwarts expectant heterosexual romance and romantic comedy genre conventions, which have “as its central narrative motor a quest for love” through a portrayal of this quest “in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion.”<sup>536</sup> As the first U.S. theatrical release featuring an Asian American lesbian couple, *Saving Face* pursues the pleasurable “light-hearted” approach in narrativizing a difficult situation that could in reality lead to depressing, tragic, or traumatic ends. Through its light-heartedness, the film entertains an optimistic and hopeful possibility in the adaptive resiliency of re-negotiating, and re-defining cultural expectations of Chinese-ness.

In the film, Ma (Joan Chen) and her daughter, Wilhemina (Michelle Krusiec) pursue “deviant” desires in their private lives at the risk of alienation from the rest of the Chinese American community in Queens, New York. Wilhemina is a lesbian doctor who is in love with a beautiful ballerina (Lynn Chen) and has not yet come out to her traditional Chinese American family; meanwhile her 48-year-old widowed mother, simply referred to as Ma, shocks and disappoints her own parents by becoming impregnated by a man finally revealed in the film’s ending to be ten years Ma’s junior. Likened to Ang Lee’s family portrait film about a Taiwanese

---

<sup>534</sup> Andrea Louie, "Searching for Roots in Contemporary China and Chinese America," in *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture*, ed. Sucheng Chan and Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 196.

<sup>535</sup> Peter X. Feng, *Identities in Motion : Asian American Film and Video* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>536</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy : Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (London and New York: Wallflower, 2007), 9.



American father and his three daughters in *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), *Saving Face* also delights in revealing the binding ties, humorously rendered, of several generations in a Chinese American family. One IMDb user writes about the ineffable pleasures of his experience watching *Saving Face*: "It's too bad that I don't have the skill to describe the pleasure of seeing 'Saving Face.' It's something like the experience of looking into the fire in the fireplace on a cold evening."<sup>537</sup> Ultimately the film is a feel-good comedy that offers the *pleasures* of overcoming heteronormativity within the Chinese American community. The film's generic comedic pleasures offers spectatorial levity, balancing out the more serious and graver issues involved in overcoming the cultural taboos carried over by immigrant families.

Parallel to the quest for love between Wilhemina and Vivian is the quest for reconciliation between Wil and her mother, as they attempt to understand one another's generational and cultural differences—as well as their differences in sexual and gender identity. Ma is a tough-love Chinese mom who nags and fusses over Wilhemina, making judgmental statements about her daughter's friends and refuses to accept that her daughter is gay. Unlike the malicious stereotyping seen in other American romantic comedies, John Hughes' *Sixteen Candles* (1984), for instance, stereotypes about first generation immigrants are rendered into light-hearted comedy achieved through the skilled comedic performances by the film's actors. Wu, in other words, draws on the common sense of the comedic genre in order to revise stereotypes of Chinese American identity. Chen is especially endearing and charming, playing both over-involved mother and filial daughter reduced to tears when her own father accuses her of bringing shame to the family.

---

<sup>537</sup> dsa-12, user review of *Saving Face*, April 17, 2005, "A Very Enjoyable and Very Different Movie," in *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb), [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0384504/reviews?ref\\_=tt\\_urv](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0384504/reviews?ref_=tt_urv).

*Saving Face* is a “Chinese American identity narrative,” to use Andrea Louie’s term.<sup>538</sup> It demonstrates the “merging and the processes through which the meanings of Chinese-ness and Chinese American-ness as heritage, racial category, and political identity are negotiated.”<sup>539</sup> However, rather than dwell on such processes as heavy, difficult and depressing, *Saving Face* reveals how such negotiations, although difficult in context, can be light, intimate and joyful. For instance, the family’s fluid and masterful command of bilingualism is used in strategic and humorous ways. When Wil invites her friend, Jay, an African American neighbor, over for dinner, Ma becomes offended when he over-spices her cooking with soy sauce (an insulting cultural gesture also remarked upon in Wayne Wang’s famous 1993 film adaptation, *The Joy Luck Club*). In response, Ma takes advantage of the American guest’s inability to comprehend Chinese in order to make passive-aggressive and judgmental remarks about how she should eat less soy sauce, lest it “stain” her baby. Ma *knows* that she is behaving badly, and thus chooses to speak only in Chinese, creating an esoteric conversation that attempts to abide by the rule that “what you don’t know can’t hurt you.” Although the American audience is made privy to the conversation via subtitles, the Asian American spectator is especially inculcated in what Hye Seung Chung calls the “Oriental masquerade” wherein the insider knowledge involves a larger recognition of social re-training for many first generation immigrants.<sup>540</sup> Later, in a humorous scene showing Ma’s awkward blind date, Jay’s conveniently-timed neighborly appearance in the apartment hallway allows her to dodge an unwanted end-of-night-kiss, for which she is visibly grateful. Ma learns that she has been unfair about Wil’s friends just as unfair judgments were launched at her by the Chinese American community for her out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

---

<sup>538</sup> Louie, "Searching for Roots in Contemporary China and Chinese America."

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>540</sup> Hye Seung Chung, *Hollywood Asian: Philip Ahn and the Politics of Cross-Ethnic Performance* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

Chen-as-Ma subtly infuses her character with performative insincerity and irony, not unlike Chen's aforementioned performances in *The Last Emperor* and *Twin Peaks*. Just as Chen is able to convey irony through her performance, the film also self-reflexively gestures to Chen's previous body of work. In one scene, she goes to the video store to rent a movie, and simply asks the clerk, "China?" He points to a row of films, and Chen's eyes gloss over the selection, the first of which is *The Last Emperor*, followed by *The Joy Luck Club* (a metatextual gesture to the aforementioned best-known Chinese American film about mothers and daughters). Finally through a POV shot, we see that the next row holds pornographic videos featuring Asian performers, a seamless continuity that visualizes the phenomenon Shimizu refers to as "the hypersexuality of race."<sup>541</sup> It is later revealed that Ma passes up the more typical fare offering Chinese fantasy for one such pornographic video, which she watches with rapt attention, confusion, and ambivalent pleasure. As the porno audibly asserts its overt racialized sexuality intended to scintillate its viewers (the man provocatively asks, "Who's your Asian daddy?"), Ma engages in what Shimizu refers to as "productive perversity," that is, identifying with "bad" stereotypical images of race and gender, in order to participate in a production of identity that extends beyond normalized and standardized images. Ma's energetic curiosity into the perverse stereotypes of Asian sexuality vis-à-vis pornography reflects a wider socio-cultural engagement between Asian Americans and "bad" representations, ultimately suggesting that we take pleasure in these images. Moreover, in this subversive pornography, rather than featuring a hypersexual Asian women, as is the norm, an Asian man becomes the hypersexual object of desire.

Chen's performance in *Saving Face* not only demonstrates her comedic acting abilities but also how her body of work spans across genres and filmmaking modes. Wu's romantic

---

<sup>541</sup> Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*.

comedy illustrates how the affective identification with non-normative sexual identities need not be premised on precarity, danger, and anxiety as the film draws on the comforts of genre, expectation, and beauty to advocate for gentle and light-hearted assimilation into American cinema and society.

Lucy Liu: Contested beauty and ironic masquerade

Born in Queens, New York to mainland Chinese immigrant parents, Lucy Liu's first language was Mandarin and she only began to learn English at the age of five. After Liu began her university education, she was discovered on the subway at the age of 19 and subsequently filmed her first commercial. In her senior year of college at the University of Michigan, she landed the lead role in the school's production of *Alice in Wonderland*. After a few bit roles in other television shows in the 1990s, Liu was injected into American popular culture through her re-occurring and prominent role as a hypersexual female chauvinist on the hit television show, *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), a popular and controversial show with a five-year-run on the FOX network.

Remarking on her place in Hollywood, Liu told an online fashion magazine: "It's a very *strange place* to be. You're not Asian enough and then you're not American enough [emphasis added]."<sup>542</sup> With 81 acting credits, Liu is the most employed Asian American actor ever to work in Hollywood—and yet, her fame occupies a "strange place" in American popular culture. Although Liu is a household name, her body is perceived neither as Asian nor American, but as an in-between *some-body*. Analogous to Liu's ethno-nationalist liminality, the actress' onscreen status has persistently hovered somewhere between leading woman and supporting role throughout her more than two-decade long career. Just as Liu identifies the cultural geography of

---

<sup>542</sup> Tiffany Bakker, 2013, "True Colors," *Net-a-Porter*, <http://www.net-a-porter.com/magazine/194/10>

her celebrity as a “strange place,” her embodiment as an “intimate stranger,” to use Richard Schickel’s term, is at once familiar and alien, a fact exacerbated by the shortage of Asian American celebrities in mass media.<sup>543</sup> Conjugating Schickel’s term to discuss the “intimate strangeness” of stardom, this section examines Liu’s celebrity liminality in terms of her on and off-screen roles in (post-)racial and (post-)feminist cultural fantasies.

The actress’ early “Dragon Lady” television and film roles adhered to hypersexual conventions of Asian female representation in popular media, but Liu’s career changed course as her celebrity rose. Choosing more “colorblind” roles, Liu’s trajectory patterns the paths of Asian assimilation into white society—from immigrant/foreigner to (hyphenated) American. Nevertheless, as post-identity itself is a fantasy, illusions of (post-)race and (post-)feminism fray around the edges of Liu’s stardom, most discernibly in public discourses about her appearance. In Western societies Caucasian beauty is naturalized as common sense. Thus when actor Martin Freeman (who plays her counterpart in the BBC *Sherlock*) called Liu “very ugly” and compared her to a “dog” during an interview, his remarks, perhaps motivated by rivalry also reflect *dis-ease* and affective distress in the encounter with the embodiment of un-common sense—both in terms of Liu’s ethnic Chinese looks and the decision to cast the actress as Watson in the American television adaptation of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Meanwhile, debates over Liu’s physical beauty by Chinese netizens also reveal a disavowal of Liu’s star credibility vis-à-vis beauty capital, as many Internet posters contend that her appearance caters to exotic, colonialist ideals of Chinese beauty and femininity. Reflecting on Liu’s own observations that she is perceived as neither Asian nor American “enough” in Hollywood, I conclude with preliminary connections between trans/national beauty politics, common sense, and celebrity liminality.

---

<sup>543</sup> Richard Schickel, "Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity in America," (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000).

### Ally McBeal

After a few bit roles in television shows in the 1990s, Liu was injected into American popular culture through her re-occurring and prominent role as a hypersexual female chauvinist on the hit television show, *Ally McBeal*, a popular and controversial show with a five-year-run on the ABC network.

The show focused on contemporary working women's issues in a "postfeminist" atmosphere, and with the exception of a few dramatic plotlines, the series is generally regarded as a legal comedy show. Initially introduced as one of the titular character's pseudo-nemeses, Ling Woo quickly became a prominent figure in the show. Similar to Joan Chen's portrayal as girl-next-door Josie Packard, Liu-as-Ling embodies the "unwelcome houseguest," to use John Caldwell's conceptualization of the ambivalent televisualization of sexuality, race, and high culture. Caldwell writes, "The consistent historical conflation of art and race is perhaps the best example of how television's posturing also functioned as a way to assimilate—rather than to simply elide—its threats. . . . Race persists as television's avant-garde."<sup>544</sup> Ling embodies a kind of sexual avant-garde for the American viewer as she performs the ironic masquerade as an assertive and powerful "Dragon Lady" both as a lawyer in the courtroom and in the bedroom. Although she often proclaims that she does not like sex very much, she nevertheless proves that she is highly skilled at it. Stalling sexual intercourse with her boyfriend for months, one of the partners of Ally McBeal's law firm, Ling keeps Richard Fish (Greg Germann) satisfied and comically incapacitated merely with her electric kissing abilities and her suggestive, if not perverse, finger-licking skills. Aural motifs characterizing Ling include the non-diegetic use of the Miss Gulch theme song from *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and a growling

---

<sup>544</sup> John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 68-70.

diegetic sound other characters hear whenever Ling is dissatisfied. The canine-like growling sound aurally signifies that Ling is a “bitch,” falling in line with conventions of Chinese female *object*-ification that eject Chinese female bodies outside of humanist common sense. However, despite her characterization as an aggressive man-eating alpha woman, Liu’s controlled performance of Ling is graceful, cool-headed, and even-tempered—a stoicism that lends to her character’s charm and gestures to Liu’s self-aware management of her own image.

As the show’s most vocal female chauvinist, Ling consistently voices her opinion about women’s superiority, referring to men as “Neanderthals” and “horny toads,” and referring to their penises as “dumb sticks.” She owns a club wherein women in bathing suits wrestle with one another in mud and defends her right for women to use sex “as a weapon,” insisting that it is the advantage God gave to women. While all the female characters on the show, including Ally McBeal (Calista Flockhart), apparently support the recalibration of power between men and women through the use of feminine and sexual charms, Ling is most forthright about it. When charged with exploiting the female wrestlers, Ling insists that, on the contrary, it is men who are being exploited by allowing women to control their “dumb sticks.” In another episode, Ling is arrested for running a dating service with underage male clients and defends her business by insisting that she sells envy and popularity (not sex) by allowing young boys to be seen in public with beautiful women—in other words, she coordinates transactions in an affect economy (also a metatextual comment on her own affective-performative labor to sell pleasure, envy, and desire). Shimizu writes of Liu’s hypersexual performances in film and television: “It is her embrace of hypersexuality in such roles—in terms of her deriving sexual enjoyment from giving and receiving pain—that makes Lucy Liu’s roles hover on the edge of defying or reinscribing stereotypes of Asian women as hypersexual. It is her play with race, gender, and sexuality as a

subject-in-struggle that allows us to see how her performance pushes us toward an understanding of the vast possibilities of political resistance in representation.”<sup>545</sup>

Scholars have written about the conflicted feminist messages in *Ally McBeal*, a show helmed by creator David E. Kelley, who states, “[Ally’s] not a hard, strident feminist out of the ‘60s and ‘70s. She’s all for women’s rights, but she doesn’t want to lead the charge at her own emotional expense.”<sup>546</sup> As Bonnie Dow suggests, *Ally McBeal* is a show that demonstrates lifestyle feminism, in which feminism is not a political orientation but rather an everyday lived concern with women’s happiness. Middle-brow discourses, however, interpret the show as proof of the death of feminism. As Laurie Ouellette recalls in her essay, “Victims no more: postfeminism, television, and *Ally McBeal*,” a 1998 *Time* magazine cover juxtaposes the fictional character Ally McBeal alongside Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinam. Under Ally’s portrait in blood-red letters reads the question, “Is feminism dead?”<sup>547</sup> As scholars like Ouellette and Probyn contend, the show presumes the success of feminism and the women’s movement. As such, it affords its characters flexible subject positions that allow them to construe feminism as “other” and even threatening to their goals of both professional and personal success. The show’s postfeminist ideologies thus allows for the production of new social identities in a post-victimization universe wherein women view feminism as antithetical to their personal ideologies of freedom, lifestyle, and happiness. Such is the case in an episode when Ally defends her right to wear short skirts in the courtroom (even calling the judge played by Sydney Poitier a “pig”), ostensibly to prove that being sexually attractive does not negate a

---

<sup>545</sup> Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*, 88.

<sup>546</sup> Qtd. in A. Susan Owen, Leah R. Vande Berg, and Sarah R. Stein, *Bad Girls: Cultural Politics and Media Representations of Transgressive Women* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 97.

<sup>547</sup> Laurie Ouellette, "Victims No More: Postfeminism, Television, and Ally Mcbeal," *The Communication Review* 5, no. 4 (2002).



woman's credibility. The show is unapologetic in its oversimplified notion that women's progress can be seen in the privilege to dress "nasty" and "slutty" as a means to express one's individuality.

If, as Ouellette suggests, *Ally McBeal* conveys the premise that "young women's right to choose femininity [is] a postfeminist gain," then is the right to *choose* beauty as a feminine practice also a postfeminist gain?<sup>548</sup> All the women in the show possess a significant amount of beauty and sexual capital, as many television and film actresses are cast are to reify "narrow if not impossible beauty standards."<sup>549</sup> For instance, controversies about actress Calista Flockhart's petite frame were perceived by many to be the result of an eating disorder. Embodying another *kind* of "impossible beauty standard," as one that is eroticized through race, Liu's performative body as Ling Woo is marked as an exotic-erotic foreign body—in the first episode in which she appears, a shock jock she is suing describes her as having "that slutty little Asian thing going"—and yet, she is also an ideological extension of *Ally McBeal* and the postfeminist privileges *Ally* embodies as a white, middle-class woman, including the privilege to reap the rewards and pleasures of conforming to expectations of feminine beauty as reinforced by advertising, television programs, films (and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Internet and social-networking media).

Under the guise of multiculturalism, the assimilationist politics of the show are premised on the erasure of ethnic difference, and the women of color are absorbed under the postfeminist promises that women can be successful *and* beautiful, smart and feminine—without feminism.<sup>550</sup> Moreover, Ling's embrace of neoliberal consumerism through her ethos that "true happiness can

---

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>550</sup> The other prominent woman of color on the show is *Ally*'s roommate, Renee Raddick (Lisa Nicole Carson). She partners up with another female lawyer to start their own law firm that plans to use their feminine "sensuality" as "eye-candy" in order to attract male clients.

only be found in one thing: shopping” accords with other televisual representations of “empowered” female consumers at the turn-of-the-century, for instance in the contemporaneous HBO show, *Sex & the City* (1998-2004). As Ouellette rightly points out, the show as a whole fails to examine “the social construction of gender and the gendered politics of looking relations.”<sup>551</sup> Nevertheless within Liu’s performative embodiment as Ling lies a more complex and resistant politics of beauty, particularly in terms of race, wherein a gendered and raced politics of looking relations based in neocolonialist fantasy are always-already inscribed in common sense. Through the performance of an ironic masquerade, which defines many, if not the vast majority of Liu’s filmic performances, complex affective pleasures arise, particularly for the female spectator and her perverse enjoyment in hypersexual representations as a kind of “me, not me” identification. In other words, Ling’s performances of femininity and beauty enable flexible spectatorial identifications with her character.

Similar to the notion of Josie Packard as a woman whose survival was contingent on “*being* what other people wanted to *see*,” Ling also reveals her multiple talents and identities within the cosmopolitan environment of the fast-paced law firm, embodying multiple visions of the successful Asian American achiever as well as fulfilling the vision of beautiful exotic foreigner. Ling is a successful entrepreneur and lawyer, who also happens to design clothing, cut and style hair, and do makeup. As a neoliberal consumer of beauty in the new millennium, Ling uses beauty to build her self-esteem and confidence. In one episode Ally asks Ling if she can do her makeup, and without missing a beat Ling confidently responds, “Look at me. Is my face not flawless?” to which Ally begrudgingly agrees that, “it’s without flaw.” In a later episode Ally exasperatedly describes Ling’s visage as “that perfect, perfect face!” Often adorned in tight,

---

<sup>551</sup> Ouellette, “Victims No More: Postfeminism, Television, and Ally McBeal,” 324.

feminine dresses and short mini-skirts, Ling flaunts her looks and her ability to attract men— however, she also makes it clear that she does not enjoy being ogled and objectified by men. By distinguishing between two kinds of desire: *attracting* and *objectifying*, Ling complicates and diversifies the ways in which we understand the concept of woman as object of the gaze.

In one episode, appropriately titled “Just Looking,” Ling sues one of her employees at her steel plant for having sexual thoughts about her. When the judge questions her decision to wear sexy attire, Ling refutes his implication, instead insisting on her right to self-style in “contemporary” fashion. Similar to the episode wherein she defends her female mud-wrestling club, Ling asserts the postfeminist claims that feminine beauty is pursued, not for the pleasure of (heterosexual) men, but for oneself and for the pleasure of one’s own being-in-the-world. Although Ling does not question how the “gendered politics of looking relations” came to be structured by social constructions and power dynamics within gender, she does, however, challenge the *right to pleasure* implicit in the male gaze by insisting on the latent dimensions of power within the allegedly innocent act of “just looking.” By pursuing this line of argument, Ling translates feminist psychoanalytic theory into a kind of low or common-sense theory or utility for everyday working women.

However, how are we to make sense of Ling’s blatant materialism, apparently hyper-inflated ego, shallow concerns with beauty and appearance, and blatant disavowals of love? Unlike Ally’s belief in make-believe worlds in which unicorns and soul-mates exist, Ling is jaded by love and instead espouses the ideology of the neoliberal consumer, that “true happiness can only be found in one thing: shopping.” Unlike the other characters in the show, Ling is rarely portrayed as vulnerable, and her interiority in large part remains unexplored. Similar to Chen’s character in *Twin Peaks*, Ling is a mystery, a performative enigma. The hypersexual Asian

American woman embodies epistemological limitation, and Hollywood tokenist casting practices only reinforce such readings. However, there can be affective, if not narrative pleasures, found in ironic consumption of exotic-beauty-in-masquerade, the knowingness that performance and performativity can enable fluid and elusive negotiations within Asian American identity production. Lauren Berlant describes the role of affective belonging within “intimate publics,” suggesting that “ongoing and developing social practices and mobile identifications within a field of belonging generate diverse kinds of absorption in the activity of the reproduction of life—not just as work, but in domains of the pleasures.”<sup>552</sup> *Ally McBeal*, as a reproduction of life, albeit a fantastic and even male-authored world, generates numerous intimate publics for women, and not least of all for Asian American women who can enjoy the predictable and problematic character of Ling as an “aesthetic structure of affective expectation,” a generic character belonging within a generic domain of pleasure.<sup>553</sup>

In the episode, “Buried Pleasure,” a title befitting the claims of this chapter, Ling and Ally discover that their animosity towards one another actually stems from a repressed mutual sexual attraction. In the beginning of the episode, Ling is even more stoic than usual when the team meets to discuss their latest case. After everyone else leaves, Ling stays behind and asks Ally if she’s ever had a dream where she kisses another woman. She then asks Ally if she would like to work on their friendship and go to dinner together. Later at her home, Ally talks to her roommate about Ling and confesses that she “isn’t disgusted” about the idea of kissing Ling, and is in fact nervous about what to wear at their upcoming dinner. Meanwhile Ling expresses her anxiety to her boyfriend about becoming a lesbian, and Richard spouts a bio-deterministic

---

<sup>552</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

justification about two women kissing as a valid method of heterosexual male arousal (as opposed to two men kissing) in order to perpetuate the human species.

On their dinner “date,” Ling is styled in an especially feminized manner in an elegant black cocktail dress with her hair in wave curls descending down her back. Meanwhile, Ally is styled in a youthful, flirtatious way with crimped hair and a colorful shoulder-exposing sweater, marking her as the immature and inexperienced “lover” of the two. Ally is visibly nervous when Ling confesses that she was the woman that Ling dreamt about kissing, but Ling calmly adds that despite the dream, she decided that at the end of the day what she is looking for in a relationship is “a penis” (with no mention of a man attached). Then the two spot a team of hockey players lustfully looking at them, and Ling convinces Ally to play a trick on them, which she asserts is the “most arousing and the most frustrating thing” for heterosexual men. They dance with one another in the center of the room in an erotic and sensual way as the hockey players watch. A deliberate appeal to the voyeuristic male gaze in the Mulveyian sense, the two actresses (Liu and Flockhart) nevertheless seem comfortable and convincing in their erotic chemistry, one that allegedly excludes a heterosexual male participant but includes a heterosexual male voyeur who is invited to “just look.”

The next day in Ally’s office, Ally confesses to Ling that she had the urge to kiss her at the end of their night together. While Ally is stumbling and nervous, Ling cool-headedly asks her to step out from behind her desk. Ling suggests that the urge may go away if they kiss. The two kiss, framed in a profile medium close-up. The scene is titillating in its lingering on the kiss, and in the visible traces of pleasure on Ally and Ling’s faces. By the end of the episode, however, in line with the heterosexual imperative of mainstream television, Ling and Ally both agree that while the kiss was good, the missing ingredient “for the tingle” was a penis, and the two laugh

about it as friends who have grown closer by intimate sexual experimentation.<sup>554</sup> Nevertheless, as a stand-alone text, the episode's subversive ending overthrows this heterosexual narrative, as the episode ends on the exchange of longing gazes between Ally and Ling from across the room.

Airing on November 1, 1999 during sweeps week, there is no question that the show's creator David E. Kelley attempted to lure in a high volume of viewers with a sensationalistic lesbian subplot. A GLAAD spokesman even allegedly called the episode "nothing more than just straight man's titillation."<sup>555</sup> Fallout from the episode also extended beyond domestic borders, as the Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS) banned the episode, despite the fact that *Ally McBeal* was one of their top-rated shows. TCS officially issued out the statement, "As a responsible broadcaster, we are very careful to monitor and take action against overtly sexy or alternative themes. Episode 2 has been banned as the entire episode centers on alternative sexual explorations."<sup>556</sup> Sexual experimentation did not, however, dissuade the 18 million U.S. viewers who tuned in, making the episode the most watched in the series to date, and one that merits a critical discussion on sexuality, gender, and looking relations. The episode, like the show, polarized viewers, critics, and scholars alike. In line with the aforementioned academic critiques of the show, Michele L. Hammers, for instance, argues convincingly that, "*McBeal* operates as a cautionary tale about the dangers presented by the co-optation of postfeminist and third-wave feminist discourses as they relate to current professional discourses surrounding the female

---

<sup>554</sup> Roseanne Kennedy observes the lesbian relationship in the show *L.A. Law* (FOX, 1986-1994), "Apparently, in the heterosexual world of *L.A. Law*, a potentially sexual relationship between C.J. and Abby can only be represented as *an issue*, at the cost of eliminating the sex." Rosanne Kennedy, "The Gorgeous Lesbian in *L.A. Law*: The Present Absence?," in *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, ed. Charlotte Brunson, Julie D'Acci, and Lynn Spigel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 319.

<sup>555</sup> Virginia Heffernan, "It's February. Pucker up, TV Actresses.," *The New York Times*, February 10, 2005.

<sup>556</sup> Suzanne Sng, "Ally McBeal-the New Season," *The Straits Times*, March 27, 2000.

body.”<sup>557</sup> Nevertheless, as female bodies are perceived unevenly, even across professional women, Liu-as-Ling’s body plays a significant (non)sense-making role in unmaking hegemonic representations.

Here a lesbian kiss offers a non-normative assimilative entry into America’s televisual multiculturalism. As Khoo writes, “The Chinese exotic is able to create a distance from itself as that which is outside (ex-centric and ventriloquial), and in doing so can question the underlying assumptions and bases of power by negotiating with its preceding colonialist representations.”<sup>558</sup> Whereas in colonialist literatures, the colonized woman is freely available for heterosexual consumption, Ling’s character, despite her beauty and allure to men, powerfully manages other people (both men and women’s) desires towards her. Ling becomes *subjectified* through her unwavering gaze and ability to command others (she quite literally commands Ally out from behind her desk in “Buried Pleasure”). Moreover, Liu reportedly enjoyed the kiss and took active pleasure in it. In an 2003 cover feature with popular women’s magazine, *Jane*, Liu reportedly remarked, “It wasn't weird kissing Calista. It was very sensual.”<sup>559</sup> Then, in what would become the origins of subsequent career-shadowing rumors about her possible (bi/homo)sexuality, Liu added, “Sometimes you fall in love with somebody, and you're really not thinking about what gender they happen to be. But if I happen to fall in love with a woman, everyone's going to make a big deal out of it.”<sup>560</sup> Henceforth inspiring speculation about her sexuality, Liu’s comments suggest partial authorship of her celebrity liminality, what Kathleen McHugh, Diane Negra, and Su Holmes have conceptualized as celebrity autography, or “self-staged agency and

---

<sup>557</sup> Michele L. Hammers, "Cautionary Tales of Liberation and Female Professionalism: The Case against Ally McBeal," *Western Journal of Communication* 69, no. 2 (2005): 168.

<sup>558</sup> Khoo, *The Chinese Exotic: Modern Diasporic Femininity*, 19.

<sup>559</sup> *Jane magazine*, October 2003.

<sup>560</sup> Stuart Cameron, "Bi Love Lucy," *The Mirror*, September 6, 2003.

embodiment.”<sup>561</sup> Refusing to assert a monodirectional sexual identity, Liu’s autographic remark embraces liminal sexual politics in a tabloid-saturated world. The ventriloquism of postfeminist desires through Ling and Liu’s own autographic voice cohere in a celebrity image that is eccentrically (and ex-centrally) liminal—a threshold persona that defined Liu’s early career.

### Payback

A year after Ling Woo began to make her weekly appearances on *Ally McBeal*, Liu also appeared in a film starring Mel Gibson, *Payback* (Brian Helgeland, 1998). *Payback* is a neo-noir film featuring an urban setting and morally ambiguous characters, including the tough-guy male protagonist and multiple femme fatales, one of which is played by Liu. The film is stylistically marked as a noir film with its high contrast chiaroscuro lighting, snappy dialogue, and voice-over narration and direct mode of address to the audience by the protagonist.

Another direct mode of address concerns Liu and her campy performances as a Chinatown dominatrix named Pearl. Pearl is impervious to death and pain—in fact, taking pleasure in both receiving and doling out the latter. In nearly each of Pearl’s scenes, she is seen relishing in administering or receiving corporeal punishment from men, and enjoying the sight and *taste* of violent spectacle (in a few instances, she even licks her lips to savor the taste of blood in her mouth). From the growling bisexual “bitch” in *Ally McBeal* to the insatiable, inhuman dominatrix in *Payback*, Liu’s body is accented by carnal pleasure, desire, and animalism.

---

<sup>561</sup> Diane Negra and Su Holmes, "Introduction: Going Cheap? Female Celebrity in the Tabloid, Reality and Scandal Genres," *Genders* 48 (2008); Kathleen McHugh, "Of Agency and Embodiment: Angelina Jolie’s Autographic Transformations," *Celebrity Studies* 5, no. 1-2 (2014).



In the film's introduction of Pearl, a tracking shot and slow low-angle pan illustrates Pearl's dominance and power within her surroundings, despite her thin and petite frame. Pearl regurgitates the now-iconic lines uttered by a Vietnamese prostitute character in *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987): "Me love you, baby. Me love you long time." However, she utters the lines ironically and in a deadpan manner while beating up her lover/client and film antagonist, organized crime thug Val (Gregg Henry). Pearl's sarcastic tone satirizes the hypersexual Asian woman stereotype as well as the collapse of multiple ethnicities under one umbrella "Asian" identity in the West. Rather than be injured by such categorical assumptions, Pearl exploits them to her advantage. It is all part of her generic Asian dominatrix act.

Although she beats, and is beaten by, men in her line of "work," Liu's performance indicates that she gains nothing but pleasure in the economy of pain. Often giggling, and unable to contain her glee in scenes of violence, Liu-as-Pearl's squirming, ecstatic body even exceeds common sense notions of pain itself. Pearl's experience of pain is shockingly inhuman insofar as her expressions of pain are powerful utterances of satisfaction, enjoyment and pleasure. In Elaine Scarry's formulation of pain and power, 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.<sup>562</sup> By the end of the film, Pearl is the only person who survives a final blow-out gun battle with the film's protagonist, Porter, played by the always-gruff and weathered tough-guy, Mel Gibson. In a final exchange with Porter in the film's denouement, both Pearl and Porter's guns run out of bullets and each ends up sparing the other's life. However, in a film that did not spare in its body count (all of Porter's enemies are killed), it bears asking why and how Pearl survives. One answer is that Pearl is a non-human and even

---

<sup>562</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

monstrous being who neither *makes* nor *perceives* sense. She embodies a liminal being, to use Victor Turner's mythical-ritualistic conceptualizations of rites of passage. Here is it worth quoting Turner in his description of a "rite of passage," initially defined by Arnold Van Gennep (1909), at length:

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past of coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and "structural" type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.<sup>563</sup>

Although Turner is literal in his anthropological exploration of rites of passage among tribal communities, it is worth discussing how rites of passage function in symbolic socio-political spheres, such as within the rites and rituals of "naturalization," the "process by which U.S. citizenship is granted to a foreign citizen or national after he or she fulfills the requirements

---

<sup>563</sup> Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969; 2008), 94-95.

established by Congress in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA).”<sup>564</sup> The ongoing naturalization and assimilation processes of Asian Americans within the *longue durée* suggest that the “earlier fixed point in the social structure” can be read both historically in terms of low and high periods of Asian immigration, as well as to the theoretical notion of “immigrant” as an earlier social identity. Moreover, as a relatively “new” kind of American, the Asian American is a kind of neophyte, still gaining his/her skills in order to fully embody American identity in his/her pursuit of “reaggregation or reincorporation” into American society as a full “American” (not a foreigner).

In a MSNBC news program, political pundit Chris Matthews publically asserted: “You can't be more American than African-American. Most African-Americans have been here for 300 years, whereas a great majority of white families came in the 18th and 19th centuries, building on what African-Americans already laid the foundation for.”<sup>565</sup> As “Other” people of color, Asian Americans are unable to make similar claims to American authenticity, given that Asian immigration only began with Chinese immigrants in the mid-1800s. Although Chinese immigrants were also exploited as an instrumental labor source for such infrastructures as the Transcontinental Railroad, discriminatory immigration laws beginning in the late 1800s prohibited significant volumes of immigration from Asian countries until the repeal of such acts in the 1950s and 1960s. The “Asian American” figure remains in its initiation rites of passage, and as such, is subjected to a liminal or transitional period, ascending from a “passage from lower to higher status” through a “limbo of statuslessness.”<sup>566</sup> Although Turner and his

---

<sup>564</sup> “Citizenship through Naturalization,” 2013, Department of Homeland Security (Official Website of the Department of Homeland Security), <http://www.uscis.gov/us-citizenship/citizenship-through-naturalization>.

<sup>565</sup> “The Impact of MLK's 'Dream,' 50 Years Later,” August 28, 2013, (NBC News).

<sup>566</sup> “Liminality and Communitas,” 97.

intellectual descendants in the anthropological fields examine the ritualistic and ceremonial contexts of rites of passage, descriptions of liminal entities suitably describe the embodied representations of Asian American people throughout film and television, like Pearl in *Payback*.

“Threshold people” as Turner writes, as “the subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, ‘invisible.’” Pearl is “betwixt and between,” or to word it in academic terms, she occupies an “intersectional” identity. Although she is associated with the Chinatown “Chow” gang in the film, she takes one of their sworn enemies as her lover. When Porter comes to exact information from Val and threatens to beat him up, Pearl then suddenly turns on her lover and beats Val up on Porter’s behalf. She is disloyal to any and all groups—she does not belong to *any* community. As a liminal entity, Pearl is “neither here nor there; [she is] betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”<sup>567</sup>

The Asian American body in the American imaginary is pre-civilized, situated in the sexual, the primitive, and the ceremonial. Thus, terms like “Asian fetish” to explain a typically white man’s inexplicable and heightened sexual attraction to Asian women circulate in popular culture and vernacular. Moreover the idea that Chinese female characters like Pearl are impervious to pain also symbolically places their represented bodies within liminal, ceremonial spaces. In order to feel pain, one must have a human body, but as Asian Americans are still in the liminal status of *being* and *becoming* American, Pearl, as the mythical Asian American body feels nothing.

She is the body that lacks materialism because her body has yet to be *defined*. Turner explains, “The neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed

---

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status. The ordeals and humiliations, often of a grossly physiological character, to which neophytes are submitted represent partly a destruction of the previous status and partly a tempering of their essence in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities and restrain them in advance from abusing their new privileges.”<sup>568</sup> In conjunction with notions of uncommon sense, the monstrosity of Pearl, demonstrated through her fantastic embodiment and defiance of *sense*, destroys her previous status as a “foreign body”—a Chinese immigrant. She cannot experience pain as a normal human being, instead taking enormous punches to her body with a pleasure verging on ecstasy. Pearl therefore undergoes bodily trials to prepare her for her new social status, preparing her to cope with new responsibilities ushered in by the uneasy assimilation of the Asian American woman through neo-colonialist narratives of sexual encounter and conflicted multicultural visions in a “post-feminist” world.

In both cases of Chen and Liu, there appears to be a sense of “haggling” with their liminal roles and performances. As both actresses have remarked on the stereotyping of Asian characters in film and television, each has also insisted, through bodily performance and embodiments of uncommon beauty, that there is space for negotiation and compromise within the Hollywood industrial-image-making and common-sense-making complex. In addition to the anthropological meanings of “liminality,” the concept also appears in Hamid Naficy’s theoretical configurations of transnational filmmaking as a genre.<sup>569</sup> Naficy suggests that exilic filmmakers share a state of “liminal panic” over their interstitial subject-hoods, an affective state that becomes refracted in films thematically dealing with phobic spaces. He suggests that their films

---

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>569</sup> Hamid Naficy, “Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: Independent Transnational Film Genre,” in *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, ed. Ella and Robert Stam Shohat (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

are a product of filmmakers “haggling” and struggling over their “homelessness,” as well as their ambivalence about both host and home countries. The same observation could also be applied to liminal actors and their “haggling” over Hollywood roles.

Returning to beauty performance and embodiment, how do Chen and Liu’s exotic appearances play a role in the negotiations, by both performer and spectator, of their images? What about the “common sense” of beauty that implicitly takes it as natural, good, and socially acceptable? In contrast, the “non-sense” of trans/national Chinese femininity pervades contemporary diasporic visual culture and its neo-colonialist fascination with Chinese femininity.<sup>570</sup> Geertz suggests that common sense functions as a cultural system akin to religion, science, philosophy, art, and ideology insofar as it, too, “pretends to reach past illusions to truth, as we say, things as they are.”<sup>571</sup> However, unlike the common sense of white actresses’ beauty, Liu’s appearance has been a contested point in discussions about her, and her stardom is very much premised on her “exotic” appearance. Her uncommon looks are industrially valuable in terms of Hollywood’s affect economy to generate new and exciting thrills through the presentation of exotic bodies. However, neither is Liu considered beautiful within the dominant Anglo-European dictates of beauty nor within modern Chinese beauty standards.

In the case of Anglo-European dictates of beauty within the U.S., Liu’s facial physiognomy differs from the popular Asian American actresses that preceded her, actresses like big-eyed Anna May Wong and Nancy Kwan. Renee Tajima explains, “The standard of beauty of Asian women that it is set in the movies deserves mention. Caucasian women are often used for Asian roles, which contributes to a case of aesthetic imperialism for Asian women. When Asian actresses are chosen they invariably have large eyes, high cheekbones, and other Caucasian-like

---

<sup>570</sup> Khoo, *The Chinese Exotic: Modern Diasporic Femininity*.

<sup>571</sup> Geertz, “Common Sense as a Cultural System,” 17.

characteristics when they appear on the silver screen.”<sup>572</sup> In a 1924 issue of *Photoplay* magazine, the author writes of Wong, “Her deep brown eyes, while the slant is not pronounced, are typically oriental. But her Machu mother has given her a height and poise of figure that Chinese maidens seldom have.”<sup>573</sup> Unlike Wong, Liu has small and slanted “phoenix eyes” with an epicanthic fold. She is also unlike Eurasian actresses, Nancy Kwan and Maggie Q, whose biracial makeup allows a different kind of spectatorial pleasure surrounding notions of miscegenation.

Mainland Chinese audiences continually debate Liu’s physical appeal, because her appearance, and particularly her small, upturned “phoenix eyes,” are consistent with traditional, rather than modern, conceptions of Chinese beauty. As a kind of discursive validation of Chinese modernity, which is marked on the bodies of women, many Chinese people degrade Liu’s looks to signify and perform their modern and progressive (read Westernized) tastes. In a *Baidu* user-generated forum, someone began a discussion in 2005 titled, “Does everyone think Lucy Liu is beautiful?”<sup>574</sup> 155 Chinese posters attempted to answer this question: some stated that she is “pretty”; others defended Liu’s appearance as “special” and insisted that her talent, charm, and *weidao* were attractive; still others insisted that she is not beautiful and is precisely what Westerners believe is exemplary of Oriental beauty. For instance, one poster remarked, “Have you seen the U.S. version of *Mulan*? She has the same kind of face. Perhaps in the eyes of foreigners, this is the standard for Eastern beauty!” Seeing Liu’s looks as cartoonish, exaggerated, and most of all, outdated, this netizen flexes his resistance against what he

---

<sup>572</sup> Tajima, "Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed: Images of Asian Women," 314.

<sup>573</sup> Ibid.

<sup>574</sup> "大家认为刘玉玲漂亮吗? (Does Everyone Think Lucy Liu Is Beautiful?)," <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/70582321>.

perceives as the re-signification of China as an ancient and traditional place. Unlike the criticisms launched at Zhang Ziyi, premised on perceiving her un-Chinese *interior* characteristics of hyper-ambition and promiscuity, Liu's *exterior* appearance is carefully scrutinized as illustrative of regressive, backwards China.

The physical characteristics most remarked upon in this forum however are Liu's eyes and her freckles (which are seen as un-Chinese). In line with what Wissinger describes as the fashion industry's reliance on "gut feelings" when casting a new model, many of Liu's Chinese defenders, rather than defend her physical characteristics, choose to focus on her ability to impart affect and feeling.<sup>575</sup> One poster, for instance, stated, "Her charisma cannot only be explained by her appearance. I can only say that when I saw *Charlie's Angels*, she gave me a breathtaking feeling." Breathtaking is indeed an apt description of this lavish Hollywood production.

### *Charlie's Angels 1 & 2*

If Pearl represents the Asian neophyte undergoing trials of pain to become American, the character of Alex Munday in *Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2000) and *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (McG, 2003) embodies the aftermath of Pearl's liminal rite-of-passage—reincorporation into society as a new being, specifically an assimilated and acculturated American. Despite the film's superficial and predictable narrative, the highly-stylized, but economically short shots and scenes in *Charlie's Angels* convey exuberance, fun, and whimsy. As one IMDb user writes, the film is a "Eye Candy No-Brainer Fun To Watch" film, extending the notion of "eye candy" to the three

---

<sup>575</sup> Elizabeth Wissinger, "Always on Display: Affective Production in the Modeling Industry," in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. by Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 237.



lead actresses, Drew Barrymore, Cameron Diaz, and Lucy Liu, as well as to the spectacle of expensive film sets and production design.<sup>576</sup>

Liu was cast as the last of the three Angels, and was not the first choice. Dozens of actresses were apparently considered, with top contenders including Thandi Newton and Posh Spice. Industry reports seem to indicate that Liu was the actress producers finally “settled on” after negotiations with Newton fell through. As one newspaper journalist writes, “[Producer Leonard Goldberg] interviewed dozens of stars, including Adams, and finally *settled* on Liu after his number one choice, *Double Jeopardy* actress Ashley Judd, turned him down because she was too busy” [emphasis added].<sup>577</sup> After two prior iterations of (Caucasian) Angels, it certainly did take a “ casting process [that] has turned into one of Hollywood's longest running sagas” as well as an uncommon sense to cast an Asian American “Angel” for the first (and only) time.<sup>578</sup> Managing her own liminal panic, Liu haggled and pushed for roles. Remarking on the stereotyping of Asian characters in film and television, Liu stated that she has had to “push a lot just to get in the room.” However, her successful career has also proven that there is space for anomalous Asian stars in Hollywood.<sup>579</sup>

The 21<sup>st</sup>-century *Charlie’s Angels* film remakes (of the 1970s television series), like most contemporary films of the typically masculine action genre, could be considered as corporealized fantasies of perpetual serendipity wherein luck is the principal guiding force and narrative motor. Although they constantly find themselves in life-endangering situations, the Angels (Dylan,

---

<sup>576</sup> ccthemovieman-1, user review of *Charlie’s Angels*, March 29, 2007, "Eye Candy No-Brainer Fun to Watch," *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb), [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0160127/reviews?ref\\_=tt\\_urv](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0160127/reviews?ref_=tt_urv).

<sup>577</sup> "Posh No Angel, but Lucy Liu Is," *The Daily Telegraph*, November 18, 1999.

<sup>578</sup> Grace Bradberry, "Lucy Liu Foils Posh Spice's Angels Ambition," *The Times (London)*, November 24, 1999.

<sup>579</sup> *Ibid.*

Natalie, and Alex played respectively by Barrymore, Diaz, and Liu) are never in any physical danger—especially within the first hour of the narrative. The operative adverbial term at play here is *somehow*. *Somehow* the Angels always manage to survive explosions in buildings and cars, bullets shot at them from 20-foot ranges, swarms of nasty assassins, jumping off multi-story buildings, and the like. Moreover, the preternaturally beautiful, intelligent, *and* hyper-athletic kung fu specialists are also *somehow* cognitively linked, each able to choreograph her own movements with the other two so that they are able not only to survive but also to “kick ass” while doing so. Certainly the “somehow” conceit of perpetual serendipity constitutes one of many reasons why more sophisticated moviegoers scoff and deride the films. Nevertheless, such objects of popular culture reflect the tastes and sensibilities of mainstream society, a fact confirmed by the films’ significant box-office sales, both domestic and international.<sup>580</sup>

Like *Ally McBeal*, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century *Charlie’s Angels* franchise also represents a “post-feminist” moment in which powerful and attractive women always triumph—despite, and in fact, partially because of their girliness and their girly behavior, a performative motif that is ever-present within the film, even in more “serious” sequences where their lives are in danger. In the first film, Natalie says to a female villain after she interrupts her phone-call with her boyfriend: “Do you know how hard it is to find a quality man in Los Angeles?” Indeed, although the women are skilled and multi-talented spies, plotlines about each Angel’s boyfriend or love interest are never neglected. The multi-talented, multi-faceted Angels always manage to “kick ass” *and* present themselves as physically-attractive, desirable girlfriends who, at the end of the day, also knows how to “kick back” and have fun. As the credit sequences of both *Charlie’s*

---

<sup>580</sup> According to Box Office Mojo, the film’s total domestic gross is over \$125 million domestically and its international total gross is over \$138 million. “Charlie’s Angels,” in *Box Office Mojo*, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=charliesangels.htm>.

*Angels 1 & 2* reveal, the final extra-narrative take-away is that the three actresses laughed and had fun throughout the production of these campy, silly, femme action films. Behind-the-scene montage sequences feature “bloopers” during production and illustrate that, like the film itself, the actresses do not take themselves very seriously—a thorny “post” feminist issue that calls into question women’s self-valuation and worth. Nevertheless, if nothing else, the films reveal a happy homosociality between female companions, a narrative that is not often seen in big-budget Hollywood productions. It is also worth noting that Barrymore’s production company, Flower Films, co-produced the film.

Without digressing too much into the contested feminist politics of the films, it is significant that the uncommon sense of Liu’s performance becomes a point of empowerment, even if following generic filmic and feminine convention. On the one hand, like *Payback*, it satisfies generic expectations in the common sense form of popular, commercial cinema. Unlike *Payback*, the film’s narrative does not explicitly address Alex’s race or ethnicity, although her transnational adoption is implied in the sequel, *Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle* through the introduction of actor John Cleese as her father. Alex Munday embodies the end result of Pearl’s liminal rite-of-passage. Despite her “exotic” looks that inevitably signify an immigrant past and a process of *naturalization*, the film’s racial politics (or lack thereof) do not address Alex’s once-foreignness in terms of her ethnic genealogy. In tandem with the post-feminist logic of the film, the post-racist implications of the film demonstrate how we as a society no longer “care” about race. Alex is just another of Charlie’s peppy and spritely Angels, her beauty an unquestioned judgment of common sense. Nevertheless, despite the film’s colorblind narrative overtures, ethnicity is a crucial aspect of the “eye-candy” of *Charlie’s Angels*. As in *Payback*, Liu embodies the Dragon Lady dominatrix in one scene, drawing fear, awe, and desire from her

diegetic and extra-diegetic male audiences. Brandishing a whip and clothed in a full body latex jumpsuit, Alex “plays” the role of the castrating female sadist, only to undo her own authority in the final beat of the scene wherein her embodiment suddenly shifts to the role of a helpless bimbo. Liu suddenly pushes her weight on one leg and twirls a strand of her hair asking the room of men, “Can anyone show me?” One performance of hyper-femininity undoes the other, one generic convention replaces another, revealing the artifice of both acts. It is precisely within these moments of un-doing that Asian female stereotypes of the Dragon Lady, the over-achieving model minority, and the kung fu mistress are unveiled as farce, satire, and ironic performance.

Ethnic, feminine, and drag masquerades pervade the film’s narrative and mise-en-scène, as each undercover mission seems wholly contingent on the Angels’ ability to go in disguise. Post-feminist and post-racist logics collude in the visual pleasure of the wardrobe-driven film. The primary visual satisfaction and “eye-candy” of the film involves the extravagant and frequent wardrobe changes undertaken by the undercover Angels as they dress as up in kimonos, and as Middle Eastern belly dancers, Swedish nationals, nuns, working men of various occupations, and members of various sub-cultures. Ethnic masquerade is also sublimated in the very viscera of the film itself, as all the action in the film is based on the martial arts wire-fu choreography of Hong Kong martial arts choreographer, Yuen Cheung-yan (brother of Hong Kong’s most skilled and famous martial arts choreographer, Yuen Woo-ping). Performed by the American actresses to embody a kind of “girl-power postfeminism,” these movements pass as American corporeal athletic arts as Liu authenticates the cross-cultural framework of kung-fu physicality through her ethnic body.

The casting of the *Charlie’s Angels’* film franchise bears critical discussion. The

uncommon sense of beauty embodied by Liu becomes a valuable asset because of its unsettling, unconventional nature. Wissinger writes about the high-fashion modeling industry, “There is a certain ‘irrationality affective investment,’ and yet, in an affective economy, value is produced through enlivening, capacitating, and modulating affect. In such an economy, a primary goal of production is to stimulate attention and motivate interest by whatever means are possible, to produce affect in a volatile or turbulent situation.”<sup>581</sup> However, in terms of genre expectations, the casting of Liu in various roles offers sameness with difference—a hot female body with a different ethnic flavor (*weidao*). In *Charlie’s Angels*, Liu rounds out the trio with Cameron Diaz, a blond (Latina) bombshell, and Drew Barrymore with her Old Hollywood lineage and looks. Each woman complements the other by embodying Deleuzian Sameness vis-à-vis diversity. Coded, identified, and recognized as a “hot” actress in her roles as well as in extradiegetic publicity, Liu’s racial difference is further commoditized by popular men’s magazines like *Maxim* and *GQ*.

Liu’s ethnicity is undeniably visible and instrumental in enlivening affect, evinced by the lively online debates about the decision to recently cast her as Dr. Joan Watson in the U.S. adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle’s mystery series, *Elementary*, which premiered on the CBS network in 2012. A daring trans-gender and trans-racial casting decision, the character of John H. Watson is turned into a Chinese American woman, Joan Watson. In an online blog entry on *Thought Catalog* entitled, “Dr. Joan Watson, Racism, and The Sherlock vs. Elementary Backlash,” Gaby Dunn, self-proclaimed “*Sherlock* purist” explains that although she initially called the casting “bullshit,” she was eventually won over by the idea of Liu as a “female lead of color” playing a “strong, complex female lead.” 134 responses to this entry passionately continue

---

<sup>581</sup> Wissinger, "Always on Display: Affective Production in the Modeling Industry," 238.

this debate, with many justifications against the trans-gender, trans-racial casting. Many comments support what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has described as the dominant racial ideology of the post-Civil Rights era: “colorblind racism” in which apparently nonracial explanations are given to maintain racial hierarchy and domination.<sup>582</sup> Accompanying those comments are also “genderblind sexist” statements that reveal certain spectators’ discomfort with seeing Watson “pass” as a woman. While many commentators cite the casting as a violation of the original text in various ways (the BBC *Sherlock* also violates the original text by setting the story in the modern-day, among other *Sherlock* variations), other commentators insist that Liu is not a good actress, and a good number criticize the potential sexual tension and romantic relationship that could arise between Sherlock (Jonny Lee Miller) and Watson—a concern thinly veiling the fear of miscegenation.<sup>583</sup>

Discourses about Liu’s appearance support hegemonic and racialized beauty politics in the West, while also revealing the affective discomfort of Liu’s celebrity. As mentioned earlier, actor Martin Freeman called Liu “very ugly” while conceding that she was also “charming” in a media interview.<sup>584</sup> Meanwhile Liu’s “red-carpet” looks are scrutinized by shows like the E! cable network’s *Fashion Police*, a show which, not so subtly, polices women’s bodies with

---

<sup>582</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

<sup>583</sup> On a not-so-thinly-veiled website called “Reclaiming Beauty: Winning Back Our Civilization,” self-titled writer and photographer Kidist P. Asrat alleges that Liu has only dated white men in order to demonstrate a phenomenon she attributes to a white masculinity crisis as a result of emasculating white feminism, childhood trauma, a depreciation in white feminine appearance, and Asian female cunning to improve her social station. Contending that, “Often, the Asian woman is smartly dressed, slim and attractive,” Asrat’s projects much of the blame of the rise of Asian female desirability unto Liu’s stardom. Kidist P. Asrat, Reclaiming Beauty: Winning Back Our Civilization Blog, “Lucy’s Liu’s Long List of Lovers,” May 14, 2013, <http://reclaimbeauty.blogspot.com/2013/05/lucy-lius-long-list-of-lovers.html>.

<sup>584</sup> “Martin Freeman Dishes on ‘Sherlock’ and Meeting Lucy Liu,” *Access Hollywood* videos, <https://celebrity.yahoo.com/video/martin-freeman-dishes-sherlock-meeting-160000112.html>.

unapologetic body-shaming jokes and taste didacticism. In an episode covering the 2013 Golden Globes, co-host Giuliana Rancic insisted that a Carolina Herrera floral print ball gown was not appropriate for Liu, although she could not explain why. Despite the apparently nonracial or “colorblind” comment, Rancic’s unusual inability to explain her critique implies a deeper racialized logic at work, suggesting that Liu’s intimately strange ethnic appearance operates as a kind of visual anachronism that looks “out of place” and even “out of time” in classical American feminine attire. Indeed, as Liu’s celebrity liminality illustrates, she is both out of place and time, operating in a realm of non-sense and uncommon sense that nevertheless reveals the various stages of Asian assimilation in American culture and society. Through her corporeal performances of sex, health, and beauty, Liu becomes an affective and identifying sensorial stimulus that provokes discussion on what it means to be Asian American.

### *Kill Bill 1 & 2*

In Quentin Tarantino’s cinephilic homage to East Asian film genres, *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (2003) and *Kill Bill Vol. 2* (2004), Liu plays a member of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, a group of assassins who also work for a man who, like Charlie in *Charlie’s Angels*, is heard but not typically seen (until the sequel). One newspaper reporter, Rick Groen pointed out the coincidence of Liu’s film roles: “you don’t need a doctorate in Pop to figure out that the plot is standing one more pulpy stereotype on its clichéd head: *Charlie’s Angels*, make room for *Bill’s Devils*.”<sup>585</sup> A London reporter gave a sarcastic critique: “The result is charmingly reminiscent of how *Charlie’s Angels* might have turned out, had it been directed by Genghis Khan.”<sup>586</sup> More than chance or “perpetual serendipity,” co-incidences that rely on shared clichés of Asian female

---

<sup>585</sup> Rick Groen, "Quentin Kills Again; the Most Influential Director of the 1990s Is Back with a Dazzling Kung Fu Actioner," *The Globe and Mail*, October 9, 2003.

<sup>586</sup> Christopher Tookey, "Quentin Misses the Point," *Daily Mail*, October 10, 2003.

fighters also depend on the “common sense” casting of Liu to embody and authenticate such roles. In *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, Liu plays the lead nemesis, a trans/national half-Chinese, half-Japanese assassin who, since helping to plot and murder the films’ lead protagonist, Beatrix Kiddo (Uma Thurman), has taken to running the Tokyo underworld gang. The film ends in a culminating battle between O-ren Ishii and Beatrix Kiddo concluding with a graphic depiction of a stunned O-ren (Liu) with the top half of her head swiftly taken off by Beatrix’s fetishized Hattori Hanzo sword.

Epitomizing contemporary trans/national identity, O-ren Ishii is a half-Japanese, half-Chinese assassin who grew up as an army brat on an American military base in Tokyo, Japan. Parallel to the generic hybridity of the film itself, O-ren embodies ethnic hybridity, namely of Japanese-Chinese ethnic miscegenation and American nationality. According to Beatrix’s voiceover, the “subject of blood and nationality” only came up once during O-ren’s tenure as organized crime boss, which Tarantino depicts in a flashback sequence. This character development scene displays both O-ren’s great swordplay and her tenacious personality—tough, vengeful, and uncompromising. Liu plays again with ironic performance in her depiction of O-ren, particularly in this scene. Upon hearing Boss Tanaka (Jun Kunimura) call her a “Chinese Jap-American half breed bitch,” she quickly and nimbly runs on top of the table upon which the crime leaders had been dining and celebrating, and decapitates his head with one swift movement, a move that both anticipates and satirizes her own impending death. Without a moment’s pause, she collects herself and makes a speech to the room to explain her sudden action. As Tanaka’s headless body violently spews blood like a geyser, she begins in a pleasantly calm and thoughtful manner, “As your leader, I encourage you, from time to time, in a respectable manner to question my actions. No subject will ever be taboo.” O-ren then quickly



contradicts her own affectation in the next few lines: “The price you pay for bringing up my Chinese or American heritage as a negative is I will collect your fucking head. Just like this fucker here,” as she holds up Tanaka’s head. Clearly, one taboo subject that is “off the table” is her trans/national identity.

O-ren assumes the role of a considerate boss as well as typically brutal mob boss in the same breath. She refuses to tolerate any disparagement of her heritage, which, not accidentally, encompasses both her Chinese ethnicity and her American nationality in accordance with Liu’s own identity. O-ren’s hybrid subjecthood is indeed evocative of the film’s own hybridized nature, what one journalist referred to as Tarantino’s “bloodthirsty homage to Asian martial arts movies.”<sup>587</sup> Her defensiveness about her mixed origins even seems anticipatory of criticisms that would later be launched at the film’s “mixed” appropriation of violent East Asian genres, a maneuver one London reporter denigrates: “It appears that [Tarantino] is so busy recapturing the callous cool of the violent oriental cinema he giggled at in his teens that he can’t be bothered with any human or moral dimension at all.”<sup>588</sup> Implying that “violent oriental cinema” lacks in human or moral dimension, the cultural misunderstanding betrayed by the reporter’s rhetoric illustrates the kind of “awkward encounters” which global communication theorists Paula Chakravartty and Yuezhi Zhao describe as undergirding international relationships between contemporaneous modernities.<sup>589</sup>

Another journalist called the film “blood porn,” referring to Tarantino’s exaggerated use

---

<sup>587</sup> John Dingw, "Kill Bill Is a Bad Dream Come True; It's the Film Tarantino Has Always Wanted to Make and No, He's Not Apologising for the Violence," *Daily Record*, October 3, 2003.

<sup>588</sup> He also argues that the film is a kind of post-9/11 revenge film that exploits the angry mood of young people following the attacks, calling Tarantino the “Osama Bin Laden of American supremacism.” Tookey, "Quentin Misses the Point."

<sup>589</sup> Yuezhi Zhao and Paula Chakravartty, *Global Communications: Toward a Transcultural Political Economy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 15.

of the convention of excessive blood in samurai films and Japanese anime.<sup>590</sup> Aaron Anderson elaborates on the blood trope in *Jump Cut*, mentioning one particular gesture that involves swords and blood referred to as *chiburi* (“blood shedding technique:” a flick of the sword to shake blood from the blade). Anderson contends that, “This throwing of blood from the blade is a useful choreographic device in part because it forces the body into a momentarily upright, almost heroic, pose that is recognizable from countless other visual media, including fantasy novel cover art, comic books, anime and live action films. Tarantino’s connoisseur twist is that he accompanies this pose with an ambient sound of blood splashing onto solid surfaces, thus adding an element that does not appear in other renditions of the movement.”<sup>591</sup> The enhancement of the blood spatter through sound is one way Tarantino enhances the sensual terror within the film. Nevertheless, he defends the visual exhibitionism of blood by insisting on its purely aesthetic and formal value.<sup>592</sup> The same could be said about Tarantino’s use of Liu and her aesthetic qualities representing hybridity and hyphenate identities. Like the dramatic enhancements provided by Tarantino’s gratuitous use of blood, Liu’s exotic body represents a further development into Tarantino’s miscegenation of national film genres. Nevertheless, Liu’s ferocious defense of her character’s hybrid ethnic and nationalist identity transcends Tarantino’s defense of the film’s genre and cultural appropriation. O-ren’s threatening words, “The price you pay for bringing up my Chinese or American heritage as a negative is I will collect your fucking head” are words that, although she may never dare speak them, can nevertheless provide a thrilling moment for the liminal Asian American spectator.

---

<sup>590</sup> Chrissy Iley, “Quentin’s Madonna, Quentin’s Whore,” *The Globe and Mail*, October 4, 2004.

<sup>591</sup> Aaron Anderson, “Mindful Violence: The Visibility of Power and Inner Life in *Kill Bill*,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 47 (2004).

<sup>592</sup> For instance, in several interviews Tarantino faces his objectors by citing Godard’s well-known response to the use of blood in his films (“There is no blood in *Pierrot le Fou*. There is only the color red”).

## Conclusion:

The dual constructs of pleasure and anxiety undergirding international relationships result in the production of “awkward encounters” which are “constitutive both for non-Western modernities and for the articulation of dominant Western political economic and cultural power.”<sup>593</sup> In Deleuzian terms, these “awkward encounters” signify the implosion of the time-space image, creating alterities to common sense discourses, as Keeling has argued.<sup>594</sup> However, rather than construct a creative geography that highlights sympathetic cosmopolitanisms, I am interested in the productive and problematic tensions, translations, and equivocations which arise from the pleasurable and anxious encounters between the indigenous and the foreign, and the muddling between these two identities. Rather than simply embracing the creative possibilities of hybridity enabled by transculturation, it is also important to understand its limitations, as when common sense discourses embedded within cinematic text exceed their legibility when exported. A transcultural text necessarily undergoes problematic translational issues, resulting in a surplus of affective labor. This chapter examined the ways in which bodies (and bodies of work) of beautiful Chinese American actresses produce a surplus of desire, pleasure, and displeasure.

With regard to mainland actresses Gong Li, Zhang Ziyi (Chapter Four), and Tang Wei (Chapter One), there is an affective investment on the part of Chinese audiences in stardom wherein desire becomes a kind of political affect that invokes nationalistic pride and shame, intertwined with China’s historical wounds. As an investigation of the trans/national politics of beauty expands further outward in the concentric circles of the Chinese diaspora, the capacity for fetishization and the projection of nonsensical desires become intimately bound to the Chinese

---

<sup>593</sup> Zhao and Chakravartty, *Global Communications: Toward a Transcultural Political Economy*, 13.

<sup>594</sup> Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*.

American actor's body. Expanding on Chris Perriam's notion of the actor as a deterritorializing agent, Song Hwee Lim asks compelling questions as they pertain to trans/national actors:

In what ways does the ability of the corporeality of the actor's body to deterritorialise and reterritorialise cinematic spaces and national borders interfere with its capacity for fetishisation and the projection of desire? What and whose desire does the body of the actor represent, and what kinds of desires are projected onto his/her body by the audience? Does the body produce desire or does desire produce the body?<sup>595</sup>

Actresses like Joan Chen and Lucy Liu vividly and passionately resist the mastery of the gaze, eliding domination through their performances of indecipherable desires. If desires produce the body, then such characters and their desires can never be known—and this opens up a space of radical alterity, transformation, paradox, and finally, pleasure. Vivian Sobchack reminds us that, "Performance escapes, bodies escape—not only the performance of the people we see on the screen, or the performance of narrative and cinematic elements, but also our performance."<sup>596</sup>

The spectator's reactions to the performances of Chinese and Chinese American actresses should be analyzed in tandem with these onscreen images. Rather than feel shame towards "bad" representations of Asian American women, it would be useful to engage with our common sense(s), challenging and remaking sense itself.

---

<sup>595</sup> Song Hwee Lim, "Is the Trans-in Transnational the Trans- in Transgender?," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 5, no. 1 (2007): 46.

<sup>596</sup> Scott Bukatman, "Vivian Sobchack in Conversation with Scott Bukatman," *e-Media Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009).

## Chapter Five Bibliography

- Anderson, Aaron. "Mindful Violence: The Visibility of Power and Inner Life in Kill Bill." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 47 (2004).
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Baron, Cynthia, Diane Carson, and Frank P. Tomasulo. *More Than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004.
- Berlant, Lauren. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Cambridge: Polity Press Cambridge, 2002.
- Bukatman, Scott. "Vivian Sobchack in Conversation with Scott Bukatman." *e-Media Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009).
- Caldwell, John Thornton. *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995.
- Chow, Rey. *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*. Theory and History of Literature. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Chung, Hye Seung. *Hollywood Asian: Philip Ahn and the Politics of Cross-Ethnic Performance*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.
- Del Rio, Elena. *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. London: Continuum, 2004.
- . *The Logic of Sense*. Translated by Mark Lester and Charles Stivale. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.
- Dyer, Richard. *White*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

- Feng, Peter X. "Recuperating Suzie Wong: A Fan's Nancy Kwan-Dary." In *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*, edited by Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu, 40-56. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000.
- Feng, Peter X. *Identities in Motion : Asian American Film and Video*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Geertz, Clifford. "Common Sense as a Cultural System." *The Antioch Review* 33, no. 1 (1975): 5-26.
- George, Diana Hume. "A Feminist Reading of *Twin Peaks*." In *Full of Secrets*, edited by David Lavery, 109-19. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995.
- Hammers, Michele L. "Cautionary Tales of Liberation and Female Professionalism: The Case against Ally Mcbeal." *Western Journal of Communication* 69, no. 2 (2005): 167-82.
- Heung, Marina. "Representing Ourselves: Films and Videos by Asian American/Canadian Women." In *Feminism, Multiculturalism, and the Media: Global Diversities*, edited by Angharad N. Valdivia, 82-104. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1995.
- Kang, Hyun Yi. *Compositional Subjects : Enfiguring Asian/American Women*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment. 1790*. Translated by J.H. Bernard. New York: Prometheus, 2000.
- Keeling, Kara. *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Kennedy, Rosanne. "The Gorgeous Lesbian in *L.A. Law*: The Present Absence?" In *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, edited by Charlotte Brunson, Julie D'acci, and Lynn Spigel, 318-24. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Khoo, Olivia. *The Chinese Exotic: Modern Diasporic Femininity*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007.
- Koshy, Susan. *Sexual Naturalization: Asian Americans and Miscegenation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Lavery, David. "Introduction: Twin Peaks' Interpretive Community." In *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*, edited by David Lavery, 1-21. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995.
- Lim, Song Hwee. "Is the Trans-in Transnational the Trans- in Transgender?" *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 5, no. 1 (2007): 39-52.

- Loshitzky, Yosefa, and Raya Meyuhas. "Ecstasy of Difference: Bertolucci's 'The Last Emperor'." *Cinema Journal* 31, no. 2 (1992): 26-44.
- Louie, Andrea. "Searching for Roots in Contemporary China and Chinese America." In *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture*, edited by Sucheng Chan and Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu, 195-218. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008.
- Marchetti, Gina. *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993.
- Marshall, P. David. *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- McDonald, Tamar Jeffers. *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*. London and New York: Wallflower, 2007.
- McGowan, Todd. "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes." *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 3 (2003): 27-47.
- McHugh, Kathleen. "Of Agency and Embodiment: Angelina Jolie's Autographic Transformations." *Celebrity Studies* 5, no. 1-2 (2014): 5-19.
- Naficy, Hamid. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- . "Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: Independent Transnational Film Genre." In *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, edited by Ella and Robert Stam Shohat, 203-26. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003.
- Negra, Diane, and Su Holmes. "Introduction: Going Cheap? Female Celebrity in the Tabloid, Reality and Scandal Genres." *Genders* 48 (2008).
- Noland, Carrie. *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Ong, Aihwa. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Ouellette, Laurie. "Victims No More: Postfeminism, Television, and Ally McBeal." *The Communication Review* 5, no. 4 (2002): 315-35.
- Owen, A. Susan, Leah R. Vande Berg, and Sarah R. Stein. *Bad Girls: Cultural Politics and Media Representations of Transgressive Women*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007.
- Puyi, and W. J. F. Jenner. *From Emperor to Citizen: The Autobiography of Aisin-Gioro Pu Yi*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1989.

- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Schickel, Richard. "Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity in America." Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000.
- Shimizu, Celine Parreñas. *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Silverman, Kaja. *The Subject of Semiotics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Tajima, Renee E. "Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed: Images of Asian Women." In *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and About Asian American Women*, edited by Asian Women United of California, 308-17. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.
- Tokuda, Marilyn. In discussion with the author. November 16, 2008.
- Tomlinson, John. *Globalization and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Turner, Victor. "Liminality and Communitas." In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 94-130. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969; 2008.
- Wissinger, Elizabeth. "Always on Display: Affective Production in the Modeling Industry." In *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, edited by Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley, 231-60. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Yu, Henry. *Thinking Orientals : Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Zhao, Yuezhi, and Paula Chakravartty. *Global Communications: Toward a Transcultural Political Economy*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.



CONCLUSION:

**Acting Chinese**

*Trans/national Chinese Bodies Performing Sex, Health, and Beauty* examines the ways the mediated Chinese body articulates wellness and un-wellness. By analyzing Chinese embodiment in contemporary cinema and media through the lenses of performance, affect, and gender, this project demonstrates how “Chinese-ness” is authored through non-verbal expression. By doing so, this study grants critical depth to the question: How does one *act* Chinese?

Indeed, questions of acting, behaving, and performing identity have driven this research. *Trans/national Chinese Bodies* proposes that modern Chinese identity is an interactive and reactive media phenomenon that is imagined through *performances* of sex, health, and beauty, which are shaped and inflected by transnational encounter and cinematic/televisual stylization. Although there is no such thing as an essential Chinese-ness, Chinese actors generate ideas about what it means to be Chinese through their gestures, movements, and appearances. The “trans/national” Chinese body is both domesticated by national histories and cultural expectations and disciplined by global body politics and circulations of film and media. These trans/national influences exist contemporaneously to produce and manage an ever-changing image of the Chinese body in negotiation with national and global audiences. Nevertheless, something always escapes from the body. That is, the onscreen human body always communicates *beyond* the narrative, *beyond* the form and the frame. Thus, this project gives primacy to the agency, authorship, and autonomy of the performer who is *acting* Chinese and embodying the carnal dimensions of Chinese identity in cinema and media.

In fact, the trans/national Chinese performer is always-already “passing” as Chinese. Stars like Tang Wei, Gong Li, Zhang Ziyi, Joan Chen, and Lucy Liu play significant roles in authoring differing versions of Chinese-ness for national and international spectators. As embodiments of affect, these actresses corporealize how it *feels* to be Chinese, creating affective-sensorial vectors of identificatory pleasures and dis-pleasures within the realms of common (and un-common) sense and sensorium. With regard to PRC stars Tang, Gong, and Zhang, it is necessary to contextualize their stardom within Chinese sensorial practices and discourses of face-reading, shame, and *weidao* (flavorful embodiment). As the project moved from PRC bodies to Chinese American bodies, another question arose: Is there a space of empowerment outside of common sense? A new vocabulary of corporeality is necessary to represent liminal Chinese bodies and new American citizens, and as Chen and Liu demonstrate, pleasure and incomprehensibility are inextricably conjoined in the exotic-erotic representations of Chinese American women.

As a cultural anatomy of the contemporary Chinese body in cinema and media, this dissertation analyzes the systems of representation and reception that produce images and ideas of Chinese-ness within and outside of the PRC. Anchored by discussions of affective, sensorial, and phenomenological spectatorship, this project’s intervention in the study of Chinese cinemas is its exploration of the Chinese body as a fictive text that powerfully elicits senses and feelings of cultural belonging. The changing signification and discourses surrounding eyes, skin, bones, breasts, feet, and hair, for instance, illustrate how ideas about Chinese womanhood are informed by historical, social, and celebrity politics, inviting public participation in their construction. Theoretical frameworks, including psychoanalytic film theory enable analysis of the abject, the object, and *jouissance* in terms of Chinese embodiment—in other words, to help deepen our

understandings of the structures of fascination and pleasure that underwrite our gaze of Chinese bodies.

The texts discussed throughout this dissertation constitute a *mise-en-abyme* whereby there is no *original* Chinese body. Frames endlessly confound and complicate the image of Chinese-ness, creating a virtual space of Chinese bodies referencing other bodies in perpetuity. Nevertheless the circulation of Chinese bodies and their images also remain circumscribed and framed within global conceptions of sexy, healthy, and beautiful bodies. Ideals emanating from the West have a stronghold on Chinese imaginations and desires, as the Chinese body in flux continues to gesture, move, and posture in enigmatic and engaging ways in trans/national cinema and media. Through the continual re-making of history, fantasy, and sense, the mediated Chinese body is determined by and through performance. As *Trans/national Chinese Bodies Performing Sex, Health, and Beauty in Cinema and Media* illustrates, China and Chinese-ness are themselves performances inextricable from bodily systems of desire, pleasure, and well-being.

#### Coda: The Chinese Performing Body

This project explored the structures of representation and reception of trans/national Chinese bodies performing sex, health, and beauty in cinema and media. One future project on the Chinese body will deliberately re-order three key words of this dissertation title “Chinese bodies performing” to generate new research questions about “Chinese *performing* bodies.” In pursuit of this nuanced distinction, I intend to explore the systems of Chinese *performance*, especially the institutional disciplining of a film performer’s body before s/he becomes an onscreen image, a significantly understudied subject. As Susan Leigh Foster contends, “the encounter between bodies and some of the discursive and institutional frameworks that touched them, operated on and through them in different ways...[reveals] idealized versions of bodies—

what a body was supposed to look like, how it was supposed to perform, how it was required to submit.”<sup>597</sup> It is precisely because we take the onscreen bodies we see as always-already there that ideologies about how a body is supposed to look, perform, and submit are most effectively embodied. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the “encounter between bodies...and institutional frameworks that touched them, operated on and through them.”

Towards this end, I employed auto-ethnographic methods to experience and observe institutional training at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing, China’s premiere performance institution, over the course of six weeks in 2012. The hybridity of training I observed, specifically the adaptation of French theater actor Jacques Lecoq’s performance training techniques, indicates that just as Chinese bodies reterritorialize foreign corporeal ideals, performance training in China also undergoes trans/nationalization.

As an academic participant-observer, my approach was influenced by Clifford Geertz’s “thick description” methodology, which seeks to interpret behavior within a specific context, with the intention of descriptively establishing the significance of the event and the intentions of the involved actors including the researcher him/herself.<sup>598</sup> In film industry studies, John Caldwell adapts Geertz’s interpretive approach by “look[ing] over the shoulder” of film and television workers to interpret Hollywood’s production culture and belief systems.<sup>599</sup> Similarly, while my own body was engaged in activities, I was also “looking over the shoulder” of eight other acting students in a General Graduate Acting Class in Mask improvisation taught by Sarah Munroe, the first permanent non-Chinese faculty hire at the school.

---

<sup>597</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, “Choreographing History,” in *Choreographing History*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>598</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Perseus, 2002).

<sup>599</sup> John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 5.

Munroe adapted masking exercises from Sears A. Eldredge's *Mask Improvisation for Actor Training & Performance: The Compelling Image*, translating the textbook into Chinese instruction for her students.<sup>600</sup> While Elredge's text provides the practical application of mask improvisation, theories of mask training, specifically in terms of the "neutral mask," stem from the work of French actor, mime, and instructor Jacques Lecoq (1921-1999), who wrote in 1987, "L'homme pense avec tout son corps" (Man thinks with his whole body).<sup>601</sup> Lecoq's emphasis on the material and the "physical imagination" insists that the "actor 'writes with his body' in space," producing a corporeal text that conveys meaning to the audience.<sup>602</sup> According to Lecoq, movement and gesture precede thought and language. Although there is an overlap between Western traditions of miming and Chinese operatic traditions, which also heavily emphasizes external performance, one crucial difference is the ritualization of Chinese operative gesture and movement in comparison to the fluidity of Lecoq's approach.

Lecoq advocated for the stripping away of the constructed elements of physical behavior inflected by social expectation in order to imaginatively discover the world through uninhibited bodily expression. The ease of this progression is achieved in part by eliminating the face as the primary expressive point on the body.<sup>603</sup> By first donning a "neutral mask" (a white mask donning a blank expression), students concentrated more readily on the body's *movement* rather than on psychological *feeling* as the origin of performative action. John Wright explains the significance of a neutral mask: "Because there is no conflict in the face, the neutral mask creates

---

<sup>600</sup> Sears A. Eldredge, *Mask Improvisation for Actor Training & Performance: The Compelling Image* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

<sup>601</sup> Qtd. in Franc Chamberlain and Ralph Yarrow, *Jacques Lecoq and the British Theatre* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), 11.

<sup>602</sup> Editor's Introduction in Jacques Lecoq, *Theatre of Movement and Gesture* (London: Routledge, 2006), xiii.

<sup>603</sup> Eldredge, *Mask Improvisation for Actor Training & Performance: The Compelling Image*, 6.

conflict in the minds of the audience who, on seeing the mask, sense that something is about to happen. By making no comment or by ‘having no story,’ the neutral mask creates a vacuum that, as an audience, our imaginations rush to fill.”<sup>604</sup> One exercise, for instance, is based on the premise of “awakening from 100 years of sleep” and discovering a never-before-seen object. Students are asked to perform from a non-affective place of wonder, innocence, and curiosity to interact with materiality and the physical world. Focusing solely on the object itself, it allowed for pure play.

In Lecoq’s context, play becomes a “dynamic principle which informs the quality of interaction between performances and their audience, but also opens up possibilities for action which can both liberate the actor from the ‘literalness’ of the text and enrich it with additional (physical and visual) meaning.”<sup>605</sup> By concentrating on gesture and movement in a decontextualized, acultural and asocial space, this playground, advocating for experimentation through Lecoq’s mask improvisation techniques, enables the individual to become, in a sense, deterritorialized from him/herself. In other words, under the conditions of such exploration and play, each student became dehistoricized and acultural, as personal narrative and backstory are irrelevant and even disruptive to such activity.

The phenomenon of Chinese bodies undergoing training in Western performance techniques deserves further critical attention in cinema and media studies, as acting and figure behavior constitute an important aspect of *mise-en-scène*. Chinese theater scholars, for instance, have discovered that the development of *huaju* (Chinese spoken drama) was directly influenced by Western theater, as the first *huaju* dates to a 1907 performance of the play *Heinu yutian lu*

---

<sup>604</sup> John Wright, "The Masks of Jacques Lecoq," in *Jacques Lecoq and the British Theatre*, ed. Franc and Ralph Yarrow Chamberlain (London: Routledge, 2002), 76.

<sup>605</sup> Simon Murray, "Tout Bouge: Jacques Lecoq, Modern Mime and the Zero Body. A Pedagogy for the Creative Actor," *ibid.*, 34.

(The Black Slave's Cry to Heaven) based on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe's story carried a strong transcultural message that "sympathized with downtrodden masses," and also spoke to the Han Chinese struggle to overthrow the Manchu minority regime during that time.<sup>606</sup> Foreign influences also impacted local performance theory. In 1924 Yu Shangyuan wrote the first Chinese essay on the work of Konstantin Stanislavsky, after which a translation of the Russian theater practitioner's *An Actor Prepares* was "enthusiastically received" and supported by Chinese Communist Party cultural leaders who were looking for a model of "modern drama that directly reflected real life."<sup>607</sup> By the 1930s-1940s, theater practitioners, filmmakers and actors attempted to reconcile Stanislavsky's naturalistic acting system with the traditional Chinese emphases on physical gesture. By the 1950s, as a result of the positive Sino-Soviet relations at the time, Stanislavsky's theories dominated Chinese theatre<sup>608</sup> and performers generally drew on *neixin tiyan* (technique of inner experiences) to convey character.

Professor of Acting Han Yue from the Communication University in China, a "project key university directly under the Ministry of Education," confirmed to me that Stanislavsky's methods are presently institutionalized across Chinese state institutions.<sup>608</sup> In the first year, students are required to focus on *jiefang tianxing* (liberation through tension), which is Stanislavsky's concept of training the actor to be focused while completely at ease. Curiously, it is also known in Chinese as *suzhi xunlian* (exercising social identity), attaching the notion of one's social place, to Stanislavsky's notion that, "Only by trying to achieve the topmost heights

---

<sup>606</sup> Colin Mackerras, "Tradition, Change, and Continuity in Chinese Theatre in the Last Hundred Years: In Commemoration of the Spoken Drama Centenary," *Asian Theatre Journal* 25, no. 1 (2008): 2.

<sup>607</sup> Constantine Tung and Colin Mackerras, *Drama in the People's Republic of China* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987), 141.

<sup>608</sup> Han Yue, in discussion with the author, September 25, 2012.

can we achieve genuine freedom.”<sup>609</sup> Han clarified that Chinese students particularly need to learn how to *jiefang* (liberate) and *kaifang* (open) their bodies and experience *ziyou* (freedom) to overcome their *baoshou* (conservative) and *chuantong* (traditional) upbringing. The rhetoric of liberating and freeing the individual body from tradition and conservatism, while acceptable in performance theory, however becomes a perilous mode of political discourse in China. The utopic possibilities of the personal performing body in contrast with the highly-managed body politic and imagined nation of China reveals the rich ambiguities of contemporary Chinese culture and society.

To conclude, *Trans/national Chinese Bodies Performing Sex, Health, and Beauty* is a situational exploration of Chinese body cultures and trans/national screen cultures.

Representations of sex, health, and beauty are *mediated by* social, cultural, and historical belief systems, which become common sense over time and reiteration. Cine/televisual depictions of the body also, in turn, *mediate* gender, cultural, racial and ethnic identification across national boundaries. As a construction of film and media, the Chinese body enables access to a diversity of erotics and pleasures that elucidate trans/national Chinese-ness as an affective condition of being-in-the-world.

World-making involves self-making. Self-making necessitates body-making. As China’s worldly participation in 21<sup>st</sup> century modernization continues to be inscribed upon Chinese bodies, Chinese-ness becomes visual construct, shared fantasy, and communal affect. New global identity politics involve the ways in which gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class are imagined, transformed, and performed through embodiments of sex, health, and beauty—contemporary markers of First Worldism and global cosmopolitanism. Furthermore, systems of

---

<sup>609</sup> Qtd. in John Gillett, *Acting Stanislavski: A Practical Guide to Stanislavski’s Approach and Legacy* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 9.



performance, their ideologies and material practices, are changing in Chinese performance institutions in tandem with the nation's growing interests in cultural globalization. To turn our attention next to the Chinese *performing* body as a constellation of trans/national ideas and influences with regard to acting will further illuminate our critical understandings of Chinese embodiment in cinema and media.

## Conclusion Bibliography

Caldwell, John Thornton. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.

Chamberlain, Franc, and Ralph Yarrow. *Jacques Lecoq and the British Theatre*. Oxford: Routledge, 2013.

Eldredge, Sears A. *Mask Improvisation for Actor Training & Performance: The Compelling Image*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1996.

Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3-32. New York: Perseus, 2002.

Gillett, John. *Acting Stanislavski: A Practical Guide to Stanislavski's Approach and Legacy*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014.

Lecoq, Jacques. *Theatre of Movement and Gesture*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Mackerras, Colin. "Tradition, Change, and Continuity in Chinese Theatre in the Last Hundred Years: In Commemoration of the Spoken Drama Centenary." *Asian Theatre Journal* 25, no. 1 (2008): 1-23.

Murray, Simon. "Tout Bouge: Jacques Lecoq, Modern Mime and the Zero Body. A Pedagogy for the Creative Actor." In *Jacques Lecoq and the British Theatre*, edited by Franc and Ralph Yarrow Chamberlain, 17-44. London: Routledge, 2002.

Tung, Constantine, and Colin Mackerras. *Drama in the People's Republic of China*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987.

Wright, John. "The Masks of Jacques Lecoq." In *Jacques Lecoq and the British Theatre*, edited by Franc and Ralph Yarrow Chamberlain, 71-84. London: Routledge, 2002.

Han, Yue. In discussion with the author, September 25, 2012.

## Filmography

Films and television analyzed or referenced:

\*\*most significant

\*significant

### Introduction:

*Broken Blossoms* (D.W. Griffith, 1919)  
*Chinatown After Dark* (Stuart Paton, 1931)  
*Curse of the Golden Flower* [Mancheng jindai huangjinjia] (Zhang Yimou, 2006)  
*Daughter of the Dragon* (Lloyd Corrigan, 1931)  
*Hero* [Yingxiong] (Zhang Yimou, 2002)\*  
*House of Flying Daggers* [Shi mian mai fu] (Zhang Yimou, 2004)\*  
*It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934)  
*Ju Dou* (Zhang Yimou, 1990)\*  
*Kill Bill Vol. 1* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003)\*  
*Lust, Caution* [Se, Jie] (Ang Lee, 2007)\*\*  
*Raise the Red Lantern* [Da hong denglong gaogao gua] (Zhang Yimou, 1991)\*  
*Shanghai Express* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932)  
*Summer Palace* [Yihe yuani] (Lou Ye, 2006)\*\*  
*The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Charles Brabin, 1932)  
*The Last Emperor* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1989)\*  
*The Toll of the Sea* (Chester M. Franklin, 1922)  
*To Live* [Huo zhe] (Zhang Yimou, 1994)\*

### Chapter One:

*Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005)  
*Bullet in the Head* [Diexue jietou] (John Woo, 1990)\*  
*City of Life and Death* [Nanjing! Nanjing!] (Lu Chuan, 2009)\*  
*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* [Wohu canglong] (Ang Lee, 2000)  
*Don't Cry, Nanking* [Nanjing yi jiu san qi] (Wu Ziniu, 1995)\*  
*Eat Drink Man Woman* [Yin shi nan nü] (Ang Lee, 1994)  
*Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959)\*  
*Lust, Caution* [Se, Jie] (Ang Lee, 2007)\*\*  
*Nanking* (Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman, 2007)\*  
*Purple Butterfly* [Zi hudie] (Lou Ye, 2003)\*  
*Pushing Hands* [Tui shou] (Ang Lee, 1992)  
*Qixia Temple 1937* [Qixiasi] (Deng Jianguo, 2004)  
*Ride with the Devil* (Ang Lee, 1999)  
*Sense and Sensibility* (Ang Lee, 1995)  
*The Flowers of War* [Jinling shisan chai] (Zhang Yimou, 2011)\*\*  
*The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, 1997)  
*The Night Porter* [Il portiere di notte] (Liliana Cavani, 1974)\*  
*The Wedding Banquet* [Xiyun] (Ang Lee, 1993)  
*Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl* [Tian yu] (Joan Chen, 1998)

## Chapter Two:

*Meili's Big Feet* [Meili de dajiao] (Yang Yazhou, 2002)\*\*

*Lust, Caution* [Se, Jie] (Ang Lee, 2007)\*\*

*Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997)

## Television:

“Ye Jianying’s Great Beijing Clean-up” [Ye Jianying Wei Beiping Da Saochu], an episode in *Public Records* [Dang’an] (Beijing: Channel BTV, August 23, 2012)\*\*

## Chapter Three:

*Ermo* (Zhou Xiaowen, 1994)\*

*Ju Dou* (Zhang Yimou, 1990)

*Love for Life* [Zui ai] (Gu Changwei, 2011)\*\*

*Love and Care* [Guan’ ai zhi jia ] (Ai Xiaoming, 2007)\*

*Tiger Day* [Huri] (Zhuang Kongshao, 2002)

*To Live Is Better Than to Die* [Hao si buru lai huozhe] (Chen Weijun, 2005)\*\*

*The Blood of Yingzhou District* (Ruby Yang, 2006)\*

*The Epic of Central Plains* [Zhongyuan ji shi] (Ai Xiaoming, 2006)\*

*Together* [Zai yiqi] (Zhao Liang, 2011)\*\*

*Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956)\*

## Television:

*Aria in G* [G zianshang de yongtandiao] (CCTV, 2003)

*If There’s Tomorrow* [Jiaru you mingtian] (CCTV, 2001)

*Losing Paradise* [Yileyuan] (CCTV, 2004)

*Together Forever* [Yongyuan zai yiqi] (CCTV, 2012)\*\*

## Chapter Four:

*2046* (Wang Kar-wai, 2004)

*Chinese Box* (Wayne Wang, 1997)

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* [Wohu canglong] (Ang Lee, 2000)\*

*Hero* [Yingxiong] (Zhang Yimou, 2002)

*House of Flying Daggers* [Shi mian mai fu] (Zhang Yimou, 2004)

*Ju Dou* (Zhang Yimou, 1990)

*Memoirs of a Geisha* (Rob Marshall, 2005)\*\*

*Operation Cougar* [Daihao meizhoubao] (Yang Fengliang and Zhang Yimou, 1989)

*Purple Butterfly* [Zi hudie] (Lou Ye, 2003)

*Queen of Sports* [Tiyu huanghou] (Sun Yu, 1934)\*

*Raise the Red Lantern* [Da hong denglong gaogao gua] (Zhang Yimou, 1991)

*Red Sorghum* [Hong gaoliang] (Zhang Yimou, 1987)\*\*

*Rush Hour 2* (Brett Ratner, 2001)

*Shanghai Triad* [Yao a yao, yao dao waipo qiao] (Zhang Yimou, 1995)

*The Road Home* [Wode fuqin muqin] (Zhang Yimou, 1999)\*\*

*To Live* [Huo zhe] (Zhang Yimou, 1994)

*What Women Want* [Wo zhi nüren xin] (Daming Chen, 2011)

Chapter Five:

*24 City* [Ershisi chengji] (Jia Zhangke, 2008)  
*Autumn in New York* (Joan Chen, 2000)  
*Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986)\*  
*Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2000)\*\*  
*Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (McG, 2003)\*\*  
*Eat Drink Man Woman* [Yin shi nan nü] (Ang Lee, 1994)\*  
*Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987)\*  
*Heaven and Earth* (Oliver Stone, 1993)  
*Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1959)\*  
*Judge Dredd* (Danny Cannon, 1995)  
*Kill Bill Vol. 1* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003)\*\*  
*Kill Bill Vol. 2* (Quentin Tarantino, 2004)  
*Little Flower* [Xiao hua] (Zhang Zheng, Huang Jian-zhong, 1979)\*  
*Payback* (Brian Helgeland, 1998)\*\*  
*Saving Face* (Alice Wu, 2004)\*\*  
*Tai-Pan* (Daryl Duke, 1986)\*  
*Temptation of a Monk* [You seng] (Clara Law, 1993)\*  
*The Joy Luck Club* (Wayne Wang, 1993)\*  
*The Last Emperor* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987)\*\*  
*The Sun Also Rises* [Taiyang zhaochang shengqi] (Jiang Wen, 2007)  
*The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939)\*  
*The World of Suzie Wong* (Richard Quine, 1960)\*  
*Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)\*  
*Youth* [Qingchun] (Xie Jin, 1977)\*  
*Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl* [Tian Yu] (Joan Chen, 1998)\*

Television:

*Ally McBeal* (FOX, 1997-2002)\*\*  
*Elementary* (CBS, 2012-)\*\*  
*Fashion Police* (E!, 2010-)\*  
*Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987)  
"The Impact of MLK's 'Dream,' 50 Years Later," an episode in *NBC News* (MSNBC, August 28, 2013).  
*Sex & the City* (HBO, 1998-2004)\*  
*Sherlock* (BBC, 2010-)\*  
*The Roller Girls* (NBC, 1978)  
*Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991)\*\*