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The Global Chinese Presence in Transnational Cinemas

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Hong Kong University Press is honoured that Xu Bing, whose art explores the complex themes of language across cultures, has written the Press's name in his Square Word Calligraphy. This signals our commitment to cross-cultural thinking and the distinctive nature of our English-language books published in China.

"At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square Word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed."

— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

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Introduction:
Remaking Chinese Cinemas, Hollywood Style

When Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) leapt onto global screens, many saw it as a cinematic event that heralded the unprecedented arrival of Chinese cinemas in Hollywood. As part of the recent "Asian invasion"[1] of the American multiplex, where mainstream audiences are now eagerly taking to the various Asian cinemas, this Chinese cultural presence dominated the invasion, thanks in part to the migration of numerous stars, directors, and various players from Hong Kong's film industry: a professional diaspora spurred by the 1997 British handover of Hong Kong to mainland China. Since I began my research in 2000 on this then-emerging cinematic phenomenon, a recurring commentary I encounter is that this trend, like all Hollywood trends, is a transient one: the Chinese are only Tinseltown's current cultural flavor of the month, soon to be replaced by the next big thing capable of revitalizing Hollywood (as Chinese cinemas are believed to be currently doing), thus rejuvenating and sustaining the studios' capitalist productivity and hegemony. In engaging this prediction of the waning interest in Chinese kung fu flicks, sword-fighting spectacles, historical epics, supernatural thrillers, romance/family melodramas, and Chinatown crime stories, one cannot help but wonder how long Chinese cinemas can maintain their current pride of place in Hollywood's multiculturalist approach to cultural appropriation and syncretism? What strategies can these cinemas resort to in order to achieve longevity in the business, and at what cost?

I open with this notion of pop cultural "transience" in my study of the Chinese in Hollywood because it provokes a rather visceral response in me, as both a cultural and film critic; a response that I can only describe, with a deep sense of ambivalence and an eagerness to disavow, as "cultural nationalism." Being an ethnic Chinese from Singapore, I find myself reluctantly cheering on the success of Chinese cinemas in Hollywood in a

culturally conflicted fashion: mainly because I bemoan, as a student of film, the often cringe-worthy aesthetic shortcomings of these movies, while questioning, as an anti-Orientalist and anti-essentialist cultural critic, the social, political, and cultural implications of these filmic texts. My painting this personal image of critical and cultural ambivalence and anxiety initiates a theoretical mapping of the kind of cultural politics surrounding this cinematic phenomenon. To bring into further relief the emergent critical questions that color this picture, I now rehearse three very recent moments of globalized Hollywood spectacle where cultural anxieties and contradictions intermingle with the celluloid magic and sparkle that the Chinese in Hollywood have engendered so far.

Hollywood Spectacle One: The much anticipated kung fu fantasy match up between Jackie Chan and Jet Li occurs not in a local Hong Kong production, as fans thought it would.[2] Instead, this über-duel takes place in the number one US box-office hit *The Forbidden Kingdom* (2008), a movie helmed by *The Lion King* director Rob Minkoff and distributed by Lionsgate and the Weinstein Company. This faceoff between Jackie Chan and Jet Li is of such epic proportions from a kung fu cinema standpoint that even the stars themselves decided to downplay audience expectations of the touted fight scene.[3] While he publicly dismissed the script as "nonsense," Jackie Chan chose to sign on to the project because "they told . . . [him] Jet [Li] was doing it." He described his fight scene with Li as one that was "so natural" that they shot the scene only after one rehearsal. In fact, they worked so well together that the director had to ask them to slow down the pacing of the fight sequence.[4] In the eyes of their fans, this representation of their collaboration is indeed worthy of a clash of two kung fu titans.[5] Whether or not this media narrative was part of a marketing ploy, the strategy clearly worked: the film raked in an impressive US$20.9 million during its opening weekend in American cinemas;[6] and an equally stunning US$21.4 million in China, despite Hong Kong newspaper *South China Morning Post*'s criticism that the film "hardly offers a progressive understanding of the multifarious aspects of Chinese culture as it rehashes the themes of kung fu classics" and a Hong Kong magazine characterizing its plot as "unbelievably weird."[7]

The culturally incongruous and "weird" plot, of course, did not go unnoticed by the stars. Chan anxiously reminded viewers that the film was "made for Americans. Chinese viewers may not like it"; while Li concurred by noting how "this is an American production, created by an American screenwriter, about an American child's dream of the Journey To the West story. It would be more interesting to approach this film from a different angle."[8] While its narrative relies on the story of the Monkey King in *Journey*

to the West (*Xiyou ji*), a Ming dynasty classic believed to have been written by Wu Chengen, *The Forbidden Kingdom* updates it for American audiences by retelling it from the perspective of American kung fu-crazed teenager Jason Tripitikas (Michael Angarano), who is magically transported to the world of ancient China to free the immobilized Monkey King (Jet Li), with the help of drunken master Lu Yan (Jackie Chan), from the magical spell of the evil Jade Warlord. This narrative premise basically retells *The Wizard of Oz* story, with Jason taking on the Dorothy role in his search for a way home. His encounters with the denizens of a fantastical ancient China — like the culturally colorful but alien characters of the Land of Oz — provide the psychic means for Jason to attain a new sense of heroic confidence (and a requisite set of martial arts skills) to confront the bullies and thugs of his urban American reality. Mainstream American audiences' familiarity with the reformulated Oz tale served to cement *The Forbidden Kingdom*'s successful appeal; while the Monkey King mythology, together with Chan and Li's superstardom, brought Chinese audiences to theaters internationally.

The combination of Hollywood's remaking of the *Journey to the West*, the much-awaited Chan-Li matchup, and the film's impressive global box office success marks for me a spectacular confluence of the critical and cultural issues that this book seeks to investigate. Like many of the films I look at in the chapters that follow, *The Forbidden Kingdom* is an excellent example of a transnational cinematic production, with American company Casey Silver Productions and China's Huayi Brothers and the China Film Co-Production Corporation joining forces in this instance. (Huayi is a rising media group based in China known for co-producing *Kung Fu Hustle* with Sony/Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia[9]; and China Film Co-Production Corporation is credited for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.) With these transnational and multinational collaborative production efforts becoming the norm, what cultural, political, and aesthetic effects will one witness in movies involving the Chinese in Hollywood? What forms of cultural hybridity and filmic synergies will such (un)equal partnerships create? While being thoroughly entertained by the film, I found myself most critically intrigued instead by *The Forbidden Kingdom*'s extra-diegetic elements, particularly the opening credit sequence — Jason's movie poster collection of films like *Monkey Goes West* (1966), *One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978), *Drunken Master* (1978), and *The Bride with White Hair* (1993)[10] come to vivid life. Using an ingenious animated pastiche of classic, painted poster imagery, the film visualizes symbolically the concepts of cultural appropriation, reconfiguration, and synthesis, which constitute the mechanics of remaking Chinese cinemas in Hollywood.

Hollywood Spectacle Two: The scene opens with our intrepid heroine in a drab sampan-woman disguise creeping into an Oriental pirates' den in order to meet its evil lord. Upon being discovered, she and her companions are dragged into a dark lair fit for the nefarious Fu Manchu. On the platform stands a tall bald figure imposingly decked out in apparently Qing dynasty robes,[11] looking battle-worn but regal. He slowly turns around and deliberately pauses for the classic profile shot. Suddenly, audiences encounter the familiar mien of Hong Kong superstar Chow Yun-fat cosmetically remade into the salt-encrusted pirate captain Sao Feng. With thick bushy eyebrows framing his blood-shot eyes, a sparse but long beard reminiscent of *Flash Gordon*'s Ming the Merciless, a menacing knife scar cutting diagonally across his forehead and face, and frighteningly long, sharp fingernails painted black, Sao Feng smiles sinisterly as he masterfully proclaims in Hong Kong-accented English, "Welcome to Singapore!"

Chow Yun-fat remade into pirate captain Sao Feng

This now familiar episode is the opening sequence in the final installment of Disney's summer blockbuster trilogy *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (2007). As a seafaring adventure where the protagonist, Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp), crisscrosses the globe to encounter an array of culturally exotic characters, the film, as a Hollywood blockbuster with indubitable global box office potential, similarly travels well by means of its multicultural representation, giving the film the correctness of a glossy Benetton ad. Representing "Asia" in its multicultural lineup is the epitome of Hong Kong masculine cool, Chow Yun-fat, who has been expertly made up to look like an evil Chinese pirate, hiding out in Singapore and lusting after Elizabeth Swann (Keira Knightley). Chow's role of Orientalist stereotype might be small — his character Sao Feng dies midway through the movie after his attempt to sexually assault Elizabeth — but his presence in this film is nonetheless

significant in the context of his career in Hollywood: Chow has indeed arrived in America. His joining a requisite star-studded cast of a blockbuster epic also signals the significant place the Chinese now occupy in Hollywood and American cinema.

But what exactly is the nature of this interest in the Chinese? What motivates it? What sorts of cinematic images and representations does it foster? What precedence in American film history feeds it? In other words, what forms of American cultural politics does this interest turn on and engage? The singular instance of Chow Yun-fat's exoticized appearance in *At World's End* also throws up difficult questions of the cultural cost to attain mainstream Hollywood success: what kinds of roles do ethnic Chinese stars and actors have to play to gain this success? How does the Chinese Hollywood presence affect Chinese cinemas globally? What effect does this presence have on Asian American cinema, considering its independent and alternative cinematic history? Does this presence reinforce Orientalist imagery to pander to American audience expectations of the racist depictions of the Chinese that have emerged out of classic Hollywood? Or are there possibilities of subversive resistance and cultural critique even within a transnational capitalist industry that privileges box office earnings over cultural and political concerns?

The advertising machinery of Buena Vista International kicked into high gear before the film's opening here in Singapore. Ubiquitous posters and huge wall panels dotted the island nation with the tagline "Welcome to Singapore! " turning Sao Feng's proclamation into a tourism-board style marketing strategy. Made up of 70% ethnic-Chinese, Singapore audiences not only love their Chinese-language movies, they absolutely adore Chow Yun-fat and his Singaporean wife Jasmine. This is a textbook case of the power of Hollywood's global appeal accomplished through the specific nodes of cultural localism — in this case, Chineseness and Chinese-language cinemas — within the transnational systems of cinematic production, distribution, and consumption. This global/local nexus that characterizes the contemporary Chinese presence in Hollywood constitutes one of the focal points of critical analysis in this book.

Hollywood Spectacle Three: Flushed with success from *Chicago*'s triumph at the 75th Academy Awards, Rob Marshall goes on to bring Arthur Golden's novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* gloriously to life on the big screen in 2005, a movie destined to be a hysterical camp classic in the likes of, dare I say, *All about Eve* (1950) and *Mommie Dearest* (1981). For who can resist the fabulous gay-iconic performance of Gong Li as Hatsumomo, especially as she threatens Zhang Ziyi's Sayuri with "I shall destroy you!" uttered with the dramatic flourish of a drag-queen?

But clearly not everyone was laughing at the absurdly contradictory image of Chinese actresses playing geishas speaking perfect English. Though being touted by *Time* magazine's Richard Corliss as "Hollywood's Asian Romance, "[12] audiences in Japan and China did not buy into this claim. Having three Chinese stars play the main roles, when high-profile Hollywood acting jobs for Japanese are hard to come by, did not go down well with Japanese viewers, [13] despite the ironic fact that these geisha characters reinforce the Madame Butterfly myth and "the image of sweet, gentle Japanese child-women" as evident in Sayuri.[14] Equally, if not more inflamed, were mainland Chinese audiences. Many denounced the political insensitivity of having Chinese actresses in these geisha roles that are set during the time of World War Two, considering Japan's historic rape of Nanjing in 1937–38 and, more recently, Prime Minister Koizumi's controversial visits to the Yasukuni war shrines in Tokyo.[15] China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television eventually banned the film.[16]

Of course, mainland China's censorship and outright banning of Hollywood films that inappropriately or negatively depict Chinese culture and politics have a long history. For instance, films such as *Shanghai Express* (1932) and *Limehouse Blues* (1934), both featuring the sensual Anna May Wong playing up the Dragon Lady stereotype, incurred the displeasure of Chinese censors way back in the 1930s.[17] What intrigues me here in the case of *Memoirs of a Geisha* is the way nationalism came roaring back with a vengeance over a Hollywood film, despite the fact that China seeks to insert itself into the network of transnational capital. The central question to ask is: under what cultural political circumstances will Hollywood's deployment of global/local cultural strategies work for their film productions involving Chineseness? For a film that boasts a *trans*national appeal through its pan-Asian casting, the irony is that this multinational casting is the source of discontent. It is also crucial to analyze the motivational factors that spur this kind of cultural nationalist response from the Chinese government and Chinese audiences both in the mainland and across the diaspora. This instance of global Hollywood gone wrong exposes precisely the complex and conflicted cultural and political discourses that mire the tense national-transnational interface, especially as one watches Chinese cinemas enter Hollywood and its network, and as Hollywood remakes, reinvents, and reconfigures Chineseness into its own likeness or the likeness of its perceived Other.

Critical Perimeters: East Asia, Hollywood, the World

Beginning with the premise that post-1997 Hollywood saw a new, resurgent interest in the Chinese presence in its cinema, this book focuses its attention on a number of aspects of this phenomenon. One of its primary concerns is the proliferation of Hollywood and Hollywood-inflected films featuring ethnic Chinese stars like Jet Li, Michelle Yeoh, Gong Li, Chow Yun-fat, and Jackie Chan, in works directed by the likes of John Woo, Wayne Wang, Wong Kar-wai, and Zhang Yimou. This ethnic Chinese presence is clearly not "new" in the sense that it does not form a full cultural/national body of film separate from the commercial and art-house cinemas of mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Instead, the long histories and traditions of these national cinemas, together with Chinese-American film, contribute to, overlap with, and provide the contexts for this new Chinese presence. Though this presence is clearly derivative, the various streams of Chinese cinematic histories, traditions, and practices conjoin to produce a nascent film aesthetic and sensibility that offer Chineseness as a commodity for Hollywood's transnational system of cinematic production and consumption. This complex system of interconnections and relationships compels me to address the issue not only from the standpoint of Hollywood films, but also to consider the effects this phenomenon has on films coming out of Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan, and Chinese America. In any case, in an age of multinational and transnational co-productions and co-financing (as demonstrated by earlier references to Huayi Brothers and the China Film Co-Production Corporation in my discussion of *The Forbidden Kingdom*), it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish these cinemas in strictly national terms. Thus, my analyses would even include films made in and released in theaters in Asia but with the potential to enter the US market, either through limited engagements or DVD sales. In taking on this broader range of cinematic works to transcribe critically the Chinese presence in Hollywood, I am registering the globalizing effects of Hollywood's hegemony. I am also particularly interested in how these Chinese cinemas ride the wave of Hollywood appeal, which is part of its contemporary transnationalization. Like most books of this nature, *Remade in Hollywood* has no ambition, nor the ability, to be comprehensive in its coverage of the various cinemas and its individual films. Instead, it is governed by my own mapping of the topical problematic, through the tracing of the significant and predominant themes, ideas, trends, questions, and concerns.

The temporal framework I have chosen for the book is not arbitrary, but is politically pegged to the July 1997 handover of Hong Kong by the British government to the People's Republic of China. Since the 1984 signing of the

Sino-British Joint Declaration, the territory and its people were plagued by anxieties of what a return to mainland Chinese rule might portend. This anxiety was exacerbated by the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, which accelerated the mass exodus of the rich and the mobile to the western countries that welcomed them. The new home for Hong Kong film industry players seemed naturally to be Hollywood, attracting Hong Kong stars, directors, and industry players who were in high demand to make the transition.[18] Such capital-induced diasporas, of course, are complex ones in that their trajectories are never unidirectional, but are bidirectional and even multidirectional in their fluid negotiations of the trans-Pacific capitalist networks that help define the Pacific Rim as a "space of cultural production."[19] Major players like John Woo, Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-fat, Michelle Yeoh, and Jet Li display "flexible citizenship" and are "astronauts"[20] who shuttle between Hollywood, Hong Kong, and wherever film production and promotion take them. The impact of this migration to Hollywood was multifold: film cultures of Hollywood, Asian American cinema, and Chinese cinemas were, in varied ways and to varying degrees, transformed. The rising popularity of the Hong Kong newcomers among American audiences also bode well for those mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, and Asian American players who aimed for Hollywood success, leading many to ride the Chinese/Asian wave of American cinematic fascination.

The Politics of Cinematic Citationality and Transculturation

As the earlier anecdotal examples of monkey kings, pirates, and geishas serve to demonstrate, this book's examination of the Chinese in Hollywood relies on the theoretical nuances of the cinematic remake. My interest lies less in a concern for the remake in its traditional form as a material filmic practice, but more in its critical efficacy as a trope for cultural reinvention, reconfiguration, and rewriting. This theoretical spinning-off from its narrower definitional confines helps one rethink the Chinese-Hollywood connection and its discursive problematic.

Everyone is familiar with the Hollywood remake as a filmic form of secondariness: one removed from its "original" text, but exploited for its box office potential. Yet the remake is much more complex and multifarious in its variations and permutations, in that one could remake a film in many ways and for different purposes. An older film can be updated to accommodate contemporary trends, values, and politics,[21] such as *The Stepford Wives* (1975

and 2004). A film is remade to impress different audience demographics, like Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995). Some remakes are faithful frame-by-frame retakes as in Gus Van Sant's *Psycho* (1998), while others spoof or mimic the original like in the *Austin Powers* series and *The Tuxedo* (2002) starring Jackie Chan. The kind of remakes that are of special interest here are, of course, the "cross-cultural"[22] ones, considering how the commercially successful Scorsese remake of Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's *Infernal Affairs* (2002) into *The Departed* (2006) has now spawned fresh Hollywood interest in also remaking the Jackie Chan-produced *Enter the Phoenix* (2004).[23]

Remaking as a filmic form aside, its structure and character further bespeak of the very nature of cinema itself. In order to make this point, I now turn to Derrida and his theory of the mark of communication. In his essay "Signature Event Context," Jacques Derrida disrupts the purity of the sign by examining its iterability and citationality:

> This is the possibility on which I wish to insist: the possibility of extraction and of citational grafting which belongs to the structure of every mark, spoken or written, and which constitutes every mark as writing even before and outside every horizon of semiolinguistic communication; as writing, that is, as a possibility of functioning cut off, at a certain point, from its "original" meaning and from its belonging to a saturable and constraining context. Every sign, linguistic and nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the usual sense of this opposition), as a small or large unity, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring. This citationality, duplication, or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is not an accident or an anomaly, but is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could no longer even have a so-called "normal" functioning. What would a mark be that one could not cite? And whose origin could not be lost on the way?[24]

In *re*citing Derrida's theory, David Wills constructs the same argument for "the cinematic mark" in what he terms as "cinematic citationality":

> What is being commonly and communally referred to here as the remake, the possibility that exists for a film to be repeated in a different form, should rather be read as the necessary structure of iterability that exists for and within every film . . . The slightest mark is being remarked or remade even as it is being uttered or written, to the extent that it cannot make itself as full presence, as intact and coherent entity. It constitutes itself as reconstitutable, at least it must do so in order to function, that is to say, in order to make sense.[25]

In other words, cinema is a medium of unending citations, quotations, allusions, appropriations, adaptations, remaking, reinventions, rewriting, representations, and hybridizations. Built into the visual and auditory technologies of cinema is this demand for citationality. The power of Derrida's theory and Wills's redeployment of it lies in its deconstruction of essentialist notions of cultural ownership and originality, thus rupturing the boundaries between national cinemas. This is not to say that national cinemas do not exist or that the ideological insistence on those boundaries (real or imaginary) does not have material consequences.

Wills's argument has deep implications for the way we think of transnational Chinese cinemas, of which the Chinese presence in Hollywood is now an integral part. What happens when cinematic citationality leaps cross-culturally, which it must if we are to believe Sheldon Lu's argument that Chinese cinema, in all of its history, is transnational in nature on account that Chinese film is "deeply embedded in the economics of transnational capital"[26]? Patricia Aufderheide offers a telling example of the unpredictable and spiraling way cross-cultural cinematic citationality functions. In her discussion of Sammo Hung's *Eastern Condors* (1987), Aufderheide considers how the film "replays the characters, themes, and plot of" a number of Hollywood war movies.[27] But what is most interesting to me is that at the end of the essay, she gestures to the future where "Hong Kong cinema, itself a pastiche product, may now become the inspiration for tomorrow's Hollywood hits,"[28] an ironic turn that is being realized today. Here we see the possibility of Hollywood citing Hong Kong cinema citing Hollywood, and this is only taking into account a single linear causal thread (that has turned somewhat circular). This irony of cinematic narcissism was not lost on John Woo who similarly observed "that Hollywood began to imitate Hong Kong movies in the late 1980s and 1990s because Hong Kong films (to a certain degree) are imitations of Hollywood films, so Hollywood is imitating Hollywood,"[29] a process that David Bordwell calls "the Hongkongification of American cinema."[30] This mode of citation is naturally much more complex than has been portrayed, in that it is based on the accrual of cinematic sedimentation, one layer transforming itself on the basis of the previous, while adding to or shifting the elements according to its needs. The global cinema industry is a giant network of multiple lines of citation, increasing in its manifold turns and returns, connections and reconnections, particularly as cinematic cultural production intensifies through time. Hence, Tan See Kam takes necessary umbrage at Bordwell's linear formulation of a Hollywood–Hong Kong Hollywood "plagiarism"[31] by arguing that both Hollywood and Hong Kong cinemas have "been produced by, and [are] productive of, the interplay