VISUALITY and IDENTITY

SINOPHONE ARTICULATIONS ACROSS THE PACIFIC

Shu-mei Shih

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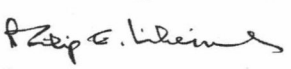

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ABOUT ROMANIZATION

This book tries to follow the different romanization practices in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China whenever possible, but generally follows the pinyin system per scholarly convention in the United States.

CONTENTS

Introduction

The ticket cost was NT$250, and I was one of fewer than a dozen people watching the film. The theater was relatively small, with about eight rows of seats, each with fifteen or so seats, and I could easily feel all the empty seats. When the lights dimmed, the two *chukou* (exit) signs glared conspicuously in green from above the doors flanking the screen. The soundtrack crackled as the volume was turned up to an almost unbearable level, which is characteristic of the theaters in this intimate outpost of Taipei City, known for its hurried replications of Taipei cosmopolitanism. Outside the theater were streets crowded with shops and cars, peddling a middle-brow cosmopolitan stew of survival and pleasure: imported goods, local food, sidewalk stalls, inexpensive thrills and services. If theaters in Taipei set the volume high to enhance the thrilling effect of the films, theaters in Chung-ho set it higher. Chung-ho theaters do not have the righteousness of Taipei theaters and cover up this lack by anxiously blaring at the theatergoers in exaggerated imi-

tation of the capital city proper, while competing with the hustle and bustle of the streets outside.

The poor sound quality unexpectedly crystallized to the ear the many different accents of the Mandarin spoken by the actors and actresses, breaking down the fourth wall of illusion even before the camera obscura of illusion had a chance to establish itself. It was a real challenge to be convinced by a love story in so many accents, accents that inevitably foreground the differences and tensions among those geopolitical spaces the accents come from—in this case, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, and Malaysia. It was also a challenge to be persuaded by the highly aestheticized and gravity-defying kung fu sequences that were already unrealistic in themselves but were then accompanied by the anachronistic tonalities and vocabularies in the lines delivered by the actors and actresses.

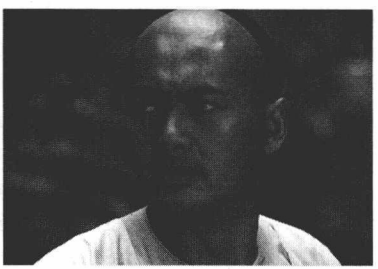
The so-called Chinese-language cinema in general, and the martial arts genre in particular, has largely been a story of standard Mandarin spoken with "perfect" pronunciation and enunciation.[1] Actors who speak with accents are usually dubbed over so that the illusion of a unified and coherent "Chinese" community is invented and sustained. Earlier Taiwanese-language cinema was very much a ghetto unto itself, and Cantonese-language cinema from Hong Kong was routinely dubbed in Mandarin when exported to other Chinese-speaking communities. It was therefore jarring to hear so many accents in this particular movie, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,* to the extent that one was led to wonder whether the director, Ang Lee, had made a mistake or whether there was not enough money in the budget to dub the voices. More crucially, the accents break down the idea that the characters live in a coherent universe where relationships are inevitable, interfering with a compelling development of the diegetic narrative within the film, per the conventions of the genre. When the lead actor, Chow Yun-fat, mumbles his lofty ideals of love and loyalty in a heavy Hong Kong–style, Cantonese-saturated Mandarin, the classical lyricism of his words stands in stark contrast to what Mandarin speakers would see as an awkward delivery, not to mention that the diction of the presumed classical lyricism belongs to contemporary Taiwan-style melodrama and romance fiction.

The dissonance among the different accents seemed to parallel, in a strangely paradoxical way, the cacophony of the streets. So many voices, so many different kinds of noise; but amid the din, life lives and life continues, despite inauthenticity and incoherence. A copy of the metropolis it will never become, Chung-ho

1 Michelle Yeoh (from Malaysia).

2 Chang Chen (from Taiwan).

3 Zhang Ziyi (from China).



4 Chow Yun-fat (from Hong Kong).

does not seem to care one way or the other. Besides, the city's majority populace speaks Taiwanese, or more precisely Minnan, rather than Mandarin, and its political allegiance leans clearly toward Taiwan independence, again unlike the Mandarin-heavy Taipei.

Inauthenticity and incoherence aptly describe the film and the setting and expose the illusion that such martial arts films must necessarily reference an eternal China and an essential Chineseness. The martial arts genre in film is closely related to the literary genre of martial arts fiction, which is often pseudohistorical but usually classical in terms of diction and syntax, and both forms, ironically, have developed and were perfected in places outside China. The classics of the film genre were produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 1960s and 1970s, when China was an isolated communist state, even though the origin of the genre dates back to the early twentieth century in China. In the context of the 1960s and 1970s, Taiwan and Hong Kong's relationship to the so-called classical Chinese culture

had paradoxically been less ambivalent than it became in the ensuing decades. "Classical Chinese culture" was one of the legitimizing mechanisms for the Guomindang government's rule of Taiwan—the logic being that the Republic of China on Taiwan, not communist China, was the preserver of the authentic Chinese culture, and by that, the Chinese mainlanders in Taiwan were culturally superior to the local Taiwanese, the Hakkas, and the aboriginals. As for Hong Kong, British colonialism engendered nostalgia for China among Hong Kongers. With China safely tucked away behind the "iron curtain," Hong Kong and Taiwan were free to claim their versions of authentic Chineseness through nostalgic reconstructions of classical Chinese culture in popular media. Even though a degree of ambivalence existed and contradictory implications of nostalgia, reinvention, and resistance to the continental center of China proper could be detected (especially the anticommunist variety), the politically motivated valorization of the nostalgic mode helped the martial arts genre to serve as a privileged form for the fantasy representation of classical Chinese culture. Against this genealogy of fantastic projections of authenticity, then, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* enters the scene with such scandalous disrespect that theatergoers in various communities that speak Sinitic languages were aghast with disbelief when the film first opened. There has been no other martial arts film brandishing so many accents and so daringly risking the displeasure of audiences whose cinematic expectations of the genre have not changed with the times. As can be expected, the film had poor box office showings across these communities, until it won the award for best foreign film at the Oscars and opened for a second time. The Hollywood validation of the film indicates a transpacific sphere of cultural politics within which the filmic negotiations and transactions among China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are played out in political economical terms.[2] For now, let me dwell on the important implications of the linguistic dissonance.

The linguistic dissonance of the film registers the heterogeneity of Sinitic languages as well as their speakers living in different locales. What it engenders and validates, ultimately, is the heteroglossia of what I call the Sinophone: a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries. What the film makes audible, hence also visible, is confirmation of the continuous existence of the Sinophone communities as significant sites of cultural production in a complex set of relations with such constructs as "China," "Chinese," and "Chineseness."

To be more precise, the Chinese language spoken in the film is the Mandarin, or *putonghua,* also known as Hanyu, the language of the Han people, the majority ethnicity in China, where even by official count there are fifty-five other ethnicities (or what the Chinese government calls "nationalities") other than the Han, but Hanyu is enforced as the standard language. We hear differently accented Hanyu on the screen through the voices of the four lead actors and actresses. Multiple accents for one standard language reveal a more powerful message in that they indicate living languages other than the standard one, whose hegemonic projection of uniformity is subverted through a straightforward representation that refuses to cover up dissonance with uniformity. If the film represents a certain temporally ambiguous "China" as the space of action and narrative, it is, like Chung-ho City, a copy, rendered with a fracturing of standardness and authenticity. Chineseness is here accented variously across geopolitical borders, and the film jolts the audience into a defamiliarized, alienated reception as jarring as the loud and uncomfortable sound blaring from the theater speakers in Chung-ho. The Sinophone may be a cruder or finer copy, and most importantly, difficult to consume, since successful consumption implies flawless suturing from the perspective of either monolingual *putonghua* (Beijing standard), monological Chineseness, or a monolithic China and Chinese culture. The Sinophone frustrates easy suturing, in this case, while foregrounding the value of difficulty, difference, and heterogeneity.

The important point here is that the copy is never the original, but a form of translation. It may desire to be the original, or to compete with the original, but this desire always already predetermines its distance from the original as a separate, translated entity. Translation is not an act of one-to-one equivalence, but an event that happens among multiple agents, among multiple local and hegemonic cultures, registering an uncertainty and a complexity that require historically specific decodings. At the conjuncture of the end of British colonialism in Hong Kong, the emergence and codification of independence consciousness in Taiwan, the rise of China as an economic and political behemoth, the ever-increasing intensity of U.S.-directed transpacific cultural traffic, and the gradually enhanced visibility of immigrant artists and filmmakers in the United States who reformulate their Chineseness, the spheres of cultural transaction and negotiation shift fluidly and the accents of Sinophone articulations have become more audible as well as visible.

If Chung-ho is a copy of a metropolis, the film presents a corrupted copy of an empire that breaks down the illusion of wholeness and coherence. Representation as copy—the old theory of mimesis—here becomes the literal description of Sinophone cultural production, hence perhaps more intensely metarepresentational, more able to confront the flows of inauthenticity in the new borderless world, which might explain why the film was so popular in the United States. The central tension therefore emerges: while the Sinophone traces linguistic boundaries, as I will show in greater detail later in this introduction, Sinophone film and art as visual work open themselves to the global while simultaneously taking a varied stance toward what is known as "Chinese culture." This makes it imperative that Sinophone visual practice be situated both locally and globally.

This tension between the linguistic and the visual is dramatized by the way *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was received in the United States. For those American audiences without any linguistic ability in Mandarin, their comprehension of the film was limited exclusively to the glossy Hollywood filmic style and English subtitles, both of which project, more seamlessly, the illusion of a coherent linguistic and cultural universe. The differentiation between what is Sinophone as the destandardization of Chineseness and what is Chinese as the exotic and beautiful foreign culture is largely lost at this level of perception and reception. The visual without specificity of linguistic determination, then, necessarily opens itself up to the possibility of translinguistic and transcommunity consumption. It is no wonder that the visual has increasingly become the forum and the tool to articulate identity struggles, a desired medium with an expansive reach and a wide appeal. Ang Lee's Sinophone to Chineseness, then, is what his Chineseness is to his Americanness: in different contexts, his identitarian struggle is divergent. In this film, Sinophonic dissonance can be positioned against uniform Chineseness; but in his struggle against uniform Americanness, his alternative appears constricted by stereotypical Chineseness, rather than challenging it, as shown in his other films such as *The Wedding Banquet.* Herein lies the transnational political economy of representation that often reduces complexity and multiplicity that appear only through multilayered differentiation by projecting a particular logic of power, subjecting a national subject (Taiwanese) to minoritization (becoming Taiwanese American).

In the act of representation and translation (from one medium to another, from the center to the margin, from China to the Sinophone, and the other way around), multiple contexts therefore come into play, which may easily be erased

by the global. The global asserts its preeminence as the largest and the most important context; thereby it can easily erase the geopolitical specificities of the Sinophone and its intra-area dynamics. To assert heterogeneity and multiplicity, as the reading of *Crouching Tiger* above requires, however, cannot be the end point of an analysis or an argument (as is the case for some contemporary theories). Heterogeneity as an abstract concept can itself be easily universalized to avoid the hard work of having to sort it through and become instead contained by a benign logic of global multiculturalism. To activate heterogeneity and multiplicity therefore means, above all, being historical and situated, because not all multiplicities are multiple in the same way, and not all heterogeneities are heterogeneous in the same way. The question is one of both content and structure, which are sensitive to multiangulated overdeterminations by such categories as history, politics, culture, and economy, both locally and globally.

To use the Freudian notion of overdetermination in this context is to suggest that just as the libido and the unconscious are a result of plural causes, cultural formations in Sinophone places are attributable to a multiplicity of factors, which "may be organized in different meaningful sequences, each having its own coherence at a particular level of interpretation."[3] As Arif Dirlik puts it, "Overdetermination is in fact nothing more than the sensible recognition that a variety of causes—a variety, not infinity—enters into the making of all historical events, and that each ingredient in historical experience can be counted on to have a variety—not infinity—of functions."[4]

Raymond Williams has also defined overdetermination simply as "determination by multiple factors," as opposed to the problematic economism of singular determination. As such, overdetermination can help better analyze "historically lived situations and the authentic complexities of practice."[5] Recognizing both continuous and discontinuous multiplicity, Simone de Beauvoir furthermore offered the following in a different context: "Without raising the question of historical comprehension and causality it is enough to recognize the presence of intelligible sequences within temporal forms so that forecasts and consequently action may be possible."[6] Beauvoir connects the possibility of historical understanding with subjectivity, which makes action possible. The coinage and recognition of the category called the Sinophone is itself then a form of practice and action, registering "intelligible sequences," in this case, within both temporal and spatial forms.

The pull between different contexts in trying to analyze and comprehend a