

# Diaspora Literature and Visual Culture

Asia in flight

Sheng-mei Ma



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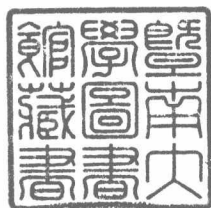
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# Diaspora Literature and Visual Culture

This book offers an incisive and ambitious critique of Asian Diaspora Culture, looking specifically at literature and visual popular culture. Sheng-mei Ma's engaging text discusses issues of self and its relationship with Asian Diaspora Culture in the global twenty-first century.

Using examples from Asia, Asian America, and Asian diaspora from the West, the book weaves a narrative that challenges the twenty-first century triumphal discourse of Asia and argues that given the long shadow cast across modern film and literature, this upward mobility is inescapably escapist, a flight from itself; Asia's stunning self-transformation is haunted by self-alienation. The chapters discuss a wealth of topics, including Asianness, Orientalism, and Asian American identity, drawing on a variety of pop culture sources from *The Matrix Trilogy* to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. This book forms an analysis of the new idea of Asian Diaspora that cuts across area, ethnicity, and nation, incorporating itself into the contemporary global culture while retaining a distinct Asian flavor.

Covering the mediums of literature, film, and visual cultures, this book will be of immense interest to scholars and students of Asian studies and literature, ethnic studies, cultural studies, and film.

**Sheng-mei Ma** is Professor of English at Michigan State University, USA, specializing in Asian Diaspora Culture and East–West comparative studies. His books include: *East–West Montage: Reflections on Asian Bodies in Diaspora*; *The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity*; *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures*; and *Asian Diaspora and East–West Modernity* (forthcoming).

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In our diaspora for the past three decades, Lien Hsu has been my light amidst the thickening darkness.



# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	viii
Introduction	1
 <b>PART I</b>	
<b>Asian diaspora visual culture</b>	9
1 Shadow's shadow in visual culture: anime's doll, alien's home	11
2 Inter-Asia unbilical love in visual culture	24
3 Chinese cinema's global dream, multilinguality, and dialect's wake	38
4 Found(l)ing Taiwanese: from Chinese fatherland to Japanese <i>Okasan</i>	48
5 Genesis by the sword and special effects in Korean TV costume drama	59
 <b>PART II</b>	
<b>Asian diaspora literature</b>	73
6 Chinese graffiti: poetic out from Muk Lau, Tongyan Gaai, and House of English	75
7 Italic and indiscernible Asianness in Asian diaspora literature	96
8 Tears of Asian diaspora in " <i>The Namesake</i> ": empathetic nostalgia from an eyehole	112
9 Eileen Chang and Zhang Ailing: a bilingual orphan	126
10 Chink chic, a.k.a., shitnoiserie	148
 <i>Notes</i>	162
<i>Bibliography</i>	171
<i>Index</i>	181

# Introduction

Out of the ashes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism, Asia seems to have been in ascent for some decades prior to the new millennium, elevating the modern self, transcending the old and traditional. However, given the long shadow cast across modern film and literature, this upward mobility is inescapably escapist, a flight from itself, or self-alienation. Such ambivalence over "Aerial Asia" splits off into Asian America, whose American identity and empowerment are constructed, in part, on a floating, imaginary Asia. Asian American aerialist traverses the Pacific Ocean parallel to the course of Western Orientalist. Not far from either levitates Asia in flight, Orientalized Ariel in service to the white master.<sup>1</sup> This book traces these wisps of dream rising out of Asia, Asian Diaspora in the West, and Asian America. From Asia to Asian Diaspora to Asian America and elsewhere, Aerial Asia evinces a continuum, like three movements in a symphony, rather than discrete, unrelated identities. Given that any flight must take off from and land somewhere, both readiness and cessation of flight are already pregnant with physical and psychic dynamism, motion and stillness interlocked. Aerial Asia thus dreams on, aloft, yet with a keen, albeit subconscious, dread of awakening to reality. The elusiveness of modern dream-self threatens to turn self-transcendence into a mere trance, one's rootedness via, in effect, aerial roots.

Some racist joke has it that Orientals cannot roll their "r," which invariably stiffens into "l," as in "fled lice" mangled by that proverbial Chinese restaurateur, bucktoothed and all. Asia "in flight" puns, Orientaly, with Asia "in fright," its ecstatic soaring unwittingly yoked with vertiginous fleeing. Bigotry aside, the doubleness of flight is not unique to the Asian modern self. A human is a land animal with winged dreams, eager to take off to transcend this existence, fancying an arc skyward, in denial or in defiance of the cage of body and life's course downward, into the ground. The "s" in "winged dreams" zigzags like a bolt of thunder, each dream blinding and deafening for a short while. The solid mass that is the body touches the earth, which is itself suspended in the air; the body's sense of power and mastery arises oftentimes from absent-minded, "out-of-body" daydreaming. Accordingly, pre-, modern, or post-, Asian or non-, we never see the world for what it is, only through the stained glass of the mind. Nor do we see the self for what it is, like our eyes

## 2 Introduction

unable to gaze into themselves. A mirror gives reflections of things, not thingness, which shifts restively between a transcendent spirituality and nothingness, between God and Death.

The self, truth be told, rarely soars above all else; it exists in relation to others, even when it is alone with mental images of loved or hated ones, with lifelong fixations or random turns of the mind. (To call up images at all requires connectivity of brain synapses.) The self pursues both with equal passion, either to possess the object of desire and kill its independence or to banish the object of loathing, which means housing it in one's heart in the first place. Either scenario seeks the demise of the other as the other, which only haunts the self with increasing vengeance. The implicit kinship of love and hate surfaces in the dying words of the archvillain Jade Fox in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). Extending her hand to Jen, her disciple who betrayed her and whom she attempted to poison, Jade Fox mourns: "*Wo weiyi de qing, wo weiyi de chou*" (My only flesh, my only foe). The symmetrical *duizhang* (tonal and verbal parallelism) of Jade Fox's words bears out the duality of *chou*, meaning enmity and vengeance as well as compatibility, repulsion as well as attraction. The classical script of *chou* consists of two adjacent *zhui* (short-tailed bird) flanking *yen* (talk or words), as if two birds engage in a dialogue. Indeed, the classical ideogram denotes not only opposition but also counterpoint. Such is the conundrum of *chou* with its ready reversal of love and hate, flight from self and fright of the unknown—out there and in here. Ang Lee's characterization echoes Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), where the "object-love" is introjected or narcissistically incorporated, resulting in "self torments of melancholiacs" (161–62), including the homicidal/suicidal Jade Fox.<sup>2</sup>

Vanity of vanities, the dream for the beyond reprises in the soaring spires of Gothic architecture, mythological towers to reach the sky, and endless tales of transcendence. Soaring, however, evokes the homonymic "sores" from crashing; a fall is to fly in reverse. Flying requires a leap of faith on the part of wingless humans, a jump off the land mass of human reason, which may well be a jump to death. Self-transcendence is fraught with self-abandonment, even suicidal wish. The classic letting-go of the Song dynasty poet Su Shi is tinged with unease in "*Shuidiao getou*" (A tune of water and fragment of a song): "I wish to ride the wind to return,/Yet I fear the jeweled tower and jade pagoda/Might be frigid, too chilly up there." Synesthetically, the euphoric, paradisaical vision couples with a freezing sensation. Gandalf the Grey's last words "Fly, you fools!" in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) urge his companions to flee and presage, subconsciously, his own fall or rebirth as Gandalf the White. Such poetic ambiguity is even echoed in the American counterculture as Kris Kristofferson rasps in a psychedelic high in *A Star Is Born* (1976):

Watch closely now  
Are you watching me now?

...  
 You're coming closer lady; don'tcha leave me now  
 We're gonna make it, don't look down  
 ...  
 Maybe I'll teach you at least that you've  
 Got to be free when you fall

Two souls balancing on a tightrope high above our deadened quotidian life, the counterculture gives a positive spin to "free fall," suicide exercised through one's free will becoming liberation. Yet the refrain "Are you watching me now? ... Don't look down" registers the overwhelming risks. At the threshold of the new millennium, in a *wuxia* (swordplay) rendition of the entwined romantic overreaching and melancholia, Ang Lee closes *Crouching Tiger* with a swordswoman flying/falling to Yo-Yo Ma's cello aria.<sup>3</sup>

Mapped in space and time, Aerial Asia stretches literally across the Pacific Ocean, most concretely embodied in Asian Diaspora Culture. The airborne soul is invariably mirrored on the surface of water, refracted underwater. For centuries, people of Asian descent on both sides of the Pacific Ocean have traversed the great water, either to flee home or to go home. Perhaps unbeknownst to them, they are the modern Moses parting the Pacific. The parting eventually ages into an ache for return, all the more so because of the irreversibility of any departure. As modernity rages across the globe throughout the twentieth century and beyond, this venturing forth and looking back has pulsed within Asian Diaspora Culture, always involving somewhere and something else, a beyond that promises a better "return," a new home for one's risk-taking or a resplendent home-coming. "Beyond" points both to time—the new millennium—and to, with a "the" before it, desire for social mobility, even spiritual transcendence. The drive into what could be, alas, is haunted by memories of what has been. Asian Diaspora Culture, accordingly, is poised between future possibilities and past recollections, equally ethereal and intangible.

With its aerial roots in time past and time future, Asian Diaspora Culture is often seen through, the afterbirth cast aside by "adult" disciplines such as ethnic studies on Asian America, US area studies on Asia, and even national studies in Asia. Respectively, Asians and Asian Americans seem securely ensconced in their Asian or American identity; their selfhood appears to fit perfectly the here and now. Yet for the global twenty-first century, Asian Diaspora studies proves conceptually flexible and paradigmatically transformative, unbounded by area, ethnic, and national studies. Without the baggage of Cold War geopolitics, civil rights identity politics, and Asian/American nationalism, yet informed by these histories and more, without its own discursive and disciplinary turf except the air, Asian Diaspora studies capture the self-contradicting spirit of the millennium, free-floating though glocalities, deeply rooted like aerial orchids.<sup>4</sup> To translate the facility of Asian Diaspora studies into individual as well as shared human terms: who among

#### 4 Introduction

us—erstwhile newborns of Asian diasporas and those of white empires—is immune to the separation-anxiety with mothers and surrogate *motherlands*, particularly as we age and bury our youth in our mothers' graves? Wherever we have started and wherever we end up, the longing to return is the Mosaic Exodus both to something new and back to the womb-like homeland, via a birth canal of wonder and terror, the towering walls of waves.

All the preceding tropes revolve around splitting, either the zigzag thunder that halves the sky or Moses who halves the sea. The split within Asian Diaspora Culture bespeaks the fractured, schizoid human condition. Deemed revolutionary and iconoclastic, modernity makes its name by pitting against the traditional. Drawing from Lacan and Sausurrean structuralism, Fredric Jameson defines postmodernism as marked by schizophrenia in a descriptive rather than diagnostic sense of the "breakdown in the signifying chain" (Jameson 1991: 26). Needless to say, postmodern affectlessness and temporal incongruousness bear an eerie kinship to schizophrenics detached from emotions and isolated in presentness. A Foucauldian archeology serves as well to excavate the subterranean continuum of pathology and normalcy, so much so that the collection *Schizophrenia, Culture, and Subjectivity* (Lucas 2004) is subtitled *The Edge of Experience*, i.e., on the borders of human experience and not outside of it. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) in *Anti-Oedipus* in fact locate emancipatory potential in the theoretical interstices of schizophrenia and capitalism, where schizophrenic presentness negates an originary Oedipal complex.<sup>5</sup>

A number of critics see schizophrenic symptoms in specific cultures. Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas 2009: viii) view the Chinese body politic as professing "the deeply schizophrenic national history". Likewise, Rod Lucas (2004: 154) identifies Australia as a "schizophrenic culture". This is where that delusional, prophetic last line to Patrick White's (1957) *Voss* comes from: "The air will tell us." Tell us what, and it remains to be seen or heard, those voices in the air—classic symptom of paranoia schizophrenia. Indeed, many settler, postcolonial nations manifest schizophrenic splits along racial and other lines. Frantz Fanon diagnoses postcolonial Black man's inferiority complex thusly:

I believe that the fact of the juxtaposition of the white and black races has created a massive psychoexistential complex. I hope by analyzing it to destroy it.

Many Negroes will not find themselves in what follows.

This is equally true of many whites.

But the fact that I feel a foreigner in the worlds of the schizophrenic or the sexual cripple in no way diminishes their reality.

(Fanon [1952:] 12)

To substitute "West and East" for "white and black," however artificial either dichotomy may be, Fanon's insights readily apply to Aerial Asia. That some

in the East and in the West may not be plagued by the “massive psychoexistential complex ... in no way diminishes” that distorted reality. If the reality is warped, then the normal, sane person—Fanon’s foreigner “I,” or Fanon himself—is irreparably severed from that reality. Alienation from the surroundings renders alleged sanity precarious. According to Fanon, the Freudian trauma of colonization compounds a Jungian “collective unconscious” to create blacks’ shared neurosis (145). A psychiatrist, Fanon nonetheless eschews Freudian and Jungian disinterestedness: “Scientific objectivity was barred to me, for the alienated, the neurotic, was my brother, my sister, my father” (225). The alienated and the neurotic is the “foreigner” Fanon himself.

Nor do I preclude myself in identifying Aerial Asia in flight with Schizoid Asia in fright. To leave aside Asian Diaspora, which is fraught with fissures, Asia proper veils innumerable fault lines: North and South Korea; the stand-off across the Taiwan Strait; urban and rural China; modern Tokyo and old Kyoto in Junichiro Tanizaki. A common thread runs through each of these instances: modernity exacts a flight to a new self *westward*, while remaining intensely nostalgic for the old self. In contemporary films, a host of schizophrenics and their doppelgangers recur: the bipolar protagonist in Park Chan-wook’s *Oldboy* (2003); female ghosts in J-Horror; Hong Kong and Chinese kung fu films and their jarring sentimentalism; John Woo’s aesthetics of violence. Collectively, the obsession of John Woo *et al.* to make it to Hollywood, to “Go West!”, is taken for granted by Asian fans. This frenzied wooing is but one of the myriad ways of idolizing, fetishizing the Western, modern other, which culminates in the general public’s acceptance of cosmetic surgery mimicking Western features. To vacate the filmic, cultural, even corporeal body for the West epitomizes a schizophrenic Asia, egomaniac and self-hating, boasting of the Asian/Chinese Century to impress the West. Figuratively, this Asia is dismembered across air, land, and sea: “Flying Chinamen” and estranged Asian homebodies, both haunted by waterlogged reflections. Therefore, both Asians in Asia and Asian Americans in America—or, for that matter, Anglo-Asians, Asian-Canadians, Asian-Australians, and more from other corners of the world, including inter-Asia migration—belong to Asian Diaspora Culture so long as the ambivalent “Parting Pacific (or Atlantic, Indian)” flashes through their mental or cinematic screen, a yearning that defamiliarizes their present existence, if not compelling them to actually take leave. The parting, real or imaginary, from the host culture launches one into the unknown, the thrill or agitation of being a guest, distinguished or unwelcome, posited on the cessation of quietude. This Mosaic moment is the commencement to Asian Diaspora Culture, the dubious ritual to initiate and undo diaspora at once.

In the wake of the initial plunge into the air or the sea, the absent Moses is invoked rather than empathetically, vicariously identified by Asian or Asian American idol-worshippers. The Pacific Ocean is, after all, a gash deep and wide on the earth’s and the Asian diasporic’s body. Salt water fills up the

wound in no time, the excruciating pain nicely preserved for posterity. The immigrant generation's diasporic trauma is implicitly taken as the originary difference of an Asian Other, a difference from the US mainstream culture that leads to identity struggle in Asian-American writings. That which is originary is the immovable mover that lies beyond proof. Hence, rarely in Asian American culture is there a poignant, in-depth representation of the diasporic, which is submerged in either Asian or Asian American (or simply American) discursive paradigm. The diasporic remains the dark backdrop against which Asian or Asian American existence is silhouetted. The "perennial alien" Keymaker in *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) not only "come[s] in handy" but "the immigrant is the Everyman of the twentieth century,"<sup>6</sup> an allegorical figure for the projection of *non-immigrants'* desires. The possibility that the ocean-crossing—the flight as well as the fright—may never end is summarily and collectively repressed.

To borrow, once again, from the proverbial restaurateur, Chinese restaurants in the American Midwest routinely open with great fanfare, some even offering authentic Sichuan, Hunan, or other cuisine. Within months, however, survival compels them to accommodate American taste, and the numbing, spicy dishes from Sichuan and Hunan give way to the usual fare of sweet and sour pork or greasy Oriental/American buffet. Creative writing by people of Asian descent around the globe follows similar market trajectory, the ethnic bildungsroman debut maturing into not so much multicultural as "color blind" novels. Anglo-Asian novelists—Kazuo Ishiguro, Hanif Kureishi, Monica Ali—move into something akin to whiteface performances soon after their early ethnic stage. Even in such a debut as Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), after an epigraphic chapter or two on those Buddhas of "old Indians [who] come to like this England less and less and [who] return to an imagined India" (74), Kureishi unswervingly focuses on the Buddha's British-born son in his sex romp across 1970s London and New York.<sup>7</sup> Asian Americans, in comparison to Asian Britons' mainstreaming, continue to churn out multicultural texts in response to the politically correct public ethos. That writers are often conscientious enough to reflect on self-Orientalizing does not altogether exorcize the ghost of Orientalism. A number of Asian American writers feeding off and into Oriental stereotypes resemble obesity patients in a course of yo-yo weight loss, swinging between self-punishing diet and self-indulging binge, between virtual memories of immigrant traumas and Asia, on the one hand, and a white gaze at one's own and even oneself, on the other.

Ultimately, minority voices are the Freudian "talking cure," in English to Western ears, to heal Old and New World traumas, respectively, diasporic legacy and minority complex. The linguistic register in, say, Chinese American discourse ranges from standard English of ABC (American-born Chinese) characters to broken English, Chinglish pidgin, or stilted, translation-style English of FOBs (fresh off the boat) and Asians. Not only stylistic but also affective uncanniness informs minority writings: the ancestral (dream)land is



strange and distant to Asian American writers but it feels *heimlich*, home-like.<sup>8</sup> An integral part of the West, minority writers are also the West's own "talking cure" to balance, through model minority myth and token representations, colonial guilt with late capitalist, multicultural, and globalist euphoria.

The never-ending saga is not only in the content of Asian Diaspora Culture but in its form. Stylistically, Asian Diaspora narratives exhibit a high degree of formal hybridity. Whereas one cannot be, legally, both American and Chinese, a body of filmic and literary texts, unlike the human body, often claims dual, even multiple, citizenship, despite the proprietary interest of any particular culture. This is especially true of Asian Diaspora film and literature, a constellation of texts stretched taut over a huge expanse of water, its fingertips barely gripping land's end. Neither "texts written and filmed in English" (from the United States primarily) nor "those in Chinese" (from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Chinese diasporic communities) aptly defines these texts since the nineteenth century, which betray, invariably, shadows of the other language and culture, from the verbal and syntactic basics to the discursive, ideological, and cultural superstructure. Monolingual and monocultural at first blush, Asian Diaspora texts shape-change in a long hard—and bilingual—look. To turn the metaphor on its head, an Asian Diaspora text is monolingual only in a frontal, flattened portrait. Should the page be turned sideways and looked at askance, one finds its profile, its cross-section, sagging, the words elongating like distorted sounds from a broken gramophone. Asian Diaspora texts' taped-over residual signs reveal themselves.

*Diaspora Literature and Visual Culture* opens with five chapters on Asian Diaspora visual culture, covering turn-of-the century cinema, television, anime, radio play, and picture book, from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Australia. The concluding five chapters investigate Asian Diaspora literature from early Chinese America to contemporary, across several ethnic groups and two continents and languages. Modeled after their namesake of Asia in flight and in fright, each chapter springs from one specific image or question, an initial shock of sorts, followed by theoretical rumination, critical analysis, and intuitive association. Objectivity and dispassionateness of this scholarly book join an eclectic, poetic style to embody, unflinchingly, diasporic affects of loss and thrill, pain and happiness. Chapter 1 wonders if shadows throw their own shadows, which seems to be the case when anime characters in Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell 2* (2004) play with dolls and when "perennial aliens" in Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006) construct their home. Chapter 2 seizes upon one fleeting shot in E.J.-yong's *Asako in Ruby Shoes* (2000), the very first inter-Asia filmic collaboration, to explore regional visual culture. Chapter 3 pits Chinese *wuxia* cinema's global, monolingual aspirations of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige against multilingual and dialect films of Jia Zhangke, Edward Yang, and others. Chapter 4 theorizes the founding and foundling paradox of Taiwan's identity, particularly Wei Te-sheng's



## 8 Introduction

*Cape No. 7* (2008). Chapter 5 explores the representations of genesis in three Korean TV costume dramas. Chapter 6 contrasts the use of Chinese language in Angel Island detention camp poetry from early Chinese America with that in contemporary writers such as Gish Jen. Chapter 7 pursues the formalistic, italicized representation of Asianness and the erasure thereof, exemplified in Kim Ronyoung, Chang-rae Lee, and Kazuo Ishiguro. Chapter 8 contemplates tears of empathetic nostalgia in Jhumpa Lahiri and Mira Nair. Chapter 9 excavates the two sides of a prominent Chinese-language writer Eileen Chang, whose English-language novels are virtually unknown. Chapter 10 goes ungently into the night by raging against the latest, millennial rage of Chink Chic practiced by white Orientalists and Chinese diasporics—the New China Hands.

This book does not have a conclusion since Asia Diaspora Culture will never end. Each Asian, immigrant, Asian American, and Western character in this long story does grind to a halt. Repeated three times, though, a period turns into an ellipsis of spaces and dots, brief blackouts before the next blip of heartbeat, from the air, across the sea ...