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Globalization and Cultural Identity in the Films of Ang Lee

A consideration of the filmic oeuvre of Ang Lee — he has directed ten films to date — reveals a startling array of genres and approaches to the topic of cultural identity in an increasingly globalized world. As Lee's film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) swept awards and garnered critical acclaim at the international level, Oscar-winning composer Tan Dun described *Crouching Tiger* as a crossing of boundaries — of film genres, musical traditions, and national cultures. This description of the film succinctly suggested the exciting trend toward globalization reflected by mainstream acceptance of a subtitled motion picture in Mandarin Chinese. This conception of globalization is not only realized as the synthesis and transcendence of opposites, but also as the representation of geographic localities and notions of territory — including nationalism, identity, narrative, and ethnicity. Ang Lee's films, including his early Chinese-language trilogy as well as his American films — he moves back and forth between the two cultures in his work — complement the current theoretical orientation of comparative film and literary study and its focus on cultural identity and globalization. In particular, the transnational appeal of Lee's films has been a topic of much scholarly criticism that has emerged in the past decade.¹ Lee's most recent film *Lust, Caution* (2007), and two of Ang Lee's earlier works, *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), and *The Ice Storm* (1997), are particularly clear examples of the way in which, as Malcolm Waters (1995) has asserted, globalization is fueled by symbolic exchanges, such as images on television, film, commercial consumerism, fast food, art and culture.

The implications of globalization must be considered in light of the relationship between commodity and economic exchange and symbolic and cultural exchange — globalization studies are a continued rethinking of the relation among nations, economies, cultures, and social practices. Globalization theorists are divided on whether to view globalization historically or from a strictly postmodern perspective. Writers such as Edward Said and Roland Robertson argue that the globalization process has a long history and must be worked through key historical periods —

beginning with the development of maps, maritime travel, and global exploration. This paradigm stands at odds with that of postmodern theorists Anthony Giddens and David Harvey, who argue that globalization is linked much more directly to modernity and postmodernity. According to Giddens, the “‘lifting out’ of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across time and space” is made possible by the cohesion and strength of twentieth century nation-states (Giddens 21). Meanwhile, Harvey takes his position on globalization from the point of view of recent developments in mechanization and technology — such as the Internet — causing the shrinking and contracting of time and space worldwide; thus globalization is a thoroughly modern or even postmodern phenomenon (Harvey 201-11).

Globalization — according to Giddens — leads to the “intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens 64). The implications of this theoretical paradigm are striking, and provide fertile ground for comparative literary study, itself a field caught up with influences and relationships. Though scholars of globalization focus largely on the fundamental impetus of capitalism and the spread of economic and commodity exchange, Malcolm Waters does not agree that “the driving force for global integration is restless capitalist expansionism” (*Globalization* 10). Instead he feels that globalization has been fueled by symbolic exchanges, i.e., television, advertising, films, novels, music, fast food — cultural entities that are circulated and recycled simultaneously in many locations throughout the globe. This is based on the understanding that “symbols can be produced anywhere and at any time and there are relatively few resource constraints on their production and reproduction” (Waters 9).

The most striking example of the transference of symbols between East and West is in the Ang Lee film *Eat Drink Man Woman*, whose title alone impresses “otherness” for the native English speaker. A direct translation of a common Chinese idiom, the title in English conjures up pidgin grammar, thus suggesting a whole history of Asian “otherness” in a western setting.² The suggestion of binary opposition in the title also calls to mind the East/West dialectic. The title implies larger themes that the narrative of the movie will explore, e.g. the difference between male and female, yet it suggests an interdependence, such as that between eating and drinking. In the two pairs of the four-word idiom, *Eat Drink Man Woman*, the larger motifs of food and sex, the fundamental components of all human life, are implied in a neat short-hand of translated Chinese, and are universally recognized to be transcendent of any cultural boundary or border. Thus, the title of the film itself is a sign of the globalized, territorially non-specific themes within. A final

twist on the meaning of the title is given when the proverb — “Eat drink man woman” (or in Chinese “yinshi nannü”) — usually employed to describe the bare necessities of sustaining life, is given an ironic reading when pronounced by the main character in the film to illustrate that even life’s simplest elements have a way of becoming complicated.



Figure 1. Traditional Chinese cuisine is juxtaposed with the homogenizing force of a global American fast food corporation (Wendy's Hamburgers) in Eat Drink Man Woman

As the film opens, the viewer is treated to the sights and sounds of all manner of traditional Chinese gourmet cooking, which presumably involves the use of certain tools, cooking techniques, and animal organs not found in the western kitchen. This may provide a shock or at least a pleasurable voyeurism for the western viewer. However, this is set against later semiotic signals that suggest the power and the reach of globalization — specifically, the appearance of the western fast food chain in which the two teenage friends work in Taipei — with all of its western accoutrements such as the uniforms, burgers, shakes, fries, and so forth. This may also prove to be a shock for some western viewers unused to seeing Asian faces in the uniforms of American franchises. Food in the film is totemic, infused with significance, and an intergenerational means of communication. “We communicate through food,” is a line spoken by the middle daughter of the family, and in the film *Eat Drink Man Woman*, food truly serves as a linguistic signifier. This is further emphasized by the father’s disability in the film — although a gourmand and master chef, he loses his sense of taste, and this becomes a major theme in the narrative. When this sense of taste is restored at the end of the film — while he shares a meal

cooked by his second daughter — it serves as a fitting denouement to demonstrate that communication and understanding has been restored. “Daughter,” he says; “Father,” she replies to him.

As a semiotic discourse, in this film there are signs of cultures and influences colliding and synthesizing which demonstrate the true nature of globalization. For example, with the roles of three sisters in the family, each has a juxtaposition of contradictions — the eldest, who brings Christianity into her closed, loveless existence — the presence of the Christian church in Asia, often a signal of western colonialism, but here simply presented on its own terms, in the form of the unsteady faith of the Christian sister; the middle daughter, an executive for a Taiwanese airline which is expanding into new countries by acquiring new airline routes in the international market. The youngest sister works at a Wendy’s, although as a contrast to that, when she gets off work she enjoys a bowl of noodles at a traditional roadside food stall. International influences abound — globalization is demonstrated by franchise infringement in modern Taipei, a boyfriend’s perusal of Dostoevsky, and the young Taipei students’ apathetic intonation of French phrases in a university language lab. The film’s structure itself suggests a Western stage play. The tried-and-true formula of family drama — three sisters all very different, under the tutelage of a hapless father whose generational separation from his daughters renders him incapable of true understanding is instantly recognizable to a western audience raised on *Lear* and Chekhov. As Ang Lee undoubtedly supposed, this placement of unfamiliar food/city/language within a well-traveled plot would help the film reach audiences versed in western literature. The drama is a keenly-observed character vehicle — especially the quiet ending which serves as delightful theatre — a tableau of father-and-daughter bonding.

The impact of globalization on traditional Chinese culture is clearly demonstrated in one particular section of the film. The scene where the middle daughter, Jia-chien, and her co-worker, Li Kai, who have begun a flirtatious relationship at work, go shopping together at a large, brightly lit, “ToysR Us”-style department store, is a good example of the challenges posed by postmodern, globalized culture. Li Kai has asked Jia-chien to help him choose a toy to send to his young son, who lives in America with his mother. He specifically would like to find “something Chinese” — a toy that will represent traditional Chinese culture rather than the mass-produced plastic items that line the shelves. As they wend their way through the aisles, the items all seem to look more and more identical and mass-produced. The exported western iconic figures and Disney toys that fill the shelves in such abundance cannot satisfy Li Kai, who longs for a toy that carries actual cultural significance. The whole effect is extremely alienating, as the two have this conversation:

- Li Kai: I always wanted to find something Chinese for him. He has plenty of these already.
- Jia-chien: He's interested in Chinese culture?
- Li Kai: I wish. I can't believe that in a few [short] years, my son is growing up to be an American. Sometimes I look at him and wonder if he's actually my son. He was raised in America, and his mother doesn't mind.
- Jia-chien: His mother? How does she feel about you being away all the time?
- Li Kai: She's glad I'm not around. I think the only reason we're not divorced is that we're both too busy. That sounds so cynical, doesn't it?

Li Kai begins to discuss his university life with Jia-chien. This is a key plot point and she becomes troubled by his revelations. Toward the end of their conversation, Jia-chien hastily grabs a "Barney" lookalike doll off the shelf (the "Barney" doll is called "Harvey" in the film).

- Jia-chien: This looks Chinese.
- Li Kai: That's [Barney]. You have no idea how much I suffered from those [T.V.] shows. Wanna hear the theme? I love you, you love me...
- Jia-chien: Please don't [sing it].
- Li Kai: What the hell. I'll just buy this one. He'll like it.

The sentence "This looks Chinese" to describe the "Barney" doll is heavily ironic — it implies that the label of "Chinese-ness" can be tacked on to any western icon and refashioned as an item of cultural significance. Li Kai's singing of the "Barney" theme song is just as troubling; although he complains to Jia-chien that hearing the theme on the TV show every day drove him crazy, he now mindlessly repeats it, showing how successful the "brainwashing" that comes with mass export of culture can be. Jia-chien asks him not to sing it, calling a stop to the powerful infiltration of western culture. In the scene's final troubling conclusion, Li Kai abandons his original plan to expose his son to traditional Chinese culture — he hastily dismisses the idea with the words, "What the hell. I'll just buy this one. He'll like it." Li Kai's fruitless quest for a traditional Chinese toy and Jia-chien's mis-identification of "Barney" as "Chinese" both underscore the bleak prospects of passing on Chinese traditional values in a world of globalized consumer culture.

It is interesting to consider that the criticism leveled against this film in the United States centered on how the film was not easily classified as a comedy or a drama. Andrew Tudor notes "The crucial factors which distinguish a genre are not only characteristics inherent in the films themselves; they also depend on the particular culture within which we are operating" (Tudor 139). However, criticism of the film from its home country, Taiwan, centered on how the drama itself was too "westernized" and that such "exaggerated" events could never take place in conservative Chinese culture. This criticism reflects the argument of James Clifford

in confronting global identity. Clifford puts emphasis on the dis-location of culture, that culture has become deterritorialized and diasporic. Arjun Appadurai builds on Clifford's view by demonstrating that "deterritorialization" creates new markets for film companies, art impresarios, and travel agencies, which thrive on the need of the deterritorialized population for contact with its homeland" (Appadurai 38). The members of diasporas thus may imagine or fashion new, postnational identities, making and remaking themselves in response to new localities, social and political pressures, and transnational cultural discourses (31).

No director of modern film seems to contribute more to the debate on globalization, in the sense of blurring the distinctions between cultural identities and plumbing their interrelationships, than does Ang Lee. His own path to worldwide recognition has been a crossing of boundaries. Lee left Taiwan in 1978 and relocated to the United States, where he completed a Masters of Fine Arts in Directing at New York University in Manhattan. His directorial focus shifted back and forth between his homeland and his adopted home in his earliest films, as he directed a series of critically-acclaimed independent dramas — these include 1991's *Pushing Hands*, and two spectacularly received Asian films, *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994). Having finally achieved deserving recognition, he was invited to direct Emma Thompson's \$15 million Jane Austen adaptation, *Sense and Sensibility* (1995). His 1997 work *The Ice Storm*, based on the novel by Rick Moody, followed on the heels of this great success. In the imagination of the artist, however, the cultural entities of the West and the East have been metamorphosed, blurred, and traditional attitudes called into question. As such images of a young male student pondering Dostoevsky and female college students working at fast food restaurants in cosmopolitan Taipei indicate, globalization is a trend that cannot be resisted. And yet, through this dialectic of shifting inter-relationships of cultural identities, an opportunity arises for Ang Lee to uniquely promote Chinese culture (or a hybridization of Chinese culture) in a way which in many respects serves as an enlightenment. While his work appeals to consumer culture, it also suspects the more traditional grand narrative, demonstrating that people living in the new millennium have developed a unique sensibility to deal with the contradictions of their age. Ang Lee's filmic voice indicates the paradigm of globalization in the contemporary era — that ours is no longer a world of totality — that the world has become more and more fragmentary.

One of the most harrowing examples of this fragmentation in the work of Ang Lee is his 1997 film, *The Ice Storm*. In this film, set in 1970's suburbia, Ang Lee creates a stark, alienating, gray microcosm for his players — difficult to watch, but oddly compelling. The Connecticut winter is at its most harsh and unforgiving, and

the scenes leading up to the famous storm are filled with bare trees, dead leaves, and bitter cold air. This paints an apt picture for the tone of the film, which is about sexual detachment and alienation within the family. The film is a masterpiece of irony and bitterness. One can go so far as to say there is practically no communication in the film — that is the transference of understanding and coherent exchange of ideas between the characters. Each scene is fairly short, and if conversation takes place, it is usually brief or interrupted. Characters speak with their backs to each other, from under bedclothes, from behind closed doors, from within a Nixon mask, without meeting each other's eyes. Characters do not listen to each other. Silence is an actual medium in the movie — the film is all about what is unsaid — and the unexpressed thoughts fill the movie like a picture highlighted in relief. Kevin Kline and Joan Allen play a married couple for whom an upcoming weekend of Thanksgiving vacation could provide a chance to reconnect with each other and with their two teenage children, played by Christina Ricci and Tobey Maguire. Instead, however, the character played by Kevin Kline is distracted by his own affair with a neighbor (Sigourney Weaver) while his children are engaged in their own precocious sexual pursuits. Children mimic parents in their meaningless and labyrinthine chase.

Some of the most unforgettable scenes in the film include Kevin Kline and Christina Ricci's silent walk through a wet and muddy woods, as he carries the chastened teenage child home in his arms (her feet are cold). The final scene is also a masterpiece, as Kevin Kline weeps, penitent, bent over the steering wheel of the family car, while in the back seat, his son remains uncomprehending, watching the rear view of his tortured father's head. Other haunting scenes include the kiss, in a winterized, drained swimming pool filled with dead leaves, between Christina Ricci and her adolescent boyfriend — Ricci first takes her chewing gum out of her mouth in a gesture that seems both vampish and all too innocent. Lines from the film which linger in memory include Sigourney Weaver's scathing line to Kline, post-coital: "You're boring me. I already have a husband." Her husband returns from a business trip to Houston and says to their two boys, "Hey, guys, I'm back." The older son replies, "You were gone?" There is also the angelic cherub-like son who tells Christina Ricci "I love you." In response, she asks, "Are you drunk?" In addition, there is an early scene where Tobey Maguire recommends to a girl on which he has a crush to read *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky, as he stands on a staircase feeling like one. "I think you'd really like it" — he says — "*The Idiot*."

Ang Lee's familiarity with 1970's Connecticut life is formidable. The movie was filmed in New Canaan, Connecticut, the center of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant

culture, and the accoutrements of the movie, stereo phonographs playing “Montego Bay,” rainbow-colored toe socks, polyester fashions of the ugliest nature including long lapels and gaudy leisure suits, hairspray-hardened hairstyles, waterbeds, and the hardcover volume of *Watership Down*, are all products well-remembered by those who came of age in those years. The modernist houses used in the set—shag carpets, wall-sized windows, flat interior design, gray paneling, and unattractive box TV sets, are all exact replicas of the 1970s community. Even the television commercials (i.e., the weeping Indian chief in an advertisement for environmental protection) and programs in the background are authentic television footage that nail home the era.

The use of both drugs and sex as escape routes in the movie accurately mirror the American social scene as it unfolded in 1973. The human dramas in the film are made all the more convoluted, murky, dream-like and detached by the emotionally-numbing involvement of drugs, sex, and alcohol. Alcohol is served at every party and gathering among the adults in the film — there is never an adult without a drink or a cigarette, usually both. The sexual relationships include those between Ricci and the two sons of a friend’s family, Maguire and his love interest, plus the adulterous relationships of both parents. This culminates in the notorious “key party” in which everyone exchanges car keys and goes off with everyone else — including the town’s preacher (“Sometimes the shepherd needs the comfort of the sheep” — “I’m going to try hard not to understand the implications of that.”).

The date of 1973 is pinpointed by the footage of Richard Nixon on the television set, Thanksgiving week in 1973, in which Nixon is about to be relieved from office



Figure 2. In *The Ice Storm*, the adulterous affair of the father of the family, Ben Hood (played by Kevin Kline), is echoed by the deception of Nixon (the figurative “father of the country”) during the Watergate scandal

over the Watergate scandal, the war in Vietnam is not going well, and disillusionment pervades the atmosphere. This was the accurate historical date of the famous ice storm which hit Connecticut and a large swath of New England in 1973, in which the air over the eastern seaboard suddenly turned to a freezing temperature, and in a single night a rain storm coated every exposed surface with a glaze of ice. The storm was dangerous, and entire communities and neighborhoods were immobilized and isolated for days. Trees cracked under the weight of the ice, and the falling of these huge trunks crushed houses, buildings, and automobiles. The storm in both the movie, and in reality, highlighted the distance and alienation felt at that time. This is captured in Ang Lee's film by the sights and sounds so clearly etched in one's memory — the clinking and cracking of the ice as the wind blew through ice-encrusted trees, the squeaking cracks of falling branches, the impassable roads, the loss of electricity. The "ice" metaphor is given further weight by the close-ups of a metal ice tray appearing in the film. Metaphors are further suggested by the short, cold days accentuated by the gray skies and the bleakness of the approaching winter. Those from the New England area recognize Thanksgiving as the beginning of a long winter season, incessant and relentless until April. The ice is even given a role in the film, as husbands and wives gingerly make their way across slippery, unfamiliar terrain. Because of the ice on the roads and the rails (in the opening scene, the train of the teenage protagonist has been halted by the storm), the characters in the film become isolated in space and time.

This isolation is contrasted with the experience of the media broadcasts of the downfall of Richard Nixon during the Watergate scandal. Contemporary theorists can associate this image of the American president's crumbling integrity broadcast around the globe with the aforementioned notion of deterritorialization. As Jan Aart Scholte observes, "Global events can — via telecommunication, digital computers, audiovisual media, rocketry and the like — occur almost simultaneously anywhere and everywhere in the world" (Scholte 45). Here, the effects of globalization are experienced as fundamental changes in the spatial and temporal contours of social existence due to the dramatic acceleration of broadcast images and their ability to connect distinct geographical locations in space. When the time necessary to traverse the space between geographical distances is reduced, distance or space undergoes compression. The human experience of space is intimately connected to the temporal structure by which space is traversed. Thus, the broadcast images of Nixon become intimately connected to the human experience — the effect of the U. S. presidency on the world is to inject it with further cynicism and coldness; in addition, the television images show the dichotomy between what the world thought

of Nixon, and the image Nixon hoped to project. Ultimately, Nixon's dishonesty at the global level is echoed by Ben Hood's dishonesty at the local level.

The Ice Storm is a remarkable achievement on the part of Ang Lee because it demonstrates that he is not confined to a single culture or genre. Indeed, the film presents an unexpectedly penetrating vision of the 1970's American suburban experience. In addition, the book itself, which became a best-seller in the United States, was written by Rick Moody, who grew up in the environment he describes, and for whom the experiences related are semi-autobiographical. While Moody's fiction shows a confidence with his material, the film in some ways surpasses the fictional experience — how often can it be said that the book wasn't as good as the movie? And yet in this case, the book can be judged due to its appeal as a type of "pulp fiction" — it contains far more explicit sex than the film — almost needing to entice the reader through its softly pornographic writing on nearly every page. The movie transcends this sexual obsession, presenting the sexual material more obliquely, or even omitting it, in favor of more sophisticated portraits of its characters. The book, for example, opens with a scene in which Ben Hood is wandering around in his neighbor's house, and he takes a pair of her underwear and masturbates into it, and then throws it into her son's room. The film omits this graphic scene. Another specific example is the teenage son's crush on his Manhattan classmate — in the book, a detailed scene of masturbation is described as the boy takes advantage of the girl's drugged stupor. The movie treats this situation more tenderly and comically — more skillfully in general — the girl passes out in the boy's lap; the expression on the boy's face is priceless. However, he does not take advantage of the situation in such a depraved and prurient way. Instead, trapped under her body, he uncertainly and clumsily moves her, clunking her head against the ground in one of the most bittersweet and believable scenes in the movie. Then he has to leave, running for his train that will carry him into the freeze of the ice storm. Surely one can appreciate the subtlety of this presentation over the graphic sexuality of Moody's fiction.

Not all critics agree that Ang Lee was successful in his adaptation of Moody's work. Charles Taylor represents one dissenting opinion:

Everything about "The Ice Storm," from the cool green titles that seem to smoke and shift (as if seen through ice) to Mychael Danna's score of lonely, Asian-sounding wind instruments, is tasteful and distant... Moody was writing from the inside; Lee doesn't get beyond displaying artifacts from a lost civilization... the movie does call up the early '70s. But being an anthropologist isn't the same thing as being a dramatist, and I'm not convinced Lee understands the period. How could he? Lee's being Taiwanese didn't matter in his last picture, "Sense and Sensibility," because the early 1800s are distant to everyone, but the calamity of American life in 1973 is still fresh in the minds of anyone who lived through

it. The exhausting, one-damn-thing-after-another tenor of American life, with the outrage of Watergate striking before the hangover from Vietnam wore off, was far removed from the cool, ascetic portentousness on display here. (Taylor)

In addition, the film has to make a coherent narrative out of a book that presents a fragmentary one. The story is not linear, but rather patchy series of events described without chronological order in a chapter-by-chapter exposition each told from a different character's point of view. Thus, Ang Lee must create a narrative from what is essentially a cubist and fragmentary piece of work. The nature of the film is part satire, part psychological drama, and part tragedy. It is also a period piece, requiring the director also to address accurately a time period in which he was not physically located in the United States, and also an era that is very recent in people's minds.

I basically made the movie from the crew's suggestions. For one scene, I wanted some kids' toys against the wall in Mikey's room, to give the scene texture, and we tried a field hockey stick. It looked really good to me, until someone had to say that in America, field hockey is more of a girl's game. Gradually I got tuned into the world — that happens on every movie. I did a women's movie, and I'm not a woman. I did a gay movie, and I'm not gay. I learned as I went along. What hit me the most was when Wendy says, "Mom, are you all right?" And I couldn't understand when Ben tells the kids to go to bed by 10, and they don't do it — I couldn't relate to that. I had to learn from the crew, who explained to me that this was a time when the kids were really raising their parents. The parents were so self-absorbed that the kids had to take responsibility for their own upbringing... I tried to keep the emotional core of the tragedy — that's what prompted me to make the movie ... I think [the tone of the movie] is a lot softer. Less angry. I didn't grow up there. I wasn't pissed off. That distance helped me to make it art — it wasn't so personal. But I think if the movie moves people, *it's because it has a subtext that's universal, that anyone, from any culture, can relate to* (italics mine). (Yabroff)

In the last sentence of this statement, Ang Lee himself points to the global nature of the story of the dissolution of marriage and family that is a common theme in his work. The universality of Lee's filmic voice transcends cultural boundaries. Lee himself has stated "Quite honestly, I don't know what's what anymore. I wanted to make a Chinese Film [*Crouching Tiger*] so that I could be different from Hollywood, but actually my Hollywood films are more Chinese in vision than the Chinese films I made before. My first three films were just made for the mainstream Taiwanese audience. I wasn't thinking about being Chinese or not Chinese" (Chung 54-60). In considering the work of Ang Lee, questions must be raised about the relation between parts and whole, between local and general, between individual and global. For Lee, the filmic voice he has created reflects a multifaceted approach which symbolizes globalization and informs it with process of enlightenment and liberation.

Ang Lee's most recent film, released in 2007, is the Chinese historical drama *Lust, Caution*, his first film since his Oscar win for *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and his first Chinese film since *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). Having his status as world-class director secured by his Oscar win, it is noteworthy that Lee would choose, for his next project, to return to a Chinese-themed film. International critical response to Lee's China-related topic has been less than promising; the film's NC-17 rating most certainly reduced its accessibility, but despite the film's early win of the Golden Lion, the top prize of the Venice Film Festival, critical response to this World War Two-era espionage film has been only lukewarm. This may be because the film is a complicated and politically charged treatment of early twentieth century Chinese history and culture. The film also presupposes a fairly advanced understanding of the conflicts and divided loyalties within China during World War Two; notably, the film lacks any explanatory text in the opening frames that is a common feature of historical dramas.³ While being centered on a historically Chinese topic, the film also references the pervasive influence of globalization on traditional Chinese culture.

The film depicts a tale of espionage involving a young student, Wang Chia-chih, who goes undercover to entrap a married man, known only as Mr. Yee, who is collaborating with the Japanese in occupied Shanghai during the Second World War. In trying to snare the wealthy and powerful Mr. Yee, Wang Chia-chih takes on the identity of the married Mai Tai-tai, entering into a world of luxury and conspicuous consumption dominated by the powerful Mrs. Yee. In the Yee family circle, Wang Chia-chih must adapt to playing the role of an elite and sophisticated woman who knows the finer points of wealth and status in upper-class Chinese society — ironically, this requires her to be fluent in English and familiar with the style and taste of the western world. The westernized elements incorporated into haute Chinese culture serve to highlight both the intense danger of Wang Chia-chih's ruse and give her a sense of otherness or distance from her own identity. This globalized identity drives the movie deeper into psychological intricacies as Wang struggles to keep her mask from slipping when she begins to fall in love with Mr. Yee. The final events in the film take place on a ring-shopping trip in a jewelry store run by an Indian shop owner, when after Mr. Yee has given Wang Chia-chih a large diamond ring as a gift (symbolizing a commitment), Wang is unable to hide her emotions any longer and tips off Mr. Yee to the subterfuge, allowing him to escape.

It is significant that the connotation of status involves the interplay between the traditional and the modern, as well as the Chinese and western. The film is made in six languages — Mandarin, Japanese, English, Hindi, Shanghainese, and

Cantonese — an early twentieth-century example of the effect of globalization as many different cultures and languages co-exist in the Shanghai of the period. For example, the high-end jewelry shopkeeper and the manager of the jewelry shop are Indian and communicate with each other in Hindi, but the language of luxury in Shanghai is English — when Wang Chia-chih enters, she conducts all of her business in English. For the native English speaker, the experience of watching the film is made more stimulating — after hearing a confusing mix of Chinese, Japanese, and Indian tongues — when Wang Chia-chih breaks into proper British English. When Wang Chia-chih first receives the ring from the Indian shopkeeper, the Indian man breaks into the Chinese conversation between Wang and her lover, using English to say “Congratulations, Miss!” as though congratulating Wang Chia-chih on an engagement. This adds an unexpected emotional element to the scene. English is also the language used at the Keissling Café in Shanghai where Wang Chia-chih sets the trap for Mr. Yee; she uses English to address the waiter and to ask to use the phone in the restaurant. These multi-lingual abilities are a common trope in films involving espionage — a world-class spy must be fluent in several languages — moreover, the seamless shift among languages highlights Wang Chia-chih’s sophistication. Many of the major street names and shop names are in English; for example, as Wang Chia-chih flees from the assassination scene, she gives the address “Ferguson Road” to the pedicab driver. This use of English gives the scenes of post-Qing Shanghai and the stylistic elegance of colonial Hong Kong an extra air of pedigree.

The influence of western styles of clothing also plays a significant role in the film. Western materials, especially English wool, are in demand, and men like Mr. Yee wear custom-tailored western suits. But by far the most significant statement is made through the clothing of Wang Chia-chih. In earlier scenes in Hong Kong where Wang attends class as a student, she wears a simple, unadorned blue *qipao* worn by all the female students, and dressed like this, with no makeup, she appears young and innocent. However, later, in the scenes at the Keissling Café, waiting to entrap Mr. Yee, she wears the garb of a classic spy with her trench coat, red lips, and a black hat tipped down over her eyes. This clothing is an archetypal signifier for a classic western spy, and she dresses the part like an actress preparing for a role — her identity as a spy is almost unmistakable. The detail of Wang Chia-chih’s clothing tells a shorthand version of the espionage story and helps propel the narrative forward — Wang is quite obviously dressed for the part.

In addition, Lee finds it important to demonstrate that Wang Chia-chih was significantly influenced by western film culture, especially film noir, through references to five different western films. First, she is shown on two separate

occasions watching western films in a movie theatre; these are *Intermezzo: A Love Story* (1939), and *Penny Serenade* (1941). *Intermezzo* is the story of a love affair between a married man (Leslie Howard) and his young daughter's piano teacher (Ingrid Bergman) — the victimized seven-year-old daughter is caught between the heartbreak of the betrayed mother and her own devotion to the adulterous father. Wang Chia-chih's face is covered with tears as she watches the film. This reaction reveals Wang's own loneliness due to the abandonment by her own father, who left China for England, remarried, and began a new life in a new country with seemingly no regard for his daughter. It is notable that this western film is a catalyst for unlocking Wang Chia-chih's deeply buried emotions concerning betrayal. In addition, posters for specific films are seen outside of the cinema: *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940), which Wang Chia-chih contemplates briefly, *Destry Rides Again* (1939), and *Suspicion* (1941), a poster seen inside a cinema Wang visits. *Suspicion*, in which a shy young Englishwoman (Joan Fontaine) begins to suspect her new husband (Cary Grant) of trying to kill her, is replete with the film noir characteristics of shadowy darkness and claustrophobic intensity which echo the elemental composition of *Lust, Caution* itself.

The film opens with technically complicated and multi-angled filming of a scene of mahjong, using four cameras. The short story by Eileen Chang (from which the film was adapted) also begins at the mahjong table. The opening lines of Chang's story accentuate the flash of the diamond rings:

Though it was still daylight, the hot lamp was shining full-beam over the mahjong table.
Diamond rings flashed under its glare as their wearers clacked and reshuffled their tiles.

(3)

The mahjong scene sets the tone as an artifice, as the *tai-tais* at the mahjong table are competing, not only at the game of tiles on the table, but in their dress and jewelry, financial background, and social status. The mahjong itself is only one the "games" being played — a metaphorical image of the competing and social climbing of the wealthy *tai-tais*. This opening scene reveals the entire plot of Eileen Chang's narrative in a microcosm — everyone has secrets; every participant has something in mind, and no one can trust anyone else in the room. Their relationships are based on intricate connections of business and social obligation, so they cannot speak of real feelings. Instead, they must communicate in a sort of double-talk, jockeying for position though words that are outwardly superficial. They discuss whose turn it is to treat the group to dinner, in which restaurant they plan to dine, and the prices of high-society articles in the inflationary economy of Shanghai. The scene encapsulates Wang Chia-chih's alienation from the high-class, fashionable

world she has entered — she's in this circle but she's not. The important elements of the scene, such as the outfits and accessories worn by the *tai-tais*, point out their social class, and Wang Chia-chih's lack of a diamond ring makes her stand out as an outsider:

The edge of the table glittered like a diamond exhibition, Chia-chih thought, every pair of hands glinting ostentatiously — except hers. She should have left her jadeite ring back in its box, she realized; to spare herself all those sneering glances. (8)

Eileen Chang's fictive portrait in the opening scene of her narrative accentuates this posturing and deceit. She adds minute details through short sentences, and tends to use words to describe sizes, shapes, colors, and patterns — the throw-away details that only someone of her wealthy background and privileged social class could have observed so keenly. She uses colors in her description in the opening pages: "white," "rouged," "electric blue," "yellowish-brown," "brick-red." Chang's writing is known for its focus on the clothing, accoutrements, the furnishings and curtains, the ornaments and decorations, the lighting and the subtle sensitivity to detail which her highly-attuned sense of fashion and taste could give her, as a member of the wealthy class in Shanghai of the period. This is displayed through descriptions such as that of the fashionable gold neck chains worn by the mahjong *tai-tais* (employed intentionally to display wealth in a subtle, tasteful, unostentatious way):

Thanks to the extravagantly inflated price of gold in the occupied territories, gold chains as thick as these were now fabulously expensive. But somehow, worn in the place of a collar button, they managed to avoid the taint of vulgar ostentation, thereby offering their wearers the perfect pretext for parading their wealth on excursions about the city. (4)

A great deal of care is taken in describing the outfit worn by Wang Chia-chih with its "shallow, rounded collar standing only half an inch tall, in the Western style" (Chang 3-4). Chang also records "her makeup was understated, except for the glossily rouged arcs of her lips" (Chang 3). In a later passage quoted above, Wang is ashamed of her simple ring, which does not compare to the glittering display of wealth on the fingers of the other players in the mahjong game. Special focus is also given to the drapes, which were cut in broad swaths to match the intricate pattern, which, Chang notes deliberately, allowed for "extra wastage":

The wall behind him was swathed in heavy yellowish-brown wool curtains printed with a brick-red phoenix-tail fern design, each blade almost six feet long....False french windows, and enormous drapes to cover them, were all the rage just then. Because of the war, fabrics were in short supply; floor-length curtains such as those hanging behind Mr. Yee — using up an entire bolt of cloth, with extra wastage from pattern matching — were a conspicuous extravagance. (7)

Early in the film, the viewer sees Wang Chia-chih after her own first performance onstage — she is breathless, exuberant, and the euphoria carries her late into the rainy night; she can't sleep for all the excitement she feels. This theatrical bearing is what first attracts Wang to performance: she enjoys the power she feels over her audience. A day later she is drawn back to the stage on which she had performed so successfully, and she wanders, musing among the false trees of the fictional scene until Kuang Yu-min and his friends call her from the audience seats in the balcony to join their meeting. Metaphorically, they are calling her "back to reality," where they request her aid in an actual assassination. Kuang's lines in the film underscore the dichotomy between reality and performance when he says that it is more valuable to kill a real flesh-and-blood traitor than to wrench tears from an audience.

While the idea of performance is what seems to drive Wang Chia-chih, her own emotion plays a significant role. The cyanide pill that Wang is instructed to take if she is ever caught is meaningful as a metaphor. The pill appears twice in the film: the first time, when Wang defines herself as Mr. Yee's false lover (as performer), and the second time, just after she defines herself as Mr. Yee's real lover (as a woman experiencing actual love). After she is exposed, Wang Chia-chih does not take the pill as she was instructed. This refusal to commit suicide in service to her country is the metaphorical conclusion of the story: Wang becomes her true self only when she gives up playing the role of agent. She stops performing and allows herself to be true to her actual emotion. As if to confirm this, immediately following there is a flashback to the scene in Hong Kong University where her friend and fellow collaborator Kuang Yu-min first calls her off the stage. It is as if



Figure 3. In 1940's Shanghai, Wang Chia-chih (right) gazes at a movie poster of Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941) as she contemplates her own choice to seduce and murder the traitorous Mr. Yee in *Lust, Caution*.

she is bidding farewell to performance a second time, this time from the other side of the stage, from her performance of her role as agent, and back to the freedom of her own real self.

After Wang Chia-chih reveals her true emotion, she is left spent and empty, and stumbles out of the jewelry store in a daze. From there, she wanders along the sidewalk, pausing briefly to gaze at the display window of an expensive department store. The mannequins in the windows are all dressed in high-society blouses, wraps, and gowns, resembling the styles of fashion icons from European haute couture. The scene underscores Wang's helplessness and loneliness, as the accoutrements of high fashion can no longer help her or offer any meaning to her life. The expressionless, phantom-like mannequins underscore the emptiness and falseness of Wang Chia-chih's position — she has been stripped of her high-class identity, and her life will soon be extinguished; however, the false status of western fashion, with which she had carefully constructed her identity, now offers her no help or refuge.

The effect of globalization has had a profound influence on the filmmaking of Ang Lee, on both the narratives and genres he chooses to direct and on his larger-scale themes of nationalism, ethnicity, cultural identity, and social practice. Films such as *Eat Drink Man Woman*, *The Ice Storm*, and *Lust, Caution* demonstrate the ubiquitous effects of globalization as modern western culture intersects with more traditional Chinese culture (even Lee's experience in making *The Ice Storm* clearly raised questions of cultural identity). In many of his films, there is a dichotomy between identification with western culture and resistance to cultural exchange, a dialectic that involves tradition vs. modernity, with traditional attitudes called into question. Ultimately, both Lee's Chinese language films and his American films continue to demonstrate the effects of globalization, and thus they help the viewer begin to grasp the fluidity of cultural exchange, and to envision how the clashing forces of globalization and resistance may work together to produce unexpected results.

Notes

¹ A frequent topic in books and journals on Ang Lee's work in the past decade is how the success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* raises issues of cultural power, differentiation, and subordination, bringing accusations of Ang Lee catering to Western tastes, or perpetuating Orientalism. However, Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell W. Davis defend Lee's work, calling his vision of China "highly idealized, romantic, even mythical." See Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell W. Davis, *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005), 211. The

question is also addressed by Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar in *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia UP, 2006), 69, where the themes of the film are related to the Chinese diasporic experience.

² Interestingly, however, this title was somewhat accidental rather than intentional — “Eat Drink Man Woman” served as a working title for the script, penciled in for the crew and actors to work with — the problem of setting up a formal title was left until after the filming, when it was suggested that the working title be left as is.

³ For example, the technique of employing explanatory text in the film’s opening frames was used to introduce the central conflict between the Bushwhackers and Jayhawkers at the beginning of Lee’s American Civil War drama *Ride With the Devil*. Presumably, for the native English speaker the conflicts of war in China would have an even greater need for explanation.

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