

# Introduction: Chinese Connections

## *Critical Perspectives on Film, Identity, and Diaspora*

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In a scene from Peter Wang's film *A Great Wall* (1985), a Chinese student demonstrates his command of English by haltingly reciting the Gettysburg Address; his reward for completing his college entrance exams is a bottle of Coca-Cola. Wang's film follows a Chinese American family's trip to China to visit their relatives, but the expected "culture clash" is mediated by the realization that aspects of American culture have already been assimilated into Chinese society. As Lisa Lowe points out, "the Great Wall of China, from which the film takes its title, is a monument to the historical condition that not even ancient China was 'pure' but coexisted with 'foreign barbarians' against which the Middle Kingdom erected such barriers."<sup>1</sup> Just as the wall begs the question of cultural cross-contamination, so do the Chinese diaspora and the globalization of the economy beg the question of the influence of Chinese culture generally, and Chinese cinema specifically, on the rest of the world (and vice versa). Cinema is like the Great Wall, a symbolic system that shapes our perception of reality, a transnational product that serves to bring China and the world together even as it defines the difference between China and the world.

*Chinese Connections: Critical Perspectives on Film, Identity, and Diaspora* brings together scholarship written in English on the cinema of China, the Chinese diaspora, and the cross-fertilization between Chinese film and global film culture. This volume primarily deals with "connections" within transnational, diasporic, migrant, historical, cultural, and political contexts. Previous collections have initiated comparative approaches, but

even such significant contributions as Chris Berry's *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (1985),<sup>2</sup> Nick Browne et al.'s *New Chinese Cinemas* (1994),<sup>3</sup> Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu's *Transnational Chinese Cinemas* (1997),<sup>4</sup> and Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh's *Chinese-Language Film* (2005)<sup>5</sup> have not extended their reach much beyond the so-called "three Chinas": the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, and Hong Kong. *Chinese Connections* brings Chinese American cinema, ethnic Chinese filmmakers in Hollywood, French and U.S. discourses about Hong Kong and PRC film, and more into the mix, highlighting the connections between Chinese-language cinema and global films with Chinese input but made in languages other than Chinese.

The flow of talent and filmmaking resources from East to West, and vice versa, has not diminished global Hollywood's continuing grip on the transnational film economy. But it is clear that, since the 1980s, Chinese-language films have slowly but surely burned a visible trail on the world-cinema map, making their mark on the global distribution and consumption film circuits, from Cannes to Hollywood and the video and digital video disc (DVD) stores in between. The global highway and byway for the film traffic, channeled by economic policies that range from protectionist legislation to international copyright laws, will without a doubt continue to be a hotly contested arena for years to come. It remains to be seen if the playing ground for this traffic will eventually even out significantly.

The intellectual enterprise of Chinese film scholarship in English, including Asian American studies with a focus on the complexity of Asian American studies identity formations, parallels the Chinese-language films' ride to the global arena. *Chinese Connections* partakes in this endeavor by exploring the film cultures of what we would call "transnational China." Separated yet connected to mainland China, "transnational Chinese" film cultures constitute a useful category for grouping diverse works by "Chinese" filmmakers variously associated with the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, as well as Chinese American and Chinese Canadian filmmaking communities in the Western hemisphere. It encompasses audiences that make up the consumer base for Chinese-language films, from the Antipodes to the American continents, from the Middle East to the PRC, from Africa to India, from France to Singapore. This book also makes connections with films and filmmakers in conversation with Chinese film culture that range from Olivier Assayas to the Wachowski Brothers.

When taken together, *Chinese Connections* brings to focus hot topics in transnational Chinese and Chinese diasporic cinemas, including issues of national politics, gender, sexuality, immigration, class, race, and economic displacement. The original impetus for this anthology came from a series of special issues that the film-and-media journal *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* devoted to the topic of transnational and diasporic Chinese cinemas. All of these fine articles are now available

online at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/home.html>. Although we are not able to reprint them here, we strongly urge you to use this volume in conjunction with the *Jump Cut* material, especially issues number 42 (Winter 1998), 46 (Summer 2003,) and 49 (Spring 2007). This collection bears the imprint of *Jump Cut*'s emphasis on a radical critique of the global media, highlighting issues of class, race, and sexual politics. In addition, several essays reprinted here come from a special issue of the *Asian Journal of Communication* devoted to critical perspectives on gender and sexuality in Asian cinema. The previously unpublished essays solicited for the volume were chosen to reflect this editorial perspective. Across the broad range of subject matter, the focus remains on ideology and cultural and political critique, and this is what makes this volume unique.

## The Structure of Chinese Connections

This anthology consists of three sections, with each exploring various aspects of “transnational Chinese” film cultures. The first section, “Global Connections,” revolves around the evolving interaction among American, European, and Chinese cultures in the cinema. In addition to exploring the impact that the influx of Hong Kong’s talent into Hollywood has had on the imagination of the postmodern condition in films like *The Matrix* (1999), *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998), and *Rush Hour* (1998), this section includes an examination of the intersection of Hong Kong action films and African American hip-hop, the use of American music in Taiwan’s New Wave cinema, an account of the reception of Hong Kong popular film in France, a contrasting account of the Chinese reception of Hollywood films, a study of Hong Kong cinema in the context of the global film market, and a case study of *Hulk* (2003), a Hollywood film by Taiwan-born filmmaker Ang Lee, and its relationship to Chinese culture and Asian American politics.

The second section, “Questions of Gender,” explores the representation of masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and queer issues in PRC and Hong Kong films from the postwar years onward. Although separated by different histories apropos to Chinese socialism and British colonialism, the postwar films of these two culturally connected geopolitical entities share a fascination and obsession for supposedly gender-neutral, or neutered, figures. By around 1997, such figures are memories of the past, but political tensions arising from Hong Kong’s impending return to the “motherland” result in the imagining of the parent and child’s relationship in the metaphorical terms of failed romances and unrequited love affairs that likewise question male potency or “authentic” femininity. Hence the essays collected here chart the changing representation of Chinese women *and* men from de-gendered socialist figures to sexually liberated ones, from seemingly sexless cross-gender actresses to sexy powerful vamps, from effete

romantic heroes to *kung fu* boxer-dancers, in an assortment of youth films, action comedies, “failed gay texts,” and Category III films (soft porn).

The chapters in this section show that gender roles in Chinese films do not depict a stable universality, but embody a contested area rife with contradictions and negotiations, variously and concurrently demonstrating that

[Women in films] . . . have been allegorized . . . as the beleaguered representative of a nation, race, ethnicity or class . . . as the embodiment of the contradictions surrounding nationalism, tradition, and modernity. As the clearest figure that has the most to gain and the least to lose from the loosening of feudal, patriarchal strictures against female mobility and autonomy, women have also served as symbols of rewards and dangers of the modern era in [films] that show them struggling against the vestiges of colonialism and poverty within . . . decaying traditional [Chinese patriarchies].<sup>6</sup>

Women in these films, as well as men, thus analogously come to represent “the ‘new’ Asian (that is, cosmopolitan, flexible, polyglot, competent, and competitive, but often cold, threatening, deracinated, and unappealing)”<sup>7</sup> inside and outside “transnational China,” fostering the Chinese connections therein. Gender identities are not static, but perennially constituted and reconstituted in dynamic ways, variously serving as metaphors for the signs of changing times, including economic, political, national, ethnic, cultural, and other areas of dramatic transformation. For film scholars globally, then, the configurations of shifting genders within the cinemas of “transnational China” present a tremendous challenge because they throw issues of spectatorship, representation, national cinema, and genre as well as gender into a state of crisis.

The concluding section, “At the Millennium and Beyond,” features chapters on the current state of Chinese-language and Chinese diasporic filmmaking. It deals with current films by Hong Kong directors, new Taiwanese filmmakers like Tsai Ming-Liang, contemporary Singaporean films (Eric Khoo), and the Chinese Sixth Generation. The volume concludes with a critical look at how China’s Fifth Generation filmmakers like Zhang Yimou have approached the new millennium.

This anthology brings these essays together to underscore common ground and expand the range of connections made among Chinese-language cinemas, films from the Chinese diaspora, and films made outside of the Chinese-speaking world dealing with Chinese themes. Taken together, the essays make a compelling case for exploring broader connections involving ethnicity and culture across national and linguistic borders. As transnational productions become more common, questions of politics and nationalism, particularly involving Hong Kong and Taiwan, continue to strain

against a facile leap to an imagined “Greater China.” However, the common experiences of the Chinese diaspora and the global links among various Chinese communities must not be dismissed—particularly for those who traditionally may be at odds with a conservative Chinese patriarchy, such as heterosexual women, lesbians, and gay men, and who have the ability to cross borders and to participate in a wider, global sphere that transcends ethnic and cultural ties. The contradictions surrounding the label of “Chinese cinema” call for a truly dialectical film criticism. These chapters provide excellent examples of critical thinkers engaging these political, social, and cultural complexities. We anticipate this book will form a basis for conducting ongoing conversations and debates: by serving as a bridge to future scholarship, we hope this volume serves to foster continuing engagement with *Chinese Connections*.

## Notes

1. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 80.
2. Chris Berry, ed., *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (Ithaca: Cornell East Asia Papers, 1985); reprinted, London: British Film Institute, 1991.
3. Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau, eds., *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
4. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, ed., *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).
5. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, eds., *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).
6. Tan See-Kam and Gina Marchetti, “Foreword,” *Asian Journal of Communication* 11.2 (2001), vii.
7. *Ibid.*, ix.