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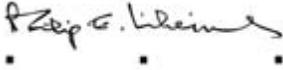
VISUALITY and IDENTITY



SINOPHONE ARTICULATIONS ACROSS THE PACIFIC

Shu-mei Shih

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It is subjectivities hybridized in colonial encounters that provide the most effective medium for the conjoining of the colonial and the global.
—Arif Dirlik, *Global Modernity* (2006)

Globalization and Minoritization

1 Much has been said by scholars in the social sciences and humanities regarding the emergence of flexible subject positions in our late capitalist world governed by what David Harvey calls the “flexible regime of accumulation.”¹ We have seen the repetition of the word *flexibility* in such notions as “flexible citizenship,”² which tries to yoke the production of contemporary subjectivities to late capitalist processes. Frequently connected to the notion of flexibility is the widely used metaphor of flow. The mass migration of people; the hypercompression of space-time brought about by advancements in communications and electronic technologies; the hyperreal, disembodied movement of money and commodities; and so forth have come to take on the characteristics of flow, all appearing to move freely and fluidly through space and across boundaries. Affirmative readings of flow have emphasized its liberating and resistant potential against disciplines of the nation-state, charted the emergence of transnational and diasporic public spheres, and identified the potential for new

transcultural cosmopolitanisms, of which the notion of a “third culture” is a good example.³

Extending the utopic readings of the consequences of flow to the peripheral communities, or to put it more precisely, out of a competitive motivation to claim deterritorialized subjectivities for the margin, scholars have also rushed to identify Third World postcolonial hybridities as the quintessentially transnational, and some claim, postmodern. Frederick Buell, drawing from the work of many scholars, argues, for instance, that the Third World is “au courant” today, much further along as a contemporary hybrid cultural formation than the metropolitan center, since its colonial hybridization is precedent to the hybridity engendered by globalization in the metropolitan center. The Third World, for Buell, thus constitutes the source of new cosmopolitans.⁴ According to this line of argument, due to colonialism and imperialism, which disrupted native systems and forcibly imposed metropolitan cultures, Third World cultures can now readily flaunt hybridity and can serve as cosmopolitan examples and models for the center. Anthony King maintains in a similar vein that Third World colonial cities with their multiracial, multicultural, and multicontinental urban cultures were precursors of today’s world cities.⁵ Here, colonialism seems to have accidentally and ironically become a historical benefit that enabled the production of exemplary transnational, deterritorialized, and therefore contemporary and postmodern subjectivities and cultures in Third World postcolonial nation-states.

Conversely, the migration of postcolonial people to the metropolitan centers as immigrants has also hybridized metropolitan cultures and turned these centers into world cities. Particularly with the post-1965 immigration of Asians to the United States, older paradigms of assimilation into the U.S. nation-state are said to have become increasingly obsolete, resulting in a decentering of the core by the periphery.⁶ Referring to all Americans of Asian descent, Lisa Lowe similarly argues that since Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have always been prevented from becoming authentic, assimilated citizens, their unassimilability actually helped them carve out a space of critical resistance to the U.S. nation-state.⁷ Due to the racialized policing of the U.S. nation-state, unassimilability could be actively deployed and deterritorialized subject positions could be effected against the nation-state. In sum, in the articulations of postcolonial and immigrant agency, the erstwhile *sources* of oppression—colonialism, imperialism, and state racism—can become the basis of constructive and resistant disidentification with the nation-

state, which, in the context of globalism, becomes a marker of some kind of power. In our era of globalization, allegiance to the nation-state can no longer be taken for granted, and its absence may actually allow for agency and subjectivity for both the immigrant and the minority.

If we presume, then, that global capitalism's favorite subjects are flexible citizens, and the immigrant and the minority have a privileged access to these subject positions, the question concerning us in this chapter is how this flexibility actually works for Sinophone visual workers and artists. Among the visual media, film and video are able to cross national borders much more easily than the traditional plastic arts. The success of Sinophone directors in Hollywood such as Ang Lee from Taiwan and John Woo from Hong Kong further suggests that the translatability of the medium makes the filmmakers themselves more marketable in different cultural contexts, practically granting them the status of flexible subjects. This question of flexibility is therefore crucial to an understanding of the political economy of Sinophone visual culture across the Pacific.

THE LIMITS OF A COUP D'ÉTAT IN THEORY

With the exception of Buell, the various scholars mentioned above also uniformly evoked the dystopic potential of the transnational, even though a celebratory tone remains dominant in their works. Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini note how transnationalism can work in complicity with oppressive nation-states to further the exploitation of labor;⁸ Lowe emphasizes the oppression of sweatshop laborers as a symptom of the new international division of labor and flexible production;⁹ Arjun Appadurai warns how migration exacerbates difference and deterritorialized fundamentalisms can heighten ethnic violence.¹⁰ The fact that none of these dystopic possibilities and actualities received in-depth and detailed analyses in these texts betrays to me not so much the limits of their arguments as their felt need to effect a theoretical coup d'état. This coup involves the overthrow of the oppressive view of immigrants and minorities as the always already victimized and the institution of the nonreactive view of them as transnationally constituted subjects who need not be completely subjected to or dictated by their oppressive nation-states, whether native or adopted. Furthermore, it involves the enlargement of the frame of reference and discourse from the national to the transnational ter-

rain, in which there are more possibilities of empowerment for the immigrant and the minority.

This coup d'état, I suspect, is most crucially motivated by the desire for theoretical coevalness. The conferring of deterritorialized citizenship, in its proximity to postmodern subjectivity, acquires for the immigrant and the minority the status of being a contemporary with the metropolitan subject, not the embodiment of the perennial "past" of Western modernity as was the case in older modernization paradigms. The rhetoric of flexibility applied to the Third World subjects allows them to be coeval with the West in the temporal scheme.¹¹ But the potential risk in the quest for theoretical coevalness is the flattening of historical and power differences, which may cause it to paradoxically repeat the kind of universalism that underpinned modernization theories. Avoiding the trap of another universalism, maintaining historical and geopolitical specificity, while arguing for coevalness is indeed a profound challenge. We may begin by defining coevalness not as a "peaceful co-existence" of cultures, but as the "co-temporality of power structures."¹² Contemporaneity, then, is marked at every turn and at every moment by the operation of power on an uneven terrain.

From my vantage point as a multiply displaced immigrant scholar working within both the disciplines of area studies and ethnic studies, I worry about the seeming contiguity constructed among the flexible subject (Asian cosmopolitans), the minority subject (Asian immigrants and Asian Americans), and resistance against the nation-state. I understand the necessity of identifying agency in post-colonial and minority subjects and do indeed see new forms of agency emerging for minority subjects in the transnational terrain, but I wonder whether this necessity should always bear the burden of reactively employing vocabulary and terminologies that are current and therefore appear to confer power. What I worry about is that agencies have not been so much examined through their production and embodied practices as they have been *identified* or *discovered* via available terminologies in a theoretical turn toward coevalness. It may be fruitful for us to ask, for instance, what are the material consequences of flexibility? In Harvey's conception of the flexible regime of accumulation, flexibility empowers the holders of capital, not the workers and producers of commodities—it is an extremely uneven practice. In the way late capitalism has moved the Fordist structure of production to the global arena to form an international division of labor, and in the

way it sanctions flexible labor processes that deepen the exploitation of labor, flexibility can simultaneously be the prerogative of the few with mobility and economic power *and* a profoundly abusive practice subjecting workers to “flexitime” regimes of multiple jobs with no traditional benefits.¹³ Stuart Hall’s penetrating statement that “the global is the self-representation of the dominant particular” aptly captures the extreme unevenness governing the production and circulation of cultures across the globe.¹⁴ Pushing Hall’s statement further, I would argue that the so-called postcolonial hybrid cultures that we celebrate today are usually seen by the center as but corrupted versions or poor cousins of metropolitan cultures and are seldom, if ever, seen as precursors. The proliferation of McDonald’s in Taiwan is a confirmation of metropolitan culture’s inevitability, not the occasion to study cultural hybridity as a model for American McDonald’s. Seldom does postcolonial hybridity provide enough of a threat or inspiration so that the metropolitan center feels the need to emulate. Neither has postcolonial cosmopolitanism ever shared the same exalted place on the pedestal with metropolitan cosmopolitanism. Postcolonial and metropolitan hybridities embody two different histories, are derived from two very different experiences, carry divergent “values” globally, and can never be equal.¹⁵ When these postcolonial cosmopolitan cultures do travel to the metropole through migration, they are met with profound ambivalence and efficient policies of containment, which include either naked racism or a multiculturalism that suppresses difference in the name of authenticity or utilizes difference for the purpose of commercial gain or absolution of liberal guilt.

It is also imperative to reexamine the metaphor of flow so frequently evoked in studies of globalization and transnationalism. Flow is always affected by topography—it must follow specific contours, layouts, and routes, which affect its speed, direction, and density. The directions of flow are also always historically marked. For example, the flow of postcolonial people to the West in our historical moment mainly appears as economic migration, while the flow bound for the postcolonial sites appears chiefly in the form of tourism. Furthermore, for the production of meaning, flow is always arrested at a specific conjuncture of time and space; that is, it has its own chronotope, albeit a continuously shifting one, depending on context and therefore avoiding fixity and determinism. Like the way narratives achieve meaning through the application of closure as in classical theories of narrative or in Hayden White’s useful discussion of how “proper history” acquires narrativity through closure,¹⁶ flow acquires meaning only at a moment

of temporal and spatial arrest within one or more contexts. Like “reality effects” that are produced by the artful arrangement of everyday objects and the provision of descriptive details in realist narratives,¹⁷ larger meaning-effects that are of crucial social consequence are more often than not constructed and manipulated by dominant institutions with their governing laws and discourses and are always permeated by power.

Using a different metaphor, Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe call these privileged mechanisms of closure or fixity “nodal points”:

The impossibility of an ultimate fixity of meaning implies that there have to be partial fixations—otherwise, the very flow of differences would be impossible. Even in order to differ, to subvert meaning, there has to be *a* meaning. . . . Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a center. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, *nodal points*. (Lacan has insisted on these partial fixations through his concept of *points de capiton*, that is, of privileged signifiers that fix the meaning of a signifying chain. This limitation of the productivity of the signifying chain establishes the positions that make predication possible—a discourse incapable of generating any fixity of meaning is the discourse of the psychotic).¹⁸

For signification to be possible, then, meaning has to be temporally and provisionally fixed at nodal points, and the agents who have the privileged access to nodal points are institutions, organizations, and individuals whose wills to power and domination are forcefully expressed through discourses that repress differences, or in our new historical moment, recontain differences through channeling them to unthreatening venues. Examples are numerous. The discourse of multiculturalism that so easily slips into a recontainment of differences is a ready example. Another example: the flow of postcolonial migration to the United States is governed by the nodal points articulated by the Immigration and Naturalization Services in terms of priority and desirability clearly favoring immigrant investors over economic and political refugees. Likewise, the virtual flow of images and money, theoretically always in transit and deferred in their consumption—as in Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto’s intriguing formula of M-I-M (money-image-money) and I-M-I (image-money-image) in which capital “accumulates not only through the circulation of money but also through the circulation of images without end,” that is,

“without being consumed”¹⁹—nevertheless accumulates meaning-effects, or in Laclau and Mouffe’s language, confronts nodal points. The endlessly circulatable image is Stuart Hall’s “dominant particular,” to which the challenge from the margin is deferred and whose vitality is renewed through circulation and recirculation, whereas money, even in its virtual form, lines the pockets of some and not others.

The necessary tension and contradiction between fluidity and fixity can be examined in detail through an analysis of flexible subject positions in the transnational context. In the following analysis of Sinophone filmmaker Ang Lee’s early films as well as their divergent reception in Taiwan and the United States, I will illustrate how the nodal points of meaning assert themselves across the global divide *in* and *through* flexible articulations of culture. My reading of the operation of these nodal points in Ang Lee’s early work will suggest the persistence of meaning-production privileging the nation-state, albeit more than one nation-state. In the juxtaposition and interaction between the two nation-states, Taiwan and the United States, we will see how two nodal points—nationalist patriarchy and gendered minoritization—separately discussed in Asian Studies and Asian American Studies respectively but never together, and it is Sinophone studies that makes this unorthodox commingling possible—operate within and with flexibility. I briefly explain the ways in which these two nodal points are utilized below.

In postcolonial historiography, as well as studies of colonialism in general, native nationalism has been an important discursive construct as the predominant form in which resistance is articulated. When analyzed as a gendered discourse, nationalism has most often been seen in its complicity with patriarchy and masculinity, which either represses internal feminist causes or competes with colonial masculinities. The works of Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* and *The Nation and Its Fragments*, have helped define the terms of the discussion, alongside various works on the relationship between gender and nationalism nicely summarized in Nira Yuval-Davis’s useful book *Gender and Nation*.²⁰ While nationalism in the Third World is construed as a reactive cultural and political discourse that has ambivalent implications for Third World agency, it delimits the coherence of its power through the repression of internal dissent and differences, in particular, its female constituencies.

Gendered minoritization, on the other hand, is a familiar topic in Chinese American Studies. By “gendered minoritization,” I mean that the process of minoritization—to turn an immigrant who was a national subject into the mi-

nority subject in the United States—is often structurally revealed to be different for men and women. Sau-ling Wong, for instance, has argued convincingly how gender becomes ethnicized for Chinese immigrants in the American context and thereby men and women acquire differential access to acculturation and assimilation: female immigrants seem to acquire “whiteness” more readily than do male immigrants in that they assimilate more effortlessly and they are more easily accepted by white society.²¹ In mainstream representations, Chinese American men are more readily associated with their race than with their sex (hence they are racialized and desexed or feminized in stereotypes), while Chinese American women more with their sex than their race (hence they are sexually considered enticing and perceived as less threatening). The gendered minoritization of Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants has been a condition noted by many scholars, who bemoan, for instance, that Chinese American women writers have always received much more favorable reception by the mainstream audience and media, while male writers have suffered from neglect and prejudice. Hence the perceived necessity to construct hypermasculinity by Chinese American male writers such as Frank Chin in order to fight emasculation.²² In sum, in the operation of these two nodal points—nationalist patriarchy and gendered minoritization—“nation-ness” ends up dictating the discourses involved, and the category of the “national” remains an important determinant of meaning.

FLEXIBILITY AND NODAL POINTS

If the realm of legitimacy for nationalist patriarchy is the Third World nation-state, and that for gendered minoritization is the metropolitan nation-state, how does someone simultaneously situated in both places operate in terms of these two nodal points? The case of film director Ang Lee offers an interesting example of how someone simultaneously Taiwanese and Taiwanese American effects a flexible subject position with seemingly flexible gender and race politics. The crucial question for me in the following is this: what does it mean for someone to be a national subject and a minority subject simultaneously? To a large extent, the emergence of Ang Lee as a flexible subject has much to do with the U.S. cultural hegemony in Taiwan through decades of propagation of Americanism. Knowledge of American culture became a given for the educated Taiwanese to the extent that a national subject from Taiwan can be readily transformed to a minority subject in

the United States. I discuss the supremacy of Americanism in Taiwan in more detail in chapter 6.

Ang Lee's success as a director began with his small-budget *Father Knows Best* trilogy (*Pushing Hands*, 1992; *The Wedding Banquet*, 1993; *Eat Drink Man Woman*, 1994), all produced by the Central Motion Pictures Corporation in Taiwan. The films were major box office successes in Taiwan, especially *The Wedding Banquet*, which was the most successful film in Taiwan history. Except for the last one in the trilogy, the films are set in the United States, and all begin with issues of cultural or generational conflict and end with some kind of resolution. There have been many movies with immigrant themes prior to and after Ang Lee (Clara Law's *Farewell China* and Sylvia Chang's *Siao Yu*, to name two prominent ones), but none has garnered such widespread appeal and box office success. Lee's films' success begs the broad question of ideology—cultural, political, and sexual—rather than the usual query about style and technique. My ideology critique that follows will reveal the reconstitution of patriarchy and patriarchal gender politics, the evasion of pointed political issues, and the subsumption of homosexuality under heterosexual hegemony as prominent features in the films' appeal to Taiwan audiences. I then examine a different set of conformities in the films' appeal to the American audience to illustrate the particular content of Ang Lee's flexible representation across the Pacific in these early films. Unlike his later films, which exploit flexibility with a much more nuanced critical awareness, these early films may be seen as model illustrations of how Sinophone films can be squarely caught within a political economy of culture structured by the unevenness of power along the axes of gender and nation.

In *Pushing Hands*, we are told that during the Cultural Revolution in China, the patriarch Mr. Zhu was caught in a situation where he could only shield either his wife or his son from the violent raid of the Red Guards. As a good patriarch should, he chose to protect his son instead of his wife, who later died. The diegesis thereby establishes the patriarch's absolute dedication to his son, Alex, as he has sacrificed his wife for him, so to speak; thereby any remotely unfilial act on Alex's part becomes a moral, if not mortal, defect. Alex now lives in New York and is married to a white woman named Martha. When Mr. Zhu comes to live with his son, his discomfort due to cultural conflicts with his white daughter-in-law therefore immediately becomes a question of Alex's unfiliality, contributing to Alex's immense sense of pressure from having to mediate between two cultures.

The object of sympathy in the logic of the diegesis is always the displaced father, whose patriarchal and patrilineal orientation is sympathetically portrayed. An illustration of this is his peeking at his grandson Jeremy's penis and calling it his "root of life" (*ming'genzi*) that will continue the family line (*chuanzong jiedai*) in a typical Confucian patriarchal fashion. Throughout the film as well, his conflict with Martha is mainly attributed to her inability to fulfill her traditional role of a daughter-in-law. The unsympathetic representation of the white wife may explain why the film was the only one in the trilogy not publicly released in the United States.²³ The patriarch's pathos from being an immigrant in the United States is time and again compensated by his moral righteousness, buttressed by his selfless dedication to his son, his extraordinary mastery of the Chinese art of *taichi*, and his attractiveness, confirmed by a graceful widow from Taiwan who falls in love with him. Any potential tension between China (Mr. Zhu) and Taiwan (the widow) is glossed over by a rhetoric of shared cultural Chineseness, and a sense of pan-Chinese sympathy is established.²⁴ Here the Sinophone is problematically equated with a kind of pan-Chinese culturalism. Against white America, all Sinophone peoples are, so to speak, "Chinese." This is the only film in the trilogy that presents a subject position closest to that of the national subject (albeit under the aegis of a politically suspicious "Greater China").

In *The Wedding Banquet*, a homosexual son must stage a heterosexual wedding in order to please his visiting parents from Taiwan. The white lover of Wai Tung, Simon, occupies the feminine role of the daughter-in-law in a patriarchal household: he buys appropriate gifts for the parents, cooks, and otherwise takes care of them and knows where Wai Tung places all his belongings, as a good housewife should. It is also he who suggests that Wai Tung stage a marriage with an immigrant woman from China who needs a green card, Wei Wei, in order to win the approval of Wai Tung's parents. When first meeting Wai Tung's parents, Simon acts nervously, as befits the role of a new and shy daughter-in-law per Chinese customs. So the tale of love configured here is a triangular one, with two women (Wei Wei and Simon) vying for the love of Wai Tung in a heterosexual economy of desire. Such manipulation of homosexuality into conforming heterosexuality has led Hong Kong critic Lau Mun-ye to conclude that *The Wedding Banquet* did not at all subvert heterosexual hegemony.²⁵ This entire comic drama, of course, leads to the conclusion that the patriarch is the one who always wins: if the patriarch desires heterosexuality, as he always does, then so be it. Al-

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

5 Taiwan poster for *Pushing Hands*.

though in the end it was revealed that the patriarch knew about the homosexual relationship between Wai Tung and Simon all along, he pretended that he didn't until the marriage between Wai Tung and Wei Wei was consummated. With Wei Wei pregnant, the patriarch got what he wanted, and thereupon he let Simon know that he would accept their homosexual relationship. Through what the Taiwanese audience would consider benign duplicity, the patriarchal authority of the father is confirmed and shown to be capable of dealing with unexpected and unconventional challenges with flexibility.

In a similar manner, what passes seemingly as a woman-centered narrative in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, where the love stories of the three daughters appear to dominate the narrative, in the end restores the woman's place in the kitchen, as several critics have pointed out. In an understated manner, the old widowed father (played by the same actor as in *Pushing Hands* and *The Wedding Banquet*) ultimately emerges as the hero. Unlike his three daughters whose romantic experiences are filled with much bad air, the father has secretly nurtured a lover his daughters' age.

To everyone's surprise (particularly to the young lover's mother, who has had a crush on him), the father ends up marrying the young woman. One of the last scenes of the movie shows his newly wed wife heavily pregnant and sitting in a rocking chair in their modern-style apartment. His romanticism and youthfulness is confirmed at the expense of the young woman's mother, who is represented alternately as hysterical and nauseating in her overtures to him; his virile, reproductive sexuality is confirmed at the expense of his daughters' confused experiences with love and sex. In the end, the most career-minded of the daughters, the second, airline executive Chia-ch'ien, returns to the kitchen, and with her cooking she restores the sense of taste that her father had previously lost. In all three films, the resolutions return the credit to traditional patriarchy, which is now seen as even more capable of containing challenge and renewing its validity through flexible negotiations and "well-intentioned" duplicity when necessary. These are tales of "resuscitated patriarchs," as Cynthia Lew has so succinctly characterized.²⁶

There are other reasons why the films were such a success in Taiwan and why they have invited such lingering appreciation and loyalty from the Taiwan audience. Ang Lee's success has been perceived as Taiwan's national pride, even though Ang Lee refrains from expressing any Taiwan nativist sentiments about Taiwan's independence from China. His fame is considered a reflection of Taiwan's ascendancy in the global cultural arena. The films garnered a degree of international attention unprecedented in Taiwan cinema, with *The Wedding Banquet* and *Eat Drink Man Woman* earning the coveted Golden Bear Awards for two consecutive years at the Berlin Film Festival. Homosexuality, furthermore, is another marker of advanced civilization of the West: by watching a film about homosexuality, one is qualified to become a global citizen,²⁷ and a largely recontained representation of homosexuality at that. In fact, by the early twenty-first century, gay-friendliness has become one of the selling points for Taiwan's capital city of Taipei and part of its cosmopolitan appeal. For a nation and a city eager to be acknowledged and accepted by the global community, homosexuality may even be a strategy, as long as it can coexist, albeit through dubious means, with local patriarchy.

The films therefore became "national" representations, exemplars of Taiwan's successful globalization, that would advance the international image of Taiwan. The Taiwan government launched a much-publicized promotional campaign in 1994 upon the nomination of *Eat Drink Man Woman* in the best foreign film competition at the Academy Awards, including a banquet for hundreds of Hollywood

personalities replete with the sumptuous dishes so luxuriously fetishized in the film, having flown in the chefs and ingredients from Taiwan. Ang Lee himself whetted this nationalist appetite by saying in interviews aimed at Taiwan audiences that he would love to receive an Oscar in order to bring glory to Taiwan. When it turned out that he was not even nominated for the best director category in 1996 for *Sense and Sensibility*, for which occasion Chinese American film critic Lu Yan and the Reverend Jesse Jackson separately accused the awards committee of racism, Ang Lee was extremely apologetic to his Taiwan supporters. He thereafter promised that the next Sinophone film he made would win the best foreign film award at both the Golden Globe and Academy Awards, saying that he “must win this honor for Chinese cinema.”²⁸ And he eventually would, with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* winning the best foreign film award at the Academy Awards in 2001. He desperately wanted the recognition from the international community also in order to please his father, he noted. Having failed the college entrance examinations by which one’s worth was defined by one’s parents in Taiwan society, and having spent five years as a househusband without a steady job or any job prospects before he made *Pushing Hands*, Ang Lee wanted his father’s approval as much as he coveted national recognition for Taiwan. So even on the personal, psychological level, we can see the collusion between patriarchy and nationalism.

If the trilogy clearly presents the perspective of a national subject, it also as prominently displays a representation of culture from the perspective of a minority subject. There is the stereotypical representation of consumable exotica and multiculturalism: the banquet customs, the exotic food, erotic and exotic women, the *taichi* moves, and so forth. What is at stake in this soft, multicultural filmic representation, however, is not merely the minoritization of ethnic culture but also what can be called *the minoritization of Taiwan*. Ang Lee himself seems cognizant of such an implication. In an interview he gave to *China Times Weekly* in 1993, he said that the Taiwanese today are Westernized just like Chinese immigrants in the United States, and both groups want to be Westernized yet maintain Chinese familism and Confucian ethics. He noted that “in the process of Westernization, Taiwanese people have already done many of the kinds of work that immigrants do. Although their bodies are not in the United States, they are psychological immigrants. . . . What is the difference between living in Flushing, New York, and Taipei? Except that one knows America better and sees more Americans, there is not much difference.”²⁹ According to Ang Lee’s perceptive comment, Western-

ization necessarily turns Taiwanese at home into psychological immigrants, which has the effect of minoritizing Taiwan as it must conform to the cultural hegemony of the United States. Increasing global traffic of cultural production and consumption not only has subjected national cultural productions to minority status within the United States in the name of multiculturalism, but also has turned the geopolitical Taiwan into the minority “region-state” of the United States. It is therefore not surprising to hear certain Taiwanese jestingly call Taiwan the fifty-first state of the United States, since more than 80 percent of Taiwanese government personnel are graduates of American universities. A serious and organized version is the “Club 51” (*wu yi julebu*), established on July 4, 1994. Its motto is “Rooted in Taiwan with America in the Heart” (*lizhi Taiwan xinhuai Meiguo*), promoting what they say was China historian John K. Fairbank’s original suggestion to turn Taiwan into the fifty-first state of the United States. The club’s ultimate goal is to call for a plebiscite on Taiwan’s union with the United States as its main agenda, and if agreed to by a majority of Taiwan citizens, present the proposal to the U.S. Congress.³⁰

Part of the minoritization process of Chinese culture as ethnic culture in Ang Lee’s films also involves the fetishization of Chinese food. Ang Lee devoted about five minutes of the opening sequence of the film *Eat Drink Man Woman* to the preparation of exquisite Chinese dishes. After the release of this film, there were a series of two articles in the *New York Times* by food writer Suzanne Hamlin on the food in the film, complete with a recipe for “Stir-Fried Taiwanese Clams” and suggestions on how to find the dishes cooked in the film in local Chinese restaurants in New York. One particularly telling example: “To order any of the dishes seen in ‘Eat Drink Man Woman,’ requests must be made in advance. Shun Lee West, 43 West 65th Street, (212) 595–8895, will prepare any of the 14 dishes from the film, given 12 hours’ notice.”³¹ This passage captures the uncanny transformation of the foreign into the domestic, the national into the ethnic; the slippage is between Taiwan and the United States, mediated by Chinese food. Ang Lee seemed to have endorsed this transformation wholeheartedly—he himself went to this very same Chinese restaurant in New York and posed in front of a table full of luxurious dishes in a photo for the food writer.

The Chinese food fetishism here in multicultural America is also appropriately gendered. It is revealing that while the Taiwan poster for *Eat Drink Man Woman* shows the venerable father in a pensive mood in the foreground (since

the emphasis is on resuscitating patriarchy), the American poster shows only a sensual set of the three sisters with a beautiful, delectable dish of Chinese food—literalizing the Chinese metaphor that women are so beautiful they are edible (*xiu se ke can*). One reviewer notes, “The people in this movie are almost as great-looking as the food. One dish after another: the women slender, exquisite, volatile; the men, handsome but languorous, waiting to be awakened by the women.”³² And another reviewer: “The meals presented look mouthwatering, and the daughters are an equally tasty trio.”³³ The transference of food metaphors to the women as tasty, delectable, consumable beauties neatly fits the porno-culinary genre in which the film falls. But more importantly, it registers the eroticization of the exotic female in the stereotypical mode of sexualization of Asian women, which is, of course, not at all a big surprise.

The *Father Knows Best* trilogy, then, embodies the nationalist appeal to the Taiwan audience through resuscitated patriarchy and the Taiwanese craving for international fame, while embracing the exoticist requirements necessary for the approval of the American audience. Vis-à-vis the Taiwan audience, the films are national constructs, albeit the “national” has to remain ambiguous at times due to the confused designation of the relationship between China and Taiwan. Vis-à-vis the American audience, the films embody the process of minoritization of national constructs into a consumable multiculturalism. On the surface, the national subject and the minority subject positions present contradictions. But upon closer examination, Ang Lee cleverly suppresses the potential contradictions. In all three films, the patriarchs are situated outside the U.S. economy of gender. They are old, they are objects of love by other Asian women, and they pose no threat whatsoever to the dominant economy of masculinity and femininity. The only attractive Asian male figure, Wai Tung in *The Wedding Banquet*, is also appropriately emasculated as a gay man, hence nonnormative. Curiously, therefore, what brings tears and sighs of relief to the Taiwan audience—the pathos of the patriarch—poses no threat to the voyeuristic enjoyment of the American audience. The national subject and the minority subject are successfully fused. More than that, there is ample proof that the minoritization of Chinese culture through exoticism and eroticism has itself become the desirable means of consumption in Taiwan,³⁴ confirming Edward Said’s fear of the “dangers and temptations” of employing Orientalist structures of cultural domination by the dominated upon themselves.³⁵

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

6 American poster of *Eat Drink Man Woman*.

From the perspective of bilateral political relations between Taiwan and the United States, the two constructs of the national and the minority are closely intertwined, as Taiwan's national fate is largely seen to be at the mercy of the United States. In no uncertain terms, Taiwan—a nation without an internationally recognized state, a non-nation-state nation—functions like a U.S. colony or minority state, with the Taiwan government and the entire populace deeply anxious about every minute change in U.S. rhetoric about Taiwan. Former president Bill Clinton's public affirmation of the Three No's policy toward Taiwan during his 1998 visit to China—"We don't support independence for Taiwan, or two Chinas, or one Taiwan, one China, and we don't believe that Taiwan should be a member in any organization for which statehood is a requirement"—is an instance of how Taiwan can be expendable for the enhancement of China-U.S. relations. How else should one name the U.S. power to determine Taiwan's fate but as a new kind of colonialism, just as one struggles to name China's containment policy toward Taiwan? For China and the United States, Taiwan functions as a minority to be con-

tained, a die to be cast at will at each twist and turn in the relationship between the superpowers. On the one hand, the American Republican government's use of Taiwan as a counterbalance to China is largely a continuation of Cold War policies that have now been conjoined with the rising discourse of China threat. On the other hand, the American Democratic government has always shown willingness to barter Taiwan in exchange for more engagement with China. In each case, Taiwan is a useful chip insofar as it weighs in on vilifying China or pacifying China, depending on the needs of the White House at a given moment.

The minority subject position proves to be inescapable for Ang Lee as he begins to deepen his foray into Hollywood after the success of the trilogy. His directorial work in *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) has been quite uniformly applauded as a masterful feat, since somehow a "director from Taiwan" was able to capture quintessential Victorian England, prompting Prince Charles to say that he did not know England to be so beautiful until he saw the film at its royal premiere at the queen's palace. Ang Lee employed numerous strategies of flexibility in rationalizing his participation in the making of the movie through a prominent evocation of the trope of translation. While facing the Taiwanese audience, he told them that although he had made an English film, since he grew up in Taiwan, he directed the film as if it were a Chinese film.³⁶ To the Western audience, he recuperated age-old notions of Zen-like nonaction, Confucian morality, *taichi* (he actually taught Kate Winslet *taichi* during the shooting), "family values," Confucian notions of *ren* (benevolence) and *li* (ritual), and so forth.³⁷ Ang Lee also provided the following rationale:

I feel very comfortable in the world of Jane Austen. Because as a society we Chinese are still in transition from a feudal culture and filial piety to the modern world. In many ways, I think the Chinese would understand 19th century England better than the English today because we are still there.³⁸

In my films I've been trying to mix social satire and family drama. I realized that all along I had been trying to do Jane Austen without knowing it. Jane Austen was my destiny. I just had to overcome the cultural barrier.³⁹

A linear notion of time that identifies contemporary Chineseness with Victorian England is the premise of his argument in the first quotation, where Chineseness is equated with the past and the nonmodern. In the second quotation, this iden-

tification allows him to place his own artistic destiny as Jane Austen; it is Chinese traditionalism that gives him authentic credentials for shooting a film about Victorian England. In a different interview he invoked the foot-binding of Chinese women as a cruel Chinese tradition,⁴⁰ implying the emancipatory meanings of Western modernity. Likewise, Western film critics and reviewers also had to rationalize why Ang Lee could do such a superb job with the English material—hence various evocations of universalism that are often used in discourses of tokenization or model minority: Ang Lee is good at depicting generational relationships, family issues, subtlety of human relations, and he also understands “the strains and stresses of social ritual extremely well,”⁴¹ all of which are universal for all cultures. Retrospectively therefore, one reviewer would call *Eat Drink Man Woman* a result of the combination of “Austen-like acuity with Chinese food.”⁴²

What gender implications can we draw from this fluid marriage between translatable cultures? What is the gendered position of this translatability? To put it differently, what transpires in the process when a director obsessed with resuscitating patriarchy ends up directing a semifeminist film that criticizes patrilineal property inheritance law in England? The minority gender implications of the film for Ang Lee can be discerned in both the production and the reception of the film. Firstly, there is the occlusion of Ang Lee’s contribution to this film’s success. Although *Sense and Sensibility* received awards from the London Critics Circle Film Awards and the New York Film Critics Circle Award, swept up the best screenplay and best drama awards at the Golden Globes, and was nominated for seven Oscars at the Academy Awards, Ang Lee did not receive the best director award from the Golden Globes, nor was he even nominated for the Oscar in the best director category, to the dismay of many. I suggest that this is where flexibility ends. To put it bluntly for the moment: racism disregards Ang Lee’s strategic flexibility and universal appeal as irrelevant at moments of crucial production of meaning. The Academy Awards’ exercise of gendered and racialized minoritization is such a moment of arrest, a nodal point, in the process of flow. But the absence of the award for Ang Lee is damaging even besides charges of racism: it suggests that Ang Lee, unlike many of his coworkers who were nominated for the film (best picture, best screenplay, best actress, best supporting actress, best photography, best fashion design, and best music) was merely one of the screws in the making of the machine, his fortune merely being that the producer (who is the designated recipient of the best picture award) did well in *hiring* him. He was merely

a hired hand, not the original artist who put the film together. “Ang Lee was no devotee of Jane Austen, having never read any of her books before he was *hired* to direct Thompson’s script”⁴³ (emphasis mine), a critic notes unambiguously.

Therefore it is not surprising to read the same film critic, Graham Fuller, arguing in the influential *Sight and Sound* that the shaping vision behind the film belongs to Emma Thompson and that the audience is not to believe the credit shown on the screen that says “A Film by Ang Lee.” After analyzing the absence of the father figure in the film, Fuller notes that the older daughter, Elinor, assumed the “male position” in the disenfranchised female Dashwood house and the “heroic role” in the narrative. Extending this argument, he concludes that Emma Thompson is “*Sense and Sensibility*’s auteur, its suffragette and heroic ‘male’ surrogate.”⁴⁴ Thompson herself captures her brushes with Ang Lee during the shooting of the film: she and other actors had different opinions on how certain shots should be done, and Ang Lee was supposedly “deeply hurt and confused.”⁴⁵ Unlike shooting in Taiwan, where “directors are allowed to do exactly what they want,” where Ang Lee was supposedly accustomed to being “followed with chairs, ashtrays, wet towels, tea in constant attendance,” the actors in England dared to challenge Ang Lee’s despotic directorial style.⁴⁶ Thompson observes: “It’s easy to feel a terrible bully with Ang”; and, “Hugh has taken to calling him ‘the Brute.’”⁴⁷ Ang Lee began as the consummate combination of Oriental despot and “self-contained calm,”⁴⁸ one who was authoritarian and yet taught the crew Eastern rituals (including meditation, *taichi*, and the good luck opening ceremony)—all typical “Oriental” imports with their stereotypical authoritarianism, exoticism, and spirituality. Toward the end of the shooting, there is ample sense that Lee is no longer a despot but is tamed into a democratic director who listens to opinions and buys champagne and Chinese food for his crew. Ang Lee’s directorial debut in Hollywood, the making of *Sense and Sensibility* and its reception, involves the taming of the shrew, the feminization of a despot, and the minoritization of a national subject.

When *Ice Storm* appeared, again to the acclaim of many, Ang Lee’s credibility as an Asian director was again tested, this time in making a film about 1970s America. With the success of *Sense and Sensibility*, all manner of rationales for Ang Lee’s superb direction compared his sensibility to Austen’s favorably, as I illustrated above. But *Ice Storm* was not at all showered with such rationales of compatibility. At the Cannes Film Festival of 1997, *Ice Storm* was branded as a Holly-

wood commercial film by French judges and considered an inauthentic representation of America by American critics.⁴⁹ When Ang Lee tries to translate not the remote Victorian England but 1973 New England in the home front, and very negatively at that, American film reviewers were not as forthcoming with their praise. It might have been just too close for comfort.

FLEXIBILITY AND TRANSLATABILITY

If Ang Lee embodies the Taiwan national subject at moments when he tries to appeal to the Taiwan audience, he at times prefers the anonymity of the U.S. minority position. When Ang Lee did not receive the Oscar nomination for best director for *Sense and Sensibility*, he begged Taiwan media reporters not to make it a “national” issue or national shame at the hands of racism, repeatedly saying that he feels less pressure as an individual, as opposed to being the national representative. When short Jackie Chan was paired with the tall Kareem Abdul Jabbar at the Academy Awards ceremony the same year, it ignited an angry reaction in Sinitic-language media across different Sinophone communities accusing Hollywood of “dwarfing the Chinese” (*aishua zhongguoren*). Jackie Chan told the media just to leave him alone, and Ang Lee mentioned in an interview that he understood Chan’s reaction completely. Chan is honored with the label “Hong Kong National Treasure” and Ang Lee, “Taiwan National Treasure,” hence their subjection to the logic of minoritization was nothing short of humiliating for audiences in both Hong Kong and Taiwan.⁵⁰ What with the economic prowess, cultural vitality, and martial arts know-how of Hong Kong and Taiwan, should these stars be subjected to the same demeaning processes of minoritization?

The ease and flexibility with which Ang Lee oscillates between and incorporates these two subject positions begs the question of translation, or rather, translatability in the transpacific political economy of power. The success of his trilogy owes much to the translation of a national culture (of China or Taiwan) to that of an ethnic culture. This translatability ensured easy assimilation, commodification, and consumption of an ethnic culture by an American suburban audience. It is perhaps ironic to evoke here Walter Benjamin’s rather positive assessment of a work’s translatability as the mark of its capacity for future flowering in the afterlife as a translation.⁵¹ If for Benjamin translatability secured a longer life for a literary work, translatability of Ang Lee’s films commandeers a bigger,

transnational market and higher profit. If Benjamin's translatability of the original text presumes a linear temporal relationship between itself and the translation, Ang Lee's translatability is built on flexible encodings that can be readily decoded by both American and Taiwan audiences, so that the reception of both Taiwan and American audiences is contemporary, coeval, and simultaneous. But this contemporaneity encoded by easy translatability is more a symptom of the neocolonial cultural relationship between Taiwan and the United States, by which Taiwan is minoritized. Translatability, in this sense, is a necessary mode for the minoritized to acquire access to and acceptance by the center. Through flexible negotiations between national and ethnic cultural codes, easy consumption and assimilation are guaranteed. This is what I call "decipherable localism," the presentation of local national culture with the anticipation of ready decipherability by the nonlocal audience.

The reception of both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Ice Storm*, furthermore, shows how flexibility and translatability can be denied to Ang Lee and he can be squarely placed back to the minority position by U.S. racial politics. Translatability, in other words, is accepted only when it is nonthreatening. Unassimilatability becomes a ready excuse to circumscribe Lee's success as a foreigner, hence the lingering doubt about the authenticity of Ang Lee's translation of New England cultural codes of 1973. The coproduction and dialectic operation of neocolonial minoritization of Sinophone culture from Taiwan and the racialized, gendered minoritization of an immigrant cultural producer in the United States have circumscribed and will continue to constrict the production of true contemporaneity, even for someone like Ang Lee, who seemed to have crossed many boundaries. Although I agree with Rey Chow that there is power in the superficial and the surface in cinema in their ability to reach a wider audience and thus make a difference,⁵² it is important to continue to ask *on whose terms* and *on what terms* that reach is made possible.

If translatability and flexibility that draw from the terms of the dominant can easily be contained for assimilation and consumption, they are also limited forms of empowerment when institutional nodal points arbitrate upon the worth of minority and immigrant cultural production by way of conservative and reactionary criteria. The flexible subject's resistance toward the containment of the nation-states by evoking transnational paradigms of subjectivity is itself dictated by what the nation-states involved will allow. In examining popular culture, such as popular fiction and cinema, this contractual relationship between the flexible subject

and the nation-state becomes especially apparent, as marketability has always been a game of marking the right boundaries or targeting the right consumers. Marketing specialists have always known to heed cultural differences traced along national borders. In the constellation of forces operating in the creation and reception of Ang Lee's films, the nodal points of meaning, as I have shown above, will seem to continue tracing national boundaries by alternately extolling nationalist patriarchy and gendered minoritization. Sinophone articulations, when encountering multiple power dynamics, must negotiate with diverse nodal points of meaning, including the problematic calls of pan-Chineseness and racialized assimilationism.