Screening Asia: Passing, Performative Translation, and Reconfiguration

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The questions of what is “Asia” and what role it plays in the world system have preoccupied philosophers, historians, social scientists, cultural anthropologists, and politicians of different persuasions, both within and without Asia, ever since the beginning of Western colonial history. The word Asia is derived from *Asu*, an ancient Phoenician term, meaning “the place of sunrise,” as opposed to *Ereb*, or “the place of sunset,” later known as Europe. Originally referring vaguely to the broad landmass to the east of the Aegean Sea, Asu became an administrative unit of Rome by the first century BC. The Asian continent as we know now came as a later development. The Asian continent did not acquire a recognizable shape in European cartography until the 1375 Catalan Map.¹ The definition of Asia has been shifting up till now. The fact that the cultural, political, as well as geographical
content of “Asia” is constantly reshaped demonstrates its problematic and metageographical quality.

In the new millennium, when worldwide politics, culture, and economics are undergoing tremendous reconfigurations, to raise the question of “What’s left of Asia” both continues the age-old intellectual and political engagement with the role of Asia and signifies a renewed effort to intervene into the current economic, political paradigm.

This project of problematizing Asia, of reassessing its role in the current world system, has acquired special urgency for two reasons: globalization and New Asia discourses. Globalization, which is first and foremost a form of globalized capitalism, aided by accelerated flow of capital, information, and electronic media, has produced the “global village” (Marshall McLuhan), “financial capitalism” (Fredric Jameson), and “flexible accumulation” (David Harvey). As a result of globalized capitalism, Leo Ching argues, “‘Asia’ has become a market, and ‘Asianness’ has become a commodity circulating globally through late capitalism.”2 The question I shall discuss then is what is left of the political importance of Asia in the face of its commercialization. The second imperative for reconsidering Asia is to challenge the post-1980s New Asia discourse, which sees the rise of Asia as “a reactive postcolonial desire to rise to the top of the world,” while masking “deeper social contradictions and problems.”3 Globalization and the New Asia triumphantalism are mutually reinforcing. The latter draws upon the former for legitimacy and manifests the former’s homogenizing desire.

It is important to note, however, that globalization does not automatically lead to mere homogenization. As Arjun Appadurai, among others, contends in Public Culture, globalization always entails glocalization; that is, the capitalist desire for homogenization and hegemony is always counterbalanced and ruptured by local “disjuncture and difference.”4 Thus, to reenvision Asia in this post–Cold War “transitional era,”5 one must take into consideration both the “global design” and the “local histories,” studying their contentions as well as intersections by conducting what Walter Mignolo calls “border thinking.”6 A crucial step in conducting border thinking is precisely to emphasize the agency on the part of Asia, understood not as an essentialist category, but rather as a contextualized position fostered by various translational strategies, as I shall examine in the following pages. The
purpose is to imagine and develop an alternative social order, based on the local histories and experiences, so as to challenge and fracture the ostensibly globalized capitalist ideology. As Arif Dirlik puts it, the Asia/Pacific Rim is “a new paradigm for global economic organization and change,” not simply “a frontier of development.”

Regarding the shifting imaginaries of Asia in the past centuries from the Western and Eastern perspectives (especially Japan), Wang Hui has provided a thorough delineation and theoretical assessment. My endeavor in this essay is to chart out how Asia has been imagined and imaged through three specifically coded border-crossing film actresses. Whereas an analysis based on film texts alone can by no means constitute a direct social claim, my politicization of cinema aims to assess a film both as a cultural product arising from a constellation of determinants and as a social agent addressing its circumstances, thereby proffering new imaginaries. By analyzing the implicit as well as explicit Asia imaginaries inscribed in the border-crossing film actresses and their selected films, I propose new ways of strategizing the Asian position in the new millennium.

The three border-crossing film actresses I study are: Anna May Wong (1905–1961), Yamaguchi Yoshiko (a.k.a. Li Xianglan, Ri Ko-ran, Shirley Yamaguchi) (1920–), and Maggie Cheung (or Zhang Manyu in Mandarin Chinese) (1964–). I choose to focus on them for two reasons: (1) their career climaxes correspond with three important historical conjunctures; and (2) their screen personae parallel their off-screen transnational movements, bringing together the textual and sociopolitical levels. My study concentrates upon the Asia imaginaries that dominate Euro-America-China in the 1920s to the 1940s, Sino-Japan in the 1930s to the 1940s, and both Sino-Europe and mainland–Hong Kong at the turn of the twenty-first century. I start by analyzing how these imaginaries circumscribe the figurations of the crossover stars. I then interrogate how and to what extent the stars succeed in intervening and disrupting the master design/plot, whereby carving out their own roles in the border-crossing processes. I focus specifically on their translational strategies and implications. By shifting the emphasis from the externally determined filmic figuration to the crossover actresses’ agency, I move from external Asia imaginaries to localized reconceptualizations of Asia, as urged by such critics as Appadurai, Dirlik, and Mignolo. My study
addresses the sociopolitical dimension of Asia through the lens of cinema and the related politics as well as the agency of representation. My working premise is that the representational and the sociopolitical levels of Asia are interconnected since they both involve border crossing with comparable implications in the current context.

In this connection, Appadurai’s notions of ethnoscape and mediascape in the twentieth-century global cultural economy become particularly instructive. Although his privilege of deterritorialization has been subjected to feminist critique, Appadurai’s analysis of ethnoscape and mediascape helps me to pinpoint two prominent features of the cinematic border crossing in question. By constantly shuttling between diverse geopolitical spaces, Wong, Yamaguchi, and Cheung illustrate the globalized ethnoscape throughout the twentieth century, where labor circulation (in the form of glamorous entertainers’ mobility) saturates real-life experiences. Such an off-screen ethnoscape is staged in the equally globalized mediascape, which both inscribes and generates divergent fantasies and scenarios specific to differing sociohistorical contexts. In Appadurai’s words, mediascape leads to imaginary scripts that “constitute narratives of the ‘other’ and proto-narratives of possible lives, fantasies which could become prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement.”

With this in mind, I segue to part 1, the discursive framing of the stars and their border-crossing performative agency. Due to the limits of space and my area of specialty, I lay emphasis on East Asia, especially China and Japan, as an example of how the Asia problem might be approached.

**Framed Stars and Border-Crossing Actresses**

The discourses that frame the three Asian-coded stars, who nonetheless have differing ethnic, national, and cultural identities, can be summarized under the rubric of Edward Said’s “Orientalism.” Orientalism, according to Said, is an otherizing process of “substitution and displacement” that seeks to construct an internally consistent knowledge system about the Orient, while discursively rendering the material and geographical Orient completely irrelevant and absent. As a result, the Orient and Asia, as we come to see through the Western lens, do not designate any actual, geographical
locale; but rather a discursive construct, against which the West formulates its self-identity and definition. Not surprisingly, therefore, the construct has been constantly resignified in accordance with the shifting needs and concerns of the West. Furthermore, the power disparity heavily influences, if not fundamentally structures, the intra-Asian relationship, as testified by Japan’s militarism between the end of nineteenth century and 1945. My analysis below demonstrates that whereas the Orientalist discourses determine the three actresses’ figurations to a large extent, they are also challenged by the border-crossing actresses’ self-conscious mobility and agency to different degrees.

Anna May Wong, one of the earliest well-known Asian-American actresses, active in America, Europe, and China in the 1920s to 1940s, had a career that extended from the silent era to the sound era, from film industry to TV shows. The period from the 1920s to 1940s was marked by what Timothy Tseng calls “political Orientalism.” Unlike the previous two types—“patrician Orientalism” and “commercial Orientalism”—“political Orientalism” emerged in the 1880s and “recast desire-imbued and ambiguous representations into an exclusionary and segregationist discourse.” It provoked the missionary emphasis on cultural-social assimilation and Americanization of Asian-Americans. The assimilation discourse sometimes took on a militant turn, as it did in 1919, in Ezra Pound’s edited version of Ernest Fenollosa’s manuscript “The Chinese Written Language as a Medium for Poetry.” The edited version opens with a declaration of the beginning of a “startling chapter” in the “book of the world.” In this new chapter, the “Chinese problem” is described: “We in America, especially, must face it across the Pacific, and master it or it will master us.” The underlying power struggle reveals Pound/Fenollosa’s apparent Sinophilia as ultimately Orientalist.

Under these circumstances, Anna May Wong, the conspicuous “Oriental Other” within the “Western Self,” necessarily experienced discursive assimilation even when her difference, or supposed “Chineseness,” was highlighted and exploited. Her figuration on and off the screen resulted from the dual discourses of Orientalism and assimilationism, which alternatively worked against and reinforced each other. She experienced three important moments: the 1920s when she entered Hollywood; between 1928 and
1934 when she worked in Europe as a theater and screen actress; and 1936 when she traveled to China on the eve of the Anti-Japanese War. In her own accounts and publicity writings, her identity was shown as a representational conundrum, derived from a rigid internal-external dichotomy. In order to defuse her racial and cultural “otherness” and convert the threat into an exotic attraction, publicity writings frequently described her as externally Americanized, yet internally Chinese. Rob Wagner, Wong’s friend and also a regular contributor to showbiz magazines, for instance, advised this “Chinese flapper” to “‘can’ her Hollywood feathers and be Chinese. . . . to burn incense in her hotel room, to add to her exotic charm.”

The rigid internal-external dichotomy both contains and reopens the difficulty of representing Wong, whose physique and multilingual capacity constantly challenged the Asia/China mystique. Her “un-Chinese” height, five feet six inches, for instance, was attributed to the bogus Mongolian breed, despite her Cantonese heritage. Her impeccable English also surprised many Americans. Hence the paradox of Orientalist representation: the more Western reviewers tried to code Wong as internally and authentically Chinese/Oriental, the more they found details that exceeded the Orientalist stereotype. If Orientalism allowed the ethnocentric gatekeepers to safeguard the Caucasian purity by exoticizing and otherizing Wong’s “Chineseness,” assimilationism reaffirmed the white superiority by emphasizing Wong’s imitation of the supposedly Caucasian features. Both served to reinforce the East/West hierarchy. The disrupting potential of Wong’s interstitial and border-crossing experiences are therefore left unnoticed.

Pigeonholed as an “authentic Chinese” with Western trappings, Wong was mostly limited to minor Oriental roles in Hollywood. The Oriental female lead was, ironically, often reserved for a white actress acting in yellowface. The Euro-America-centered representation is reflected in a translation sequence in *Shanghai Express* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1932). Playing a reformed Chinese prostitute, the only Chinese in the first-class car of a Shanghai-bound train, which is hijacked by local Cantonese-speaking warlords, Wong naturally becomes an interpreter for her Caucasian companions. The “naturalness,” however, glosses over fundamental artificiality. A major incongruence is that the train is staffed by people who speak Cantonese, a southern Chinese dialect, despite the fact that it departs from a north-
ern Chinese city, where Mandarin and its variants are spoken. This betrays
the film’s Orientalist urge to display Wong’s hereditary language—Taishan
dialect that was perhaps lumped together with Cantonese by the film-
makers—as an index of her authentic Chinese identity as a “native infor-
mant.” Informant nonetheless, local Chinese in the film are considered
inferior, their language barely human. Wong’s interpretation is presented
not as a mediation of two equal human languages, but rather as a quaint
trick of converting primitive gibberish (Cantonese) into a modern signifying
system (English). The one-way translation undoubtedly has to do with the
context where the Cantonese-speaking train cops are to be obeyed and not
negotiated with. Nevertheless, it also highlights the impossibility of commu-
ication between native Chinese and the Western passengers, due to their
unequal political positions.

Anna May Wong’s personae remained largely framed by the Orientalist
discourse dominant in Euro-America in the 1920s to 1940s. This discourse
and the inherent essentialism masked the fact that Wong was also 
passing
as Oriental—a phenomenon that could be described as “cultural trans-
vestitism”17 or what I call “yellow yellowface” performance.18 Her acting
was nothing less than role-playing, or reenactment of Western stereotypes of
the Orient. Such performance, self-consciously deployed, could potentially
demystify the stereotype. Nevertheless, given the complicity between the
filmmakers and the audience in her era, her “cultural transvestitism” and
“yellow yellowface” performance of Chinese and other Oriental characters
were suppressed. Consequently, her border-crossing and interstitial experi-
ences became naturalized and neutralized, failing to pose any significant
challenge to the Orientalized Asia.

As Western Orientalism constructed an undifferentiated Orient/Asia as
its Other, East Asia was experiencing an internal split, which led to redefini-
tion of East Asia’s internal hierarchy and its position in the world. This split
was engineered by the militarist Japanese government in the early twentieth
century. Japan’s colonial reconceptualization of Asia, especially East and
Southeast Asia, merits in-depth study, for as Sun Ge points out, “the ques-
tion of Asia must not merely be pursued within the framework defined by
the dichotomy of East versus West, but also should be considered as dealing
with internal problems in the Asian region.”19 It is important to note,
however, that the internal restructuring of Asia was inextricably bound up with Western colonization of Asia. An Asian consciousness emerged with political urgency only when large areas of East, Southeast, and South Asia became subjected to Western colonialism in the nineteenth century.20

Besides Sun Ge, other historians and critics, such as Wang Hui, Tan Zhengliang, and Sheng Banghe, have all written extensively upon Japan’s Asia imaginary since Meiji Restoration and the Sino-Japan relationship in the Republican era.21 All these historians emphasize that not only Japan but also China participated in reenvisioning Asia in the face of Western imperialism and in response to Japan’s Asianism (yaxiya zhuyi). Chinese interventions included Liang Qichao’s “Asian essence” (yacui), Zhang Taiyan’s “Asian affinity” (yazhou qinghe), Sun Yat-sen’s “Great Asianism” (da yazhou zhuyi), and Li Daozhao’s “new Asianism” (xin yaxiya zhuyi). Among these, Sun Yat-sen’s Great Asianism, developed in his 1924 Yokohama talk, was directly counterpoised to Japan’s Asianism. As Wang Hui argues, Sun emphasized an independent, united Asia premised upon respect for ethnic, historical, and political heterogeneity. It “represents a poly-nationalism that transcends a unitary nation-state, race, culture and religion. It contains a built-in mechanism of self-deconstruction, and presumes resistance against hegemonic colonialism.”22 Such Great Asianism can be achieved only through “the king’s way” (wangdao), originally a Confucian conception of benevolent governance aiming at civilizing neighboring peoples and countries only if they voluntarily subject themselves to such civilization. Economically, it was based upon the feudal China’s tributary system. The rippling model of disseminating civilization from a center (traditionally understood as the China Empire) to the margin (including Japan, Korea, and the central East) corresponds with the pre-nation-state situation described by Benedict Anderson.23 Great Asianism premised upon such a “king’s way” is diametrically opposite to the “dictator’s way” (badao) that marked Japan’s expansionist Asianism.

However, the reflection on the Asia problem was short-lived in China, according to Wang. Unlike the situation in China, where intellectuals-historians tend to favor the question of the China-West relationship over inter-Asia connections, Japan (along with Korea) has displayed continuous interest in rethinking the Asia problem from the inter-Asia perspective.24
Geographically marginalized, historically overshadowed by the China empire, and politically forced open by the West in 1853, Japan faced the urgent problem of repositioning itself vis-à-vis China (and other East and Southeast Asian nations)—as a way of counterbalancing the West. This led to two apparently opposite theories: Datsu—A ron, or “dissociating from Asia and integrating with Europe,” proposed by Fukuzawa Yukichi; and “Asia is one,” originally proposed by Okakura Tenshin in his 1904 English work The Ideals of the East. They combined to suggest that Japan should both transcend the backward Asia and preserve the best essence of Asia.

Both theories aimed to decentralize China and redefine modernized Japan as the leading nation-state of East Asia. Such power realignment involved decoupling zhonghua (grounded on Confucianism) from its conventional referent—China—and recoupling it with the advanced West. Japan’s Westernization was thus legitimized as a form of “Zhonghua-ization,” and, as the new locus of Zhonghua civilization, Japan would become the leader of Asia. Japan’s difficult negotiation with the West and China (along with other East Asian countries) necessitated its constant vacillation between de-Asianization (Datsu-A ron) and re-Asianization (Asia is one).

With the rise of the militarist government, Japan’s pan-Asianism became increasingly tied up with the colonialist ideology, which culminated in the conception of the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere. The old policy of assimilation (doka) gave way to imperialization (kominka) in the 1930s, which stressed total “Japanization” of the colonized people. The resultant cultural propaganda that involved cultivating pro-Japan film culture in East and Southeast Asia came to serve the potentially contradictory ideological demands of upholding Japanese hegemony and producing pan-Asian appeal.

A specific vehicle facilitating the dual task was Yamaguchi Yoshiko, a Japanese national born in Manchuria, renamed Li Xianglan after being adopted by a pro-Japan Chinese banker, Mr. Li. She subsequently cultivated a Chinese identity by adopting Mandarin Chinese, Chinese friends, and qipao — the Manchurian female dress transformed and popularized in the first half of the twentieth century. Her dual identity and talent for singing paved the way to Manei (Manchurian Eiga/Film Cooperative), established by Japan in 1937. As a major actress at Manei between 1938 and 1945, she
starred in over twenty films, shot in Manchuria, Japan, Shanghai, and Taiwan. To promote and glorify the Sino-Japan friendship, her films, such as *Song of Orchid* (*Byakuran no uta*) (dir. Kunio Watanabe, 1939), *Song of China* (*Shina no yoru*) (dir. Osamu Fushimizu, 1940), and *Winter Jasmine* (*Yingchun hua*) (dir. Yasushi Sasaki, 1942), all featured interracial romance between a Japanese man (a clerk, soldier, or doctor) and a Chinese (or Manchurian) girl, sentimentalized through her love songs in Mandarin or Japanese.

These melodramatic narratives (in the literal sense of *melo*, or music, plus *drama*) shared a gender and linguistic ideology that allegorized the Japan-centered pan-Asianism. The agency reserved for the male Japanese (who enlightens and salvages a weak Chinese girl) entails feminization of China (and East and Southeast Asia in general), as indicated in the women’s willing adoption of the Japanese language and identity. Yamaguchi played a crucial role in the symbolic power representation by convincingly passing as a Chinese waiting to be transformed into a Japanese. Indeed, her publicity reports claimed that she could pass successfully not only as Chinese, but as other East Asian nationals as well. When talking about her experiences in Taiwan, Harbin, and Korea, Yamaguchi observed that the local Taiwanese, Russians, and Koreans all saw her as “one of their own.” Her ability to assimilate (at least according to the public discourse) helped to account for and promote her popularity in East and Southeast Asia between the late 1930s and 1945, a fame that has been revived recently in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China.

A revealing moment is the sequence of interpretation from *Winter Jasmine*, where Yamaguchi plays a Manchurian girl serving as an interpreter between a Japanese clerk and a Chinese builder. In contrast to Anna May Wong’s one-way interpretation from Cantonese into English, Yamaguchi's act of interpretation is a bilateral interpretation between Mandarin and Japanese for both parties. Moreover, the peaceful setting suggests a harmonious relationship between Japanese residents in Manchuko and local Chinese, a relationship supposedly brought about by Japanese expansion and governance. Interpretation in this context is portrayed as conducive to reciprocation.

Yamaguchi’s (presumably) successful “cultural transvestism” forms an interesting contrast to Anna May Wong’s apparent inability to pass and hence her
confinement to Orienta(lized) roles. Yamaguchi’s “Oriental” femininity, dual identity, and multilingual capacity (it was reported that her English impressed Western journalists who interviewed her) made her a perfect screen icon for the pan-Asian policy that championed “Japan-Manchuria Ally” (*Riman qingshan*), “Harmony of Five Ethnicities” (*Wuzu xiehe*), and, most importantly, the “Happy Asia” (*xing ya*). As “a colonizer passing for colonized,” Yamaguchi conjoined Japan’s pan-Asian entertainment and imperialism. Her border-crossing mobility and variable identity elicited a utopic Greater East Asia imaginary where national boundaries and the ethnic and linguistic markings were erased. This utopic strain ultimately stemmed from the national crisis that Japan (and other East and Southeast Asian countries) struggled with as a result of Western colonialism. Nevertheless, whereas Yamaguchi’s border-crossing experiences enabled her seamless passing, such mobility was ultimately harnessed for the ideology of the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere. Consequently, she could offer a borderless fantasy of Asia, but was unable to make it politically viable. If both Wong and Yamaguchi fall short of disrupting their respective constraining discourses (i.e., Orientalism and imperialism), what, then, can Maggie Cheung, a contemporary crossover star offer through her border-crossing performance? I address this question by examining the implications of her off-screen mobility and on-screen passing, or what I call “performative translation.”

Born in Hong Kong in 1964, raised in England, and returning to Hong Kong in 1983, Cheung (like Wong) speaks fluent Cantonese and English, but no Mandarin. She acquired an international reputation when she became the first Asian female recipient of the Best Actress award at the Berlin International Festival for her acting in *Center Stage* (dir. Stanley Kwan, 1991). This self-reflexive film features Cheung playing herself playing Ruan Lingyu, a 1930s Shanghai movie star. Cheung’s simultaneous sympathy with and alienation from Ruan, foregrounded in the film, underscores the difficulty of passing, even within the so-called greater cultural China. The difficult, if not impossible, passing becomes more important in two of her more recent films: *Irma Vep* (dir. Olivier Assayas, 1996) and *Hero* (*Yinxiong*) (dir. Zhang Yimou, 2002). My argument below shows that Cheung’s “performative translation” denaturalizes and problematizes the processes of passing and border crossing, thus challenging the colonialist discourse on Asia.
Like Center Stage, Irma Vep is a metafilm, featuring a diegetic director, René Vidal (played by Jean-Pierre Léaud), who is attempting to remake a classic French silent serial, Les Vampires (dir. Louis Feuillade, 1915), by casting Maggie Cheung as the female protagonist, Irma Vep, a Parisian thief leader. Unlike Irma Vep’s overt intellectual bent, Zhang Yimou’s Hero provides an extravagant, kung fu-ized retelling of a historical legend from China’s Warring States period (475 to 221 BC). Apparently unrelated, both films are fundamentally concerned with the definition of China and Asia, one from the French intellectual filmmakers’ perspective, the other from a mainland Chinese Fifth Generation director’s perspective. They both address this issue by mobilizing Cheung’s transnational appeal, which is characteristic of Hong Kong’s commercial culture in general. Both films also hinge upon Cheung’s (impossible) performative passing—as an early-twentieth-century Parisian woman in Irma Vep and as a northern Chinese assassinator during the Warring States era in Hero. For a contemporary Hong Kong actress like Cheung, who speaks neither Mandarin nor French, playing a northern Chinese assassinator is as much a form of performative passing as playing Irma Vep, even though it is less obvious in ethnic terms. Cheung’s ethnic/racial and linguistic mismatch with her roles in the two films foregrounds the problem of passing, thus heightening the performative aspect of her acting. It allows her to denaturalize not only the taken-for-granted fit between the actor and the role, but the Self-Other binary as well, which in turn invites us to reconfigure the relationship between China, Asia, and the West in light of her performative passing.

Cheung’s casting as Irma Vep and as Musidora, the French actress who played this role in the 1915 Les Vampires, both stems from and contradicts the Orientalist mislabeling of her as a mere Chinese (not even Hong Kong) actress. Such Orientalism is expressed by both diegetic directors. The first diegetic director, René Vidal, fetishizes her as an East Asian female body amenable to his fantasies and anxieties. For the second diegetic director, José Murano, who takes over René’s job after his alleged mental breakdown, Cheung is no more than “la chinoise” and cannot possibly play Irma Vep, who embodies “Paris,” “Paris Underworld,” and “working-class Paris.” If Murano’s Orientalism seeks to protect the Parisian purity from a Chinese actress’s mimicry and contamination, René’s Orientalism reinforces the
fetishized Asian mystique. Neither of them can mobilize Cheung’s apparently impossible screen passing to challenge the Orientalist conception of national and racial border lines. Nevertheless, Cheung’s challenge comes to the fore in the metafilm of the real-life director, Olivier Assayas, in the form of a night escapade sequence and the closing sequence.

Significantly, the night escapade sequence that depicts Cheung’s impulsive criminal act takes place in her hotel, away from René’s monitor and crew, thus available only to the film audience. In this sequence, Cheung is shown putting on her figure-hugging latex costume (an imitation of the original Irma Vep’s dress) and being instantly transformed into her role — as a thief. She slinks into another hotel room, steals a jewel necklace, and subsequently throws it out. Cheung’s “latex performance,” as Olivia Khoo terms it, can be best understood not as her projective identification with Irma Vep, but rather with a transgressive impulse associated with pure agility and speed. By performing the theft in the absence of René’s crew, Cheung frustrates René’s attempt to monitor, misrecognize, and Orientalize her. Furthermore, she successfully usurps the latex costume, which is obtained from a hookers’ accessories store and originally meant to accentuate and exhibit Cheung’s Oriental body. By citing (in a deconstructivist sense) and performing (in terms defined by Judith Butler) the latex dress, Cheung executes what Khoo calls an “anagrammatical translation.” Anagrammaticality, according to Khoo, is “a form of interpretation where other meanings become possible or apparent through ‘repetitious’ reversals and rearrangements”; or, “repetition is also the mark of difference.” In this light, what has hindered Cheung’s screen passing, i.e., her “Oriental” look and lack of French, actually produces her self-reflexive performative translation, which contributes to the disrupting of the Orientalist codes. Her off-the-set theft can therefore be read as a trope for stealing back her agency from the Orientalist René.

Cheung’s performative translation becomes openly deconstructive toward the end, when Murano shows to the crew the footage featuring Cheung as Irma Vep, which René has shot and edited before his purported mental breakdown. In this sequence, the latex-clad Cheung scampers on rooftops, with the Parisian landscape dwarfed beneath her or fading into the background. Furthermore, the stock is heavily scratched to produce the effect of white lines darting out of her eyes and mouth like electric currents, accom-
panied by techno sound effects that continue into the closing credits. The apparent disfiguration of Cheung and the Paris landscape transports Cheung into a virtual, cybernetic space, where, dissociated from linguistic, ethnic, and national trappings, the latex-covered, nimble body alone emerges as the paramount concern. Irma Vep and Cheung thus converge on the ground not of French tradition, but of speed, agility, and the transportability of the mute, streamlined body itself. By metamorphosing into an anonymous body that erases national and racial trappings, Cheung not only inserts a foreign (Asian) body into a French film, but more importantly, she shows how the foreign can actually mimic and pass as the native through elaborated repackaging and costuming. As a result, both the French Self and the Asian Other are deessentialized; so is the Orient-Occident dichotomy. The fact that René experiences a mental breakdown shortly after editing this footage seems to suggest his inability to sustain the power he accidentally unleashes from the Asian female body.

Unlike Assayas, who foregrounds Cheung’s performative passing to critique a deep-seated Eurocentrism, Zhang Yimou reconstructs the China hegemony in *Hero* by upholding the age-old China-centrism that virtually continues Japan’s early-twentieth-century pan-East Asianism. This master plot, however, I shall argue, encounters a counter-discourse embodied by Cheung.

Zhang’s China hegemony is premised on rewriting a historical legend about the assassination of the king of the Qin state during the Warring States era. Contrary to previous versions that eulogized the assassins’ resistance against the tyrannical Qin king, Zhang defends the Qin King’s invasion into other states as a heroic attempt to build *tianxia* (literally: “all that is under the heaven”). In *Hero*, the three male assassins decide to give up assassination upon realizing that the Qin king alone is capable of unifying China and salvaging people from endless interstate wars. The only assassin who insists upon killing the Qin king to exact revenge for her destroyed state and home is Maggie Cheung’s Flying Snow. The contrast between the men devoted to *tianxia* and the woman preoccupied with her home is my focus below.

The notion of *tianxia* has traditionally been deployed by two kinds of people, Chinese emperors and intellectuals. For the emperors, *tianxia* signi-
fied their irresistible power. It enveloped the largest possible territory under their cultural, if not political, control. Related to this empiric notion is the Chinese intellectuals’ *tianxia*, which suggested a commitment to civilize the entire human race, regardless of ethnicity and nationality, while assuming the centrality of China and the *han* Chinese. *Tianxia* suggested that Chinese civilization (which might or might not be coupled with military invasion) could potentially transcend geographical borders through dissemination, assimilation, and interpellation. Its Confucian premise (including the “king’s way” and the tributary system) continued to inform Sun Yat-sen’s Great Asianism. The crucial difference is that Sun’s Great Asianism was articulated in 1924, a year that witnessed the disintegration of many other Asian countries and the collapse of the Chinese empire as well as civilization. This post-empire crisis prompted Sun to resort to Japan—China’s “little brother” and the first Westernized modern nation-state in Asia—with the hope of establishing a new, synergized Asia based on mutual respect. In other words, the post-empiric crisis necessitated Sun’s modern revision of the China-centered *tianxia* concept.

The revision and critique are precisely what is missing in Zhang Yimou’s use of *tianxia*. In *The Cause of Hero* (*Yingxiong yuanqi*), a documentary about the making of *Hero*, Zhang states that the film’s emphasis on peace (instead of terrorism) was a response to the 9/11 event that happened one month after the film shooting started. A real hero, says Zhang, is one who prioritizes the universal interests over his or her selfish will. In these terms, the three male assassins become real heroes by giving up assassination, which is equated with terrorism. Nevertheless, one should ask whose peace is involved. In the case of *Hero*, a film historically set in the preempiric northern China, when the questions of who was to unify China and in what form were still undetermined, Zhang’s selection of the Qin king as the vehicle of *tianxia* constitutes no less than an ad hoc projection, a circular argument that uses the result to justify the cause. The peace rhetoric thus becomes an excuse for legitimizing the status quo. Consequently, the benevolent concept of *tianxia* flips into its opposite—maximal territory annexation and terrorism precipitated by a dictator. That is, the utopic imagined community of *tianxia* becomes its travesty—a monolithic empire. Zhang’s use of *tianxia* implicitly revives Japan’s expansionist Sphere ideology of the 1930s and 1940s to the
extent that they share a similar assertion of empire at the expense of neighbor nations’ interests and, more importantly, their alternative agendas and imaginaries.

This master plot, however, encounters challenge not only from Flying Snow—the fictional character within the film—but more importantly, from Maggie Cheung and her problematic passing as Flying Snow. According to Zhang, the two Hong Kong megastars, Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung, were selected for their superb acting. Other people have noted their transnational bankability. What has escaped critical attention are their linguistic and cultural specificities derived from their Hong Kong background, which inadvertently introduce dissonance into their screen passing as northern Chinese assassins. Zhang’s resort to dubbing apparently redeemed their lack of Mandarin. Yet it also glossed over, and therefore failed to address the significance of their (especially Cheung’s) problematic passing, which I examine in connection with the insistence on assassination that defines her character, Flying Snow.

Like Flying Snow, who is committed to a self-selected task (as opposed to the tianxia ideology) that leads to her alienation from other characters, Cheung is visibly distanced from most of the cast. In an interview, Cheung expressed that she would not have accepted the role if Tony Leung had not also been invited. Meanwhile, it is arguable that Cheung is alienated from her role as well, to the extent that Flying Snow’s Mandarin is literally put in Cheung’s mouth through dubbing. That is, Cheung is misfitted with her role and most of the cast, just as her role is misfitted with the tianxia narrative. Such alienation renders her a “body too much,” a body hypervisible, even “problematic, paradoxical . . . strange to itself,” as Jean-Louis Comolli argues in the case of miscasting. Cheung’s miscasting underscores her distinctly centrifugal presence, derived from her Hong Kong affiliation and the specific geopolitics entailed by Hong Kong’s vexed relationship with mainland China.

With this in mind, Cheung’s distancing from the Zhang Yimou production outside the diegesis and Flying Snow’s misfit within the diegesis could both be understood in the post-1997 context. In the light of Hong Kong’s official repatriation to mainland China in 1997, Cheung and Leung’s characters arguably represent two opposite attitudes regarding Hong Kong’s posi-
tion vis-à-vis the Chinese government. In allegorical terms, Cheung/Flying Snow’s commitment to her “home” suggests a pro–Hong Kong stance that prioritizes a local identity independent of a hegemonic center; whereas Leung/Broken Sword’s suturing into the *tianxia* ideology symbolizes Hong Kong’s voluntary folding into mainland China. This gender-inflected divide in political allegiances echoes Kondo’s feminist emphasis on “homing,” which is in opposition to the privileged position that male theoreticians, such as Appadurai, give to exile.41

Just as her “anagrammatical translation” challenges the purist French Self in *Irma Vep*, Cheung’s misfitting and her character’s refusal to comply with the grand *tianxia* design contribute to undermining the myth of a unified China. The question, now, is: how can Cheung’s conspicuously impossible passing on and off the screen (as compared to Wong’s unnoticed passing and Yamaguchi’s illusory, seamless passing) inform our reimagining of China and East Asia? Why is Cheung’s Hong Kong location especially important to developing alternative concerns and demands? This leads me to the next part of my essay, where I use the three film actresses’ transgressive agency (or lack thereof) as a trope for developing the localized position in reimagining East Asia and China.

### The Dubbing Culture and the Reimagination of China/Asia

As stated at the beginning, textual (film) analysis differs from a sociopolitical study of the contemporary reconfiguration of Asia, and a film’s political implications can by no means instantly translate into identifiable social changes. However, the question of why certain thematic and structural patterns recur in cinema at certain historical moments should alert us to the important linkage between representation and sociopolitics. The changing modes of passing in the twentieth century, as illustrated by the three actresses’ on- and off-screen border-crossing experiences, testify to the shifting social, cultural, political, and discursive configurations of East Asia’s position in the world system. When carefully contextualized and politicized, a constellation of film texts can be used to problematize the existent Asia imaginary and produce alternative imaginaries. Furthermore, as Rob Wilson argues in connection with the notion of Asia/Pacific, to imagine a
supranational cultural geopolitics does not simply mean “an act of liberal consensus, cosmopolitan expression, or the shapely postcolonial construction of transnational 'hybridity' discourse.” Rather, it entails “articulating a situated and contested social fantasy” by “expressing the will to achieve new suturings of (national) wholeness within ‘the ideological imaginary’ of a given culture.” Wilson’s emphasis on the “situated and contested social fantasy” suggests the close connection between the sociopolitical and the imaginary or (re)presentational. With this, I shift gear from analyzing the politics of representation to proposing a localized sociopolitical position from which new representations and practices of the East Asian position can be articulated.

In my previous discussion, I have shown that Wong’s screen passing was essentialized, thus unrecognized; as a result, it failed to challenge America’s political Orientalism at the time. Contrary to this, Yamaguchi’s perfect passing was carefully cultivated as an illusion to be exploited by Japanese government as a strategy of propagandizing pan-Asian militarism and the Sphere ideology. On the surface level, Yamaguchi’s passing embodied an important utopic thrust of cosmopolitanism and transnational mobility and thereby could have suggested a new way of reconfiguring the East Asian power structure. That is, her seamless passing and mobility seemed to capture the East and Southeast Asia’s collective desire for a unified, strong Asia. Nevertheless, this utopic thrust ultimately derived from and was therefore curtailed by Japan’s imperialist agenda.

Unlike Wong and Yamaguchi’s modes of passing, which are elided in different ways, Cheung’s passing comes across as impossible, hence conspicuous, due to the stark linguistic, racial/ethnic, and cultural disjunction between her and her roles, as well as between her and the rest of the cast. Cheung’s accentuated passing disrupts verisimilitude, thus helping to foreground the performative process. This, in turn, releases her and her personae from essentializing constraints, thereby enabling them to exceed the predetermined design/plot and gesture toward a new Asia imaginary. Cheung’s excessive existence and rupturing power can be compared to the Deleuzian “lines of flight” that deterritorialize the system from within. Contrary to Wong and Yamaguchi’s linguistic translation that presumes translatability and transparency, as illustrated in the two sequences discussed previously,
Cheung’s linguistic deficiency (i.e., her lack of French and Mandarin) and absence of translation serve to highlight untranslatability and disjuncture. If Wong and Yamaguchi’s translator role is more characteristic of the colonial situation, where the colonizer-colonized interactions tend to serve practical and material purposes, Cheung’s passing and performative (as opposed to linguistic) translation evoke the postcolonial condition where the Self-Other relationship acquires more symbolic power, stemming from the indigestible and untranslatable agency of the colonized, mimicking Other. The reason, as Homi Bhabha puts it, is that the colonial mimicry “must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.”

The connection between passing and slippery, self-differing mimicry becomes more important in Hamid Naficy’s discussion of the doppelgänger figure featured in accented or diasporic cinema. Accented, diasporic films, according to Naficy, “frequently contain foreigners who attempt to pass as natives.” Moreover, on and off the screen passing are oftentimes coextensive with each other, so that “the performative skills of passing by the exiles and émigrés and the hermeneutic procedures of discovering the passing are not just part of the . . . diegeses but also of [the actresses’ own] lives and identities.” “Passing, slipping, and doubling” lead to the “partial, double, or split” identities of the doppelgänger. All three actresses discussed here can be viewed as doppelgängers whose displacement on and off the screen both necessitates and enables their border crossing and identity reconfiguration. However, Cheung alone has to “face not only the vision and voice of the interpellating authority . . . but also [her] own ‘inauthenticity’ and lack of fit,” for her performative translation highlights dissonance and slippage, as opposed to a certain presumed inherent essence. Cheung’s problematic passing and performative (mis)identities can be partially attributed to her Hong Kong locality. As a British colony for one and a half centuries, Hong Kong, unsurprisingly, becomes a site where doppelgängers, mistranslation, nontranslation, and hybrid practices are not only necessitated, but also encouraged, as part and parcel of the colonial experience. Furthermore, as a border zone, Hong Kong demands what Walter Mignolo calls “border thinking.” To an extent, Asia/Pacific as a whole can be viewed as a border zone; and it is precisely in such a border zone that a localized agency can be imagined.
Given the historically defined connections and distinctions between Asia/Pacific and the colonial, capitalist West, it is impossible to take Asia/Pacific as an automatic site of alternatives. Nevertheless, as a border zone, it can be deployed so that alternative possibilities are tested, improvised, and performed. As Dirlik and Wilson suggest, the very idea of an Asia/Pacific region should be used as a “counter-hegemonic ‘space of cultural production.’”49 The localized agency should therefore be understood not only as a form of resistance against colonialism in the traditional sense but also as a critique of the New Asia and Pacific Rim discourses, or what Dirlik and Wilson describe as the “postmodern co-prosperity sphere,” as crystallized in Zhang Yimou’s *tianxia* ideology.

To link this back to my analysis in the first part, I argue that one strategy of developing localized agency and reimagining East Asia and Asia/Pacific is to mobilize the cultural politics of performative translation, as conducted by Cheung in the transregional and transnational ethnoscape and mediascape. In his discussion of the unified Asia, Rustom Bharucha argues that we need “a new sensitization . . . to the *culture of translations in Asia.*”50 Translation, I contend, is not simply linguistic, but also physical or performative. Performative translation, as my discussion shows, indicates hypervisibilized passing and performativity mediated by specifically coded crossover star bodies. Its interstitial position registers the interactions and conflicts between diverse geopolitical sites. Contrary to the Orientalist narrative that, according to Said, serves the “function of speaking from a place” and provides “the possibility of producing a territorial object . . . or a territorial location,” Cheung’s performative translation produces not one, but multiple, territorial locations; and by bringing them into a dialogic relationship, such performative translation muddles the border line.51 The endings of *Irma Vep* and *Hero* become particularly significant in this regard. The first foregrounds the difficulty of defining a place by refusing to deliver an identifiable geographical location. In the second, the “home” that Cheung’s Flying Snow dies for symbolizes a microplace that refuses to be sutured into the macroplace of the unified Qin state. More importantly, this home does not simply suggest an a priori and unchangeable root, but rather a self-consciously adopted, localized position, produced and situated in relation to its others. This home implies the potential existence of multiple other embodied locations.
Such deessentialized geography helps to undermine Asia stereotypes such as the Orientalized Other, the Japan-centered pan-Asia, the China-centered *tianxia*, or capitalism’s new frontier in the Eastern Hemisphere. It leads to a more complex conception of identity, what Stuart Aiten and Leo Zonn describe as “espacement,” a spatial dimension of difference that suggests that identity is defined as alterity (fragment), not repetition. By foregrounding the difficult process of translation and questioning the assumption of translatability in the disjunctive ethnoscape and mediascape, performative translation highlights the tension-ridden relationships between geopolitical sites both within and outside of Asia. On that basis, we can trace the localized agency arising from translation.

The importance of performative translation can be further related to the concept of “dubbing culture.” In his study of Indonesian gays’ and lesbians’ dubbing of Western sexual subjectivities, Tom Boellstorff uses “dubbing culture” to produce an “awkward fusion” and disjuncture whereby the very notion of the “original” is problematized. Furthermore, “dubbed culture is a product of localization, and the ‘message’ and sense of ‘locality’ where that message appears are formed at a point that can hardly be called the point of ‘reception.’” For my purpose here, dubbing culture arises from performative translation, both aiming to avoid reifying either of the two ends (the Self or the Other, the source or the target, the producer or the receiver) by “foreign-izing” them, bringing them into interaction, thus producing an “espaced” identity for both. The localized position of agency, therefore, is not simply lodged in a single locale, but rather self-consciously shuttles between disparate locales and subsequently becomes reconfigured while making the border ambiguous.

To sum up, border-crossing flow in the form of embodied performative translation in the global mediascape contributes to problematizing the hegemonic logic, be it championed by Euro-America or by Asian countries/regions. By keeping the space open to interaction and transformation, performative translation and the resultant dubbing culture constitute the first step toward reimagining a dynamic Asia that may gesture toward a new paradigm of the world order.
Notes

I am indebted to the issue editors and readers for their generous help and suggestions for bringing the essay to the present form. I am solely responsible for any errors that might exist in this piece.


3 Kuan-hsing Chen and Beng Hua Chua, “An Introduction,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 1 (2000): 9. In this introduction, Chen and Chua recall the agenda for the 1998 Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Conference on “Problematising Asia.” They reaffirm that “problematising Asia” and critiquing the triumphant discourse on the “rise of Asia” remain the theme of this journal.


9 According to Dorrine Kondo, for instance, Appadurai’s celebratory discourse on exile and deterritorialization symptomatically reveals the privilege of male theoreticians in general who knowingly or inadvertently ignore the fact that exile can be forced and traumatizing for the disenfranchised, as well as liberatory and inspiring for the privileged social sector. Thus, contrary to the male postcolonial theorists’ trumpeting of the “homeless” status, feminists like Kondo stress the importance of being “homed.” The notion of “home” will take on a special significance in my discussion of Maggie Cheung’s recent film *Hero* (dir. Zhang Yimou, 2002). See Dorrine Kondo, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997).


Whereas the categories of Orient and Asia have different origins and began with divergent delimitations, they have increasingly moved toward a similar set of connotations (from the Western perspective at least), ever since the institutionalization of the current geographical mapping of the world.


Italics mine. Ezra Pound’s edited version began to be serialized in *Little Review* in the September issue in 1919 and then was published as a monograph in 1936. For Fenollosa’s original opening, including sections edited out by Pound, see Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Displacement: Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 20.


A classic case of Hollywood’s Orientalism is the casting of MGM’s 1937 *Good Earth* (dir. Sidney Franklin, 1937), adapted from Pearl S. Buck’s 1931 novel of the same title. Rejected for the leading role—a Chinese female peasant who was played by Luise Rainer—Wong was asked to play the male lead’s second wife, a seductive woman of the pleasure quarters, which Wong turned down.


For a detailed analysis, see Yiman Wang, “The Art of Screen Passing.”


24 Wang Hui, “Yazhou xiangxiang de puxi.”

25 East Asia, as defined by imperialist Japan, gradually came to include the South Sea Islands as the principle suppliers of resources, so that the building of the East Asia Economic Sphere involved an important step, i.e., the southward expansion. See Tomizuka Masaki, “Asia as Seen from Yamagata,” in *Pearl Harbor Fiftieth Anniversary — Media Wars: Then and Now*, ed. Yikio Fukushima and Markus Nornes (Tokyo: Asahi Planning, 1991), 178–207, esp. 200.

26 Sun, “How Does Asia Mean? (Part I),” 15.

27 Ibid., 19.

28 Ching, “Globalizing the Regional,” 251 — 52.

29 She debuted with “Manzhou xin gequ” (“The New Manchuko Song”) in 1933, one year after the establishment of Manchuko. Her singing talent made her an ideal actress in an age crazed for song-and-dance cinema.

30 Yamaguchi Yoshiko, “Li xiaojie shuo: ‘zheyang de youqing cai zhenshi zhide baogui ne!’ ” (“Miss Li says, ‘This sort of friendly feeling is really worth valuing!’ ”), *Xin Yingtan (New Film Scene)* 3 (1944): 23.

31 Examples of Yamaguchi’s afterlife include re-release of her songs, newly composed pop songs evoking her (one titled “Hua xin,” or “Blooming Heart,” by Taiwan pop singer Chou Hua-chien, the other titled “Li Xianglan,” or “Yamaguchi Yoshiko,” by Hong Kong pop singer Jackie Cheung), and a multilingual play, *Fenghuanghua kaile* (*The Phoenix Trees Are in Blossom*) (1995) by Hsu Rey-fang. A most noteworthy instance is a four-episode play, *Sayonara Ri Koran* (*Biele Li Xianglan*) (1992), based on Yamaguchi’s autobiography, coproduced by mainland China and Japan, which highlights her dilemma as a border-crossing movie star in the war-torn Far East.


34 Ibid., 242.

35 Tu Wei-ming argues that non-Mandarin speakers will find it hard to become “truly Chinese.” See Tu’s preface in *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, ed.
Tu Wei-ming (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), viii. This claim, importantly, contradicts his including Hong Kong, along with China, Taiwan, and Singapore, in what he calls the “first symbolic universe” of the “Cultural China.”


Ibid., 383.


41 Kondo, About Face, 175–82.

See Rob Wilson, Reimaging the American Pacific: From South Pacific to Bamboo Ridge and Beyond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 33, italics original.


45 Ibid., 275, italics mine.

46 Ibid., 275, 272.


52 Stuart C. Aiten and Leo E. Zonn, Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), 211.


54 Ibid., 41.