

Becoming Modernized or Simply “Modern”?: Sex, Chineseness, Diasporic Consciousness in *Lust, Caution*

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Abstract

The extended, seemingly self-indulgent sex scenes in Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* have generated rather unfavorable responses from both Chinese and Western critics. But this paper argues that these sex scenes are central to Ang Lee's project of interrogating Chineseness from a Taiwanese/diasporic Chinese position. Sex here is just a metaphor for a people-state relationship, which often approximates what we usually understand as “lust.” The metaphor unfolds when Wang Jiazhi, abandoned by her biological father, embarks on a quest for a new Father while trying to understand her own femininity, a quest that leads to her involvement in a daring but reckless plan: to sleep with a major collaborator, Mr. Yi, in order to assassinate him. But the resultant misreading of lust as love on the part of Wang (and by extension “the people”) is fatal. The romantic feelings she develops for Yi after he voluntarily reveals his vulnerability put her in a difficult situation: in order to love she has to “relinquish” her lover. By highlighting the fact that the people, symbolized by Wang, are bound to play the manipulated feminine role in their romance, as it were, with the state, this film criticizes that modern form of nationalism which is predicated on modernity. The twin target of Ang Lee's criticism—nationalism/modernity—is embodied by Yi, an undercover communist and apparently a stauncher-than-usual nationalist, who ironically tries to serve the people by abusing them. Seeing that modern nationalism, presumably devoted to bringing modernity to the nation, has brought more suffering than good, Ang Lee suggests with this film that to outgrow their obsession with modernity, i.e., with “becoming modernized,” the people need to become “modern subjects” as Wang has unwittingly done. And one can only do so by undergoing a Lacanian (and Freudian) *Versagung* or redoubled renunciation, in which what Lacan calls “subjective destitution” is experienced. Ang Lee's caution against “lust” is therefore a call from the diaspora to renegotiate Chineseness by becoming post-Taiwanese/post-Chinese.

Keywords

sex, nationalism, modernity, modern subject, *die Versagung*, diasporic consciousness, Zhang Ailing, love, lust, phallus, Father, gift, post-Chinese, post-Taiwanese

The Mystery of Too Much Sex

The extended, seemingly self-indulgent sex scenes in *Lust, Caution* (hereafter referred to as *Lust*) are probably the most conspicuous as well as most controversial aspect of this film. Critics are split as to the relevance of these explicit sex scenes. Chinese critics (including both those from Taiwan and China) unhappy with the profusion of sex scenes tend to see them as an unnecessary addition that spoils the artistic tension achieved by Zhang Ailing's low-keyed (non)portrayal of sex in her original story whereas Western criticism of Lee's representation of sex in this film predominantly centers on his "lack of emotion" and typically and contemptuously compares the it to a sort of emotionless physical exercise.¹ At first sight, both these two kinds of critics seem to have a point. Given that western films are saturated with intrigues surrounding sex and betrayal, this may seem a Chinese late comer's overdose on sex that at best amounts to a mimicry of the western sex scene. On the other hand, compared to Zhang Ailing's original short story that shows a high degree of restraint concerning the depiction of the sexual relationship between Wang Jiazhi and Mr. Yi, Ang Lee's version of *Lust* would even seem to have missed the point. Zhang's story apparently puts a major emphasis on how power engenders sexual appeal whereas the fact that in *Lust* the charming Tony Leung plays Mr. Yi considerably diminishes the constructedness of sexual appeal. Thus, in Zhang Ailing's story, sex is already political but in the sense that sex is a metaphor for how much the attractiveness of everything from individual people to ideologies is in fact constituted by power relations. By contrast, Ang Lee's sex scenes would seem to have reduced the level of political perspicuity of Zhang's original and rendered the film a romanticized parody of her story.

But I argue that Ang Lee's agenda is equally, if not more, political, except that his point does not completely coincide with Zhang's. And this is precisely why sex in this film seems to be on the verge of becoming a purely physical exercise. For the sex scenes are crucial to Ang Lee's political endeavor as bodied forth in the film, one that critiques the nationalist ideology from the position of someone who

¹ Li Li's comment on the film represents a fairly common indignation at Ang Lee's modifications of the original. In her "Shise zhi jie," she argues that the sex scenes spoiled Zhang's original by among other things adding too many incorrect details about the female protagonist's sexual experience. A typical example of Western critics' contempt for this film is Manohla Dargis's review in *New York Times*, which summarily dismisses the film's as Ang Lee's "newfound flirtation with kink" and compares sex in the film to a kind of unsavory calisthenic. Similarly, Anthony Quinn ridicules it as "[having] more in common with "Sumo wrestling than anything resembling erotic pleasure."

considers himself both Taiwanese and globalized (diasporic) Chinese. Although Ang Lee's intention of critiquing the nationalist ideology is not hard to see, to say that this critique is issued from this specific position is a challenging proposition, one that can be understood most readily from these sex scenes. For one thing, being actually part and parcel of the film's political intent, the sex scenes help to bring into relief a fierce battle fought out between the colonizer and the colonized.² In the film, the woman's body not only literally bears the brunt of political conflicts but serves as a metaphor for the (subaltern) indigenous subject over which both the nationalist discourse and the discourse of colonial modernity contend to consolidate control. In other words, Wang also, and perhaps more importantly, represents "the people" as "the governed," who are caught in the crossfire between the two forces.³ Without those scenes, this metaphorical content would not have been borne out as easily and profoundly.

It is already clear in Zhang's story that this struggle between the KMT agents, including Kuang Yumin with whom Wang is secretly in love, and Mr. Yi's gang is meant to drive home the point that the struggle between the colonizer and the colonized is always also a war between ideologies. And more often than not, it is a war between a nationalist ideology and an ideology of colonial superiority. Although the war rages on in people's minds, in the film it is visualized as one that ravages Wang's body. Being similarly grounded in the discourse of modernity and represented by cold-blooded *men*, both ideologies, however, are doing pretty much the same thing: trying to transform this innocent woman into a tamed tool for their own purposes. In the film, the colonial attempt to conquer the people, represented by Yi's violent sexual assault on Wang, reveals two things that were not the concern of the original: on the one hand, hard as he tries, Yi is not able to "reach her heart" by means of pure sex and on the other hand, however, Wang is not totally unmoved

² China's pillaging by the imperialist powers has usually been characterized as "semi-colonization." But in terms of motives, the Japanese invading forces seemed prepared to stay permanently in China one way or another and thus can be considered constituents of a full-scale colonial project.

³ The term "the people" draws on only one half of the bifocal conception of "the people" proposed by Bhabha in "Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation." According to Bhabha, the nation's people "must be thought in double-time": both as "the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse [of the nation] an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin *in the past*" and as the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity" (145). In the film, however, the people is portrayed mainly as the "objects" of this pedagogy to highlight the inability on the part of the people to attain to exercise agency in a time of national crisis.

by his sexual penetration because as the proxy of Japan, Yi is armed with nothing less than the “modernity” on which colonial power thrived. In Zhang’s original, Wang is eventually “penetrated all the way into the heart” because Yi’s manipulation of power, which is power in general rather than colonial modernity in particular, decidedly turns sex into what Wang believes to be “love.” But in Lee’s film, while Yi’s upper class lifestyle and especially his unfathomable power among other things add to the seductiveness of his physical endeavor in the same way as in Zhang’s original, this endeavor impacts differently on her body because all these factors (including the handsome looks added by Lee) are now subsumed under a more specific and more immediately powerful force—colonial modernity. However, unlike in Zhang’s original, in the film, despite being propped up by all these seductive factors, sex alone cannot constitute “love.” Wang remains loyal to the nationalist discourse because she had agreed to join this sinister game due to her “puppy love” for Kuang, the symbol of nationalist passion.⁴ It takes something extra to turn sex into “love.”

This “something” extra occurs during a brief getaway at a Japanese geisha house, an ingenious addition by Ang Lee. There Yi’s confession about “I know better than you do about how to be a whore” seems to serve as the tipping point where “lust” transforms into “love.” Obviously, then, this change proves that, for “love” to occur, physical contact (i.e. sexual intercourse) is plainly not enough. The difference between “lust” and “love” would seem to be: whereas lust is the attempt to break into the body, love is the movement into “the heart” or “subjectivity.” And the sex scenes, which a review caricaturizes as calisthenics,⁵ do have a deliberately calisthenic quality whose meaning, however, is not readily accessible to the reviewer: to adumbrate among other things the ultimate insufficiency of lust as a basis for “love.” But things become complicated when we look carefully at the relationship between “lust” and “love.”

To begin with, how does one get into the “subjectivity” of the other? Love in psychoanalytical terms is basically a “transference effect,” an “investment in the other as the subject supposed to know” which can happen in both man and woman (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 253). The analyst/Other is not lovable because of the person s/he is but because of the position in which s/he is. In other words,

⁴ The scene where Wang becomes spellbound by Kuang’s silhouette when he is giving instructions to staff on adjusting the lights from the center of the stage is highly symbolic. The handsome Kuang, dressed in the national dress and giving confident orders to his peers, appeals to Wang both sexually and ideologically. But as I would argue later, both kinds of appeal actually are one and the same ideological appeal.

⁵ See note 1.

then, “love” is in fact “giving what one does not have” (Lacan, *Écrits* 290). Despite the fact that this applies to both sexes, there is an asymmetrical relationship that holds between them (Žižek, *Indivisible* 161; Grosz 137). This is because “the Other always intervenes between the subject and the other” since, according to Lacan, a love relationship “is always structured with reference to the phallus” (Grosz 137).⁶ Thus, love seems doomed from the very beginning since the man and the woman simply cannot reach each other.

Nevertheless, this intervention of the Other results in a huge difference between how the man and the woman respectively approach the other as Other. While in a romantic relationship, both the man and the woman are caught in “an unresolved tension between demand and desire (Grosz 135), that is, between “love and sex/lust”; the man seems to exhibit “a specific ‘depreciation of love’ and a concomitant elevation of (sexual) desire whereas the woman, based on her “‘preference’ for passive aims and the strength of her demand for affirmation through the other, love and affection may serve in place of the satisfaction of her desires” (Grosz 136). For the woman, it is most likely when the man loses the status of being that “subject supposed to know,” the one that has the phallus, that he becomes truly lovable whereas for the man, the woman needs to retain the status of being the phallus in order to sustain his attention. The above analysis of love helps to clarify the transformation of the relationship between Wang and Yi. It is when the unfathomable Other (Mr. Yi) reveals its inherent weakness—that it does not have the phallus—that Wang falls uncontrollably in love with him. It is this voluntary revealing of the lack (of phallus) in the Other that triggers the (feminine) subject’s (Wang’s) imagination that s/he could fill up that hole in the Other.

In this light, then, if Wang stands for the people, “love” becomes a metaphor for their “successful” or “complete” interpellation by the Other. The insufficiency of sexual calisthenics and the unexpected transformation of lust into love converge to spell out how Wang’s/the people’s interpellation by the Other can be “successful.” While Yi is not able to completely “interpellate” Wang by means of repeated attempts to sexually tame her, that enigmatic statement “I know better than you do about how to be a whore” accidentally does the job and enables him eventually to penetrate into her “subjectivity.” What this statement does, first of all, is create a secret bond between them. By this statement, Yi is saying to her, “I am the sacrifice (whore) to a higher/lower power,” conjuring a situation extremely similar to Wang’s own and making her believe that, as the Chinese saying goes, “they both are the

⁶ In pp. 131-40 of her *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, Elizabeth Grosz elaborates on Lacan’s idea about love presented in *Écrits*, pp. 289-90.

downtrodden of the earth.” In the final analysis, it seems what crowns his seductiveness is not his looks, nor his power, but *his vulnerability*; which serves as “a weakness” with which Wang projects her “imaginary identification” (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 43-44). On the part of Yi, this vulnerability is manifested as a gesture of trust—you know my secret: that I don’t trust anybody; in fact I cannot trust anybody. He is not able to trust but wants to trust. That ultimately explains why she tells him to “leave fast” at that crucial moment because she wants to reciprocate; she wants to prove to him that she deserves his trust.

But on a deeper level, what this transformation reveals is that the mechanism of love, or of interpellation by the Other, relies less on the discursive part of ideology (that is, showing the plenitude of a particular discourse) than on the revealing of the lack/Real of that ideology to complete the co-optation of the subject. The discursive stage remains what Žižek calls “interpellation without identification/subjectivation,” a stage where the subject is “trapped by the Other through a paradoxical object-cause in the midst of it” whereas the voluntary revealing of lack by and in the Other enables the subject to find “a Cause with which to identify,” that is, it installs the subject in the symbolic (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 43-44). In other words, interpellation works not on a simplistic Althusserian “stimulus and response” model but on a Lacanian one where it is in fact the “constitutive inconsistency” of ideology, that, though being a void, serves as in Žižek’s words “the last support of the ideological effect” (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 124-27). In sum, it is precisely the voluntary revelation of the lack by and in the Other that consolidates the interpellation of the (female) subject by the Other (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 116).

The Father Never Dies

What is equally important to the change of her relationship with Yi is that at this moment Wang is also experiencing a crisis of confidence in the nationalist ideology. But inevitably one would wonder why Wang adopts the KMT nationalist ideology in the first place. What happens is that this process of adoption is triggered off and conflates with that in which her romantic feelings for Kuang develop in close connection to her relationship with her father. In this ingenious subplot added by Ang Lee, Wang’s feelings for Kuang begin shortly before she learns about her father’s re-marrying and renegeing on the plan to take her to England with him. It is undoubtedly a crucial Oedipal moment in the patriarchal system at which Wang realizes that she has to look for the phallus in a man other than her biological father.

The trauma caused by her father definitively transforms her feelings of puppy love for Kuang into a faith in the nationalist ideology. All her expectations of her father are now projected onto Kuang. In this sense, Kuang is not just a potential lover but also seen by her as a new Father figure. He is a Lacanian “subject supposed to know” (Grosz 137) because as a patriotic student leader, Kuang embodies the (KMT-sponsored) Chinese nationalist discourse. This conflated perception of Kuang, which embodies the phase of “lust” or desire in a romantic relationship as well as in the process of adopting an ideology, entails the unfolding of her fate in the film.

Since for Wang, Kuang is at once a real person and a symbol for the KMT nationalist discourse, she is not able to decline his invitation to join the crudely thought-out, reckless plot against Yi. Although she is doing it for Kuang, in doing so she has to go through a degrading experience in which she not only is unable to have the man she fancies but has to be subjected to sleeping with the nation’s enemy. The more she is committed to the project, the more she is distanced from Kuang, her object of desire. In other words, she seems to be heading toward a Lacanian *Versagung* or redoubled renunciation. According to Lacan, a redoubled renunciation is constituted when the subject sacrifices what is most precious to him/her for a higher Cause but in the end loses both. At that crucial moment of recognition, the subject goes through the “night of the world” where s/he descends into the realm of death drive, what Lacan calls the realm of “subjective destitution,” and becomes a “modern subject.” The subject is characterized as “modern” precisely because, unlike the tragic heroes in the Greek tragedy, s/he accidentally *chooses* to learn about the emptiness of her/his subjecthood in the symbolic (Žižek, *Enjoy* 165-69).

By agreeing to do this job for the sake of Kuang, who represents the Cause of saving the nation from the invading Japanese, she ironically sacrifices Kuang as her beloved, “what is most precious to her,” “the kernel of her being” (Žižek, *Indivisible* 117). But in the end, her sacrifice comes to nothing because she eventually finds out that the KMT nationalist discourse to which she is committed is but a parody of what she had imagined it to be, “a shallow and impotent semblance of the original” (Žižek, *Indivisible* 117). For it turns out that the truth of the KMT nationalist discourse is Lao Wu, the cold-blooded veteran agent rather than the innocent and idealistic Kuang. But Wang misses this “opportunity” for true subjectivity; her route to “becoming modern” is more tortuous than that derived from a typical “redoubled renunciation.”

The first time Wang meets Lao Wu, she actually switches to him as the Father earnestly. After Lao Wu promises her that he will send her to England once the

mission is completed, she even entrusts to him the letter she has written to her father. Since she joins the student drama club’s heady plunge into the plot basically because of her feelings for Kuang, the fact that Kuang never can bring himself to reciprocate (i.e., he has never come down to the status of having a lack) keeps him on the plane of ideology (i.e., as a Father). And the fact that Kuang turns out to be only a subordinate of Lao Wu makes it easy for her to transfer onto Lao Wu her attachment to Kuang.

Thus, when she pleads with Lao Wu to speed up the process by confiding to him, “He is trying to get into my heart too,” she is expressing bluntly that she is on the verge of compromising herself, that is, falling in love with Yi. She is asking the (newly-adopted national) Father to prove to her that all she’s been doing for him is worth the toil and pain. But this second meeting with Lao Wu proves that the new Father does not cherish her either. When Wang implores Lao Wu to carry out Yi’s assassination as soon as possible, he responds by saying it has to wait until the whereabouts of the lost batch of munitions has been ascertained. It then dawns on her that he is indulging in his own *jouissance* or enjoyment at the expense of her wellbeing. His wife and children having been killed by the Japanese, Lao Wu has covered that lack with a nationalist fantasy/ideology and thus would take whatever action is necessary to ensure its power. At this juncture of national crisis, what is at stake is modernity, here symbolized by that lost batch of advanced weaponry provided by the USA, the object of exchange or phallus contended over by all three parties involved in the Sino-Japanese War, the KMT, the Japanese, and the Chinese Communist party (hereafter referred as the CCP). Lao Wu then is the Father who is still alive and enjoying, what is called in Lacanian terms “the anal Father” (Žižek, *Enjoy* 124-25). The anal father is that which lurks behind the Name of the Father and disrupts the subject’s “normal” membership in society (Žižek, *Enjoy* 127). Central to our purpose here is the fact that it “hinders the sexual relationship” (Žižek, *Enjoy* 125).

Despite the fact that Kuang at some point does indeed try to extricate Wang from this dangerous, entangled relationship, Lao Wu, being the anal Father, destroys what little is left of the potential romantic relationship between Wang and Kuang by insisting on extending the project. Finding out about the truth of KMT nationalism (that the Father has not died into a symbolic one) causes Wang to realize the futility of her loyalty to the KMT nationalist Cause for which she had sacrificed (without her knowing it) her (potential) relationship with Kuang, a fact suggested by her rejection of Kuang’s kiss. At this point, as mentioned earlier, she might very well be thought to undergo *Versagung* or “redoubled renunciation.”

Though cognizant of the “obscene” truth and hence the emptiness of the KMT nationalist discourse, Wang nevertheless succeeds in avoiding the “night of the world” and hangs on to the world of daylight (discourse) by immediately submitting to a new ideology, albeit one which seems to her not to be an ideology. The strategy she unwittingly adopts is to distinguish between the romantic/personal and the nationalist/political, a banal strategy not infrequently adopted by people disillusioned about politics. In so doing, she executes a separation of love from sex/lust, of demand from desire, one that, according to Lacan, is typical of the woman (Grosz 136). That is, as long as it is love, a proof that the man recognizes her *personal* worth, it does not matter if he has the phallus, which would ensure her a place in the Other, that is, have her endorsed by a nationalist ideology in the context of the film. That is why, for her purpose, she can opt for the love for an enemy of the nation since after the tipping point, Yi for her has become much less the proxy for the Japanese Other than a “real” person. But the problem is that Wang is in fact deceived by the Other’s vulnerability into thinking love actually exists and can transcend politics. Not only does colonial modernity with all its riches and glamour now still serve to reinforce romantic love, but Yi assumes the status of a new Father, that is, a new assimilating ideology. And there is another way to explain why Yi can serve as a new Father.

The Question of “Femininity”

The fact that Wang can endure the pain of being a secret agent is mainly because she is “enjoying” in her own way. According to Lacan, anyone who can stick with a discourse (fantasy) in the extreme is clinging to a secret *jouissance*, or in plainer language, has something to enjoy (Žižek, *For They Know*). That secret *jouissance* or enjoyment comes from her father’s abandoning her, which prompts her to ask the question, “What is femininity”? In other words, what she is trying to find out about in playing Mrs. Mak is the secret possessed by the woman who has seduced her father. That is why Lao Wu says, “Wang’s strength lies in the fact that rather than being a secret agent she simply thinks she *is* Mrs. Mak.” In Lacanian terms, she “enjoys” being Mrs. Mak because, by being a seductress, she is trying to understand how “that woman” has seduced her father *away from* herself. Thus, to the extent that she “impersonates” the other woman, Yi’s relationship with her is a replication of her father’s relationship with his new wife.

Obviously, there is an interesting parallel between the father-daughter relationship in Wang’s case and that in the famous Dora case. Dora’s symptoms are

likewise derived from her enjoyment, which was caused by the loss of her father to his mistress Mrs. K and therefore produced in her a secret desire to know why her impotent father loves Mrs. K. The desire is then manifested in an attempt to secure "a desperately needed insight into how a woman, or anyone, could become an object of desire and what this entailed" (Rabaté 91). But, unlike Dora, who opts for a quasi-homosexual attachment to Mrs. K through the intermediary of Mr. K, Wang's hysterical question is embodied in a parallel identification with the seductress who has, as it were, broken into the interior of her father. In other words, instead of developing a homosexual attachment to the seductress as Dora did, Wang in fact is *impersonating* that seductress.

What complicates the situation is the task she has been entrusted with: to seduce Yi. To seduce an enemy is to feign a sexual relationship without love (that is, without really asking for recognition), which is precisely a relationship of lust, one that resembles the individual's relationship with an ideology in its initial phase. But since one adopts an ideology when one feels one's own lack (*jouissance*), as evidenced by the case of Wang's successive adopting Kuang and Lao Wu as Father, even as Wang remains loyal to the nationalist Father, by the mere act of beginning that relationship, she is already treating Yi as a Father. The fact that she is disappointed with the national Father on the one hand and conflates Yi as Father with Yi as her biological father on the other makes it possible for her to shift her transference onto Yi and finishes off with (the KMT version of) Chinese nationalism.

As mentioned earlier, a facile interpretation of her "love" for Yi would be that she chooses the personal in defiance of the national(ist).⁷ Following this assumption, one can easily argue that, after the scene in the Geisha house, Wang and Yi have become two "real" people and can now love from the heart. But the fact is they are still interacting with each other on the level of ideology/discourse. For one thing, since, as already indicated, the Other always intervenes in the relationship between the man and the woman, they often expect different things from each other and as a result, quips Lacan, "there is no sexual relationship." What happens here, then, is that the old ideology has been replaced by a new one; the fantasy of family/home, a dream that had been dashed by her biological father, nevertheless underlies her "love" for Yi. Moreover, this fantasy is undoubtedly itself a ramification of the national(ist) ideology and more often than not works in one way or another to bolster the hegemony of nationalism (McClintock 357). We'll

⁷ See for instance Mei Wen, "Tianli or renyu? minzuzhuyi or gerenzhuyi?" where she interprets Li's film as an effort to challenge nationalism with individualism.

come back to this in the next section.

What is more thrilling is that Mr. Yi himself may not be such a far cry from nationalist ideology anyway because he is very likely a CCP double agent.⁸ This possibility is derived most obviously from the fact that Yi and his gang had intercepted the munitions the U.S. had been delivering to the KMT. Since under those circumstances Yi could not have done this for his personal gain, the only explanation is that he had done it for the third party that was involved in the Sino-Japanese conflict: the CCP. Yi's secretary Zhang is another clue to his hidden identity. Although it is revealed at the very beginning of the film that they both are involved in the interception of the munitions, the conversations between Yi and Zhang as well as Zhang's surveillance of Yi indicates that Zhang takes orders from a higher authority which is neither the KMT nor the Japanese. And on top of all this, Li's enigmatic claim that this film is more about the Chinese civil war than about the Sino-Japanese war can be deciphered only by bringing in a hidden but significant third party.⁹ This possibility dramatically complicates the story and signals the most daring attempt on the part of Ang Lee.¹⁰ Seen in this light, Mr. Yi becomes a totally different person. He is now an undercover nationalist/Communist in the disguise of a high ranking collaborator whose job obligates him to inflict cruelty on the anti-Japanese resistance and even innocent civilians for a higher Cause, this Cause being also Chinese nationalism, except that this is a different brand.

In other words, far from interacting with Wang on the personal level, Yi is *performing* all the time. And this most perverse acting actually makes Yi the most father-like Father for what characterizes a Father is that he hides his obscenity/*jouissance* behind his stern and non-affective façade; the Father is

⁸ There have been attempts to construe Mr. Yi as an undercover Communist agent by critics from China, but the focus is consistently on the "reactionary" motives of Ang Lee, who, breast-fed as they believe he was by the KMT, uses this film to disparage the whole revolutionary project by the CCP on the basis of a rightwing ideology. See for example Wang Qitao, "Sejie de wenben fenxi, lishi quanshi yu dui qi xianshiyiyi de sikao (I)."

⁹ Ang Lee has apparently made this suggestion on various occasions, including a private conversation with this author and other friends. One of the most notable occasions was the press conference that launched the film in Japan where he said, "Although apparently the Sino-Japanese war is thematized [in the film], what actually is portrayed is the Chinese civil war." See the news report by Zhongyangshe, the official Taiwanese news agency, Dec 4, 2007.

¹⁰ Another possible explanation is that he is simply an opportunist, who, seeing the Japanese are losing the war, is trying to switch to the Communist camp. The real historical figure on which the character of Yi is partially based—Ding Mocun—indeed was said to have approached both the KMT and the Communist party toward the end of the war. But this explanation almost completely does away with the inner conflicts of this character.

therefore the most sinister kind of simulacrum under which a non-truth, or a Void, is festering (Žižek, *For They Know* 231). Therefore, what seems to be a moment of real contact, a moment of *tuché* in Lacanian terms (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 53), turns out to be a moment of profound misunderstanding, a powerful witness again to the Lacanian motto: “there is no sexual relationship.” But that Void in the Father is a black hole that engulfs everyone who glimpses it into its ideology, a fantasy whose function is precisely to cover up that hole.

Wang’s status as “the people” who have been victimized in this war of ideology (over the ownership of modernity) is confirmed once again since whichever party the people turn to they are under the sway of a (national) Father, who secretly enjoys; they can never fully understand the Father’s goal but somehow believe in him as if in love with him. In the end, then, the question of femininity is not only about femininity per se but also about femininity as an extended metaphor for the subjects of a nation, what we have called “the people.” In the film, the people are put in the position of the female role in the context of national politics whereas those in power assume the male role, which, holding (or pretending to hold) the phallus, manipulates the people for their own purposes (rather than for the Cause of the nation) and finds satisfaction first and foremost in proving their having the phallus by subjecting the woman/people to their will. In the case of the film, this particular woman’s quest for the love/recognition from the Other/Father embodies the vicissitudes of the people’s quest for recognition from the national Father. However, this quest paradoxically requires the people to engage in the nation’s (in fact the leaders’) quest for the phallus, which in this case is incarnated as modernity, and to do so because the Father actually does not have it (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 122) and precisely for that reason induces “love” from its subjects. Hence, it is arguable that the quest encapsulates the fate of modern China. We’ll come back to this quest of modernity in the last section where we discuss *Lust*’s status as a post-Taiwanese as well as post-Chinese statement.

In Yi more than Yi

As mentioned earlier, for Wang to ask the question of femininity is in fact for her to try to fathom the desire of the Father since, as mentioned earlier, this desire constitutes her stepmother’s attraction to her father in the first place. According to Lacan, “The point of the ego ideal is that from which the subject will see himself[*/herself*], as one says, *as others see him[*/her*]*—which will enable him[*/her*] to support himself[*/herself*] in a dual situation that is satisfactory for him[*/her*] from

the point of view of love” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 268; original italics). In other words, she can only understand her stepmother’s attraction by looking *from* Yi’s (the surrogate father’s) perspective since the “specular mirage” of love “is situated in the field established at the level of the pleasure reference, of that sole signifier necessary to introduce a perspective centered on the Ideal point, the capital I, placed somewhere in the Other, from which the Other sees me, in the form I like to be seen” (268). She is asking her father by asking Yi, “What do you want from my stepmother/me?” “What do you see in my stepmother/me that fascinates you?” In the end, then, it is Yi’s desire as the Other’s desire that constitutes the ideal of femininity for Wang.

Put in a different way, it is what is “in Yi more than Yi” that Wang believes is the real cause of her father’s infatuation with her stepmother. The Lacanian term “in you more than you” refers to the obj(a) in the object of desire, the x that is the center of the object’s attraction to the subject. At the same time, however, the obj(a) is also the desire/lack of this object (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 274). What is “in Yi more than Yi,” then, is Yi’s/Wang’s father’s desire/ lack, which is at once what attracts her stepmother/Wang and, paradoxically, what makes him perceive the attraction of her stepmother/Wang. Despite the fact that Wang originally had been asked to figure out that same lack, which she could then present to the national Father for his deliberation, feigning a sexual relationship has made her increasingly ambivalent about Yi.

The man’s attempt to conquer the woman by sexual means is a procedure executed, as mentioned earlier, on the level of desire, with the phallus as the gift/object of exchange (Rabaté 88-89). Exposed to such sexual means, the woman is immediately caught in the game of proving her worth as the phallus to him if she agrees (even falsely) to somehow respond to his sexual advances. But since Wang’s secret mission—to find Yi’s weakness—and her impulse as a woman (i.e., favoring demand over desire) coincide, Yi’s unexpected move to reveal to her his weakness completely messes up her “soberness” because now her demand rather than her desire is at stake.

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, Yi’s descent from the level of desire to demand, i.e., from *Man* the phallus provider to *man* the love provider, is initiated by his voluntary revealing of a fundamental lack in himself. But this process has to wait till Wang receives the gift—a diamond ring—from Yi to complete itself. While the lack makes her see him as a “real person,” the ring, signifying recognition and affection, establishes a “personal” relationship between Yi and her. By giving her the ring as an evidence of his lack (of the phallus), Yi is

also saying to her that she *is* his phallus. Upon receiving the ring, Wang is definitively transformed from a seductress into a woman in love. Thus, it is less the promises the ring adumbrates to Wang the Oedipal subject that cause her to fall in love than the lack in Yi that it embodies since “what establishes the love relationship is that the gift is given, if one may say so, for nothing” (Lacan, *Le Séminaire IV* 140). According to Lacan:

What constitutes the gift is that a subject gives something in a gratuitous manner, for as much as behind what he gives there is something that is lacking, and thus the subject sacrifices beyond what he has. The same happens with the primitive mode of the gift that one can see as the effective root of all human exchanges under the shape of the *potlatch*. (Lacan, *Le Séminaire IV* 140)

And “love” is what amounts to an extreme case of gift-giving where the gift represents “nothing” since, as mentioned earlier, “love” is “giving what one does not have” on the part of the giver (Lacan, *Écrits* 290). Thus, if the subject is always in search of the Father’s love, the latter’s reciprocation is marked by the activation of the transaction of a “gift of nothing” between him and the subject, one that embodies, even for just a moment, his impotence.

In the film, Yi eventually proves to be just such an impotent Father; now merged with Wang’s biological father, he claims to be himself a whore; i.e., he is no longer the all powerful *whole* Other, but a *holed* person (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 196). And, as just mentioned, by giving Wang a ring that signifies his own lack, Yi confirms her worth as the phallus. The moment at which she sees the Dove’s Egg (apparently representing peace, love, and biological reproduction to her, but more fundamentally signifying that he is giving her “what he does not have,” what Rabaté calls “a true sign of love” (88) therefore marks the end of her fantasy of the KMT Father.

But then is this really “love”? We have demonstrated that Wang’s love relationship with the Chinese Father is ideological and therefore falls into the category of “lust” rather than “love.” In that particular fantasy, Wang is charged by the national Father with the task of taming the national excess, the symptom of the nationalist fantasy. But at the same time the Japanese Other, it would appear, is also trying to subjectivate her. The Japanese Other, represented by Yi the collaborator, is physically trying to penetrate her whereas she, both as the proxy of Chinese national Father and as the seductress trying to find out about her biological father’s

desire, is trying mentally to pry Yi open (i.e. to locate his lack). Now that the enemy Other, which had gradually become a new Father/Other, unexpectedly opens himself up, the mystery is revealed: Yi does have a lack, but this lack is not the Achilles' heel of the Japanese Other but the lack that induces love and materializes as a lovely diamond ring, a proof that he needs her as phallus. From then on, as mentioned above, to Wang Yi is no longer the agent of colonial modernity but seems to have become a "real person" who holds out to her a "heart of diamond," which is a promise of a happy ending—a new family/home beyond politics (The ring's connotation of "home" is fully revealed toward the end of the film when she tells the rickshaw driver to take her "home" while appreciating the ring on her index finger).¹¹ And this indeed seems like a change from "lust" to "love."

The ring, however, does not persist in being a "real thing," but in no time transforms into a Lacanian Real Thing. Upon its appearance, it instantly assumes the status of a differently configured obj(a), the *jouissance* around which a new fantasy, one of family/home, is constructed. Whereas in the old KMT-activated fantasy, Yi is the bad guy, a most detested traitor, in the new fantasy, he is a hurt person calling out to be loved. But the fantasy will remain fantasy since what is at stake here is that once the transaction of love begins, the gift exchanging process cannot be stopped. Under the logic of reciprocation, the Gift that was given was not only an object but also part of the giver her/himself and therefore *desirous* of a return to its birthplace. In the end, it inevitably comes back to the giver, demanding to become part of her/him again (Mauss 9-10). In Lacanian terms, it comes back to re-confirm the lack in the original giver. The test of love, of whether one can actually wrestle away from ideology (lust), lies in whether one can look one's own lack in the eye. But it is a hard job, which ultimately would entail undergoing *Versagung*. And Yi is not exempt from this logic. Now, having accepted Yi's gift of nothing, Wang in turn gives herself to him as a gift, embodied in the same ring, which is staring right at him from his desk. To admit or not to admit that he has given this ring to Wang as a gift, that is, that he has a lack in himself—that is the question.

Day of the Living Dead

While it is "love" (from the Father) that everyone in the film seems to be

¹¹ One cannot fail to notice that when Wang is waiting in the coffee house for Yi to take her to the jewelry store, there is a strong evocation of an imaginary of home/family by means of such things as the dolls, the cakes and couples choosing cakes.

seeking, it is anxiety that provides the impetus for holding on to that love (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 114-17). This is a special kind of anxiety, one that is over the futility of the Father; over the possibility that He has a lack. Yi's anxiety is especially conspicuous. Underlying his longing for love (from the nationalist Father) is the fear that his belief may go or has already gone bankrupt, i.e. that the Other/Father has a hole in the midst of it around which the Other/Father has established itself as Other/Father. Yi confesses to Wang that he is constantly living in fear and envies her because she does not know fear at all. It is not true, however, that Wang has no fear or anxiety. Since her enjoyment is double—one organized around the “betrayal of her father” and the other around the “national crisis”—by being the seductress, she is doing it for her newly-adopted KMT nationalist Father even as she, as mentioned earlier, is also trying to figure out why her biological father had abandoned her in favor of her stepmother. Since her task is a two-in-one project, Wang is caught in an impasse. If she goes only halfway through with it, she sacrifices herself for nothing; on the other hand, if she does it too well, she might not only identify the “in Yi more than Yi”/“in father more than father” but eventually fall in love with Yi. Her fear then is precisely the latter: that eventually she might be “penetrated” by Yi all the way to the heart and so abandon her nationalist belief. However, since her fear is about “falling in love” (albeit with the wrong person), there is no imminent need of having to face the “night of the world,” of total meaninglessness, as I have demonstrated earlier.

But Yi's fear has a much stronger intensity. Being his enjoyment, his fear is about the possibility that the core of his belief (i.e. the nationalist Cause) may just turn out to be nothing more than the horror he is undergoing: ruthlessly and mindlessly persecuting innocent people against the “ethical mandate” of nationalism (Žižek, *Enjoy* 177). Presumably he is doing that for a higher Cause, but his fear is that this Cause may not even exist; what exists could be just a semblance or parody of it. For what Yi is doing (i.e., being a double-agent for nationalist purposes) pre-supposes a “suspension of the ethical.” But it might turn out that “there is more truth in the mask than in what is underneath the mask” (Žižek, *Enjoy* 177). Judging from the way he vents his desperation on Wang, it is likely that every day he is on the verge of confronting the horrible truth and has to constantly disavow that possibility. In that sense, he is a much stauncher nationalist than people like Lao Wu, and is thus able to deny his involvement with Wang despite the telltale returned gift right before his eyes. He sticks to his Cause and sacrifices his newly-found love, what may have for a while been most precious to him.

Wang on her part is not completely wrong about Yi's feelings. As mentioned

earlier, the moment of love (the moment when Wang discovers that he is a whore vis-à-vis the Japanese, thereby identifying the X in Yi) seems likely to be a moment of *tuché*, an encounter with the Real (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 53). But he misses it by a “stair’s breadth” by refusing to see her again “downstairs.” When the ring is returned to him, he is presented with a last chance to face the abyss in his subjectivity, to encounter the Real/lack one more time, for, as mentioned earlier, the ring had been meant by Yi precisely to reveal to Wang that he has a lack. But despite his “love” for Wang, which had caused him to believe that she could fill up his lack, he forecloses that possibility of facing the abyss by disavowing his involvement with Wang. For, by demanding that Yi prove his love to her, Wang is automatically reduced from the status of being the object of desire (i.e., the phallus) to being a subject of demand (Grosz 137) and no longer able to fill out that lack in him uncovered by the uncertainty about his own Cause.

Thus, despite the fact that Yi the Communist sacrifices the people “for the benefit of the people” also points to a potential *Versagung* on his part, it has never become a real one. For, if he acknowledged that the gift had been from him, that is, that it were a proof of his lack, then he would have to admit that he had wavered in his job (i.e., confided his doubts about what he has been doing) and therefore have to face his fear: that the Cause he has been fighting for is empty and consequently he has been doing something completely senseless. In other words, he has to be prepared for a showdown with his own belief and very likely even for a final collapse of his belief. But in the end he cannot bring himself to face that senselessness and ends up remaining a ghost, a living dead, which he already *has* been as a result of hanging on to an especially austere kind of nationalism. The scene in which his shadow is vaguely projected onto the linen of Wang’s bed fully corroborates this interpretation of him having persisted in being a ghost, a shadow without substance. And this casts a rather ironic light on the sentence thought aloud by Mr. Yi in Zhang’s original after he had all the students, including Wang, executed: “As a living person, she was his and now even as a ghost, she is still his!”

Presumably Kuang could deliver Wang out of her predicament any point should he so will it, but for quite a while he too persists in urging her to continue! That is, being completely conditioned by the nationalist discourse and thus devoid of any real affect, he behaves almost like an automaton and thus also belongs in the category of the living dead, until the moment he tries to kiss Wang, with profound regret. Even then his awakening is transient. Only Wang achieves a radical awakening and is the only person in this film who successfully struggles her way out (though perhaps accidentally) of the prison of the living dead.

As mentioned earlier, when Wang discovers the disappointing truth of the KMT nationalist ideology, the intervention of a romantic discourse diverts her attention away from the imminent “night of the world.” Now Yi’s refusal to take back the ring (i.e., to cherish the phallus he has found) aborts the romantic discourse and proves (with or without Wang’s knowing it) that this discourse is not situated beyond but rather subsumed under the nationalist discourse not only because she understands the romantic discourse as synonymous with the discourse of family/home but because what she is looking for in Yi is nevertheless another Father figure. In the end, Wang is once again used and dumped by the Father, who is enjoying.

Surrounded by these automatons, Wang/the people can be construed as being trapped in a “day of the living dead” from which she finds no exit until in the end she experiences the “night of the world” and eventually attains “true” subjectivity. But that occurs not because she has felt “love” but because she has eventually been disenchanted with “love”—something which occurs only after she has been put in an extreme situation in which she endures the exploitation by and pain from two consecutive Fathers (the KMT and the CCP). While appearing to have steered away from abstract ideology, Wang nevertheless sees in the ring a higher Cause, though not a political one. Thus, since the process of her falling in love with Yi is completed at the moment she receives the ring, she cannot help but try to save his life. But the problem is that she does not know that their relationship can only exist on the level of fantasy, one that is called “love” and organized around Yi’s lack/the ring as obj(a) and in which she perceives both Yi and herself to be “real people.” Once she has saved Yi, their relationship has to dissolve because she has destroyed the fantasy of “love” by pushing Yi back into his original fantasy of nationalism. The words she utters at that crucial moment (“Leave fast”) instantly constitute a new *Versagung*: in order to save the discourse/fantasy of family/home in which their future would be accommodated, she has to sacrifice Yi by pushing him back into the nationalist ideology where he would no longer be able to provide her with a home/family. For, in order for him to remain in the nationalist fantasy, he has to disavow their relationship.

The repetition of a double-bind situation in her case eventually enables her to arrive at the experience of “subjective destitution,” i.e., becoming a true or “modern” subject. When Wang kneels before the bottomless pit at the mining site waiting to be executed, that gaping hole she is forced to face is literally the “subjective destitution” that she is undergoing. This completes Wang’s *Versagung*, or “redoubled renunciation” with a twist. The subtle sign of having achieved this is

the uncanny “tic” that appears on Wang’s face after Kuang gives her an incriminating look (seeing that she had not been tortured at all and therefore suspecting that she had betrayed them). That tic reminds us of the one that appears on the face of Sygne de Coufontaine in Paul Claudel’s play *The Hostage* (*L’otage*), discussed in Lacan’s seminar VIII. It is a “sign” which registers her realization of the utter senselessness that underlies ordinary subjectivity and therefore her attaining of “true” subjectivity (Žižek, *Indivisible* 115-17).

Wang Jiazhi, *C’est Moi*

Lust has engendered quite a bit of controversy principally for two reasons: its divarication from Zhang’s original in important details and its apparently preponderant emphasis on sex.¹² But these two aspects are in fact the most significant changes Ang Lee made to the original. Designed to complicate the original, these changes most critically stamp the film as Ang Lee’s rather than a derivative of Zhang Ailing’s original. To complete our foregoing discussion of this film, we need also to approach it alternately by investigating the “forbidden divine secret” that he suggested is adumbrated in this film.

In response to the question in a TV interview, “What exactly is the forbidden divine secret adumbrated in the film,” Ang Lee said “In brief, during the process of shooting this film, I have become clear about some things such as my outlook on life, things about us Chinese, and things that I have hidden and repressed as I grew up.”¹³ This is yet another important testament to the inclusion of the CCP in an unfavorable light in this film. The possibility of a CCP inclusion of this nature has evoked rather cynical criticisms of the film, which on the whole ridiculed Ang Lee as lamenting the decline of the KMT’s sway in Taiwan and thereby accidentally revealing a desperate sense of crisis, often said to be typical of the “second-generation mainlanders in Taiwan.”¹⁴ But despite the fact that his criticism of the CCP may not be so far from the surface of this film, judging from his depiction of Mr. Yi, it seems that this criticism evolved into its present mature form only after a long process of painful inner struggle on his part. In the context of the film, the “things that I have hidden and repressed as I grew up” could very well

¹² See note 1.

¹³ TVG (San Francisco) interview of Lee, qtd. In Wang Qitao, “Sejie de wenben fenxi, lishi quanshi yu dui qi xianshiyiyi de sikao (I).”

¹⁴ See for instance Wang Qitao, “Sejie de wenben fenxi, lishi quanshi yu dui qi xianshiyiyi de sikao (I)” and Jiafu Song, “Zai Taibei kan li’an sejjia” [Understanding Ang Lee from Taipei] *Sixiang* [Reflection].

refer to the resentment against the KMT many youths harbored but held back as they grew up—as well as to the secret sympathy with the CCP which often developed from this resentment (either for nationalist or socialist reasons) but which tended to fade gradually after the true picture of Cultural Revolution had begun to emerge.¹⁵ Thus, Ang Lee’s disenchantment with the CCP was not the result of KMT indoctrination, as some self-styled “neo-left” mainland Chinese critics averred, but rather derived ironically from an idealistic, anti-KMT sentiment.¹⁶

Thus, the key to this “divine secret” is to read this film as a *Bildungsroman*, that is, as the painful coming of age of a diasporic Chinese intellectual raised in Taiwan. For quite a number of such people—educated to be Chinese but dissatisfied with the KMT rule—the beacon of idealism, ironically, was once Chinese Communism, which had been in fact no less a nationalist ideology than a socialist ideology. But the film seems to show that it is precisely the abuse of people in the name of this “ideology for the people,” embodied by Mr. Yi’s secret career, that eventually sobered Ang Lee up. For he sees clearly now that the reason Mr. Yi could sustain himself without going mad is because he has *nationalism*, not *the people*, on his side.

And this is why the “divine secret” about this film should be thought to concern “things about us Chinese.” And Ang Lee is indeed speaking from the position of Taiwan vis-à-vis Communist China, one that is however informed neither by the KMT stance nor by the DPP stance, even less by the fictitious “second generation mainlander” stance, but by one that transcends all three stances and can be characterized as Taiwanese-diasporic Chinese. The bone of contention therefore is the nationalist fervor that has held in thrall the societies on both sides of the Strait, a fact that to quite an extent defines daily life in both of them. In other words, Ang Lee’s concern in this film is first and foremost China’s “becoming modern” and how this affects the ordinary people, especially those situated on the

¹⁵ The Defending Diaoyutai Island movement, which started in Taiwan in 1970 as a reaction to the agreement between the United States and Japan to transfer administration of the Ryukyu Islands in 1974 to Japan and the Japanese government’s immediate action of staking their claims over this island by reinforcing naval patrol and soon spread to the overseas communities of Taiwanese students, was probably one of the most conspicuous examples of this “from KMT to CCP” trajectory. Though composed mainly of Taiwanese students either in Taiwan or overseas where there were few Chinese students, the movement nonetheless saw many of its participants turn leftwing and pro-CCP. Famous cases of “defection” include renowned writers such as Daren Liu and Songfen Guo, who dropped out of U.C. Berkeley’s Ph.D. programs to become leftwing, pro-China activists, and Ruoxi Chen, who actually went to China to work, which was extremely rare in those days.

¹⁶ See note 8 and 15.

periphery, of whom the Taiwanese are the most outstanding case.

The rise of nationalist fervor in most societies is closely connected to a crisis of legitimation or investiture, due to the fact that traditional ways of conferring meaning were upset by the impact of modernity and the whole society was cast adrift in a tumultuous sea of cultural chaos. What this entailed was at once a resistance to and a worship of modernity, the two being the two sides of one coin, however. And nationalism has been almost a universally adopted strategy by those in power to cope with this situation because it is believed to be able to articulate the two impulses and, therefore, to cement the disintegrating socio-cultural order by means of precisely what had caused this disintegration in the first place. Only very few individuals saw clearly how nationalism provided legitimation actually by means of excluding a society's excess, which at this juncture unwittingly revealed the "performative nature of investiture" of the establishment of that society (Santner 143) and tried to maintain a distance from this discourse.

A similar and yet perhaps more serious situation occurred in the Chinese societies. The modernity-induced chronic anxieties and sufferings there have persisted in permutated forms all the way into the present time. Contemporary Mainland China's susceptibility to nationalist fervor has obviously been caused by a self-conflicting mentality toward modernity. Though apparently due to Chinese nationalist pressure and the related uncertainty concerning identity formation, the attempt to flirt with nationalism in Taiwanese society is in large part derived from the belief that Taiwan has had a better grasp of modernity.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, in *Lust Ang Lee* conducts a critical investigation of China's negotiation with modernity from the perspective of someone from Taiwan who also recognizes himself as a diasporic/globalized Chinese. Confronting the encroachment of nationalism on "the people," Ang Lee adopts a strategy not unlike that adopted by Daniel Paul Schreber over a hundred years ago. This famous case has engendered various readings but, most recently, Eric L. Santner has uncovered a dimension that had hitherto not been well noticed. Santner understands Schreber's symptoms (fantasizing himself as a transvestite etc.) as the psychological strategies to cope with the crisis of investiture that occurred in the late nineteenth century Wilhelmian Germany then encountering the impact of modernity. More specifically, his strategies lie in identifying with women and Jews, those social categories that were blamed for the "impasse and dilemmas of symbolic power and authority" and thus targeted as the scapegoats in the rise of Nazism, which had become the dominant way of coping with the said crisis toward the end of Wilhelmian Germany (144). Like Schreber, who is construed as "at some

level" identifying with those who were "cursed with embodying those impasses" when he said: "That is me!" (144), Ang Lee is also quoted as saying: "Wang Jiazhi is me." This comparison with Schreber helps bring out his broader concerns.

While Schreber's identification with women and Jews enabled him to avoid the trap of Fascism, which blamed each and every problem created by the impact of modernity on those relegated to the periphery of the nation, Ang Lee's identification with Wang reveals a stance that critiques the prevailing nationalist tendency on both sides of the Strait to blame everything on (internal) "enemies," i.e., anyone who does not submit (unreflectively) to the nationalist ideology. Identification with Wang is tantamount to an identification that with those who have little to gain and often much to lose vis-a-vis nationalism; in other words, with "the people."

Granted that in the film the feminine is literally depicted as being instrumentalized by and bearing the brunt of the nationalist/political, it has in fact been extended to comprehend all the other marginal, "abject" groups. Thus, as mentioned earlier, Wang Jiazhi manifests both the woman and the people in their common plight of being victimized by governmentality. The way she embraces ideology especially bears out this comparison. When she throws away the poison pill that she is supposed to swallow in the event of her being in danger of compromising herself, she again recalls the moment when she had been abruptly accosted by the other members of the student drama club while loitering on the stage relishing the lingering ecstasy induced by her stage *début*. This is a classic scene of Althusserian interpellation: by responding to their call, she submits herself to their plot, that is, to becoming involved in a much larger and more drama-like drama. This submission occurs only when there is already some kind of fantasy organized around a *jouissance*, a lack that is in need of the Father's gaze. But this exemplifies only how a subject submits or surrenders to an ideology (i.e., entering into a relationship of lust) rather than how it is completely *incorporated* into an ideology (i.e., transforming the relationship of lust into one believed to be love). Nevertheless, there is only a thin line that separates lust from (what feels like) love. And that is why "lust" has to be "cautioned against."

As mentioned earlier, in *Lust* everybody is depicted as involved in a quest for the "love" from the Other/Father. But in fact love is but lust misconstrued, for in the Lacanian scheme, all desires, whether sexual or not, are by definition mediated by the Other and therefore are necessarily ideological (Grosz 137). In this film, the object of Wang's lust is represented by Kuang/Laowu (the KMT nationalism) on the one hand and by Yi (the CCP nationalism) on the other. But the subject "feels love" when s/he imagines their relationship has gone beyond a tipping point where the

Other is no longer an ideology or a Father but a real force, albeit a more-than-physical one, which has penetrated his/her interior. For the woman as well as for the people, feeling love is feeling the Real, or the lack, of ideology willingly revealed to the subject by the other/Father/Other, and thereupon the subject in love begins to perceive the other/Father/Other as a real person, one who by definition is lacking and therefore in need of him/her as the phallus. Thus, in the end, being subject to love is nonetheless being overcome by ideology/lust. It is just that that particular ideology now has *completely interpellated* the subject.

The pun of the story's title is thus fully brought out in Ang Lee's film. The two obvious meanings—"Lust should be cautioned against" and "Lust turns easily into a ring"—are intertwined in a very interesting way: the people/the subaltern (embodied by Wang) rather than any particular characters in the film are cautioned against lust (i.e., flirting with an ideology, especially a nationalist one) precisely because, firstly, from lust it takes only one small tip to precipitate into "love" and, secondly, the most seductive power of lust ultimately comes from its being disguised as apolitical love and embodied in the form of a precious diamond ring. The harder and bigger the ring is, the more attractive it is since the true reason for this attraction is that in proportion to the size and hardness, the man's/leadership's "sacrifice" and the emptiness behind it is measured. In fact, however, such a "romantic" relationship is not only a relationship of "nothing for nothing," which Rabaté concludes is the Lacanian "formula of [the] type of exchange" in a love relationship (88), but also one that "subjectivates." The gist of the film is excellently summed up in a casual remark Yi makes to the wives at the mahjong table, one that reveals the pedestrian nature of the diamond elevated to the status of an obj (a) and how the (female) subject is easily duped and enslaved by the fantasy based on it, "love," which is activated by the lack in the Father/Other: "Diamonds are nothing but stones . . . when they are too big, they weigh on your fingers and reduce your nimbleness."

That is why, as the film has so deftly demonstrated and Zhang's story only vaguely hints at, Wang's romantic kind of love simply is not able to transcend politics and she has to pay for that. The desire to avoid the political by means of the personal/romantic is in the end a piece of wishful thinking. So is the people's romance with the ruling class. But on the other hand, it is also this persistence to find alternatives to the nationalist ideology that enables one eventually to attain true subjectivity. For, to achieve this, one has to go through the "night of the world"! And it is arguable that the film succeeds in revealing among other things that in the process of negotiating with modernity, the few Chinese who have eventually

become truly “modern” made it only after sustaining tremendous pain and suffering from the two self-styled modernities: the KMT (rightwing) modernity and CCP (Marxist) modernity.

How to Become Truly “Modern” by Becoming Post-Taiwanese/Chinese

This is not the first film in which Ang Lee attempts to negotiate with Chineseness/Chinese cultural identity. In fact, the negotiation with the (Chinese) Father could actually be considered a perennial motif in Ang Lee’s films in so far as in most of his films with a Chinese background, there is a conspicuous father. The image of the Father changed with time from one that evokes nostalgia toward one that smacks of decadence, even though in the latter that sense of nostalgia seems still abiding. Ang Lee’s critique of the Father is already discernible in *The Wedding Banquet*. Most recently in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (hereafter referred to as *Crouching*), however, he began seriously to contemplate the senility and decadence of Chinese culture as well as possible sources of its revitalization. At the end of that film, the scene in which Yujiulong urged Luo Xiaohu to jump from the mountain top down into an unfathomable abyss is fully indicative of Ang Lee’s prescription for revitalizing Chinese culture: one needs to take a plunge from the height of “Chinese culture” onto the ground that is the reality of “the Chinese people,” who hold the key to the regeneration of China. In terms of his actual propositions concerning the overhauling of Chineseness, Ang Lee is however slightly less sophisticated and more aligned with modernity in *Crouching* than he is in *Lust* (Liao, “Sexual Philosophy”). In *Crouching*, the Chinese cultural identity is interrogated in a relatively conventional way, i.e., by means of a familiar scheme of “Han Chinese versus barbarians,” with the latter paradoxically evoking modernity and thus serving as the re-energizing tool kit for the presumably fossilized traditional Han Chinese culture. On the other hand, because modernity, which has been looked up to as the phallus that would redeem China, is completely hollowed out at its foundation in *Lust*, the modern(ized) Chinese cultural identity is also radically deconstructed. And it is in this context that my title “becoming modern” should be understood.

“Modern” in this essay has two meanings that are pitted against each other. The first, deployed in the traditional way, depicts the socio-cultural condition that came with modernity. The second, on the other hand, is derived from the unique Lacanian concept of a “modern subject,” which presupposes a new way of

cognizing the tragic nature of human existence, one in which the protagonist inadvertently *chooses* to confront his tragic role. What happens in *Lust* is that the Chinese obsession with modernity, which presumably would bring about a successful new “subjectivation,” actually results in its opposite, a Lacanian “becoming modern,” that is, a “subjective destitution.” In other words, in this film, China’s becoming modern is turned inside out and upside down by the “becoming modern” of the Chinese people. And it is through this strange confrontation of these two opposing “becoming moderns” that Ang Lee’s insight into the tragedy of modern China is played out.

To quite an extent, then, modernity is an illness that has infected the third world societies and trapped them in an as yet unresolved conflict between trying to become “modern” and trying to remain “indigenous.” Even though a plethora of recent arguments about reconciling the two seem to indicate possible exits out of this predicament, in practice most of these societies are still inextricably mired in this conflict and therefore deeply divided. The Chinese societies are patent examples. A major, if not the most serious, symptom of this conflict is manifested in an obsession with nationalism in both Taiwan and China, even though the manifest content of their nationalisms apparently differs. This obsession creates a tremendously warped vision and a twisted lifestyle on both sides of the Strait. For example, while there is a significant difference in the degree of democratization in the two societies, identity formation in both is re-defined (modernized) in a way that stigmatizes traditional culture(s) as an incubus-like burden that drags down and eats up the society. Furthermore, with the twin demands—the primacy of national identity and the transparency of national loyalty—having formed the underlying principles that govern the prevalent understanding of identity formation as well as serve to governmentalize citizens, national loyalty cannot but be daily tested and verified in a manner that reveals the nation-state’s clear lineage from the Foucauldian pastoral state (Liao, “Jekyll Is”).

But, to be more precise, nationalism is not really a *symptom* of the above-mentioned conflict between tradition and modernity but in fact is predicated on as well as perceived by many to be leading to modernity, which has been the much desired *phallus* of all non-western societies. The relative glory of the nation is taken to be commensurate with the level of modernity it has achieved, not least because modernity (whether broadly or narrowly defined) has always been the cornerstone underlying the nation-state as well as national identity.¹⁷ And the belief

¹⁷ See my “Jekyll Is and Hyde Isn’t: Negotiating the Nationalization of Identity in *The Mystery Garden* and ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s.’” *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* (2001) 5.1, pp.

that one does not have it has caused a tremendous sense of belatedness and even of impotence among many of these societies. Thus, to relieve our society from the clutches of nationalism, one has to attack it at its foundation, which is modernity (Taylor 219-46). Since the nationalism-defined identity is modernity-substantiated, it can only be de-substantiated and opened up when one's identity becomes "modern(ized)" in the Lacanian sense. That is, when one realizes the emptiness of modernity (in the film symbolized by the lost batch of munitions) as well as the subjectivity based thereupon after having gone through the "night of the world." And this is what the film has presented to us, although this time the emphasis is less on the Father as traditional culture (as in *Crouching*) than on the Father as the nationalist ideology predicated on modernity.

As mentioned earlier, Ang Lee's insight has very much to do with his position of enunciation, a vantage point made possible by the presumably "peripheral" status of Taiwanese culture. Despite and perhaps also due to the rise of Taiwanese nationalism, there has been consistent intellectual endeavors in Taiwan since the 1980s to grapple in non-nationalist ways with Taiwan's internationally uncertain, marginalized status as well as its domestically polarized milieu with a view to exploring positive possibilities in this situation. And the moderate success of one particular line of thinking, what I have termed the "politics of amorphousness," has thought up a most creative response to this unique, though ambiguous, status, a response that attempts to maximally tap the potential thereof. This politics, with proponents such as Ang Lee, Hsiao-hsien Hou, Dong Nian, Xu Xinliang and Sun Dachuan, as well as the radical group "Isle Margin," among others, has centered around re-defining "Taiwaneseness" in a deconstructive manner. In so doing, it pushes Taiwanese society toward the threshold of "post-Taiwaneseness" where the very concept of "Taiwaneseness" is being opened up and emptied of its narrow and chauvinist connotations so that "the people" could become visible and their sundry voices audible.¹⁸ And it is in the Taiwanese context that the project of

65-92.

¹⁸ My essay "Jiegou Zhongguo" [Deconstructing China] (1987) for the first time in Taiwan articulated the need for a decentralizing of the Chinese identity. This essay was followed by a longer and more focused essay, "Jiegou Taiwan" [Deconstructing Taiwan], in 1993. And my 2000 essay "Yizhong houtaiwan wenxue de keneng" [Toward a Post-Taiwanese Literature] was an ahead-of-its-times call for the recognition of the hybridized nature of Taiwanese identity as well as the literature grown out of this fact. The whole movement toward deconstructing the essentialist concept of identity reached its peak in the 1990s, when, under this deconstructing impact, even Taiwanese nationalism itself began to diversify and transform. See my "Becoming Cyborgian: Postmodernism and Nationalism in Taiwan." *Postmodernism and China* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), pp.175-204.

deconstructing Chineseness as it is found in *Crouching* and *Lust*, though each with a different degree of success, can be properly gauged and appreciated.

Facing PRC nationalist threat from without and Taiwanese nationalist intransigency from within, Ang Lee has especially called our attention to what high-sounding nationalist slogans have covered up—national decadence, represented respectively by Li Mubai in *Crouching* and Mr. Yi as well as Lao Wu in *Lust* because they are all Fathers (either traditional or modern) who refuse to die (Žižek, *For They Know* 231). And most obviously, what Yi represents, being more idealistic and “modern(ized)” (i.e., nationalistic) and therefore necessarily more indulgent in “enjoyment” than the others, is in fact a more sinister kind of nationalist ideology, which eventually may cause one to forget that nationalism was, to begin with, enlisted “for the people.” As mentioned earlier, in *Crouching*, Ang Lee seems more optimistic as well as perhaps less sophisticated by offering the couple Luo Xiaohu (probably a Uigur or Hui bandit) and Yujiaolong (an anti-conventional Manchu princess) as the people-powered future of Chineseness whereas in *Lust* he arrives at a much more poignant conclusion, one that reveals the black hole of the modern(ized) Chinese cultural identity and yet stops short of offering any possibilities of redemption. The reality onto which Yujiaolong asks Luo Xiaohu to dive in *Crouching* proves to be simply “not there” in *Lust*, a truth Wang Jiazhi discovers when she faces that bottomless pit at the stone quarry.

But in the Lacanian scheme, such an understanding of identity/subjectivity presents a potential that actually offers unlimited possibilities. Now that one has become fully alive after the experience of *Versagung*, one is, according to Lacan, ready for identifying with the symptom. As long as one could identify with the symptom after s/he experienced the night of the world, one could ultimately re-tie the rings (the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real) of the Borromean knot of subjectivity, which is in danger of falling apart in the face of an overwhelming Real. This time, however, the knot is re-tied no longer by means of re-attaching oneself simple-mindedly to the symbolic but via the symptom as *sinthome*, which is a “particular signifying formation which confers on the subject its very ontological consistency, enabling it to structure its basic, constitutive relationship to enjoyment” (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 75). But this possibility is only latent in both *Crouching* and *Lust* and is perhaps something Ang Lee has still to negotiate with.

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