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Pacific Crossings: Remaking Bodies and Cultures Through Film

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Abstract

This paper draws on scholarship from Inter-Asia and Asian diasporic cultural studies to look at two recent attempts by East Asian performers to appeal to Western audiences on the big screen, reading their crossover attempts as embodied forms of cultural and aesthetic translation. The first considers the 'success' of an Australian film, *Mao's Last Dancer*, based on the life of a male Chinese diasporic ballet dancer, and the second, the 'failure' of two Hollywood films, *Blood: The Last Vampire* and *Ninja Assassin* which star Korean actors, Jeon Ji-hyun (Gianna Jun) and Jung Ji-hoon (Rain), Focusing on the ways in which these stars were produced and consumed transnationally, the paper questions the cultural, institutional and generic terms through which western films showcasing non-western bodies and themes are deemed to fail or succeed. It argues, ultimately, that a close examination of how certain narratives, genres, stars and performances are (mis)translated across different cultures demonstrates the continued existence of cultural and national differences in a supposedly swiftly globalizing world.

Contributor Note

Jane Chi Hyun Park is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, University of Sydney and has published widely on the social uses of media technologies, the cultural impact of minority representations, and transnational flows of popular film, music, and television, with a particular focus on East Asia and Asian America. Her most recent book is *Yellow Future: Oriental Style in Hollywood Cinema* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), which looks at the ways in which East Asian bodies and cultures get articulated through and as technology on the big screen.

Introduction

In *Yellow Future: Oriental Style in Hollywood Cinema*, I examined the ways in which Hollywood films since the 1980s, have imagined the dystopian near future, focusing on the role of Asian images and iconography in the backdrop of popular genre films such as *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), *Rush Hour* (Ratner 1998), *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers 1998) and *Batman Begins* (Nolan 2005). I attempted to show how this pattern of referencing East Asia as fantastic spectacle and *mise-en-scène* – a pattern I coined 'oriental style' – contributes to the *process* of racialising Asians in the US ('oriental') even as it sells this racial difference as an aesthetic *product* with wide appeal due precisely to its lack of depth, subjectivity, and history ('style') (Park 2010: vii-xii).

During the three decades the book surveyed, explicitly stereotypical depictions of racial and ethnic minorities from previous eras gave way broadly to two alternate modes of representation in US cinema. The first appeared in realist narratives that showcased the lives and experiences of minorities, usually in emotionally deep and complex ways that humanised the characters. Written and directed by members of the minority group, examples of such films that successfully crossed over into the mainstream include *The Joy Luck Club* (Wang 1993), *Boyz n the Hood* (Singleton 1991), *Smoke Signals* (Eyre 1998), and *Real Women Have Curves* (Cardosa 2003). The second mode continued to portray non-white people, places and cultures from dominant Anglo-American perspectives but in ways that highlighted the fascination and identification of viewers with the radical difference that these sub-cultures signified. These two modes of representation occasionally merged as in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (2000), the action films of Robert Rodriguez and the ghetto-centric cycle of Black youth films directed by Allen and Albert Hughes in the 1990s.

Along with other minority groups, Asian Americans since this period have become more visible in US media culture. The number of Asian bodies in front of and behind the camera has increased, and oriental style continues to be showcased in everything from requisite martial arts action sequences to remade versions of the futuristic *Blade Runner* city in recent films such as *Looper* (Johnston 2012), *Total Recall* (Wiseman 2012), *Cloud Atlas* (Twyker 2012) and many others. These developments would seem to indicate that the once abject and undesirable 'Oriental Other' has been made over into 'Cool Asia' – an object of attraction and even emulation in the US as well as other places around the world where American popular culture is routinely consumed.

Yet, as I discussed in the book, many of the new, seemingly celebratory images of East Asia in Hollywood replicate the uniquely Orientalist forms of racism that have structured previous representations. For example, an Asian actor's top billing does not ensure that the film in which she or he appears will not utilise one-dimensional stereotypes. Indeed such stereotypes often continue to be played to the hilt for spectacular or humorous effects, such as in the character of Mr. Chow in the *Hangover* films (Philips 2009; 2011; 2013), a comic caricature of Fu

Manchu updated for the twenty-first century. Performed with an ironic, postmodern wink in a supposedly post-racial and post-feminist era, such effects not only detach cultural signifiers of race, gender, and sexuality from their historical contexts but also elide their legacy in the unequal relations of power underlying expressions of present-day racism, sexism, classism and homophobia.

Since the publication of *Yellow Future*, my work has turned to look at the creative ways that Asian and Asian diasporic films, actors, and directors have performed, negotiated and attempted to resist oriental style. In the process, I have found myself being drawn more and more to ways that we can defamiliarise and decentre the West. The idea of a monolithic 'West' is just as dangerous but far less critically examined than its necessary counterpoint, the Orientalist notion of a homogenous 'East'. This impulse also arose, in part, from my move to Australia where I had to adapt to a new culture, institution and discipline. Through the questions and challenges that arose in attempts to translate my work to colleagues and students, I became aware of my own privileged and limited position as a scholar who had been trained to see race and analyse the problem of racism in specifically American ways.

As Kuan-Hsing Chen suggests in *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization,* one way to decentre the West is by looking at ongoing processes of decolonisation around the world (Chen 2010). Chen, Chua Beng-Huat, Meaghan Morris, Soyoung Kim, Koichi Iwabuchi and others in the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies group have examined how this process plays out in the Asia Pacific region, tracing the effects of different countries' cultural contact with Western and neighbouring nations through war, diplomacy, education and trade (Chen and Chua 2007). These forms of contact are linked to the colonial history of countries such as India, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Taiwan and Korea and the 'colonisation of consciousness' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1989) that characterises the relationship to Western modernity in these formerly colonised nations and others such as China, Japan, and Thailand which were only 'semi-colonised'. For instance, in many of these countries, the aspirational connotations of the American Dream have been internalised and commodified, coming to signify local, national and regional tastes and identities as much as 'American' ones (Chua 2000; Wang 2012).

The different forms of cultural translation that were used to make sense of, justify and resist these encounters with the West engendered new ways of seeing and imagining one's place in the world for coloniser and colonised alike. We can see these cosmopolitan perspectives reiterated – always with a twist – in the highly paradoxical forms of mixed modernity lived and constantly created in many contemporary non-western nations.

In her reading of Walter Benjamin's essay, 'The Task of the Translator', Rey Chow used the metaphor of transport to emphasise the movement that underlies and enables any act of translation – from one language, culture or medium to another – and the ways in which the original text, doubled through this movement, is thus transformed and its authenticity questioned (Chow 1995: 248-254).

According to Homi Bhabha, 'colonial mimicry' is subversive and generative precisely for this reason – because it is a deliberate mistranslation of the coloniser's words that occurs in and through their repetition by the colonised which produces 'a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha 1994: 86). Yet as Paul Bowman shows in his work on the mediated dissemination of mixed martial arts and the continued trans-national appeal of Chinese American martial arts star, Bruce Lee, postcolonial binaries of coloniser/colonised, East/West and core/periphery are also challenged when popular culture is transported and translated through different media, to different audiences, around the globe (Bowman 2013: 100-124).

Drawing on these ideas, this paper focuses on two recent attempts by Asian performers to appeal to Western audiences on the big screen as embodied forms of cultural and aesthetic translation. The first considers the 'success' of an Australian film, *Mao's Last Dancer*, based on the life of a male Chinese diasporic ballet dancer, and the second, the 'failure' of two Korean stars performing oriental style in Hollywood.

Mao's Last Dancer

Ien Ang has described the often contradictory, always strategic position that Australia has occupied with respect to the East/West binary as 'sometimes already part of Asia; at other times … not at all', a position that she predicts 'may well be the fate of many Western societies in years to come' (Ang 2010: 128). On the one hand, Australia is geographically closer to and economically dependent on East Asia, especially China. Yet despite its economic ties to this region, Australia aligns itself, culturally and politically, with the US and the UK. This emotional disconnect, or 'distant proximity' that Ang suggests (white) Australians feel toward Asia, for which China often serves as a metonym, seems to be echoed in the disproportionately low number of narratives about people of Asian descent in Australian media. I would add here that even more significant than the *number* of Asian representations (which to some extent, reflects the international marginalisation of the Australian entertainment industry) are the generally clichéd nature of these depictions – in which Asians as tourists, migrants, international students or traveling chefs – appear either in the background of stories about white Australians or peddle their exotic cultures to liberal white audiences.

Given this, the commercial and critical success in 2009 of *Mao's Last Dancer,* a biopic based on the memoirs of former ballet dancer and Chinese-Australian Li Cunxin, seems, at first glance, quite remarkable. The picture, directed by Bruce Beresford, made $15 million at the box office to become the top grossing domestic film of the year, followed closely by Baz Luhrman's *Australia.* Centring on a Chinese international student who politically defects to the US in the 1980s, the film is directed, adapted and choreographed by Australians; shot in China, Australia and the US; and performed by a multinational cast for a global audience. As such it presents itself as an interesting case study for thinking about the relationship between China and Australia as mediated through the US, and in particular, through the

transnational movements of the figure of Li Cunxin, Chinese-American-Australian dancer turned stockbroker and motivational speaker.

Backgrounds

Li's memoirs trace his multiple journeys from a poor childhood in Shandong to a rigorous education at Madam Mao's Dance Academy in Beijing to an internship at the Houston Ballet as the first international student from Mainland China. His marriage to American dancer Elizabeth MacKey and subsequent defection from the People's Republic of China in the early 1980s comprise the climax of the book. After battling depression and divorce, Li becomes an internally acclaimed ballet dancer and marries another white woman, Australian dancer Mary McKendry, at which point the memoirs end.

Li and his family moved to Melbourne in the mid-nineties where he danced with the Australian Ballet for a few years before retiring to take up a second career as a stockbroker for Bell Potter Securities. In 2003, he published his autobiography, which won several national awards and went on to became an international bestseller.

Li's success as an author led to his side career as a motivational speaker (of which more later) and brought producer Jane Scott and writer Jan Sardi to his door in 2007, asking for the option rights to adapt *Mao's Last Dancer* into a film. Beresford was signed on to direct, and after six months of negotiation, shooting began in China, followed by Australia and the US. While the Australian Film Commission partly financed the $25 million budget, Li and his contacts in the private sector raised most of the money, giving him considerable creative control. *Mao's Last Dancer* premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2009 and was released in Australia the following month. A year later, the film, distributed through Samuel Goldwyn Films was released on a limited number of screens in the US, made $4.8 million there, and received mixed reviews.

Art, Freedom and Authenticity

Mike Walsh describes the off-screen position of Australia in the film as a kind of mediating Third Space. He writes, 'Australia is the unseen end point in the narrative, the place of calm outside the action, the place from which reflection is now possible. It is also a point from which both the US and China can be criticized with varying degrees of severity. China, of course, gets the worst of it' (Walsh 2009: 162). Walsh points to the grainy 'dull green' filter that permeates scenes of Li's childhood as well as constant references to the lack of creativity and individuality in China due to its totalitarian, communist government. In contrast America is painted in broad strokes as a place of excessive consumerism and political freedom where Li's artistic abilities flourish and his subjectivity subsequently emerges.

In order to appeal to both domestic and international audiences, the film needed to sell the character as an exceptional Chinese immigrant who achieves success in America and by extension, becomes modern and Western. It does this by interweaving Li's past as a poor peasant child and one of Madame Mao's dancers with his present as a fish out of a water in the Houston of the 1980s, slowly being deprogrammed of his communist brainwashing. The film moves in between different temporal,

geographical and mental spaces to delineate Li's own 'Great Leap' from the economically and culturally impoverished collective darkness of Maoist China to the singular light of artistic and political freedom in America.

Even viewers, who were critical of the film's representation of Maoist China, accepted and celebrated the trope of dance as a universal communicator of the values of desire, hard work and success. This is in keeping with the general message of the film. Artistic and political freedom are implicitly linked in the tagline of the movie – 'Before you can fly, you need to be free' – and reiterated throughout. Li's character changes as he plays characters from an iconic Maoist worker to a Spanish hero to a Modernist concept. He becomes more confident and self-assertive, a process paralleled in his courtship with Liz where, after a shy beginning, he is the one who takes the lead, sexually and otherwise.

Liz's initial attraction to Li is his exceptional dancing, which not only masculinises him in her eyes but also racialises him through its association with martial arts. On their first date, a scene from a Kung Fu movie with an angry hero on a motorcycle cuts out to a two-shot of the couple watching the movie in a theatre in Chinatown. Later we see Liz visibly falling in love with Li as she watches his performance on TV. All of his dance sequences are shot like action scenes in sports or martial arts films, with heavy use of slow and sped up motion to denote his strength, agility and physical power.

In this film, Li embodies the hybrid, westernised masculinity of the martial artist by transcending national, racial and sexual boundaries through his professional exceptionalism, which is linked to personal individualism. This individualism gives him equal status with the white characters and superior status over Asian ones, who serve as plot devices in his back story or as symbols of a demonised Chinese Communist collectivism that stifles the freedom that he – and the film – associate with American capitalist individualism. It is worth noting here that Li's narrative subjectivity and sex appeal is heavily dependent on his job performance, namely his artistic and athletic skills.

The same masculine individualism that leads Li to professional success also leads to the demise of his relationship with Liz whose own dream of becoming a successful dancer never comes true. In this sense the film elides the fact that Li's freedom is based on Liz's sacrifice for him to stay in the US. Similarly, Li's memoirs are dominated by memories of his hardworking, peasant mother whom he must leave in order to succeed. China trains him technically, America teaches him to dream and Australia becomes the in-between home where he realizes that dream.

Li marries an Australian professional woman, an expatriate like himself. *Mao's Last Dancer* ends in a three quarter profile freeze frame of Mary and Li dancing for the villagers in his Chinese hometown, balletically gesturing off-screen as red flags fill the backdrop, metaphorically reconciling Li's two homes and identities. In this final scene, the narrative of freedom as specific to the US is rendered obsolete.

Much like the tumultuous first love he experiences with Liz, the American Dream represents an adolescent phase in Li's development as a liberated artist and capitalist. To develop fully as a 'free' artist, Li must be able to translate and transfer that dream outside the US and

indeed, anywhere in the world that his cultural capital can take him. Off-screen then, the far past of Chinese 'backwardness' and the near past of American achievement slips into the continuous present of Li as consummate performer, an adopter and adapter of different roles.

Performance, Entrepreneurship and Inauthenticity

In an Australian advertisement for Li's services as a motivational speaker, his effectiveness in instilling productive values among members of civic and corporate organisations – values such as having a strong work ethic and being goal-oriented – is built on the authenticity of his experience as someone who has gone from the extreme rags of Maoist China to the riches of the US. Particularly appealing here is his simultaneous universality and singularity, as the 'last' representative of a bygone era, and the nostalgia this evokes on the part of Western and Chinese audiences.

Yet I want to argue that what makes Li Cunxin so fascinating for audiences is his *inauthenticity* – his ability to perform seamlessly so many different kinds of identities and roles, professionally and ideologically, depending on his audience. This frees viewers from feeling the need to identify with him as a Chinese man, and instead allows them to align themselves with the (mostly Anglo-) American characters that admire him. Indeed, the focus on Li's disciplinary training of his body and his dance performances may free them from the need to align themselves with any characters at all, and instead, simply enjoy the spectacle of the choreography – which many critics hailed as the centrepiece of the film.

The same fluidity that marks Li's performances on and off stage also characterises *Mao's Last Dancer* generically. It can be, and has been described as a ballet film, a chick flick, a family-friendly film and a heart-warming melodrama. In other words, the film *passes* in much the same way Li does. In doing so, it upholds the liberal humanist fantasy that underneath radically different political systems, cultures and histories, we all think, feel and want the same thing, namely, professional and personal 'success'.

Hallyu Crossover

I want now to switch gears and contrast the successful performance of oriental style in *Mao's Last Dancer* for Australian audiences to the commercial and critical failure of two Asian-themed Hollywood films the same year: *Ninja Assassin* (McTeigue 2009) starring Rain (Jung Ji-hoon) and *Blood: The Last Vampire* (Nahon 2009) starring Gianna Jun (Jeon Ji-hyun). In particular, I want to consider how the execution of the lead fantasy roles in these films by South Korean actors reproduce techno-oriental themes and tropes yet in their inability to appeal to critics on both sides of the Pacific, also point to the limitations of this postmodern mode of depicting East Asian difference.

There has been a plethora of scholarship in recent years on *hallyu,* or the Korean Wave, which refers to mostly mediated Korean cultural products such as TV dramas, films and Kpop that have become increasingly popular outside South Korea (hereafter, Korea) since the mid-nineties. However, most of this work has focused on the circulation of these products within the region with less emphasis on their transnational and

diasporic relationship with the 'West' – whether this is North America, Europe, or Australasia. The brief reading that follows of Jun and Jeon's crossover attempts centres on this relationship to consider the impact of the rising visibility of Korean popular culture in the United States.

In contrast to the ways in which US remakes of Asian films are often denigrated as 'deracinated' copies of the original (Xu 2005; Lim 2009: 243-244), the bodies of Korean stars that have begun to appear in US popular culture are read a bit differently, since they involve another kind of cultural and aesthetic passing or crossover. The racialised bodies of these actors cannot be as easily erased as the cultural 'odor' of Korean narratives (Iwabuchi 2002: 28). For the most part, Korean and Asian actors and musicians who have actively tried to woo the American market have been criticized as inferior imitations of their Western counterparts. These stars and their performances are often felt to be aesthetically and affectively jarring not only because they are out of place but also anachronistic, or out of time.

The term 'crossover' first emerged in the music industry to describe the movement of a singer or group from a marginal, often 'ethnic' genre such as R&B and soul to a mainstream one such as pop or rock. In the process of crossing over, a non-white artist sheds his or her racialised cultural difference in order to be accepted in the dominant culture. As Irene Nexica and Reebee Garofolo point out, white artists never need to cross over and can easily appropriate non-western musical styles whereas the same is not true for non-white artists who are instead seen either as naturally gifted in their own musics or as imitative sellouts (Garofolo 1993: 232-240; Nexica 1997: 65-67).

A similar pattern occurs in the positioning of ethnic others in the film industry. Non-white and non-western identities, communities and cultures remain under-represented, and people of colour usually are relegated to stereotypical roles in front of the camera. While this pattern has been changing for Asian Americans in television since the mid-nineties, film has lagged behind in colour-blind casting. As Korean Canadian actress, Sandra Oh, notes, 'I've always felt a heavy glass ceiling in my film career because it just did not move for years. If *Grey's Anatomy* were a film, they probably wouldn't have cast me' (Onstad 2007).

Rebellious Ninjas and Vampires

In a 2006 interview with *Chosun Ilbo,* Korean American actress, Yun-jin Kim, revealed that when she moved to LA, she intentionally made appointments in Korea, telling her US agent that she was busy and only available on certain dates so as not to seem desperate to be cast. The strategy worked. When Kim auditioned for the female lead in the soon to be hit TV show *Lost*, its producer J. J. Abrams, showed interest in her successful career abroad, and created a specifically Korean role for her and later, Daniel Dae Kim to play her husband. Now known in the US as the 'Julia Roberts of Korea', Kim starred in the Korean blockbuster *Shiri* in 1999 which sparked the so-called New Korean Cinema and several other Korean films and TV dramas before landing her pioneering role on *Lost*. She links the current interest in Korean actors to the market potential of *hallyu* in the following way: 'When casting Asian actors

in the US, casting directors look not only at Asian actors in the US, but to actors in all Asian countries. Because the Asian market is huge, American producers tend to choose those who are popular in Asia' ('Kim Yun-jin').

Jina Kim critiques the current popularity of *hallyu* in the US, urging further investigation into 'how Hollywood and the US continue to instill dependence on the part of Korea' as evidenced in the widespread notion that for *hallyu* stars to succeed, they must break into the US market as Yun-jin Kim has (Kim 2010: 167). In a footnote, she mentions the recent efforts of Jung Ji-hoon (Rain) and Jeon Ji-hyun (Gianna) to do precisely this, noting that 'what is interesting and troubling about these ventures into Hollywood films is that all these Korean actors and entertainers were cast as fantasy figures' (167). Before engaging with Kim's observation, let me give some background on the Hollywood films in which Rain and Gianna starred.

Ninja Assassin was directed by Australian James McTeigue and produced by Warner Bros., and Lana and Andy Wachowski. Raizo (Rain) is an orphan adopted by an evil Japanese ninja, Ozunu (Sho Kosugi) into his multi-ethnic clan, one of nine Ninja Clans that have been hired assassins since ancient times. Trained to be a merciless killer, Raizo leaves the clan after Ozunu kills his girlfriend and hides out in Berlin where he is discovered eventually by his rival and adopted brother Takeshi (Rick Yune). Takeshi attempts to kill Mika, an Interpol agent played by Black British actress, Naomie Harris, who has been targeted by the clan for discovering its secrets. The film ends with Rain killing Takeshi and his sadistic father. Made for $50 million, it failed to recoup its production costs, grossing $38 million.

Blood was directed by French filmmaker, Chris Nahon, co-produced by Pathe and Edko, filmed in China and Argentina, written by Chinese American, Chris Chow, and choreographed by Corey Yuen. Saya (Gianna Jun) is an ancient vampire and demon-killer raised by Kato (Yasuaki Kurata) after her human father is murdered by the demon Onigen (Koyuki). Disguised as a high school teen, she is sent to root out demons on an American Air Force base in Japan during the 1970s. Saya becomes friends with another student, the General's daughter, Alice (Allison Miller), also an outsider. Eventually she gets revenge on her father's killer, who unsurprisingly, turns out to be her mother. Produced for $30 million, the film grossed only $8 million around the world with highest box office earnings in France.

These films exhibit familiar techno-oriental tropes such as fantastic characters from *anime* and ninja films and heavily digitised East Asian martial arts choreography. Such tropes consciously draw on the violent aesthetics of the industry-constructed genre of 'Asia Extreme', which lumps together East and Southeast Asian live-action, thriller and horror films for a primarily adolescent Anglo male audience in the US and UK (Shin 2008) and its Hollywood cousin, the 'hip hop kung fu' genre, a term coined by producer Joel Silver to describe films like *The Matrix, Romeo Must Die* and others that meld high concept martial arts sequences with Black hip hop style (Park: 143).

Along with being fantasy characters, Raizo and Saya share a number of common traits. Both are orphans rebelling against adopted parents who are ontologically evil. Both lack family and community, live between two worlds and work for international military

organizations (Interpol and The Council) headed by Americans. Indeed we could read Raizo and Saya's rebellion against their Japanese parents – and their collusion with the US military – as loose allegories for Korea's ambivalent relationship to its histories of Japanese colonisation and US military occupation.

Extending that reading would be the dependent role that the stars play with respect to American side characters. Both Rain and Gianna perform the role of what Cynthia Sau-ling Wong has called 'caregivers of color' to female American sidekicks who need constant rescuing and with whom the audience is supposed to identify (Wong 1994: 70). Mika (whose name sounds vaguely Japanese) plays Aliyah to Rain's Jet Li in a CGI ninja version of *Romeo Must Die* (Bartkowiak 2000) while Alice unconvincingly plays whiny best friend to a stoic Saya. Finally, both stars changed their names for American audiences – Bi to Rain, Jeon Jihyun to Gianna Jun – diligently studied English and trained hard physically for their roles. Indeed the Korean papers consistently stressed their strong Confucian work ethic as evidence of their determination to succeed on the world stage and make the nation proud.

One major challenge for the Korean actors was learning to speak English to play their roles. Gianna Jun described the challenges of learning and acting in English in the following way:

> Communicating in English created mental stress. The action stunts that I had to do put pressure on my body. Both were rather difficult for me. … It was not easy at all trying to express my feelings in English during the shooting so I had to train very hard to speak the language. *The hardest part was not so much having to remember the lines, but to express my character's emotions while speaking in another language.* (Zeeneshri 2009, emphasis added)

Note her emphasis on the challenge of learning to emote in another language. Byung-hun Lee, the most successful Korean crossover actor to date with his continuing role as Storm Shadow in the *G.I Joe* films (Sommers 2009, 2013), expresses the same frustration, describing how acting in another language involves cultural as well as linguistic translation:

> I'd memorize each and every line perfectly before going to the shoot. But I'd just forget every line – literally every single line – when I was told that I'd pronounced one word wrong while acting. Having to think that I somehow have to fix my pronunciation for that one would just make me totally lost at the set. *There's a huge difference between making conversation in a foreign language and acting in a foreign language.* I feel the most comfortable when I perform for pieces that are based on Korean culture. So *I can't help but feel that I could've done better if this were a Korean movie.* (Lee 2012)

The irony, of course, is that Jun and Lee needed to perfect their American-accented English in order to portray authentically Japanese fantasy characters for American (read: international) audiences.

Rain and Gianna's hard work did not pay off. Most critics panned both films for being stylistically derivative, narratively incoherent, and lacking compelling dialogue and character development. Peter Bradshaw's review of *Ninja*

Assassin in *The Guardian* is representative. He writes: 'Hardcore action and martial arts fans might find something to interest them here, on DVD maybe, but I found it a living death of boredom' (Bradshaw 2010). So dull, in fact, that he mistakes Korean American actor Sung Kang who dies in the first scene for Rain, the Korean lead. This mistake is particularly interesting given the deliberate erasure of Asian American presence in the opening scene and the film's elision of the Korean heritage of the two young leading actors.

Sung Kang plays an Asian American gangster, appropriately named Hollywood. This character blatantly disrespects an old Asian tattoo artist who warns him of the existence of ninjas. Sure enough, within seconds, Hollywood receives an envelope full of black dust – the symbol of the Ozunu Clan. Members of the clan proceed to materialise as shadowy ninjas enveloping and hacking off heads and limbs of Hollywood and his Asian American crew. The scene ironically proves the 'authenticity' of the ninjas as Asian to the 'inauthentic' Asian Americans who are all killed for mocking Oriental stereotypes.

Along with Asian Americanness, the extradiegetic Koreanness of Kang, Rain, and Rick Yune is effaced at the narrative level; after Kang's character is dispatched, a Korean and a Korean American play Japanese-style ninjas whose ethnic backgrounds are unclear. Similarly, Saya (who is racially and culturally ambiguous in the original short *anime* film on which the movie is based) is superficially coded Japanese in the fetishistic *seifuku* (Japanese schoolgirl uniform) she wears and the samurai sword that she wields.

Finally, these techno-oriental tropes were performed, with an eye, to Asian audiences as well as US and Western ones. Consider the following two quotes from Rain's former manager, Jinyoung Park, describing his market strategy:

> Every market has been tapped except for the Asian market, and that's 5 percent of America. That's our base. But I believe we can move beyond that, and I believe that *the American music industry needs to partner with us to make inroads into Asia, too.* (Sontag 2006, emphasis added)

> Although it sounds paradoxical, that is because we want to maintain the Asian market … only after achieving success on the best [biggest] stage, that is, the American market, can Rain consolidate his position as Asia's number one. *It is essential to enter into the American market to conquer the Asian market with its huge population.* (Choi 2006, emphasis added)

Note the shift in the crossover rhetoric to emphasize the focus on the Asian rather than American market. In the first quote, Rain's fan base moves from the hitherto untapped Asian American market to the mainstream American audience, which in turn would give the US music industry access to the vast *Asian* market. In the second quote, Rain needs to capture the American market in order to maintain his audience in Asia. This questions the implicit Western and specifically US-centred mode of globalisation that we have come to take for granted in cultural studies and postcolonial theory. Indeed, in a certain sense, Park's strategy, put into practice here through the attempts at crossover by Jeon and Jung, hopes to realise the techno-orientalist fear of Asians beating the West at its own consumer capitalist game – or at least entering it on its own terms. In any case,

regardless of whether the balance of power will shift in the Asian Century and China will come to 'rule the world' (Jacques 2009), contemporary flows of mediated culture – such as the examples of diasporic and transnational crossover that I have sketched here – clearly indicate that the model of globalisation first introduced by the West through imperialism, has been and continues to be decentred as the characteristics of post-industrial capitalism and the neoliberal, entrepreneurial spirit it engenders are translated and adapted around the world.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Korean actors played stereotypes. What is interesting is how they failed to perform these stereotypes, which buttress the deliberately *inauthentic*, postmodern genres of fantasy and horror in a convincingly *authentic* way – visually, narratively, and affectively – for critics on both sides of the Pacific. Meanwhile, analysing the performances of the lead actors in *Mao's Last Dancer* proves more complicated as they bleed into the remembered experiences of Li Cunxin as a diasporic artist. Yet here, too, the lines between authenticity and inauthenticity are blurred in how we are to read Li's performances of his constantly moving and changing identity – as cosmopolitan citizen (of China, the US and Australia), lover and husband and freedom-loving dancer, author, and motivational speaker. Rather than simply dismissing these self-orientalising performances as examples of false consciousness or 'selling out', I suggest reading these performances as hybrid acts of mimicry that are performed by Asian and Asian diasporic stars to survive in the local and regional market as well as the global one. Consider, for instance, Byung-hun Lee's pragmatic response to the question of whether his character, an evil ninja, can be regarded as another American stereotype of Asian men:

> I didn't necessarily decide to play this character because I loved it so much. Right now I'm not given a lot of choices in Hollywood. I thought this character was something that I had to do as I take my first steps to break into their world. And maybe I will be given more choices if I portray this character very well, even though he may be another Asian male stereotype. (Lee 2006)

While it is tempting to use Bhabha's notion of 'colonial mimicry' to describe the conscious modes of self-presentation exemplified in all of the actors' performances, the concept is not applicable in this case as the mimicry performed is neither active nor deliberate, nor postcolonial in the sense discussed by Bhabha and other South Asian postcolonial scholars (as neither China nor Korea was officially colonised by Western powers). Instead, Michael Taussig's definition of mimesis in *Mimesis and Alterity* gets a little closer to describing the dynamic within these *hallyu* crossover attempts into Hollywood. Taussig defines mimesis as 'the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and *become Other*' (Taussig 1993: 5, emphasis added). The idea of 'becoming Other' is particularly conducive to the medium of film, as a mode of imaginative transport. Jane Gaines's concept of 'political mimesis', which links Eisenstein's work on the affective impact of montage and Fanon's concept of the colonial mirror, gestures

toward ways in which the usually ignored visual and the visceral elements in documentary film may be able to move spectators politically (Gaines 1999: 92-96). Similarly, the aesthetic power of fictional films and popular media more generally also might, in some cases, lead audiences to question their perspectives and take different affective and ideological positions. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, in *Identity Anecdotes* Meaghan Morris articulates this connection with one's audience as crucial to cultural and aesthetic translation. As she puts it, 'Identity is always a matter of address, that is, as produced by desire and undoubtedly, history in an encounter with others' (Morris 2006: 6). In other words, context matters.

In this sense, the kind of nomadic, cosmopolitan subjectivity embodied by 'successful' diasporic celebrities like Li Cunxin and the 'failure' of the imitative attempts by Jung and Jun to embody Hollywood fantasies of Asian characters both provide interesting cases in point of transnational Asian performers constantly having to worry about shifting contexts and the matter of address in relation to others. Li's success in Australia, the US and China reflect his keen understanding of these cultures and his ability to code-switch in order to appeal to whomever he is addressing. And while *hallyu* ostensibly celebrates Korean 'culture' – its regional and transnational popularity has as much to do with the ability of that culture to quickly mimic and transform genres, forms, and styles.

Finally, I want to end by questioning the cultural, institutional and generic terms through which failure and success are determined when it comes to how scholars, critics and audiences assess these onscreen cross-cultural translations. Jina Kim's ambivalence about the fantasy genre is based on the notion that this genre, especially expressed in the commercial form of the Hollywood blockbuster, has a strong potential to distort and dehumanise Asian Americans and people of colour. This is a popular position, and follows prevalent public and academic discourse that privileges realism as the most effective narrative mode for moving audiences politically. To some extent, it also explains why *Mao's Last Dancer* – with its familiar capitalist trope of rags to riches wedded to the melodramatic mode of minority made good – did so well at the box office, at least in Australia.

While it is important to study how and why certain representations of minorities can cross over successfully to mainstream audiences, it is as just important to look at how and why other representations fail to do so. Here I turn to *Blood: The Last Vampire* and *Ninja Assassin.* It should be obvious by now that I read these films as exaggerated examples of the idea that an authentic and homogenous nation, race, or culture is itself a fantasy. Not only are these films themselves hybrid and transnational (with international finance, settings and production crew) but so also is the *hallyu* style that distinguishes Rain and Gianna as 'Korean' in its combination of Oriental and Occidental signifiers.

Yet a large number of people in the world, for better or worse, watch and enjoy fantasy films more than they do documentaries, dramas and other more serious forms of media. For some of these people, like the young Australian Filipina woman from whom I rented *Ninja Assassin* at my local video store in Sydney, seeing an Asian celebrity, especially Rain, as the lead in a

blockbuster film – even if it is cheesy, even if Rain self-orientalises – in itself, is a pleasurable and vaguely empowering thing.

Does this private pleasure have the potential to move people collectively? And if so, move them toward what – the creation of consumption communities in fandom, the development of a critical consciousness, the practice of some form of political activism? Answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this paper, but we need to keep asking them in our discussions of how representations travel, how they are translated and transformed – and how they move audiences – across geographical and cultural borders.

In particular, a close examination of how certain narratives, genres, stars and performances are (mis)translated across different cultures highlights the continued existence of cultural and national differences in a supposedly swiftly globalizing world. As Asia becomes one of Hollywood's biggest export regions and as stars, styles and stories increasingly cross over from Asia to Hollywood and back – and across to other film industries and audiences around the world – understanding and appreciating these differences will become ever more important.

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