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Dis-Placing the East/West Binary: Aesthetic and Cultural Crossover in Film and Visual Culture
Cardiff, 2 November 2012

A Symposium Report by Hiu M. Chan, Cardiff University

When that other is Asia and the "Far East", it always seems as if the European intellectual must speak in absolute terms, making this other an utterly incomprehensible, terrifying, and fascinating spectacle ... [T]he "native" is turned into an absolute entity in the form of an image (the "empty" Japanese ritual or "China loam"), whose silence becomes the occasion for our speech. (Chow 33, 34)

Dis-Placing the East/West Binary was a one-day symposium organized by Paul Bowman at Cardiff University in November 2012. The conference aimed to explore displacements and transformations of the relations of East Asian film with Euro-American film and visual culture; furthermore, it also aimed to examine the complexity of "place" (space) of Eastern and Western representations. Surprisingly for such an important research topic, this symposium has been one of the very few to focus on a similar theme within film and visual studies. Paul Bowman, who has been researching and writing on the work of Rey Chow, and has a particular interest in studies deconstructing the East/West binary, was unarguably a most suitable scholar to host this symposium.

The first speaker, Fraser Mckissack, a doctoral student from the University of Auckland, presented a paper on "Cowboys, Samurai and the Crisis of Masculinity: Cinematic Representations of Manhood in the US and Japan in the Post-war Period". His paper discussed how director Takashi Miike challenges the East/West and masculine/feminine binaries in *Sukiyaki Western Django* (2007), a film that represents a meeting point of influences, a culmination of years of cross-cultural remakes, reimaginings and negotiations of what it means to be American, Japanese, male, female, homosexual, heterosexual and others. Mckissack focused on the film as a case study to explore the mythic spaces of the cowboy and samurai, archetypes that belonged to reimagined histories and reimagined lands that were culturally specific. Mckissack argued that, because both the mythic spaces of the cowboy and the samurai were only imaginary, they could be reinterpreted and relocated by cultural "others". He concluded that, while East repeatedly met West and vice versa, the blurry cultural boundaries became unclear as to whether the cowboy really was a product of a unique American experience, or if the samurai really did belong to an unknowable oriental culture. Mckissack's paper brought to mind Japanese director Akira Kurosawa and his samurai films. Kurosawa was also influenced

by the Western, while his own films influenced some key works in that genre. Indeed, it would be interesting to explore how much Takashi Miike was influenced by Kurosawa, if at all.

The symposium not only attracted academics and postgraduate students from around the world, but also critics and artists who explore the East/West topic through different approaches. Paul Quinn is the founder of *Hangul Celluloid*, a blog and network that specifically focuses on discussions and reviews of Korean cinema. The title of Quinn's paper was "Dis-Placement, Replication and Replacement of Korean aesthetics in Hollywood K-film Remakes". He criticised how most of the Hollywood remakes of K-films (Korean films) lack the aesthetics of the originals. Quinn used Korean film *A Tale of Two Sisters* (*Janghwa, Hongryeon*, Kim Jee-Woon, 2003) and the North American remake *The Uninvited* (Charles Guard and Thomas Guard, 2009) as examples; he compared the same scenes from each film in the original and remake versions, demonstrating how the American remakes resemble conventional Hollywood film and fail to be faithful to the original version. Quinn's presentation begs the question: does a Western remake of an Asian film have to faithfully follow what we know as "Asianness", if the remake targets a wider audience, including those who might not be interested in Asian culture?

Also focusing on Korean media studies, in her paper "Searching for 'Asianness' in Korean Pop Culture: From an Empty Signifier to a Structure of Feeling", Xiaodan Liu (Zhejiang University) proposed that "Asianness" in Korean pop culture is complex and also hybrid. Liu argued that Asianness is an ideology that is created within the Western capitalist economic and cultural structure; and that Asianness is constantly reimagined by the audiences outside of Korea. Liu provided the example of how the reimagined Asianness in K-pop is closely related to good-looking female stars who are identifiable and share a similar fashion style. To deconstruct this illusionary Asianness, Liu presented different types of representations, including "traditional Asianness", "market Asianness", "hybrid Asianness", "Asian as local", and "Asian as global".

Art Mitchells-Urwin, a doctoral student at The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, explored both Thai and Western bodies in his paper "Space and Body: Sexual Power and Geographic Relations Between Thai and Western Bodies in Interracial Pornography". Following Michel Foucault's definition of sex being "an especially dense transfer point for relations of power", Mitchells-Urwin argued that contemporary constructions of pornographic images featuring sexual interactions between Western and Thai bodies betray a process of intense power struggles that span the East/West binary of spatiality and corporeality (Foucault 103). Mitchells-Urwin closely analysed some film examples that feature both Thai and Western bodies, and argued further that the space or, more importantly, the construction of space is utilised to heighten eroticism, whilst simultaneously allowing an orientation of the Western body in order to demonstrate its spatial dominance. Is this dominance only evident in pornography? Can we also find this dominant power in other types of East/West media? How can we break through this dominant power?

Taey Iohe is an artist and researcher based in Seoul, London and Dublin, and a doctoral candidate at University College Dublin. Instead of looking at the displacements and transformations between East and West in theory and analysis, Iohe invited us to think about the East/West binary through art practices via her presentation "A Displacing Practice: *Sleepwalkers* and Cultural Translation". Iohe's looked at a series of art projects that involve cultural,

intellectual and artistic exchanges in a transcultural narrative in the early twentieth century. As an example of a transcultural narrative, she discussed a project that tells the imaginary displacement story of Na Hye-sok (1896–1946), a Korean proto-feminist activist and landscape painter. Iohe proposed that, as a female artist during the Japanese colonial period in Korea, Na's imaginary travel was the anchor that carried the physicality of her work. Iohe compared the case of Na Hye-sok and British writer Mary Wollstonecraft, and suggested that while they emerged from different backgrounds, in consecutive centuries, and wrote in different languages within divergent cultures, they shared an artistic gaze upon, and orientation towards, the world of displacement. Through this case study, Iohe proposed that "displacing" is a form of visual practice rather than a force of removal. Furthermore, Iohe introduced a larger conceptual project, *Strangers in the Neighbourhood*, which focuses on exploring this visual displacement and trans-historical encounter with Korean female artist Na.

Iohe's presentation brought to my mind the thoughts of ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi on how the spirit of humans lingers and remains after their death. Their thoughts and ideas are passed on to the next generation. Although Korean artist Na Hye-sok lived in a very difficult period, a female artist during the Japanese occupation whose body was only discovered a few weeks after her death, her spirit and arts were with everyone in Cardiff, Wales at the symposium, through Iohe's presentation. The borders sometimes are not only between East/West, but also between life and death.

June Pak is a Korean artist based in Toronto, Canada. Her paper "Is Multiculturalism Well Packaged Idealism? Asian Ethnicity in Canadian Television" examined a 2006 TV advertisement called "Proud Fathers" broadcast during the Turin Winter Olympics. The narrative of the advertisement is a sentimental story of the unspoken love between a Chinese immigrant father and a Canadian-born son at a hockey rink. The story ends with the son finally realising that his father cared for him all these years, and expressing his gratitude for his father's love. Through this advertisement, Pak asked whether being represented on TV is a sign of the integration of the Other into dominant culture. Pak argued that, in this advertisement, both Canadian and Chinese identities are represented in a reductive and stereotypical way. Pak called this type of representation a perfect package of a nation/community relationship. Following both Jean-Luc Nancy and Rey Chow's writings and opinions, Pak also criticised this kind of representation as problematic, falsifying and manufactured.

"The Language of the Orient" presented by Colette Balmain (Kingston University) was a good theoretical conclusion to all the previous papers. Is there a *language* that belongs to the Orient? Is deconstruction a way of allowing the others to speak? Balmain pointed out that Iwabuchi, in *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (2002), suggests that cultural products that flow most easily across the East/West binary are those which have very little "cultural odour"; for example, products such as computer games and anime. However, Balmain argued, this trend seems to be subverted by contemporary texts that offer the Orient as "traditional" spectacle for the desiring western gaze. Oftentimes, the Orient is visually constructed as a place of exoticism and eroticism. These cases, Balmain recalled, evoke what Iwabuchi calls a "cultural fragrance" that is linked to popular ideas and stereotypes that evoke the country of origin. Balmain proposed that, in order to deconstruct these stereotypes of Oriental

images, we seek to think outside of traditional binaries of West/East, self/other, colonial/postcolonial, thus complicating what can be seen as an act of "self-orientalism".

The two keynote speakers at the symposium were Dana Arnold (Southampton University) and Jane Park (Sydney University). Arnold's talk "The Complexities of Place: Transcultural Readings of Tianjin" investigated the unique Western-influenced architecture and public spaces in Tianjin in the nineteenth century—the East/West dialogues were evident in the urban visual culture of Tianjin long before the rise of consciousness of globalisation. Arnold proposed that through the case of Tianjin, we can think about how the notions of visuality and temporality of the complexities of place can inflect our transcultural reading of this modern urban space. The unique architecture and urban plan of the city survived the Cultural Revolution, despite its imperial associations, as both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping saw it as culturally valuable. Arnold proposed further that the "modernity" of Tianjin as a twenty-first-century global city is a complex category in which a distinctive visual urban culture is the product of processes of transculturation.

Western-influenced architecture and city plans are not only evident in Tianjin. There are many other cities such as Qingdao, Dalian, Harbin and Guangzhou that are also worthy of consideration in this respect. Below is an old photo of the Chinese city of Harbin, close to the Russian-Chinese border. If we try to identify this picture (Figure 1) according to the current dominant image of "Chineseness" that we learn from the media, we might fail to realise the actual location of this photo. Arnold's presentation inspired me to recall Balmain's suggestion that, in order to deconstruct the imaginary and constructed border of East/West, we must think outside of the binary. Perhaps, instead of pointing out the self and the other, we can learn to celebrate cultural hybridity, and investigate how accepting the mixture of two or more cultures is already an act of removing the *force.*



Figure 1: Harbin, China. Photo from www.orthodox.cn.

The title of the second keynote, given by Jane Park, was "Pacific Crossings: Remaking Bodies and Cultures through Film and Popular Media". To begin her talk, Park recalled some memories of her association with the word "Oriental". A Korean-American, Park moved to the US at the age of four with her family. The first time she used the word "Oriental" was when she was a grade-five student. During a school trip on a bus her fellow students were trying to identify their own races. Because she thought that no one would know where Korea was at that time, she described herself as "Oriental" and hoped the word would describe her own racial identity. Park introduced her first book, *Yellow Future: Oriental Style in Hollywood Cinema* (2010), in which she examines the ideological role of East Asian imaginary in Hollywood films. In her presentation, she discussed "Oriental Style" outside America, in Australian films for instance. She provided two case studies to examine what she calls "remaking bodies and cultures through film and popular media". The first example was the success of an Australian film, *Mao's Last Dancer* (Bruce Beresford, 2009), and the second was the failure of two Korean stars who tried to cross over to Hollywood. Park argued that *Mao's Last Dancer* was successful because the film can be seen as a dream that is projected through a diasporic East Asian body via self-orientalisation, which I believe can be considered as part of the "oriental style", in a positive, active and creative way. Self-orientalisation is a marketing strategy in films and other cultural products, as it fits into the oriental fantasy that emerged in the West. It is a safe investment within a structure of power.

The one-day symposium encouraged an active conversation on the subject of East/West binary and hybridity in film and visual culture. If borders and communities can be imagined, then perhaps there is not a binary between the East and the West at all. As well as continuously deconstructing an invisible force that is unconsciously pulling these two cultures apart, we may also want to discover the active, creative and productive results when East meets West:

> But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
> When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth! (Kipling 245)

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Hiu M. Chan is a PhD student at Cardiff University. Her thesis aims to produce a comparative study of Western and Chinese film theory, in order to create a cross-cultural reading of Chinese films. She recently compiled an archive for the Phoenix Picturehouse Cinema, Oxford, in order to celebrate its 100th anniversary. The archive lists most of the films that the cinema has shown over the century and it's free to download online.