

Is the trans- in transnational the trans- in transgender?

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Abstract

*It has become increasingly popular, within film and cinema studies, to challenge the framework of 'national cinema' with that of 'transnational cinema'. Transnationalism in cinema can be understood as modes of production and consumption, as well as ideology, genre and aesthetics. It can be argued, however, that transnationalism, while purporting to transcend the national, does not so much displace the nation as reinstate it within a larger, pan-national framework. This essay aims to interrogate the notion of 'trans-' and ask to what extent the prefix 'trans' transcends existing boundaries, whether in relation to the nation or to gender. Mobilising the concept of 'passing' in transgender practice, it argues that the ethnic passing that is increasingly common in popular culture (such as three ethnically-Chinese actresses playing Japanese geishas in the film *Memoirs of a Geisha*) raises questions about ethnicity, transnational capital, transcultural flows and globalisation at the start of the twenty-first century.*

Keywords

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One morning recently I went to see *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Columbia Pictures and American director Bob Marshall's account of the education of a young girl who becomes one of the figures in eastern life that most fascinates the west—a geisha. As the end credits rolled, I walked to an adjacent screen and watched *Brokeback Mountain*, Taiwanese director Ang Lee's portrait of the lives of the figures in western cinema who most fascinate eastern directors—cowboys. Each is a ventriloquism of sorts, or a stealing of the rival's clothes. (Cousins 2006: 60)

When I first presented an earlier version of this article at a symposium on cultural flows within East Asia entitled 'What a difference a region makes' in March 2006, Mark Cousins's above comments, made in the February 2006 issue of *Prospect* magazine, provided the appropriate point of entry as they highlight the prominence of a transnational mode of cinematic production at the beginning of the twenty-first century. *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005; hereafter *Geisha*) is released by a United States studio – Columbia Pictures – which is owned by the Japanese company Sony. Directed by a citizen of the United States – Bob Marshall – and adapted from a best-selling novel by United States writer Arthur Golden, it is about the life of a Japanese geisha and stars three Chinese actresses in the central roles of the geishas. *Brokeback Mountain* (2005; hereafter *Brokeback*), on the other hand, is adapted from a short story by United States

1 It should be noted that, unlike actresses Gong Li and Zhang Ziyi who are from the People's Republic of China, the third geisha (actress Michelle Yeoh) is ethnically Chinese but her nationality is Malaysian.

author E. Annie Proulx about the lives of two cowboys who meet in Wyoming. It is directed by Ang Lee who hails from Taiwan but bases his film-making career largely in the United States, and one of the two cowboys is played by the Australian actor Heath Ledger. The two films are transnational not only in terms of financing, production and the composition of their cast and crew, but also in terms of the reach of their distribution, exhibition and reception. They exude an aura of transnationalism that is simultaneously embraced as exotic and exposed as commonplace in the political economy of cultural industries.

The topic of this essay captures a moment when East Asia as a region has indeed made a difference in the world of cinema and also beyond; a moment when a Taiwanese director's sensitive telling of a love story between two men touches a raw nerve in a Bush-dominated USA, and when three Chinese actresses passing as Japanese geishas re-ignites the nationalistic flame within both China and Japan.¹ It signals the arrival of East Asia as a formidable cultural force, capable of commanding global audience attention, shifting the terms of debate in US domestic identity politics, and rekindling geopolitical tension. It resonates with the enormous popularity across the world today of cultural products from East Asia, ranging from Japanese *anime* (animation) and *manga* (comic book) to Chinese wire-fu movies and ultra-violent South Korean films. It also heralds the emergence of East Asia, or more specifically China, as a global superpower on the world stage, and the challenge it may pose to the current superpower, the USA.

In cinematic terms, Cousins describes this transnationalism as a 'bout' between Hollywood and Asia, and declares the latter the winner ('the east wins on a knockout'); he also concludes that the 'clash, and engagement, between Hollywood and Asian cinema is proving to be one of the great cultural contests of this or any other time' (2006: 60). However, while Cousins stages such cross-cultural exchanges in terms of a Huntingtonian clash of civilizations (1998), I want to ask instead the following questions: What insights can we gain from examining this phenomenon through the prisms of nation, class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity? More specifically, what can the recent rise of East Asian cinema tell us about the increasingly fashionable concept of transnationalism, and how can it profitably interrogate the new regional imaginary that is 'East Asia' and the difference it claims to make?

Transnational cinemas: Theoretical imperatives and implications

The focus on East Asia as a region at the 'What a difference a region makes' symposium reflects a trend in academia to put the 'national' in question if not bracket it entirely. It has become commonplace across disciplines from the social sciences to the humanities to debunk the myth of the nation as a unified and coherent entity and to argue, *à la* Benedict Anderson (1991), for an understanding of the nation as a socio-cultural, historical and political construct, imagined as a community. However, as Berry and Farquhar note, there is a tendency in scholarship to (mis)appropriate Anderson's idea of 'imagined' communities as 'imaginary' communities, whereas Anderson

uses the term 'imagined' to designate communities that are too large for their members to meet face-to-face and thus must be imagined by them to exist (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 6). It is precisely this (mis)appropriation, I would suggest, that betrays a collective desire in academia to demystify the national and concomitantly reify a transnational model. The questions then are: Why this, and why now? Is it because we live in an age in which contradictory ideologies of resurgent nationalism, transnational movements of religious fundamentalism, and celebratory globalisation compete in the guise of a clash of civilisations? Can transnationalism valorise the 'trans' at the same time as it reinforces the 'national'? What was transnationalism like before it became an item of fashionable academic jargon?

The theoretical shift of paradigm from the national to the transnational is not without its perils. When East Asia was invoked as a regional imaginary for global consumption in the 1980s, it played to a resuscitation of neo-Confucianist ideologies that sought to account for the economic miracles then sweeping across Japan and the four little dragons namely, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea (see Vogel 1991). For a period such a transnational register was mobilized to legitimize authoritarian rule disguised as Asian-style democracy, and pan-national concepts such as 'cultural China' as promoted by the Harvard Confucianist scholar Tu Wei-ming (1994) won friends and favours in high places (see Chua 2004). As a theoretical operation, rather than assuming that the gesture of moving beyond the national necessarily resolves the inherent problems of the national, it is imperative to trace how power relations are differently reconfigured in the new paradigms of transnationalism, regionalism and globalism.

Owing to the influence of Anderson's work on the field of film studies, it has become almost impossible to continue to employ the concept of national cinema uncritically. It is particularly interesting to note that, notwithstanding some publishers' insistence on capitalising on the long-cherished national cinema label, many scholars have chosen to introduce their volumes on respective national cinemas by qualifying the problematic nature of the concept of the national. Zhang, for instance, begins his introduction to *Chinese National Cinema* (2004; under the Routledge national cinema series) by suggesting that the publication of another volume on national cinema at the start of the new millennium 'may seem ironic' (2004: 1). Likewise, Berry and Farquhar argue that the national cinemas model is inadequate and propose approaching the 'national as contested and construed in different ways' by reconfiguring 'national cinema' as 'cinema and the national' (2006: 2).

Within the field of the study of Chinese cinemas, Lu's introduction to his edited book, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas* (1997), marks an end to any naïve notion of a singular Chinese national cinema.² Acknowledging the plurality of film industries in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the transnational character of these industries throughout the twentieth century, Lu asserts that 'it seems impossible to justify the notion of a single Chinese cinema', and the 'study of *national* cinemas must then transform into *transnational* film studies' (1997: 25; original emphasis). While Lu's motivation is clearly to decentre the sign of 'China' and 'Chinese' in relation

2 It is noteworthy that the concept of transnational cinemas is most amenable to the case of Chinese cinemas but not to Japanese or Korean cinemas. As Berry and Farquhar point out, 'few places have a more complex relation to the national than the combination constituted by the People's Republic, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora', whereas the model of national cinemas has tended to reign in 'places that troubled the assumed unity and coherence of the nation the least', such as Japan (2006: 14). While Korea is divided into two nations, the prominence of its cinema in the South in contrast to its relatively unknown counterpart in the North implies that most references to Korean cinema point singularly to South Korea.

- 3 See Morris (2004) on the relationship between transnationalism and genre film.
- 4 See Chan (2004) for a critique of Lee's film.
- 5 For a detailed reading of Zhang's film in the context of geopolitical aesthetics, see Chiu (2004/2005).
- 6 In a widely circulated article on the Internet, Lee has been called 'the man of eternal guilt of Chinese cinema' and held responsible for starting a trend that has now led to the making of films ranging from *Hero* (Zhang 2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (Zhang 2004) to *The Promise* (Chen 2005) and *The Banquet* (Feng 2006) (see Ma 2007). Zhang Yimou has just released another lavish blockbuster, *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), which has been criticised for its vacuous spectacle and political allusions (see for example Zhou 2006).
- 7 The restriction on the number of sheep used was imposed owing to the concern of the Canadian authorities for a disease apparently only carried by American sheep ('Trivia. . .' n.d.).

to the concept of national cinema, as I have argued elsewhere, the subsumption of cinemas from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong under the umbrella of transnational Chinese cinemas does not so much displace the nation as reinstate it within a larger, pan-ethnic national framework (Lim 2006: 5). More to the point, to focus on transnationalism mainly as a mode of production and consumption risks overlooking its function as ideology masquerading as genre and aesthetics.³ This latter mode of transnational filmmaking has become more salient since Ang Lee's reinvigoration of the *wuxia* (martial arts) genre with his hugely successful *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). The casting of the four main characters in Lee's film, one from China (Zhang Ziyi), another from Taiwan (Chang Chen), another from Hong Kong (Chow Yun-fat) and still another from Malaysia (Michelle Yeoh), perfectly embodies Tu's concept of 'cultural China', and may serve to re-imagine a pan-Chineseness that transcends national boundaries – the hallmark of transnationalism.⁴ Capitalizing on Lee's success, *Hero* (Zhang 2002) epitomises the abuses that can be inflicted on transnational cinema through genre film. It portrays the Emperor Qin's desire to defeat his enemies and unify the warring states in the name of *tianxia* (literally, 'all under heaven'), a transnational concept that manages to persuade the assassin to give up his weapon, and draws uneasy parallels for cross-straits relations between China and Taiwan today.⁵ *Wuxia* is arguably the most popular dramatic genre in literature, television and film in the Chinese-speaking world, and its repackaged transnationalism can mask a more insidious ideology beneath its seemingly innocuous aesthetics.⁶ Indeed, aesthetics can turn into the degree zero of ideology in transnational cinemas, especially in genre film, wherein the overriding discourse of pan-Chinese nationalism and loyalty denies any expression of dissent under the cover of the sweeping beauty of panoramic landscape or the blinding bombardment of computer generated images (CGIs).

If the 'post' in 'postcolonial' and 'postmodern' is a temporal designation, the 'trans' in 'transnational' is first and foremost a spatial marker, and one of its functions or effects is to destabilise the notion of place, for transnational cinema is 'most "at home" in the in-between spaces of cultures, in other words, between the local and the global' (Ezra and Rowden 2005: 4). However, precisely because one of the means by which transnational cinema (and transnationalism more generally), in contemporary times, disregards national boundaries is through digital technology, and because the use of CGI further problematises 'any connection between the places films depict and the places where they are made' (Ezra and Rowden 2005: 8), the boundaries between the realms of the real, the virtual real, the unreal and the surreal are also increasingly blurred or merged. For example, *Brokeback* is set in Wyoming, USA, but filmed in Calgary, Canada. Because of the restrictions imposed by the Canadian authorities on the number of sheep allowed on set (700 rather than the 2,500 that Lee would have preferred), the director had to resort to using fifteen CGI shots of sheep to achieve his desired effect. Lee also struggled to get the sheep to drink from a stream because apparently sheep do not drink from running water but only from ponds and dams.⁷ But the advancement of digital technology affords the director, if he so chooses, the possibility of creating

scenes in which 'electric' sheep actually drink from a stream. Given the usual hype surrounding the issue of straight actors playing gay roles – a different kind of trans-sexuality if you will – does the increasing availability of CGI not lead to the logical step of creating kissing cowboys via CGI if the presumably straight actors prefer not to do so? To recall the title of Philip K. Dick's book, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) on which the film *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) is based, would it not be possible to argue that it is now humans, rather than androids, who dream of electric sheep, as the example of *Brokeback* testifies? Digital technology's disregard for boundaries, including the national, can thus also display its deterritorialising effects by transcending boundaries of sexuality, creating kissing cowboys as and when necessary.

What transnationalism sometimes affords is greater capital, and consequently the transnational production and consumption of cultural products can also function as a camouflage for the ruthless penetration of global capitalism. After all, the 'trans' in transnational cinema is also the 'trans' in transnational corporations. As Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto suggests, CEOs and executives of multinational corporations have actively promoted and capitalised on notions of hybrid identities of consumers and commodities for some time now. However, 'the mere assertion that transnational cultural flows are fundamentally changing human experience does not give rise to a radically different type of critical discourse on cinema' (Yoshimoto 2006: 259), as it does not necessarily critique the politics underlying such transcultural flows. In the case of *Geisha*, the decision to cast three Chinese actresses as Japanese geishas, as with most business decisions, must be at once calculated and compromised. Granted, there are probably no Japanese stars in the ranks of Zhang Ziyi, Michelle Yeoh and Gong Li to carry a film of this scale, and it might be plausible that the studio executives did not think the ethnic difference would matter to audiences anyway. Moreover, if the filmmakers and studio executives are not totally incognisant of current geopolitical tensions in East Asia, it is perhaps not too cynical to suggest that the ethnic (mis)casting is a marketing ploy that deliberately plays/preys on the predictable nationalistic outcry stirred up in both countries. Thus, the surging East Asian imaginary, embodied by these female actresses of 'Oriental beauty' and carried on the wings of transnational cultural industries, can easily operate within the logic of late global capitalism.

Transnational stardom: Performing (de)territorialisation

While *Brokeback* and *Geisha* can be seen as epitomising a transnational mode of filmmaking in terms of their production and casting, the question of their exhibition and reception within China highlights the tenacity of national(istic) boundaries and sentiments that may pose a challenge to any celebratory gestures of transgression or transcendence. Both films have been banned in China: *Brokeback* for its depiction of homosexuality, which remains taboo in China, and *Geisha* for 'the negative social response to the film', reflected in various media, according to the film company Sony Columbia Tristar Pictures ('China ban. . .' 2006). Perriam has recently developed, via Deleuze and Guattari, the idea of the actor as a

detritorialising agent, arguing that actors are agents of cultural communication and embodiments of imaginings across national borders (Perriam 2006). Given the staggering rise of Zhang Ziyi in world cinema and her performance in *Geisha*, it is appropriate to take her as a case study to explore the interface between the national and the transnational.

Zhang Ziyi made her film debut in *The Road Home* (Zhang Yimou 1999) when she was dubbed 'little Gong Li', Gong of course being Zhang Yimou's former muse and a mega-star in Chinese cinemas. Since Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* propelled her to international fame, Zhang Ziyi has become a celebrity in her own right, acting as spokesperson in advertising campaigns for products ranging from cosmetics to mineral water, and consistently featuring in polls on the sexiest women and most influential people in the world ('Biography' n.d.). In terms of cinematic career, she has appeared in a Hollywood production (*Rush Hour 2* [Ratner, 2001]) and has worked with avant-garde directors such as Wong Kar-wai (*2046* [2004]) and Seijun Suzuki (*Princess Raccoon* [2005]). There are numerous fan sites devoted to her on the Internet, and *Geisha* is the first film in which she has to speak exclusively in English.

Zhang Ziyi's case raises many interesting issues for scholarship on stardom, including the particular appeal of the star and the mechanisms by which actors achieve the status of stars, and whether these are similar locally, regionally and globally. The relationship between stardom and fandom is also worth exploring; for example, to what extent are stardom and fandom both structured by ethnicity, age, gender and sexuality? There are certainly industrial machineries (studios, publicity campaigns, the media and so on) that help to build up the image of a star, and transnational stardom cannot be simply explained away by the economy of exoticism. However, is the same star buttressed by similar machineries across national borders, and does s/he signify a different matrix of desire and identification for audiences in different countries? How is stardom inscribed on the level of signification within the film medium, in terms of *mise-en-scène*, make-up and costume? What do stars need to do, both on screen and off screen, to perpetuate their stardom, and are stardom and fandom necessarily ephemeral?

While this is not the place for a full-blown study of Zhang Ziyi's stardom, it is important to situate her transnational stardom in the context of the rise of East Asia, both in terms of global economic power and cultural soft power. It is also necessary to differentiate between her popularity within East Asia and in the rest of the world, and to theorise transnational stardom in relation to a globalised Asia that, according to Tsai, has consistently 'taken a backseat to the celebratory desire to see Asian stars go global/Western' (2005: 102). More important, the dialectics between the national and the transnational must continue to be examined in order to discover the limits of transnationalism when it clashes with national interests.

The final point is particularly pertinent to Zhang's performance in *Geisha* as it has had some domestic and regional repercussions, and these repercussions highlight the possible precariousness when a national star ventures beyond her territory and goes transnational. According to a news

report, China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television withdrew its original approval for the film to open in February 2006 because it claims the film is too 'complicated and sensitive' for the Chinese public and, if opened in cinemas, could spark anti-Japanese tensions (Lorenz 2006). The film's release date was apparently too close for comfort for many Chinese since it was only in April 2005 when thousands of Chinese took to the streets to protest owing to Japan's approval of the publication of a history textbook that many Chinese believe downplays the atrocities committed during Japan's occupation of China (Coonan 2006). While people polled in the streets of Tokyo questioned Hollywood's decision to cast Chinese actresses as Japanese geishas, some Internet posters in China claimed that Zhang 'deserves to be chopped into a thousand bits' and that she should be 'deprived of Chinese citizenship' (Johnson and Doi 2005).

While Zhang might have won even more international fans through her performance in *Geisha*, her national standing has undoubtedly been dealt a blow as a consequence of this saga. It demonstrates that, far from achieving a deterritorialising effect, the responses generated by the film among some Chinese and Japanese serve to reinforce notions of national identities and to safeguard ethnic boundaries. Moreover, because *Geisha* is a Hollywood product aimed at global market domination, there is very little room for nuances in narrative and characterisation but plenty for stereotyping and exoticism. Just as Jackie Chan's global stardom speaks more to 'global domination by a culture industry than to critical intervention in the globalization of cultures' (Tsai 2005: 105), Zhang's transnational stardom, in her performance in *Geisha* at least, is a limited effort at deterritorialisation but provides ample opportunities for a reterritorialisation in nationalistic terms. A ban on the theatrical release of *Geisha* however did not prevent the film's easy availability as pirated DVDs in China. That is to say, while Zhang's performance had been denied official entry into the territory, it achieved a reterritorialisation through the illegal but rampant practice of piracy. Hence her role as an agent of deterritorialisation has in fact been usurped by a different technology and economy, one that thrives in the interstices between national and transnational boundaries, where even the mighty power of the state censor cannot fully reach and prohibit, and where agency is transferred from an actor to the mechanical reproduction of millions of copies of DVDs.

Moreover, while the United States director of *Geisha* may stand accused of Orientalism and exoticism, the Chinese actresses are seen in some quarters as unpatriotic for *choosing* to play Japanese geishas. It is noteworthy that, in many academic and popular (particularly nativist) discourses on the early films of Zhang Yimou, the Chinese director has consistently been charged for exoticising China for the consumption of Western audiences. The actor, in particular Gong Li, who embodies a tormented China suffering under a ruthless Confucianist patriarchy, is merely a vehicle for, rather than an agent of such representation. In the case of *Geisha*, however, the blame is laid squarely on the actresses, since they are assumed to be free agents in their career choice. However, as deterritorialising agents, they have clearly crossed into the wrong territory in the eyes of some of their compatriots, and there is a price to be paid for making the wrong choice.

8 On the challenging practice of 'genderfuck,' see Evans and Gamman (1995).

To sum up, if we follow Berry and Farquhar's argument that 'dominant images of Chinese women in the cinema can be understood better in relation to different configurations of modernity and the nation-state' (2006: 12), what does Zhang Ziyi's transnational stardom stand for in the twenty-first century? Dovetailing the career of Gong Li, Zhang's career shares with Gong in certain aspects and differs in others. Like Gong Li, Zhang embodies an exotic, Oriental beauty that plays well in both domestic and foreign media. Unlike Gong, Zhang does not symbolise the suffering of China during the Cultural Revolution or in a mythical time-space. Rather, like the character she plays in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Zhang Ziyi exhibits a new confidence among Chinese youth in openly rebelling against the familial and societal roles assigned to her, and as suggested by the film's ambiguous ending, by taking her fate in her own hands, ascends to new heights (or plunges to new depths). This new confidence corresponds to the one found by China's ascending regional and global status, and the fascination that Zhang's transnational stardom has generated worldwide can be read as a synecdoche for the fascination that China currently holds among observers of world affairs. What does this transformation entail and promise? What will the 'trans' in transnational transform into?

Passing: Crossing, becoming, beyond

Cousins's metaphor of Eastern and Western filmmakers stealing the rival's clothes, of course, points us to the 'trans' in transvestism or transgender and the notion of passing. I am interested in the theoretical implications and potential in focussing, as Perriam does, not just on the actor but, more specifically, on the *body* of the actor in the study of transnational cinemas. We might ask: In what ways does the ability of the corporeality of the actor's body to deterritorialise and reterritorialise cinematic spaces and national borders interface with its capacity for fetishisation and the projection of desire? What and whose desire does the body of the actor represent, and what kinds of desire are projected onto his/her body by the audience? Does the body produce desire or does desire produce the body? This is where a critical intervention of transgender studies may prove productive.

While a transgender identity (denoting those who identify with and choose to live as the other gender) can be distinguished from transsexuals (those who undergo hormonal and surgical procedures to become the opposite sex), 'transgender' has come to function as an umbrella term that embraces a wide variety of practices and identities (including transsexuality) that trouble gender boundaries. According to Prosser, the prefix 'trans' in transgender literally means 'across' but can also mean 'beyond' (1997: 310), and I would add a third meaning of 'becoming' (or 'potentiality') in the case of transsexuals. The 'trans' in transgender thus offers at least three possible positionalities: to literally cross the gender boundary by choosing to live as the other gender; to potentially become the other sex so that the physical body congeals with the gender identity by undergoing gender realignment procedures; to go beyond the definition of gender by deliberately highlighting the artificiality of gender as drag performers do.⁸ The first two positionalities usually demand successful passing as the other

gender, while the third, at once passing and not passing, elucidates queer theory's notion of performativity, exemplified by Butler's argument that drag, in imitating gender, '*implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*' (1990: 137; original emphasis).

Like the 'trans' in transnational, the 'trans' in transgender does not necessarily have to be transgressive and may merely refer to a crossing of borders or even serve to consolidate gender boundaries. For example, it has been argued that 'transsexuality has been brought about by medical technology married to a rigid ideology of gender', though this argument has been criticised as undermining the transsexual as a knowing subject and moralising sex change (Prosser 1997: 314). Contrary to the conceptual challenge posed by performativity in underlining the constructedness of gender, Prosser argues that the 'power of the appeal to what feels essential, *to what gender feels like*' has real political and personal consequences for transsexuals for whom sex is all too 'material, embodied, fleshly' (Prosser 1997: 319; original emphasis). It seems to me that, whether in relation to nation or to gender, the prefix 'trans,' while indexing a crossing of boundaries, can in effect fix the boundaries even more firmly and in an essentialist manner.

For Papastergiadis, the deterritorialisation of culture requires us to rethink 'not only the significance of place but also the processes by which cultural change occurs' (2004: 300). I would suggest that it is imperative, alongside tracing the processes of deterritorialisation, to also determine wherever possible the impetus behind such cultural change or, in other words, the economy of desire. That is to say, what motivates people to cross borders, to become the Other, to want to go beyond and challenge the very definition of boundaries?

For me, what is most intriguing about *Geisha* is not so much its Orientalist exoticisation of the world of geishas but the will to power of the nine-year-old girl Chiyo (Suzuka Ohgo) after her encounter with the Chairman (Ken Watanabe) who buys her a cherry ice cream. Admiring the geishas who accompany the Chairman, Chiyo decides at that very moment, as recounted years later in a voice-over, that 'I changed from a girl facing nothing but emptiness, to someone with purpose. I saw that to be a geisha could be a stepping stone to something else . . . a place in his world' ('Memorable quotes' n.d.). But it would take many more years before the adolescent Chiyo (now played by Zhang Ziyi), sold to a geisha house as a servant, is given the opportunity to be trained as a geisha. As her mentor Mameha (Michelle Yeoh) points out, Chiyo has to learn in months the gestures and skills that others take years to perfect in order to pass as a geisha. Originally a maid, Chiyo transforms herself into Sayuri not so much by cross-dressing but by dressing up in kimono and painting her face white and acquiring a new identity in the process. The litmus test for her passing comes when she is instructed to cast a single glance at a man on the street, leading him to stare at her and to fall from his bicycle, at which point Mameha announces: 'You're ready!'

Chiyo-the-maid's rapid transformation into Sayuri-the-geisha is a remarkable feat of passing. The film illustrates her transformation through a montage of images consisting of the artifice that makes up the illusory

world of the geishas (glamorous kimonos, make-up boxes, props such as fans and so on) and also the skills she has to acquire such as dance and an ability to play the *shamisen* (a three-stringed musical instrument). Both artifice and skill are layered or inscribed on the body, and it is the materiality and corporeality of the transformation that the film highlights. While artifice and make-up can be acquired and put on or off at will, skills are bodily memories that are summoned to perform and can be unlearned or forgotten through time. Crucially, this transformation hinges upon Chiyo/Sayuri acquiring highly gendered gestures and skills in an economy of desire in which her virginity can be sold to the highest bidder. She has passed but she does not dictate the terms of passing.

My intrigue about *Geisha* can be summarized as follows: Why does the nine-year-old Chiyo see becoming a geisha as a stepping stone to a place in the Chairman's world, and what does she know about his world given her tender age and their brief encounter? What does her will to power tell us about the structure of desire? What does it mean for her entry to the world of geishas to be premised upon a material and corporeal transformation, to be highly gendered and thus subject to an unequal power relation and, in the final analysis, to possess her virginity as a commodity? Besides the Chairman's almost paedophilic interest in a prepubescent Chiyo, what does Chiyo's lifelong pursuit – stalking even – of the Chairman reveal about age, gender and desire, especially a desire so blatantly associated with power?

The key issue arising from *Geisha* is not really about the ethnic (in)authenticity of Chinese actresses playing Japanese geishas, since we all know the identities of the actresses and since the film is made in the English language. What *Geisha* suggests to me is a parallel between the act of passing – both literal and metaphorical, ethnic and linguistic – and the Chinese actresses' desire for a place in the world of Hollywood and mega-stardom. To return to the question of what Zhang Ziyi might stand for in relation to modernity and the nation-state, the *agency* represented by her role in *Geisha* indicates precisely a desire to enter the world of transnational corporate business, to join the club of the big boys, and to get a taste, induced by the cherry ice cream, of unfettered power embodied by access to the materiality of worldly goods and artifice, the corporeality of the female body, and the first rights to penetration – of both markets and sex.

Conclusion: Making difference, unmaking difference

To conclude, is the 'trans' in transnational the 'trans' in transgender? It is clear from these examples of transnational cinemas that while geographical boundaries have been crossed in their consumption and production, the cultural politics underlying such translocation does not necessarily transgress or transcend deeply entrenched ideologies. As the furor surrounding *Geisha* demonstrates, a transnational production may precisely provide the timely fodder for a reinstatement of national(istic) sentiments geared towards geopolitical negotiations both at popular and governmental levels, solidifying rather than challenging notions of ethnic identities that are defined against a vilified Other. To recall the title of the symposium

where I first presented my research on this subject, East Asia as a region might have made a difference in cultural flows, but we must question exactly what kind of a difference it makes. Moreover, in its production and consumption of popular culture, does East Asia also make (that is, generate and create) differences? Or should we be thinking about unmaking differences?

It seems to me there has been a missed opportunity in the reception and reading of a transnational film like *Geisha*, and I propose that the 'trans' in transgender and the notion of passing may assist us in rethinking the terms of cultural politics. In her writing on passing Robinson introduces, beyond the conventional dyad of passer and dupe, a third term known as the 'in-group clairvoyant' (1994: 716) – a member of a group from which one has passed and is thus 'privy to visual codes that evade the duped spectators of the pass' (1994: 715). I would like to use the figure of the 'in-group clairvoyant' to raise questions about the spectatorial position of those who know the geishas are played by Chinese actresses in contradistinction to those who do not (though, unlike the clairvoyant, the audience in this instance, regardless of ethnicity, is not complicit in the Chinese actresses' attempt at passing as Japanese). For instance, what does it mean for a Chinese audience to watch these Chinese actresses passing as Japanese when they know that the actresses are Chinese, and what does it mean for a Japanese audience to know and to watch the same on screen? What about for an audience that is neither Chinese or Japanese? Does it make a difference?

More important, are the Chinese actresses even trying to pass as Japanese given that the publicity machine would most plausibly render their ethnicity transparent to audiences before viewing? If not, are they merely performing rather than passing? In Robinson's study of African Americans passing as white, 'for the reader who knows the passer is black and sees her "becoming" white, the *passer "is" white precisely because she is black* – because she stakes a claim to the real that makes no claim to truth' (1994: 728; original emphasis). Is this suspension of disbelief and a belief in the vacuity of 'truth' and 'authenticity' possible in the case of *Geisha*? Do we see the Chinese actresses as Japanese precisely because they are Chinese and do not pretend to be Japanese since they all speak in English?

What I have been trying to explore is not so much the question of ethnic authenticity but that of performance and passing, and the in-between space where one transforms into or performs as the other. That is to say, when Zhang Ziyi, Gong Li and Michelle Yeoh are performing or passing as Japanese geishas, they are neither Chinese or Japanese but in an in-between space embodying both or neither ethnicities. They are *in the process of passing* from Chinese to Japanese, or they are literalising the process of a Chinese performing as a Japanese. Like a Butlerian drag show that 'calls attention to the act of impersonation and foregrounds its status as imitation' (Robinson 1994: 727), these actresses are echoing, albeit unknowingly, the Brechtian alienation effect inspired by Chinese opera, in which the artist uses his or her 'countenance as a blank sheet, to be inscribed by the gest of the body' (Brecht, quoted in Robinson 1994: 729). This appreciation of the actor as a palimpsest erases problematic questions

of essentialism and authenticity that plague the furore surrounding *Geisha*, and points towards a politics of 'trans' in which a transformation defies and goes beyond definition.

For Prosser, transsexuals speaking as such constitute a paradox: 'if the goal of transsexuality is to pass as not transsexual, what does it mean to come out and speak as a transsexual?' (1997: 317). I want to return to the question of language as a way of drawing this essay to a close. Recall that *Geisha* is made in English, and thus the authenticity issue should have been bracketed in the first place. That is to say, the performance of the Chinese actresses as Japanese geishas speaking in English could have provided an opportunity for decoupling the link between ethnicity and language, and for challenging the myths of origin underpinning every essentialist claim to identity. As a way of answering the question posed by Deleuze and Guattari, 'How many people live today in a language that is not their own?' (quoted in Papastergiadis 2004: 300), *Geisha* could have been exemplary of transnational actors as deterritorialising agents, and of actors who either speak more than one language or usually speak in a language that is not their own without necessarily troubling their relationship to national and ethnic identities. If the transformative figure of the transsexual indexes a paradoxical positionality that is neither here nor there but in-between and in-process, perhaps it is possible to begin to rethink multilingual, transnational actors in the twenty-first century as epitomising a kind of situated cosmopolitanism.

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