Jane Chin Davidson, "Patty Chang and The Cinematic Subject," chapter in book titled ***Staging Chineseness: From Modernism to Contemporary Art, Globalization and Transnationalism***, forthcoming, copyrighted to the author

> The collective power that is common to these spectators is not the status of members of a collective body. Nor is it a peculiar kind of interactivity. It is the power to translate in their own way what they are looking at.
>
> Jacques Rancière[1]

Fig. 1. Patty Chang, *The Product Love (Die Ware Liebe*), 2009, still from video installation, Hu Huaizhong as Walter Benjamin and Yi Ping as Anna May Wong. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The video installation by the artist Patty Chang, *Die Ware Liebe*: *The Product (or commodity) Love* expresses a "trans"-nationalist subject in historical and contemporary ways, beginning with its inspiration from Walter Benjamin's 1928 essay titled "Gespräch mit Anne May Wong" (A Conversation with Anna May Wong, also subtitled," A Chinoiserie Out of the Old West").[2] Published in the important leftist review, *Die literarische Welt,* Benjamin wrote about his actual meeting with Anna May Wong who was the most famous Chinese American screen actor and yet the most type-casted in the Hollywood stereotype of slave girl, prostitute, and "fallen woman" during the era of "yellowface" cinema. In reality, Wong was a consummate transnationalist actor who travelled to Europe to work in films, to Berlin in particular, where she met Benjamin amidst the growing tensions of 1920-30s nationalism and fascism. Chang's contemporary project corresponds to Wong's movements of the past as she incorporates diverse actors and locations from Los Angeles to Hangzhou for her two-channel, forty-two minute video installation exhibited at Mary Boone Gallery in New York in 2009. Chang was the recipient of the 2014 Guggenheim award for her bodily-oriented works.

Fig.2. Patty Chang, still from *A Chinoiserie Out of the Old West* (2009)

The operative activity for Chang's project is in the performance of translation, which she explores through both videos of her installation. The very "labor" of translation comprises the subject of *A Chinoiserie Out of the Old West* as the first video engages viewers in the act of watching three different academic translators in Los Angeles interpret Benjamin's original German text. Benjamin had noted in "The Task of the Translator" that "[t]ranslation is a form. To comprehend it as a form, one must go back to the original."[3] Through the video medium,

Chang takes on this challenge to conceptualize translation as a visual form. Benjamin's Chinoiserie essay is performed for Chang's viewers in this way, and the translators in the video are interspersed with images of transnational locations such as the Benjamin archive in Berlin and the film studio in Hangzhou. She reminds the viewer of that transnationalism was always a part of the past whilst pointing to the current state of globalization in which cultural relationships are based on comprehension of visual languages beyond the production of the text. In modernity, the audience was always "global" and meaning always contingent on the ability to comprehend both textual and visual languages.

For the second video titled *Die Ware Liebe*, Chang creates a sexual fantasy, an imaginary love scene, based on the very excerpts that were translated by the linguists in her first video. Among them were Benjamin's writings about Wong through his orientalising language: "her hair flowing loose like a dragon romping in water" a cascade that "cuts into her face and makes it most heart-shaped of all."[4] (Fig.2) The love scene is between Benjamin and Wong, and this provocative interlude is incited by Chang's casting of Chinese actors Hu Huaizhong and Yi Ping to play the respective parts.(Fig.1) Subtitled and delivered in Mandarin Chinese, Chang is in essence reversing the logic of sexual desire from 1930s cinema – the Asian female is still circumscribed to her exotica role; but the casting of Benjamin in the Chinese body breaks from the dynamic of the historical fantasy. The depiction of illicit desire between white male and Asian female characters was a titillating formula for mainstream movies in the 1930s because miscegenation laws made these relationships dangerous. Interracial marriage was prohibited in the United States until 1967 and legislation in fascist Germany was of course based on racial purity. In this way, cinematic history is rewritten by Chang, and the cinematic text functions metaphorically in her expressive play of political contexts for trans-nationalism.

Overall, Chang's theatrical role-playing and use of the cinematic form pays homage to the theories of both Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin. As explored in this essay, the two Marxist thinkers established important political concepts for performance and film during the 1930s, which appear as inspiration for Chang's return to their historical subjects. Following the principles of Epic Theatre, the viewer watches the entire production of *Die Ware Liebe* from behind the scene in documentary style with the film crew blocking the scene at the studio in

Hangzhou and the director Gu Bo providing the commentary.[5] The concept of "live theatre," however, is merely an illusion since the actors are performing for the video – the mechanical distinction that Benjamin established for the medium of film was the assertion that the "audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera."[6] The film actor is transformed by the camera's technology whereas the stage actor contends with "aura," or some cult remembrance of his persona from the past.[7] Reviving this distinction, Chang's cult remembrance of Benjamin is explicitly for film rather than for stage, particularly since she created his "character" from a text that he had written. In this way, Chang puts to the test Benjamin's advocacy for radicalizing "the functional relationship between stage and audience, text and production, producer and actor. Epic theatre,[Brecht] declared, must not develop actions but represent conditions."[8] The question then is whether the performative expression is still able to reflect the dialectics of moral life and the ethics of capitalism, even if political Marxism is no longer viable and capitalism is fragmented by its multinational form.

The answer can be assumed in the fact that both Brecht and Benjamin appear to have gained rather than diminished in relevance for contemporary thought. As Rey Chow asserts "Walter Benjamin's work on Bertolt Brecht is exemplary of the conceptual innovations that continue to bear an impact on theoretical and artistic thinking in the twenty-first century."[9] Chow had described the media age as the trend in which "reflexivity becomes porn," the condition when artistic practices "become synonymous with the violence of medial exhibitionism."[10] Concurring with others such as Jacques Rancière, Chow's reprisal of Brecht and his "gay science, in all the pleasure of learning and testing," brings a renewed sense of coalitional purpose in artistic practice and theory.[11] This comes at a moment when art discourse is thought to be suffering "intellectual fatigue" according to Nikos Papastergiadis and lacking in critical seriousness in its complicity with corporate entities for art.[12] The processes of globalization have brought a new urgency to Brecht's deconstruction of power in regards to the relationship between the observer and the performer. On the other hand, analysis of contemporary art has become intensely complex, which Papastergiadis attributes to "the massive expansion of people and practices that are now considered as being part of the global artworld."[13] The complexity of discourse emerges from the need to comprehend globalized

cultural histories, traditions, and hierarchies that are played out in the new heterogeneous playing field for art. A "Chinese Walter Benjamin" can therefore exemplify Rancière's conception of the "new stage of equality, where different kinds of performances would be translated into one another," the very act of translation – including the reading of performing bodies as a kind text – underwrites the ideal that an "emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators." [14] The loss of centrism in the context of nationality allows for a new freedom of expression.

Chang returns to historical relationships among "stage and audience, text and production, producer and actor" in order to develop the Chinese subject that emerges from the texts of Benjamin and Brecht. Given the fact that *Die Ware Liebe* was the working title of Brecht's 1943 play *The Good Woman of Szechuan,* Chang's re-use of the title underscores the complexities of role-playing as represented by gender and Chinese identification.[15] Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* in theory and practice was developed from his own role as spectator of the "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," also the title of his 1935 essay. His translation of Chinese theatre was inspired from viewing a cross-dressing performance by the great Chinese opera star Mei Lanfang who carried on the tradition of male actors groomed to play female roles. The translation of the operation of theatre is an interpretative act, and likewise, in viewing Chang's version of *Die Ware Liebe*, the spectator watches the production team in China in the act of interpreting the Chinese American subject of Anna May Wong.

Chang translates the fantasy from the history of the gendered Chinese subject for review in the contemporary transnational context for culture. In globalization, the internal diversity of culture is newly recognized, such that, the example of "Chineseness" engenders a complicated term that articulates the disparate theoretical, historical and political dimensions of a heterogeneous Chinese identity. Chang addresses this internal diversity through her conception of translation as a visual form. The *Chinoiserie* subject in Benjamin's essay can be viewed as the philosopher's translation of Wong's exotica fantasy stage-persona rather than assumed to be a naïve Orientalist reading – especially since Chang implicates the fictitious character of Benjamin himself in her new narrative. As such, Chineseness affirms Rancière's fluid form of translation as "the blurring of the opposition between those who look and those

who act, between those who are individuals and those who are members of a collective."[16] That is not to say that Orientalism had no "real" consequences, but that fantasy cannot be dismissed in the controversial distinction of Chineseness.

Ultimately, Chang's project can be conceived as a kind of defamiliarization through the staging of Chineseness, which functions on a political level to reveal the gendered history of nationalism that extends from the cinematic past. The citizen-subject that emerges from transnational circuits and libidinal economies was one that served an underlying mythology of nationhood expressed by cinematic narratives. In immigration history, the fictional role was no small thing as it contributed to the formation of the citizen-subject in modern nationalism. The eroticized Asian female character in American film arose during the period when immigration of women from China to the United States was severely restricted and miscegenation laws were firmly established. Cinema therefore reinforced nationalist narratives through the telling of moral tales, narrated in film fantasies of illicit affairs between white male protagonists and Asian female seducers that ultimately ended in the punishment and death of the woman. The film archive of Anna May Wong provides a clear understanding of nationalist ideologies portrayed as fantasy.

Fig. 3. Anna May Wong in *The Thief of Bagdad (1924)*

Benjamin's writing about Wong in his essay "Gespräch mit Anne May Wong" is unrecognizable from the intellectual discourse of the great literary critic, using descriptions such as her name "like the specks in a bowl of tea that unfold into blossoms replete with moon and devoid of scent."[17] Benjamin wrote his "conversation" in a style that reflects his casual meeting with the movie star in the company of several others.[18] While most of the essay celebrates Wong and her achievements in film, there are odd moments, such as, when Benjamin asks if movies are made in China, "are there any Chinese directors?" Wong replies, "yes, of course movies are made in China." But Wong was hardly one to ask since she was a third-generation, Los Angeles born actor who at the age of nineteen, performed with Douglas Fairbanks Junior in *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924). (Fig.3) Often called the "most beautiful Oriental actress in Hollywood," her public appeal was established by her scantily clad, servile character

as a Mongolian slave in the film. In order for her to accept the provocative role, the studio had to obtain her father's legal permission. The slave girl character, "dressed in the skimpiest of bandeau tops and very tight briefs" as described by Celine Shimizu, was considered as the perverse "hypersexual" counterpart to the white princess character, a vision "enshrouded in whiteness" in this Arabian Nights fantasy.[19] Films such as *The Thief of Bagdad* comprise the documentary record of the sexually passive-aggressive stereotype for Asian woman. Wong was also the first to play the sinister, duplicitous "dragon lady" (the counterpart to the evil Fu Manchu) in *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931), a role that coexisted with the submissive, subjugated Chinese slave-girl character.

By 1928, Wong was a hot film commodity, and she had accepted an invitation to go to Berlin to work with the German producer and director Richard Eichberg on a series of movies, which fatefully brought the opportunity to meet with Benjamin. Eichberg was a pioneer of the international film industry. In his essay, Benjamin had commented on Wong's encounter with the Hollywood author Karl Vollmoeller who later convinced Eichberg to cast Wong in the movie *Song* (1928) because he had written the script with her in mind.[20] His movie *The Flame of Love* (1930) featuring Wong was shot in three different languages. During these early years of the talkies, Wong had to learn German and French for each version. *Piccadilly* was Wong's last silent film, which she made for the British public. Benjamin frequently went to the movies, and when he wrote about Frank Capra's *You Can't Take it With You* (1938), he made an example of the "film industry's complicity with fascism, 'even over there' (that is, in the United States)."[21] But Benjamin's inference of an Orientalist gaze toward Anna May Wong appears oddly contradictory as he describes Wong in his essay, dressed in a "dark blue suit, a light blue blouse, a yellow tie over that," but then he remarks inexplicably "one would like to know a Chinese verse to describe this."[22] Benjamin appears to be expressing a desire for some vague Oriental perspective; but then he states forthrightly that Wong has "always dressed this way, for she was in fact not born in China but in Chinatown in Los Angeles."[23] For the spectator of 1930s film, gender and race were cinematic costumes, in which, Orientalism functions as an exchange, the substitute of an illusion of a community, even as the sexualized identity of Asian women in film affected the "real" statutes for Chinese-American citizenship.

In contrast, Brecht's 1940s version of *Die Ware Liebe,* the play *The Good Woman of Szechuan,* can be perceived as a "live" disruption of the cinematic sexual illusion of Asian women in film. (The "live" staging of bodies continues to underwrite performance theory.) The key element in Brecht is the Marxist materialism of the body, which is central to the moral tale featuring the protagonist Shen Teh as the prostitute who is bestowed fortune from the gods because she proved to be a "good person" – her willingness to give shelter to the gods (disguised as humans) represents the concept of "good" in exchange for the character's prostitute status (the very status of the exotica Asian female stereotype in 1930s film). Brecht explained his vision for the Shen Teh role and the set for the play: "the girl must be a big powerful person. The city must be a big, dusty uninhabitable place….some attention must be paid to countering the risk of chinoiserie. The vision is of a Chinese city's outskirts with cement works, so on."[24] Countering the Orientalist commodification of Chinese women and the place of China in film, the city of Szechuan stands in for the ubiquitous modern metropolis where "man is exploited by man."[25] John Willett suggests that Brecht was inspired by the fourteenth-century scripts of Li Hsing-tao, and the play pays homage to the Chinese parable form.

With the money she is given, Shen Teh is able to go into business and stop selling herself as a prostitute to make a living. But the "good woman" is unable to make ends meet because her neighbours learned of her windfall and constantly took advantage of her generosity. In the critical scene of the play, Shen Teh changes her costume in front of the audience to become another character, her cousin Shui Ta, who is able to conduct business shrewdly without being manipulated by the leeching neighbours because he is a male. The prime example of defamiliarization, Brecht is referring to the gendered relations of power on the one hand in a "society where women's role was to be sold, but salesmen had to be men," and on the other, he is translating Chinese opera and its form of cross-dressing.[26] Alisa Solomon asserts that Shen Teh is "a familiar (and derogatory) image of women…the familiar cannot be rendered strange without first being established *as familiar.* By means of the *Verfremdungseffekt* – the central mechanism of which is the Shui Ta disguise."[27] The cross-dressing act – live and in real-time – is meant to let the audience see and feel the way in which material conditions are a result of the costume of gender in which the sexual expectation is also assumed.

Brecht had long ago addressed what Judith Butler articulates as the concern "to rethink performativity as cultural ritual, as the reiteration of cultural norms, as the habitus of the body in which structural and social dimensions of meaning are not finally separable."[28] Shen Teh literally embodies the idea that "love" is an economic transaction particular to "woman." Brecht's working title *Die Ware Liebe* emphasizes the Marxist exchange of "love." The German phrase translates into either "Love for Sale" or "The Commodity, Love," and *Ware Liebe* "product love" is also a pun on *wahre liebe* "true love." Reflecting his poetic use of irony, the wordplay expresses Brecht's primary objective for exposing the value of human life in commodity culture. Most importantly, Shen Teh is a Chinese character in name only, whose role was ostensibly written for Elisabeth Bergner specifically and acted by any nationality wherever the play was presented (including Eitaro Ozawa's 1960 version in the Haiyuza Theatre in Japan).[29] Wong had also considered playing the part after she had acted in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle,* the 1924 version of Li Hsing-tao's play *The Chalk Circle* rescripted by the German poet Klabund.[30] If the costume of gender and sex determines material conditions, Chang's casting of the Chinese subject appears to be a continuation of the translation of Chineseness that was part of the transnational history of *The Good Woman of Szechuan.* She questions, however, what happens today when the actor cross-dresses in the costume of the Chinese body?

Fig. 4. Film Still from *Die Ware Liebe* (2009)

From the start of the viewing experience of Chang's first video, *A Chinoiserie Out of the Old West,* the translators are clearly struggling to discern what Benjamin meant as we watch their attempts to read the phrases first in German and then in English. The word "touch," in particular, is a focus of their translations. From the spoken performance to the eventual action on film, "touch" becomes the textual-verbal-visual punctum of the movement on the screen, interpreted by translators, directors and actors. Chang explains that the "variations in their translations expand and make visible the slippage between language, culture and context" as she clarifies the connection between the two videos by noting that the same work of translation is being conducted by the film crew producing the "love scene in China, with the

Chinese director interpreting the characters of Benjamin and Wong."[31] In the second of the two-channel videos, the viewer is behind the scenes as we watch the staging of the love scene, the actors are in their chairs being made up to look like photographs of Wong and Benjamin. (Fig.4) We are then included in the directing and shooting of the make-believe love- tryst between Wong and Benjamin.

Fig.5 and 6. Film Still from *Die Ware Liebe* (2009)

Producer Jin Yu and director Gu Bo interpreted the sex scene in nationalistic terms. They directed the Benjamin character to "treat the body of May Wong like he would treat or touch eastern culture. To find the G point or G spot of culture."[32] (Fig.5) The actors go through the motions of lovemaking, which the audience views through the lens of the director, staging every move in the pretense of the sexual act. (Fig.6) Instead of eliciting sexual excitement, the characters appear to be out of their comfort zone as much as the translators were in translating Benjamin's text. The viewers are also made to feel awkward watching the staged sex act "in the making" as we are compelled to recognize the fantasy but not to believe that it is real. And yet, the very function of pornography is to awaken desire in the body of the viewer. Chang's overt stage-directing of the video's pornographic set-up emphasizes Benjamin's description of the process of the actor who experiences a "vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about."[33] Benjamin refers to the "live" context of the stage actor as compared to the difference in the film actor's "mechanical contrivance." The condition of Wong's exotica objecthood shares affinity with what Benjamin describes as the film actor's ontological *exile* – "not only from the stage but also from himself."[34] As described by Chang, the "bodies of the actors are uncomfortable, laboring manifestations of the ambivalence in the act of translation that could be a characteristic of the transnational."[35] "Trans"nationalism is therefore defined as a performance of translation in the reading of bodies as in the text. Comprehension is dependent on the meanings and significations of the cultural contexts that pertain to language. The awkward bodies become a metaphor for the difficulty in comprehending language due also to the mistranslations of the body from the historical

cinematic text. Wong's "role" during the 1920s-30s was prescribed by her Asian exotica character, functioning to titillate for the pleasure of the white male viewer. The thwarting of desire under Chang's manipulation through video is a "trans" method of subverting the historical narrative, challenging the "moral" conventions for miscegenation in history. In the reality of immigration, the impact of the mistranslation of the Chinese female body was confirmed by the legislation of American exclusion acts against Chinese women during the greater part of the twentieth century.

Fig 7. Anna May Wong, as Shosho, the mistress in Piccadilly (1929)

Sex as Nation in the Cinema

Among the majority of Wong's roles in American and European films, her cinematic character always served as the exotic and unobtainable object of desire who titillates and seduces the viewer with the dangerous potential for miscegenation. During the period when Chinese women were denied entry to Europe as well as the U.S., racial and sexual mixing was so improper that Wong's first onscreen kiss with a white male actor in Eichberg's *The Flame of Love* (1930) was a major topic of controversy in Britain.[36] The film was also titled *The Road to Dishonor,* and according to Anthony Chan, the newspapers "raged for days" over the kiss: "Since miscegenation was frowned upon in the British empire, especially in the colonies where the superiority of the white race was always proclaimed, the embrace and kiss between an Englishman and an Asian woman were sacrilegious even in a film set in Russia. The penalty for such a transgression could only result in the death of the woman."[37] But Chang's focus is not so much on Wong's character as it was on re-translating the body of Benjamin as she casts him in what would have been the miscegenation scene. The real German-Jewish body of Benjamin paired with Wong's Chinese body would have been completely unacceptable on the cinematic screen. The rewriting of the film fantasy through the Chinese body of Hu Huaizhong causes a rupture to the 1920s-30s film template of illicit desire between white male and Asian female characters.

Interracial titillation resulting in the death of Wong's character was an inevitable storyline in almost all of her films. For instance, the character Hai-tang in *Flame of Love* is a

member of a dance troupe traveling through imperial Russia and in all three transnational versions of the same film, titled in English *The Flame of Love*, in German *Der Weg zur Schande* , and in French *L'amour maitre des choses*, she falls in love with a Russian officer, whose rival the Grand Duke, eventually tries to seduce her. In the end, Hai-tang takes the fall for her brother (her father in the French version) and commits suicide rather than let him face the firing squad for coming to her defense.[38] Through this formulaic narrative, the forthcoming liaison was always resolved by the death of Wong's character. In many other roles such as Lotus Flower in *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) and Song in *Wasted Love* (1928), Wong's onscreen death would exhibit the penalty for illicit bi-racial affairs.

The degree of censure for narratives of illicit desire differed among viewers in European nations. The German review of the British version of *Flame of Love* for *Film-Kurier* acknowledges Eichberg's grasp of the prudish, censorious "English mentality: eroticism without sex appeal, exoticism without miscegenation; instead, tender melodies are played on the piano in a homely setting. Hai-Tang's lover is her brotherly friend, he watches her dancing, alluringly undresses, but apart from that - nothing happens between them. This is truly English."[39] Chan argues that in British cinema, the colonialist logic for an "empire full of yellow, brown, and black people" was based on the "exalted notion of its own [white] racial superiority" - if whites cohabitated with the colonized, the relations of power would shift and "a consensual romantic liaison would imply equality."[40] On the other hand, German critics in the 1920s were calling for realism in film and Chan suggests the motivation was for "genuine physical interaction between yellow women and white men to be played in human ways." Chan argues that the German contempt for modesty in English film was produced from a focus on "emasculated love relationships" in British cinema that revealed "more of their own arrogance than an understanding of the British." [41]

Laws prohibiting interracial marriage enforced in the United States were the same kind of prohibitions eventually enacted in nationalist Germany. The state-legislated marriage provisions that applied to Chinese Americans proliferated in the early part of the 20th century, and according to legal scholar Gabriel Chin, they "more than doubled between 1910 and 1950."[42] The prohibition began, however, in the nineteenth century when Chinese male

laborers arrived to work in the United States. The notion that the "amalgamation" of the Chinese "with our people…would be the lowest, most vile and degraded of our race" was a legislative theme for politicians as so noted by a delegate of the 1878 California constitutional convention.[43] The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act is considered the first national immigration law, and the preceding 1875 Page Law (named after the California congressman Horace F. Page) instantiated the provision banning immigration of female Chinese prostitutes. However, the law was widely understood to be a ban against single Chinese women in the effort to discourage the "Yellow Peril" of unwanted Chinese settlements in the United States. The intention was to hire cheap male laborers who would return to China instead of immigrating to the U.S., which was the basic rule for all U.S. immigrants of the labor class.[44] The Page Law was essentially a propagandist campaign that informs the stereotype of Chinese women who were considered as passive but immoral concubines. The titillating miscegenation subject in film would enhance this campaign against the immigration of Chinese women.

Rancière explains that "the citizen who acts as a member of the collective" demonstrates how the "essence of theatre is the essence of the community" since theatre is built upon long-held notions of the "Platonic assignment of bodies to their proper - that is, to their 'communal' - place."[45] In the context of nationality, citizenship is a theatrical simulation of a birthright determined by the heterosexual kinship order, one in which, to be alien is to be outside of the nationalist norm. To accomplish this "special birth," the immigrant to the United States must perform in the communal theatre of the naturalization ceremony, through which, the host nation officially "adopts" the immigrant. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that the very definition of nationalism is predicated on reproductive heteronormativity.[46] The period of exclusion acts in U.S. immigration (1910 to 1950) was one in which Wong's portrayals in film serves as a record of the cinematic consequence of going outside of exogamous marriage. In this way, cinema becomes an archive of the "moral" parameters of heteronormative desire.[47] Under the "norm" of nationalism, marriage within ethnic nationality on behalf of clan purity has been the historical ideal for most cultures. (Claude Levi Strauss developed his structuralist theory through those kinship rules.) The logic of nationalism is distinguished by an understanding that citizenship originates from being born in one's homeland, and as Spivak

suggests, to "naturalize" is to adopt a nation by proving a "private conviction of special birth."[48] She goes on to explain that citizenship is premised on the belief in an abstracted maternity, in which, to "legalize a simulacrum of displaced birth… becomes an actual birthright for the next generation."[49] The granting of naturalization papers is a replication of the birth certificate, representing the legal documentation of the namesake's new "nationality" for generations to come.

Alienation Effect and the Mistranslation of Gendering

The mainstream narratives of film are informed by the politics of citizenship because both are contingent on the acceptance of a fantasy. In Chang's re-translation of the cinematic text, the two Asian bodies representing the Benjamin and Wong characters are no longer a threat to the original immigration marriage laws. The historical norm of legislated desire was kept intact, but it is within this imaginary context that the meaning of Chang's video is representative of the historical drama in association with long-held illusions required for citizenship in the theatre of immigration. During Brecht's moment of Marxist criticism, he saw great potential in an expositive "live" theatre that can examine all the events of life: "Everything must be seen from the social standpoint…a new theatre will find the alienation effect necessary for the criticism of society and for historical reporting on changes already accomplished."[50] Brecht contributed an important methodology for translating social positions and relations of power according to the roles that people play in capitalist society. Related to contemporary performance art, Amelia Jones explains how "body art does not strive toward a utopian redemption but, rather, places the body/self within the realm of the aesthetic *as a political domain*," which shares affinity with Brecht's objectives for theatre.[51]

Fig. 8 Mei Lanfang and 9. Mei Lanfang as Yu-Niang, Peking Opera, *Han Yu Niang. 1930s*

As effective as Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* has been to performance history, Chinese theorist Wu Zuguang asserts that alienation effect derives from a *mistranslation* of the motivations of Chinese theatre. Wu argues that "Stanislavsky believed in the 'fourth wall,' Brecht wanted to demolish it, while for Mei Lanfang such a wall didn't exist, since the Chinese theatre has always

been so highly conventionalized."[52] The innovator of Peking Opera, Lanfang is perhaps the most famous transnational actor during the 1920s-30s period who was known around the world, receiving honorary degrees from Pomona College and University of Southern California.[53] (Fig.8) He was descendent from four generations of male actors using the female name "Mei" as their stage name, having first cross-dressed for the stage at the age of eleven.[54] (Fig.9) The point was to create a "realism" around the change of genders, unlike the costume change in *The Good Woman of Szechuan.* Brecht believes that the Chinese actor "makes it clear that he knows he is being looked at."[55] To him, the transparency of the actor's relationship to his character was the distinguishing element of Chinese opera, a tradition in which the actor is always the spectator of his own performance. But for the Chinese viewer of Peking Opera, Wu suggests the expectations were nearly opposite of Brecht's alienation. The artform had long relied on a system of codes and gestures to express the meaning of the play, and viewers were encouraged to fall under the spell of the drama and buy into the illusion of title *dan* female characters who were traditionally played by male actors. Similar to the training of the Italian castrato, the opportunity for boy-actors was premised on the aesthetic protocol of excluding females from the stage.

The disjunction in Brecht's political use of his alienation effect was in advocating its ability to "underline the historical nature of a given social condition"; meanwhile, the very historical conditions in China were overlooked in terms of the politics that perpetuated the taboo against female actors on the public stage.[56] Chinese opera denied female actors the right to play their own female roles in the same way that "yellowface" denied Chinese actors the opportunity to play Chinese roles in film. China in the 1930s was in the middle of the radical movement called *xin nuxing* (new woman) in which women's roles in the opera were finally being played by women actors. Carol Martin sums up the "trans"nationalist differences:

> For feminist theatre in the U.S., cross-gender casting has been a major means of exposing the conventions of gender. For the Chinese *xin nuxing* movement, cross-gender casting was the major means of excluding women from the stage. Women playing women was the radical new means of putting the physical signs of the actor and the performer's body in historical context. [57]

The asymmetries of theoretical Brecht are nothing more than its development in the "globalized framework of encounter and exchange" under Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's argument that today's power relations "are connected to inequalities that result from earlier forms of globalization."[58] The "trans" for theorizing transnational studies of sexuality takes into account the circulation of identities no differently than the flow of goods and people in global capitalism. Acts of mis-interpretation contribute nonetheless to the current model of a fluid nationality.

In her rewriting of the 1930s *Chinoiserie* filmscript, Chang questions the fluidity of cult manifestations that are always bound to the fantasy of nationality. As a spectator of Anna May Wong, Benjamin obviously plays with the spectacle of Oriental desire. He had explained clearly the way in which "film responds to the shrivelling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the 'personality' outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality,' the phony spell of a commodity."[59] Here, the title *Die Ware Liebe,* "the commodity love," serves as an ironic example, and Anna May Wong appears as the object of Benjamin's fake aura. Wong's Hollywood persona and her true "self" were generally indistinguishable from the industry's creation of the exotic female Asian stereotype. But Chang's film turns the focus onto the object of Benjamin himself as he is the title character in *Die Ware Liebe.* Whether the viewer could even find plausible the sexual fantasy of Wong and Benjamin becomes a "testing" of the cult value of the film actor: could the viewer actually fall under the spell of the Chinese actor in the role of the Benjamin "character-type"? In the case of audiences in New York and Berlin where *Die Ware Liebe* was first shown, and in the few times that I've presented this work for an academic audience, the Benjamin character has often caused a nervous reaction – usually, the audience cannot "believe" in his persona in the sex scene since the pornographic context can be viewed as a slight to the philosopher. Benjamin is lionized as the author of the holy grail of the "work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction." Chang also noted that when she first exhibited the video installation at the Mary Boone gallery, her work was criticized for being too "didactic." Amidst the denial of the libidinal economy of intellectual practices, the alienation effect functions to acknowledge one's own desire in the act of interpretation. It is precisely the

erotic narrative in Chang's conceptual defamiliarization that is meant to imagine something entirely different in contrast to the intellectual aura of the great literary critic who changed the contemporary understanding of mechanical reproduction. The bodily intertwining of the eminent film theorist and the ultimate film fetish functions as an embodied metaphor for the trans-libidinal co-mingling of separate histories, philosophies, and *nationalities*. Thus, in viewing the historical object of Benjamin, *Die Ware Liebe* raises the very condition from which his writing about Wong is "translated," the condition of desire based on the different priorities within cult intellectual interests.

Alienation Effect of Yellowface and Nationalism

As this essay has sought to bring to light, the cinematic apparatus had profound effects since the audience identifies with the camera, not the "real" person/actor of the film. In the 1930s, "yellowface" characterizations by white actors would enable the audience to accept the narrative portraits of the Chinese. By casting Benjamin in Hu's cinematic Chinese body, Chang reverses the order in which white actors were cast in Chinese roles such as Luise Rainer and Paul Muni in the leading parts for Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* (1931). (Fig.11) Anna May Wong understood clearly that the good roles depicting Chinese characters were reserved for white actors. Much like Brechtian distanciation, the viewers of yellowface cannot fully "believe" that Rainer and Muni are actually Chinese, but they can safely fall in love along with the characters who are in truth white people. As exemplified by Anna May Wong, the eroticized female character in the Chinese body follows a different viewing convention. Chan describes the logic of the narrative as "the European American male writers' fantasy of Asian women lusting after European American men." [60] The very crux of orientalism in the yellowface form of power is through the appropriation of the Chinese body itself and its subjugation through invented narrative.

Films were also being made in Shanghai during the 1930s and women actors such as Hu Die and Ruan Lingyu were the cinematic counterparts to Anna May Wong. At the time, the Guomingdang nationalist party was the ruling party of China during the period before the civil war with the Communist party and at the onset of Japanese military aggression in 1932.[61] During the same year, Josef von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express* had just opened and Paramount

brought the film to Shanghai wherein Wong was cast in perhaps her most famous role along with Marlene Dietrich and Warner Oland in the film. Wong played the prostitute Hui Fei, another of her type-casted immoral women, in a story set in the realpolitics of Shanghai. China's last dynasty had fallen and Japan had taken over Manchuria, meanwhile, the stage was being set for the political scene of Chinese Communism. *Shanghai Express*'s sophisticated plot involved opportunistic men and women, out to experience adventurous desire in the cosmopolitanism of modern Shanghai. The train becomes a liminal "trans"nationalist space to contain the characters in the setting of a journey.

Wong had travelled to China in 1936 partly to see if she could move back to her ancestral home, since her father and most of her family had moved back to Guangdong province.[62] During her visit to Shanghai, she met with her friend Mei Lanfang from the Peking Opera and she visited the national film board in Nanking.[63] By then, *Shanghai Express* had been banned by the Guomindang because its subjects of licentious behaviours and prostitution were an embarrassment to Shanghai. Paramount disregarded the ban and ignored the censors' demands in China. Chan suggests that whilst attending a banquet hosted by the Guomindang, Wong received the brunt of the criticisms for her portrayal of prostitutes and dubious women in American films.[64] The idea that she was no different than the character she portrayed brought reprimands from the officials, and later from the newspapers and magazines circulating in China. She was thought to have represented China in a shameful way. On the other hand, Warner Oland, who was well known in China for his yellowface portrayal of Charlie Chan, was lauded as a great actor because it was obvious that he was not the character he represented. In *Shanghai Express*, his character Henry Chang was a warlord who raped Hui Fei (Wong's character). She was of course killed off in the end, this time apparently for her illicit lesbian desire toward the Marlene Dietrich character.

Fig. 12. Anna May Wong, Schmutziges Geld (Dirty Money, also called Show Life in the UK) (1928) Richard Eichberg, Berlin, 1928 FILM CLIP

In China, the mistranslated cinematic persona placed the Chinese -American female body into the convenient submissive role for representing patriarchal nationalist power. Spivak asserts that for a descriptive heteronormativity, "woman is the most primitive instrument of

nationalism."[65] Amidst the different histories of feminist resistances, Chang raises the spectre of Wong in a way that confounds the historical master narratives of film by focusing on the linguistic punctum, the "touch," in order to show that cinematic nationalism was always a sensual and visual process. As an additional film loop in the installation, titled *Laotze Missing* (2009), Chang includes a three-minute clip of the 1928 silent film *Schmutziges Geld* (1928), also called *Show Life*. (Fig.12) In one act of the movie, Wong plays the role of the target for a knife thrower. As each frame flickers on the screen, the viewer eventually sees Wong's bodily outline showing that she is not there when the knife thrower misses and hits the spot where her body would have been. In this one scene, Wong glances knowingly at the viewer to suggest that this time, she had escaped the inevitability of her cinematic death.

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[1] Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," *Artforum* (March, 2007).p.278.

[2] Walter Benjamin, ""Gespräch mit Anne May Wong,"*Die literarische Welt*, No. 27 (July, 1928).

[3] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, *Selected Writings*, Volume 1, 1913-1926 (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996).p.254.
[4] As quoted in Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).pp.77-78.
[5] I am indebted to Patty Chang for providing information for this paper throughout. Also for the primary resources at the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles.
[6] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999).p.222.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, tr. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998).p.99.
[9] Rey Chow, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking About Capture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).p.2.
[10] Ibid.p.28.
[11] From Bertolt Brecht, *Diaries 1920-1922,* reprinted in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).p.99.
[12] Nikos Papastergiadis, "A Breathing Space for Aesthetics and Politics: An Introduction to Jacques Rancière," *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol.3, No.7/8 (2014).p.5.
[13] Ibid.p.6.
[14] Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," *Artforum* (March, 2007).p.280
[15] See Alisa Solomon, *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1997).p.74.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend.*p.77.
[18] See Shirley Jennifer Lim, "'Speaking German Like Nobody's Business': Anna May Wong, Walter Benjamin, and the Possibilities of Asian American Cosmopolitanism," *Journal of Transnational American Studies,* Vol.4, No.3 (2012).p.3. Lim suggests the passage reveals Benjamin's desire for reconciling identity: "An eloquent man of letters, Benjamin is stymied by the paradox of Wong's cosmopolitan western modernity and racialized Chinese body. Although he invokes the national to describe the racial, he wants to merge her Chinese and western

identities. In fact, the subtitle of this essay, 'A Chinoiserie from the Old West,' indicates his fascination with her complicated and contradictory star image."(p.7.)

[19] Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).p.67.

[20] Lim, "'Speaking German Like Nobody's Business': Anna May Wong, Walter Benjamin, and the Possibilities of Asian American Cosmopolitanism."p.6.

[21] Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 2014).p.640.

[22] Quoted in Lim, "'Speaking German Like Nobody's Business': Anna May Wong, Walter Benjamin, and the Possibilities of Asian American Cosmopolitanism."p.5.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan,* tr.John Willett (London: Bloomsbury, 1985).p.v.

[25] Ibid.p.vi.

[26] Ibid.p.v.

[27] Solomon, *Re-Dressing the Canon.*p.79.

[28] Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London and NY: Verso, 2000).p.29.

[29] See Tatsuji Iwabuchi,"Brecht Reception in Japan, The Perspective of theatrical Practice" in Antony Tatlow and Tak-Wai Wong, *Brecht and East Asian Theatre* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1982).p.115.

[30]Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan*.p.vi.

[31] As noted by Chang to the author.

[32] Transcribed from the *Die Ware Liebe* video.

[33] Ibid.p.223. Benjamin cites Luigi Pirandello, *Si Gira,* quoted by Leon Pierre-Quint, "Signification du cinema,"*L'Art cinematographique, op.cit.,*pp.14-15.

[34] Ibid.

[35] As noted by Chang to the author.

[36] Anthony B. Chan, *Perpetually Cool: the Many Lives of Anna May Wong (1905-1961)*, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2007).p.50-1.

[37] Ibid.p.51.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.p.52.

[40] Ibid.p.53.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Gabriel Chin, "Preserving Racial Identity: Population Patterns and the Application of Anti-Miscegenation Statutes to Asian Americans, 1910-1950," *Journal of Asian Law* (May, 2002).p.1.

[43] Ibid.p.2.

[44] George Anthony Peffer, "Forbidden Families: Emigration Experiences of Chinese Women Under the Page Law, 1875-1882," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Fall, 1986) and Ben Railton, *The Chinese Exclusion Act* (NY:Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).p.25.

[45] Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator." p.278.

[46] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Nationalism and the Imagination," *Lectora,* Vol.15 (2009).

[47]See Jane Chin Davidson, "Displacements of the Desiring Machine," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies,* Vol.14, No.3 (2012).p.381.The nineteenth-century manifestations of "race" and queer in the historically "white" entertainment sphere illustrated an "abnormal" sexuality to the public that potentially "freed the viewer from the pressing rigours of judging normal sexuality as well as normal 'race' during the period when biopower became the force of the normalizing state." Jane Chin Davidson, "Displacements of the Desiring Machine," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies,* Vol.14, No.3 (2012).p.381.

[48] Spivak, "Nationalism and the Imagination," pp.75,80.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Bertolt Brecht, "On Chinese Acting,"*The Tulane Drama Review,* Vol.6, No.1 (Sept.,1961). p.136.

[51] Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).p.13.

[52] Wu Zuguang, Huang Zuolin and Mei Shaowu, *Peking Opera and Mei Lanfang* (Beijing: New World Press, 1981).p.19. See also, Chou Hui-ling, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," *TDR (1988-)*, Vol.41, No.2 (Summer, 1997).
[53] Zuguang, *Peking Opera and Mei Lanfang*.p.52. Wu Zuguang suggests that he was both a successor and a pioneer of Chinese opera.
[54] Ibid.pp.8, 30.
[55] Brecht, "On Chinese Acting."p.130.
[56] Ibid.p.136.
[57] Carol Martin, "Brecht, Feminism, and Chinese Theatre," *TDR(1988-),* Vol.43, no.4.(Winter, 1999).p.83.
[58] Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, "Global Identities: Theorizing Transnational Studies of Sexuality," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol.7, No.4 (2001).p.663.
[59] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999).p.224.
[60] Chan, *Perpetually Cool: The Many Lives of Anna May (1905-1961)*.p.169.
[61] Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend.* P.144.
[62] Ibid.p.150.
[63] Ibid.p.148.
[64] Chan, *Perpetually Cool: The Many Lives of Anna May (1905-1961)*.p.117.
[65] Spivak, "Nationalism and the Imagination."p.75.