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Catherine Gomes, “‘The Era Of Lustrous Screen Sirens Lives On, Thousands Of Miles From Hollywood’: The Cross-Cultural Reception Of Chinese Martial Arts Cinema’s Sword-wielding Actresses,” pp. 70-93.

Between 2000 and 2004, cross-cultural film critics in the English-speaking West became fascinated with three Chinese films which did exceptionally well with film audiences in America and elsewhere: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Lee 2000), *Hero* (Zhang 2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (Zhang 2004). All three films from the particular genre of martial arts cinema known as *wuxia* or swordplay place their narratives in ancient China. Cross-cultural criticism was particularly enamoured by physically strong Chinese warrior women known as Asian Swordswomen. These women were recognised by their exceptional martial arts skills which were either equal or better than their male counterparts. Some critics, for instance, comment almost exclusively on the Asian Swordswomen characters, often reading them from a feminist-cultural studies structure. Other critics, however, choose to write on the actresses who play swordswomen, frequently centring their discussions on Maggie Cheung and Zhang Ziyi, and focusing on their glamorous appeal. This essay investigates this specific aspect of critical audience reception.

Film writers in publications such as the *New York Times*, *The Times*, *People Weekly* and *Time Magazine*, for example, repeatedly compare Cheung and Zhang favourably to classical Hollywood figures of glamour. Cheung, who appears in

Hero, is an internationally-renowned Hong Kong-based actress who has been making films in Asia since the early 1980s. Zhang, who appears in all three films, is the most well known Mainland Chinese actress presently working in the Hollywood film industry.

These actresses have impressed cross-cultural film critics with their respective performances in previous films. Cheung has won critical acclaim and international awards for her performances in Hong Kong and French productions. For example, in 1992, Cheung won a best actress award at the Berlin International Film Festival for *Centre Stage* (Kwan 1992) and in 2004 she won a best actress award at the Cannes International Film Festival for *Clean* (Assayas 2004). Likewise, Zhang has won awards for her acting roles. In 2000, Zhang won the Hundred Flowers Award — Mainland China's equivalent of the Academy Awards — for best actress in *The Road Home* (Zhang 1999). Zhang has also won critical praise and awards for her role in *Crouching Tiger*. For example, in 2000, the Toronto Film Critics Association named her as best supporting actress while the Chicago Film Critics Association gave her the “Most Promising Actress” award in 2001.

While Cheung and Zhang are accomplished actresses, film commentators in the cross-cultural press often describe them as embodying the glamour of classical Hollywood cinema (1920 to 1960) when reviewing their performances as powerful women in such Chinese films as *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*. What, therefore, are the complexities surrounding the glamorous ethnic female star? Can these complexities be traced to Hollywood's treatment of ethnicity in its classical

period? Both these actresses, particularly Cheung, had been considered glamorous in Asia prior to the releases of *Crouching Tiger, Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*. Does glamour in Asia have the same currency as Hollywood glamour?

Glamour in cinema is complex especially when contextualised within a framework that combines ethnicity with femininity. This essay will show that glamorising Cheung and Zhang is a method by which Chinese femininity is Orientalised by cross-cultural criticism. Orientalising Cheung and Zhang is possibly an avenue that enables cross-cultural film criticism to recognise and make sense of these “foreign” ethnic actresses and their “foreign” ethnic femininity. By referring to discourses on ethnic femininity and ethnic female stars in Hollywood, I will show how glamorising Chinese actresses in the popular press reduces the discomfort of their ethnicity. Chinese ethnicity on screen is threatening because it is connected to the global presence of China as the Asian juggernaut of economic domination. China’s success as an economic powerhouse reinvigorates previous fears of the “yellow peril” in EuroAmerica when the Japanese military showed its might in the Asia-Pacific War and rising numbers of ethnic Chinese immigrants swept across the West in the twentieth century.

Hollywood’s Glamorising of the ethnic actress

Diane Negra’s work on ethnic female stars in Hollywood is particularly useful in shedding light on cross-cultural reception’s linking of Chinese actresses Cheung and Zhang to Hollywood glamour of yesteryear. American audiences, Negra argues, have a complicated dialogue with ethnic female stars and the way their ethnic femininity is narrated on film. On the one hand, ethnic female stars

reinforce national myths of ethnicity in America (Negra 2), particularly with regard to the United State's perception of itself as a plural society that provides a space for individual success regardless of ethnic background. The success ethnic female stars such as Dorothy Dandridge, Mae West, Dolores del Rio and Anna May Wong achieve in Hollywood reinforces the myth of America as a color-blind meritocracy that rewards immigrants with success, if it is attained through hard work and sacrifice (Negra 2-3). On the other hand, ethnic female stars go through a "whitening" processes that makes them less threatening to American audiences. Ethnic femininity on screen, as Negra explains, presents discomfort to audiences as they feel threatened by the non-white Other (5). She explains that while whiteness has been "normalized to the point that it often becomes invisible," ethnicity plays its foil, serving "as a marker of disruption, drawing attention to the precarious cultural power associated with whiteness" (Negra 5) Hence while ethnic female actresses are considered embodying national myths on ethnicity and success, the characters they play are often femme fatales who tear away at the fabric of white patriarchal cultural power.(Negra 2) White femininity on screen, however, is more acceptable and non-threatening.

Hollywood thus attempted to masquerade ethnicity in the way that it approached some "ethnic" stars (S. Berry 108). In her analysis of Rita Hayworth as a symbol of Hollywood's view of ethnicity, McLean explains that Hayworth would not have been able to get good roles and "become a star" unless she transformed herself from Latino Margarita Cansino to American Caucasian Rita Hayworth ("I'm a Cansino" 8-27). Hayworth's Americanness, McLean notes, was

manufactured by the Hollywood studios (“I’m a Cansino” 8-10). Hayworth was told by studio heads of Columbia Pictures to undergo weekly electrolysis treatment of her hairline. This was in order to broaden her forehead so that she would look more Caucasian (McLean “I’m a Cansino” 10). However, while Hayworth and the studios resorted to these extreme measures in order to “Americanise” her, it was her Latin ethnicity and the tropes of sexuality that surrounded this ethnicity that led to her enigmatic star status (McLean “I’m a Cansino” 22). In other words, her ethnicity allowed Hayworth to become the erotic symbol she came to represent in the 1930s and 1940s.

While Hayworth’s ethnicity enabled her to become one of Hollywood’s most famous glamorous stars, it also paradoxically guaranteed her the status as “an American woman” (McLean “I’m a Cansino” 19). Hayworth’s film roles were “most interesting not for their eroticism alone but for the way they integrate [American] sweetness and innocence with erotic power” (McLean “I’m a Cansino” 22). McLean explains that Hayworth’s ethnicity during the height of her popularity in the 1940s and 1950s was all-American because it “represented tradition, stability, and domesticity as well as eroticism” (McLean “I’m a Cansino” 22). Furthermore, McLean agrees with Sarah Berry’s theory that Hollywood glamour girls in the 1930s embodied non-white sensuality with Eurocentric virtue (McLean “I’m a Cansino” 19-22; S. Berry 124-9). Glamour thus becomes acceptable if ethnic femininity is meshed by a veneer of whiteness. This veneer is also evident in the way Chinese femininity is negotiated in the West.

Whitening Chinese Ethnicity: The Complicated World of Color

As I noted, Negra's work shows that the whitening of ethnic female stars is a tool that makes them non-threatening particularly to American audiences. Of the ethnic female star, she observes:

The ethnic female star is a figure of great potential ideological disruption, for she threatens to expose the fragile construction of white, American patriarchy. The transformation narratives in which the ethnic female is often situated are a reflection of a need to strictly control the ideological meanings she carries – meanings which could signify the undoing of a number of taken-for-granted notions of identity which are maintained by the exclusion or denigration of the Other. The representational prominence of ethnic femininity threatens to expose the fact that there is no innate, unique and ahistorical whiteness, Americanness or masculinity”(8).

A key element of Negra's work thus is her observation that audiences find comfort when ethnic actresses in Hollywood undergo a whitening process that erases their ethnic identity both on and off screen. Drawing on previous work by Dyer (42-3), Negra (5) explains that a way in which ethnic actresses were “whitened” was through the use of make-up in order to make them more palatable to the American public.

The whitening of ethnic actresses raised issues in *Irma Vep*, a film starring Maggie Cheung and directed by French filmmaker Oliver Assayas. *Irma Vep* chronicles the remaking of the 1915 French silent film classic *Les Vampires* by has-been director René Vidal (Jean-Pierre Léaud). While all the characters in the film are fictional, Cheung plays herself as the actress Vidal chooses to play the title role of vampire cat-burglar Irma Vep, a character in the original *Les Vampires*. While the film provides a fictional behind-the-scenes look at the making of a classic French film, the true focus of *Irma Vep* is the contestation issuing from the directorial choice of Cheung in a role originally played by popular French silent

film star Muisdora. While there is at least one racist in the film whose dislike of Cheung in a French role results in his successful scheme to have her replaced by a French actress, others view Cheung through an Orientalist lens. For example, Cheung is Orientalised by Zoe (Nathalie Richard), Vidal's gay costume designer. Zoe's attraction to Cheung causes her to eroticise the Chinese actress by taking her to a sex shop and dressing her in a latex cat-suit. Another example that sees Cheung Orientalised is through Vidal himself who views Cheung as an exotic. Vidal's choice of Cheung as his lead actress is based solely on his obsession with her in the Hong Kong martial arts film *The Heroic Trio* (1993), a film in which Cheung plays Thief Catcher, one of three glamorous female heroes. Before *The Heroic Trio*, Vidal knew nothing about Cheung. He Orientalises Cheung by erasing her identity and replacing it with that of the fictional but glamorous Thief Catcher. His obsession with Cheung as Thief Catcher prevents him from getting to know her either professionally or personally.

However, Vidal also seems to be aware that Cheung's ethnicity requires concealing. So he "remakes" her as a French woman by glamorising Cheung through costume and makeup. In character as Irma Vep, Cheung is made to not only wear a latex costume but thick white makeup. The end result is a ridiculously clownish-looking Cheung. Equating whiteness with nationality is also a point raised by Negra. She suggests that Hollywood whitened ethnic actresses as a form of Americanizing them (3). To be white, in other words, is to be American. The whitening of ethnic actresses therefore has a dual but related process where they are Americanised in order to reduce the perceived threat their cultures present to

Western audiences. The whitening of Cheung, however becomes more complicated as she continues to be made-up while in-between the filming scenes in *Les Vampires*. Cheung's complicated dual identity promotes hostility during an interview with a French journalist (Antoine Basler) who questions her ethnic authenticity by probing her on her knowledge of Hong Kong and French cinemas.

Whitening Chinese ethnicity makes Cheung and Zhang not only more palatable with cross-cultural audiences but it also makes their ethnicity less threatening. Cross-cultural criticism's whitening of Cheung and Zhang by describing them as embodiments of the glamour of a bygone Hollywood era could well be a process by which Western audiences reduce the perceived threat of China. Referring the Chinese face to a framework that looks to the past rather to the future becomes, thus, is a means by which to cope with the current unstoppable rise of China. The twenty-first century has witnessed China's burgeoning presence on the world stage. While the Chinese face has been around since the 1800s with the establishment of Chinese settlements in Europe, the Americas and various parts of the Asia-Pacific, it is only recently that China has become a powerful economic world player with significant impact in the West. China today is the world's fastest growing economy with almost every first world nation attempting to bask in the glow of Chinese economic success.

Hollywood, for example, has been making headway into China with the producers of films such as *Crouching Tiger, Big Shot's Funeral* (Feng 2001) and *Kill Bill Vols 1 & 2* (Tarantino 2003 & 2004) looking towards China for talent and resources. While Chinese films have a niche market in the West, most prominently

with Hong Kong-made martial arts films such as *Fist of Fury* (Lo 1972) and *Five Fingers of Death* (Jeong 1973) in the 1970s, it was not until 2000 and beyond that Chinese productions achieved international mainstream success. *Crouching Tiger* and *Hero*, for instance, were phenomenal box office successes in the English-speaking West. Earning US\$128 million from U.S. box office receipts alone, director Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger* created history as the most financially successful Chinese film in cinema history when it was released in 2000. Not to be outdone, Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, released in 2004, became one of only two films — the other being the Hong Kong-made martial arts film *The Hammer of God* (Wang 1970) released in the U.S. in 1973 — to successfully open at the number one position in the U.S. box office (Desser 26). *Hero* also earned almost US\$54 million at the box office. Following the release of *Hero* the same year was *House of Flying Daggers*, another Zhang Yimou-directed film which earned moderate success at the U.S. box office.

The success of the Chinese face is also documented in the successful international careers of ethnic Chinese stars. Cheung and Zhang, for example, are accomplished international actresses as they both have carved careers in Asia and elsewhere. In Asia, besides *Hero* they have also appeared in the much anticipated Wong Kar-wai film *2046* (Wong 2004). However, it is the films made outside Asia which have made Cheng and Zhang more internationally accessible. Cheung, for example, starred in Olivier Assayas' 2004 film *Clean* as drug addict Emily Wang; a role that garnered her the best actress award at the Cannes International Film Festival that year. Zhang is currently perhaps the most successful Asian actress in

Hollywood. She appeared as the villainous henchwoman Hu Li in *Rush Hour 2* (Ratner 2001) and as the protagonist Nitta Sayuri in *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Marshall 2005).

Paradoxically, this international fascination with China and Chinese actresses is accompanied by a global sense of fear. Real or imagined, this fear of an Asia threatening Euro-Americans, however, is not a twenty-first century phenomenon but one that has been around well before then, particularly in Hollywood. In her groundbreaking study on the early history of Hollywood's portrayal of Asians in cinema, Gina Marchetti notes that Hollywood highlights the element of race and gender in its depiction of the Asian woman as "sexually available to the white hero" and in constant need of rescue by a white man (113). In early post-war films, non-Asian women such as Latina characters like Pearl Chavez (Jennifer Jones) in *Duel in the Sun* (Vidor 1946) were often portrayed as passionate and feisty while Caucasian women could be represented as strong-willed, like Angie Lowe (Geraldine Page) in *Hondo* (Farrow 1953). In her discussion of *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*, Marchetti draws attention to the deterioration-of-the-independence of female (Asian) protagonist Han Suyin (Jennifer Jones). Han Suyin starts out as a medical doctor only to devolve into a lonely, lost and unemployed woman due to the death of her Caucasian lover. Peter Feng observes that Suzie Wong (Nancy Kwan), the "Hong Kong hooker-with-a-heart", developed into the prototype for Hollywood's perception and idealisation of the Asian woman (Feng 32-5). Suzie, as Marchetti notes, was "illiterate, orphaned, sexually abused as a child [and] brutalised regularly as a prostitute" (Marchetti

113). It is only through her romance with Caucasian Robert Lomax (William Holden) that she is “rescued” from an unhappy and lonely life of prostitution in the sleazy alleyways of 1960s Hong Kong.

Marchetti speculates that this is drawn from a fantastical fear of a “threatening” Asia. In her study of the Hollywood narrative of interracial sex and romance between the Asian female and the Caucasian male, Marchetti explains that, rather than being a mere erotic fantasy, the Asian woman is actually an Orientalist signifier for “Asia, Asians and Asian themes” (113). Reading the Asian woman within a postcolonial and poststructuralist feminist framework, Marchetti argues that Hollywood’s insistent depiction of the Asian woman as feminine and passive is fundamentally linked to the perceived threat of Asia as the “yellow peril” (2). She notes that between 1915 and 1986, the West, particularly the United States, was concerned with Asia’s emergence as both a military and capitalist threat to Western hegemony, especially in the period just after World War II (1-3). The tropes of the yellow peril “contributed to the notion that all non-white people are by nature physically and intellectually inferior, morally suspect, heathen, licentious, disease-ridden, feral, violent, uncivilized, infantile, and in need of the guidance of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants” (Marchetti 1). One way to nullify the threat of the yellow peril is to feminise Asia through Orientalist portrayals of the Asian woman. Hollywood narratives therefore depicted romantic Asian-Caucasian sexual liaisons in order to ideologically “uphold and sometimes subvert culturally accepted notions of nation, class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation” (Marchetti 1).

Marchetti's work on the Asian woman in Hollywood cinema reveals the way Hollywood positioned her as powerless stereotypes, thus signifying the West's relationship with Asia. Her work clearly draws on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. "The relationship between Occident and Orient," Said wrote, "is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony ... [t]he Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental' in all those ways considered commonplace ... but also because it *could be*—that is, submitted to being *made* Oriental" (Said 5-6). The relationship between the East (Orient) and West (Occident) therefore becomes one in which the powerful, masculinised West devours and thereafter represents the feminised East. This patronising relationship was not only prevalent between imperial nations and their colonies but also between non-imperial Western and Eastern countries.

The rise of China today has thus led to an almost knee-jerk reaction to disempower China, if not literary, at least figuratively. One way by which this is achieved is through cross-cultural criticism's description of Cheung and Zhang as glamorous within a classical Hollywood framework. By glamorising these actresses, cross-cultural film critics assign the codes attached to ethnic glamour, thus making Cheung and Zhang palatable and non-threatening to EuroAmerican audiences. Such connections are not surprising since as cultural theorist Rey Chow (26-35) and other scholars have long argued, that Chinese femininity is symbolic of Chinese tradition, if not nationhood. Cross-cultural critics thus read Chinese glamour from an Orientalist lens, thus maintaining the Occident's hegemonic relationship with the Orient.

The Glamorous Maggie Cheung and Zhang Ziyi

Adam Mars-Jones from *The Times* observes that it is difficult to view the female fighters in *Crouching Tiger* as anything other than glamorous, even though they resort to physical force. Rather, he describes them as “glamorous women warriors who complain about their combat-hardened hands while the camera shows us only softness”. Charles Taylor of *Salon.Com* describes Maggie Cheung’s performance in *Hero* as comparable with the legendary stars of the silent film era. In reference to Greta Garbo, Taylor observes that Cheung exudes “a poetry and mystery that’s Garboesque” as even “her eyes are capable of transmitting hauteur, disdain, wounded eroticism and unutterable sadness”. Likewise, the *New York Times*’ chief film critic Manohla Dargis finds Zhang’s performance in *House of Daggers* to be reminiscent of classical Hollywood glamour. Dargis states:

There are images of Ms. Zhang in *Flying Daggers*...[w]ith her alabaster skin and dark pooling eyes, her body adorned in rich brocades, and bathing alfresco while discreetly veiled by green woodland; Ms. Zhang doesn’t just look bewitchingly lovely; she looks like an MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer] pinup.

Cross-cultural film critics note that *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* present a return to classical Hollywood glamour, as an anonymous article by the *UPI NewsTrack* entitled “Chinese Filmmakers Embrace Glamour” shows. This classical Hollywood glamour, according to Dargis, ceased with the end of the studio system in the 1950s and the death of glamorous film actress Marilyn Monroe in 1962. The *UPI NewsTrack* article observes that the “current crop of Chinese filmmakers has gone back 60 years to create a generation of classical Hollywood-style glamour films”. Dargis states

These days no one does glamour better than Chinese filmmakers. In American film, where violence invariably trumps sex, glamour tends to surface in period stories like *L.A. Confidential*, where the director Curtis Hanson explored the distance between gleaming false fronts and hard-boiled reality. David Lynch wields glamour to similar if more disturbing effect in films like *Mulholland Drive*, while Steven Soderbergh likes to put an old-studio polish on bagatelles like *Ocean's Twelve*. Meanwhile, in the major Chinese cinemas - those of mainland China, Hong Kong and, to an extent, Taiwan - glamour is serious business. Much as it was in Classical Hollywood, glamour in contemporary Chinese film is a device, a disguise and a luminous end in itself.

Dargis explains that her understanding of Hollywood glamour is based on glamour photography during the classical Hollywood period. She observes that this kind of glamour was promoted by glamour photographers “who created the shimmering images that sold the stars and their movies to the public”. Dargis clarifies that it was through glamour photography that Hollywood film stars were immortalised as icons of glamour. She observes that the rise of the Chinese screen goddess is due to Chinese filmmakers being able to recreate the Hollywood glamour of the 1930s and 1940s. However, Cheung and Zhang were not the first Chinese actresses who played strong women to be considered glamorous in the West. That honour goes to Mainland Chinese actress Gong Li.

Scholars (Chow; Chu; C. Berry 159-80; Kaplan 141-54) have been describing Gong Li as glamorous since her appearance as the strong yet visually eroticised woman in Zhang Yimou melodramas such as *Red Sorghum/Hong Gao Liang* (Zhang 1987), *Judou* (Zhang 1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang 1991) and *The Story of Qiu Ju* (Zhang 1992). Internationally respected film commentator Bernice Reynaud (12-3) and the *New York Times*' Dargis describe Gong as China's glamour ambassador. Gong was also the first Chinese person to grace international

glamour magazines such as *Elle*. She was also the first Chinese person to become spokesperson for fashion labels such as the cosmetics company Maybelline (Reynaud 12-3).

Reynaud observes in *Sight and Sound* that it was through the depiction of tortured yet glamorous women in Zhang Yimou's films that Gong was turned into an international celebrity (Reynaud 12). In all these films, Gong plays the tragic heroine who is often faced with adversity beyond her control. Gong thus became associated with the tragic heroine whose strength is her own resolve. However, this heroine lived either a sad life of hardship or was eventually killed. In *Red Sorghum*, Gong plays Jui'er, a woman who is forced to marry a leprosy wine owner. Instead of being defeated through a forced marriage, Jui'er forms a quasi-matriarchal community. Tragically, this thriving community is destroyed when the Japanese invade China. In resisting the Japanese, Jui'er is killed. This film was followed by *Judou*, a tragic romance about a woman — Judou — who is married to an abusive and infertile man. However, she falls in love with his nephew and bears his son. Judou is then forced to raise the baby as her husband's child. The next Zhang Yimou film that Gong starred in was *Raise the Red Lantern* in 1991, a film about a nineteen year old bride who is forced to wed a wealthy fifty year old man who already has three other wives. The film's narrative follows each wife's attempts to outdo the others for his affections. Each of these films was nominated for "Best Foreign Film" at the Academy Awards: *Judou* in 1990 and *Raise the Red Lantern* in 1992, respectively (Farquhar). This gave these films more international coverage. *Raise the Red Lantern* was followed by the 1992 film *The Story of Qiu*

Ju about a pregnant woman seeking redress from Chinese authorities for the violent treatment of her husband by the village head.

Cross-cultural film critics recognise Gong's signature character of the strong yet tragic heroine. A.O. Scott of the *New York Times*, for example, describes Gong as "an icon, alternatively tragic and triumphant, of female heroism in the face of cruelties meted out by repressive marriage customs, feudal social relations, Japanese aggression and corruption of the Shanghai underworld". Writing in a similar vein for *Senses of Cinema*, Chinese cinema scholar Mary Farquhar observes that Gong's presence in films such as *Red Sorghum*, *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* has been used to rethink and rework early twentieth century debates on "Chinese patriarchy, liberation and modernity" (Farquhar). Gong thus helped pave the way for Chinese actresses, particularly those who portray strong women, to be described by film critics as glamorous.

Examined more closely, cross-cultural criticism's description of Cheng and Zhang as glamorous reveals a tendency to eroticise them. This is particularly evident in film criticism on Zhang in the press. Jami Bernard of *New York Daily News* and James Berardinelli of *Reelviews* both write that Zhang is as seductive as she is physically powerful. Bernard observes that although Zhang as Mei is "meltingly beautiful", she is also "quick on her feet" and "downright ambidextrous". He implies that Mei's beauty hides her martial arts skills, an ability that mystifies and clouds the judgement of the male authorities. He argues that Mei's ambidextrousness mirrors that of Zhang herself, whose allure lies in her "seeming delicacy" hiding "a roundhouse kick that could knock out a mule".

Berardinelli notes that Zhang is “more than just a pretty face” as she “captures the arrogance and vulnerability of Mei perfectly”. Zhang, he explains, can be “sexy and seductive one moment”, but “deadly the next”. Claudia Puig, of *USA Today*, points out that swordplay heightens Zhang’s sexuality. She observes that while Zhang may have played a “strong-willed and courageous young warrior” in *Crouching Tiger*, she has “an even more powerful and luminous presence” in *House of Flying Daggers*. This “powerful and luminous presence”, Puig notes, is illustrated in the way that Zhang easily shifts from “bewitching and elaborate dance” to “masterful swordfighting”.

Glamour, in other words, is used as a lens to eroticise the Chinese actress. However, while cross-cultural film critics describe Cheung and Zhang as erotic, they also note that being identified as glamorous has allowed these actresses to secure contracts with the high fashion industry. Doing so allows these actresses not only to become more familiar to cross-cultural audiences but also reinforces their glamour.

A few months after *Crouching Tiger*’s international release, *The Sunday Times* featured a cover story on the glamorous actresses from this film entitled “Crouching Men, Flying Tigresses”. The article observes that “the stars can sweat and kick butt on film but they are photographed outside films in glamorous gowns.” *The Sunday Times* also notes that the glamour of these Asian Swordsman actresses, namely Zhang Ziyi and Michelle Yeoh, is further exposed when they appear in the media, especially at award ceremonies and in

advertisements. Zhang and Cheung have become spokespersons for luxury goods such as Tag Heuer and cosmetics company Maybelline (Bhattacharya).

In 2001 Swiss watchmaker Tag Heuer launched a print campaign of its “Alter Ego” collection of women’s watches, featuring Zhang, together with Olympian Marion Jones and Spanish actress Ines Sastre. This was the year that *Rush Hour 2* reached cinemas; and a year after the release of *Crouching Tiger*. According to Tag Heuer’s president Jean-Christophe Babin, the women were chosen because they “symbolize the values of Tag Heuer women...endowed with strength of character, they are sensual and elegant” (“Alter Ego or “The Other Face of TAG Heuer”). The campaign was featured in the October and November issues of fashion magazine trendsetters *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *House and Garden*, *InStyle* and *Conde Nast Traveler* in 2001 (“Tag Heuer Watches Wind Up for Women’s Intro”).

The clothes and accessories that Zhang wears have also become a significant aspect of her status as a glamorous actress. For example, *People Weekly* reported that Zhang wore a Bulgari custom-made 42-carat diamond necklace and 3-carat diamond earrings for 77th *Academy Awards* (2005) (“The Affair of the Necklace” 127). *InStyle* dedicated a fashion spread to her, photographing her dressed in elegant designer wear by designers such as Vera Wang and Chanel (“Ziyi Zhang Beyond the Pale” 272). In addition, Zhang does endorsements for Maybelline, Pantene, Tag Heuer, Coca-Cola and Visa (Bhattacharya).

So far I have suggested that the process by which cross-cultural critics respond to the Chinese actress as glamorous is a means by which they render

Chinese ethnicity non-threatening. This, however, differs significantly from the way glamour is approached when contextualised within a local Chinese framework. Such difference serves to highlight cross-cultural criticism as a problematic discourse due to possible mis-readings of Chinese glamour.

Glamour In Chinese-Language Cinema

Scholars from Chinese-language cultures, such as Hong Kong and Mainland China, interpret glamour in Chinese-language films from their own culturally-specific perspective. For example, Hong Kong academic Stephen K. Chan reads the glamorous Chinese actress who plays the Asian Woman Warrior as a national allegory of Hong Kong. Chan argues that “Chinese glamour” in Chinese-language cinema is used as a site to challenge and question rather than to influence society, culture and politics. This reading of Chinese glamour in Hong Kong Cinema is an extension of theorisations about Hong Kong Martial Arts Cinema representing the pulse of the Hong Kong people. Theorists of Hong Kong Martial Arts Cinema, such as Ackbar Abbas (16-62) and David Bordwell (1-17), have observed that this cinema became an important cultural phenomenon in the colony because it represented the traumas and angst the Hong Kong people underwent in anticipation of the 1997 British handover of the colony to Mainland Chinese rule.

Chan reads Chinese glamour as represented by the actresses who play the Hong Kong action heroine. He explains that these actresses, such as Michelle Yeoh, Cynthia Rothrock and Brigitte Lin, become sites for the negotiation of Hong Kong people’s transnational existence in Hong Kong (11-26). The characters these

actresses play negotiate contrary ideological construction of East and West. This East-West dialogue may be represented by Western actresses placed in an Eastern setting or Eastern actresses in a Western setting (Chan 12-4). To illustrate, Rothrock was an American actress working in Hong Kong films such as *The Inspector Wears Skirts* (Chan 1988) and *Blonde Fury* (Hoi & Yuen 1989), while Eastern actress Yeoh played Bond Girl Wai Lin in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (Spottiswoode 1997). However, this East-West relationship can become more complex. Yeoh provides a case in point, since before she became a Hong Kong action star, Yeoh spent some time in Great Britain studying to become a dancer (Au).

However, Chan's most potent example of Hong Kong as a transitional space is witnessed in his discussion of Brigitte Lin's character Asia the Invincible in the 1992 film *Swordsman III: East is Red* (Ching 1992). Chan argues that Lin is a glamorous actress. Her character Asia is also glamorous because of the fashionable clothes s(he) is dressed in (Chan 17). However, Asia is also a transgendered character. Chan suggests that the glamour represented by Asia is a signifier of transgenderism. Chan also notes that this transgenderism is an allegorical site for transnationalism. Like other scholars of Hong Kong culture, Chan reads Asia's transgenderism as representing Hong Kong's transnational position as a space that hosts both the East and the West (Chan 17-8). Hence unlike cross-cultural film critics who use glamour as a recognisable yet complex tool that provides comfort, Chinese glamour is read locally as allegorical, precisely because it has become a culturally-specific nuance.

Conclusion

The description of ethnic Chinese actresses Maggie Cheung and Zhang Ziyi as embodying classical Hollywood glamour in cross-cultural criticism on *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* provides certain revelations concerning the reception of ethnic Chinese femininity, differing from the ways Chinese glamour may be interpreted and consumed in the local context. First, cross-cultural critics make intertextual references to their own cultural knowledge, even though they are writing on a cinema outside of their own language and culture. Here, critics rely on their knowledge of Hollywood's treatment of ethnic femininity as a way to approach the "foreign" Chinese actresses. Second, ethnic Chinese femininity in cinema is a metaphor for China's present global economic success — accomplishments that may be viewed as threatening to the wider EuroAmerican community. Cross-cultural critics thus metaphorically "dis-empower" China by modifying Chinese femininity through a process of "whitening" ethnicity. This "modification" erases the actresses' ethnicity, thereby easing any discomfort cross-cultural audiences may have had with their Chineseness.

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