

East Goes West - Chinese Filmmakers in the United States

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“The Spy Who Loved Me: Affective Game Theory and the Problem of Altruism in *Lust, Caution*”

Lust, Caution (2007)* remains Ang Lee’s most controversial film. Notorious for its graphic sex scenes, which seem to compensate for the oddly platonic lovemaking in *Brokeback Mountain*, Ang Lee’s adaptation of Eileen Chang’s novella earned the NC-17 MPAA rating in the US, which typically guarantees commercial failure. However, its Category III rating in Hong Kong proved a box-office draw, making it the highest grossing Chinese-language film of 2007. Filmgoers in Mainland China were treated to a sanitized version that cut several of the sex scenes and included some “political” edits. Stories abound of Mainland Chinese tourists crossing the border into Hong Kong just to watch the uncensored original. Sex scenes may have brought audiences to the theaters, but *Lust, Caution* set fingers clacking on keyboards for far more interesting reasons.

The film proved divisive amongst critics and audiences whose opinions, Leo Ou-fan Lee explains in “Ang Lee’s *Lust, Caution* and Its Reception,” reflect their political affiliations and tastes. Later scholarship accounts for this odd configuration, even including meta-textual analyses of that discourse. In “Transnational Affect: Cold Anger, Hot Tears, and *Lust, Caution*,” Hsiao-hung Chang argues that these divergent opinions react specifically to the transnational figure of the “Hanjian,” a derogatory term that roughly translates as “race traitor.” Mainland Chinese internet warriors lambast Eileen Chang and Ang Lee as the equivalent of Chinese Uncle Toms, while Taiwanese president Ma Ying Jiu cries tears honoring the patriotic sacrifice of those brave would-be assassins after a screening. These polar reactions represent “affective discharges” that result from the very same “trans-historical force of assemblage in the (post)Cold-war era,” out of which Ang Lee’s adaptation and these subsequent discourses also spring forth. These reactions temporally conflate the World War II collaborators with the political fault lines of the Cold War and aim their abhorrence or sympathy at the present day figure of the cosmopolitan citizen or “global man” represented by those such as Ang Lee and Eileen Chang, who represent a cultural identity divorced from the nationalist project. Whereas Hsiao-hung Chang’s analysis focuses upon these two peculiar reactions, Leo Lee mentions yet a third reaction by American critics, who find Ang Lee’s adaptation stylistically masterful but ultimately derivative of classical Hollywood spy-noir, a “cheap Chinese copy.”

In this paper, I shall focus upon how this third reaction informs this notion of the transnational affective assemblage, for *Lust, Caution* cannot be divorced from norms of the spy-noir genre and melodramatic mode that Eileen Chang and Ang Lee play with so adroitly. By doing so, I conduct a genealogy of the traitor trope found within the literatures of the postcolonial East Asian diasporas. Just as Hsiao-hung Chang demonstrates that divergent reactions to *Lust, Caution* represent outputs of the

same assemblage, I argue that narrative representations of political loyalty and betrayal function similarly as expressions of an assimilatory process insidiously driven by deprivation from and desire for love.