

Ethnic Ghosts in the Asian Shell

Racial Crossover and Transnational Cinema

The growing homogenizing and integrative forces of global capitalism have facilitated the emergence of a pan-Asian popular culture during the last two decades of the twentieth century. While East Asia has been developing into a new hub of corporate capitalism, Asian people, images, and cultural products also simultaneously cross national borders and infiltrate everyday life in the region in multiple areas. Japan's days as an economic superpower may be gone, but its role as a transnational cultural trendsetter in Asia and the Pacific Rim—in cutting-edge music, art, fashion, design, TV drama, comics, and other pop culture categories of every stripe—still has lingering effects. Hong Kong cinema had its heyday in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, edging out Hollywood in East and Southeast Asian markets. The pop stars of Hong Kong have already become household names for many Asians. Korean films, as well as TV dramas and pop singers, are currently sweeping Asia and even the Asian communities on the other side of the Pacific, and could potentially take over the dominant position once occupied by Hong Kong popular culture (Park 2004), though there are also signs to show that this Korean wave is on the wane abroad (Kim 2008). The rapid growth of the mainland Chinese economy and its huge consumer market encourage its neighbors' cultural industries to focus on the transnationalization, or "Asianization," of marketing and advertising.

This chapter discusses the notion of Asia by looking at the (im)possibility of representing an Asian identity in popular films. It first examines the brief history of inter-Asian collaboration in film industries, with a focus on Hong Kong transnational cinema. Although many nations in the region presently are keen on producing so-called Asian films, the visual representation of Asia still remains heterogeneous and problematic. I treat two Chinese-Japanese coproductions, *Sleepless Town* and *Fulltime Killer*, and explore in what ways

the notion of Asia presented in the films designates a failure that indicates the impossibility of a unified image, as well as how antagonism always pertains to the reality of Asia. An analysis of two Hong Kong films that appropriate Japanese culture, *Throw Down* and *Initial D*, follows, and demonstrates how the cross-racial impersonation of one Asian national by another produces an unsettling excess that threatens the unity of ethnic national identity. These racial impersonators constitute a third type of transracial term, that is, an excess, beyond the self-other binarism by converting themselves into “un-Chinese” or “un-Japanese,” and creating an intimate otherness in one’s national self. Such transracial terms dwell within racial boundaries and are immanent in the ghost of racial subjectivity itself.

Transnational cultural interflows and resonance within Asia are primarily founded on the economic synchronicity brought about by the success of capitalist modernity in the region. Unlike Europe—which non-Western people like to conceive as supposedly a single civilization originating in Greece and dominated by Christian religious spirit—Asia is nothing more than a geographical concept that loosely comprises a myriad of coexisting and diverse ethnicities, traditions, religions, languages, and cultures. Even those nations under the Confucian influences of imperial China have very different histories and experiences in their processes of modernization. The only historical reason that Asia has been and still is considered a unit is its intricate relation to the imaginarily unified West. The notion of a single Asia is itself a fantasy of the West, revealing the Orientalist, imperialist, and colonial desires of the eighteenth century onward. But it is precisely because of the hegemony of the West, and the United States in particular, that many Asian countries regard themselves as units of cultural reclamation and self-definition. However, although they define themselves in opposition to the West, secular Asian peoples are by no means hostile to Western culture and values. The contemporary regionalist discourse of Asianism, as Leo Ching (2000: 244) pointedly suggests, is fundamentally complicit with global capitalism, and is a mediatory attempt to converge “the contending forces of global integration and local autonomy.” Most individuals living in the more economically successful Asian countries and cities may find themselves even closer to the United States and Western cultures than to those of their poorer neighbors, even as they insist on their creative hybridity and cultural differences from the West.

Although it is all too obvious that the concept of Asia was and still is a Western construct, I want to look at the dimension of “Asia” as a sign. Whether it is a fully loaded entity or simply an empty signifier with no determinate

meaning, Asia as a proper name always already designates its presence as opposed to its absence. My question on the “fluid” content of Asia is this: In what way can a certain ethnicity, such as Chineseness, be reconstructed as an Asian representative in the context of transnational popular cultural flows? As a starting point of inquiry, I focus on how the Chineseness (no matter how problematic this notion already is)¹ manufactured by Hong Kong cinema may be a catalyst for a kind of Asianism seen particularly in the collaboration among Japanese, South Korean, and Hong Kong productions. Participants in regional discussions of the question of Asian identity generally are limited to state bureaucrats; but an examination of how popular cultural productions, especially commercial films, deal with the idea of Asia may open up the issue to a wider and more extensive scale.

It is tempting, at a first glance, to appropriate Ernesto Laclau’s notion of hegemonic articulation to understand the construction of Asian identity by means of Chineseness.² A certain ethnic position, as a particular identity, fights for hegemony, claims to articulate universal interests and demands, and engages in struggles and confrontation to become a signifier for all. Thus, the only universality that Asia can achieve is a “hegemonic universality”—a universality embedded in a particularity that exerts leadership and totalizes all other members to represent the general interest of the region and create a certain order. Since Asia, for Asians, is only an empty signifier that totalizes the chain of equivalences of any particular content in order to represent the whole, each particularity can “universalize” itself or occupy the hegemonic universal position by substituting itself for other particularities. However, though this hegemonic articulation of Asian identity may sound democratic enough, the entire edifice of the representation and formation system remains unquestioned. The problem of Asia is not exactly how to fill its emptiness in a hegemonic struggle for an all-encompassing representative, but about how its historicization and political implications matter to each particular member living under its shadow. Nevertheless, it is true that there is always arbitrariness between the totality of Asia as a cultural imaginary and its sociopolitical structures. The incomplete character of Asia as a totality already attests to this arbitrariness.

The cooperation in the film industries of Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong sometimes functions under the pretext, in cultural terms, of challenging and resisting the global dominance of Hollywood movies. Besides their shared motivation to secure a foothold in local and regional markets, the cultural commonalities of these East Asian coproductions are not necessarily a return

to Confucian or Asian values.³ Instead, Asian critics talk more often of a possible rejuvenation of their local or national industries and cultural identities in these collaborative films.⁴ This drive for a pan-Asian alliance in film and cultural industries is in general backed by the states in the region. Hallyu, or the “Korean Wave,” was initiated and fully supported by the South Korean government. In the face of a backlash against the Korean Wave from other Asian neighbors, it is also the state that encouraged the entertainment industry to seek regional coproduction, even though Koreans may still harbor hard feelings toward Japan since World War II.⁵

Experiencing a significant commercial decline since the mid-1990s, Hong Kong popular culture and cinema have been (re)constructing and exporting a kind of Chineseness—not necessarily Chineseness in any traditional sense, but more a versatile model of Asian culture’s adaptation to global capitalism—to the world, and especially to Hong Kong’s Asian neighbors. In addition to constituting an ethnic identity for diasporic Chinese communities and a distinct otherness to the non-Chinese gaze, stylized Chinese culture (represented mainly by Hong Kong popular cinema) also affects cultural consumption and production in various Asian countries. Bhaskar Sarkar (2001: 159) writes that “For many Asians, upward mobility is coterminous with a one-way ticket to Hong Kong. Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire* (1997), an Indo-Canadian co-production, dramatizes this tendency in the figure of a video-store owner from Delhi who loves martial arts films, has a Chinese girlfriend, and dreams of migrating to Hong Kong.”⁶ The enthusiastic Japanese reception of Hong Kong popular culture is subtly linked to a nostalgic longing for their lost vigor and energy. In the minds of some Japanese fans, writes Iwabuchi Koichi (2002: 196–197), “Hong Kong is a model for modern Japan that is neither Asia nor the West while at the same time embodying both. Japanese modernity has been so keen to keep the social order that it has institutionalized and tamed the chaotic coexistence of the rational and the irrational, but Hong Kong has the possibility of producing something totally new out of such chaos. It is untenable to ignore the existence of an Orientalist imagination behind such an idealized image of Hong Kong.” Hence, the futuristic cosmopolitan city of 2029 in Oshii Mamoru’s animation *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) looks much more like contemporary Hong Kong than Tokyo, where old and modern architectures chaotically but also harmoniously stand side by side. Iwai Shunji’s *Swallowtail Butterfly* (1996) features a similarly hybrid portrayal of a Chinese immigrant ghetto, modeled on colonial Hong Kong’s Kowloon Walled City, on the outskirts of “Yen Town.” The film uses Japanese actors to play all Chinese characters and features Hong Kong pop

singer Andy Hui in a small role as a non-Chinese figure.⁷ Sabu's *Postman Blues* (1997) even conjures up the Brigitte Lin character—complete with blonde wig and sunglasses—from Wong Kar-Wai's *Chungking Express* (1994). The interest in Hong Kong and its heterogeneous type of Chinese culture is not rare in Japanese cinema, which often presents them in an exotic, Orientalist mode. Hong Kong filmmaker Lee Chi-NGai was commissioned to direct the Japanese film *Sleepless Town* (1998), which deals with Chinese gang wars in the Kabuki-cho district of Tokyo; Kaneshiro Takeshi was cast as a half-Chinese, half-Japanese gangster. A number of Hong Kong movie stars have been recruited to play major or minor characters in Japanese films, including Anita Yuen in Watanabe Takayoshi's comedy *Hong Kong Night Club* (1997); Joey Wang in Sat Junya's science fiction film *The Peking Man* (1997); Michelle Reis in Miike Takashi's gangster film *The City of Lost Souls* (2000); Kelly Chan in Nakae Isamu's melodrama *Between Calm and Passion* (2001); Karen Sun in another Miike film, *Ichi the Killer* (2002); Sam Lee Chan-Sam in Masuri (Sori) Fumihiko's manga-based sports flick *Ping Pong* (2002); and Kelly Chan and Faye Wong in Japanese TV dramas. In Isao Yukisada's *Go* (2001), which deals with a Japanese-born Korean, the Korean character Lee Jong-ho (played by Kubozuka Yosuke) gives his name as "Lee as in Bruce Lee," and the action choreography is obviously modeled on Hong Kong cinema.

If China usually symbolizes a premodern backward and mysterious Asia in the Japanese consciousness,⁸ it is Hong Kong that symbolizes an alternative East Asian modernity in Japanese films. But the Chineseness of the Hong Kong stars in these movies is represented ambivalently—as something in between the elusive, threatening other and the friendly neighbor or partner who is the mirror image of the Japanese self. Chinese-Japanese relations are always represented in terms of a Japanese masculine self in an ambiguous connection with a Hong Kong Chinese feminine other.⁹ Indeed, more female Chinese stars than male are cast in Japanese films. Perhaps the entanglement of inter-Asian relations is usually understood as some kind of struggle, symbolically reduced to cinematic representations of the battles between the two sexes as well as two ethnicities. In Korean cinema, argues Kim Kyung Hyun (2004), the trope of masculinity is more often used as a reflection of political and national issues. It is particularly true of a few Korean films that reference Chinese culture by imitating Hong Kong action cinema, recruiting Chinese crews, or by casting Chinese stars. Both Kim Young-jun's swordplay *Bichunmoo* (2000) and Kim Sung-su's historical epic *Wusa: The Warrior* (2001) were shot on location in China. Modeled after Hong Kong swordplay films and set in China under

the Yuan dynasty, *Bichunmoo* employed Ma Yuk-shing (who choreographed Tsui Hark's *The East Is Red* and Ching Siu-tung's *Swordsman* series) as action director. The popularity of Korean cinema in Asia provides incentive to the industry to cast transnational Chinese stars as leads, in order to further strengthen the films' appeal. Zhang Ziyi plays a Ming dynasty Chinese princess in *Wusa* and a cameo role as a Chinese gangster in Jung Heung-soon's *My Wife Is a Gangster 2: The Legend Returns* (2003); in Song Hae-sung's *Failan* (2001), Hong Kong star Cecilia Cheung Pak Zhi portrays a mainland Chinese woman who, after the death of her parents, goes to Korea in search of work. Once again, in these Korean-Chinese collaborations, the Chinese women are the alien other to the Korean male protagonists, who have serious doubts about themselves and desperately need women of a different race to reaffirm and revitalize them. However, when a male Hong Kong star is cast, he plays a Korean character. In Park Hee-Joon's sci-fi *Dream of a Warrior* (2001), Leon Lai's voice is entirely dubbed, erasing his otherness and thereby containing the threat of his Chinese masculinity.

The Making of Inter-Asian Cinema

Inter-Asian collaboration has long taken place in Hong Kong cinema. As early as the 1950s, when Communist China was no longer a viable market, Shaw Brothers, Cathay, and other Hong Kong film companies initiated cooperative schemes with different Asian countries, such as Japan (in order to acquire their advanced skills and technologies), South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand (so as to build their distribution network). In 1955, Shaw Brothers collaborated with Japan's Daiei Company to produce the costume drama *Princess Yang Kwei Fei*, directed by Mizoguchi Kenji. Hong Kong and Philippine film collaborations began in the mid-1950s, producing a few films of special cultural characteristics and artistic quality, such as *Sanda Wong* (1956) and *The Serpent Girl's Worldly Fancies* (1958). The earliest Hong Kong-Korean coproduction began in 1957. Shaw Brothers worked with the Performing Arts Company in South Korea to release the blockbuster *Love with an Alien* (1957), codirected by Hong Kong, Korean, and Japanese crews. Veteran Hong Kong film critic Law Kar (2000) points out that from 1966 to 1972, a total of six Japanese directors, including Inoue Umetsugu, had been employed by Shaw Brothers to produce thirty-one Mandarin features. The recruitment of Japanese directors had elevated the standards of Hong Kong cinema. However, these inter-Asian collaborations "were targeted at quick success and instant profits and tended

to be isolated cases” (Law Kar 2000: 121).¹⁰ During the 1980s, the golden era of the Hong Kong film industry, Japanese actresses like Nishiwaki Michiko and Ōshima Yukari were cast in Sammo Hung’s and Jackie Chan’s macho action flicks. But the industry was eyeing the Western market at the time and was far more interested in using Caucasian, rather than Asian, supporting stars to promote its transnational image. It was only after the mid-1990s, when Hong Kong cinema began to lose its traditional Asian market to Hollywood films, that the industry attempted to rebuild its foothold in the region. Casting Japanese actors or actresses in Hong Kong films has become chic again; these stars include Tomita Yasuko in Yim Ho’s *Kitchen* (1997), Sonny Chiba in Andrew Lau’s *The Stormriders* (1998), Nakamura Tōru in Jingle Ma’s *Tokyo Raiders* (2000), Fujiwara Norika in Stanley Tong’s *China Strike Force* (2000), Tokiwa Takako in Daniel Lee Yan-Gong’s *Moonlight Express* (1999) and *A Fighter’s Blues* (2000), Osawa Takao and Momoi Kaori in Stanley Kwan’s *The Island Tales* (2000), Miyazawa Rie in Yon Fan’s *Peony Pavilion* (2000), Junna Risa in Jacob Cheung Chi-leung’s *Midnight Fly* (2001), Sorimachi Takashi in Johnnie To Kei-Fung’s *Fulltime Killer* (2001), Seto Asaka in Andrew Lau’s *Bullets of Love* (2002), Shirata Hisako in Fung Yuen-Man’s *Futago* (2004), Kimura Takuya in Wong Kar-wai’s *2046* (2004), Matsusaka Keiko and the Korean transsexual Ha Ri Su in Yon Fan’s erotic drama *Colour Blossoms* (2005), Amamiya Manami in Edmond Pang’s *AV* (2005), Anne Suzuki in Andrew Lau and Alan Mak’s *Initial D* (2005), Ikeuchi Hiroyuki in Wilson Yip’s *Ip Man* (2008), and Nakamura Shid in Ronny Yu’s *Fearless* (2005) and in John Woo’s *Red Cliff* (2008). In addition, Korean TV hunk Song Seoung Heon is the male lead in Corey Yuen’s girls-and-guns film *So Close* (2002); Korean starlets such as Choi Yeo-Jin, Cho Han-Na, and Cho Soo-Hyun play minor characters in Jingle Ma’s *Seoul Raiders* (2005); Kim Hee Seon stars in Stanley Tong’s *The Myth* (2005); and Korean movie star Ahn Sung Kee and K-Pop artist Choi Shi Won appear in Jacob Cheung’s *Battle of Wits* (2006).

In the Hong Kong film industry, the making of “Asian” films went from being on no one’s radar to being everyone’s top priority. The well-established director Gordon Chan has said, “To survive in the market place, Hong Kong cinema must cast off its local, inward-looking tendency. I very much want to make Asian films” (qtd. in Li 2000: 65). Another renowned director, Johnnie To, referring to his *Fulltime Killer*—presented in a mixture of Japanese, English, and Putonghua (standard Mandarin)—also said, “We are hoping it will be viewed as an Asian movie . . . *Fulltime Killer* takes place in Hong Kong, Macau and Japan. This is like a half-way point; maybe later we might make a movie that’s fully in

English. The market is in a moulding stage and everyone can try anything with it. Co-operating with Thailand, Singapore, Korea or Japan is inevitable. In many aspects it's for our mutual interest. If my actors and your actors work together, we win markets on both sides. There's nothing new about the concept" (qtd. in Chung 2001: 1). Peter Chan, the director of the award-winning *Comrades*, *Almost a Love Story* (1996) and *Perhaps Love* (2006), has even gone further: in 2000 he founded a new company, Applause Pictures, in order to promote greater collaboration with Thailand, Korea, Japan, and Singapore by sharing talent and resources. The company's aim is to forge financial and coproduction agreements across borders in order to strengthen the position of pan-Asian productions in the regional and global marketplace. Chan first produced the Thai film *Jan Dara* (2001), directed by Nonzee Nimibutr, with Hong Kong actress Christy Chung as the female lead. With South Korea's Sidus Corporation and Japan's Sh chiku Film Company, Applause also coproduced the Korean feature *One Fine Spring Day* (2001), starring Lee Young-ae—the female lead of the Korean blockbuster *Joint Security Area* (2000) and the widely popular TV series *Dae Jang Geum* (a.k.a. *Jewel in the Palace*) (2004). The director of the film, Hur Jin-ho, also directed the romance *Christmas in August* (1998), the first Korean feature to successfully break into the Hong Kong market. But Applause's greatest hit was Oxide and Danny Pang's horror film *The Eye* (2002). The Pang brothers are Chinese Thais who began their filmmaking career in Thailand, whereas leading actress Angelica Lee is a Chinese Malaysian who first gained popularity as a pop singer in Taiwan. The commercial success of *The Eye* has paved the way for more pan-Asian horror films, which involve little dialogue and thus present fewer language barriers in the transnational market. The two horror triptych anthologies *Three* (2002) and *Three . . . Extremes* (2004)—combining the efforts of Hong Kong, Korean, Japanese, and Thai directors—are modeled on the formula developed in *The Eye*, and also have done well at the box office.¹¹ Inspired by Bollywood's musicals, Peter Chan has made his own Chinese musical film, entitled *Perhaps Love* (2005), with the help of Bollywood choreographer Farah Kan and Indian dancers. Meanwhile, other smaller-budget independent productions from across the region also brand themselves as new Asian cinema for global circulation, and are coordinated through Andy Lau's Hong Kong-based Focus Films (Pang 2007).

Such inter- or pan-Asian filmmaking trends, however, should not be understood simply as a new flourishing of multiple Asian subjectivities in relation to Western hegemony, as multicultural celebrations of Asian diversity, or as a

kind of self-recognition and self-assertion. The success of pan-Asian productions cannot actually guarantee the continuity of pan-Asian cinema. As Peter Chan said in a seminar organized by the Hong Kong Film Archive, when their movies sell in Asia, they also sell worldwide, as evidenced by the success of *The Eye*. So why should they call their productions “pan-Asian” instead of “pan-global,” since they always target the largest number of film viewers? Is “pan-Asian” just a gimmick appropriated by shrewd filmmakers and investors to promote their products? Could Hong Kong really play a mediator role among various Asian cultural forces at a point when many Asian nations are either incapable or unwilling to do so?¹² He admits that it took a lot of time, effort, and complicated negotiations to build mutual trust among all the Asian partners, suggesting that pan-Asian filmmaking could hardly operate on a long-term basis. Chan (2004) further states that it is very difficult to write a film script that can employ different Asian talents onscreen; *Three* and its sequel anthologize the short films of the participating Asian filmmakers, but there is no collaboration at the diegetic level.

What is revealing about Chan’s comments is that an all-encompassing Asian representation is still not easy, and perhaps not possible, to construct, even though Asian peoples are more and more inclined to consume one another’s productions, and Asian filmmakers are happy to work with their competitors in the region. Seemingly, thinking of “Asian” as a category is closely tied to the question of representation. To represent Asians in the cinematic medium is to conceive of the Asian as a political category, since it never involves the simple portrayal of a given, but the act of creating a new agency out of the plurality of heterogeneous elements. A series of questions will haunt any filmmaker who endeavors to represent the Asian: How can the heterogeneity of Asians be represented in a filmic image? Who has the power to represent the Asians as one? What are the motivations behind such representations? Are Asians portrayed as they are in these representations, or are preconceived ideas being imposed by the representing mechanism and the cinematic apparatus? If representing the other among other Asians is unsatisfactory because it could be said to smack of racial or even sexual discrimination, does that mean self-representation (that is to say, Koreans representing Koreans, Chinese representing Chinese, and so on) is the only alternative? Are we then back to square one, meaning that there is no such thing as inter- or pan-Asian cinema but only Korean, Hong Kong, or Japanese cinema? If these regional cinemas are actually producing “Asian” films, does it imply that there can be only Japanese Asian, or Hong Kong Asian—but

never Asian Asian—cinema? In what way can the part be the whole, if the general consensus is that there is no partiality that does not manifest within itself the traces of the wholeness?

If Asia's heterogeneity is primordial and irreducible and it designates an ever-failing unity that cannot be contained by any cinematic representation, should we understand those "Asian" films of Japan or Hong Kong as tokens of presence for that which is absent? Are they nothing but fantasies of something that is not there at all? Are they simply hegemonic articulation? In the first part of this chapter, I look closely at two "Asian" films from Japan and Hong Kong in order to understand in what ways the "Asian" subject emerges as a certain kind of "failure," and is constructed particularly in relation to the notion of Chineseness or Chinese ethnicity. Unlike the convention of many "Asian" films that dichotomize the self-other relationship into a masculine-feminine opposition, these coproductions with multiple Asian talents represented onscreen deconstruct that rigid sexual-national binarism in a different manner.

The Futility of Representing Asia

The first film under discussion is a Japan-financed production, *Sleepless Town*, directed by Hong Kong filmmaker Lee Chi-Ngai.¹³ The movie is based on a hard-boiled fictional work by best-selling Japanese writer Hase Seishu (whose pen name uses the same characters as those in the name of Hong Kong comedian Stephen Chow Sing Chi, but in reverse order; he explains that this is a tribute to Chow, which demonstrates his love of Hong Kong cinema), dealing with the ethnic Chinese underworld in Tokyo. Hase is said to have worked as a bartender in Kabuki-cho and hence had a chance to meet the underworld gangs he later wrote about. His experience also helped him to write a similar script dealing with Tokyo's Chinese gangs for Miike Takashi's *The City of Lost Souls*. *Sleepless Town* begins in Shinjuku with a Chinese and Japanese mixed-blood gangster Ryū Ken'ichi / Liu Chien-yi (played by Kaneshiro Takeshi—who was born to a Japanese father and a Taiwanese mother) being stopped by a policeman who is asking his racial identity. Denying that he is an undocumented Chinese immigrant, Ryū embarrassedly claims that he is Japanese to the skeptical Japanese cop.¹⁴ The opening scene definitely reminds us of an everyday life situation of interpellation or subjectivization as described by Louis Althusser (1971: 174), who writes of an individual walking along the street who hears the voice of an officer behind him: "Hey, you there!" The individual

turns around, believing that the call is for him. “By this mere 180-degree physical conversion,” Althusser tells us, “he becomes a subject.” The call of the other forces an individual to dramatically become a subject while simultaneously conferring on him a recognizable identity. However, this kind of subjectivization not only designates the becoming of the subject, but also denotes the reality of subjection. In other words, a subject is produced by its readiness to submit to authority, though this submission is redeemed by the assurance of his legitimate existence. But for Ryū, his subjectivization and subjection do not lead to the formation of a distinct and secure identity. His mixed blood and his criminal activities do not grant him recognition as a subject in Japanese society. In other words, even though he recognizes the call is addressed to him, Ryū’s subjectivity is still very much in doubt. In his later voiceover narration, Ryū confesses that he is neither Japanese nor Chinese, but a bat flying around and using its radar to survive in the night of Kabuki-cho.¹⁵

The opening credit scene that immediately follows is a long tracking hand-held shot of Ryū’s back as he makes his way home through the streets of Kabuki-cho. On the way in and out of a topless bar and through dim alleys, Ryū, like a thread quilting together disparate parts, runs into blacks, Indians, and other people of color doing business with their Japanese customers, exhibiting the multiracial cultures in Tokyo’s underworld nightlife and designating a cluster of marginalized nonwhite ethnic peoples that scatter around and have no legitimate place. With the increasing number of migrants and the corresponding racism, Tokyo, in Iwabuchi’s description, is a site “where cultural citizenship can be practiced by marginalized and powerless people whose membership is not well recognized in the national framework” (2008: 554). Ryū knows and befriends almost every non-Japanese ethnic face on the streets (obviously he is popular among the ethnic groups, and he later relies on a computer owned by a black couple to find out the false identity of the female protagonist). Seemingly, he represents not only the Chinese minority (Ryū is not fully accepted by the Chinese gang family because of his Japanese blood) but also all the ethnic peoples who are dispossessed of the legal subjectivity that would have made them part of society. “Impure” blood may be some kind of stain to Ryū, but it also gives him special access to different ethnicities in the film. He is “heterogeneous” in the sense that he represents some deficient being or partiality that is far from the whole. He is also “excessive” in the sense that his ethnic otherness is not wanted and incompatible with the dominant society. It is debatable whether Ryū’s half-breed background is a curse or a blessing.

However, it is definitely a credit, in the age of global capitalism, to the transnational star Kaneshiro (as a pan-Asian sensation, he is known as Kam Shing-Mo in Cantonese, Jin Chengwu in Mandarin, and Kim Sung Moo in Korean).

Beginning his career as a pop singer in Taiwan, Kaneshiro made himself known throughout Asia mainly via Hong Kong cinema. Because of his exotic good looks, he was cast by Wong Kar-wai in *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels* (1995), which succeeded in packaging his cosmopolitan charm and turned him into a rising movie star. Wong's movies were phenomenal hits in Japan, and Kaneshiro soon became a hot commodity in the Japanese media.¹⁶ After landing leading roles in a number of Hong Kong features, he portrayed a Mongolian in Lee Chi-Ngai's *Lost and Found* (1996), which was commercially successful and critically acclaimed in Japan. Lee then was invited by a Japanese film company to direct and cowrite *Sleepless Town*, and Kaneshiro worked with him again in this noir-like, romantic gangster thriller. The project could be identified as a typical example of Japan's return to Asia following the "pan-Asianism" of the early twentieth century.

When Japan began its path to modernization in the late nineteenth century, Japanese intellectuals argued whether the nation should be considered part of Asia, given that China and Korea remained backward and stagnant vis-à-vis the progressive and advanced West. The cultural controversy over embracing or rejecting Asia later developed into a political drive to conquer and colonize Asia—the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere of the 1930s and 1940s. A new notion of pan-Asianism was raised in Japan in the early 1990s, during the nation's search for a new global position in response to the end of the Cold War. The threat of Western hegemony, the growing economic ties between Japan and Asian countries, the popularity of Japanese pop culture in the region, and the emerging sense of coequality through the general experiences of extensive modernization among Asians helped to shape the development of this concept of new Asianism in Japan (Duus 2001). Although redundant slogans like "Asianization of Asia" (Funabashi 1993), brought forth by politicians to counteract Western influence, could hardly generate wide appeal among the Japanese public, Japanese audiences have been interested in other Asian cinemas and have attempted to reconsider their cinematic identity in relation to other Asian cultures for two or three decades.¹⁷

Since Asian popular culture and cinema are projected as a fantasy screen on which Japan pursues its Orientalist imagination, *Sleepless Town* can be seen as a publicity stunt to sell exotic Asian and ethnic cultures—even though the film touches on the sensitive and complicated issues of racial tensions,

heterogeneous cultures, and sociopolitical problems such as organized crime and Chinese gangs—in the presumably culturally homogeneous and socially peaceful Japan. The novel by Seishu Hase on which the movie is based may have taken an Orientalist gaze to recast the Chineseness produced by Hong Kong cinema into a spectacular world of ethnic outcasts in the very heart of Tokyo. But what complicates the Orientalist fantasy is that under the camera lens of Hong Konger Lee Chi-Ngai, Japan's notorious playground, Kabuki-cho, also becomes an exotic spot that is at once strange and familiar to Japanese audiences, presenting “a filter of gaudy exoticism absent in most local (Japanese) films about the place” (Schilling 1999: 182). In Lee's film noir style, Japanese society is reduced to a dark backdrop for the romantic conflict of the renegade couple as well as the Chinese gang battles. So the Orientalism is twofold: while Japan fantasizes about Hong Kong or Asia, Japan itself is also turned into an object of fantasy for Hong Kong—it is no longer a nation of sovereignty, but only a stop in the borderless world where the exiled, the marginal, or the diasporic drifts and wanders along. In this fantasy world of diasporic Chinese gangs in Tokyo, Japan has been denationalized or desubstantialized by Lee Chi-Ngai, who himself might have been Orientalized by his Japanese employer. The Chinese gangs take charge of Kabuki-cho while the Japanese police withdraw from the scene. In other words, the Chinese portrayed in the film are no longer just elements marginalized by society. Indeed, the part is never simply a part of a whole, but is the whole. The whole, the social totality, Japanese society, or even Asia in its entirety can only be embodied by the part—the peripheral ethnic, the racial leftover, or the half-breed.

Ryū, however, is not the only half-breed in *Sleepless Town*. The female protagonist Satō Natsumi / Xiao Lian (played by Japanese actress Yamamoto Mirai), also symbolizes “impure” blood, as she is an orphan left behind in China after World War II by the Japanese colonizers of Manchuria, and who comes back to Japan only to find herself a “Chinese” stranger. In a way, like Ryū, Xiao Lian is not identified as Japanese even though she has Japanese blood. This may be the “mysterious” link—Ryū at first knows nothing about Xiao Lian's real identity—through which they can connect with each other emotionally and romantically. As a typical femme fatale, Xiao Lian—who first assumed the identity of Natsumi, the victim of a car accident—masterminds the plot that triggers the entire action of the film. The story begins with Ryū, who sells anything (counterfeited passports, Hong Kong lottery tickets, and so on) except children's organs to support himself in Kabuki-cho. He is connected to the Taiwanese Mafia, led by Yang Weimin (played by Taiwanese actor Lung

Sihung). Three years previously, Ryū's former partner-in-crime, Fu Chun, killed the right-hand man of Yuan Chenggui (don of the Shanghainese gang, played by Hong Kong actor Eric Tsang), and now he is on the run. But suddenly it is rumored that Fu Chun has returned to Kabuki-cho. Yuan gives Ryū an ultimatum to find Fu Chun and turn him in within three days, or else Ryū will be the scapegoat. When Ryū seeks help from his Taiwanese godfather, Yang refers him to Cui Hu, the hotheaded boss of the Beijing gang, but all Cui offers Ryū is sheer humiliation. Yang then asks Ryū to go to the influential, elderly Fujianese boss Yeh in Yokohama for help. Ryū is certain that there is a fierce storm brewing and if he wants to survive this gang war, he himself is the only person he can count on. After some convoluted plots and twists,¹⁸ Ryū finds he is nothing but a pawn in a lethal power struggle full of double-crossings. In the end, Ryū is forced to kill Xiao Lian as he embraces her. He expresses regret—like many noir heroes—in his voiceover, “I shouldn’t have gone in her apartment. I shouldn’t have opened her trunk. She was stronger than me. She knew exactly what she wanted and she’d do anything to get it,” thus suggesting that he is the most clueless person of all.

Sleepless Town may be exploitative not only in exoticizing the ethnic Chinese gang under the Japanese Orientalist gaze but also in reasserting masculine power, as the gangster genre always does, over the dangerous but seductive forces of rebellious femininity. Here the masculine self is not Japanese, but a half-breed who belongs to no ethnic group and can triumph over all ethnicities. If, historically, Japan has failed or even refused to represent itself as Asia, it is now with the help of some exotic Chinese ethnicity borrowed from Hong Kong cinema that a new borderless “Asian” subject can be reimagined. While criticizing the Orientalist exoticism that underlies the so-called new Asianism in this Japanese “Asian” film, what we should not miss is that, as the film implies, some ethnic and sociocultural particularity and excess could be capable of becoming an impossible totality. When cinematic representation does not merely play a secondary reproductive role, but occupies the primary role in constituting realities, the image of these particulars or those that have been left out could hegemonically take the place of the whole, rather than simply disrupting that whole. The representation of Chineseness derived from Hong Kong culture, other than being an exotic ethnic object consumed by Japanese viewers, does not have to be conceived as mere particularity. Instead, it can be grasped as a kind of ambiguous excess that can transform into something special—that is, the “One.” The fate of these ethnic and Chinese exiles could be the fate of all, and their interests may represent universal interests; after all, who

does not, in one way or the other, become dispossessed and displaced under the mechanism of global capitalism? Occupying the position of the excess not assimilated by the dominant society, these displaced ethnics precisely serve as a reminder of the very mechanism of capitalist economy, with its emphasis on incessant expansions and intensifications, that structurally generates more than what is needed.

Hong Kong cinema's hit man genre loves to portray the solitary killer as a drifting person in society, and even as a self-exile in the dehumanized global world. The hit man characters in John Woo's *The Killer* (1989) and Wong Kar-wai's *Fallen Angels* appear to be victims of conformist society more than predators who can kill relentlessly. Along the same lines, Johnnie To and Wai Ka-fai's *Fulltime Killer* depicts lonely professional killers who are being isolated not only by their local community but also in an estranged inter-Asian setting. Asia's number-one assassin O (played by Sorimachi Takashi) is a Japanese who speaks no Chinese but lives alone in Hong Kong rather than in Tokyo—probably because he thinks nobody knows him in this postcolonial, cosmopolitan global city (he has to wipe out anyone who recognizes him—including his high school classmate—while he is on a mission to kill a mob boss at the Kuala Lumpur train station). Like many new immigrants from mainland China, Tok / Lok Tak Wah (played by Andy Lau)—another solitary professional killer and ex-Olympic pistol shooter from China—comes to Hong Kong to make a name for himself by challenging and dethroning O. He is probably even more displaced than O, since Tok has violent epileptic seizures under blinking lights, which makes him unfit for both Olympic and killing careers. If a structured social body is an entity in which each part has its place, then these characters who are displaced and float freely are parts without their places (notwithstanding the fact that professional killer is not a recognized profession) that may unsettle the order of the social totality.

Although, as mentioned earlier, the director Johnnie To promoted *Fulltime Killer* as an "Asian" film by bringing in Japanese and Taiwanese casts; shooting on location in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and Macau; and making up a plot that allows the protagonists to shoot their way through Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Korea, Macau, and, finally, Hong Kong; *Fulltime Killer* is indeed heavily modeled on European and Hollywood crime dramas such as *Le Samourai* (1967) and *Assassins* (1995). The film directly alludes to such films as *Desperado* (1995), and even reenacts emblematic scenes from movies like *Point Break* (1991) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). As a result, *Fulltime Killer* is more like a transnational collage that invites worldwide fans of action films

to track down déjà-vu scenes and plots than a pan-Asian flick that caters to the tastes of regional viewers. The movie lays bare its action-genre references by letting Tok say in the voiceover, "I like watching movies, especially action movies, big or low budget, foreign or local, as long as they are not boring. Most important of all, they have to give me something fresh." The "freshness" *Fulltime Killer* can offer is probably not its story or its cinematography but the perception of what "Asia" means. While claiming to be an "Asian" film, *Fulltime Killer* actually is a transnational and transcultural hybrid that far exceeds any unified notion of Asia.

Adapted from a popular Hong Kong novel by Edmond Pang Ho Cheung, *Fulltime Killer* is quite similar to Hollywood's *Assassins* (starring Sylvester Stallone and Antonio Banderas) in terms of its story and characterization. O is a low-key, lone assassin, whose only human contact is with his part-time house cleaner Chin (Kelly Lin), who comes from Taiwan and speaks fluent Japanese.¹⁹ O lives such a secluded and isolated life that he never stays in his own apartment but only monitors it and his beautiful housekeeper from an industrial block across the street; he tells Chin to post his clients' fax messages on the wall so that he can read them through a telephoto lens. Tok, however, dresses like a rock star and always kills with a smile on his face. He is a flamboyant newcomer who impetuously reveals his identity and eagerly shows off his guts and his skills, but such an attitude is possibly just a response to his loneliness. In order to get close to O and to draw him out, Tok starts dating Chin. To complicate the story, Singaporean Interpol Inspector Lee (played by Hong Kong actor Simon Yam) has been hunting for O for years, and becomes obsessed with the two assassins. After a number of plot twists, Lee has a mental breakdown but becomes a chronicler of the two killers by writing an English-language novel about them.

The triangular relationships among O, Tok, and Chin at first glance may allegorize the popular cultural interflows and competition in Asia, especially those among Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Like O, the number-one killer in Asia, Japanese popular culture has been tops in the region—admired by many but also challenged by a few newcomers, like that of Hong Kong and South Korea. Perhaps Hong Kong's challenger role has been exaggerated. The Hong Kong cultural industry can never pose a threat to its Japanese counterpart; it only capitalizes on the Asia-wide popularity of Japanese products and flexibly appropriates them "through incorporation of Japanese stars, locations or motifs" (Yeh and Davis 2002: 62) in order to attract local audiences as well as those in the long-lost Taiwanese market. *Fulltime Killer* itself follows such a

formula. As the film's images are pan-Asian but their ultimate references are mainly of Hollywood, *Fulltime Killer* needs an English-speaking Singaporean to document the Asian legend, suggesting that the so-called Asian flavor or Asian identity is only a cover for the real desire for the recognition of the Western gaze.

In the film, "Asian" actually implies a hierarchy of peoples, categorized according to the degree of lightness in complexion and according to their nations' economic strengths. In this self-proclaimed "Asian" movie, the protagonists are in some sense the "white Asians" (Chinese and Japanese ethnicities), whereas their victims are primarily "black Asians" from Malaysia, Thailand, or Pakistan. Tok and Chin can easily switch from Putonghua to Japanese and then to English, seemingly denoting the fluidity of Asian identity. But Andy Lau demonstrated in the "Behind the Scenes" bonus feature on the DVD version of the film that he actually struggled take after take to deliver a single line of Japanese. Furthermore, the performances of those supporting Hong Kong actors who play English-speaking Singaporeans are in general inhibited by their English lines. In other words, the concept of Asia is always plagued by language barriers, though it is not represented onscreen as such. However, what is interesting about the film is not how the notion of Asia coheres in its cinematic representation, but rather how it appears to fail, and generates some kind of excess.

Although the story mainly takes place in Hong Kong, none of the major characters are natives of the city (O is from Japan, Tok from China, Chin from Taiwan, and Lee from Singapore) exemplifying otherness in relation to the concept of place-based identity. Perhaps it is already misleading to talk about "natives" in a global city like Hong Kong. Do these expatriates form a collective that no longer relies on place-based ethnic identity? Is that collective at its very core the collective of a struggling whole? In what ways can its particularity embody the principle of totality? In terms of existence, the two killers form a contrasting pair (the Chinese-Japanese relationship is no longer portrayed as a sexual difference): one tries to hide, cover up, and even withdraw from his existence; the other, because he lacks a well-recognized existence, desperately pretends that he has one. In short, one looks for a way out, whereas the other seeks recognition. Both are continuously on the move to (re)define their unstable or insecure existences. They are uncertain of their own identities and subject positions. In their interaction, while the core of (masculine) subjectivity remains inaccessible to the subject itself, the subject emerges only when confronted by an impenetrable other (of a different race). What is crucial is

the intertwined relation between the inscrutability of the other and one's own impenetrability to oneself. The film suggests that the impenetrable other that appears to be an obstacle to one's search for subjectivity is indeed a positive ground for one's subject formation. Ultimately, the two are engaged in an antagonistic relationship, in which one has to die in order to leave room for the other. Hence, the notion of Asia in the movie designates a failure that indicates the impossibility of a unified image or of coexistence. If the Asian subject can emerge, it only emerges as a failure to be oneself. To be oneself means to engage in an antagonistic relationship with an impenetrable other. "Asia" in the film is not the encompassing totality that includes all parts or some features shared by all members, but rather is antagonism as a kind of difference that cuts across all parts. It becomes the name for the very failure of Asia to achieve its own complete identity. In other words, the antagonism that characterizes the relationship between the two hit men is not simply a differential relation from which identity emerges. Rather, it is an antagonistic difference that alienates each man from within, preventing him from attaining full self-identity, in contrast to a simple differential relationship in which opposition to each other defines identity.

The fact that the hit man genre is something of an obsession in Hong Kong cinema is not only because Hong Kong has been struggling to search for its identity, but also because the Western-inspired image of the assassin designates a certain antagonistic dimension of the modernity that the city (as well as many other Asian nations) has experienced. It may be a cliché to say that capitalist history is all about the multiple killings and proliferation of antagonism that crime movies usually epitomize. But the representation of the professional killer in film does point to some kind of excess (in terms of violence, masculinity, or male bonding). Such excess obviously cannot be contained by the creation of a pan-Asian hero, which many "Asian" films have so far been incapable of doing. Who is the hero in *Fulltime Killer*? Is it O, who survives the duel with Tok but is portrayed as the loser in Lee's fiction? Is it Tok, who is actually killed but who becomes a legend in fictional discourse? Never could the excess be identified as the multiplicity or diversity of Asia as a whole. Does the film convey the politically correct message that there is no winner or loser, and the duel between the Japanese and Chinese killers simply ends in a draw? Perhaps the excess designates some tension or antagonism operating within the multiplicity of Asia, temporarily assuming the representation of an absent totality that cannot appear on its own terms but needs a third term, that is, the West (Lee's English-language novel, in the film), to help shape it.

What these two “Asian” movies reveal to us is that antagonism or non-wholeness always pertain to the reality of Asia—the representation of which can exist only as a form of failure. Asia is paradoxically represented as that which resists symbolization. What renders Asian representation impossible is that the difference that separates one Asian from another Asian is never the same as this “same” difference perceived from another Asian’s perspective. Hence, at best, “Asian” cinema can only acknowledge the fact that Asia is missing. But this admission of an Asia that is missing is not a renunciation of Asian cinema. On the contrary, I believe it is the basis on which the complex representation of Asia is founded. In the process of striving to represent Asia, there is always a signifier without a signified that carries no determinate meaning, since it stands for the presence of meaning as such, by which the emptiness of its signified will be filled in by some contingent particular meaning, through the hegemonic struggle, to function as a stand-in for the meaning of Asia. But the real meaning of Asia does not end here.

Cross-Racial Performance in Hong Kong Transnational Films

If the notion of Asia as a whole can never be represented fully by any single Asian agent, then what happens when one Asian tries to play another Asian? As mentioned earlier, if the difference separating one Asian from another Asian is not the “same” difference understood by another Asian, the cross-racial impersonation by one Asian of another Asian would definitely produce some disturbing excesses that pose a threat to the unity of ethnic national identity. The political tensions between China and Japan²⁰ led Beijing to ban the Hollywood film *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) a week before its scheduled Mainland release in 2006, though the film had already been widely available on pirated DVDs in the Chinese market. Presumably the Chinese government was concerned that Zhang Ziyi, Gong Li, and Michelle Yeoh playing Japanese geisha would provoke public anger.²¹ There is a controversial scene in which the geisha played by Zhang was stripped half-naked by a Japanese baron (played by the Japanese American actor Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa). Chinese nationalists read it as the rape of a Chinese woman by the Japanese military, reminiscent of the bitter history of “comfort women.”²² However, why the nationalists in China directed their anti-Japanese anger toward an English-language Hollywood film and why they did not regard the Chinese female leads as a counter to Japanese nationalism are not the issues I wish to explore here.²³ The racial impersonation in *Memoirs of a Geisha* obviously fails to convince its Asian audiences—although

Hollywood reckons that there should be no difference between Chinese and Japanese to the Western gaze, and thus cast three Chinese actresses who are far more popular than any Japanese stars in the Western world. Using *Memoirs of a Geisha* as a touchstone, I investigate racial impersonation, or what I will term cross-racial performance, in transnational Chinese cinema, with a particular focus on Hong Kong coproductions, in order to further explore the question of Asian identity.

Racial impersonation is an act dependent on conventions. From blackface minstrelsy to other ethnic imposture in Hollywood, the United States has an ongoing legacy of racial impersonation that plays into cultural stereotypes and materializes essentialist thinking about race. Hong Kong cinema in its period of coexisting Mandarin and Cantonese films also produced features of cross-racial performance. With a small domestic market, Hong Kong cinema has a tradition of working with foreign crews and stars and of shooting on location in foreign countries in order to enhance its transnational appeal. As discussed earlier, since the mid-1950s the Hong Kong film industry has worked with Japanese, South Korean, and Southeast Asian filmmakers and casts. A number of Korean and Japanese directors under sinicized names or pseudonyms worked in Hong Kong film productions. Certainly the local Chinese playing a foreigner onscreen or vice versa is a gimmick that can attract audiences through the exploitation of the exotic and decorative while maintaining a comfortable distance.

In 1955, Shaw Brothers and Daiei Company coproduced *Princess Yang Kwei Fei* with an entire Japanese cast playing Chinese historical figures of Tang dynasty (618–906 AD). In the same year two different Hong Kong film companies, Golden City and Southeast Asia Film Company, financed two fantasy movies, *Sarawak* and *Sanda Wong*, both of which were shot in the Philippines, featuring all-Filipino casts and crews. The story of Gerardo de Leon's *Sanda Wong* was set in Hong Kong and the all-Filipino cast played local Chinese people. Meanwhile, Japanese actress Yamaguchi Yoshiko (whose Chinese name is Li Xianglan), who started her career playing Chinese roles in Japanese propaganda films for Chinese audiences when Japan occupied China during World War II, began to star as Pan Jin Lian in Shaw Brothers' *Chin Ping Mei* (dir. Wang Yin) in 1955. From that time forward, she became a very popular actress in Mandarin features such as Toyoda Shir's *Madame White Snake* (1956), with the all-Japanese cast playing Chinese characters; Wakasugi Mitsuo's *The Lady of Mystery* (1957); and Bu Wancang's *The Unforgettable Night* (1958), (co)produced by Shaw. In all these Hong Kong Mandarin films, Yamaguchi always portrayed a Chinese woman.