

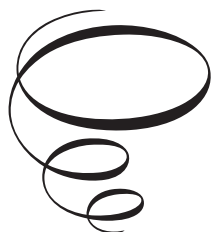
The Power of Culture:

Encounters between China and the United States

Edited by

Priscilla Roberts

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-8588-6

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8588-1

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BLOCKBUSTER DREAMS: CHIMERICANIZATION IN *AMERICAN DREAMS* IN CHINA AND *FINDING MR. RIGHT*

STACILEE FORD

This chapter links macro discussions of soft power in the cultural sphere to gendered performances of Chinese/transnational identities as they appear in one under-studied form of cultural production, the co-produced blockbuster film. In what follows I will pay particular attention to cinematic representations of gender, generation, and history in two films released in 2013, Peter Chan's *American Dreams in China* (hereafter ADIC) and Xue Xiaolu's *Finding Mr. Right* (hereafter FMR). Recent Chinese blockbusters (*da pian*) are, increasingly, a cultural archive of noteworthy cultural/historical texts chronicling changes in China (and beyond), and worthy of more scholarly analysis. Several of them have captured the imaginations of domestic audiences in China, and they have also been the subject of Western media analysis from the *New York Times* to *Variety* to the *Economist*.

Although the predecessors of current iterations have been around for nearly two decades (until 1997 *da pian* often overlapped with *ju pian*, which referred to big budget historical epics with a more clearly pedagogical purpose), the most recent versions offer ways to view processes of globalization and transnationality in China. In speaking of these films, Chris Berry (building on Arun Appadurai's notion of globalization as "not a single process, but a multiplicity of localized events as different cultures are brought into contact") asserts that, "in the postcolonial politics and globalized economics of blockbusters, borrowing and translation are only the first step on the road toward agency and creativity."¹ Berry sees locally-produced blockbusters in East Asia as "De-

¹ Berry, "What's Big About the Big Film?," 91–110.

westernizing/De-Americanizing” although still tied to Hollywood in various ways.²

As someone who examines links between national identity and gender in various historical moments (acknowledging that both of those terms are fluid and contested), I have for some time been paying attention to the cultural and historical work that Chinese films perform in holding up a mirror to US society, history, and culture. I am currently particularly interested in one type of *da pian*, the “dramedies”—to use a term invented by Lisa Odham Stokes: the films that tell stories of people, relationships, and micro/macro change in China.³ A few examples of the most popular of the dramedies released since 2010 alone include, in addition to *Finding Mr. Right* and *American Dreams in China*, *So Young*, *Tiny Times I/II/III*, and *The Stolen Years*. Neither historical epic nor martial arts romp, these films nonetheless invoke a certain time period or series of readily recognizable historical or current events. Often they are nostalgic coming of age narratives, or romantic comedies (or both) that invoke the shared pasts of moviegoers. In some cases they are loosely-based narrations of actual events (in the case of *American Dreams in China*, which is based on the saga of the highly successful New Orient English tutorial centers in the PRC) or referencing “real” trends (birth tourism in the case of *Finding Mr. Right*). The films zero in on the economic and social changes that have occurred in China over the past several decades, and on the ways in which friendships, partnerships, and romances (including bromances) are changed by China’s economic fortunes, in the process thereby altering the course of various histories, micro and macro.

Blockbuster Identity Work

Generally, scholars and critics overlook these films or dismiss them as sappy, unrealistic fantasies; “chick flicks” or fluffy fare pandering to young audiences and commercial tastes. When they are mentioned at all, it

² Ibid., 218. Although Berry calls for a recognition of the ways in which locally-produced films in China and Korea should be seen as more than mimicry or products of cultural imperialism when they reference Western modes, he nonetheless articulates a certain ambivalence, viewing the rise of “blockbuster consciousness” as linked to dismantling trade protectionism under intense lobbying from the US government and business interests. He also notes the ways in which trade debates are colored by memories of colonization, something often manifested on the big screen as well as in business negotiations over the fate of the film industry in China.

³ Stokes, *Peter Ho Sun Chan’s He’s a Woman, She’s a Man*.

is with chagrin that they are squeezing out or diverting attention from other more substantive films. They attract attention because these recent Chinese blockbusters wield a certain economic and cultural clout and many have begun to compete successfully with Hollywood's commercial offerings in an entertainment industry that seeks an ever younger and increasingly affluent viewing audience. As the average age of the Chinese moviegoer drops, there are both celebrations and lamentations over the fare being served to younger audiences, and criticism of these films, particularly of the *Tiny Times* franchise, has been especially harsh.⁴ The dramedies may not be as “da” as some *da pian* in terms of their budgets and special effects, or even their stars, but they are making waves as well as big money, and their popularity is attracting comment in various venues.⁵

As a cultural historian, I am keen to observe the preoccupations narrated in all of them, including the two I foreground here, which invoke a long history of transpacific exchange at the movies and in daily life. They knowingly appropriate US (and Hollywood) history and references, music, aesthetics, and, at times, characters and dialogue. As Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar remind us, they do so for a range of ideological or aesthetic purposes:

Both the national and the modern territorial nation-state were part of a Western package called **modernity**, as was cinema, which followed on their heels. Like elsewhere, when Chinese grasped the enormity of the imperialist threat they realized that they would have to take from the West in order to resist the West. The nation-state was a key element to be adopted, because this modern form of collective agency was fundamental both to participation as a nation-state in the “international” order established by the imperialists and to mobilizing resistance.⁶

Taking from while resisting the West is apparent in the cinematic portrayals, appropriations, critiques, or revisions and reconstructions of US and Chinese histories, as well as in the various assumptions about American and Chinese myths and values that bubble up in the films. It is often instructive, for instance, to examine the “Americans” cast in the

⁴ Zhu and Hisgen, “A Rite of Passage to Nowhere” (July 15, 2013).

⁵ Throughout the spring and summer of 2013, *Variety* magazine repeatedly chronicled this Sino-Hollywood showdown at the movies, expressing particular surprise when the first *Tiny Times* confection bested the mega-hit *Superman: Man of Steel*. Similar news reports and editorials appeared around the release of *American Dreams in China* and *Finding Mr. Right*, as well as *So Young*.

⁶ Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 2.

dramedies and the roles they play, the rendering of US spaces, particularly cities—which are, increasingly, Canadian cities—and US landmarks, products, and personalities, as well as the ways in which the Chinese characters in the films interact with these. I am particularly interested in the gender stories these films tell, as they engage a range of topics from expressions of new (and old) masculinities in China, attitudes toward love, romance, parenting, work-life balance, China’s fertility policies, reactions to those fertility policies in the United States, and the various generational and sub-ethnic tensions and bondings in diaspora.

I have written elsewhere about the importance of transnational commercial dramedies in two historical eras (the 1950s/60s Hong Kong Cathay Studio films—particularly those starring Grace Chang—and the pre-1997 migration melodramas made by many Hong Kong flexible citizens who transited between Hong Kong and the United States during the “brain drain” period from 1984 to 1997). For me, all these films are historical documents of a very particular sort. (ASIDE: This is where some of my historian colleagues become somewhat testy, as they worry that I am no different from the characters in the Hollywood spoof *Galaxy Quest* who find old *Star Trek* television re-runs and figure they have discovered historical documentation of ancient civilizations. To allay those fears I can only say that my colleagues in cultural studies believe that historians have been slow to see the ways in which all recorded histories are, to one extent or another, fabrications. I am comfortable with the unresolved tensions and appreciative of the reality check that both cohorts provide. What is important to note here is that films “do” history in surprisingly insightful ways. We often overlook their power both to remember and to misremember, and also overlook how “reel” and “real” historical analysis intersect.)

As I argued in my book on Mabel Cheung Yuen-ting’s *An Autumn’s Tale*, the pre-1997 Hong Kong migration melodrama films give us access—albeit partial and highly mediated—to stories about processes of individual, social, and global transitions and upheavals. The films fill a gap left by a lack of more conventional historical narratives of any sort, particularly on women and more marginalized populations.⁷ For me, then, these recent blockbusters constitute a “next generation” archive of cultural memory and social history in a time of rapid change. They illuminate the perks and perils of globalization. They also chronicle, admittedly in limited ways, aspects of China’s most recent transformation. And the films continue to be a revelatory mirror for scholars in US history and American

⁷ See Ford, *Mabel Cheung Yuen-Ting’s An Autumn’s Tale*.

Studies—and Americans themselves—to consider how the United States appears from different vantage points. In what follows, I seek to illustrate these claims by offering a sampling of the preoccupations on display in *American Dreams in China* and *Finding Mr. Right*, foregrounding the cultural and historical work they perform even as they entertain.

SNAGs and the City, or Revenge of the Nerds

Stories about men in the “new China” or elsewhere in “rising Asia” are a staple of the dramedies. Both *Finding Mr. Right* and *American Dreams in China* can be placed in conversation with ideas and debates in the public and cyber-spheres about men’s lives today, as well as with scholarly work on Chinese, Asian, Asian-American, and Sinophone masculinities. In terms of the actual making of these films, they are co-productions: “belonging” to various individuals/organizational entities, drawing on the talent of actors, directors, and producers who have, themselves, become used to moving across borders and between stakeholders in the creative process, including state-owned enterprises or government censorship/regulatory agencies.

On a more symbolic level, I see the masculinity being performed both behind and in front of the camera as a comparable co-production. Given the work that has been done by Kam Louie and Louise Edwards on the Wen/Wu dyad in cultural texts (the idea that there is a broader spectrum of gender traits for Chinese men—Wen being literary and Wu being martial), as well as scholarship illustrating how Chinese representations of masculinity (often resisting orientalist notions imposed from the West) are less tied to the Western or American “macho” stereotype, it is perhaps not surprising that the men in these films would tread a different path from their Hollywood counterparts. Indeed, when I first viewed these films I was reminded of the 1980s acronym SNAG (sensitive new-age guy), a moniker given to feminist-friendly men who were in touch with their feelings and not afraid to change diapers. In this case, a new generation of SNAGs (sensitive new Asian guys) claims the cinematic space. They are smart, funny, ambitious, and confident, but also loyal and unashamedly tender. They are keen to participate in the contemporary redemption of China as it rises, but they move comfortably outside of China, particularly in the United States, where they articulate their views on a new world order and at times offer gentle snippets of advice on how to adapt in a changing and—to use Niall Ferguson’s term—“Chimericanizing” world.

But there are also, I believe, other forces in play in these representations. Stories of men in China (and Greater China) circulating in

popular culture often draw upon and operate within a global discourse on men's rising/falling economic fortunes, the blurring of national boundaries, the fragmentation of subjectivities, and women's expanding aspirations and expectations of men in the wake of feminist movements—which are of course manifested differently in various contexts, classes, and cultures but are, nonetheless, influential in many Asian countries—particularly where diasporic populations access and adapt relevant theoretical and conceptual paradigms (and cultural texts) of self-actualization to local contexts. *American Dreams in China* and *Finding Mr. Right* are two of many films appearing at a moment in time when much media attention is devoted to downward mobility among white men, or commentary on popular culture's "arrested development" narratives. We live in a time when stories concerning the fates and futures of men globally—from athletes to politicians to religious zealots, among others—are marshalled as evidence of masculinity in universal crisis.

In the United States, a nation that continues to export gendered fantasies and exceptionalist ideology along with its movies, the conversation on the state of men today has captured the imaginations of pundits envisioning two very different futures. The current debate is bookended on one side by those sympathetic to what *Atlantic Monthly* correspondent Hanna Rosin has christened "The End of Men" scenario. (This is the title of Rosin's book on gender and demographic shifts in a world where, she argues, women will gain access to position and power in unprecedented ways over the next few generations.) Depending on your viewpoint, Rosin's research is a cause for celebration or anxiety, but it is dependent on the ways in which traditionally "feminine" skill sets will be in greater demand in the future.⁸ She—like others who have argued similarly—claims that the sheer numbers of women in the pipeline, coming out of undergraduate/graduate institutions or climbing various professional ladders, augurs well for the future of women but spells trouble for men. On the other end of the continuum where feminist critique often informs the argument, there is anxiety of a different sort. Scholars and activists see this moment in time as one of resurgent patriarchies of various sorts, updated for a more globally-connected world where glass ceilings and deep backlash are obstacles that even Chief Financial Officer turned reluctant feminist Sheryl Sandberg must face. While women's expectations have risen, their actual influence—by any measure, economic, political, religious, or domestic—has not kept pace and in some places has stalled or retreated. Sandberg's admonition to "lean in" has

⁸ Rosin, *The End of Men*.

captured the imagination of many women (and some men) across the globe, with China currently being touted as the most promising location for her book, podcasts, and consciousness-raising groups.⁹ In Hollywood there is little sign of the end of men, although there is plenty of anxiety about what women expect of them.

Both *American Dreams in China* and *Finding Mr. Right*, like many other Greater China co-production blockbusters, showcase multiple performances of Chinese, Asian, and transnational masculinities. My students note the stark contrast between the highly orientalized, desexualized, or hypermasculinized Asian men in Hollywood films and the more complex and humane characters in these films. (They make similar comments on such films as *The Three Idiots*, *The Stolen Years*, *So Young*, and *You Are the Apple of My Eye*.) Some men in my classes say that they can relate to many of the male leads in these films, and several of the women find them more appealing than Hollywood hard bodies because they are willing to show emotion (although I have had more than one female student come to me after class and confess that she finds some of these guys “weak” and she wonders if that is because she has been unduly conditioned by Hollywood’s portrayals of manhood).

Student responses also repeatedly note that in the Chinese and Asian dramedies there is a hierarchy of desirable manhood, with the least desirable being the white guys. Next on the “you don’t want to be them or date them” list come the most “Americanized” of the diaspora: the non-resident Indian (NRI) character in *Three Idiots*, or the privileged children who go West—particularly to the United States—in *You are the Apple of My Eye* or *American Dreams in China*. The most favored men in these films are usually the upwardly-mobile “local” boys or men who find good jobs and earn large salaries but who are loyal to their friends—particularly their guy friends—and who exhibit manliness in a variety of non-traditional yet mildly macho ways. (Proving sexual prowess is still an important indicator of success for men in these films, and some students note the contradictory messages about what it means to be a “good Chinese man” today.)

Co-Producing History: National Narrations of Gender in Transnational Times

History, memory, and cultural generalizations (and combinations of all three) saturate the blockbuster dramedies. In fact, many of the people

⁹ See Sandberg, *Lean In*.

making these films today were part of an earlier generation of flexible citizens of whom Aihwa Ong wrote almost nearly two decades ago. Their own pasts inflect scripts, production values, and marketing decisions.¹⁰ As many scholars and critics have noted, several filmmakers have turned to Mainland partners, plots, and preoccupations in order to sustain careers. As Kwai-Cheung Lo argues:

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 many Asian countries.¹¹

The dramedies, like the migration melodramas prior to Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, illustrate the level of comfort that the current generation of filmmakers exhibit as they move back and forth across the region, the Pacific, and the globe, telling stories that do to some extent draw on their own experiences as well as on a variety of issues, aesthetic styles, technologies, and commercial strictures that blur or transcend geographical and political borders.

Peter Chan, the director and co-producer of *American Dreams in China*, is part of the Hong Kong New Wave/Second Wave cohort and the current wave of directors and producers seeking to raise their profile in a post-CEPA era (the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement, under which trade agreements between Hong Kong and the PRC allow for greater access to PRC consumers). Chan, who makes films that leapfrog across historical time and geographic space, has chronicled life in Hong Kong, China, and across Asia, expanding over the Pacific to the Chinese Diaspora in New York City. Speaking at the University of Hong Kong in spring 2014, he declared that *ADIC* allowed him to “get back to his roots,” referencing films he made nearly two decades ago. Chan’s 1996 *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, a film on Mainland Chinese serial migration—first to Hong Kong and then to the United States—can be placed in conversation with *ADIC* in a number of ways, as some critics have done already. Of interest to me is that Chan

¹⁰ Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*.

¹¹ Lo, *Excess and Masculinity in Asian Cultural Productions*, 28.

confirmed that he had, to a certain extent, written himself into the film (particularly via the character of Meng Xiaojun). Although he warned viewers not to assume that everything they saw was based on personal experience or historical fact—Chan hires writers rather than writing his own scripts—he also told the University of Hong Kong audience that *ADIC* was “ten times more personal than *Comrades*.” He then added—brushing aside skepticism from some audience members—that he felt he had “lived” much of the action in the film even though he was not in the PRC when the events he chronicles occurred. He was, he said, confident in telling a story about China in the 1980s and 1990s, because it had important parallels with the life he had known in Hong Kong during the 1970s and 1980s.

As I listened to Chan speak of PRC government censorship of the film and how he dealt with this, I thought about how film censors (and the directors who must work with them) shape historical memory. Chan, who is by now a well-established Sinophone director with experience working all over the world, has carefully cultivated a working relationship with authorities in China, after years of making films outside the purview of the Chinese government. Xue Xiaolu, by contrast, the director of *Finding Mr. Right*, has more direct ties to the Mainland film industry (and the academic world) in China, where she is a university professor as well as a filmmaker based in Beijing. (*Finding Mr. Right* is her second *da pian*. The 2010 film *Ocean Heaven* starring Jet Li was her first.) Ironically, although very little of the plotline of *FMR* unfolds in the PRC, Xue’s film is, I believe, far more damning than Chan’s in analyzing the current scene in the Chinese Mainland (or at least more critical of rampant materialism, sexism, and corruption there). One reason for this may be that, because *Finding Mr. Right* is more overtly a chick-flick fantasy, the criticisms of life in present-day Beijing, as well as Xue’s discussion of the ethics and costs and benefits of birth tourism, seem marginal if they are considered at all.

What Chan and Xue have in common—with each other and with other blockbuster filmmakers—is that all are hoping to take a small bite out of a large and lucrative domestic market in China. Chan, like his peers who came of age in the Hong Kong glory days, is also seen as sustaining a shrinking Hong Kong film industry. These cultural workers are squeezed between what Shu-Mei Shih describes as two “imperial formations”—Hollywood and Mainland power and influence. As such, the dramedies can at times seem more nationalistic than those produced by “Mainland” filmmakers (although these labels are slippery at best).¹²

¹² Shu-Mei Shih, comment on an earlier version of this paper delivered in early

The films also remind us of the ways in which censorship becomes part of an already complex and convoluted reconstruction of history for a range of personal, institutional, and national agendas. This is particularly noticeable in *ADIC*, where the discussion of history (and attendant “documentary” news footage) seems distorted by the clear avoidance of anything that might even hint at events that occurred in Beijing in June 1989. Viewers follow developments in the United States and China from the early 1980s to the present day. Historical events and times are marked with actual news footage and audio clips of political speeches, the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (and student demonstrations in China), and the announcement of China’s failed 2000 Olympic bid (in 1993). Despite a harsh indictment of the United States as responsible for “ruining the best minds of our generation,” there is no mention of Tiananmen, or of the fact that many of those who left for the United States did so as a way to cope with their own disillusionment with the Chinese leadership. *ADIC* is a transnational tale of a new generation of Mainlanders making it big on both sides of the Pacific and standing up to American (as opposed to Chinese) authorities, rather than running from them (as Leon Lai’s character did from the immigration authorities in Chan’s *Comrades*). But for this particular archive of films, the question of how Chinese censorship authorities shape storylines and production decisions remains to be explored.

Along these lines, what audiences can observe (and social media reactions confirm) is a critique of racism and anti-China sentiment via representations of the Americans who have cameo roles in the film. After all, the film itself is loosely based on actual historical events and on some of the experiences of the founders of the PRC tutoring company New Orient, which was sued for pirating US university entrance examinations and answer sheets. While the SNAGs in the United States must still endure demeaning border patrol treatment (aggravated by post-9/11 security procedures), cultural stereotyping, and racial profiling, they have sufficient education, money, and linguistic skills to command respect and confront American arrogance. Because films like *ADIC* and *FMR* enjoy big box office returns, and because they are funded in large part by Chinese government grants or a range of production partners that include state-owned enterprises, they are the beneficiaries of relatively new trade agreements between Beijing and Hong Kong (or Taipei, or Hollywood), an economic melange that can have interesting implications for what finally

appears on the big screen. The “century of shame” narrative becomes even more pronounced as China wins a “free pass” from censors looking to counter what they consider to be unfair media coverage of the PRC.

Let me be clear. I am aware that these films are not, for the most part, intentionally linked to China’s diplomatic forays into the exercise of soft power at home and abroad (through Confucius Institutes, for example), although at times they may seem to be. But they should form part of the conversation on soft power and cultural diplomacy, since the directors and producers are—as Chan and other directors have confirmed—aware of, perhaps at times coopted into, larger socio-political-economic projects. Both films have been seen as contributing to a growing arsenal of informal Chinese soft power in the cultural sphere, particularly as both speak to comparisons between the American dream and Premier Xi Jinping’s recently-articulated Chinese dream. I do not wish to overstate the point and I do want to flag important differences. Xue, for example, has been recognized for her work as an important ambassador for China abroad, while Chan has not, and when appearing at the University of Hong Kong, Chan contended that, when making his film, he knew nothing about Xi’s rhetoric.

What Chan did acknowledge, something of which *ADIC* serves as a reminder, is that for over two decades he and his peers have been tapping into a body of narratives about economic growth, social change, aspirations, and relationships in the Greater China region and beyond. It is, nonetheless, an interesting coincidence that both films—*ADIC* and *FMR*—opened within weeks of Xi’s initial public utterances on China’s future and the importance of achieving individual and collective Chinese dreams. Intentionally or not, the films offer responses to and are in conversation with Xi’s rhetoric, offering various dreams and visions of their own.

While both of these films knowingly reference the American dream (and in the eyes of many filmgoers the Chinese dreams that are crafted in response or opposition to that particular national myth), as well as notions of “freedom” of expression of various sorts, Hollywood “happily ever after” endings, and promises of self-realization and individuation, the myths are selectively appropriated, unpacked, reconstituted, and then deployed for our time.

Situated at the intersecting nodes of national cultural identity and gender and historical generation, the two films (and others in this archive which there is no space to discuss here) offer up new myths, romances, histories, and narratives for audiences who have long seen the United States as arrogant and China as misunderstood, or an ascendant force that Americans underestimate to their own detriment. The United States is, in

American Dreams in China, the bully who is being sent home from the playground; or in *Finding Mr. Right*, the place where—in post-feminist style—you go to have a baby prior to “having it all”: sometimes returning to China, sometimes staying in the United States. Like the pre-1997 migration melodramas, or even the Cathay films of the Cold War period, these are transnational American studies texts, winking with a “Here’s Looking at You, Kid” message and illuminating what Shelley Fisher Fishkin has called “multiple meanings of America.”¹³ Building on Fisher Fishkin’s conceptualization, I would add that we can also discern various ways in which these films illuminate multiple meanings of China and Greater China, and twenty-first century renderings of the Sino-US encounter in various sectors, particularly in the cultural and economic as well as the political and democratic spheres.

Claiming the Space: Cosmopolitan Cinematic Fantasies in the United States

One thing that both films have in common is that they illustrate and comment upon the ways in which upwardly-mobile Mainlanders are claiming the physical space of the United States as a natural consequence of claiming “imagined America” via popular culture, particularly Hollywood movies. Within and beyond China, “Chuppies” (Chinese upwardly-mobile/urban professionals, to use another phrase from the 1980s) are a force to reckon with, especially in big American cities with connections to Hollywood films made about them (in the case of these two films New York and Seattle/Vancouver). The films rely—particularly in the opening scenes—on the lingua franca of US popular culture to signal shared moments of bonding across borders and mediascapes (especially in an era of expanding social media) and new uses of the familiar. In *Finding Mr. Right*, for example, allusions to Nora Ephron’s *Sleepless in Seattle* and Beyonce Knowles’ pop ballad “All the Single Ladies” are deployed by female lead Tang Wei (who plays the bubbly Wen Jia Jia) to charm an immigration officer. (Immigration officers are always the bad guys in these films.) In *American Dreams in China*, pop music—particularly 1960s style rock’n’roll, which is somewhat anachronistic given that most of the action takes place in the 1980s—helps to set a mood and make various statements about sexual expression or personal rebellion against authority. Popular culture offers a way to connect, a shorthand for

¹³ See Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies,” 17-57.

overcoming language differences, and in the case of *Finding Mr. Right* a way to prove that one is not an outsider. “Who is this ‘DEVIL WEARS PRADA’?” Wen Jia Jia asks a fellow Mainlander about the Taiwanese woman she meets in her maternity center in Seattle.

Characters in the films, who initially “know” the United States through popular culture, move—like the filmmakers themselves—back and forth across the region, the Pacific, and the globe, telling stories about young Chinese cosmopolites consuming with abandon. But there is more going on than just eating and shopping—although quite unquestionably A LOT of eating and shopping is going on, especially shopping! These are stories about the current generation’s negotiations with various pasts: their parents’ and grandparents’ legacies, the macro histories of nations, and the rapid pace of economic change. In *FMR* there are several references to Wen Jia Jia as belonging to a spoiled generation of viper-like Mainland women who entrap older men, care only about designer labels, and who do not—heaven forbid—know how to cook! In the case of *ADIC*, we see three friends who will become successful entrepreneurs, thanks to their ability to capitalize on a perfect storm of opportunity, hard work, luck, and economic reform. The plot switches back and forth between upwardly-mobile Chinese university students and their “sadder but wiser” older selves who are now not only disillusioned with the promise of America (due to visa rejections or racism once they do gain access to the geographic space of the United States), but who are crafting a values melange that borrows various elements of capitalist, neoconfucianist, and socialist aspirations.

Like their historical predecessors, the new co-production blockbusters narrate the cross-cultural encounter in a particular moment in time. They counter Hollywood stereotypes and expressions of orientalism—or up to a point embrace them—and are, at times, playfully and knowingly self-orientalist. Although the characters in both films have to cope with an initial culture shock when they first arrive in the United States (which becomes part of the comedic action or pathos), all eventually find their way and overcome the very real sense of dislocation (and discomfort and discrimination) they face—although the men in these films never seem to feel as truly acculturated as the women. *Finding Mr. Right*’s Wen Jia Jia will “have it all” once she has learned that the money she earns is better than her Beijing sugar daddy’s credit card. Better still, she knows how to fix her own sink as well as her son’s lunch, and her “child-friendly” food website seems sufficiently mobile to allow her to work in either the United States or China. (In all probability the United States, since her Prince Charming, the SNAG Frank, by now aged forty-four, receives a chance to

reclaim his medical career prospects in New York City. Frank, who abandoned a promising medical career in Beijing in order to immigrate to the United States and raise his daughter Julie there, experienced downward mobility in his new country and had to work as a driver shuttling pregnant Mainlanders around Seattle. There is a veiled criticism of Chinese education in this storyline, as Julie was unable to “fit in” at her Chinese school or in a PRC school system that seemed ostensibly more accepting of her.) Frank is, in some respects, the male counterpoint to Amy Chua’s Tiger Mother (the Teddy Bear Father?), but he suffers mightily for his gender-bending ways. Behind his back, he is nicknamed “DB” (deadbeat), due to his decision to follow his wife to the United States, where her more lucrative career in finance allows him to focus on Julie’s care and education. Gender stories are everywhere in these films, and gender is a theme to which I will return in this chapter’s conclusion.

Chimeric Dream Melanges

Xue and Chan steer us to a larger discussion which falls beyond the scope of this chapter, on who, what, or where constitute China (the burgeoning field of Sinophone studies as well as postcolonial studies has much more to contribute on this). As Sheldon Lu reminds us: “It is difficult to say when and where China begins and ends in the frequent cultural co-productions in the pan-Chinese areas of the mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.”¹⁴ In these films, China and the United States are mobile and plastic conceptualizations as well as geographic locations. The films are, as I have noted already, saturated with musings upon success, aspiration, money, and the loss of innocence that comes with the realization that most people’s dreams do not actually come true.

What has changed, however, is that in these films it is seemingly China rather than the United States that offers more opportunities for characters to achieve their dreams. Both films chronicle the process of disillusionment with America as the experience of the United States becomes more concrete on a number of levels. In *FMR* we follow Wen Jia Jia’s shock at seeing tatted out youth just outside her obstetrician’s Seattle office complex; her glee at the relatively cheap prices of goods and real estate in the United States; and her frustration that there are no people to be found anywhere in the suburbs (as she runs down a quiet neighborhood street trying to find help for one of her housemates who has gone into labor). In

¹⁴ Lu, Review of Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* (January 2008).

ADIC, the loss of innocence is more poetic and tragic. Such phrases as “I once loved America,” or “Our generation desires all things American,” hint at the depth of disillusionment that accompanies hands-on knowledge and experience of the United States beyond the silver screen. And there are constant reminders of the ways in which “Americans are so naïve,” my favorite being the discovery that Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) is a wonderful temporary home for a rapidly-expanding language tutorial center: “Buy a piece of chicken and you can sit here all day!”

But there is in *ADIC*, as there has been throughout the history of the Sino side of the Sino-US encounter, a clear sense that Chinese people should be quite clear about what they borrow from American people. It is the returning sea turtle, Meng Xiaojun, who knows how to pick and choose what is best from American culture. But in a more contemporary twist, audiences are reminded that in reality, neither is too much Chinese culture necessarily a panacea for contemporary complexities. Students being tutored at New Orient learn that “Traditional education destroyed your confidence,” or that “Self confidence is pivotal in American culture.” There is a grudging respect for what America does have to offer, perhaps even a belief that the United States might prove a more hospitable place for changing oneself if the alternative is battling a rigid and demoralizing education system in China. As the men in *ADIC* model for audiences what it takes to achieve professional and economic success, they make it clear that their teachers (and often parents) have been too harsh, narrow, or manipulative in their tutoring, mentoring, or parenting. Like *Three Idiots* and *You are the Apple of My Eye*, all of these films rely on shared childhood and teen memories of the evils of rote learning, excessive discipline, or pressure to perform. Characters criticize the authoritarian and uninspiring learning styles of their respective school systems. And for the most part, it is understood that sometimes one must spend a few years in an American (or Western) university if one is to be able genuinely to compete in the global marketplace.

Ultimately, however, Americans are to be admired more in principle than in reality. Not only are they “so naïve” (because they allow customers to stay for hours on end at their fast food establishments in China), they are seemingly incapable of understanding the sorts of pressure that youth in China (or India, or Taiwan) must face in order to pass exams and earn a place in the university system. Representatives of the EES (the cinematic alias for the Educational Testing service in Princeton, New Jersey) dress down the New Dream entrepreneurs, reminding them that: “To them [students in China who have been helped into university by New Dream teachers] you may be heroes, to me you’re a thief.”

In the end, however, the arrogance of the Americans is short lived. As the film concludes, Meng—strengthened by a hearty meal with his New Dream partners at the diner where he was once a busboy—returns the scolding and delivers his own lecture to the testing authorities, retorting: “I know what we’ve done wrong but you don’t know what you’ve done wrong and you don’t even care.” There is a “western-style” showdown in *ADIC*, but in this case it is not the sheriff versus the outlaw, it is the successful entrepreneurs (who are not only smart and wealthy, but brothers in arms who are not afraid to hug each other and cry) versus the elite but naïve Americans. And the Americans do not stand much of a chance, given that they have yet to understand how China has changed or that, rather than demonizing foreign others, the United States must confront its own domestic problems. The testing authorities are taken to task for *their* stereotyping of China’s citizens as unable to think for themselves and given to “cheating” due to characteristics deeply embedded in Chinese history and culture.

Conclusion: Back to the Future: Men, Women, and Social Change in the *Da Pian*

Clearly, the Mainland Chinese male protagonists in many of these films are an interesting and complex combination of sensitive new age guy and macho leading man (with more metrosexual hairstyles in the case of the fashion-forward *Tiny Times* films). As noted above in the discussion of Wen/Wu masculinity, Hollywood-type macho men are passé. If we consider the existing body of scholarship on Chinese masculinity, the question is: Was the Hollywood type ever really that compelling a model in Chinese societies? These films demonstrate how the rapid expansion of capitalism has quickly changed modes of everyday life. Reactions to these films have commented specifically on the men in them. The *New York Times* film review that skewered *Tiny Times I* noted that the men in the film were “not the usual muscle-bound Hollywood types, but Asian boys of androgynous demeanor with compact frames, exquisite facial contours and the look of perpetual youth.”¹⁵ Sadly, the objectification of Chinese men in this review undermines the attempt to compliment the film for presenting a range of masculine styles via the various characters on screen. These films are generating transpacific conversations on manhood and culture in globality and they can and should be placed in conversation with

¹⁵ Zhu and Hisgen, “A Rite of Passage to Nowhere” (July 15, 2013).

other films that have focused on the complexities of Chinese masculinities in contemporary times.

What unites all these representations of manhood is that, regardless of the modes of masculinity they they represent, most of the men in these films stand in as avenging angels for generations of Chinese immigrants and exchange students who had to endure the mistreatment, misunderstanding, and ignorance/arrogance of earlier generations. The men of the dramedies articulate notions of national and cultural belonging that “right” historical wrongs and talk back to US notions of orientalism and exceptionalism—asserting China’s power as an economic and cultural force (including the stereotypes that have appeared repeatedly on Hollywood screens) and offering a variety of upwardly mobile examples of what it means to live one’s own “Chinese Dream,” which unashamedly borrows “bits of America” to represent and redeem the “new” China. Even Peter Chan acknowledges that this film—unlike any of his others—borders on preaching, but many other films likewise articulate the same message.

Yet while the men in *ADIC* are ready to rumble and defend Chinese honor in the glass-walled conference room high above the busy streets of Manhattan, what are the women doing? In all honesty, not much. Three women in *ADIC* have speaking roles in the film. The first is Caucasian American Lucy, a doe-eyed worshiper of China (at least initially) who objectifies Wang for having the “most beautiful Chinese body she’s ever seen.” Meng’s shy childhood sweetheart is the second woman who appears in the film (although we never hear her speak). She later becomes Meng’s long-suffering wife and follows her husband to the United States where she, like Meng, endures downward mobility and racism. Although Meng believes she spends her days giving piano lessons, in reality she wears her fingers out steaming clothes in a small dry cleaning shop. The third and potentially most interesting woman in the film is the ice-princess Su-Mei. She is a dedicated student with brains to match any of the male leads. Eventually, however, she is cut out of the story, once she moves to the United States and breaks up with Cheng. (She and her young son appear briefly at the end of the film, but all we know about her is that she has become a mother who believes that it does not matter whether or not dreams come true provided one keeps one’s dignity intact. But it might be nice to know more about how her own dreams fared along the way.)

ADIC is not the only film where women receive short shrift. In almost all of the dramedies, multiple representations of contemporary manhood are not matched or accompanied by similarly expansive portrayals of womanhood. When it comes to the women in their lives, sensitive new age

guys often turn out to be less sensitive or willing to embrace the “new.” Women are still bearers of traditional values, who suffer in various ways when they resist these. Generally speaking, the films reinforce gender conventions even as they talk back to older stereotypes and assumptions. Sadly, an apt comment comes from Steve Derne’s work on globalization in India, where, as he notes, “cultural globalization gives men *new* ideas about how to act out oppressive gender hierarchies.”¹⁶

Ironically, in some respects *Finding Mr. Right* is an exception to the aforementioned assertions and, in terms of women and empowerment, the most promising of all of the films. Tang Wei’s character Wen Jia Jia evolves from being a pampered mistress of a Beijing wheeler-dealer in the opening montage, into a woman of substance who learns to stand on her own as a single mother and runs her business for nearly two years before she rushes to the top of the Empire State Building at the end of the film to reunite with Frank, her SNAG. She ends up with a man who has already proven that he will put family above his professional life, and they both know the ropes as single parents in a foreign environment. But even Frank does not really appreciate Jia Jia until he realizes she knows how to cook. Once again we are reminded that, even for a man labeled DB—deadbeat—because he chooses fatherhood over career, tradition dies hard. For all the change that appears in these Chimerican dream blockbusters, they—like their Hollywood counterparts—spin myths that engage and entice but have little to say in the way of insights into the complexities of crossings of various types, quotidian and grandiose. Yet even so, they are performing important historical work, as they clearly constitute part of an archive of globalization that both deterritorializes and reterritorializes nation, gender, culture, and multiple—and conflicting—pasts. They are worth watching (and teaching).

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