The Cross-Pacific as Method

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As I was completing page proof corrections for my first book, *Remaking Chinese Cinema: Through the Prism of Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Hollywood* in the fall of 2012, I found myself encountering a real-life (re)enactment of the book's core problematic: namely, in what ways the cross-Pacific geometry of colonial and postcolonial power has shaped and has been, in its turn, shaped by the discursive formulation and complication of the concept of national cinema. This (re)enactment took the form of the double-remaking of *Red Dawn* (dir. John Milius, USA, 1984). Originally released in 1984 as a Cold War drama featuring the Soviet Union as the archenemy of the United States, *Red Dawn* was remade and slated to be released in 2010—this time with the Chinese as America's nemesis. With the bankruptcy of production company MGM, however, the release was halted. By 2011, distributors had become concerned that the film would alienate the Chinese government and thus was at risk of being shut out of China's lucrative market. The solution was to cosmetically remake the finished film. With the help of cost-effective digital technologies, all Chinese military symbols and dialogue conveniently became North Korean, simultaneously reinscribing the racist cliché that "All Orientals look alike" and reinforcing a hierarchy among racialized Others. *Red Dawn* (dir. Dan Bradley, US) was theatrically released in November of 2012 to mediocre reception. Despite its North Korean makeover, it never reached Chinese theaters.

This double remaking of *Red Dawn* uncannily dramatized the sort of postcolonial and neoliberal reconfigurations of cross-Pacific power geometries I had sought to map in my book. I was compelled to add a section of final thoughts on the last page of the book's main text. I quote from these comments below:

> *Red Dawn*'s last-minute makeover highlights the overpowering concern with box office. Yet it does not address the US media's deep-seated anxiety and mistrust when faced with the "Oriental" Other. Indeed, such paranoia foregrounds American cinema's dependence on the global market, which leads to self-censorship while undermining its hegemony. This "two sides (paranoia/self-censorship and hegemony) of the same coin" situation is clearly evident in the remaking of *Red Dawn*, with its imaginary enemies cycling from Russian to Chinese to North Korean. The "face-off" further encapsulates the tension-ridden yet neighborly feedback loop that I have been tracing throughout this book. What I hope emerges from this loop, however, is a "foreign perspective" that is not demonized or assimilated but rather prompts a fundamental remaking of the Self— be it a national cinema or a collective identity.[1]

This "tension-ridden yet neighborly feedback loop" historically undergirds the cross-Pacific media field and continues to shape its future directions in important ways. Depending on specific historical conjunctures and the correlated geopolitics, Pacific power geometries slant in different directions at different times, producing novel aesthetic and political configurations. This is particularly apparent in China's shifting bargaining power vis-à-vis the global hegemony of the Hollywood studios since the mid-1910s. Reacting against the Western (especially US) film industries' derogatory depictions of China in the 1910s, which indulged in a colonialist Orientalism, ethnic Chinese (including the Chinese diaspora) and China's central government, represented by the Nationalist Party (KMT), rallied against *ruhua pian* (literally: China-humiliating films), demanding that Hollywood Studios and filmmakers (oftentimes also the leading stars) issue formal apologies, withdraw internationally distributed film prints, and improve future cinematic representations of China.[2] Such protests went hand in hand with contemporaneous discourses of nation-building, and more specifically, efforts to build a nationalist film industry and culture. Such nationalist discourses gathered momentum both within China and in the US, spearheaded by diasporic Chinese.[3]

Such ethno-nation-oriented decolonial interventions, which combined discursive and practice-based interventions, paralleled the African American uplift cinema that emerged in the US in the same period. According to African American film historian Allyson Nadia Field, uplift cinema promoted black civility and useful citizenship by fostering racial pride, self-help, and community improvement.[4] Beyond these points of thematic sympathy, the films that emerged out of China's cross-Pacific engagements and altercations with Hollywood shared with uplift cinema the similar impetus of "double consciousness," that is, a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."[5] Film scholar Jane Gaines has brought this fundamental insight of critical race theory into conversation with film theory to thematize "the execution of power through the trajectory of the eye."[6] We should add, moreover, that the "trajectory of the eye" drives not only the racialized experience of double consciousness, but also all power geometries, be they ethnic-racial, national-cultural, gender-sexual, or their intersections. The "trajectory of the eye" tends to emphasize *re*actions from the margins, rendering marginalized players (both those within US borders and those across the Pacific) *re*agents, rather than agents. The reagents strive to reorder or rectify political hierarchies, oftentimes with the effect of underscoring the entrenched power structure. That is, to the extent that marginalized film and media makers are seen as reacting against Hollywood and its entrenched racisms, the center-periphery structure and its accompanying power differentials remain intact as a default and untroubled reference point. This situation engenders self-censorship among marginalized media-makers, compelling them to always "[look] at one's self through the eyes of others." The confirmative self-imaging they demand or produce, therefore, always derives from a desire to present a positive identity intended to correct or combat Hollywood's overpowering ideological manipulations.

One might argue that the double remaking of *Red Dawn* suggests a reversal of this tide, as it is now the Hollywood studios who preemptively censor their representations of mainland China, illustrating the latter's rising soft power, and by extension, the reshuffling of cross-Pacific power geometries. Yet the fact that China is expediently de-demonized only to have North Korea (where Hollywood does not expect to have a market share) shoved into the role of the enemy indicates that Hollywood's narrative regime remains invested in a Self-Other, center-periphery hierarchy, and while the specifics of the pecking

order may change with the times, those pegged in the lower rungs will invariably be preyed upon to reinforce the broader hierarchy.

Thus, a major difficulty in addressing the political and aesthetic dynamics of the cross-Pacific media field, from the inception of film into the twenty-first century, is the persistence of a US-centric power structure that continues to expand and update itself by vampirizing and coopting challenges from the margins, sometimes turning the latter into satellite centers that mimic imperial logics. To accomplish any systemic transformation, we must refocus our understanding of Pacific power geometries, foregoing a center-periphery, action-reaction dichotomy in favor of an emphasis on the layered tensions within, and interactions between, media-making cultures, the mutual (re)constitution of which defies the foreclosures of the power structure that has since the late nineteenth century underpinned the cross-Pacific media field. To this end, I mobilize the framework of "Asia as method," which I visualize in media discourses as a kind of "crisscrossed stare," a thought image I first posited in an earlier study of the cross-Pacific gaze and the politics of reception.

Takeuchi Yoshimi, a postwar Japanese thinker, first proposed the notion of Asia as method in a 1960 lecture (published in 1961), but the concept has received renewed attention since the 1990s.[7] In his lecture, Takeuchi critiques Japan's post-Meiji reform modernity as being fixated upon catching up with the West. By contrast, he privileges China's revolutionary modernity as being grounded in local, everyday sociopolitical conditions, and thus more conducive to the development of a truly independent subjectivity. On this basis, he challenges those forms of knowledge production that retain the West as a central reference point, and instead advocates an "inter-Asian methodology" that departs from the presumed Western center and refocuses on a triangulated analysis of Japan, China, and India as fellow subjugated nations vis-à-vis the West. Asia as method, therefore, refers to those modes of resistance and knowledge production that depart from the Western-focused, center-periphery binary structure. It enables colonized peoples to build subject formations in ways that defy the colonial compulsion to demonstrate and display self-worth to and for the imperialist gaze, even while censuring that gaze.[8]

Building upon the notion of Asia as method, Yan Hairong and Daniel Vukovich, editors of a special issue of *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* entitled "What's Left of Asia," propose to "undo the West as epistemological

and political problematic, and to create alternative frameworks of reference and identification (of inter-Asia, as opposed to the West-and-Asia)." Asia, redefined as "a signifier for critical regionalism," thus serves as "a line of inquiry" situated "between critiques of area studies in North America and discourses that renegotiate regionalization now under way in Asia and beyond."[9] As we reenvision Asia as a perspective or method of critical inquiry (rather than the object of Western imperialist and neoliberalist projection or reactive essentialist regionalism), we can begin to reconceptualize the Pacific as a contentious terrain for enacting new modes of knowledge production, which turn upon concatenation and entanglement, rather than hierarchization, demarcation, and a reified identity politics.

As a way of transposing this alternative framework into the realm of media studies and of encapsulating such multivalent entanglements between differently positioned media-making areas, I posit the notion of a crisscrossed stare. I first developed this term in my study of the 1930 Chinese protest of the Harold Lloyd comedy *Welcome Danger* (dir. Clyde Bruckman & Malcolm St. Clair, USA, 1929), comparing that protest with the befuddled US reception in 1936 of a Chinese film, *Tian lun* (exported under the title of *Song of China*) (dir. Fei Mu & Lo Ming-Yau, 1935), which premiered in New York's Little Carnegie Playhouse, a site that catered to the film art-oriented Little Cinema movement.[10] Juxtaposing these two examples of cross-Pacific film reception in opposite directions, situating them within the context of escalating Chinese nationalism and the expansion of the central government's film censorship activities (which implicated both imported and domestic films), I developed the notion of a crisscrossed stare to describe the capillary politics inscribed in different audiences' scopic investments in foreign films—investments that encompassed disorientation, cognition, agitation, and pleasure. Simultaneously interactive and at cross-purposes, the trope of the crisscrossed stare evokes feelings ranging from fascination to befuddlement, disappointment to alienation, and even rage and hostility, all of which inhered in the complex processes of cross-Pacific film and media spectatorship. Such complex affective fluctuations point up the necessity of scrutinizing the layered and multivalent capillary politics at play across Pacific media cultures.

Harking back to the "tension-ridden yet neighborly feedback loop" and the "foreign perspective" with which I concluded my first book, and calling for a deconstruction of the essentialist Self-Other binary, I approach the Pacific as overdetermined by colonial, imperial, postcolonial, and neoliberal power

geometries. And yet I also see it as fundamentally volatile and under-determined, a space whose complexities defy the foreclosures of any macro-political paradigm. As such, it affords a fruitful framework for studying the dynamic media fields it encompasses, the kinds of interactions it enables and curtails, and furthermore, the affective politics that emerge from its continuous media and mediated entanglements. Or, more accurately, insofar as the Pacific has continuously instigated media interactivities that have (re)shaped positions of looking, discoursing, and creating among spectators and media-makers alike, this geopolitical terrain is best understood as a method that accentuates polylocal entanglement and mutual constitution through sensory negotiation, knowledge production, and subject formation.

Notes

1   Yiman Wang, *Remaking Chinese Cinema: Through the Prism of Shanghai, Hong Kong and Hollywood* (Honolulu, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 164.
2   The earliest record I have identified concerning Chinese criticism of American films' derogatory stereotyping of Chinese characters was an open letter originally written in 1916 in English by an overseas Chinese student, Li Zhoulin. This letter, purportedly addressed to all American newspapers, was soon translated into Chinese by Wang Yuxiang. Li Zhoulin, "Wei huodong xiezhen miaoxie huaqiao zhi wuzhuang zhi quanmei ge baoshu" ("A Letter addressed to American Newspapers Concerning Moving Pictures' Derogatory Depiction of Overseas Chinese"), originally published in *Liumei xuesheng jibao* (*Quarterly of Chinese Students in America*), trans. Wang Yuxiang, in *Da zhonghua* (*The Great China*) 1, no. 12 (1916). The most heavily studied protest against "China-humiliating films" is the *Welcome Danger* incident in 1930. Escalated by China's KMT government that had recently reunited China, putting an end to the twelve-year warlords' factional strife, thus taking this opportunity to confront Paramount so as to assert its sovereignty, the protest against Harold Lloyd's comedy, *Welcome Danger* (1929), snowballed across the nation, leading to China's diplomatic maneuverings, and constituting the central government's first major censure against Hollywood productions.
3   An example is *Changcheng zhizao huanpian gongsi* (the Great Wall Film Company), registered in Brooklyn, New York, in April 1921. This company was founded by overseas Chinese who were infuriated by two "China-humiliating" American films, and thus acquired filmmaking skills and made two shorts on Chinese costumes and martial arts, distributed by Urban Motion Picture Industries Incorporation. In 1924, the founders moved the company to Shanghai, producing socially oriented "problem films" and genre films until 1930.
4   Allyson Nadia Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
5   W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in *The Souls of Black Folk*, edition (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1903; New York: Dover Publications, 1994): 2–3. Citations refer to the Reprint Publisher edition.
6   Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 12.

7   Takeuchi Yoshimi, "Asia as Method," in *What Is Modernity?*, trans. Richard F. Calichman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 164–165.

8   For explication of Takeuchi's "Asia as method," see Kwan-Hsing Chen, "Takeuchi Yoshimi's 1960 'Asia as Method' lecture," in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13, no. 2 (2012): 317–324; and Yang Beichen, "'Yazhou' zuowei xin de shijie lishi wenti—Wang Hui zaitan 'Yazhou zuowei fangfa" ("Asia" as a New World History Problematic—Wang Hui Revisits 'Asia as Method," *Dianying yishu* (Film Art) 3 (2019) https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/HHqP9qXBFFaCK3Jh8FZDxA. Taiwanese cultural critic Kuan-Hsing Chen also develops Takeuchi's concept in his *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

9   Yan Hairong and Daniel Vukovich, "Introduction," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 211–12, 213, 214, 215.

10 Yiman Wang, "The Crisscrossed Stare: Protest and Propaganda in China's Not-So-Silent Era," in *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space*, eds. Jennifer Bean, Laura Horak and Anupama Kapse (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 186–209.

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