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Performing the Political in *Lust, Caution*[1]

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I. Introduction

In Eileen Chang (張愛玲, 1920–1995)'s "Se, Jie" (色, 戒, Lust, Caution, 1977), a short story that took her about two decades to write from the 1950s to the 1970s, the triumphal patriotic narrative so pervasive in Chinese cultural productions throughout the twentieth century, came to a gloomy end. The Chinese student activists who plotted to assassinate a Japanese collaborator during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) were betrayed by one of their own and were executed together.

If the Shanghai female writer, writing in Hong Kong and in the United States at the height of the Cold War, was deconstructing nationalism and revolution, Ang Lee's (1954–) twenty-first century cinematic contemplation in *Lust, Caution* (2007) was saturated with his unique perspective as a Taiwanese director of Mainland Chinese origin, established in Hollywood, who had international capital and talent at his disposal to reflect on this controversial yet defining moment in modern Chinese culture and politics.

In Lee's film, Wang Chia-chih, the virgin girl who was put through a painful process of self-transformation in order to perform the role of a *femme fatale* to facilitate the student group's assassination plot, believed that she was in love with the collaborator and let him escape instead of carrying out the assassination. Wang's final "change of heart" resulted not only in her own

1. I am grateful to Wan Chuanfa and Christopher Lupke for encouraging me to finish this essay at different stages of its incarnation. Major writings were done while I served as a Humanities Korea (HK) Research Professor at the Ewha Institute for the Humanities (EIH) in Seoul, funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of Korea. I thank the NRF and my wonderful colleagues at the EIH for their support. The essay benefited from helpful suggestions from three anonymous reviewers and editorial staff members at *Trans-Humanities*. All remaining shortcomings, of course, are my own.

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death (with the warrant signed by the collaborator), but also the death of her fellow student activists, including the handsome student leader K'uang Yu-min, her original love interest and the reason she was part of the assassination plot in the first place (Chang et al. 94–96).

Previous studies of Wang's final "betrayal" (or change of heart) to free the "traitor" (and her newfound lover) in the story and film posited feminist and ethical deconstructions of the grand narrative of nationalism and revolution (L. O. Lee, "*Lust, Caution*" 96; Lam 103; H. Lee 640–56; and Deppman 155–76). With the overarching emphasis on disavowing such grand narratives, the three sensational sexual encounters performed by Wang the female assassin and Mr. Yee the target, then, justifiably, became the focal point of analysis.[2] More importantly, such a shift of focus from the public and the political to the private and the personal encouraged scholars to read Lee's film along the lines of how an ordinary lover triumphed over a *femme fatale* in service of patriotism.

While these readings convincingly point out that Lee's film provides an alternative narrative to the conventional portrayal of patriots, assassins, as well as traitors, they often do so with the assumption that sexual and ethical considerations somehow override nationalism and revolution. However, rather than negating the public and the political, I find in Lee's carefully orchestrated performance scenes elements constructive to both sexuality and ethics, and to both nationalism and revolution. Examining three of these dramatic scenes of performance in the film *Lust, Caution*, I propose to read this twenty-first century visual text as an epilogue to a long-running narrative highlighting the intersection of performance and politics in twentieth-century China, as I have elaborated in another context (*Avant-Garde* 7–22). Focusing on the "orchestration" of cinematic performance through Lee's creative use of such elements as popular music, political theater, and leftist cinema from the 1930s, I argue that nationalism and revolution staged an intriguing comeback in *Lust, Caution*, intensified, rather than negated, by its intricate intertwinement with sexuality and ethics.

The first part of the paper details three dramatic sequences and carefully delineates Lee's intricate staging of patriotism, violence, and love in *Lust, Caution*. I combine detailed scene analysis with contextual analysis of the

2. See: Peng, Hsiao-yen, and Whitney Crothers Dilley, eds. *From Eileen Chang to Ang Lee: Lust/Caution*. London and New York: Routledge, 2014. In particular, please see its section on "Eros, Subjectivity, and Collective Memory."

cultural milieu of the 1930s, in which the popular music industry and leftist drama movement play important roles. I then demonstrate how the three scenes of patriotism, violence, and love are critically interconnected. These scenes, I argue, serve to highlight how the rise of sexual and ethical consciousness intersects with the enduring power of the political in Lee's reinvention of Chang's story in the twenty-first century.

Ⅱ. Part One: Staging Patriotism, Violence, and Love

In his film, Lee created three important dramatic sequences to heighten the centrality of performance—in public, as collective action, and in private—as catalytic to the processes of individual and collective identity formation. These three "staged" sequences include the performances of two popular songs and the two "falling in love" moments initiated by them, as well as the brutal killing of an intruder in the style of a meticulously choreographed stage performance, sandwiched in between. I argue that these three scenes of performance serve as tipping points and defining moments in the painful coming of age of the young protagonists. These scenes of performance are original to Lee's film, without precedents in Chang's story, and not examined in reference to each other in previous studies, hence warrant close examination here.

1. Staging Patriotism

1) A Patriotic Play in Context

Taking off from the single allusion to the female protagonist Wang's acting background in the original story, "she had, in a past life, been an actress" (Chang et al. 17), the film develops her rousing public performance as the female lead in a patriotic play into a full episode including a flashback to the actual stage performance (84–88). In the play, made up and dressed as a village girl, Wang's character tends her love interest in the film, K'uang's character, a wounded soldier. Having lost her brother in the ongoing war, she cares for the soldier as if he were her own brother.

This intense performance scene opens with a medium shot with two thirds of Wang's and K'uang's characters' bodies in view, with lights on their faces and their upper bodies, and Wang's character holding a knitted scarf in her

hand. Cutting to the backstage, the camera lays bare the mechanism of how background music is released from a gramophone machine: with one of the group members moving an amplifier closer and closer to the machine so as to gradually increase the intensity of the music and the emotional impact of the performance. When the camera returns to the stage, Wang raises the scarf and trusts it to K'uang while telling the story of her older brother who died on the battlefront fighting the Japanese. The scarf is recently finished intending to be given to the brother, we learned, however, he would have no use for it now. K'uang grabs the scarf with his left hand and his eyes finally meet Wang's (although his hand misses hers), explaining that he could not possibly accept the gift as Wang saved his life and he has nothing to repay her. The following line by Wang, "saving the country will be your repayment, and killing the enemy will be your revenge for my brother," effectively connects Wang, K'uang, and the audience emotionally, prepares the audience both in and outside the film, for the emotional climax to come.

The next scene shows K'uang in a medium close-up inquiring further on Wang's brother, which leads to Wang's full facial close-up in focus with tears running down her face. Wang's crucial line, "he is the same age as you," further connects the two, both emotionally, and in a fictive kinship. The camera places close-ups of Wang's and K'uang's tearing faces in and out of focus in the following scene, and places Wang in and outside the frame, with the goal of intensifying the effects of her voiceover, especially the rich implication of her important line, "he is also as strong as you." This reference to K'uang's muscled and masculine body, with the Chinese keyword, *jieshi* (結實, sturdy) as she praises both K'uang's and her brother's bodies in one breath, seems not only to connect the two in a fictive kinship, but also corporally. While tending to his wounds, she must have had close bodily contacts with him, a fact not brought into the consciousness of the audiences, both in and outside the film, until this disclosure.

However, this tantalizing moment had to be cut short with Wang's fully charged emotional narrative regarding her diseased brother. She continues to explain how her brother was the only hope for her family while tears streaming from her eyes are caught on camera. She then dramatically kneels down in front of K'uang and about to kowtow to him, which made K'uang drop his underarm crutch supporting his wounded right leg and kneel down on his left knee together with her. Wang explains that she knelt down for the country and for her dead brother, and she urges K'uang to avenge for both when he goes back to the battlefield. As they kneel down together holding each other's

arms, they are finally able to legitimize their bodily contact for a second time (after the treating of wounds). It is at this intensely emotional moment, Wang gradually raises her lowered head and looks into K'uang's eyes. In the next significant move, however, both of them shift from looking at each other to facing the audience, still holding each other in arms and still kneeling down. Wang's final line, "China cannot fall," comes after a long build-up of emotions from brother-sister love to a tantalizing physical admiration, then finally to this full release of repressed sentiments through the unleashing of patriotic energy.

How can one separate nationalism, sexuality, and ethics in such a carefully orchestrated performance scene? Hence when an older gentleman in the audience stands up with raised fist and spontaneously issues the same cry "China cannot fall," the whole auditorium is fired up. The scene then cuts to the back of K'uang and Wang. From this angle, the front of the stage—its limit is clearly marked by a line of lit lamps—and the full view of the audience, are laid bare. When the camera returns to the audience view of the stage, Wang and K'uang are again shown as arms together, kneeling. The stage settings, including the artificial clouds, plants, walls, and the roof of the house, appear in full view, highlighting the artificiality of this "staged" performance. The next shot confirms such artificiality by showing the rest of the crew peeking from behind the curtain smiling for their success while the fiery chanting of the audience continues in front. The final shot of this performance scene cuts back to Wang and K'uang on stage in the same position, panting excitedly together, apparently amazed and shocked by such rousing audience reactions to their own acting.[3]

Seventy years before the creation of such a blood-boiling performance scene in the 2007 film, Tian Han (田漢)'s play *Lugou Qiao* (盧溝橋, *The Marco Polo Bridge*) featured a similar scene, when a female college student and a member of a propaganda team knelt down in front of the audience to incite patriotic feelings. The play opens with a student propaganda team performing for the Chinese soldiers at the Marco Polo Bridge in June 1937, one month before Japan's full-scale invasion. One student after another stands up to deliver

3. The tear-jerking performance scene between Wang's and K'uang's characters in a patriotic play took place some 21 minutes and 50 seconds into the film and lasted for about two minutes in the NC-17 English-subtitled DVD version of the film, see Lee 21:53–23:54. For Lee's possible inspirations, see Tian 137–38; for the relevant section in the English screenplay of Ang Lee's film, see Chang et al. 87–88.

speeches explaining the geopolitics of the current Japanese threat to China, until a female university student (*nü daxuesheng,* 女大學生) approaches and kneels down in front of the soldiers, urging them to defend the Marco Polo Bridge and stop the invading Japanese. The kneeling draws a strong emotional reaction from the onstage audience, and as part of the performance, more and more onstage spectators stand up to tell their own stories of suffering under the Japanese invasion of Manchuria since 1931. The emphasis on the auditory elements to rouse the audience (both on and offstage) through speech and song highlights the meta-dramatic quality of such a performance. Acting and role-playing are laid bare on the makeshift stage. The theatricality of the performance is exposed and made part of the subject matter in order to demonstrate how one could replicate such a performance for the purpose of wartime propaganda (Luo, *Avant-Garde* 123–24).

In Tian's 1937 play, his protagonists are amateur student performers who are members of an "anti-Japanese propaganda troupe," a rather convenient model for Lee's cinematic re-imagination of Chang's "Lust, Caution." The significance of Tian's *Marco Polo Bridge* lies as much in its timely response to the national crisis as in its theatrical and formal self-referentiality. In the play, the bridge becomes a contested site charged with political urgency on which a variety show for the purpose of anti-Japanese propaganda is being mounted. The students are performing for an onstage audience consisting of the neighboring masses and the Nationalist Twenty-Ninth Army soldiers defending the bridge. The performance within the performance is a powerfully self-referential gesture, rendering the play and its action a model of guerrilla drama warfare in the style of a Brechtian *Lehrstücke* (Drasner 169), or "teaching play," in which members of the acting troupe become the collective protagonists and performance becomes the central trope of cultural and political activities, both on and off stage. Such a performance makes actors into activists who, by performing their roles, come to embody those roles in real life (Luo, *Avant-Garde* 123).

It is without doubt that Lee and his actors took inspirations from plays like *The Marco Polo Bridge* in recreating the above scene of staging a patriotic play in the film. For more than half a year, Lee showered his actors with texts and visual materials from the Second Sino-Japanese War to prepare them for their roles, according to an interview given by Leehom Wang (王力宏), who performed the student leader K'uang Yu-min in the film.[4] In particular,

4. See "Talk Asia Meets Wang Leehom." Online video clip. *CNN*. CNN, 14 Jan. 2009.

in this scene revisiting wartime anti-Japanese drama performances, the last line spoken by the village girl, "Zhongguo bunengwang" (中國不能亡, China cannot fall), resonates like thunder and fires up waves of patriotic chanting from the audience. Like similar slogans such as "the suffering of the Chinese nation has reached its peak [. . .] we don't want to be slaves any longer," taken from the popular film song "March of the Volunteers" featured in the *Marco Polo Bridge* performance in 1937,[5] it incites strong emotional reactions from the audience. This moment of emotional release proves to be an extremely powerful experience for the amateur student performers in the film, their Hong Kong audience in the story, but also for a contemporary viewer like this writer, a Chinese of Mainland origin working in the United States, at the film's opening night in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 2008. The power of such public performance transforms the performers themselves from students into aspiring activists. The ecstasy and fulfillment achieved through their collective acting in the theater carried them away from the protective halo of the stage into the dangerous arena of collective political action on the streets and squares.

2) A Scene of Street Singing

After the performance, the student actors roamed the night streets of Hong Kong singing "Biye Ge" (畢業歌, Graduation Song) with original lyrics from Tian Han, including such lines as "students in sweet youth today, pillars of society tomorrow," hand in hand in the rain. This street-singing scene opens with an extreme close-up of a street lamp at the upper left of the frame. With the sound of the rain adding to the chorus of student singing, camera then moves towards the lower left corner and gradually features the singing students in a long shot, at the center of the frame. When the students enunciate "julang, julang" (巨浪, 巨浪, great waves, great waves), a key phrase in the lyrics of the song symbolizing their future activism after graduation, instrumental music emerges to add to the emotional effect of the scene. The student group is finally placed at the center of the frame, with one street lamp in front on the left, and the other less prominent one at the back right, marking out the borders of a theatrical stage. The street under dim light becomes the center stage and with the help of a tracking shot, the camera brings the student singers increasingly

5. See Liang Luo's *The Avant-Garde and the Popular*, especially Chapter Four, for more information.

closer to the audience.

Stood at the center, K'uang conducts the group, and the group sings as his chorus, still repeating the word "great waves." A following shot-reverse-shot focuses on Wang and K'uang among the singing and arm-in-armed group members, highlighting their centrality in the collective and throughout the film narrative. As if making "great waves," a crucial key to decipher this scene, the group starts to get on a double-decker bus, again when they are repeating "great waves." The action of getting on the bus serves as a transition between the two off-stage "stages" in these post-performance "performances," from the street as stage to the upper level of the double-decker as another closed-up space for a different kind of performance.

The timing of such street singing is contemporary to and comparable with the Shanghai YMCA secretary Liu Liangmo (劉良模)'s directing street singing at the height of the Second Sino-Japanese War. It also echoes the unnamed street conductor in Dutch documentary filmmaker Joris Ivens's documentary *The 400 Million*, shot on location in China throughout the year 1938 (Luo, "Xianfeng" 231–32). Singing in a chorus and sharing personal and political aspirations, indeed, works magic in connecting bodies and molding minds, in the historical context of the Second Sino-Japanese War, in which period the film is set.

3) Falling in Love on a Double-decker

The immediately following scene on the double-decker bus, however, highlights a strong sexual undertone of the youthful patriotic group and the "falling in love" moment between the stage director/street conductor/student leader and his lead actress/street singer/soon-to-be female spy (due to her budding love and admiration for him). Wang Chia-chih's first cigarette signals her imminent transformation from a virgin to a *femme fatale*: learning to smoke for the purpose of acting is like acquiring skills in bed in order to perform the part of the sexually-skilled seductress to carry out the group's assassination plot. With original music composed by the French film composer Alexandre Desplat in combination with the drizzling rain, we are introduced to one of the most beautiful moments in *Lust, Caution*.

Here, the upper level of the double-decker serves as a relatively well-lit stage, compared to the dim street. The first close-up on this stage is the lighting of a cigarette and the sudden start of the bus, both having to do with some sort

of initiation ritual in this unique coming of age narrative. The facial close-ups of the male students and their trembling fingers are further highlighted by the lit cigarette, while the close-ups of passing the cigarette from one hand/month to another builds up expectation and an impending tension with Wang at the center of the narrative. When persuaded by the crucial line from the only other girl in the group, "artists have to smoke, it comes in handy on stage," Wang is shown in her innocent face cleared of the heavy makeup from the previous stage performance of the patriotic play. In a light lilac Qipao (Manchu-style dress), with cigarette held by the other girl, Wang's mouth and the other girl's cigarette-holding fingers are framed in one shot, giving out an uncanny sensibility. Wang's first cigarette, as advertised by the other girl, quickly becomes a prized commodity and is transferred from hand to mouth among all the male members of the group, with K'uang as the only exception, who simply looks at them, smiling. Amidst this chaos, Wang leaves the group for the front part of the bus and issues a silent smile while sitting down by herself. The camera, then, takes the viewers outside the bus, to a long shot showing the full frontal view of the double-decker in the rain. Music arises at the moment, and the camera discloses the street lamps, both high and low, and the lights of the cars passing by. In the background, western-style apartments frame the street from both sides in the rainy night, giving shape to a wider stage and its framed settings.

When the camera returns to the upper level of the double-decker, Wang, in her lilac Qipao in a medium close-up shot from shoulder up, is smiling, with her right hand caressing her hair. Following the raindrops, her tongue wets her lips, and her hand massages the window frame. As if taking a cue (which he could not possibly have seen from behind), K'uang approaches Wang and seats down behind her, leaving the rest of the group and forming a space of their own. The camera puts the two in medium close-up showing Wang from shoulder up facing the camera in focus, while K'uang out of focus. A shy exchange of "hi" between them initiates a moment of mutual admiration while a "thank you" from K'uang invites "for what?"—Wang's seemingly innocent response. The following shot-reverse-shot then puts K'uang's face in focus and Wang's profile out of focus in a shoulder up close-up. K'uang smiles and Wang follows suit. The camera shifts focus between the two smiling faces, highlighting one after the other.

The wind, the rain, the music, and the knowing smiles resting on the lips of the male and female protagonists, form a private moment meaningful only

to K'uang Yu-min and Wang Chia-chih (and their spectators in the movie theater), away from other group members on the bus (though it did provoke a jealous smirk on the face of the only other female member of the group from the other end of the bus). This moment of private smile, although fostered by the ecstasy and youthful enthusiasm of the patriotic stage performance immediately preceding it, seems far removed from the bloody political theater still to come. This concludes the first dramatic sequence of staging patriotism: from the full-fledged stage performance of a patriotic play, to the "singing in the rain" of a patriotic song, and finally to the staging of the "falling in love" moment using the upper level of the double-decker bus as another "private stage" for the performance of youthful desires and romantic liaisons. The intricate and complex flow of emotions from the patriotic play, street singing, to the falling in love moment on the double-decker attest to the interconnectedness of nationalism, revolution, youthful desire, and romantic love.

2. Staging Violence: Sexuality, Alienation, and the Spectral Return of Nationalism

The second dramatic sequence invented by the film again accentuates the intersection between patriotism and sexuality through the staging of violence. The brutal killing of K'uang Yu-min's *tongxiang* (同鄉, townsman) who worked for the collaborator, could be considered one of the most challenging scenes to watch in *Lust, Caution*. If Wang's half-forced deflowering in service of the patriotic plot is unpleasant and leaves a bad taste, the group killing is nearly unwatchable in its conflation of violence and its implication of sexual release. In his initiation into the ugly business of violence in the service of patriotism, K'uang Yu-min must perform the role of the initiator in this elaborately choreographed theatrical feast of thrusting a dagger repeatedly into the undying body of the collaborator amidst sweat and blood,[6] a substitute for K'uang's and most other members' frustrated sexual desires as Wang had to sleep with another male student, the only male member in the group who had prior sexual experience,

6. Leo Oufan Lee compared this scene with the climax scene close to the end of Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970) in which a Nazi goes to France to assassinate an anti-Fascist professor, his former teacher. The professor is stabbed by many people and dies in a similar fashion. Both scenes allude to the famous assassination scene in *Julius Caesar*. See Leo Oufan Lee's *Di Se, Jie*.

to practice love-making skills for the assassination plot. More importantly, the amateurish collective killing functions as a metaphor for another "play within a play." The irony lies in the fact that their adventure into the dangerous arena of the spy game and assassination business is mirrored in this farce-like performance, only this time their dreadful amateurish performance brings real life consequences: their collective loss of innocence in a feast of brutal violence soaked in sweat, tears, and blood. This is also a prophetic hint of Wang's final act of betrayal in order to stay loyal to her newfound lover, the assassination target, another amateurish performance finally leading to the death of herself and her comrades (L. O. Lee, *Di Se, Jie* 35, 43).

This dramatic killing scene opens with the symbolic tearing down of a stage. The actions of taking off curtains, wrapping up household objects, and covering the furniture with pieces of white cloths, all suggest the ending of a theatrical performance. Indeed, the students are just informed that the target of their assassination plot, Mr. Yee, is leaving Hong Kong for Shanghai, effectively leaving Wang lost her virginity in vain. Wang sits on a chair covered with white cloths in the middle of the room. She takes a cigarette from the tin box on the table and moves outside the camera frame, leaving the other girl who coached her to smoke on the double-decker, in the frame. Wang continues to move outside of the camera frame through a framed ceiling window and goes outside the room to the veranda. Shown in medium close-up in her light lilac Qipao, the same Qipao when she had her first smoke and shared a private moment with Kuang on the double-decker, Wang lights the cigarette with a lighter with a practiced familiarity.

The scene soon gravitates towards the central conflict between a bare-shouldered K'uang showing muscles (as if echoing the fictive village girl's admiration for the solider in the stage performance) and Tsao (K'uang's *tongxiang* who worked for Mr. Yee and who was used by the students to get close to Yee) after the latter enters the room issuing threatening words. K'uang shouts "Tsao, don't do anything stupid!" in such a loud voice that it startles Wang, who is alone smoking on the veranda, separated from the rest of the group and the intruder by the framed ceiling window. Tsao the intruder turns his eyes to Wang and Wang turns around to find him in the room, surprised. The camera places Tsao in front left and the other girl in front right, both out of focus, leaving Wang at the center of the frame, separated by window frames and outside the veranda, in focus, accentuating her central position in this conflict. Tsao goes on to threaten the students for money, while Wang moves

closer to the framed window, leaving her reflection framed by the window to the right, in focus, with Tsao and the group inside the room to the left, out of focus. Tsao threatens that Mr. Yee would pay big money for Wang. Right at this instance, camera turns to Wang showing her in the same lilac Qipao in a medium shot. Her face seems to have been carved out by two intersecting window frames forming a right angle, to the effect it seems that she has been decapitated by framing (indeed she is framed by fate in losing her virginity in vain at this point in the film!).

Hearing Tsao's insulting words, K'uang's facial close-up with fiery eyes and bite lips bespeak his anger, remorse, and regret regarding what happened to Wang, the girl he is neither able to protect nor love. His sudden resolve to grab a dagger and thrust it against Tsao is confronted by Tsao pointing a gun at him through a shot-reverse-shot. Wang, although symbolically at the center of the men's confrontation, physically separates herself from their world through the framed window door and becomes an engaged spectator of the violent taking place inside. Her penetrating look and intense facial expression are again reflected on the mirror-like window in focus while the gun-holding Tsao and the rest of the group are shown out of focus inside the room.

A series of shot-reverse-shot intensify Tsao's verbal onslaught and K'uang's increasingly trembling facial muscles due to extreme anger and restraint until both K'uang and Huang (another male student in the group) strike Tsao and his gun goes off, startling the girls (both in and outside the framed window) in the background. A group fight with Tsao at the center ensues. Broken windows even affected Wang, who is outside the room looking in through the window. From Wang's viewpoint, the camera shows, through the broken window, the ugly face of Tsao in extreme close-up with his fingers nail into K'uang's face in an intense fight. When Tsao is finally secured on the white cloth-covered couch and ready to be stabbed, an extreme close-up shows K'uang's profile with sweat dripping from his nose. The camera then zooms in on K'uang's dagger-holding right hand, as he pushes open Tsao's legs and prepares himself for the attack.

In a moment of almost comical anti-climax, K'uang cuts his own hand, as this must be his first stab (in the style of Wang's first smoke). A close-up shows bloodstain along the cut in his right hand. The camera then moves to his back, showing K'uang holding the dagger with both hands this time, and thrusting it all the way into Tsao's belly, leaving a shocked Tsao and terrified Huang and "Mr. Mai" (two other male members in the group) in the background.

The scene immediately cuts to an extreme close-up of Wang, still outside the broken window, with her eyes in wide stares, nasals and mouth open, panting. It then cuts back to the intense panting of K'uang, with his hair, upper lip, and body covered in sweat, showing his strong shoulder muscles in close up. For this viewer, although not holding each other in arms, their separate panting does echo their collective panting after the successful stage performance, when they were overwhelmed by the real life effect of their own action/acting.

However, it is the undying quality of Tsao that made this scene so long, so intense, and so unwatchable. Moreover, it is because of his undying quality that the scene becomes a stage for each member of the group (with the exception of Wang) to carry out an initiating killing ritual, a ritual leading to a road of no return, that is, their collective loss of innocence. Wang, however, has literally lost her innocence/virginity in her "practice sex" with Liang (the only male member who had prior sexual experience), a fact related to Liang's being the last to fulfill that killing ritual, and only stabbing Tsao from the back.

The undying Tsao, however, instead of dropping dead, struggles to move outside the door in his bloodstained white shirt, leaving a small lamp lit on the wall and a raised curtain inside the door as background, as if signifying his exiting the theatrical stage of this killing scene. Liang follows him and despite his extreme fear, manages to stab him again from the back. Tsao falls off the staircase head down, with the rest of the group (including Wang who has emerged from behind the framed window across the room/stage, and now appears) at the head of the stairs staring down (except Liang, who is crying himself out in a corner).

Now the staircase becomes an extended stage. It is K'uang the leader who must move forward and downward to take action at the center of such a new stage, and he precisely does so by twisting the head of the undying Tsao for a full 180 degrees, which ends the intruder's life finally. Close-up of K'uang's profile as he turns around and gazing up towards Wang's direction shows a blood-stained face, sweat-covered upper lip, and a red right eye, as his left face is covered in shadows, only leaving the right half of the face showing in light. The scene immediately cuts to Wang, with tilted camera again showing her in her lilac Qipao from shoulder up, looking down intensely at K'uang, again panting. A reserve shot shows K'uang, still kneeling down in front of the corpse. Turning back his head towards Wang, he is shown with intense eyes, panting intensely, with his dark shadow projected on the wall. Wang moves down the stairs holding the handrail on the left, avoiding the panting K'uang

and the corpse, and disappears into the dark night.

With the killing of Tsao, this group of amateur performers and amateur political activists had to take up these roles in real life. We are told later in the film that Nationalist underground forces covered up the death for them, and the students were taken under their wings and received trainings to be professional spies and assassins in preparation for future strikes. Indeed, this exhaustive staging of violence is intimately related to the elaborate staging of patriotism analyzed in the previous section. Underlying the intensive plot of a patriotic play, the group action of street singing, and the private smile on the double-decker in the former; and embedded in the theatrics of a gruesome group killing and the alienation of the female protagonist in the latter, lies the enduring urge of acting out one's political aspirations and sexual desires. It is at the intersection of politics, sexuality, and alienation, and through dramatic staging and reenacting, Lee's film achieves a radical revision of Chang's story and enables nationalism and revolution to stage a surprising, spectral comeback.

3. Staging Love: Another Kind of Nationalism and Romance

The third and most poignant moment, among the three scenes we focus on in this paper, came a few years later, after the drifting Wang reconnected with K'uang (now a trained Nationalist agent) and after the student-turned female spy succeeded in "trapping" their original assassination target, Mr. Yee, with her body. In a private room inside a Japanese tavern, Wang sings "Tianya Genü" (天涯歌女, Wandering Songstress) for Mr. Yee. She seems to be simultaneously performing the role of the songstress, the prostitute, and the lover for Mr. Yee in private, although the dialogue between them reminds the viewers of Yee's "prostituting" himself to serve the Japanese in public (*weihu zuochang*, 為虎作倀), setting up this unusual scene of staging love between the female agent and the male target of an intricate assassination plot.

The scene opens with a medium close-up of Wang's profile. Her face, framed by the paper door in the background, with hair meticulously made up, is in focus. In contract to the unimposing light lilac Qipao in the previous two scenes, she is wearing a flamboyant dark sapphire Qipao embroiled with white and pink flowers. The scene then cuts to a medium close-up of Mr. Yee, with camera slightly tilting down, emphasizing his forehead, an extension of his tortured psyche. Wang moves close to Yee and sits down, with camera continuing to tilt down, showing the Japanese-style end tables in two roles in the

background. Yee's comment on the unidentifiable singing in the background, "They sing like they're crying; like dogs howling for their dead masters," gives a surprising twist to viewer expectations about what a "traitor" might think or say about the Japanese invaders he serves. Such built-up tensions regarding the songs sung by the Japanese is what leads to Wang's offering her own singing for Yee.

Here, the camera shifts to the back of the sitting Yee and places Wang in a long shot with her full body in view. The white paper doors creating private rooms in this Japanese-style restaurant frame the space into a "make-shift" stage with Wang standing at the center, ready for her performance. Again, a hanging lamp at the center in the back, and a standing lamp on the right side frame the stage, in a similar fashion as the street lamps have framed the street into a stage for the "singing in the rain" scene. The camera then zooms in a bit to frame Wang perfectly in between two white paper walls. It then cuts to a medium shot of a comfortably sitting Yee taking a cigarette in preparation of the coming performance.

Wang begins by singing the first line of the song "Wondering Songstress," a recent popular song from the 1937 film *Malu Tianshi* (馬路天使, *Street Angel*) with lyrics by Tian Han, as this scene is set in the early 1940s in the film. When the scene cuts back to a medium shot of Wang singing with arms stretching out in style, she ends the first line with the keyword *zhiyin* (知音, someone who knows my music, or soul mate) as in "I search for my soul mate to the end of the earth." A reverse shot shows Yee smiling with cigarette in hand, apparently enjoying her singing the line "when I sing, you accompany me." Their eyes meet in a reserve shot with Yee again smoking with smile on his face, appreciating Wang's singing ending with "your heart is my heart."

However, these tender romantic moments are interrupted when Wang reaches the following line, "looking north to my mountain nest my tears fall and wet my blouse," an explicit reference to the Northeastern provinces occupied by the Japanese. A close-up of Yee's face and his cigarette-holding left hand shows clear signs of internal turmoil. The next line, "only love that lasts through hard times is true," brings tears to his eyes. His hand shakes and his tongue wets his lips in an effort to calm down. The final emotional climax comes when Wang approaches Yee, offers wine to him, and sings, "We are like thread and needle, never to be separated." A reverse shot shows Yee in close-up, wiping tears from his eyes, and the camera follows his point of view moving downwards, showing his hand gently caressing Wang's.

It is indeed rather ironic that the most poignant staging of love in *Lust, Caution* did not feature the highly anticipated romance between the two youthful student activists Wang and K'uang, as a continuation of their tantalizing private smiles on the double-decker; instead, it is the smothering kiss (took place right before Wang's singing) and the ensuring heartwarming private performance, offered by Wang the secret agent to Yee, the target for assassination, proves to be at the heart of Lee's revisionist cinematic reinvention of Chang's cynical portrayal of the betrayal of revolution. Lee's cinematic explorations of how Wang and Yee might have shared an unlikely nationalism and an unusual romance raise important questions on the meaning and ownership of revolution and love at a time of heightened national crises and political intrigues.

Ⅲ. The Context and Subtext of Performance

1. The Context of Performance: Tian Han, Ang Lee, and Leehom Wang

The lyrics of the two songs so central to the film and to the performance scenes analyzed above, "Graduation Song" and "Wondering Songstress," are both penned by Tian Han in the 1930s, and they form a convincing linkage between the popular film songs of the 1930s' Shanghai and Ang Lee's twenty-first century effort at revisiting and reexamining Eileen Chang's utterly cynical take on the history of the Second Sino-Japanese War in the context of the Cold War.[7] "Graduation Song" originated from *Taoli Jie* (桃李劫, *The Plunder of Peach and Plum*), a 1934 film from the Denton (Diantong, 電通) Film Company in Shanghai, while "Wondering Songstress" was one of the theme songs in *Street Angel*, a film released in July 1937 around the time of the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

"Graduation Song," featured as the keynote in the singing in the rain scene, has to be understood in the context of the film, *The Plunder of Peach and Plum*. The development of the domestically produced "Three Friends" (Sanyou, 三友)

7. See: Marchetti, Gina. "Eileen Chang and Ang Lee at the Movies: The Cinematic Politics of *Lust, Caution*." *Eileen Chang: Romancing Languages, Cultures and Genres*. Ed. Kim Louie. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2012. 131–54. Especially for the important reference to *Street Angel*, see page 146.

recording device in 1933, and the ascendance of the Denton Film Company to popular prominence in 1934–1935 had much to do with the popularity of film songs in a revolutionary age. Popularized by the first Denton film *The Plunder of Peach and Plum*, "Graduation Song" also appeared onstage in Tian Han and Nie Er (聶耳)'s experimental "new opera," *Yangzijiang de Baofengyu* (揚子江的暴風雨, *Storm over the Yangtze*).

Tian Han, the lyricist of both of these film songs "quoted" prominently in the "singing in the rain" and "performance in the Japanese tavern" scenes, was undergoing a period of "self-criticism" in 1930 before joining the Chinese Communist Party in 1932. He was head of the Music Group of the Soviet Friends Society, a United Front organization initiated by Madame Sun Yat-sen and Tian himself in early 1933. Tian Han, Ren Guang, An E, and Nie Er were among the initial members of the group. Ren Guang, a French-educated composer, was, at the time, the music director at the leading music giant Pathé-EMI's Shanghai office. Living in a Western villa in the heart of the French Concession and equipped with a piano and high-quality radio, Ren provided not only a space for the gatherings of the Music Group but also the necessary technology for their direct contact with Soviet music and communication with the wider world. The stage was now set for the members of the Music Group to exert their influence in producing popular songs.

Tian Han's continuous and intimate involvement with the Shanghai film industry and popular music scene bespoke the importance of the underlying cinematic and auditory perspective in deciphering political art and activism during the Second Sino-Japanese War. As a known leftist (and recently Communist) theater artist and activist, he composed beautiful, classical-style poems for his song lyrics, and the songs came to be known by the common men as popular love songs as well as patriotic songs in the mid-1930s. In Tian Han's reinvention of Chinese lyrical poetry amid war and national salvation, he found a way to best express his generation's erotic and patriotic desires as both sentimental lovers and aspiring heroes of the nation.

Similarly, director Ang Lee, though born to parents who fled the Communists and settled in Taiwan in the 1950s, grew up in southern Taiwan in a tightly controlled political and family atmosphere. He maintained a love-hate relationship with the authoritarian Nationalist regime in Taiwan before the abolition of martial law in the late 1980s, but he always treated the island as his hometown even after acquiring American citizenship. Lee might well be expected to view nationalism and revolution throughout twentieth-century

China from a distinctly unfriendly angle. His take on Eileen Chang's story was, however, surprisingly humane and even loving in its treatment of revolutionary politics, at times turning Chang's cynicism on its head. The sympathetic depiction of the students' bohemian lifestyle and youthful aspirations was not eclipsed by the cruelty and darkness of the ensuing *realpolitik*.

Trained in stage performance, directing, and filmmaking in Taiwan and in the United States, Lee was obsessed with the luminous quality of performance, and such obsession eventually triumphed over his investigations into the opacity of political history. Like his female protagonist Wang, he was seduced by performance and became its *chang* (倀/娼), a word donating the meaning of either "a tiger's ghost" or "a prostitute" (Chang et al. vii–viii). In turn, his film, though by its nature political, seems to have the uncanny effect of luring the audience away from politics into the world of performance. He was quite expectedly and harshly criticized by Mainland Chinese reviewers for justifying "traitorous" mentalities and behaviors (Chen 5–11). Still, featuring two leftist popular film songs from 1930s' Shanghai in a full sequence of enthusiastic street singing and an emotional private performance, Lee seems too invested in the patriotism embedded in the popular songs and too much in love with the politics that he was supposedly leaving behind in *Lust, Caution*.

Moreover, Lee casted the Taiwan-based American-born singer-songwriter Leehom Wang, as the handsome student leader K'uang, and the initial love interest of the female protagonist. Wang, whose parents immigrated to the United States from Taiwan in the 1960s, revitalized a Taiwanese pop song lauding all ethnic Chinese as "descendants of the dragon" (*long de chuanren*, 龍的傳人) at the age of twenty-four, after the takeoff of his musical career as a Mandarin pop star in Taiwan. Wang's modern-day ethnic nationalism, however, only vaguely resembles the anti-Japanese sentiments imbued in the time period to which Lee's film is set.[8]

For example, Wang's version of the "Descendants of the Dragon," recreated at the turn of the twenty-first century, softened the political edge of its original lyrics, which had been a prominent voice on Tiananmen Square during the June Fourth Student Movement, where the song had functioned as an inspiring marching song for the protesting students in the late spring of 1989 in Beijing.

8. For more on the politics of popular music in contemporary China, see: Jones, Andrew F. *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Institute, 1992.

Adding to the ambiguity of nationalism in contemporary times, Wang would be chosen as one of the first torchbearers for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, and he lent his support to the star-laden Mainland film *Jiandang Weiye* (建黨偉業, *The Beginning of a Great Revival*) commemorating the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, putting in a cameo appearance as the May Fourth student leader Luo Jialun.[9] Wang's wide appeal, casted by film directors based both in Mainland China and in Taiwan and the United States, has much to do with his identity as an American-born-Chinese/Taiwanese (ABC/ABT) which to some extent places him above the ideological divides still strongly at work among Mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, the United States, and other Asian-Pacific political entities.

2. The Subtext of Performance and the Return of the Popular

As part of his meditation on the meaning of performance, Ang Lee incorporated a subtext of references to movie-going, and to movie theaters whose crowded darkness served as a site of personal catharsis for the female protagonist, an ideal site for the assassination of the "traitor," a site to exchange information between underground Nationalist activists, and finally as an alibi to protect the assassins. The physical space of the theater leads to a deeper reference to movie going and film as a metaphor for performance in general. Theater and film, and both stage and screen, are central to Ang Lee's revamping of the "Lust, Caution" story, from the perspective of the theatricality and performativity of history and revolution, loyalty and betrayal, and love and lust, roughly corresponding to the three scenes analyzed in the first part of the paper, on staging patriotism, violence, and love.

In *Lust, Caution*, Ang Lee quotes three films directly: the female protagonist Wang Chia-chih is shown watching *Intermezzo* (1939) in Hong Kong, *Penny Serenade* (1941) in Shanghai's Meiqi Theater, and *Bo'ai* (博愛, *Universal Love,* 1941) at Shanghai's Ping'an Theater. But other indirect references are also abound, including *Destry Rides Again* (1939) starring Marlene Dietrich and

9. *Jiandang Weiye* (literally, "The Founding of a Party," translated for its international release as "The Beginning of a Great Revival") was directed by Huang Jianxin and Han Sanping, and featured a star-studded cast of actors from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other locations, including Andy Lau and Chow Yun-fat. See Huang Jianxin and Han Sanping's *Jiandang Weiye.*

James Stewart, *Suspicion* (1941) starring Cary Grant and Joan Fontaine, and *The Thief of Bagdad* (1943). The films directly quoted are all romantic melodramas that focus on intimate, emotionally charged relationships. *Intermezzo,* about a beautiful young piano teacher who falls in love with the married father of her student, touched Wang, the innocent female student in Hong Kong, to the core. *Penny Serenade,* a tear-jerker about a couple that adopts an orphan, shows the contrast between the sentimental domestic drama and the government propaganda newsreels that cut the film short when Wang watched it in *Lust, Caution.*

Throughout Lee's film, performance operated on multiple levels and across a wide range of social acts: It can be found on stage, on the screen in movie theaters, in the bedroom, at the Mahjong game table, on the streets, and in the radicalism and student activism of the time. Ang Lee forces us to consider the import of the actors' naiveté and amateurism, on the stage as well as on the street. Performance ceases to function only as a means to represent social reality. It took over *as* social reality and became itself constructive of individual and collective identities.

Such emphasis is crucial in the context of K'uang's and Wang's coming of age as gendered and ethical political subjects in the film *Lust, Caution*, and its implication is much broader than the construction of gender and ethical identities *per se*. The failed assassination acted out by the amateur student performers in *Lust, Caution* is constantly described in terms of a theatrical production through collective action. At the center of such theatrical production and collective action is the performance of popular songs. The songs with Tian Han's original lyrics, as faithfully quoted in Ang Lee's film, are nowhere to be found in Eileen Chang's original story written at the height of the Cold War. The songs propagated leftist politics and patriotic aspirations in the early-to-mid-twentieth century Chinese context, while the same musical form largely serves commercial interests today (though the popular, the political, and the commercial have maintained a triadic entanglement, then and now).

In 2011, Leehom Wang, the actor who performed the student activist K'uang Yu-min in *Lust, Caution*, better known as a pop music super star with pan-Asian followings, released a new song featuring the rather militant title "Open Fire" (*Huoli Quankai*, 火力全開). The opening line of the song, "down with imperialism, we don't want to be slaves any longer (*dadao diguo zhuyi, buyuan zaizuo nuli*, 打倒帝國主義, 不願再做奴隸), is a not-so-subtle reference to the opening line of "March of the Volunteers," the current national anthem of the People's Republic of China, created in the same 1930s' Shanghai context

as the two songs quoted in Lee's film, and with lyrics by the same author, Tian Han.

Wang seems to have taken up the identity of the patriot-activist in real life, a rather dramatic shift from the softened image he projected in his self-censored "Descendants of the Dragon," in 2000. He even composed a song in the name of "Kuang Y. M." in 2007 in imitation of the music style of the 1930s after performing the character K'uang Yu-min in *Lust, Caution*, although that song, entitled "Luoye Guigen" (落葉歸根, Falling Leaves Return to Their Roots), only captures the lyrical style, not the revolutionary spirit, of the 1930s' popular song quoted in Ang Lee's film.

It is a few years later in 2011, in the above-mentioned new experiment "Open Fire," Wang seems to have finally taken up the identity of a patriotic activist, with a significant shift. He turns his fire against what he calls "imperialism" (*diguo zhuyi,* 帝國主義), with the second half of the lyrics of "Open Fire" abruptly shifts to English, featuring lines such as "so many accusations of an Asian invasion, here they come a point'n fingers at me," turning the table on Western cultural imperialism (as represented by Lady Gaga in the lyrics!) and asserting the subjectivity of contemporary Asian artists as fighting for equality and integrity, at the same time intentionally downplaying his American citizenship while highlighting his cultural (racial and ethnic) identity as Asian. Such patriotic nationalism (or better Pan-Asian regionalism), of course, can be rather safe in the context of contemporary cultural politics between Asia and a rather monolithic West, often represented by the United States. It is far removed from the dangerous politics of anti-Japanese activism at the height of the Second Sino-Japanese War amidst factional conflicts within the Nationalist party and the struggle between the Nationalists and Communists parties.

Commercially speaking, however, the marriage of music and film, as Leehom Wang attempted to render in his 2010 directorial debut *Lian'ai Tonggao* (戀愛通告, *Love in Disguise*), shot on location in Shanghai, was but a reenactment of strategies manipulated by the leftist film industry (as well as leftist drama circles) in the same city more than seventy years ago. Exhilarating visual images, as hammered into audience's brains throughout a film (often with melodramatic plot twist), might be the most efficient ideological delivery system; but the fragmented visual slices could be best stitched together through music and lyrics, which conveyed the message and could be replayed endlessly after the film, hence allowing the audience to relive the experience at will, solitarily or collectively, at home or in public.

Wang's "music film" tells the story of a pop star's heart-warming rediscovery of his "true self" when he discovers the love of his life, a female music student at the fictive East China Conservatory specializing in *guzheng* (古箏, a zither-like instrument dates back to the fifth century BC). Performance and playacting are central to the story. The discovery of love and the rediscovery of one's "true self" can only happen when acting "in disguise," as in *Lust, Caution*. The keyword in both films, *zhiyin* (soul mate), first appeared through the stirring private performance by Wang Chia-chih for Mr. Yee in the Japanese tavern, now reemerged as a central dramatic trope in *Love in Disguise*.

Ⅳ. Conclusion

The failure of student activism in Eileen Chang's short story "Lust, Caution" suggests possible ways of deconstructing nationalism and patriotism from feminist and ethical perspectives. Although ridiculed in Chang's story written during the Cold War, such narratives are still pervasive in contemporary cultural politics throughout the world. Ang Lee's film *Lust, Caution*, especially in his departures from the story and in the three scenes of performance analyzed in this paper, heightens the intimate emotional struggles throughout the coming of age process of the young student activists, and portrays them as living, feeling, and thinking human beings. In particular, the two popular songs from popular films in the 1930s with lyrics penned by Tian Han, and their fascinating afterlives in contemporary popular culture represented by Leehom Wang, highlight the power of performance in shaping a complex range of gender, ethical, and political identities. The intersection of performance, politics, and popularity work magic throughout the film: The popularity of songs and dramas crystalize youthful activism and nationalist politics, and through their performances carefully orchestrated in the three scenes analyzed in this paper, we come to realize how Lee's film goes beyond Chang's story in reinvigorating the political through the performative and the popular. As we commemorate the 70th anniversary of the ending of the Second World War throughout the world, it is high time to reflect on the legacy of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Cold War in Asia, and to ponder the continued relevance of popular performative forms in not only reflecting but also shaping discourses on nationalism and cultural resistance in the contemporary world.

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Abstract

Examining three dramatic scenes of performance in Ang Lee's 2007 film *Lust, Caution*, based on Eileen Chang's short story of the same name, this essay proposes to read Lee's film as an epilogue to a long-running narrative highlighting the intersection of performance and politics in twenty-century China. It argues, through a close examination of Lee's creative use of such elements as popular music, political theater, and leftist cinema from the 1930s, that nationalism and revolution staged an intriguing comeback in *Lust, Caution*, intensified, rather than negated, by its intricate intertwinement with sexuality and ethics. In particular, the two popular film songs from the 1930s with lyrics penned by Tian Han quoted in the film, and their fascinating afterlives in contemporary popular culture represented by Leehom Wang, highlight the power of performance in shaping a complex range of gender, ethical, and political identities. The intersection of performance, politics, and popularity works magic throughout the film. It enables Lee's film to go beyond Chang's story in reinvigorating the political through the performative and the popular.

Keywords: popular music, performance, politics, nationalism, sexuality, Second Sino-Japanese War

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