A Glamorous Re-enactment of the Past:
Ang Lee’s Rendition of Eileen Chang’s Lust, Caution

往事魅惑重現:
看李安如何演繹/譯張愛玲的色戒

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Abstract: Drawing on the Jewish Cabbalistic mysticism, Walter Benjamin elevates the task of the translator to the level of the sublime because the translator complements what is lacking in the original and sheds light on the pure language underlying the original text. Benjamin’s theory of translation proves to be fruitful when it is applied to Ang Lee’s rendition of Eileen Chang’s Lust, Caution if we regard the adaptation of the novella as a translation from words into audio-visual representation. Deplorably, Eileen Chang’s Lust, Caution falls short of our expectation when it comes to the description of female psychology and sexuality. In the incomplete écriture féminine, Chang leaves out many essential details; thus, Wang Chia-chih’s sexual awakening and her heart-felt response to her copulation with Mr. Yee remain obfuscated and opaque to the readers. Fortunately, the “translator” Ang Lee takes advantage of his sophisticated and enlightening mise-en-scène to complement the physiological, psychological and sexual interaction between Chia-chih and Mr. Yee. With his artistic rendition, the novella Lust, Caution becomes a well-rounded écriture féminine in which the language of the body is allowed to flow freely and spontaneously, revealing how a woman reacts to her own sexuality. In terms of Benjamin’s elaboration on the task of the translator, Ang Lee has attained the goal of revealing the “pure language” by means of his quintessential rendition.1

摘要：德國文化評論家華特·班雅明秉持著猶太卡巴拉神秘教義，而將翻譯者的地位提昇到非常崇高的境地：他認為譯者的工作並不是忠實呈現原著，而是要補原著之不足，並且闡明潛藏在原著底層、接近神格的「純粹語言」。如果我們將李安改編張愛玲的小說<色·戒>視為一種將文字轉換成聲光影音的翻譯，那麼班雅明的理論絕對可以幫助我們理解這兩樣不同媒介轉換的過程。很可惜地，在張愛玲的原著中，對於女性的心理與性自覺閃爍其詞，做為女性書

1 A note on the translation of the Chinese names: For most of the Chinese names of the characters in Eileen Chang’s novella, I will stick to the common practice of putting the family name in front of the first name, as is common with the Chinese custom. However, for internationally renowned figures, like Eileen Chang and Ang Lee, I will adhere to the internationally established practice of putting the first name in front of the last name.

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In his essay “The Task of the Translator,” which serves as a preface to his own translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens* in 1923, the German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin elaborates on his own idiosyncratic definition of the role of a translator. Drawing heavily on the Jewish Cabbalistic mysticism, Benjamin emancipates translation from its conventionally marginalized, secondary position as part of the accessories to the original text and elevates it to the level of the sublime that aspires to the divine “pure language.” According to Benjamin’s highly teleological theory, the ultimate goal of translation is to go beyond the limitations of the differences between the existing languages and to reach the mystic realm of hidden divine truth in the Messianic “pure language.” He advocates, “A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully.”1 With such a religious and teleological purpose in mind, Benjamin grants translation the freedom of linguistic complementation. To unveil the hidden truth embedded in the source

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language of the original text, a translator should not be confined by the requirements of “fidelity to the word”; instead, a good translator should do all in his/her own power to “liberate the language imprisoned” in the original text. Under such circumstances, translation must be viewed “not in terms of the communication of the content, but in the emancipation from content” and thereby the task of fidelity is to be understood “as a kind of infidelity to the original” (Geertsema 1, my emphasis).

Interestingly, Benjamin’s exposition of his theory on translation may seem unpalatable to a Western reader, who may have great difficulty understanding his paradoxical assertion that literal and linguistic fidelity of translation actually reflects a kind of infidelity to the original. However, his theory may prove to be not only serviceable but also fruitful, especially to Oriental readers well immersed in the tradition of Zen Buddhism. According to Zen Buddhism, the ultimate truth is often compared to the fluid water, while language to a sieve basket with many tiny holes in it. It is absolutely futile to make any attempt to hold the water in such a basket. We can further employ this figure of speech to help ourselves understand Benjamin’s theory on translation. If the hidden truth of the “pure language” is compared to water, then when it is emptied from its original container—that is, the original text— it has to be poured into an otherwise-shaped container, which signifies the target language of the translation. Only when the water is allowed the freedom to change its shape according to the diverse containers can its true nature be revealed. Seen in this light, Benjamin’s elaboration on translation does make sense and the license of freedom he confers on the translator is more than justified.

Nevertheless, even though we can comprehend his theory from an esoteric angle, there remains the question of whether his theory can be pragmatically applied to the real task of translation. Indeed, translators worthy of the name have to constantly struggle against the tug of war between freedom and fidelity and few can afford the luxury of being licensed to supplement and simultaneously illuminate the original text as they wish. However, when translation does not occur between two languages, but between two different media of signification, the validity of Benjamin’s theory is not only lucid but
also enlightening. For example, when a historical event is “translated” into a painting, or when a novel is adapted and “translated” into a movie, the work of complementation and illumination mentioned in Benjamin’s essay is indispensable in creating a state-of-the-art rendition of the original, as it helps unravel “the unfathomable, the mysterious, the poetic.” ³ Phenomenally, Ang Lee’s award-winning cinematic re-enactment of Eileen Chang’s Lust, Caution testifies to Benjamin’s idea of translation in that the film far transcends “the sterile equation of two dead languages”⁴ and comes to “be charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.”⁵

**Eileen Chang’s Lust, Caution: Unspeakable Things Still Unspoken**

Few readers would fail to notice the analogy between Eileen Chang’s novella Lust, Caution and the author’s personal experience as she lived through the socio-political turmoil going on in the middle decades of the 20th-century China. During that period, the slumbering Asiatic giant China had to go through a critical stage in which it had to fight against foreign invasion on the one hand and deal with the on-going political wrestling among various factions on the other hand. Especially in the 1940s, China was forced to defend itself at an immeasurably dear price in the bloody Sino-Japanese War, which was worsened by the disrupting civil conflicts between the right-wing Nationalists and the left-wing Chinese Communist Party. No less turbulent than the socio-political cataclysms in which she grew up, Eileen Chang’s formative years were marked by the same atmosphere of violent tussle from

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⁴ Here Benjamin warns translators against fidelity because obstinate adherence to the principle of fidelity may suffocate the vivacity of linguistic practices and kill both the source language and target language at the same time.
⁵ “The Task of the Translator,” p. 4.
within and without. On the one hand, she was born into a traditional Chinese family
descended from the renowned politician in the Ching Dynasty, Li Hung-chang. As a
matter of fact, her father was typical of the last generation of decadent aristocracy in
China, indulging himself in opium-smoking and concubine-keeping. He embodied the
traditional Chinese patriarch who demanded nothing but absolute obedience and
unconditional docility from his daughter. He was said to have imprisoned his daughter,
who was eighteen years old at that time, because he thought his daughter did not show
due respect for her step-mother. On the other hand, Eileen Chang’s mother was an
educated, emancipated “New Woman” who had the guts to divorce her husband and leave
her two children behind to travel in Europe. Under such circumstances, the young
Eileen Chang “grew up steeped in the strange, contradictory glamour of pre-Communist
Shanghai: between the airy brightness of her mother’s modern apartment and the languid,
opium smoke-filled rooms of her father’s house.”6

Even though Eileen Chang was confronted with the political upheaval at that time, in her
creative writing, she seemed to be more concerned with the everyday emotional struggle
between man and woman as they were caught in the commonplace, mundane desolation
caused by war and modernization. Unlike her literary contemporaries such as Lu Hsun,
Mao Tun, and Ting Ling, whose works were laden with political ideology as they
endeavored to wield their pens to rouse the country and transform its people, Chang was
often criticized for her indifference to the socio-political context in which she wrote. In
contrast with other creative writers’ preoccupation with political issues and patriotic
demagogy, she bent her creative talent to a much “subtler aesthetics of the
commonplace.”7 To her, meticulous attention to details in sensory perception and
sophisticated portraits of emotional tumult could far more effectively and faithfully
reflect what the age was all about. Chang professed the aesthetic principle she adhered
to:

Though my characters are not heroes, they are the ones who bear

7 Ibid., p. 232.
the burden of our age. .... Although they are weak—these average people who lack the force of heroes—they sum up this age of ours better than any hero.... I don’t like the stark conflicts between good and evil... we should perhaps move beyond the notion that literary works should have “main themes.”

In the passage above, Eileen Chang was not only defending her idiosyncratic aesthetics but also voicing her discontent with the long-revered tradition of Chinese writers’ predominant obsession with the notion of wielding the power of the pen to transmit the Word. For her, the “petit” business of the heart—in its aspiration and despair, its altruism and selfishness, its obsession and emancipation—represented a starker and yet far more lasting reality that demanded more of our attention than the transient political ups and downs. In this respect, Chang prefigures the future generations of literati who show great distrust for the grand narrative, in whose place they would rather harness the petite histoire as a more effect means of unraveling the lived experience of people.

Notwithstanding her usual stance as an apolitical writer indifferent to the socio-political context, her novella Lust, Caution stands out in the bulk of her works as it foregrounds the patriotic politics of the 1940s, which serves as a stage for the heroine, or more appropriately, the anti-heroine, Chia-chih to enact her espionage plot of conspiring with other university students to take the life of Mr. Yee, a high-ranked jackal of the collaborationist Wang Ching-wei government. Chang is said to have begun the story in the early 1950s; however, it took her almost three decades to ruminate over the story until it was published in 1979 as a novella in a collection of other works. The excessively long process of writing may point to Chang’s psychological hesitancy as she dealt with the material which bears such a striking resemblance to her own lived experiences. In fact, the end-product of the novella is suffused with details that verge on autobiographical

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8 Qtd. in Julia Lovell, p. 233.
9 On several occasions, some Chinese proverbs seem especially appropriate in describing the situation. Though I will offer a translation in English, I still want to include the original Chinese proverb. In this case, the proverb is the so-called, “文以載道.”
references to Chang’s first-hand experience as she lived through the 1940s. The parallel
between Wang Chia-chih’s experience and what happened to Eileen Chang is too obvious
to be neglected. To begin with, like Chia-chih, Chang was evacuated to Hong Kong
when the Pacific War broke out. Furthermore, like Chia-chih, Chang had a liaison with
an official from the Wang government, which ended up in a legal marriage, only to break
up shortly afterwards because Chang’s husband Hu Lan-cheng was a libertine womanizer.
The obvious parallels between what confronts the heroine and what happened to Chang
give Chang an unmediated understanding of a woman’s heart as it is forced to go through
the crucible of romantic love pitted against patriotism, faithfulness pitted against betrayal.
Such being the case, it stands to reason that Chang could have portrayed the heroine, who
is almost her alter ego, with profound psychological realism capable of unveiling the
devious mental and emotional labyrinth which leads up to the final climax, or anti-climax,
when Chia-chih makes the fateful decision to urge Mr. Yee to leave the assigned site of
attempted murder as soon as possible.

To our dismay, Chang falls short of our expectations when it comes to her
delineation of the heroine’s psychological depths. In passages where we expect to find
insightful, thought-provoking description that helps illuminate Chia-chih’s innermost
feelings while she goes through the thrilling espionage conspiracy and her specific sexual
awakening in the process of her copulation with Yee, we find nothing but sketchy, opaque
lines the obscure our understanding rather than enlighten it. Perhaps burdened with the
long cultural tradition that views female sexuality as a taboo, Chang reduces Chia-chih’s
physiological and psychological responses to her illicit sexual intercourse with Yee to a
deceptively simple sentence, “as relaxing as taking a hot shower.” Furthermore, even
though Chia-chih has sexual intercourse with Yee twice, she must have been not only
physically aroused but also psychically allured and felt increasingly drawn to Yee even
without knowing it consciously or voicing it publicly. Unfortunately, the sophisticated
portrait of Chia-chih’s sexual awakening is lost to a laconic parody, “The way to a
woman’s heart is through her vagina.” More deplorably, Chang dare not attribute the
parodic proverb to the sexually awakened Chia-chih; instead, she takes advantage of a
male scholar, presumably Ku Hong-ming, as the mouthpiece that puts forth this antithesis to the more suave proverb, “The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.” These examples of deliberate obfuscation point to the literary manacles imposed by the long tradition of cultural decorum that has silenced women’s expression of how they feel with their body. Chang’s reticence about female sexuality reflects the fact that, even with her avant-garde adherence to aesthetic values in literary creation, she still fails to “overcome the verbal hesitancy in women by a society in which men had the first and the last word” (Jones 10). In other words, in her novella Lust, Caution, the unspeakable remain unspoken. What is worse, such self-imposed reticence proves to be extremely detrimental to the artistic achievement of the novella, for, without in-depth delineation of female sexuality, the novella is at best a farce-like character sketch that verges on nothing more than a showcase for the failed, absurd escapade for university students to enact their aspiration to serve their country by committing ridiculous espionage conspiracy.

**Ang Lee’s Film: An Androgynous Rendition That Complements an Incomplete Text**

If Eileen Chang had been influenced by feminisms, perhaps she would have been more outspoken in her portrayal of what happens to the female body. In her milestone essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous asserts, “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (347). A more recent proponent of l’écriture féminine, Madeleine Cagnon further elaborates on the true spirit of feminine writing, which defies rigid classification since such a literary form is aimed at liberating women writers from the phallogocentric categorization of literary genres. According to Cagnon, We [Women] have never been the masters of others or of ourselves. We don’t have to keep watch on ourselves, or to set up some other erected self in order to understand ourselves. All we have to do is let the body flow,
from the inside; all we have to do is erase… whatever may hinder or harm
the new forms of writing; we retain whatever fits, whatever suits us.10

Undoubtedly, Ang Lee understands more profoundly than Chang what it means to “let the
body flow,” to “retain whatever fits, whatever suits us.” Of course, it is not fair to put
Eileen Chang and Ang Lee on the same scale and measure one against the other, since
they craft their various forms of art in different cultural contexts. It goes without saying
that the latter is luckier to have been acculturated in a much more liberating aura which is
more conducive to the perception and understanding of female sexuality. Under such
circumstances, if we regard Ang Lee as a translator tasked with the job of transforming
the source language of Chang’s novella into the target language of cinematic practices, he
is certainly fulfilling the sacred job conferred on the translator by Benjamin. With his
typically sophisticated mise-en-scène, Lee complements what is left out in the original
text and elucidates Chang’s flawed text, helping it evolve into a fulfilled écriture féminine.

In his introduction to the English version of the screenplay of Lust, Caution, James
Schamus11 asks a very interesting question, “Why did she do it?” Apparently, this is the
haunting question that must have baffled a great many readers when they reach the
climax and the denouement of the novella. From the original text, we can find little
justification for Chia-chih’s sudden change of mind unless we regard it as a sign of
female weakness or whimsical response in the face of the gargantuan task of murder. In
the original text, there is little sign that Chia-chih is emotionally drawn to Mr. Yee.
Readers have the impression that she is just dutifully acting out her assigned part as a
female spy under the disguise of an illicit concubine until the fateful scene at the jewelry
shop. Somehow, while the two of them are upstairs choosing a diamond ring to mark
their liaison, she feels intensively that she is entirely alone with her “lover,” and this is
the first time she regards him as an object of heart-felt affection instead of a target of
murderous conspiracy. Despite being an old hand at handling his paramours, Yee looks

10 Qtd. in Jones, p. 10.
11 He wrote the screenplay of Lust, Caution in collaboration with Wang Hui Ling.
suddenly endearing to Chia-chih’s self-deceiving heart. Here is how Chang describes what goes on prior to the critical moment when Chia-chih makes the deadly decision:

He was an old hand at this: taking his paramours shopping, ministering to their whims, retreating into the background while they made their choices. But there was, she noted again, no cynicism in his smile just then; only sadness. He sat in silhouette against the lamp, seemingly sunk into an attitude of tenderly affectionate contemplation, his downcast eyelashes tinged the dull cream of moths’ wings as they rested on his gaunt cheeks. He really loves me, she thought. Inside, she felt a raw tremor of shock—then a vague sense of loss.

It was too late.

The Indian passed the receipt to him. He placed it inside his jacket.

“Run,” she said softly.12

With self-delusion, Chia-chih bestows her looks of newly-aroused love on the man whom she regards as her “lover,” but he is actually nothing more than one who is bent on seizing power as well as gathering mistresses as his wartime trophies. The tantalizing passage above may haunt readers’ minds while at the same time raising the almost unanswerable question, the same as Schamus poses, “Why did she do it?”

Chia-chih’s impetuous change of the heart, which is left unaccounted for and unaccountable in the original text, is developed on solid ground when the novella is “translated” into the cinema. The reductive sentence that compares copulation to the purgatory experience of taking a hot bath is re-enacted in three scenes of love-making in its crudest form. When Chia-chih has sex with Mr. Yee for the first time, her seductive gesture promptly gives way to Yee’s sadistic intrusion into her body, the cruelty of the love-making scene verging on heart-rending torture. The atrocity of that scene exposes the essential lack of emotional involvement between the two: at this point, Yee regards Chia-chih as nothing more than one of his numerous quarries that have been hunted down by himself, a skillful hunter. Simultaneously, Chia-chih submits to the sadistic

12 Julia Lovell, trans., p. 39.
manipulation of Yee for the sole purpose of using her body to win his trust, so that she
can have him murdered later on. The second scene of their sexual intercourse is no less
brutal than the first one, with the two of them trying diverse, unlikely positions that look
more than two creatures tormenting each other with all their might than a couple making
love. The enactment of sado-masochism in their love-making implies that the two of
them cannot help but resort to sexual violence to vent their deepest frustration and fear of
life. In some sense, the two of them are stranded in the same situation of being hapless
and helpless creatures at the grip of the tumultuous times. Even though Yee enjoys
power at that time, deep down he understands the fragility and futility of such power,
which can be testified by his later confession to Chia-chil that the Japanese are well
aware their days in China are numbered. As one of the Japanese’ painted puppets, he
must be aware that his own destiny is no better than that of the Japanese who support the
Wang government. More dismal than his situation is the lot of Chia-chih, who has
always been a powerless, fear-ridden woman confronted with the political turmoil at that
time, which is especially callous to an underdog like her. Her father takes her brother
with him when he flees his warring homeland, leaving Chia-chih behind to face the
gloomy prospect of managing on her own to survive the horrendous war; her fellow
students at the university take advantage of her glamorous beauty and turn her into a tool
for their patriotic exploit. As a young woman thrust into precocious sexual maturation
on account of her first purpose-driven copulation with the repulsive Liang Jun-sheng, she
is completely at a loss as to the meaning and feelings of true love.
Undeniably, Chia-chih has been alienated from her own body and from her own sense
and sensibility when she gets involved in the so-called patriotic operation of murdering
Yee. As a matter of fact, her body has become a site of “unhomeliness” to her. In his
exposition on the colonial and post-colonial experience of the once-subjugated people,
Homi Bhabha employs the term “unhomeliness” to refer to the fact that, for the
subjugated, the “home” does not serve as a fortress to guard against outside invasion.
Instead, for the colonized, the division between the home and the world—or more
specifically, between the private and the public spheres—barely exists at all because the

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home can be a site of “incredulous terror” once it is intruded by the outside world. Bhabha further explains what it means to live “unhomely” lives:

The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily, the private and the pubic become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (9)

For Chia-chih, it is obvious that her “home” has been destroyed long ago at the initial stage of the war, but even the petite domicile of her body does not belong to her. Under the banner of patriotism, her body has become a locus marked by the most obnoxious intrusion of the public discourse that everything can be sacrificed for the sake of serving or saving one’s own country. Thus, it is more than appropriate that her sexual intercourse with Yee is inscribed with such physical violence, for basically their relationship is characterized by violence and malice. It is like two pent-up beasts whose coupling serves more as a channel to let out their existential angst than as a gesture of love and affection.

In such vehement sexual violence, actually Chia-chih might have easily taken advantage of the sexual act to smother Yee since part of their sado-masochist practice is for Chia-chih to thrust the pillow on Yee’s face. One inch further down, and she could have taken his life; however, she lets go of the chance. “Why didn’t she do it?” movie-goers may wonder at this point. Since her sole purpose is to have Yee killed, why doesn’t she grasp the golden chance to accomplish her mission? Later, at the presence of Old Wu and K’uang Yu-min, who refuse to listen to her, Chia-chih confesses her innermost feelings by saying, “He [referring to Yee] knows better than you how to act the part. He not only gets inside me, but he worms his way into my heart.”13 With the mise-en-scène of the provocative and violent sexual scenes, Ang Lee has successfully interpreted and complemented Eileen Chang’s evasive remark, “The best way to a woman’s heart is through her vagina.” To work as a competent “translator” of the

original text, Ang Lee has to go to great lengths to shoot these scenes and capture the essential aura of violence juxtaposed with growing affinity. The enactment of sexuality on the screen is quite efficient in transcribing Chang’s dismissive, reductive description into authentic lived experience of the two main characters. With his camera, Ang Lee skillfully transforms Yee from a foil to the main plot into a well-rounded character and the process of complementation makes Chia-chih’s sudden change of the heart more plausible.

Nevertheless, interfusion of bodily fluid and penetration into the female body alone are not sufficient to account for what really happens to Chia-chih before she makes the wrong decision that will take her own life and also those of her accomplices. In fact, sexual pleasure, the so-called jouissance, even though it is coupled with violent pain, may have aroused Chia-chih’s growing inclination for Yee; yet without something more touching, more penetrating to the soul, Chia-chih cannot have made such a foolish decision. Michel Foucault puts great premium on the work of the soul in The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3:

The regimen recommended for the sexual pleasures seems to be centered entirely on the body. Its condition, its balances, its ailments, the general or transitory dispositions in which it finds itself, function as the principal variables that ought to determine behavior. It is as if the body dictated to the body. And yet the soul has its part to play as well, and the physicians bring it into the scheme of things. For it is the soul that constantly risks carrying the body beyond its own mechanics and its elementary needs; it is the soul that prompts one to choose the times that are not suitable, to act in questionable circumstances, to contravene natural dispositions. (133, my emphasis.)

Foucault’s insightful remark on the importance of soul in sexual experiences sheds great light on the relationship between Chia-chih and Yee. In the making of the film, the screenplay writers deliberately add more details of the interaction between Chia-chih and Mr. Yee to show their growing affinity toward each other. We watch one of the most
impressive scenes in the movie when Chia-chih is asked to meet Mr. Yee at a Japanese-style tavern in Shanghai. The scene, which does not exist in Chang’s original, lays bare the accentuating sense of camaraderie between Chia-chih and Yee. In the tavern with boisterous Japanese in other booths, the slightly drunk Yee comments on the fear embedded in the minds of these Japanese, who know that their days are numbered and vent their angst in their off-tune songs. Chia-chih responds by saying that she knows why Yee brings her to the tavern, remarking, “You want me to be your whore.” Yee in turn tells her, “I know better than you how to be a whore,” referring to his status as a jackal working for the Wang Ching-wei government. Soon afterwards, Chia-chih proposes to sing an enchanting tune for Yee:

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From the end of the earth
To the farthest sea
I search and search
For my heart’s companion

A young girl to her man
Is like thread to its needle.
Ah! My beautiful man,
We’re like thread tied together,
Never to be unwound.14
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While she is singing the song, Chia-chih herself is carried away by the sentiment of the lyrics which express a young, forlorn woman’s craving for love; simultaneously, Yee is also unaccountably moved, with tears welling up in his eyes. The spontaneous outburst of intense feelings links the two together as they feel that their lot is interlocked, like the thread and the needle mentioned in the lyrics. Moreover, the song signifies their intensified bond since they share the feelings that, living in the troubled times, they are just like two fish stranded on land, which have to depend on each other’s dripping saliva.

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to barely survive the unsympathetic socio-historical context.\(^{15}\)

The screenplay writers’ addition of episodes like the above testifies to the logocentric demand for justification and motivation behind each act. To make the climax of Chia-chih’s unlikely decision more intelligible to movie-goers, the episodes that do not exist in the original add to our rational understanding of what urges Chia-chih to make the decision. Therefore, we may regard Ang Lee’s rendering of Chang’s original as an androgynous rendition in that the movie not only shows how the female sexuality flows but also gives a logically acceptable reason to justify the heroine’s final decision. Like the title of a Jane Austen movie, *Sense and Sensibility*, also directed by Ang Lee, the movie *Lust, Caution* also aims at creating a consummate end-product of art work that combines sense, sensibility, and furthermore, sexuality to feast the movie-goers on a most glamorous reenactment of the past. Logocentric addition of the complemented episodes is combined with the free flow of the female sexuality on the screen to add up to a crescendo that culminates in an androgynous rendition that appeals to the male audience and the female audience alike.

In Walter Benjamin’s distinctive elucidation on the task of the translator, he asserts that “a translation issues from the original—not so much for its life as from its afterlife” (2). Since in most cases, a translation comes much later than the original, Benjamin argues that what is brought out in the translation actually reflects some quintessence of the afterlife of the original text. It can be better understood with the help of a Chinese proverb that describes how a lingering spirit can breathe itself into the corpse of a dead person to achieve its own rebirth.\(^{16}\) Furthermore, Benjamin points out that “Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own” (4). Such birth pangs are all too real, as can be evidenced by Ang Lee’s confession on several occasions that he himself suffered from several bouts of emotional breakdown, especially when he was

\(^{15}\) That is the feeling conveyed by the Chinese proverb, “相濡以沫.”

\(^{16}\) That is the so-called “借屍還魂.”
shooting the copulation scenes. As if tasked with the mission assigned by Benjamin on the translator, Lee has to search high and low for the most appropriate form to re-enact what the original text conveys to him, and his job does not stop at a faithful re-presentation of the novella. Transcending the original text, he needs to represent the “divine” pure language underlying the somewhat obfuscating text in order to reach artistic consummation. In the film, the past of the middle decades of the 20th-century China is allowed to be reborn on screen; moreover, the past has attained a kind of unprecedented “newness” that is both nurturing and enlightening to the present audience.

As Bhabha describes such “newness,”

It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent “in-between” space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The “past-present” becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.

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With Ang Lee’s cinematic feat, the past breathes its own overwhelming life into the present and enchants the movie-goer with a glamorous reenactment that appeals to both sexes alike as they witness how a powerless woman lived through the most chaotic years of her own life and the most turbulent era of the Chinese history.

Reference:


17 Even though Bhabha uses such “newness” to designate the cultural transformation of the once-colonized people, it can also be applied to Ang Lee’s retrieval of the past.
2007.


