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Across the Borders of Cultural and National Identity: Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution**

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キーワード：identity, nostalgia, representation

中国系アメリカ人映画監督アン・リーの様々なトランスナショナルな作品には、グローバル化する世界における文化的アイデンティティの問題への彼のアプローチが示されている。初期の「父親三部作」、『推手』(*Pushing Hands*, 1991)、『ウェディング・バンケット』(*The Wedding Banquet*, 1993)、『恋人たちの食卓』(*Eat Drink Man Woman*, 1994)から、議論的になった『ラスト、コーション』(*Lust, Caution*, 2007)まで、彼の関心は幅広く、メインカルチャーとサブカルチャーの間、東洋と西洋の間にまたがっている。リーの作品はセクシュアリティや文化的アイデンティティが社会や個人とどのような関係を持つのかを探究している。

『ラスト、コーション』は張愛玲の同タイトルの短編小説を基にして、中国の歴史的状況を背景にした映画である。舞台は主に1938年の香港と1942年の上海に設定されている。第二次世界大戦中、日本軍による事実上の占領下となっていた香港と上海で、日本の傀儡政権である汪兆銘政権の下、抗日組織の弾圧を任務とする特務機関員の暗殺計画が進む。暗殺を目論む女スパイと、暗殺対象となった特務機関員との間に芽生えた愛情の行方が物語の焦点となる。

本稿は、まずこの映画に描き出された上海のポストモダニズム的状况を構築するアン・リーの試みとその独自の映画の暗示について検討する。その後、物語や登場人物が示唆している文化的アイデンティティや華人の政治といった大きな問題へと考察を広げていく。この2つの側面からの分析によって、ディアスポリックな中国の境遇と社会変革という歴史的文脈の中で個人のアイデンティティのありかたを省察するリー映画の本質が明らかにされるであろう。

1 Introduction

With his diverse transnational filmography, Ang Lee reveals a startling array of approaches to the topic of cultural identity in the globalizing world. From his early

* 文化と民族のアイデンティティの境界を越える：アン・リーの『ラスト、コーション』(李明)

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Chinese-language trilogy – *Pushing Hands* (1991), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) – to the greatly debated *Lust, Caution* (2007), his appeal is broad, back and forth between high and low cultures, the East and the West. Lee's works challenge sexual orientation, cultural identity and the relationship between society and individuals, where gender, race, and class intersect.

As Lee describes himself in his oral autobiography, “in the real world, I have been an outsider all my life” (Zhang Liangbei 298, my translation). He is an outsider to his native Taiwan, having spent most of his adult life in the US, and an outsider to America, being foreign-born and raised in a far different culture. Within a diasporic Chinese position, “the outsider” seems to be a leitmotif of Lee's entire works. Looking back to Lee's work, we can also find some characters as outsiders in his films.¹ Furthermore, the characters are always set to cross some visible geographical borders or invisible cultural borders. As outsiders, they suffer cultural and ethical burdens that they have internalized for a long time.

Adapted from a short story of the same title by Eileen Chang, *Lust, Caution* is about a historically Chinese topic. The story is mostly set in Hong Kong in 1938 and in Shanghai in 1942, when it was occupied by the Imperial Japanese Army and ruled by the puppet government led by Wang Jingwei. Both the time and the place are clearly out of joint, a shady chapter in the “master narrative” of modern Chinese history that has seldom been explored by Chinese historians (Lee 227). Therefore, the film presupposes a fairly advanced understanding of the conflicts and divided loyalties within China during World War Two. Given the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) policy of non-engagement with the Japanese before the Xi'an Incident in 1936 and the loss of Nanjing and Shanghai in 1937, the split within Chinese politics complicates any picture of resistance to the Japanese during that period.

This paper will first examine the ideological and cinematic implications of Lee's attempt to construct the interplay between the tradition and the modern, as well as the Chinese and western in the image of old Shanghai from the postmodern perspective. It will then read the larger issues of cultural identity as a group of Chinese and the politics in pan-Chinese territories of Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong that the narrative and

¹ Examples include the father figure in *Pushing Hands*, who is a Chinese *tai qi* master retiring to suburban New York to live with his son, grandson and American daughter-in-law. He finds himself as an outsider to American society. In *The Wedding Banquet*, a gay man, Wei-Tong Gao is made an outsider by means of his sexuality.

characters seem to suggest. These two approaches will be useful for understanding Lee's cinematic exploration of the characters' individual identity within a historical context of displacement and social change.

2 Nostalgia for old Shanghai

As Fredric Jameson's investigations of the postmodern have revealed, postmodernist aesthetics and cultural production are implicated and shaped by the global forces of late capitalist logic. Furthermore, he states that, "faced with these ultimate objects – our social, historical, and existential present, and the past as 'referent' – the incompatibility of a postmodernist 'nostalgia' art language with genuine historicity becomes dramatically apparent" (19). *Lust, Caution* is exactly the juxtaposition of the tradition and the modern, the Chinese and western as well as the oblivious history and present.

Lee makes great effort to re-create the authentic setting of old Shanghai to the last detail. Interestingly, as has become typical of films about past eras, the capture of the China of 1930s and 1940s had to be made partly in different locales. Besides Shanghai and Hong Kong, major scenes were shot on location of Malaysia, where reconstruction had occurred more slowly and public architecture, shop fronts, and street ambience resembling the Chinese ones of several decades before were still to be found. From the production process, it is reported that Lee took pains to re-create precise historical details of the film's setting, down to the type of desk and stationery likely to be used by a man like Mr. Yee at his office, the type of tree growing in the appropriate neighborhood in Shanghai, and the measurements of the license plates (Long). The effort of achieving accurate historical reproduction evokes the nostalgia for old Shanghai.

In her book on "sentimental fabulations" in Chinese film, Rey Chow points out that "nostalgia, in other words, can be found everywhere in contemporary Chinese cinema, but the object of nostalgia – that which is remembered and longed for – is, arguably, often in the form of a concrete place, time, and event" (52). *Lust, Caution* gives all the form of an assassination in Shanghai and Hong Kong from 1938-42. The film tells a story that Wang Jiazhi (Tang Wei) a student from Shanghai who, while attending the University of Hong Kong, becomes interested in drama performances and is lured into joining a group of young patriotic students who form an amateur spy ring. Upon returning to Shanghai, she is engaged in a plot to endear herself in the household of Mr. Yee (Tony Leung), who is collaborating with the Japanese, and goes undercover to entrap him. In trying to snare the

wealthy and powerful Mr. Yee, Wang takes on the identity of the married Mrs. Mai, entering into the world of the Yee family circle. Although it is centered on a historical topic, the film also references the pervasive influence of globalization on traditional Chinese culture. It is significant that the connotation of status involves the interplay of tradition and modernity, as well as the Chinese and the western. Tang Wei, who performs the roles of Wang Jiazhi (as a college student) and Mrs. Mai (as the border-crossing and trade-seeking wife of a Hong Kong businessman) switches between the traditional and the modern.

In the earlier scenes in Hong Kong, Wang, as a student, wears a simple, blue cheongsam (*qipao*), which is similar with other female students. She looks young and innocent. Later, in the scenes at the Keissling Café, waiting to entrap Mr. Yee, she dresses like a classic spy, with beautiful make up, trench coat, and a black hat. The westernized elements incorporated into haute Chinese culture serve to highlight the modernity of old Shanghai and give her a sense of otherness or distance from her own identity. In *Screening China*, Zhang Yingjin notes that in cultural imagination of modern China, the old Shanghai is usually westernized, strange, exotic, erotic, female, sexually unfaithful, morally questionable (328). In *Lust, Caution*, nostalgic atmosphere is expressed by woman's fashion style, languages and cultural icons.

The short story by Eileen Chang begins at the mahjong table. In the first paragraph, Chang draws the reader's attention to diamonds and Wang's fashion style:

Though it was still daylight, the hot lamp was shining full-beam over the mahjong table. Diamond rings flashed under its glare as their wearers clacked and reshuffles their tiles. [...] Her sleeveless cheongsam of electric blue moire satin reached to the knees, its shallow, rounded collar standing only half an inch tall, in the Western style. (Chang 3)

Chang tends to use words to describe sizes, shapes, colors and patterns. Chang's writing is known for its focus on the clothing, accouterments, the furnishings and curtains, the ornaments and decorations to detail. As a member of the wealthy class in Shanghai of the period, Chang has highly-attuned sense of fashion and taste. By focusing on the domestic interior, she emphasizes the loss of human autonomy in capitalist materiality.

The film, however, opens with a series of shots of male guards outside to emphasize

the historical circumstance. Cutting to the interior of Yee's house in the second scene, Lee shows that Mrs. Yee and her guests are getting ready for another round of Mahjong (0:00:55-0:01:31). Using four cameras, the mahjong scene is filmed from multi-angles. A close-up of several delicate hands on the table symbolizes their obsession with gems and their status. Lee precisely reconstructs the mahjong scene to complicate the power structures in interpersonal relationships. The mahjong itself is not only a game being played, but also the material and hierarchical competition of the wealthy madams. The contrast between the first two scenes in the film is immediate, not only because of the differences in color and lighting (grayish blue outdoors vs. homey soft yellow indoors) but also due to the visible gender and class difference (male guards vs. female socialites). Here, by reconstructing a historical reality, Lee may aim to add contextual hints to attract a global audience. Also, the different openings of the novel and the film show Eileen Chang and Ang Lee's distinct visions of individuals and their environments. Chang's narrative focuses on the inside of high-class women. Lee shows both inside and outside to indicate how the private world gets smaller and more repressive because of the political climate. As the outfits and accessories point out their class and status, Wang Jiazhi's lack of diamond ring makes her stand out as an outsider.



Fig. 1 (0:45:49)

The *qipao*, as a fetish object, defines certain roles for its wearers, constricts their gestures, and calls attention to their performances. Wang's transformation can be seen in her dating with Mr. Yee. Mr. Yee and Wang arrange their first date at a Hong Kong tailor shop. She gives Mr. Yee advice on the cut of his suit, and they gaze at themselves in the mirror. The look transforms them into a "couple" (see fig.1). He says to Wang "I'm in your hands" with a double meaning. Wang fits a new blue *qipao* and Yee tells her to keep the outfit, which accentuates her figure as Mrs. Mai (0:45:46-0:47:38). They have dressed each other for their new roles as lovers. The influence of western styles of clothing also plays a significant role in the film. The costumes not only contribute to the film's visual style of nostalgic Shanghai, they also highlight the fact they are all playing their roles and in different power relationship.

In order to display the atmosphere of westernized Shanghai, the setting of mise-en-

scene, the language used in the film are elaborately designed. The film is made in six languages – Mandarin, Japanese, English, Hindi, Shanghainese and Cantonese – and depicts Shanghai as a multicultural and multilingual city.

Table 1

Language	Discourse	Mise-en-scene
English	Wang and coffee shop's waiter	Coffee shop
	Wang and Indian	Jeweler shop
Shanghainese	Wang and Ms. Yee	Yee's house
	Ms. Yee and servant	Yee's house
	Wang and driver	In Mr. Yee's car
Japanese	Japanese officer and Japanese geisha	Japanese restaurant
Cantonese	Wang and Kuang Yumin	Call in Coffee shop
	Kuang Yumin and Lao Cao	In a restaurant
Hindi	Indian owner and Indian clerk	Jeweler shop

As Table 1 illustrates, interesting clues can be found here. Every language as a code is set in the film's mise-en-scene. The using of English, Japanese and Hindi shows the historical times and social situation. English, as a luxury language, is used by Wang Jiazhi to conduct all of her business. English is also the language used at the Keissling Café in Shanghai where Wang Jiazhi sets the trap for Mr. Yee. She uses English to address the waiter and to ask to use the phone in the restaurant. Speaking English can be seen as having sophistication and high class. And Wang's British English suggests the historical condition of colonial Hong Kong. Shanghainese is used in some conversation between Wang and Ms. Yee. The use of Shanghainese helps Mrs. Yee to remind the cordial feeling to Wang as two people from the same hometown. Japanese speaking impresses the image of stereotyped Japanese military officer. Cantonese is used in the scene where Wang calls Kuang Yumin (Leehom Wang) to ask about the next action. As Cantonese is not familiar to most people in Shanghai, it is a good way to protect the action from being exposed. These multilingual abilities highlight Wang Jiazhi's sophistication and capability as a spy.

In the novel as well as the film, Wang Jiazhi creates herself through the cinema, and Ang Lee takes full of advantage of this to enrich the film's depth as well as Wang's performance. In the film, Wang is depicted as an avid movie fan and Shanghai cinema as an important institution for its characters. It is significant that Wang is influenced by

western film culture, especially film noir. *Intermezzo: A Love Story* (1939), the Hollywood film Wang watches in Hong Kong, is a romantic melodrama about a love affair between a married man (Leslie Howard) and his young daughter's piano teacher (Ingrid Bergman). The victimized daughter is caught between the heartbreak of the betrayed mother and her own devotion to the adulterous father. Wang Jiazhi's face is covered with tears because it evokes such deep emotion. It reveals Wang's own fate to the loss of her father (who has just remarried and neglected to provide a passage for her to follow his new family to the UK). It has a function that Wang sees herself in the Hollywood film. These tragic heroines awaken her to her identity from her role as Mrs. Mai. Wang continues to go to movies in Shanghai after the first failed attempt on Mr. Yee's life in Hong Kong. She is interrupted by a Japanese propaganda reel, when *Penny Serenade* (1941) is screened. In this film, a couple, Roger (Cary Grant) and Julie Adams (Irene Dunne), suffer a tragedy when she miscarries in The Great Kanto Earthquake during their stay in Japan in 1923. In "Elieen Chang and Ang Lee at the movies" Gina Marchetti notes that the Asian reference in the movies, establishes an imaginative commonality linking an awareness of spectatorship and the emotional vicissitudes of identification with the actors and actresses on screen (139-140). The fact that American films continued to screen after the occupation of the foreign settlements adds more facticity to contribute to the nostalgic feeling by translating the narrative across languages and media.

At the end of the film, Ang Lee does not forget to show the postmodern Shanghai after the climax where Wang Jiazhi reveals her true emotion in the jewelry store and is left spent and empty. Wang goes window-shopping to check the latest Shanghai fashions. The mannequins in the windows are all dressed in high-society blouses,



Fig. 2 (2:22:16)

wraps, and gowns, the styles of fashion icons of the West (2:21:32-2:22:30). Furthermore, the mannequins in the shop window are overlaid by the image of the anonymous shoppers in the street (see fig.2). The scene may also express the fact that as the mannequins in the window, taking up the postures of the elegant Shanghai, it is meaningless for her to carefully construct her identity with high fashion.

3 Between the individual and the group

As mentioned above, *Lust, Caution* is a story about a split in the KMT. As Poshek Fu points out in a study of Chinese cinema in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, the line between traitor and patriot is unclear: “the occupation cinema in China represented an ambiguous space in which boundaries between heroic and villainous, political and apolitical, private and public were rarely clear and constantly transgressed” (80). In Eileen Chang’s *Lust, Caution*, this line is more delicate. And Fu’s observation of occupation cinema in some points parallels with the film’s political sensitivities.

The “traitors”, like Mr. Yee, and the “patriots”, like Lao Wu (Tou Chung-Hua), do not seem all that different in the film. In the Japanese restaurant scene, Wang begins to sing the famous song “The Wandering Songstress” from the Chinese film *Street Angel* (1937). It depicts two sisters who come to Shanghai to flee the Japanese incursions in the north China. One becomes a street singer and the other a prostitute. It is regarded as a leftwing film as the director, Yuan Muzhi, joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1940. Note the following lyrics. (2:04:10-2:06:35)

From the end of the earth... to the farthest sea... I search and search for my heart's companion. A young girl sings... while he accompanies her.

Looking north from my mountain nest...my tears fall and wet my blouse.

Missing him, I will not rest.

Only love that lasts through hard times is true.

In life, who does not...cherish the springtime of youth?

A young girl to her man is like thread to its needle.

We're like a threaded needle, never to be separated.

The word “north” suggests Japanese-occupied Manchuria, and the reference to the singer’s search for a heart’s companion suggests political sentiments. Also, for Ang Lee, “north” can also mean Mainland, which is the “north” viewed from the direction of Taiwan, as he describes himself on the “loser” side. Though born in Taiwan, Ang Lee is from a so-called “Mainlander” family; Lee’s own father is a Nationalist refugee who became a school principal in southern Taiwan. In an interview with Emily Parker in the *Wall Street Journal*, he tells his Taiwanese experience: “I grew up in Taiwan, we always lose. [...] We are always on the losing side. My parents get beat by the communists, they escape to

Taiwan, Taiwan's a small island, hardly anybody pays attention".

The political message may be ambiguous, but the song completely transforms the relationship of Mr. Yee and Wang. Metaphorically, thread and needle imply the physical connection of the two. Furthermore, some crucial evidence can be found in their conversation. (2:02:36-2:03:40)

Mr. Yee: They sing like they're crying. Like dogs howling for their dead masters. These Japanese devils kill people like flies, but deep down they're scared as hell. Yet here we are with our pained faces, listening to their off-tune songs.

Wang: I know why you brought me here. You want me to be your whore.

Mr. Yee: It is I who brought you here...so I know better than you how to be a whore.

The scene seems to provide the true "act". Mr. Yee and Wang may feel some same deep anti-Japanese emotion that their circumstance forces them to deny. The words "I know how to be a prostitute better than you" express Mr. Yee's position. The spy Wang cannot deny the fact that she has prostituted herself to Yee, and Mr. Yee cannot refute the fact he has prostituted himself to the Japanese. The awareness of their shared victimization is what binds them together in one moment escape into sentimentality. From the setting of this sequence, the film appears to reproduce the romantic ideology of love over politics, individual passion over social responsibility, and universal humanism over nationalism.

Lee chose the topic to challenge the distinction of traitor and patriot. He has paid much attention to the minor characters Lao Wu, the real leader of Chongqing's spy ring. When Wang Jiazhi describes in detail to Lao Wu what sex with Mr. Yee entails for her body, mind and spirit, she articulates the effect on her feelings and body, and the uncertainty that this provokes for her (1:57:56-1:58:28). The expression shows that Wang's performance as Mrs. Mai exceeds her belief, mainly because her emotionally unimaginative peers do not understand what the belief truly entails. She moves in the domain of physical affect, memory, and occupies an individual erotic space. However, Lao Wu cannot take it, and leaves the room, exclaiming, "That's enough"! He blames her by his own masculine power, belittles her professional intentions, and shuts her down. Just as Mr. Yee uses her for his erotic pleasure, the patriots use Wang Jiazhi with little regard for her personal safety or feeling.

Wang Jiazhi joins the assassination plot partly out of personal feelings toward Kuang

Yumin. Wang becomes involved with a group of student actors, led by the handsome Kuang and anti-Japanese activists, who follow up a successful stage-play designed to rouse anti-Japanese feeling with a somewhat amateur plan to entrap and assassinate Mr. Yee. When the assassination plot in Hong Kong fails because the Yees have to move back to Shanghai, Ang Lee adds to the film a grisly scene in which the group of college students kill Mr. Yee's attendant Lao Cao (Chin Kar-lok). Rather than validating their heroism, these students are portrayed as terrified and incompetent. Specially, the leader, Kuang Yumin, is in a total panic, repeatedly stabbing the gangster and finally breaking his neck (1:06:40-1:09:54). When the murder happens, Wang Jiazhi stands outside in the balcony, she watches all this through the glass, the murder brings the viewer with the same vision with Wang (see fig.3). Visually, Lee exposes the students' gratuitous violence and savagery. The killing makes both Wang and the viewer suspect that patriotism is simply a lofty slogan and a pretense of a dangerous game. Kuang Yumin's characterization in the film is reminiscent of the unimpeachable Party hero of many post-1949 Mainland films (Donald, 54). He desires Wang but he has to sacrifice her to the action. The film provides an interesting clue that the ideal young student is asexual. Rather, his sexuality is appropriated theatrically for the Party through the propagandistic narrative. For the Mainland audience, at least, the character of Kuang would also have historical and generic resonances. He has the bearing of the typical revolutionary Party hero, whose sexual appeal is both enhanced and deflected by the higher claims of political destiny.² The murder sequence helps to establish the center message of the absence of heroic behavior in its supposed heroes.



Fig. 3 1:07:11

The politics of *Lust, Caution* and the background of the Japanese occupation of Shanghai can be easily neglected by the image of Hong Kong star Tony Leung and the debatable sex scenes. Wang Jiazhi's function as femme fatale has five sex scenes. Two are between Wang and Liang Junsheng (Lawrence Ko), who is the only student who has had

² For instance, Stephanie Hemelryk Donald notes that the character thus evokes a tradition that runs from "Xiao Chen" in *Street Angel* (Yuan Muzhi, 1937), to Chen Qiang's role as the Soldier in *Red Detachment of Women* (Xie Jin, 1961) and Wang Xueqi's ironic reprise of the type in *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1984). (54)

any sexual experience, and three between Wang and Mr. Yee. The student sex is a form of “training” for her performance as a married woman. The second scene with the student shows Wang “learning the trade” of political prostitution, and hints that the male student is beginning to enjoy his physical pleasure in his role. Again, the heroism of resistance is undermined in sequences where a woman loses her virginity to a man she does not desire, and in a way that she has clearly neither willed nor understood to be on Kuang’s agenda, when he called her to service against Mr. Yee. Although Wang is forced to have sex with Yee, however, finally it is an individual mature lust and deep attraction. It can be regarded as fantasies of control over each other. The relationship between Wang and Mr. Yee allows both characters to deny their responsibility and engagement in the affairs of the war. Their lovemaking releases both from their terribly politicized lives.

Lee and his scriptwriters have given a complete flashback sequence to the heroine’s student background in Hong Kong, which is barely touched in the story of *Lust, Caution*.³ However, Shanghai and Hong Kong as important nostalgia representations constantly appear in Eileen Chang’s works. In *Lust, Caution*, the movement (from Shanghai to Hong Kong then return to Shanghai) underscores the resemblance in personal background between Wang Jiazhi and Chang herself. Chang was once a college student at the University of Hong Kong in 1939-1941. These added scenes serve to enrich somewhat the emotional content of Wang Jiazhi’s characterization. The crucial part of the flashback sequence is her participation in the patriotic play, in which the young student actors display genuine emotion on stage and their complicit audience (0:20:11-0:23:18). In this sequence the patriotic emotions are extended. For the present-day audience in Hong Kong, the patriotic play sequence looks indeed staged, even ironic. Moreover, Lee apparently has given it much significance and weight by placing it near the film’s end. The doomed heroine’s mind returns to it, as if in a flash of insight (2:24:35-2:24:44). Metaphorically, they are calling her “back to reality”, where they request her aid in an actual assassination. She stops performing and allows herself to be true to her actual emotion. Kuang Yumin first calls her off the stage. It is as if she is bidding farewell to performance again, this time from the other side of the stage, from her performance of her role as agent, and back to the freedom of her own real self. Wang Jiazhi acts out the

³ In Chang’s novel, the patriotic play is mentioned, “while at college in Canton she’d started in a string of rousing patriotic play. Before the city fell to the Japanese, her university had relocated to Hong Kong, where the drama troupe had given one last public performance”. (13)

roles chosen for her. From the stage performance as a soldier's sister in the patriotic drama played at the University of Hong Kong to her final "role" as martyr facing the execution. When she decides to save Mr. Yee at the film's climax, it can be considered as her "act".

4 Conclusion

Ang Lee's cinematic adaptation, going far beyond Eileen Chang's representation of private experiences, is an intellectual process of cultural poetics that subverts the mythic language of nationalism and national identity. In *Lust, Caution*, The CCP, Japan, and America are at the film's margins. As I have explored above, The CCP is represented by the leftwing film *Street Angel*, Japanese appear mainly in the bordello, and the American presence is depicted through Hollywood movies. By deconstructing patriotism, Ang Lee neither criticizes traitors strictly nor compliments patriotic students simply. In addition to highlighting the loss of individual control in the political circumstance, Ang Lee's ambiguous treatment of patriotism embodies the dilemma of history and emotion that he as an outsider has no state to love.

Lee describes the evolution of his screenplay as coming from his dramatic and social background. "My dramatic background taught me how to create a situation so all the issues and circumstances collide. You throw people into a situation in which they are not in harmony, but in conflict. [...] Through these processes you examine humanity and our human situation" (Zhang Liangbei 89). Therefore, in Lee's film, he sets geographical borders or invisible cultural boundaries to examine the complicated situations. *Lust, Caution* may be celebrating individual desire and the sanctity of human emotion over social/political/national imperatives, or it may all be an "act."

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