

Tang Wei

Sex, the City and the Scapegoat in *Lust, Caution*

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Abstract

This article discusses the Tang Wei incident, which evolved across the first half of 2008, during the run-up to the Olympic Games in Beijing. Tang Wei is a Chinese actress whose breakthrough role in Ang Lee's film *Lust, Caution* caused a sensation amongst Chinese audiences. The nudity and sex scenes in the film were explicit, and as such challenged accepted norms in film content. This aspect of the film, combined with the characterization of a national traitor as a heroine, caused deep concern among some parties involved in film regulation and censorship. The argument presented here is that Tang Wei, who was singled out for criticism and upon whom travel and work restraints were placed in the aftermath of the film's release, was made a scapegoat for the disgust experienced by a masculinist political class when faced with female dissent and sexuality.

Key words

body politics ■ censorship ■ Chinese film ■ Olympics ■ performance ■ sexual politics

THE ACTRESS Tang Wei made a great impact on international and domestic audiences alike in Ang Lee's 2007 *Se, Jie* or *Lust, Caution*. She plays, very elegantly, a young woman, Wang Jiazhi (Wong Chia-chih),¹ who had been deserted by her father, during the Japanese invasion of Guangzhou (in Canton) in October 1938 (Carroll, 2007: 116–18), and is now in Hong Kong to escape the war and pursue her education. Wang Jiazhi becomes involved with a group of student actors,

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led by the handsome Kuang Yumin, 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 a high-ranking intelligence officer, a Chinese, Mr Yee (Tony Leung Chiu Wai), who is working with the arch-collaborator, Wang Jingwei. The first attempt, in Hong Kong, fails, and leads to the brutal murder of a mobster, who has been unwittingly helping them set up the plot against Yee. Two years later, now in Shanghai, Wang Jiazhi is again recruited. Having seduced Yee and set him up for assassination, at the last moment, she warns him and he escapes. The conspirators are arrested. On Yee's order, all of them, including Wang, are executed that night.

Crucial to the film's narration, and to Wang Jiazhi's function as *femme fatale*, are five sex scenes. Two are between Wang Jiazhi and a fellow student activist, and three between Wang Jiazhi and Mr Yee. The student sex is a disturbing form of 'training' for her performance as a married woman. The sex with Yee, however, is a progressive discovery of mature lust and deep attraction. The first encounter with Yee is predominantly sadistic, the second is aggressive but passionate, whereas the final scene is prolonged and intensely amorous. These very explicit sequences have attracted both critical admiration and censure. The main focus here is on the response of authorities and powerful individuals, combined in the authority of the state in the People's Republic of China. The state's response was interesting because it operated in the realm of moral hegemony, crucial to the maintenance of the cultural and social legitimacy of the state, and was supported by a complex appeal to national integrity, quasi-Confucian order and righteousness, and revolutionary heritage. However, it also referred obliquely to issues of masculinity as much as to politics per se, demonstrating how the two are mutually reinforcing at the highest levels of power.

The state's disapproval has been expressed in two ways. The first strategy was pre-emptive. Apparently based on the assumption that the passions expressed in the sex scenes might affect audiences in ways that could be socially disruptive or subversive, these scenes were simply excised from the film, or severely cut, as it was distributed on the Mainland. (There were no cuts to versions distributed in Hong Kong or Taiwan, either in cinemas or on DVD.) The second strategy came a few months later, was reactive and reeked of bullying. Tang Wei's career was undermined on the Mainland, at least in the short term, by restrictions placed on public appearances and promotional activities related to the film.

One explanation, which I pursue as a coda to the following, is that, in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the PRC government was especially sensitive to anything that might be considered threatening to its moral authority and social legitimacy. As it attempted to strengthen the cultural integrity of the Chinese nation, it saw potential dangers in such apparently diverse phenomena as new media technologies, the behaviour of celebrities in Hong Kong and – betraying a certain degree of masculine neurosis – the spectacular role of the Chinese body in the public sphere.

Lust, Caution showed all the unmanageable passion of the body, just at a time when the government wanted Chinese Olympic bodies to incarnate the perfection of the nation. The iconic story during the Olympics was that of the little girl Lin Liaoke, who was chosen to be the 'flying girl' in the 'Hymn to the Motherland' sequence in the Beijing Opening Ceremony in 2008, while the chubbier Yang Peiyi was relegated to a 'Singin' in the Rain voiceover'. This was indeed a reminder of the role of a certain version of feminine beauty in Chinese cultural nationalism, and of how the female body is manifest either as a vision of sporting excellence, or as a perversely infantilized version of sentimentalized and codified feminine beauty.²

Arguably then, the moves against both the film and the actress herself were symptomatic of a habit of misogynist bullying to give support to state power and to insist on specific, national discursive parameters for identity. In this sense, the censoring of *Lust, Caution* and the campaign against Tang Wei might be seen as just one more instance of long-standing state pressure on Chinese cinema to adhere to its preferred conventions for characterizing both Chineseness and sexuality in film (Yau, 1990). What is unusual about this case is not only the extent to which it reveals the affect of sex (or, at least, of representations of sexuality) in contemporary Chinese political life, but also the way that it suggests an explanation for the sometimes apparently random reactions of the state when sexuality threatens to become a political issue.

Part of that explanation is located in the current return to neo-Confucianism in Chinese intellectual thought. Given the relatively negative role of women in Confucian social relations, and without a concomitant feminization of the body politic and national space, a Confucian appropriation of political morality leaves women especially vulnerable to scapegoating as the causes and carriers of moral decline (Hershatter, 1999: 263; Jeffreys, 2006; Zhu, 2008).

Confucianism is a tradition of socio-political philosophy based on the collected, or collated, writings of a number of thinkers, including of course Confucius's *Analects*, the interpretations of Mencius and Xun Zi, the works of the new Confucianists in the Ming and Qing dynasties and, latterly, contemporary neo-Confucian thinkers in the PRC and the Chinese-speaking world. The tradition emphasizes correct and reverential relationships between ruler and ruled, between generations, and between genders. Key virtues arise from these relationships, and are seen to be functioning where moral order, harmonious social relations, and habits of self-cultivation are in evidence in familial, social and political arenas. Unfortunately, the Confucian tradition has a daunting effect on women's relationship to power, and has allowed and even fostered poor relations between the sexes. Moreover, the neo-Confucian 'moment' in Chinese political life has been bluntly interpreted to legitimate forced social harmony (*hexie shehui*), and to compress and confuse national imperatives, moral prejudices in wider society, and the policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with a bastardized Confucian shorthand for Chineseness and exceptionalism.

Ironically, the ‘greatest’ Confucian is a profound man (*junzi*), who seeks depth from experience; whereas the small man (*xiaoren*) seeks only profit and self-interest. Women are not named in this configuration, but we might take liberties with the gendering of the *junzi* and the *xiaoren* to make our point. Implicit in this discussion is the claim that the Tang Wei affair brought into the open the mean responses of small men (*xiaoren*) to their own sensitivity to sexual challenge, while bolstering their affinity with nationally legitimized prejudice, historical ignorance and political narrow-mindedness. At the same time, the events of 2008 exposed the vulnerability of those, in this case a young actress, who try to work with the profundity and complexity of human history and experience, through their art.

Sex and Entanglement: The Historical Body

In her recent book on ‘sentimental fabulations’ in Chinese film, Rey Chow describes the opening sex scene in Wong Kar-wai’s 1997 film *Happy Together* as the ‘physical entanglement’ (2007: 51) of the two main protagonists. For Chow, the scene exemplifies the nostalgic moment of redoubling in intimate human relationships, an extended moment of possibility, which she defines as a Lacanian return to one-ness. Such redoubling is especially crucial for these lovers, whose relationship is scarred by betrayal and renewal (2007: 51–2), the latter increasingly enfeebled by the former. Chow’s choice of phrase struck me immediately, as the word ‘entanglement’ was the same that came to mind when watching the second and third sex scenes in *Lust, Caution*. The couple here, Wang Jiazhi (aka Mrs Mak) and Mr Yee, also pursue one-ness through ‘physical entanglement.’ Their affair is not especially happy, either. The sexual relationship is cathartic but also destructive, premised on fantasies of control over each other, and marked by repeated betrayals. While their love-making and protracted orgasms release both from the terrible contingencies of their politicized lives, his as a high-ranking Minister of Intelligence, involved in countless executions and tortures of local Chinese resistance fighters, and hers as an undercover spy for the resistance movement, they also confirm the impossibility of being happy together outside the entanglement of immediate physical connection. Happiness is a ‘contingent possibility of that which has been, a possibility which preserves itself for another time’ (Hamacher, 2005: 35), and it is not available to those living through interesting and difficult times. In *Lust, Caution*, then, the spectator must not expect happiness for the protagonists, but may assess the degree to which their passion alleviates or denies the dominant historical narratives of both the times in which they exist as characters, and the present in which they are subject to the rules of history as defined by the state.

So, while the spectator of a spy story with a passionate relationship at its core might wish to examine the need for happiness, especially the happiness of women, both in the diegesis of this film and in the oeuvre of

Chinese culture more generally (Evans, 1996, 2007), this cinematic entanglement is most potent in its actual political ramifications in China. Indeed, the very identity of the protagonists is muddled and complicated by the current conditions of spectatorship in the PRC. Tang Wei's character, Wang Jiazhi, is working for a Kuomintang (KMT, Nationalist) resistance cell in the Shanghai sequences, in 1940. At that time, the KMT's Central Executive Committee was run by the powerful Chen brothers. A knowledgeable audience might expect, therefore, that the character Lao Wu (Old Wu, of whom more later) would be recognizably modelled on these brothers, or on their immediate associates. In the PRC, however, there has been little, if any, discussion of the KMT's contribution to the resistance movement in that period, and this has affected the way in which the film is understood. A straw poll, admittedly random, with university-educated Chinese audience members in their 20s, 30s and 40s revealed that they imagined that the resistance cell was CCP. This perception was historically incorrect, but not surprising, as the film does not explicitly identify the KMT as such, either by its uniform or in the dialogue. As a Taiwanese-educated man in his 50s, the director Ang Lee may not have felt that this was necessary. This silence, however, allows a Mainland audience to assume, ahistorically, that the male leaders of the cell are simply representative of male leadership in the CCP, as it is generally configured in the audience's educational and political experience. The same irony might have also confused the censors, who, although presumably informed of the role of the KMT in the period and the identity of these characters in the film, would also be aware of the degree to which Lao Wu and Kuang Yumin resembled stock CCP typologies from revolutionary cinema.

In this and other respects, the entanglement of the lead protagonists challenges the positioning characteristic of a strong national narrative and at the same time prompts textual and *ad feminam* abuses by state actors in censorship and control. The film's exploration of lust and its passage to love-making might have been intended, cinematically and emotionally, as a companion piece to the journey in Ang Lee's other recent film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), where the lust between the protagonists is also 'forbidden', but where love precedes and exceeds the act of love-making between the men. In *Lust, Caution*, however, Tang Wei's body is locked in a politically charged scopic regime determined by gender and youth, but also by her political subjectivity as a Mainland Chinese. She, the actress, as well as she, the character, is coded as a contemporary fragment of historical time. She is a visual hostage to the party-state's management of historical memory through well-worn appropriations of key historical passages of martyrdom. Nor may she escape the social judgements against her released within a context of a highly moralizing contemporary neo-Confucian harmonization of social hopes, disappointments and imaginative boundaries (Li, 2008). Tang Wei was undone by this mixture of historically sensitized scopic framing, and the state's deliberately naïve elision of boundaries

between cultural work, national philosophy, political fantasy and cinematic narrative.

The onscreen relationship between Wang and Yee should not be sentimentalized. It is a rough and opportunistic passion, which allows both characters to deny their responsibility, culpability and engagement in the affairs of the war. It is also a passion that gives sexual engagement precedence over a highly managed account of human relationships that has been the norm in Chinese war films. Surely, of course, the point of passion, is to elude and ignore boundaries? But, on the Mainland, this is the war of national humiliation, which can be neither overlooked nor forgiven. In 1938, Nanjing was deserted by Chiang Kaishek, and infamously sacked by the Japanese army, at a time when Shanghai had already been occupied, in a passage of despair for Chinese people. It remains a difficult period to reconcile with contemporary emphases on a strong and coherent nation.³ The passion between these unpatriotic protagonists reminds the state that citizens who seek a different emotional maturity to that available within the bounds of nationalism might refuse and negate the certainty of a received historical sentiment.

My argument then is that the protracted sequences of sex (and, as we shall see, an extended sequence of violence as well) in *Lust, Caution* are transgressive not merely because of the explicit camerawork and the extremely detailed visual and emotional narration of a sexual encounter, although that is certainly the case too, but because the characters do not conform with the appropriate stereotypes which populate 20th-century Chinese history, and which are still expected to contribute to current socio-political models of morality and exclusion. The film's transgression lies in its visual commitment to the entanglement of the female sexual body, with a violent but vulnerable male body, as the bearer of ontological expression and certainty, while the lies, plots and whisperings that characterize all other communications in the film are reduced to a background plot. This organization of the film's narrative material fundamentally contradicts the terms of history deployed in other cultural and political fora. Given the context of the story in the 1930s and 1940s, and the situation of the film's domestic/Mainland reception in 2008, the film forces an especially raw entanglement with the sensibilities of the state, the nation and the Party's particular versions of heroism, treachery and post-revolutionary recuperation.

Performance and Politics

As others have argued, performance, theatricality and the manipulation of the word through textual bonding have been crucial to the creation and maintenance of hegemony in China (Ames and Hall, 1987: 117–24). Theatre is also at the heart of *Lust, Caution's* narrative – in its origins, progression and denouement. The anti-Japanese activists Wang Jiazhi falls in with are student actors. Their leader, Kuang Yumin, is a handsome young



Figure 1 *Lust, Caution* (2007): The first encounter. Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLLP



Figure 2 *Lust, Caution* (2007): The second encounter. Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLLP



Figure 3 *Lust, Caution* (2007): Entanglement. Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLLP

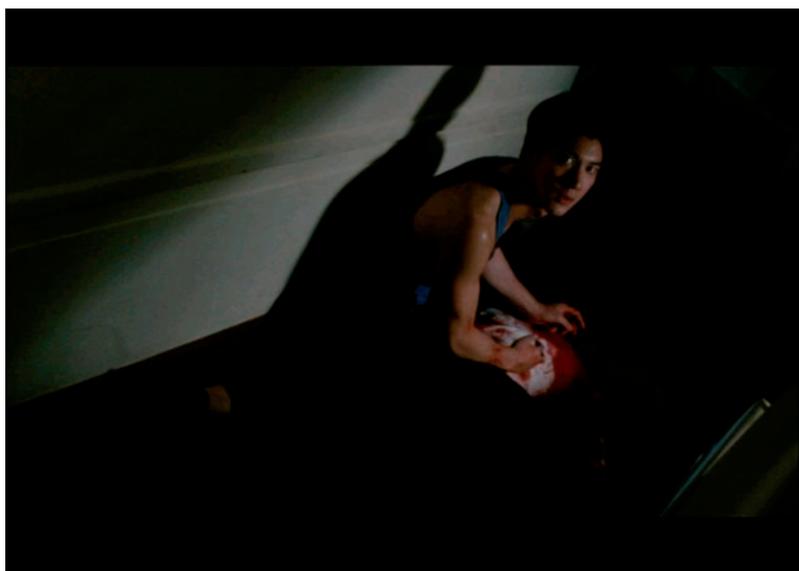


Figure 4 *Lust, Caution* (2007): Kuang Yumin commits murder. Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLLP

man, whose characterization in the film is reminiscent of the unimpeachable Party hero of many post-1949 Mainland films (Yau, 1990). He both desires Wang and is ready to sacrifice her to the cause. This echoes revolutionary narrative, where there is classically a structural refusal of physical happiness, through which the hero's simultaneously sexualized and unattainable male body displaces female desire onto identification with the Party. The young hero is *not asexual*. Rather, his sexuality – and her desire – are appropriated theatrically for the Party both through the propagandistic narrative and, more specifically, through the manipulation of looks between female and male characters (Donald, 1997), so that those who might desire him are deflected to political purposes. Chris Berry describes this phenomenon slightly differently, as a pedagogical process, whereby identification with characters is subordinated to 'analysis and education' (2004: 50). However described, the outcome is the same. Even in the 30-odd years since the emergence of a post-socialist aesthetic in Mainland Chinese cinema, it is difficult to think of a protagonist who has been both sexually fulfilled and truly heroic (Berry, 2004; Zhang XL, 2008).

The 'theatricality' of Wang Jiazhi consists largely in the way that she recalls a certain kind of Shanghai star from the 1930s and 1940s. In looks and style, she draws on the 'new' modern woman (*modeng nüxing*), typified by the film actor Ruan Lingyu. But her characterization and narrative function also hark back to that 'type'. Ruan's simultaneously fragile, sexy and challenging performance in *Goddess* (Wu Yonggang, *Shennü*, 1934) is typical of the way that left-wing films of the early 1930s represented women as the instability and contradiction at the centre of Chinese national struggles (Pang, 2002: 114–15).

For a 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. The character thus evokes a tradition that runs from 'Xiao Chen' in *Street Angel* (Yuan Muzhi, *Malu tianshi*, 1937), to Chen Qiang's role as the Soldier in *Red Detachment of Women* (Xie Jin, *Hongse niangzi jun*, 1961) and Wang Xueqi's ironic reprise of the type in *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, *Huang tudi*, 1984). The performative development in *Lust, Caution*, however, is that this character is clearly revealed as unstable and contradictory, as is Wang Jiazhi herself. Thus the instability of the *femme fatale* is matched and even exceeded by the moral fragility of the patriotic hero.

The references to performance styles and conventional characterizations may be read as key cues to the danger perceived in the film by mainland censors. *Lust, Caution's* critiques of 'official' PRC narratives are situated in the performative dimension of the film – most notably the sex scenes. They are also, I would argue, evident in the instability which surfaces in all the key characterizations. This first emerges in the *mise-en-scène* of the murder of the mobster in Hong Kong; this is a drawn-out, bloody, incompetent mess. The young idealists, led by Kuang, are in a total

panic, repeatedly stabbing the gangster and finally breaking his neck. They come across as not just amateurish, but viciously unstable.

Like the later sex scenes between Wang and Yee, the murder sequence is a detailed, visually explicit, visceral and anti-verbal account. It helps to establish the sheer nastiness of this story, and the absence of heroic behaviour in its supposed heroes. In doing so, it provides the audience with a point of reference for making sense of the scenes of Wang being given sexual ‘training’ by a (relatively) sexually experienced student. This ordeal is approved by Kuang, as preparation for Wang’s projected liaison with Mr Yee. 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 role in her protracted humiliation. 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 her quasi-lover Kuang’s agenda, when he called her to service against Mr Yee. That scene was cut for Mainland audiences. Likewise, the third sex scene between Yee and Wang in Shanghai, when entanglement and orgasm clearly indicate passionate desire, trumping political will, was removed.

Combined with the stabbing sequence, the sexual subordination of a comrade-in-arms effectively undermines the ethos of pre-Liberation modern political romanticism, reminiscent of films such as *Big Road* (Sun Yu, 1935). This mood is briefly recreated in early *Lust, Caution* sequences in Hong Kong, where the students declaim their patriotism on the stage, and sing as they walk with linked arms along the street. The murder sequence also undercuts the formal revolutionary romanticism of the post-1949 era, recalled in Kuang’s portentous statements on duty and the motherland. Wang runs away in horror, and arguably the audience will not trust this group of fumbling murderers again either. The scene was shortened to a single, ‘clean’ stabbing in the Mainland print. The censor’s decisions here indicate a politically intelligent assault on the film’s intentions. The later cuts combined to *disentangle* the Wang character from Mr Yee, while the earlier ‘clean-up’ lessens the implied guilt and violence of the young conspirators and returns a relatively ‘pure’ female body to the received historical truth of national memory.

In the Shanghai sequence, set two years after the murder in Hong Kong, Wang is again recruited and again adopts the persona of ‘Mrs Mak’, a Hong Kong-based entrepreneur’s wife, to seduce Yee. In the end, however, she is unable to deny the pull of physical entanglement against the demands of patriotism. On one level, then, Wang is an actress who finally falls foul of the intensity of her own performance. On another level, Tang Wei can be seen as a performer who has fallen foul of a deliberate political confusion between actor and role. Perhaps one should say the actress found that, by virtue of her gender, her youth and her Mainland citizenship, she was ontologically implicated in the past far more literally than she might have guessed.

Tang Wei's role onscreen is a potent embodiment of a passage of history, which is not generally debated in China. The Wang Jiazhi persona is a failure of Chinese patriotism, and a reminder of Nationalist efforts in the anti-Japanese campaign. Moreover, her enactment of instability, disorder and *immoral entanglement* (her own, but also that which the narrative prompts in Kuang Yumin) offends the prudish masculinity and the compulsion for controlled harmony at the heart of Chinese political culture. She is thus multiply vulnerable to moral judgements in the present.

At the same time, the central 'bad' characters of the film, as played by Tony Leung Chiu-Wai and Joan Chen, are complicated people. The cosmopolitan sophistication of the actors' realization is an important aspect of the film's challenge in China's political and social spheres. These actors do not allow their performances to conform to the usual one-dimensional images of the Japanese occupation period. Leung is a well-known international film actor, based in Hong Kong, who played the downtrodden but smitten Fai in *Happy Together*, and who has also portrayed ambivalent historical heroes in *Red Cliff* (John Woo, *Chibu*, 2009) and the assassin 'Broken Sword' in *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, *Yongxiong*, 2002). Joan Chen is a consummate Shanghai-ese American-based actress whose 2007 work included the decadent and stricken mother in *The Home Song Stories*, Tony Ayres' autobiographical account of a Chinese childhood in Australia. Between them they comprise a performative body which is Chinese in appearance, but patriotically unstable, and deemed in the course of the film to compromise the purity of the young female Mainlander, as a character and as an actor.

In *Lust, Caution*, the film, Wang is a natural actress. She is drawn to the role of Mak Taitai, as much as to the man she is stalking. Indeed, when Wang reports, in part as confessional, in part as complaint and in part as warning, to her senior boss (Old Wu, or Lao Wu) in the resistance cell that 'he is worming his way through my body into my heart like a snake', she is reporting on her performance as much as on her erotic awakening. Yee is also a consummate operator and thereby fulfils his role as a ruthless agent of the puppet administration in occupied Shanghai, but he too seeks the one 'dark space', where he is (rightly it turns out) no longer fearful for his life. Yee, the collaborator, says that he will not meet Wang in the cinema as he feels unsafe in the dark, but nonetheless he discovers that he is safe in the Freudian 'darkness' of a female sexual embrace, his one 'dark space'. The actress, Tang Wei, is also unsafe in the cinema, where her performance betrays her to the eyes of the censor and thereby delivers her to the squeamish bullying of the state. Both actress and character are unsafe in the darkness in which and through which their performances occur. Perhaps Ang Lee was prescient in giving Yee this line, but if so, it is Wang/Tang, and not Yee/Leung, who is truly imperilled.

Lust, Caution is based on a short story by Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing), a Shanghai writer. Chang's first collection, *Romances* (*Chuanqi*, 1944), captured the structural disappointments of life for young women in the contradictory and incomplete modernity of Shanghai (Edwards, 2000;

Zheng 2002). The symptoms of the modern in her heroines, by which I mean their formal external beauty, their independent social and sexual ambitions, and their mobility in the city, are belied by the structural denial of freedom to follow through, so that time and again they suffer internal emotional collapse, away from maturity and back towards form over substance (Zheng, 2003). This can also be seen in respect to Chow's reading of *Happy Together*, where the men struggle to find an emotional and social environment where they can indeed be together and be happy. Notably, for Fai, the place he finds is Taiwan, where a prospective relationship is seen in the light of a stable and emotionally mature family home.

'Lust, Caution', the short story, was not finished and published until 1979. This delay allowed it the power of hindsight and the terseness of a writer who no longer needs to describe the obvious, nor give any quarter to the sentimental, or the patriotic. Chang's Mr Yee is colder and more psychotic than his counterpart on film, and Chang teases us with the thought that neither of these professional 'actors' was truly in love but that both relied on the other's passion to support their need for transitory subjective completion. It may, then, be a story about what happens when people think that desire can be completed, and political danger eluded, by sentiment. Nonetheless, Yee's effect on Wang Jiazhi, even in the short story, draws her into the realm of truly erotic, and seriously dangerous, theatre, and away from crude, and violently sentimental, student theatrics.

Sleeping with the Enemy: The Real Crisis in Moral Culture

In 2008, the post-revolutionary mode of the Chinese feminine was contradictory. The pressure on the 'Mainland Woman' to perform patriotism by masking her sexual agency, and controlling the meaning of her body to accord with the sensibilities of the nation, has not been confined to the Tang Wei case. Other major actresses have attracted public censure for public nudity (Zhang Ziyi) and for the unpatriotic decision to take Singaporean citizenship (Gong Li), although they have not suffered the state restrictions on their career meted out to Tang Wei. Meanwhile the 'Shanghai Woman' returned in magazines and fashion manuals as a model of the feminine, but at the expense of her assumed gains under socialism, although of course the extent and depth of these gains have always been questioned by feminist scholarship (Evans, 1996, 2007).

In 2000, Susan Gal and Gail Kligman outlined ways of recasting gender politics in a post-socialist state. Although focusing on the developments in Eastern Europe, which is more profoundly 'post'-socialist than the PRC's centrally managed capitalism, their classifications are nonetheless instructive in China now. They talk of 'coded morality' (2000: 110), borrowed and erased traditions (to which we might add reinvented and rehashed), the re-evaluation of the gendered subject, and they also note 'a massive influx of pornography' since 1989 (2000: 111). The latter is particularly relevant to the *Lust, Caution* affair. In a situation where the

feminine subject has been re-evaluated and returned to the realm of beauty in the thrall of a national morality, where traditions of this beauty have been borrowed from a period now viewed with nostalgia in pre-Liberation, pre-war Shanghai, and where at the same time there is indeed an influx and reinvention of the pornographic and exploitation practices (Jeffreys, 2006), then the woman as an adult sexual subject is at grave risk of being erased. It is in these circumstances that three film sequences, which show a woman and man finding their way mutually, albeit self-destructively, towards *entanglement*, are both important and challenging to the current milieu of crisis and restraint.

In a recent article in the literary-philosophical journal, *Diogenes*, Ci Jiwei takes up the problem of 'moral crisis' in contemporary China. The crisis is not forged by unnameable others, nor by scapegoats, he argues, but by an increasing lack of widespread trust in society and the system to ensure fair play within any particular moral code. Thus, concludes Ci, the 'good' and the 'moral' are 'explicitly contiguous with politics' (2009: 21; see also Bell, 2009). He thereby implicitly questions the conservative, quasi-Confucian rationalization of censorship in Chinese culture, and its impact on women. In China, now, the ideal female body is decorative, well-presented, desirable, and by definition young (Hanser, 2005). By the same token, it has the potential to become dissolute and eventually aged. Any sexual encounter on screen thus gives an opportunity for postures of social/moral posturing among male elites and social conservatives. By sleeping with the enemy, even though it was under orders, the character Wang Jiazhi places her political soul in jeopardy, and, by performing the event, Tang Wei recreated the misdemeanour and has also suffered the consequences.

The official reaction to the sex scenes in *Lust, Caution* was sensitive to real attacks on the dominant narrative of Chinese war stories, and prosaically literal in the same mode as censorship decisions around the world, where false connections are made between sex and pornography, between intent and effect, and between performance and experience. However, the reaction also denoted a recognition of, first, what was deemed a frightening and anti-nationalist incursion of cosmopolitan affect into the narrative structures of Chinese language film (*huayu dianying*, a relatively new descriptor which includes, but is not restricted to, films made in Mainland China, a backdoor into Chinese culture from the Chinese *cultures* of global cinema), and, second, an attack on the immutable and non-negotiable status of the masculine in mainstream Chinese social culture. In the terms of Paola Voci's thesis on 'visual conjecture', a concept she coins to describe a tactic of critique that eludes the verbal dialogue between mainstream political thinking and dissidence, and that is evident in some independent documentary work in China, the three sequences of explicit sexual intercourse in *Lust, Caution* are a cumulative refusal to engage in 'an antagonistic dialogue with an assumed dominant ideology, but rather display an exhibitionist form of resistance' (Voci, 2004: 65). The affect is built on what

Laura Marks (2000) might describe as the memory of touch, both that of the characters in the film and that of the audiences' mounting recognition that they must feel beyond the visual to understand how the characters behave the way they do, and why the film eludes the political literal and engages with what we might term an anti-historical erotic space.

In approaching *Lust, Caution* as an erotic text as well as a political thriller, the film shares certain resonances with *Last Tango in Paris* (Bertolucci, 1972). *Last Tango* deliberately toys with the audience as it threatens to deny us the classic pleasure of connected narratives leading towards a satisfactory happy or tragic ending. Instead, it stages a *dénouement* which is in keeping with the cruelty of one party and the naiveté of the other, and which insists that any connection between the two is either arbitrary, or a fantasy of the weaker party (in this case Paul). In *Last Tango* the namelessness of the protagonists is sustained as long as the erotic is exempted from everyday commitment, either to each other or to a malign family history (in He [Paul's] case, his violent family and the suicide of his wife, and in Her case, the brutal instincts for self-preservation of her late father, a Gaullist officer who had served in Algeria with all the military and possibly sexual violence that would have entailed). He and She find that, although their affair leads them towards the consequences of connection, as the namelessness breaks down so does the affair itself, and thus the connection itself is denied.

For Yee and Wang, their sexual entanglement is a mutual journey away from the loyalties and contingencies of the Japanese occupation and Chinese suffering and towards an erotic, theatrical/professional understanding that the mutability and performative nature of allegiance can overwhelm the seemingly unmoveable forces of good and evil, patriotism and betrayal. In *Last Tango*, moreover, the tactile and quivering quality of Brando's performance blurs the reality principle, so that we are seduced by his strength on screen to assume that somehow we are indeed watching the unmediated unfolding of a human being. This is good screen acting, but is also a clue that can be taken forward to *Lust, Caution*. It suggests one possible excuse for the confusion of the censors, more used to typologies of collaborators, than humans throwing caution to the winds. Both Wang and Paul are taken in by their own sexual intensity, and either fall in love or believe themselves to have done so.

Reading the sex scenes in *Lust, Caution* in the context in which they were viewed in China in 2007–8, at least by more conservative and politically anxious spectators, requires some literalism. In sequence 2, the female Mainland Chinese naked body is all folded up with the symbolic enemy – the collaborator, in the person of a naked Chinese Hong Kong actor playing a national traitor. Given that Japanese and their collaborators on film have been portrayed for nigh on 50 years not as ambivalent objects of desire but as the epitome of evil, it is not entirely surprising that reasons would be found to criticize the film. Both Japanese characters and their collaborators have been traditionally typed as bespectacled, weedy and

thin-lipped, and thus assumed to be de-masculinized and anti-heroic (see Chris Berry on *The Unfailing Beam* [2004: 36–8] and a much more recent CCTV children's series, *Devil Soldiers* [2006], which again reiterates the type.) In *Lust, Caution*, playing a collaborator rather than a Japanese, Tony Leung only gently approximates the stereotype (and he can't really do thin-lipped), but the resemblance is there for those who would recognize it, and the hint of resemblance is more iconoclastic than the effect had he been quite a different body type. Moreover, even the hint of the type is negated across the progress of the film (Wang says early on 'he is not what I expected him to be like'), most especially when he takes his clothes off and sexual negotiations between the two quasi-lovers begin. By the last encounter, he is indeed a real man with 'real balls.' The subtle contrast between the complex humanity of Yee, against the usual war-story stereotypes of both a strongly built but sexually ambivalent and unattainable hero, and a repugnantly de-masculinized traitor or enemy, is precisely what makes this character and his sexual potency disturbing to male viewers who are thinking within the paradigms of state power and its reliance on national narratives of legitimate masculinity.

Meanwhile, as the vulnerable yet potent masculinity of a collaborator is discovered in the film, so Tang Wei's character, Wang Jiazhi, discovers that sex is its own theatre through the enactment of the love/lust affair between herself-as-Mrs-Mak and Yee. The first hint of the depth of the transformation is given in an early Hong Kong sequence when, as Wang returns to her fellow students after a dinner date with Yee, she takes off her silk stockings in the presence of the only other female in the group, who had previously been the more dominant character of the two. As she rolls the stockings down her legs, tosses them aside, and lights herself a cigarette, only at the last moment remembering to offer one to her friend, it is apparent that this situation has changed. It is not that Wang is dominant so much as she is in a quite different emotional and theatrical sphere to the other woman. She is in an entirely different play.

Now, one is reminded of Voci's point (2004: 65ff.) that the underlying logic of a binary conversation between correct thinking and dissident thinking is mutually enforced, but when it is exceeded or ignored it is truly challenging to the mainstream. Audiences who are familiar with Leung's performances in *Happy Together* (which the Mainland audience would be only in small numbers) but also as 'Broken Sword' (in *Hero*) and *Infernal Affairs* 1–3 (2002–3), and as a number of leading men in Hong Kong films over two decades, would have been likely to read the actor as a sexually attractive man as well as a romantic or moral (*yingxiong*) lead. Audiences would thus, perhaps, have anticipated the revelation of his humanity or his inner goodness (which the character in any case denies) (Zheng, 2010), but not the nudity, and for Mainlanders in particular, not the shock of refusal of the classical tropes of the collaborator. This is perhaps one of the unexplained 'shocks' that lay behind the overall shock that an unnamed senior official reportedly felt on seeing the film (reported in the *Nanfang*

Zhoumo [Southern Daily], 10 March 2008). Leung's portrayal of a key type in mainland Chinese cinema as not merely ruthless, but also vulnerable, and – I think this is crucial to negative reactions – sexually more potent than any other man in the film, represents a profound shift in characterization.

Indeed, the sexual potency of Mr Yee could be taken as a direct insult to the cinematic heritage of masculinity in the 1950s–1980s. The male hero in post-1949 film was strong, tall, ruggedly handsome, and his sexuality was used as a transmitter of passionate attachment to the Party and the nation. The figure of the collaborator is not bound in the same way by cinematic convention to be non-sexually active in a conventional sense, even though his racialized (sub-Japanese) typology assumes that he will be, and it is necessary to the functioning of the plot that he does not prove to be a credible sexual competitor for the woman's affections. That said, he does have a crucial role as the enemy within, and as the body that must be rejected as physically unsound, and ultimately expended. But beyond the confines of a classic revolutionary film, he is a loose cannon. He has no national duty to perform at the expense of personal passionate fulfilment, as he is already outside the purview of nation and morality.

Wang's performance as Mrs Mak exceeds her brief, mainly because her emotionally unimaginative peers do not understand what the brief truly entails, and, as I have suggested, they are in a different 'play' altogether. They move in a formulaic world of political cause and effect. She moves in the domain of physical affect, memory, and occupies an anti-historical erotic space. Ang Lee thus prepares the ground for the film's critics, who slipped all too easily into the position of Wang's co-conspirators, and the older cell leader, Lao Wu, in particular. The actress Tang Wei commented in an interview about her parents' reaction to the film that her father could not at first say anything at all, but then commented, presumably to reassure himself, that she 'was not like Wang Jiazhi' (Li, 2008). As an actress there is of course no reason why she should be anything 'like' her character, but her father's response might have been taken as a warning that the official position on the film would be to find ways of excising its refusal to engage only with the political dyadic, and replace an engagement with complexity in the text with a judgement on Tang Wei herself as the embodiment of the treacherous and sensual Wang Jiazhi.

The Moral Imperative

If the greatest insult within the film is to the masculinity of Party heroes, why is it that Tang Wei suffered the most opprobrium in the backlash against *Lust, Caution* over 2007–8? In one sense, it may be understood as the 'attack-and-divert' mechanism of misogyny. Attacking the young female averts attention from the embarrassed, confused and unidentified male censor. There have been a number of popular theories circulating on this question, many of them articulated in Mainland blogs and

online gossip. The film was released in mid 2007 to some acclaim, but the Mainland release was immediately controversial as the cuts rendered the film emotionally simplistic and pornographic. Some audiences complained that this made the film unintelligible, with one group of older viewers in Chengdu remarking that they felt infantilized by the censorship. The purpose of the cuts was, of course, to render the relationships in the film unintelligible. Without the sex scenes, the narrative reverts to a formulaic story of female failure. With the scenes included, the audience is privy to the physically and emotionally complex negotiations between men and women, and men and their own violence.

The year 2007 had also seen the release of a lesser film, which had no success on the international circuit, but did get a short run in Hong Kong. *Lost in Beijing* (Pingguo, Li Yu, 2007) also featured explicit sex scenes, although not as intimately shot nor as precisely framed as those between Tang Wei and Tony Leung, nor as powerfully affective or transgressive within the storyline. The sex takes the narrative forward in a functional, rather than an especially emotional, way. In the first scene, a stand-up quickie in the shower, the protagonist himself remarks that he got the idea from porn. The second is a rape by an older man (played by the other 'Tony Leung' Ka-fai, also a Hong Kong star) on a young woman (Pingguo), the violence of which is undermined by the farcical happenstance of the husband viewing the incident through the window (he is a window-cleaner). The other notable scene is between Elaine Jin, playing the older wife of the male protagonist, and the young window cleaner, where sex is quick and depressing. None of these scenes was cut, although a sub-plot, involving a young migrant woman turned prostitute, was severely shortened before release.

Then, in February 2008, the Edison Chan Hong Kong sex scandal broke across the media. Indecent photographs of Chan, a Canadian-Hong Kong celebrity, in compromising positions with a string of Hong Kong singers and starlets, were released on sites based in Hong Kong, and rapidly also on the Mainland. Apparently he had taken these photographs, stored them on a computer (the now infamous pink laptop) and carelessly given it to a computer company to mend. A technician at the company had found the images, recognized the stars and downloaded them. Eventually they were posted online. The female stars involved were badly affected by the fall-out in a number of ways. Promotional contracts were cancelled, relationships with current partners suffered and fans were furious. Gillian Chung, one half of the girl band Twins, was particularly censured because of the appeal she held for teenage and pre-pubescent girls, and for previous pledges of pre-marital chastity. She swiftly apologized to her fans, and set to work on retrieving her career.⁴

On the Mainland, however, the aftershocks of the Chan affair were complicated by a sense that the authorities did not have complete control of a highly mediated situation that was unravelling in Hong Kong, but which had implications for the Mainland. The Beijing Association of

Online Media took action, by formally censuring the Mainland search engine baidu.com for making the images too readily available, while Shenzhen ‘entrepreneurs’, who made CDs of the material for mass distribution, were arrested. Then, and this is where gossip and blogs come in first, on or around 8 March, ‘someone’ rang ‘someone’ to tell them to make sure that Tang Wei’s promotional appearances for *Lust, Caution* were stopped, that her work on other commercial ventures (Oil of Ulay and so on) was also curtailed and that her application for a visa to attend the Hong Kong film awards in March was refused. No responsibility for the action was taken for several days and then the only reasons given were that, while this was not an attack on Tang Wei but on ‘issues’, nonetheless her image and the work she had done in *Lust, Caution* would lead young people astray. The statement on 10 March by SARFT (State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television) that:

Tang Wei is a good actress, but young people look at her and think, if I strip I’ll get famous. So this attitude does not have a good influence on the young. (Zhang Haitao, 2008)

Bloggers were more expansive on both sides of the debate, and Zhu Dake (2008), a professor at Tongji University, openly suggested that Tang Wei was chosen for scapegoating because she was indeed a perfect scapegoat: weak, and unlikely to have any comeback through her connections.

The full reasons for the moral censure of Tang Wei will, doubtless, have personal as well as structural aspects. Politics are as personally inflected in the PRC as in any other society. No-one is saying who the ‘someone’ was who made the call to SARFT. But in retrospect, the way in which a Taiwanese director makes free with the affect of China’s revolutionary history and its flirtation with Confucian morality in the present is provocative, and is actually played out in the film itself! When Wang Jiazhi describes in detail to Old Wu (Lao Wu) what sex with Yee entails for her body, mind and spirit, she articulates the ‘memory of touch’, the effect on her feelings and body, and the uncertainty that this provokes for her. He cannot take it, and leaves the room, exclaiming, ‘That’s enough!’, just as someone lifted the phone and said to someone else about Tang Wei – and spluttering his fury also at all those irritatingly naked Hong Kong starlets – ‘That’s enough!’ This anonymous but rather powerful caller could not assimilate Tang Wei’s naked and misbehaving body to a preferred regime of national sensibility, but he could blame her for his own masculine instability (‘That’s enough!’), belittle her professional intentions, and shut her down.

Protracted haptic sequences in film produce affect, comparable to the visual conjectures that Voci (2004) notes in documentary, and the musical ‘hauntings’ of Taiwanese singing voices, and especially those of Taiwanese men, which Shen Shiao-ying has admired in Hong Kong films of the 1990s. In *Lust, Caution*, explicit sex, entanglement with a reviled national

traitor, and the insistence throughout the film on remembering through the erotic rather than through political logic, approximates Shen's quest for 'a Chineseness, a Hong Kongness that might elude staunch history' (2005: 128). Following Deleuze, Voci and Shen are reacting to meanings between the 'visible and the verbal' (Marks, 2000: 129). But, as Marks points out, sometimes 'meaning escapes the audiovisual registers altogether' (2000: 129).

I have already pointed to the film's apparent attack on a version of masculinity that has framed the perception of the heroic male in contemporary China. At the same time one should again emphasize confusions around issues of female sexuality and the pursuit of rights (including the right to sensual expression), pornography and exploitation, virtue and self-defence. Elaine Jeffreys (2006) has written of recent media stories (brought to public attention through the Women's Federation) of Tang Shengli. Tang was a 24-year-old rural woman who was tricked into prostitution but immediately escaped by jumping out of a sixth storey window. She sustained first-degree spinal injuries, but survived. Tang thus joined a tradition of female resistance through suicide. Virtuous suicide has been linked to Confucian wifely virtue as well as to a 'way out' from rape and enforced marriage for at least five centuries. The profile of these stories and others like them demonstrates that public opinion in China is very interested in the question of a woman's rights over her body, although this can sometimes become enmeshed in an argument for social conservatism and in the worst scenario of a woman's 'right to suicide' rather than endure rape and prostitution. This contingency is also relevant to the Tang Wei case, where a government which has openly espoused a Confucian ethic would have been acutely aware that Tang Wei's role as an actress who chose to work in the nude, when playing an actress who has been typed into a form of patriotic prostitution, brings the public argument about what is or is not virtuous onto even more nebulous grounds.

For the authorities, then, it was ultimately decided that, at some level, Tang Wei *was* 'like Wang Jiazhi'. The character is trained to be a political prostitute on the basis of her looks and her skill as an actress, and the actress is trading on her skill and her looks, and according to SARFT, her nakedness on film, to sell products and a 'pornographic' version of femininity to young Chinese women.

The Contingencies of Beijing 2008

The Tang Wei incident occurred in 2008, no ordinary year. The banning decision was taken on 8 March and the reasons were given on 10 March, the same day as violence erupted, or was reported, all over Tibet and in many parts of neighbouring provinces. There has already been much discussion in relation to the overwhelming catalogue of rebellion, nationalism, natural disaster and international hyper-branding that took place over the first eight months of 2008. The connections between the various happenings

were at once random and inevitable. The Tibetan riots led to the pro-Tibet and arguably anti-Chinese Torch demonstrations on the Torch relay route, which in turn provoked anti-Western counter-demonstrations from Chinese nationals. The depth of misunderstanding and incommensurability around key political agendas, and the way in which they were reported through respective national media organs, was clearly an issue that involved widespread popular anger as well as state-level fury in China and among the diaspora. The online anti-CNN campaign, the ‘Down with *some* Western media’ placards around the world, and the protests against the French supermarket chain ‘Carrefour’ in Chinese cities were evidence of a tight match between state and people in matters of national pride, territorial assumptions and understanding of history.

And, yes, despite the visa problems and the empty streets, the 2008 Games were stunningly successful media events, impressing a vast audience worldwide with Chinese choreography, organization, command of history and style. In particular, the opening and closing ceremonies reminded everyone of the director Zhang Yimou’s ability to create spectacular visions of China, which support and reiterate internal and external notions of Chinese exceptionalism, thus infuriating his domestic critics and playing straight into the narrative that both China and its others in the West are happy to embrace. Oddly, the very logic of exceptionalism that separated Chinese and Western opinion during the Torch relay brought them back together to some degree in the response to the ceremony. In Zhang’s historical shorthand, the Confucian harmony of the pre-Manchu, pre-modernity era led without a blush to a future exemplified by astronauts and high-tech running shoes. The years of China’s struggle over colonial and alternative modernities, including Shanghai’s famous decades of cosmopolitan decadence and a half-century of Maoist-Marxist-Leninism, were sidestepped. The contradictions between the masses and the elites of both current and past class organizations in China were not explored, most strikingly as the cast of entertainers, mostly trained through the People’s Liberation Army, showed their skills not only as exemplary drummers but as stately Confucian scholars in an almost courtly dance of scrolls and sleeves as they rolled and unrolled the brilliant invention of paper. This sequence, arguably one of the most aesthetically beautiful of the whole event, underpinned the overall message of Confucian harmonious society, which as Bell (2009) and others have suggested is a shared dialogue between government strategists and Chinese intellectuals. The ceremonies thus supported a rhetorical history of China, in which connections were drawn visually and textually between the cultural heritage of the elites, the massed bodies of the people and the political wisdom of the party-state. And as film scholars would note, Zhang Yimou’s directorial history made all this possible, as his work deeply relevant to the creation of a spectacular vernacular of Chinese culture, which appeals to Western and Chinese audiences as a genre of cinematic escapism but also on the basis of its grand entirety of vision (Zheng, 2010). The origin – or at least *commissioning* – of this vision can be traced

to *Hero*, either as a reiteration of the nationalism of the indivisible Chinese state and nation or, as in Zhang Xialing's more imaginative assessment of *Hero*: 'Zhang Yimou successfully stages a struggle among narratives between the "almighty" and the "nameless" who refuse to be silent, thus putting the control of the narrative into question' (2008: 126).

But, in truth, the narrative of the Games was never in question, and the sporting success of China, with the highest gold medal tally (51 to the USA's 38) and an overall total of 100 medals, brought home the economics of sport as soft power on the world stage. In the midst of all this heroism, Tang Wei was summarily despatched to the shadows, having been required to shoulder the blame for sexual shenanigans in the out-of-reach Hong Kong film and music industry, for webcam strippers and exhibitionists, and for the fear of sexual power, which undoes old men, whose legitimacy is always already in question.

I have suggested that an event, such as the Tang Wei incident, allows a number of interpretations in relation to cause and effect, and that, as in all complex systems, those causes may be multiple and minutely related to one another. As it was a screen event, film has to be somewhere near the centre of the discussion. Tang Wei was censured for appearing in a cinematic event, which ignored the inviolate status of historical record, and instead prioritized the ontology and disorder of passionate encounters. In filmic terms, the image on the screen was both unrecognizable within the scopic regime of Mainland cinema, and yet also profoundly troubling to that regime, as it opened up a disturbing, anti-historical space, in which truth was haptic and not nationalistic, unlike the received notions of the past, and immune to the muscularity of present ambitions for China. Returning to the opening thoughts on Lacan's notion of oneness and the elusive nature of happiness, Tang Wei's entangled body gave a *likeness* to missed opportunities, to the 'now' of experience and the 'what has not been' of identity (Lebeau, 2009: 39). She colluded in a non-textual and, thus, in Chinese terms, an illegible account of national politics, which both inflamed the censors and underlined the real uncertainty at the heart of contemporary Chinese masculinity and the state.

Notes

1. The film is voiced in Mandarin, Cantonese and Shanghai'ese, and set in both Hong Kong and Shanghai. Names are variously written in Cantonese and Mandarin oriented transcriptions. Thus, the name of the main character, Wong or Wang, is dependent on who is using the name in the context of the argument.
2. Thanks to two of the anonymous readers of the article, who reminded me of the relevance of this case.
3. In 2008–9, the film *Nanjing, Nanjing* (Li Zhuan, China, 2008) ignited a powerful and often vicious online debate about the Nanjing massacre and its legitimate representation onscreen. In particular, audiences criticized the film-maker's

attempt to understand the situation from a Japanese perspective, and they also used the opportunity to castigate the Japanese. Commentary and postings on YouTube were eventually vetoed to stem the hate-speak that emerged with a truly disturbing virulence, even on a predominantly English language site (see YouTube *Nanjing, Nanjing* ‘trailer’, URL [consulted June 2009]: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSbw4jirbz4>).

4. Where media references are not given this refers to conversation (gossip) in China between the author and friends, who would prefer not to be identified, in Shanghai and Guangzhou, March 2008.

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