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## Contention of Lust, Caution: Sexuality, Visuality and Female Subjectivity

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# Contention of *Lust, Caution*:

Sexuality, Visuality, and Female Subjectivity

## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the ways in which Ang Lee provides new insights into subject formation in his film *Lust, Caution* (*Se Jie*, 2007). In the paradigm of structuralism, the subject is defined, as well as confined, by the symbolic order or the dominant ideology. The puzzle therefore rests on how to explain the subject's negotiation with its normative identity, its denial thereof, or even its subversion of said identity. In a close reading of the female protagonist's subject formation in *Lust, Caution*, this paper acknowledges the power of ideology, specifically the power of its interpellative operation, in constructing a subject. However, this paper takes a greater interest in examining the junctures wherein the female subject ignores or rejects the interpellation of the dominant ideology. It focuses on the dialectics suggested in the title of the film, namely, the interplay between "lust" (*se*, or 色) and "caution" (*jie*, or 戒). Drawing attention to the double-layered meanings of "*se*" (i.e., sexuality and viscosity), this paper analyzes how Ang Lee uses "*se*" to confront "*jie*" (i.e., caution). This paper argues that "*se*" to which the female protagonist surrenders herself enables the subject to achieve an alternate subjectivity that contests the notion of "*jie*" and the symbolic order. In the same vein, Filmmaking/movie-going, seen by Ang Lee as another form of "*se*," becomes his way of

combating extant singular, absolute perceptions towards the human being, culture, and society. Lee's filmmaking, a form that involves both sexuality and visuality, is his way of re-examining and re-defining the symbolic discipline. Thus, "lust" not only contends with "caution," but also invokes an alternate conception of its meaning.

Since the film was first released in 2007, Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* has generated much controversy because of its steamy sex scenes. The Motion Picture Association of America classifies the film as rated NC-17 (for "some explicit sexuality") and R (for "strong sexual content and brutal violence").<sup>1</sup> In China, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television only allowed a censored version of the film to be shown, with the sexual content largely deleted.<sup>2</sup> The lead actress of the movie, Tang Wei, was even banned from the Chinese media thereafter because of graphic scenes in this film.<sup>3</sup> Ang Lee had been fully aware of both the limited audience that his film could reach with the NC-17 and R ratings and the notorious media censorship in China.<sup>4</sup> Why then did he still include such sex scenes in this film? What does "lust" in the title of the film mean, exactly? How does Ang Lee's notion of "lust" relate to his understanding of filmmaking? While *Lust, Caution* seems to follow Ang Lee's Academy Award-winning film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) in exploring repressed love and sexuality<sup>5</sup> this paper will illustrate that it sheds new light on subject formation as well as filmmaking itself.

The sweeping theoretical trends of structuralism and Marxism have led many to realize the

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<sup>1</sup> The Internet Movie Database, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0808357>> (January 26 2010). NC-17 is film rating meaning no one at the age of 17 and under is admitted, even when accompanied by an adult.

<sup>2</sup> Hong Kong screened the original version of the film. Some Chinese audience traveled to Hong Kong during the October 1st national holiday to watch the full version of the film.

<sup>3</sup> The government partially lifted the ban on Tang Wei as of early 2010. Many believe that Tang's being invited to be an honored guest at the awarding ceremony of the 13th Shanghai International Film Festival signals the final lift of her ban in mainland Chinese media. For Tang Wei's appearance in the festival was reported by the mouthpiece of Chinese official media *Xinhuanet*.

[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/photo/2010-06/21/c\\_13360491.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/photo/2010-06/21/c_13360491.htm) (21 June, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> In his recent article on *Lust, Caution*, Robert Chi reveals the irony of censorship that it, however, helps the film to achieve its aura because the film turns around to manipulate over the relationship between regulation and consumption. See Robert Chi. "Exhibitionism: *Lust Caution*" *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, vol.3, no. 2 (2009): 177-87. While Chi's discussion focuses on the distribution and circulation of the film, the present research intends to unpack the import and meaning of the censored content of the film, namely the sexual exhibition.

<sup>5</sup> Christ Berry ascribes the repression of homosexuality reflected in *Brokeback Mountain* to the Confucian family ethics which weigh duty over individual desire. He, therefore, argues that the film bears a salient Chinese mark as opposed to an entirely Hollywood melodrama that the audience commonly believes it to be at first sight. See Chris Berry. "The Chinese Side of the Mountain" *Film Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 32-37.

great extent to which the subject is defined, as well as confined, by the symbolic order or the dominant ideology. The puzzle therefore rests on how to explain the subject's negotiation with its normative identity, its denial thereof, or even its subversion of said identity, as predetermined by the dominant order. In a close reading of the female protagonist's subject formation in the film *Lust, Caution*, this paper acknowledges the power of ideology, specifically the power of its interpellative operation, in constructing a subject. However, this paper takes a greater interest in examining the junctures wherein the female subject ignores or rejects the interpellation of the dominant ideology. I focus on the dialectics suggested in the title of the film, namely, the interplay between "lust" (*se*, or 色) and "caution" (*jie*, or 戒). "*Se*" in Chinese holds double-layered meanings, one of which is "lust," as in the film title. The other implication is "visuality," as interpreted in Buddhism. As the *Heart Sutra* famously states, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form"<sup>6</sup>. Form is not other than emptiness, and emptiness is not other than form (Fox 79). "*Se*" in this case refers to material form, particularly in the external sense (i.e., as objects of the eye). The meaning of "*jie*" is well conveyed by the word "caution," as in the title. In a broader sense, "*jie*" relates to the symbolic order maintained through disciplines and regulations. This paper analyzes the ways in which "*se*" (i.e., sexuality and visuality) faces off with "*jie*" (i.e., caution). This paper argues that "*se*" to which the female protagonist surrenders herself enables the subject to achieve an alternate subjectivity that contests the notion of "*jie*" and the symbolic order. In the same vein, filmmaking/movie-going, seen by Ang Lee as another form of "*se*," becomes his way of combating extant singular, absolute perceptions towards the human being, culture, and society.

## LUST, CAUTION: A STORY OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY

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<sup>6</sup> Leo Ou-fan Lee provides a comparison between the original story and the film adaption in his discussion of the divergent receptions of *Lust, Caution* among American and pan-Chinese audiences. He points out that in the film Ang Lee adds an emotional and romantic touch to Eileen Zhang's story that is originally restrained with sentimental expressions. See Leo Ou-fan Lee. "Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* and its Reception" *Boundary 2*, vol. 35, no. 3 (fall, 2008): 223-238.

Adapted from the short story of Chinese writer Eileen Chang (1920–1995), *Lust, Caution* artfully tells a story of a woman's devastated wrestling with her identity and subjectivity. The film is set in Shanghai and Hong Kong during the Sino-Japanese war in World War II. It opens with a sequence in Shanghai in 1942.<sup>7</sup> Mrs. Mak (Tang Wei), a woman of sophistication and means, walks into a café, places a call, and then simply sits down at a table. Peering through the window, she remembers how her story had begun several years earlier, in 1938. Back then, she had not yet been Mrs. Mak but had instead been the shy and reticent Wong Chia Chi. With WWII in progress, Wong had been left behind by her father, who had escaped to England. As a freshman in Hong Kong University, she had been invited by Kuang Yu Min (Wong Leehom) to join a drama society in support of patriotism, and had soon become the female lead the theater troupe. In her debut, Wong's moving cry for the spirit of nationalism had struck a chord in the audience. Wong's successful performance had seemed to help her shake off the identity as a forsaken daughter and turn into a fulfilled performer. However, her new identity had soon become complicated. One day, Kuang Yu Min had convened a meeting of the core members of the drama society to carry out a radical plan to assassinate a top Japanese collaborator, Mr. Yee (Tony Leung Chiu Wai), by infiltrating his domestic life. Prodded by her fellow student patriots, Wong Chia Chi had participated in the plan and had become Mrs. Mak, who had been tasked with gaining the trust of Mr. Yee by befriending his wife (Joan Chen), towards the ultimate purpose of drawing the man into an affair. Wong had then transformed herself to a young resistant in disguise. However, an unexpected fatal twist—they killed Tsao who worked for Mr. Yee by accident—had spurred her to flee and abandon her mission. Wong Chia Chi had been forced to leave Hong Kong and settle in Shanghai.

Three years later, much to Wong's surprise, Kuang re-enters her life. Now a member of an organized resistance group, he again enlists her aid, urging her to once more become Mrs. Mak and to revive the plot to kill Mr. Yee. As the head of the collaborationist secret service, Mr. Yee

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<sup>7</sup> In 1942, Shanghai was under Japanese occupation and was ruled by the puppet regime (1940–45) chaired Wong Jingwei who was a former member of the Chinese Nationalist Party and later turned into the top collaborator with Japan.

has become a vital part of Wong Jingwei's puppet government. Wong Chia Chi had transformed herself once again to Mrs. Mak-cum-resistant. As Wong reprises her earlier role and ingratiates herself ever closer to Mr. Yee, she finds herself falling in love with him. Eventually, following her feelings, Wong Chia Chi betrays her colleagues at the very moment when the assassination is about to take place. By doing so, Wong turns her back on the revolutionary ideals and her identity as a spy for the resistance. As a result, the assassination plan fails. With her real identity exposed, Wong Chia Chi is cast back to her colleagues by Mr. Yee, and is executed at a quarry. While her colleagues die as revolutionary martyrs, Wong dies of the revelation of her newly acquired subjectivity, and of being faithful to her feelings. Thus, the film outlines how Wang Jiazhi gains her identities, as well as the changes in her self-perception over these identities.

## WONG CHIA CHI: SPEAKING/SPOKEN SUBJECT

Wong Chia Chi is essentially a reticent/muted girl. In the face of China's turmoil of war, Wong's father took her younger brother fleeing to England. She alone is left behind. Being abandoned by his father, Wong however does not possess the language to complain. Brought up in a Chinese patriarchal society, Wong has been imbued with the moralities and ethics that highlight the inferiority of women in a typical, traditional Chinese family. A set of patriarchic language muzzles Wong as she lacks both words and legitimacy to express her disappointment. Even when she learns that her father has remarried in England, she congratulates him through a letter, despite her realization that she has been completely excluded from her family. Is Wong Chia Chi now a subject yet? According to Jacques Lacan, the subject is a subject only by virtue of his/her subjection to the field of the Other or the symbolic order represented by language, law, institutions, ideology, and so forth.<sup>8</sup> The predicament of Wong Chia Chi lies in that, regardless of her willingness to succumb, she is already exiled by her father. From the outset, she is denied of the right to be part of the basic unit of the symbolic order, the family. Being a familial outcast, Wong Chia Chi is yet to claim a subject position in the society.

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<sup>8</sup> Lacan says, "The subject is a subject only by virtue of his subjection to the field of the Other." See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar: Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-55*. Trans. Sylvana Tomaselli. (New York: Norton; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 188

Wong Chia Chi is not only hampered from articulating his/her feelings, but functions as the device through which the symbolic speaks. Wong joins the drama society and makes her debut playing the sister of a soldier who died in the anti-Japanese war. At the end of the play, she cries, "For our country, for my dead brother, for our people, and for generations to come, China will not fall!" Wong Chia Chi's powerful call resonates with the audience. As moving as they are, the authorship of her words is ambiguous. Are they simply lines in the play? Is this really her voice? This paper suggests that the true speaker of these lines is Kuang Yu Min, the organizer of the drama society. Just like the plot in the play, Kuang's brother had died fighting the Japanese. In response, Kuang had devoted himself to safeguarding the nation. Forbidden by his parents from joining the army to fight on the front line, theatric performance becomes his means of participating in the war and of awakening the patriotism of the people. Kuang Yu Min is virtually the embodiment of patriotism in the film. The role of Wong Chia Chi in the play voices Kuang's affective desire and political ambition.

At the fundamental level, Wong speaks for China's predominant discourse of patriotism at large. Her mouth and tongue function as the device to instigate the nationalistic passion of Chinese people. As the Saussure linguistic theory proclaims: the truth is we do not speak a language; rather, language speaks (through) us. In this sense, the initial identification of Wong Chia Chi with patriotism is essentially a speaking effect. In the repetitive practice of being spoken by the patriotic utterances, Wong Chia Chi is made to believe a certain truth about herself: an impassioned resistant against the Japanese aggression, as if this sense of patriotism grows out of the bottom of her heart. The act of speaking constructs the self-reality of Wong Chia Chi as a subject. Ironically, the severed relationship between Wong Chia Chi and her biological father is replaced by her connection to the nation, the symbolic father of Chinese people, through her acquired patriotism. Wong Chia Chi now becomes the good daughter of the nation. Her lack of fatherly love is compensated by her intimate relationship with the nation, which is consummated in the performance. The stage role redeems Wong from social exclusion under the condition that she subjugates herself to the language of the symbolic order.



## AN INTERPELLATIVE SUBJECT IN MASQUERADE

Wong Chia Chi's final resolution to take part in the summer assassination plan articulates the power of ideological interpellation. Wong herself seems to be content of being a stage actress especially given that she finds a remedy for her wound of being abandoned in her stage role as the daughter of the nation. Wong's move toward an off-stage resistant is ideologically invoked. This fact is manifested in the salient scene of interpellation in *Lust, Caution*. While lingering among the *mise-en-scenes* on the stage and mesmerizing herself with an ideal self fulfilled in her theatrical performance, Wong Chia Chi is all of a sudden called over by Kuang Yu Min from somewhere above (i.e., the second floor of the auditorium). Upon Kuang Yu Min's hailing of her name "Wong Chia Chi," she raises her head responsively. This moment is a typical scenario of classical interpellation. Althusser stresses the condition that individuals are *always already* subjects. He calls attention to the particular moment of *interpellation* and the subjection of the individuals to the ideology: when an ordinary policeman hails "Hey, you there," the person spoken to must turn to respond accordingly. Althusser writes,

By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was "really" addressed to him, and that "it was *really him* who was hailed" (and not someone else). (1504)

Ideological power inducts an individual into its system at the very minute the individual automatically responds to the code inscribed upon him/her. And the subject succumbs to the ideology precisely at this moment. Symbolically, Kuang Yu Min represents the authoritative police, and Wong Chia Chi is in the place of the coded individual. As she turns around, Wong Chia Chi is compelled to position herself in the ideological system. Despite her initial hesitation, Wong Chia Chi eventually agrees to assume the role of a patriotic activist within the dominant discourse of anti-Japanese invasion. It is in the sense of being called upon and responding to it that Wong Chia Chi's identification with the resistance is a result of the interpellation mechanism and is determined by the predominant ideology of the day. (Of course, this predominant ideology is a retrospective assumption based on the present ideology in

China.)

In this way, Wong Chia Chi carries her stage persona of a patriotic revolutionary to the real life. For her, the distinctions between the stage and the real world, and between the theatrical role and her true identity gradually diminish and blur so much so that her life itself becomes a performance. A devoted actress, Wong Chia Chi easily takes on the character of Mrs. Mak, whereas her team players appear discomposed and nervous. It is noteworthy that she wears makeup whenever she appears in the role she performs, be it on or off the stage. The heavily painted face transforms Wong Chia Chi into a sheer masquerade. Žižek understands femininity as masquerade in the sense that women take on a mask and conceals what is behind. Žižek's notion of femininity points to the ontological lack of women who does not have a phallus. Masquerade covers up the lack (161). In a similar vein, Wong Chia Chi's painted face belies herself being a lack (of paternal love, family, and legitimate position in the society). Beneath her spectacular veil is a void. This emptiness becomes evident when she is separated from the persona she plays. During the interval between their shocking bloodshed in Hong Kong and her being recruited to the team again years later, Wong Chia Chi stays in seclusion in Shanghai, living like a walking corpse as reflected in her pale and lifeless face. She becomes a subject only in performance and masquerade.

However, it would be reductive to conclude that Wong Chia Chi's delusion in masquerade simply grows out of her desire of seeking self-fulfillment. I contend that it rather projects the fantasies of the nationalistic, patriarchal society of China. It is true that Wong plunges into the world of Mrs. Mak in the most complete manner as soon as she resumes the assassination scheme in Shanghai. But we should not ignore the forcible power of the ideology in regulating its subject. It is Kuang Yu Min who *invents* Wong Chia Chi's theatric role and initiates the plan in the first place. The Nationalist senior officer Old Wu *dictates* her to become Mrs. Mak heart and soul so as to keep her espionage from being exposed. Demanding Wong to mechanically memorize piles of data and details of Mrs. Mak, a nonexistent being, Old Wu literally programs Wong Chia Chi into another person. Rather than take the initiative in obtaining this identity, Wong is imposed to put it on. Wong Chia Chi's dual identity invites special attention. Acting as

Mrs. Mak, Wong is a typically femme fatale who seduces and destructs. In Chinese tradition, dangerous beauty (“Hongyan huoshui”) has long been condemned as the culprit for men’s degeneration and a national downfall. Ironically, femme fatale at the same time is the object of men’s desire in a patriarchal society. The famous Qing novelist Pu Songling (1640-1715) in his works *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (Liaozhai zhiyi) has made it crystal clear how much men hunger for the beauty (of ghosts and spirits) in spite of the destructive threat hidden behind their alluring veil.<sup>9</sup> Wong Chia Chi’s attractive appearance reflects exactly men’s desire in China’s patriarchal society. However, by bestowing her with the role of a patriotic resistant, the peril that Wong Chia Chi poses on the nation is counterbalanced. With the spirit of nationalism set at the core of her, Wong Chia Chi becomes a desirable subject of the nation as well. Straddling the two identities (femme fatale and patriotic resistant), Wong Chia Chi mirrors the fantasies of the patriarchal Chinese society and gratifies its desire both erotically and politically. In this sense, Wong Chia Chi in essence is the conscious/unconscious creation of the dominant ideology of China.

Nonetheless, the two identities do not stay at ease within Wong Chia Chi. She has to struggle continuously with her two identities: the mistress of a traitor and a revolutionary spy. The paradox lies in that the more devoted Wong becomes to her role, the more detached she becomes from her revolutionary identity. These two roles are not congruent; rather, they are contradictory. David Lloyd, in his discussion on the potentiality of the subject, writes,

Philosophically, the concrete emergence of this purely formal subject is seen as always entailing the engagement of certain potentialities at the expense of the realization of others... This again entails the abandonment or supersession of other potential social forms.  
(217)

Lloyd reveals that the engagement of the subject in one role tends to deny the possibility of realizing other roles. Wong Chia Chi’s fatal betrayal of her colleagues in the resistance group declares her unreserved commitment to the role of Mrs. Mak. The puzzle emerges immediately:

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<sup>9</sup> See Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (Liaozhai Zhiyi). Trans. Herbert A. Giles. (New York: Dover Publications, 1969)

What cracks and fissures enable the subject to negotiate with and even deviate from the ideological stipulation? In what condition does the subject manage to sneak in an alternate subjectivity? If “caution” (“*jie*”) represents discipline, language, and ideology in a symbolic order, as I will show in the following sections, then sexual drive and visual forms denoted by “lust” (“*se*”) open up the possibility for the subject to evade or subvert his/her prescribed identity.

## SEXUALITY: A BODILY TURN

Ang Lee’s camera graphically captures Wong Chia Chi’s sexual encounters with Mr. Yee, which, as I will show, delineate Wong’s turn from an ideological and theatrical subject to a subject informed through her body. Wong’s first sexual encounter with Mr. Yi strikes the audience with its thrilling sadomasochistic violence, in which Mr. Yee appears to be a torturer, whipping, beating, and making her bleed. A collaborator in the puppet government, Mr. Yee acts to be particularly brutal. However, his sadistic treatment to the arrested resistants as well as Wong Chia Chi reflects not merely his cruelty but more importantly his inner fear. As Japan had begun to show signs of being defeated in 1942, Mr. Yee got increasingly uncertain of his future. Under the tough surface lies his ineluctable vulnerability. He takes advantage of sadism to reclaim his control over the situation. In this relationship, Wong Chia Chi is physically tortured. The question is: can we understand Wong Chia Chi simply as a victim afflicted by demonic Mr. Yee? I propose to read it in light of Žižek’s notion of masochism. In his discussion of the masochistic theater of courtly love, Žižek argues that in masochism it is the victim who “initiates the contract with the master” and “authorizes” the master to afflict pain on him/her (1994, 92-93). In it, Žižek reveals the theatrical feature of masochism. The knight, like a playwright, allows the ordeals to happen on him in his pursuit of the woman. Similarly, there is a hidden deal in Wong Chia Chi’s mind that she will need to suffer all sorts of ordeals to accomplish the assassination plan. Put it simply, experiencing pain is part of the plot she knows she will perform. Wong Chia Chi’s sense of being in control is best registered on her facial expression following the sexual intercourse. Lying on the bed after a spell of torment, Wong Chia Chi surprisingly smiles as if she has triumphed in a fierce battle. Wong’s gratification

comes from the fact that she finally achieves the goal of sexually captivating Mr. Yee. Wong Chia Chi's masochistic psyche discloses precisely her consciousness of the theatrical role she is playing as a secret resistant. She is therefore still captive to the ideological dictation at this point.

Nonetheless, sexuality exerts subtle influence on her over time. This influence looms large in the scene in which Wong Chia Chi openly confronts Old Wu. Along with her physical affinity to Mr. Yee, Wong Chia Chi also becomes emotionally attached to him. She confesses to Wu, "He (Mr. Yee) not only gets inside me, he worms his way into my mind like a snake, deeper and all the way in. I take him in like a slave." Wong's attentiveness to her body is ruthlessly dismissed by Old Wu. His wife and children being murdered by Mr. Yee, Old Wu nonetheless is able to put his personal enmity with Mr. Yee aside and be in contact with him for practical reasons. In his words, "for an agent, there is only one thing—loyalty, to the party, to our leader, to our country." Wu's rhetoric of loyalty and personal sacrifice is also reflected in how Kuang Yu Min deals with his desire for Wong Chia Chi. Despite being attracted to Wong Chia Chi and knowing her affection for him as well, Kuang represses his feeling in the interest of his grand political ideal. As such, he appears impotent while beholding one of his cohorts deprive Wong's virginity and Mr. Yee penetrate Wong's body and mind. As Kuang offers himself to the party's cause, his libido has been largely sublimated into the revolutionary zeal. Old Wu and Kuang both exemplify the idea of overcoming personal desire by virtue of strong ideological belief. Based on such a Cartesian demarcation of the mind and body, Old Wu bids Wong to subject body to mind so as to resist the sensational attraction. However, Wong Chia Chi finds herself incapable of applying this arbitrary body-mind dichotomy. In fear of losing her self-control and being enchanted by Mr. Yee instead, Wong Chia Chi anxiously begs Kuang and Old Wu to rush the plan before her resistivity against Mr. Yee collapses. But serving merely as a tool for the revolutionary agenda, Wong's physical and psychological struggle is consigned out of consideration. For strategic reasons, the assassination is postponed. The irresistible bodily pleasure and pain lead Wong toward a different direction.

While awaiting further orders, Wong completes a bodily turn surrendering herself to the

physical sensations derived from her sex with Mr. Yee. If in their first sexual encounter there remains distance and clear distinction between Mr. Yee and Wong (one observing and the other being observed; one being sadistic and the other masochistic), the sexual scenes that follow foreground a profound entanglement of these two persons from opposite political camps. The audiences all over the world are impressed by Ang Lee's presentation of their intense sexual intercourses. Their bodies tangle together and tremble; their facial muscles contract, all of which indicate an enjoyment of intensity and pain. I suggest that the bodily pains aid to pacify the sense of identity crisis shared by both of them. Similar to Wong Chia Chi who is caught into the incompatible roles, Mr. Yee is also trapped into his positions of being a Chinese and a running dog of Japan. At the point when the peaceful coexistence of their two identities can no longer hold, physical pains become auxiliary to consolidate their beings as such. Their acrobatic postures also visually inform the will to challenge the (physical) limits. Jacques Lacan terms such pleasure derived from pain as *jouissance*. For Lacan, *jouissance* articulates a person's desire to transcend the realm of the symbolic; *jouissance* is a feeling of being on the edge.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the constitutional boundaries that separate them are smashed down. The theatrical role merges into the true self; the good is not conveniently distinguishable from the evil anymore. The political commitment is rendered irrelevant in their sexual relationship in which they enjoy the liberty to invest as much as they wish to the other, as indicated in their firmly entangled bodies. In other words, sexuality dismisses the political confinement and contributes to transcendence beyond the symbolic order. Wong Chia Chi's "painful" pleasure of *jouissance* and her indulgence in her physical sensations empower her to transform from a patriotic subject at the mercy of the dominant ideology to someone who follows her corporeal senses. Of course, this transcendence is not without consequence. During their sexual encounters, one element does not escape our attention—a gun, always in the view. A symbol of the phallic power, the gun makes it clear of omnipresence of the surveillance of the symbolic order. Wong and Yee's sexuality is a dangerous game at the risk of their lives.

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<sup>10</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-60*. Trans. Dennis Porter. (London: Routledge, 1992).

## VISUALITY: LIBERATION OF THE SUBJECT

In an interview, Ang Lee remarks,

Lust [in Chinese, Se/色] not only refers to sexuality but also visuality. Any substance with form and color, for example the films that we go to watch in our daily life, is also a type of lust/se. (Zhong 102)

Built upon Ang Lee's explanation of "lust," this paper further argues that films/moviegoing also create space for alternate subjectivity. In the film, Wong Chia Chi frequents movie theatres. How does moviegoing relate to her sense of subjectivity? In her polemic article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey identifies the voyeuristic pleasure in watching a movie. Based on her research on male spectatorship, Mulvey concludes that the audience follows the film apparatus to objectify the women characters (6-18). One is left to wonder: What about the female spectator? Do women simply appropriate men's fetishistic gaze when looking at female images on the screen? Mary Ann Doane's explanation of the female spectatorship complements Mulvey's analysis. According to Doane, female spectators tend to identify with female characters as women are usually too attached to their bodies to cast a voyeuristic gaze (which requires certain distance) toward screen female images (176-92). This paper contends that in the mode of *identification* Wong Chia Chi finds an avenue to purge her forbidden feelings and emotions through watching these films. For Wong, going to cinema is not a social event; rather, it is a private act. Enveloped in the symbolic world, Wong cannot give in to her love and hatred, but the female characters on the screen voice what she longs for but cannot express.

In *Lust Caution*, Wong Chia Chi goes to the movie theater three times. The three film clips presented point to three male figures in Wong's life, and they help to articulate her repressed feelings toward them. While still a student in Hong Kong, Wong Chia Chi goes to watch *Intermezzo: A Love Story*. *Intermezzo* tells a story of a love affair between a married man

(Leslie Howard) and his daughter's piano tutor (Ingrid Bergman). It ends with Bergman's retreat from the forbidden love and Howard's return to his family. Howard and his wife are reconciled by their mutual love for the daughter who is injured in a car accident. This film creates a powerful response in Wong Chia Chi. She cannot hold back her tears while watching it. Leo Ou-fan Lee suggests the fact that Wong is so touched by this particular film foreshadows her fate of falling in love with the married man Mr. Yee (Lee, Oct. 7th, 2010). Although Ang Lee might use this movie clip to prefigure Wong's future situation, it would be inefficient to read Wong's response to it as futuristic act. I argue that it is Wong's identification with both the piano teacher and the little daughter in the film that results in her emotional discharge. Resonating with Bergman's role that ends up being outside the relationship alone, Wong Chia Chi weeps for her misfortune of being excluded from the family. The daughter's role pricks Wong's heart in that Howard and his wife's tender care for their daughter forms a stark contrast with Wong's father who abandons her. While Wong pretends to be an obedient daughter to her father, this movie allows her to lament over her loss of paternal love and, most of all, of her worthless and homeless situation.

The second time that Wong Chia Chi goes to cinema takes place in Shanghai. Astounded by the ferocity of their accidental homicide of Tsao, Wong Chia Chi flees from Hong Kong to Shanghai. Divorced from her social and performing roles, Wong Chia Chi feels that she is nothing but an empty shell. She spends her scant pocket money on a ticket to watch a melodrama. On the screen, a young woman succeeds in attracting the attention of a man. As the romance is about to start, the film is abruptly interrupted by a propagandist clip made by the collaborative government. This interlude certainly reminds us of Mr. Yee, who is now an important figure in the puppet regime. Representing both the male protagonist (a handsome man) and the intrusive clip (a collaborator), Mr. Yee appears to Wong Chia Chi as both a desirable lover and a despicable traitor. The film lays bare the conflicting feelings of Wong toward Mr. Yee. She is torn by her attachment to him and the proper hatred her role ought to have toward him

The last film speaks of Wong Chia Chi's relationship with Kuang Yu Min. Wong's affection for



Kuang partially serves as the impetus that compels her to take part in the resistant group. However, Kuang's self-repression has been disappointing her acutely. Wong goes to see a Chinese film after a tense sex with Mr. Yee. According to Leo Lee, the film on the screen most likely is a melodrama entitled *Bo'ai* (indiscriminate love, 1942) (Lee, Oct. 7th, 2010). Right before entering the theater, she is stopped by Kuang. There transmits a dialogue from the screen:

Sister: Brother... whatever happens, you can't break the law.

Brother: I didn't do it.

Given that Kuang acts as Wong Chia Chi's brother in their plan, this dialogue fits their relationship. The words that the "sister" addresses to her "brother" mirror the psychological truth of Wong Chia Chi. But why does Wong ask Kuang not to "break the law"? It is important to note that *Bo'ai* was made under the constraint and surveillance of Wang Jingwei's collaboration government (Li 119-124). "The law" should be on the premise of pro-Japanese regime. Having already physically and emotionally attached to Mr. Yee at this moment, Wong Chia Chi is reluctant to execute the assassination plan. The message from the screen once again betrays Wong Chia Chi's unconscious intention of ceasing their actions. In a word, watching movies liberates Wong Chia Chi's suppressed feelings. However, clearly, the experience of watching a movie becomes worse each time due to the interruptions. The political power intervenes maliciously to keep Wong from "going astray".

Visuality foregrounded in this film is also seen from a significant, although inanimate, character of the film, the diamond. The film culminates in the jewelry shop sequence toward the end of its narrative. The value of the diamond remains a major theme throughout the film. At the very beginning, the women in the movie heatedly discuss the value of the diamond over a *mahjong* table. The spotlight given to the diamond is easily reminiscent of the movie *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in which Lorelei quantifies love through diamonds.<sup>11</sup> The women in

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<sup>11</sup> Anita Loos, *Gentlemen prefer blondes: the Illuminating Diary of a Professional Lady*. (New York, Boni & Liveright, 1925). The novel was later made into a film starring Marilyn Monroe in 1953. Howard Hawks, Dir., *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, 1953)

*Lust, Caution* also see their values through the diamonds they are given. In the pivotal scene, as Wong is given the ring mounted with the “quail egg” diamond, a reversed subject formation occurs. While Wong stares at the diamond, the diamond gazes back at her. Apparently, the diamond serves as a visual apparatus (similar to a mirror or a camera) with the power to define who Wong is, rather than Wong having the power to judge the value of the diamond. Put differently, the diamond constitutes Wong Chia Chi’s sense of self as invaluable. In this process of perverse subjectivity, Wong becomes determined to renounce the roles given by the symbolic order in which she is nothing but a rejected daughter and a tool for political agenda. The dilemma is that, as soon as she fully identifies with Mrs. Mak and asks Mr. Yee to run away, she is exposed as a spy. Her love is terminated the moment she speaks of it. Wong’s speech, beyond the ideological language, results in her death: the ultimate exclusion from the world. That she is executed at the edge of a dark abyss, which can be easily associated with one’s pursuit of unbounded *jouissance*, is no coincidence. Wong Chia Chi’s subversive action places the symbolic order at risk. After all, her death is accompanied by that of her colleagues in the resistance, indicating powerful sabotage to the dominant ideology.

## CONCLUSION

Ang Lee’s *Lust, Caution* is a rich text that examines the enigma of subjectivity via the contention of “lust” and “caution”. Although Wong Chia Chi is defined and confined by the language of the symbolic order and the ideological interpellation, she nonetheless discovers a sense of self beyond the ideology. Transcending the social bounds, Wong obtains *jouissance* from sadomasochistic sexual congress with Mr. Yee. Moreover, the experience of watching movies helps Wong to explore the realm of the unconscious and to express the ineffable. An alternate self arises from the sexual *jouissance* and film watching, both of which are forms of “lust” (“*se*”). Ang Lee’s representation of the character of Wong Chia Chi shows the possibility and plausibility of subverting one’s predetermined role and challenging the dominant ideology (“caution,” or “*Jie*”).

Sexuality and visuality also function as devices for Ang Lee’s exploration of human existence.

Specifically, he utilizes sexuality and visuality to foster a new sense of “caution” (“*jie*”). Inviting a reconsideration of “caution” has been a recurrent theme in Ang Lee’s films. His Father Trilogy (*Pushing Hands*, *Wedding Banquet*, and *Drink Eat Man and Woman*) leads viewers to ponder upon those desires and loves that are at odds with the symbolic order. In an interview, he reveals, “people have many habitual practices in everyday life, but they acquire another perception of things when they go to watch visual/sexual images on the screen. This different perception is caution (*jie*) (Zhong 102).” To Ang Lee, “caution” does not represent a set of indoctrinated disciplines per se; rather, it points to comprehension based on one’s own perceptual apparatuses. Many critique Ang Lee’s ambiguous representation of the traitor, Mr. Yee, and have thus charged Lee with the film’s wicked confounding of the victimizer and the victimized. The film never denies Mr. Yee’s brutality; neither does Ang Lee intend to legitimize Mr. Yee’s political choice. The significance of Ang Lee’s casting a complex light on the characters lies in his challenge of the politically based, unquestionable, clear-cut moral judgments on people and events that prevail in China and elsewhere. Ultimately, Ang Lee opens up new perspectives on the notion of “*jie*” via sexuality and visuality. Lee’s filmmaking, a form that involves both sexuality and visuality, is his way of re-examining and re-defining the symbolic discipline. Thus, “lust” not only contends with “caution,” but also invokes an alternate conception of its meaning.

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