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A Postcolonial Reading of the "Asian Presence" in North American Films

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Introduction

During the mid 1980s I taught writing for a year at a university in central China. Since then I have had a strong personal interest in reading literature and viewing films set in China and in the Chinese-Canadian and Chinese-American communities of North America. During my time in China I also visited Tibet and have studied many books and films about Tibet as well. My obsession with literature and movies about Asian cultures might have remained a private passion, but in 1987 in the province of Ontario, where I taught high school English, a new curriculum document mandated the teaching of multicultural literature. I was thrilled at the opportunity to introduce my students to the works of Joy Kogawa, Yukio Mishima, Amy Tan, Nien Cheng, and a multitude of other fine writers who had not previously been included in high school literature classes (Greenlaw, 1992, 1995a, 1995b, 1998a, 1998b, 2000). But my first challenge was to find ways to help the students visualize the settings of the stories which these writers told. Thus I began to consider how films could help my students to develop their understanding of the places and people they were studying. But for every wonderful film such as *The Joy Luck Club*, with its rich depiction of the lives of two generations of Chinese-American women, there were dozens of films which contained eurocentric misrepresentations of the many cultural communities of Asian countries and their diasporas.

In this article I explore the place of popular culture, and of feature films in particular, in shaping the views of secondary school students about Canadian and American relations with various Asian communities. Among the complex array of forces shaping U.S. and Canadian curricula are the changing relations between Asian and North American countries. How Canadian and American teachers, students, parents, and citizens generally make sense of these changes contributes to what then becomes represented in the school curriculum. I therefore examine three popular movies in the following pages in order to determine what they might teach about these relations and to consider how English, Social Studies, and Media Literacy teachers might make use of such films in their classrooms.

As Canada and the U.S. continually negotiate their relationships with Asian countries, it is important to understand the impact which mass cultural texts, such as feature films, have on public education, especially given their complex and contradictory role in socio-cultural representation. If teachers in North American high schools are to include popular films about various Asian cultures in their curricula it is also important that they consider carefully with their students how the concept of Asia has been constructed by a multitude of colonial and postcolonial writers and filmmakers. Postcolonial critics such as Edward Said (1978, 1993) and Rey Chow (1991) have long argued that eurocentric depictions of, for example, Chinese, South Asian, Korean, Vietnamese, or Japanese people, in films, novels, and government documents, have failed to fairly or accurately portray the heterogeneous composition of Asian cultures. Furthermore, colonial authors and directors have often resorted to stereotypical representations of these peoples as the exotic or inferior "others" of the white European or North American protagonists of their works. Postcolonial authors and filmmakers such as Amy Tan, Peter Wang, and Joy Kogawa, on the other hand, call into question stereotypical, eurocentric depictions by including in their films and novels more complex representations of these communities.

The three films I have chosen to discuss are *Seven Years in Tibet*, which is set primarily in Tibet but has an Austrian protagonist, *The War Between Us*, which is set in Canada and features central characters who are of

Japanese background, and *A Great Wall,* which is set in both China and the United States and is directed by a Chinese-American film maker. My purpose in conducting a postcolonial reading of these films is not to identify the essential Asianness which underlies them, for postcolonial theorists resist any simplistic representation of societies as monolithic entities. Instead, I wish to contrast the eurocentric treatment of Tibetans in *Seven Years in Tibet* with the heterogeneous rendering of Japanese-Canadian, Chinese-American, and Chinese communities in the other two films. The method I have selected for this particular analysis of three films is based upon Said's technique of "contrapuntal reading" (Said, 1993) which involves juxtaposing colonial and postcolonial texts for the purpose of examining the different portrayals of cultural interactions and perspectives in each. In addition, I employ Rey Chow's (1991) strategy of "reading the popular," from her study *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East.* I have chosen Chow's methodology in part to avoid the problems of Said's (1978) colonial discourse analysis. In his early work, Said focused on "textual practices" to the exclusion of the social dimension of language and meaning, and the material basis of social relations. Turner (1994, p.7) observes that this type of textualism has often given rise to a "vicious solipsism" whereby the reader can no longer distinguish between text and social reality. In contrast, Chow's methodology gives expression to the impact of the specific conditions of production and circulation of filmic representations of culture. Unlike Said, Chow has demonstrated a capacity to see the problem of film and literary production in terms of the everyday "materiality of commodity exchanges" (Turner, 1994, p. 18).

Chow (1991, p. 39) has employed a strategy made up of interrelated elements for reading popular works of literature; I believe that this approach to analysis can usefully be tested for its value in studying recent Canadian and American films. In her methodology, Chow (1991, p. 39) seeks to provide a "materialist reading" of popular texts, by clarifying the relationship between popular texts and history. She reads popular texts "not as a mere document of, but in itself a mediated response to, the changes taking place" (Chow, 1991, p. 39) in a given country at a particular time. The particular features of popular texts, Chow (1991, p. 39) argues, "are in this way not simply 'reflections' but expressions that bear the marks of contradictory historical conditions". I will therefore aim to situate the films I have chosen for analysis within the changing political and economic conditions of American and Canadian relations with various Asian countries.

Another element in Chow's methodology is to read popular texts "by way of woman [to] produce a different understanding" (Chow, 1991, p. 39) of women and modernity. Thus in my analysis of *The War Between Us*, the particular concerns of Japanese-Canadian women are foregrounded in order to examine how they resist the overlapping oppressive forces of racism and sexism in their lives.

An American Film Set in India and Tibet with a European Protagonist

Based on Heinrich Harrer's autobiographical book by the same name, the Hollywood film, *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), spans the years 1939 to 1951. It begins with Harrer's attempt to climb a Himalayan peak, then chronicles his escape with his German friend, Peter Aufscnaither, from a British World War II prison camp and his entry into the inner circle of the Tibetan Buddhist religious leader, the Dalai Lama. Near the end of the film, as Chinese troups invade Tibet, Harrer is forced to leave the Dalai Lama and to return to Europe to become aquainted with the son he left behind in 1939.

Critical reviews of this movie vary widely. The sister of the Dalai Lama, Jetsun Pema, who plays the part of her own mother in the film, is quite impressed with the effort that went into the making of the film by its director, Jean-Jacques Annaud.

> The re-creations of the different sets of the Potala steps, the Jokhang, and the Lhasa streets deeply affected all the Tibetans. I saw these icons of the Tibetan identity and knew that the originals were no more. For me personally, to relive the Tibet of my childhood and to act the role of my own mother was a wonderful and moving

> experience. Many times, tears came to my eyes, and I had to tell myself that this was "only a movie." (Pema, 1998).

Laurence B. Chollet, a writer for the Buddhist magazine, *The Shambhala Sun*, seems to be in agreement with the Dalai Lama's sister that one of the film's virtues is its verisimilitude. As he points out, the director employed the former prime minister of the Tibetan Government-in-exile, Tenzin Tethong, as an advisor on such matters as ceremonial protocol and the precise color of red to be used in the monk's robes. In the following passage Chollet quotes Annaud's views on representing cultures in the cinema. "You know, when you dig into a country like that, it is not only about landscapes, architecture. It's about people. I look at their costumes, I look at their shoes, the way they braid their hair. It's not only getting to understand the behavioral aspect of a people, but the mind of a people, their soul" (Chollet, 1997).

But while the realistic portrayal of the setting and characters is important to Chollet, it is the poetic and spiritual dimensions of Annaud's work which please this critic the most. "On another level this story can also be read as an allegory about a western man, obsessed by achievement, who literally climbs into another world, and there undergoes a spiritual rebirth through the discovery of Buddhism" (Chollet, 1997).

In contrast to these affirmations of the film's faithfulness to the lives of the Dalai Lama and his followers, Steve Rhodes comments on the film's portrayal of the relationship between Harrer and the Dalai Lama:

> About halfway through the movie, Heinrich and Peter finally escape and eventually find themselves in the home of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama, played as an inquisitive teenager by Jamyang Wang Chuck, thinks Heinrich is really cool and pumps him for info about topics ranging from Molotov cocktails to Jack the Ripper. These excessively cute scenes dominate the story's latter half, and the almost total destruction of Tibet seems, in contrast, almost tacked on as an afterthought. (Rhodes, 1997)

Although Rhodes' tone is rather facetious, his point is a serious one. As many writers have observed over the past decade, the destruction of Tibet by the Chinese from 1951 to the present is the real story which needs to be told. Yet, because only a few minutes of the movie are devoted to showing the audience how the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1951, the fact that thereafter some 1.2 million Tibetan's died (Kewley, p. 392) as a result of that invasion is left unstated by the film. Carrie Gorringe explains Hollywood's current interest in Tibet's tragic history:

> Nearly fifty years after the Communist Chinese forces invaded and conquered Tibet, as part of Mao's plan to restore China to its "proper" size, Hollywood has suddenly seized upon the plight of the Tibetans as the issue of the year. Following closely on the heals of Annaud's film (around Christmas) will be Martin Scorsese's Kundun, also about the Dalai Lama. From Steven Seagal to Harrison Ford to Sharon Stone, celebrities have been hopping on the pro-Tibet band-wagon until the entire apparatus has threatened to tip over from the sheer Iight. And, of course, let's not forget the efforts of Richard Gere, one who has been in the trenches longer than most (nearly twenty years), and who dedicated his 1992 Oscar presentation speech into a well-intentioned, if rambling, anti-Chinese message. (Gorringe, 1997)

By exposing students to the above critical reactions to the film version of *Seven Years in Tibet*, teachers may discuss with them the issue of eurocentrism in the media. The following kinds of questions need to be asked: Why does a film about the destruction of Tibet devote its first half to following the mountain climbing exploits of two Europeans? Why might the Dalai Lama's sister endorse a film which devotes so little time to

telling her people's story and so much time to chronicling the inner journey of Heinrich Harrer? What can we learn by comparing this film with other attempts by Hollywood to depict Tibet such as the two screen versions of James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon*? What happens to our understanding of the film when we supplement it with books about Tibet such as Vanya Kewley's *Tibet: Behind the Ice Curtain* (1990) and Heinrich Harrer's original *Seven Years in Tibet* (1953)?

When experiences of the Tibetans, rather than those of an Austrian visitor, are foregrounded through intertextual readings, students will be able to deepen their appreciation of the issues which the film raises. When Gorringe considers the film from the perspective of the Tibetans, for instance, several problems emerge:

> The film's attempt to place tacit blame on Buddhist philosophies of non-violence (don't they have the guts to fight?) and open blame upon the thwarted ambitions of a Tibetan official is inadequate, at best. Moreover, there is an unpleasant undercurrent of semi-racist thinking in this film that does not correspond to Harrer's own reminiscences. The film simplifies Harrer's genuine love for the Tibetan people and characterizes them, by and large as either rigid-minded, if they are officials, or happy natives; at times the film has the feel of a 1930s travelogue, observing, as it does, the natives with a combination of patronizing contempt for their "simplicity" and barely-concealed envy over their good fortune in maintaining a relatively peaceful culture (simplicity, it need hardly be said, is the price of a peaceful culture). West meets East, and here the combination is uneasy and, fundamentally, dishonest (Gorringe, 1997).

In Vanya Kewley's book, *Tibet: Behind the Ice Curtain*, students can study what happened in Tibet after the movie ends, and they can therefore come to recognize for themselves the inadequacies of eurocentric depictions of Tibet. For instance, as Kewley observes, the "Tibetan Government-in-exile has documented proof that of the 6,259 monasteries, temples and shrines that existed before the Chinese invasion, only thirteen were left in some sort of functioning capacity after the Cultural Revolution. The rest were totally destroyed" (Kewley, 1990, p. 103). As L. B. Shriver argues, despite any worthy intentions on the part of the Chinese government, the results of their occupation of Tibet since 1951 have been devastating.

> The Chinese contended that Tibetan society was backward and feudalistic, which was true in many respects. Desirable reforms had often been blocked by the aristocracy. China sought to modernize Tibet according to socialist principles, and introduced secular public education and health care facilities, improved drainage, and built wells, canals, and roads. Nevertheless, China's reforms were instituted at tremendous human cost. In addition to the thousands who died while resisting the advance of the PLA, hundreds of thousands died of famine caused by forced collectivization of Tibetan agriculture. According to the Legal Inquiry Committee on Tibet in its 1960 report, the Chinese had violated 16 of the 30 points of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Atrocities included summary executions, torture, rape, forcible separation of children from parents, and the destruction of shrines and monasteries. (Shriver, 1997)

The problem with a film about Tibet's recent history that represents its people in simplistic, stereotypical terms as the child-like or exotic companions of an heroic European protagonist, is that students of literature, media, and history are left to fill in for themselves the detailed information concerning the people they should really be learning about in the story, the Tibetans. Teachers can help students to accomplish this supplementary work through intertextual readings. For instance, to help students resist the North American or European stereotypes of Tibet, teachers could encourage them to view films such as *The Cup* (2000) by Bhutanese-Tibetan film maker and religious leader, Khyentse Norbu. In this wonderful film a novice monk

struggles to organize a viewing of a World Cup soccer match in his monastery. The characters in Norbu's film are three- dimensional people rather than projections of Western fantasies.

I am not suggesting that we should avoid showing students eurocentric films such as *Seven Years in Tibet*. In fact, I believe it is only by juxtaposing eurocentric and postcolonial films that teachers can enable their students to learn to distinguish their own biases as North American film viewers. But these contrapuntal readings should not be limited to the juxtaposition of films. For instance, another approach to opening students' minds to the complexities of contemporary life for Tibetans both inside and outside of Tibet could be to ask them to read stories by writers in exile that are available at the *Tibet Online* Internet web site. When they contrast the views of Tibetans in the film *Seven Years in Tibet* with representations of contemporary Tibetans in magazine articles they should be able to understand more clearly how their attitudes about Tibetans have been influenced by the American film industry.

A Canadian Film Featuring Characters of Japanese Background

Although, like *Seven Years in Tibet*, this next film is also a historical piece that deals with the theme of social injustice, unlike the previous work there is a clear attempt in *The War Between Us* (1995) to strike a balance between the perspectives of the two cultural groups represented in this movie. *The War Between Us* was produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. It is the story of the experiences of Aya Kawashima and her family as they are forced by the Canadian government in 1941 to leave their home in Vancouver and to move into a shack in the town of New Denver in the interior of British Columbia. This film can provide students with a chance to investigate how a small rural community both accommodated and marginalized the Japanese-Canadians who were forced to live there during the Second World War.

There have been other attempts by writers to describe this terrible event in Canadian history, the most noteworthy being the powerful and popular novel by Joy Kogawa titled *Obasan* (1981). A poem by Kogawa, "What Do I Remember of the Evacuation?" concludes with the lines, "I prayed to the God who loves/ All the children in his sight/ That I might be white." It is this sentiment that perhaps best expresses the theme of the film *The War Between Us*, that to be Japanese-Canadian during the Second World War is to be without a country or an identity. All of the Japanese-Canadians' rights to vote and own property were taken away from them after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. In the case of the Kawashima family, they discover during the course of their first year in New Denver that Mr. Kawashima's house, car, and lucrative boat building company have all been confiscated by the government. One woman who moves in with the Kawashima's, Yushiko, is permanently separated from her husband by the government. He is placed in a prisoner of war camp for joining a protest against the evacuation.

In the early days of their internment in New Denver the Japanese-Canadians are both feared and welcomed by the town's permanent residents. Peg Parnham, who owns the house next to the Kawashima's, sees the influx of Japanese people as an opportunity to rescue her family from poverty as she opens a store to sell specialty food items and clothing materials to Japanese women. At the same time, she and many of the other residents of the town are full of prejudices against their new neighbours. Peg's older daughter, Margie, for instance, reads a passage from her textbook aloud while she is writing an essay for school. The book states that "the Chinese expression is likely to be more placid, kindly, and open. The Japanese are more ruthless, dogmatic, and arrogant." Other remarks heard from the people of the town as 2000 Japanese-Canadians arrive are: "I didn't realize I'd be outnumbered," and "Anne said they carry diseases. Yellow fever!" When Peg's husband proposes that he and his brother, Peter, go into partnership with two Japanese-Canadian men, Peter, who was wounded at Dunkirk in the First World War, says, "You forget we're at war with these guys. I don't trust them."

At first the Parnhams shun the Kawashima's, but, when Peg realizes that she needs a nanny to take care of her younger daughter and places an advertisement with the government agency, it is Aya Kawashima who is

sent to the Parnham's house. As the story progresses Aya becomes a valued servant to the extent that Peg begins to feel jealous that her younger daughter, Mary Jean, seems more fond of Aya than she is of Peg. When an angry Peg orders Aya to go home early one evening she reminds Aya that she is still the mother of the household. This hurts Aya bitterly and she retorts, "You are the wife, the mother, the shop owner, the free voting citizen. I understand that very well!" Later when Mr. Kawashima learns that his business has been confiscated by the government and he throws into the fire the Canadian military uniform which he wore during the First World War, Peg attempts to make up to Aya by offering her some additional salary for work that she has done in Peg's store, but Aya refuses it stating, "I don't want your sympathy. I want self respect." And when a government official who sees Aya working in Peg's store says, "Got your girl working for you. It's a fine opportunity to learn some valuable skills," Aya remarks with bitterness, "Actually, Mr. MacIntyre, I have a business college certificate and I worked for my father for years. He had a boat building business, and I did the books."

Another source of friction between Aya and Peg involves the love affair which develops between Aya's brother, Moss, and Peg's daughter, Margie. When Peg discovers the two kissing she tells Margie that she cannot marry Moss. Peg says to Margie, "You will be treated like a second class citizen. And what about your children?" But as she realizes that Moss and Peg are planning to run off together to Toronto, she asks Aya to have Mr. Kawashima talk to Moss. Aya replies that he has already done so, indicating that the Kawashima's are no more happy about this inter-racial marriage than are the Parnhams.

Yushiko eventually feels so ashamed that her husband is in the POW camp that she drowns herself in the lake near the town. When Peg attempts to show Aya compassion, Aya says concerning Yushiko's shame, "I will not feel it. I will not feel shame! I love this country, Peg. You never really know what democracy is until they take it away. It's like being betrayed by your own family." At the end of the movie, the government forces the Japanese-Canadians to sign an agreement saying that, if they will not move further inland to central Canada, they will agree to return to Japan after the war. Even though Aya was born in Canada, she dutifully decides to accompany her parents to Japan to take care of them there. Before the Kawashima's leave for Japan, Aya receives a letter from Moss in which he describes to her his new life with Margie in Toronto. She reads the letter to Peg, and they embrace as family members. When Aya must finally leave for Japan, Peg's younger daughter, Mary Jean, is clearly heart-broken to be losing her second mother.

T*he War Between Us* provides teachers with an opportunity to help students examine the effects of wartime racist policies by the government towards Japanese-Canadians. Shortly after the movie aired on national television the Canadian government made a formal apology to Japanese-Canadians and provided partial financial restitution to them for all that they endured in the 1940s. Nevertheless, many Japanese-Canadians have suffered in silence over the past fifty years, and the stories of long term damage to their communities are just now being told to the general public in the popular media. For instance, Canada's most famous contemporary environmentalist, David Suzuki, was a childhood classmate of Joy Kogawa's, and yet he has only recently revealed in a televised biography that it was the feelings of rejection at the hands of white children in the internment camps which drove him for the rest of his life to prove repeatedly that he is as valuable as any other Canadian. In a book he has written with Keibo *Oiwa, The Japan I Never Knew: A Journey of Discovery* (1996), Suzuki explains why he decided in the 1990s to investigate his Japanese heritage by journeying to Japan.

> For the west, the Japanese people remain an enigma, which we westerners conveniently overlay with widely held stereotypes - they show little emotion, they work like ants, they are great at imitation but show little originality, they are obedient and polite, they are homogeneous in race, language, history, and culture. As with all generalizations, each of these notions contains a kernel of reality that is immediately countered by individual exceptions. Whoever the Japanese are, they arouse emotions in other countries. They are welcomed for their investments and tourist dollars, yet are

> feared and hated for their actions in the Second World War…Japan has always aroused a complex multilayered response in me personally. My ancestry is Japanese, so that even as a third-generation Canadian, I will always be identified by a hyphenated description, a *Japanese*-Canadian. While my physical features reflect my ancestry, the mind behind the face feels itself completely Canadian. (pp.1-2)

The point of the movie, *The War Between Us*, is that although Japanese-Canadians such as David Suzuki had every right during the Second World War to believe themselves to be loyal Canadians, to therefore be fully protected under Canadian law, and to be accepted by other Canadians as friends and equals, instead, they were treated disgracefully at the hands of a racist society. Even though, in the case of Peg and Aya, individual white Canadians made an effort to embrace Japanese-Canadians, the harm which institutional racism caused has left scars which are still afflicting the Japanese-Canadian community fifty years later. Studying the various inter-racial conflicts and unions which take place in this film can facilitate students' understanding of the processes in North America which have alienated and marginalized citizens of Asian descent in the past and which continue to do harm to them in the present.

An interesting film that students could view as a counterpoint to *The War Between Us*, is *Paradise Road* (1997), in which a group of white women in Singapore are captured by Japanese soldiers during World War II and held in a concentration camp. As these women from various countries struggle to deal with their captors and with their own cultural differences it is worthwhile for students to compare the ways in which the Japanese in Canada and these European and American women in a prison camp in Sumatra learn to cope with their captivity. *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) is another film which shows how Americans, British, and Europeans survived in a Japanese concentration camp during the Second World War. In all three films the issues of war and racism are complex and interconnected.It may be easier for North American students to recognize the injustice of holding Japanese-Canadians against their will when they see how it felt for North Americans and Europeans to experience similar mistreatment at the hands of the Japanese. The goal is not to argue that "if they did it to us, it was all right for us to do it to them." On the contrary, a contrapuntal reading here should help students to see more effectively how it feels to be Japanese-Canadians who are trapped in camps against their will.

A Film Directed by an American Filmmaker of Chinese Background

Directed by the Chinese-American film maker, Peter Wang, the movie *A Great Wall* (1985), introduces several postcolonial themes such as displacement, intercultural communication, and American cultural domination. The film is a gently satirical portrait of the relationship between two families, the Fangs of California and the Chaos of Beijing. When computer business executive, Leo Fang, fails to receive the promotion he feels he deserves, and learns, instead, that the position has gone to a much less qualified white male, he protests to his boss, and finally quits because of his frustration over this clearly racist act. Anxious to discover a new direction in his life, Leo decides to take his wife and 18-year-old son with him to Beijing to visit the family of Leo's sister whom he has not seen since he left China as a child forty years ago. Leo's son, Paul, is reticent to leave his white girlfriend behind, but both he and Leo's wife (who though also a Chinese-American speaks no Chinese) are quite excited about the prospect of visiting their relatives, the Chaos, for the first time. When they finally arrive on the Chao's doorstep, a group of curious Beijing neighbours gather to stare at them and speculate that, because of the Fang's fashionable appearance, they must be Japanese tourists.

As the film's title implies, at first glance there appears to be a "Great Wall" of cultural differences separating the Americans from their Chinese relatives. For instance, while Paul and his cousin, Lili, are coming to know each other, they compare their views about schooling. Paul asks Lili what she "does for fun at school" and Lili replies that she goes to school to work, not to play. Lili feels that Paul takes school far too lightly whereas she, and her boyfriend, Liu, are much more serious about their studies, knowing that if they do not

pass the college entrance exams they will disgrace their families and have a very difficult time finding work. However, as the Fangs stay with the Chaos, Lili drifts away from her studies and begins to act more like Paul. Meanwhile Lili's boyfriend, whose father, an English teacher, instructs him to memorize the entire dictionary, is studying extremely hard for the impending grade 12 exams. Liu does not fail to notice that Lili is beginning to dream about going to the United States to live the decadent life and he resents Paul's influence over her. At the same time, however, it becomes clear that Liu, himself, is infatuated with certain features of Western culture such as the music of Luciano Pavaratti, which he sings with great enthusiasm and which the entire neighbourhood enjoys while they watch a video of Pavaratti on their communal colour television.

Early in the movie it is pointed out that, although the Great Wall was constructed to keep invaders (such as the Fangs) out of China, it has also served over the centuries to keep the Chinese locked in. As cultural border-crossers the Fangs and Chaos are forced to reconsider their own stereotypical views of each other's cultures. In the process they discover that their ethnic and national identities are fluid rather than unchangeable, and socially constructed rather than essential attributes. For example, Lili's father, Mr. Chao, when he realizes that he might lose his daughter to the United States, says that all Americans are promiscuous and that he does not want Lili to travel to America where she will be with people who are not of her own culture.

To alleviate his boredom Paul, who is proud of his ping pong prowess, decides to enter a local tournament in which his final opponent turns out to be Liu. At the end of the closely fought competition in which the whole community has applauded each player's victories, Paul eventually loses the match, and Liu, who has at last achieved this proof of superiority over the American, becomes reconciled with the Fangs. The other climactic episode in the film occurs as Lili, who finally realizes that she has not prepared sufficiently for her exams, is taken to hospital in an ambulance after going without sleep for several days in her efforts to catch up on her studies. Although she is not able to write her exams, she recovers fully before the Fangs have to return to the U.S. Liu, on the other hand, is successful in his exams and brings honour to his father's home. By the end of the movie, having rediscovered his cultural identity, visited his father's grave, and come to know his sister's family, Leo returns with his wife and son to California, where his boss, who has found that he cannot survive without Leo, is forced to enter Leo's personal Chinese Garden to beg him to return to the company.

The heterogeneity of its Chinese and Chinese-American characters as well as the multiple and conflicting discourses in the film have generated widely differing reactions among its viewers in the United States. Rey Chow's analysis of the movie's reception amongst her friends helps to explain the diverse opinions which the film has elicited:

> The responses to this film among my friends were fascinatingly dissimilar. A Chinese person thought this film pandered to the taste of the kweilo (Cantonese for "foreign devils"). A European couple, who completely missed the fact that the Chinese youth won the ping-pong match, found the film aesthetically offensive because it polarizes America and China in terms of technological supremacy and backwardness. An American liked the film because it showed people living on the fault line between cultures and trying to hold them together - "Real people are hyphenated people," he said. What interests me about these responses is the strong if lopsided conviction with which each view is expressed. It soon became clear that this was one of those texts which is thought-provoking not so much because of intrinsic merit as because of the way it triggers divergent and even opposed views from its audiences. Those views, heavy with historical resonances, turn a rather stereotypical story into the battleground for contending - perhaps mutually uncomprehending - claims as to how an Asian-American "homecoming" experience should be aesthetically produced. (1990, p. 31)

Chow continues in her analysis of the movie to argue that, "Given the demolition of the traditional terms of

reference and the de-legitimation of the grounds of criticism that such terms provide, and given the untenability of a return to traditional culture in any unadulterated form, the very instability of cultural identity itself becomes a combative critical base. This critical base engenders a new set of terms for the production of knowledge and for intervention that are no longer simply cognitive or ontological, but are informed by subjectivity and experience" (Chow, 1990, p. 46). It is this recognition of the "instability of cultural identity" which can provide students with the opportunity to develop a postcolonial literacy that interrogates the breakdown in communication between the Chaos and the Fangs. Studying the gaps in understanding between these two families can provide students with revelations about relations between America and China. The ping pong diplomacy which is worked out at the microcosmic level between the Chaos and Fangs can serve as a lens through which students can consider the greater negotiations which were taking place between China and the U.S. when the film was produced in 1985. Students could be encouraged to consider why a humorous treatment of the tragic issues of displacement and economic disparity would be considered by both the American and Chinese producers of this film to be important enough to make the movie in the climate of the mid 1980s and to show it on a national television station (PBS) in the United States in prime time.

Chinese-American, postcolonial theorist Lisa Lowe described the film as follows: "[Rather] than privileging either a nativist or assimilationist view, or even espousing a 'Chinese-American' resolution of differences, *A Great Wall* performs a filmic 'migration' by shuttling between the various cultural spaces; we are left by the end of the film, with a sense of culture as dynamic and open, the result of a continual process of visiting and revisiting a plurality of cultural sites" (Lowe, 1991b, p. 39). Lowe extrapolates from her reading of the film the notion that "I might conceive of the making and practice of Asian-American culture as nomadic, unsettled, taking place in the travel between cultural sites and in the multivocality of heterogeneous and conflicting positions" (p. 39). This sense of culture as dynamic and open is what students need to develop if they are to avoid reductive explanations of U.S./China relations.

One activity which might help high school English, media and history students to learn to question stereotypical representations of Chinese and Chinese-American communities would be to have the students compare the complex representations of the Chaos and Fangs in *A Great Wall* with a number of similarly effective postcolonial films such as Wayne Wang's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989) and *The Joy Luck Club* (1993). Then they could view a number of eurocentric films such as Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987) and Jon Avnet's *Red Corner* (1997) to contrast the depictions of Chinese characters in these films with those that they encountered in the films by Peter Wang and Wayne Wang. The purpose of such contrapuntal viewings is to help the students question their own assumptions about Chinese and Chinese-American people.

Conclusion

By viewing films such as *Seven Years in Tibet, The War Between Us,* and *A Great Wall* in a high school English course on multicultural literature, a Social Studies course on global issues, or a Media Literacy course on representations of race in film, students can have the opportunity to connect their current awareness of their own cultural and political identities with their developing understanding of relations between North American and Asian countries. If students do not possess a critical filter, such as Edward Said's or Rey Chow's, through which to interrogate Canadian and American filmic textuality, then they will have little ability to resist stereotypical readings of the "Asian presence" in popular North American culture as their knowledge of Asia is being fashioned on a daily basis during their encounters with films and television shows. Postcolonial readings such as those suggested in the above analyses can serve as guides for high school students' attempts to understand how attitudes about racial difference are developed and influenced by the popular media's representations of Asian communities and their diasporas.

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