

(Re)writing (Hi)stories: Re-presenting the Gender/Class in the Postcolonial Discourse/Condition of Zhang Yimou's Movies and Wang Chen-ho's Novels

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Abstract

In this paper I aim to make a comparative study of Chang Yi-mou's films and the novels of a Taiwanese regionalist novelist—Wang Chen-ho, for both of the two artists reveal great impulse of postcolonialist view in representing history and gender/class, though with different emphasis. Chang is now one of the most successful movie directors in the Asia-Pacific region, just like Ang Lee, and enjoys high prestige and international fame—a great example of “globalization” and “multiculturalism,” whereas Wang has always been recognized as one of the most successful Taiwanese nativist (regionalist) novelists because of his experimental representation of the hybridized Taiwanese languages by skillfully blending “Chinglish,” Japanese, and other Taiwanese dialects within his story-telling. In other words, in this paper, I intend to make a comparative study of the micropolitics of how Chang's and Wang's works reveal a postcolonial discourse/condition in representing history/gender/class. Critical approaches that will be employed in this project are mainly the micropolitics in the postcolonialist poetics of Homi Bhabha, Said, and Deleuze and Guattari.

Keywords: Globalization, History, Postcolonialism, Self-orientalization, Transgressivity, Micropolitics, Representation, Minor literature, Deleuzian

We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities—to say nothing of historical entities—such locales, regions, geographical sectors as “Orient” and “Occident” are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West.

—Edward Said, *Orientalism*

Introduction

In this paper, I plan to focus on a comparative study of Zhang Yimou's films and Wang Chen-ho's works, for both artists reveal in their works a great impulse of postcolonialism in re-presenting history/gender/class, though with different strategies. Besides, both Zhang Yimou and Wang Chen-ho have been highly valued as talented artists in their fields on the two sides of Taiwanese Straits—China and Taiwan—respectively. The former is now recognized as one of the most successful movie directors in this region, just like Ang Lee, and enjoys high prestige and international fame—a great example of “globalization” and “multiculturalism,” while the latter is a Taiwanese regionalist novelist. Moreover, both Zhang and Wang have shown some characteristics of decolonization in their works—revealing some paradoxical modes of re-representing gender/class—when they appropriate the colonizing language and culture of the West in “dismantling colonialist power in all its forms”:

This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved. Initially, in many places in the colonized world, the process of *resistance* [italics added] was conducted in terms or institutions appropriated from the colonizing culture itself. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1998, p. 63).

In other words, both Zhang and Wang create some *resistance literature* that is very characteristic of decolonization by appropriating the colonizing cultural modes (language and aesthetics in general) of representation.

Nevertheless, Zhang and Wang have received very different responses and evaluations from the critics/spectators: The former is often devalued as “creating Orientalism out of making tragic stories of Chinese (i.e. representing misery of Chinese people, which, according to Edward Said, is a kind of self-orientalization) that look appealing to the Western audience, while the latter is often praised as “authentically (re)presenting real life stories of Taiwanese ordinary people.” In other words, Zhang often receives negative criticism whereas Wang frequently wins positive evaluation from either the academics or readers/spectators in general.

To justify my comparative study of the two artists with very different cultural backgrounds from some postcolonial perspectives, I want to focus on the similarities in their (micro)politics of re-presenting gender/class through rewriting Chinese/Taiwanese histories. Differing from many critics, I also aim to reveal the process and strategy for creating an exotic world in both the two artists’ works by highlighting the fact that many critics tend to neglect Wang’s micropolitics also appropriates some Western literary theories and approaches. Given the above-mentioned, in this paper I intend to present a different perspective on the two artists by appropriating some postcolonial theories of Fanon, Said, Bhabha, Spivak, and Deleuze (and Guattari) to illustrate the two artists’ problematic re-presentation of gender/class in re-writing histories of their motherlands (China and Taiwan)—different versions of *self-Orientalization* by constructing historical/alternative worlds.

Some people may be puzzled about my labeling Zhang as one artist practicing decolonizing artistic work, since China proper (some small colonial territories such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Qing Dao not included) has never been completely subject to any colonial rule. This fact does not mean that colonialism has never generated any impact on Chinese people and culture. According to Edward Said, who raises from a postcolonial perspective the idea of cultural domination of the West over the Third World, namely, the old form of colonialism has been replaced by neo-colonialism; the former is characterized by its control of territorial boundaries (spatial colonization), while the latter discursive boundaries (mental colonization). In addition, the latter is what scholars of postcolonialism are strongly concerned about. Just like Fanon, Said emphasizes the fact that the contemporary form of colonialism/imperialism manifests itself in a kind of “general cultural sphere” where the ideology of neo-colonialism haunts the colonized people’s psyche and results in their morbid states of mind:

In our time, direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism, as we shall see, lingers where it has always been in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices. (Said, 1994, p. 9)

Therefore, many Chinese intellectuals are also colonized in one way or another by the western imperial powers and thus become westernized, which may be demonstrated in their creation of resistance work of art/literature in the era of decolonization.

The above-mentioned phenomenon happens to correspond to this paper’s opening epigraph cited from *Orientalism* in which Said argues that human beings make their own history and extend it to geography and the Orient is an idea that is created for the West. Nevertheless, Said declares that even though the Orient is a man-made idea we cannot thus assume that “the Orient was *essentially* an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality” (5), since the idea has been realized when it is extended to become geographical and cultural entities. More importantly, some Orientalism is created by the colonized people. The self-Orientalizing may be interpreted as a perplexing/paradoxical/psychopathological aspect of the colonized people’s mind. To further explore Zhang’s and Wang’s self-Orientalizing representation of Chineseness/Taiwanese-ness, Said’s insight is worth our special attention:

The paradox of an Arab regarding himself as an “Arab” of the sort put out by Hollywood is but the simplest result of what I am referring to. Another result is that the Western market economy and its consumer orientation have produced . . . a class of educated people whose intellectual formation is directed to satisfying market needs. . . . So if all told there is an intellectual acquiescence in the images and doctrines of Orientalism, there is also a very powerful reinforcement of this in economic, political, and social exchange: ***the modern Orient, in short, participates in its own Orientalizing*** (emphasis added). (Said, 1979, p. 325)

Referring to this passage we may well doubt that either Zhang or Wang, intentionally or not, has fallen in to the trap of self-Orientalization by producing Western consumer-oriented works that are appealing to Western audience’s tastes and ideology.

The paradoxical/perplexing nature of the colonized could be best illustrated in their use of the colonizer's language, as Fanon observes. While analyzing the black men's mentality in their painstaking process of learning French, Fanon discovers that

To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture. The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is. Rather more than a year ago in Lyon, I remember, in a lecture I had drawn a parallel between Negro and European poetry, and a French acquaintance told me enthusiastically, "At bottom you are a white man." The fact that I had been able to investigate so interesting a problem through the white man's language gave me honorary citizenship. (Fanon, 1986, p.38)

Here, Fanon intends to pinpoint an interesting yet perplexing phenomenon of the colonized Negro: they gain self-esteem by receiving recognition from the colonizers because of their mastery of the colonizer's language. Fanon also reminds us that some scholars or the elite people of the colonized world who actively advocate decolonization by arousing their fellowmen's awareness to fight against the colonial power are actually those who have been already highly mentally colonized.

Likewise, in terms of Zhang's and Wang's re-presentation of history/gender/class, I also discover that the two artists are both influenced by some Western language and aesthetics in creating their works, either consciously or unconsciously. This is a typical case of decolonization, for both of them appropriate some Western modes of representation to present their own culture in an era of decolonization. In other words, Zhang and Wang are just like the "westernized" intellectuals of whom Said accuses presenting the Western views of the Third World. Those intellectuals include theoreticians, filmmakers, and travel writers and so on "whose specialty is to deliver the non-European world either for analysis and judgement or for satisfying the exotic tastes of European and North American audiences" (Said, 1994, p.xviii).

When it comes to Zhang's postcolonial discourse/condition, some critics such as Zhang Yi-wu raises a negative critique of his films by accusing him of "creating the *otherness* of China/Chinese culture for the consumption of the Western audience" (Zhang, 1995, p.409). To be more specific, Zhang's films, be they directed, photographed, or acted by him, often present an exotic Chinese world to satisfy the Westerner's gaze. In addition, Zhang Yi-wu also argues that in Zhang's films the image of China always presents an allegorical and mythic impulse and thus diachronic and timeless (Zhang, 1995, p.408). In addition, he considers Zhang's films as a product of international funding and marketing, which makes Zhang's films a profit-oriented commodity. To sum up, he declares that Zhang's films present a "sub-history" (repressed history) of China—a commodity of cultural industry in a postcolonial discourse/condition (Zhang, 1995, p.418).

Undoubtedly, Zhang Yi-wu's negative and derogatory critique of Zhang's films strongly devalues and ignores the artistic creativity of Zhang's filmmaking. My observation of his films tends to be more positive by acknowledging his micropolitics in re-presenting Chinese culture through re-writing history of ordinary Chinese people in the countryside, especially the life of the peasantry, regardless of the fact that ***Zhang may be suspicious of applying some western aesthetics for intentionally constructing some Orientalized world in his films to satisfy the Western audience's exotic tastes.*** To be more specific, one of Zhang's recurrent scenes presents a vivid/realistic picture of the misery of the subaltern in pursuing their subjectivity and humanity. As many critics have pointed out, one of Zhang's recurrent themes is "a celebration of the resilience, even the stubbornness, of Chinese people in face of hardships and adversities, a theme which has occurred from *To Live* (1994) through to *Not One Less* (1999)" (quoted from *Wikipedia*). Meanwhile, gender/class conflicts have been highlighted in presenting their "desiring production" (a Deleuzian term).

In many of Zhang's films, women have become the focus in his re-presentation of gender/class conflicts and pursuit of selfhood in an Oedipal/patriarchic/feudalistic society. This shows "the psychoanalytic problem of identification that always begs the question of the subject," as Bhabha indicates when he analyzes Fanon's interpretation of Negro's identity crisis:

Fanon's *Black Skink, White Masks* reveals the doubling of identity: the difference between personal identity as an intimation of reality, or an intuition of being, and the psychoanalytic problem of identification that always begs the question of the subject: "What does a man want?" The emergence of the human subject as socially and psychically authenticated depends on the *negation* of an originary narrative of fulfillment, or of an imaginary coincidence between individual interest or instinct and the General Will. Such binary, two-part, identities function in a kind of narcissistic reflection of the One in the Other, confronted in the language of desire by the psychoanalytic process of identification. (Fanon, 1986, p.51)

Take some women-centered films such as *Ju Dou*, *To Live*, *The Story of Qiu Ju*, and *Old Well* for observation, women's desire in pursuing selfhood and the human subject is highlighted, while men are often presented as

territorialized subjects who are subject to the Oedipalization of the Law of the Father. Meanwhile, Zhang seems to blur gender/class borderlines by identifying the subjugated individuals, male or female, as victims of the hegemonic power of Chinese feudalistic culture. An echo to Fanon's cry for humanity, Zhang's claim for the human subject happens to reflect many Chinese people's desire/quest for selfhood.

On the other hand, unlike Zhang's humanitarian touch of Chinese people's desiring production, Wang's fictional characterization often presents a portrait of vulgar personalities in many of his novels, such as *Rose Rose I Love You*, *A Portrait of Beauty/Americans*, *An Ox-cart of Dowry* and *Shangarila*. Some critics such as Lu Zheng-hui point out Wang's symbolic annihilation of Taiwanese culture and people, for they argue that in the dramatization of some vulgar and nasty characters in his novels, Wang seems to reveal his contempt for the peasantry by ridiculing and demonizing them so that they can hardly arouse the reader's sympathy except contempt. In other words, Wang tends to dehumanize and vulgarize a lot of peasant figures in his works (p.32-33). Hence, Lu declares that Wang cannot be considered as a rural novelist, though most of his works are set in the countryside (33). In *Rose Rose I Love You*, while revealing the nastiness of those materialistic people who are colonized by American culture, Wang also dramatizes the vulgarity and snobbishness of Taiwanese people's speech and behavior (e.g. Councilman Chian and the brothel owners). Nevertheless, the protagonist—the English teacher (non-peasant figure), Mr. Tung (董斯文, an ironic name that bears Wang's mockery of him for being "Americanized")—is represented as one having a vision of the commercialized society, though Wang blames him for being colonized by the Western culture, which results in his snobbish attitude toward the Americans.

Like Zhang's re-presentation of gender/class in history writing, Wang reveals a similar perspective on the subjugated beings: in the capitalist society, besides the cultural imperialism from the West the underprivileged people are also subjected to the rich and hegemonic class, be they men or women. However, unlike Zhang's humanitarian concern for the underprivileged and marginalized people, Wang's dramatization of the stupidity and vulgarity of the marginalized/rural people reveals his apathy for them, as Lu observes. Lu declares that the impoverished man in *An Ox-cart of Dowry*, the man who has no other choice but to surrender his wife to a businessman for gaining daily necessities is the most obvious example that shows Wang's attitude toward the underprivileged/disadvantaged (34). Moreover, in this novel, all the main characters—the poor man, his wife and her lover—all have some physical defects: the poor man has hearing problem, the woman has bad breath and ugly figure, while her lover had bad body odor. The vulgarity or nastiness of these figures greatly weakens the reader's sympathy for their misfortune. Ridiculing the dark aspects of his characters happens to be a recurrent theme of Wang's novels (Lu, 1987, p. 34).

Above all, borrowing from Spivak's idea of the subaltern in one of her influential essays "Could the Subaltern Speak?," I want to focus on the problematics in both the two artists' re-presentation of gender/class in history writing. No matter what tone the artist adopts in creating his work, neither Zhang nor Wang could claim that they have (re)presented a realistic picture of the marginalized. For both of the two artists speak for the subaltern among their fellowmen (the marginalized Chinese or Taiwanese). In other words, the peasantry in either Zhang's or Wang's work are those who are unable to represent themselves in public/cultural sphere. They are what Gramsci/Spivak declared—the cultural proletariat. The cultural proletariat has no power/ability to properly represent themselves in mass media or to fully narrate their stories; that is, they have been deprived of the chance/right to narrate and are thus "blocked" from forming their identity/subjectivity in the general cultural sphere. Therefore, the real voice of the subaltern is not heard.

To explore the micropolitics in creating a "resistance literature" or "minor literature" in the postcolonial condition in both Zhang's and Wang's works, I intend to apply a Deleuzian perspective on their special aesthetics. According to Deleuze and his collaborated partner Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, minor literature is a special writing that is a literary counter-tradition, a minoritarian discourse that is opposed to the majoritarian one. In a broader sense, minor literature is any great literature that appropriates a foreign language and makes a language look foreign by deviating from the grammar of the ordinary language. In one of Wang's highly celebrated novels *Rose Rose I Love You*, many critics such as Yulin Lee (2006) have been over-praising his intentional/artistic use (manipulation) of different foreign languages (mainly English and Japanese) and dialects (mainly Cantonese and Taiwanese, if we could call them dialects), especially the rhetorical skill—pun—to create some sense of humor or even funny/comic/paraodic effects while neglecting Wang's appropriation of some Western modernist literary skills such as dramatic and interior monologue (stream-of-consciousness). For instance, in *Rose Rose I Love You*, one of the main narratives is presented by Councilman Chian's flashback and his dramatic monologue. Yulin Lee in one of his essays on Taiwanese literature, "Translation and the Production of Local Literature," also points out Wang's minor use of the major language through "juxtaposing different languages, and his continued play with the impossibility of translation,"

yet he, while linking the Deleuzian idea of minor literature to translation, just like some other scholars, fails to pinpoint how Wang has formed a “self-Orientalization” by vulgarizing/essentializing the Taiwanese subaltern class—a stereotyped or discriminated image of Taiwanese people and culture—in “the production of local literature” (Lee, 2006, p.73-78).

Though some other critics like Chiu Kuei-fen have examined Wang’s intentional merging of different colonizing languages and Taiwanese dialects in *Rose Rose I Love You* in the postcolonial context, they tend to give a positive comment on Wang’s creativity in constructing a “polyphonic” (a Bakhtinian concept) “de-centering” world in which every word used is saturated with “internal dialogism” (Chiu, 1995, p.182). Chiu even argues that Wang has presented in *Rose Rose I Love You* a “microcosm of the cultural hybridity of Taiwan generated by the colonial rule over the past four hundred years.” This achievement happens to be Wang’s intention (as he admits in one interview) in creating such a polyphonic world (Chiu, 1995, p.182). In other words, Chiu sees Wang’s intentional/creative manipulation/mixture of different languages as a natural phenomenon of the post-colonial Taiwan, where people naturally mix up several colonizers’ languages with their own dialects. Nevertheless, I tend to view Wang’s “polyphonic” discourse as “unnatural,” for even in a long-colonized Third World nation which also consists of several ethnic groups of people, e.g. Vietnam and Burma, no one will ever speak like that (simultaneously using/mixing up several languages in speech). If we take a close look at Wang’s writing, we can easily discover that his syntax is rather westernized (Anglocized), deviating from either Mandarin Chinese or English while he unnaturally inserts some Taiwanese idioms or phrases into the Mandarin Chinese discourse uttered by some rural/peasant figures. The same writing style also characterizes his major third-person narratives (authorial narration).

Besides, Wang also applies a widely employed narrative strategy of Western modernist writers such as James Joyce—to present the story that consists of events happening within one day through the stream-of-consciousness/perspective of some main character—and Faulkner, who adopts some experimental narrative techniques—flashbacks and switches in chronology. As for Zhang’s cinematic narrative and aesthetics, he often resorts to symbolism (much more frequently than Wang, e.g. the use of Rose and Oxcart), such as the use of the symbolic red color (e.g. in the films *Raise the Red Lantern*, *Ju Dou*, and *Old Well*) and some objects that serve as the dominant symbols and theme(s) of the films. In fact, most of his films are saturated with highly symbolic dialogues or acts, e.g. near the end of *Shanghai Triad*, the young boy is hung upside down for being resistant to the Gangster when some silver coins drop off from his pocket onto the board of the dock by the sea and finally roll over to the water. This symbolic act seems to imply the disillusionment of his dream of seeking his fortune in the big city (Shanghai), for it is a dream that will never come true in the dehumanizing/suppressive Chinese society that is characterized by its feudalistic/patriarchic values and behaviors.

Besides appropriating the above-mentioned Western rhetoric skills and aesthetics, both Zhang and Wang, with different strategies and mentality, have created some intellectual formation that results in what Bhabha declares “stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism” in representing Chinese/Taiwanese histories. To be more specific, both Zhang and Wang have assumed some cultural/mental fixity in their “ideological construction of otherness”:

Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated . . . as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved. (Bhabha, 1994, p.66)

Zhang’s films, as Zhang Yi-wu has argued, often present an unchanging, “diachronic and timeless” Chinese society that looks allegorical and mythic. That is to say, Zhang seems to presuppose some “essentialism” in Chineseness or the feudalistic tradition he aims to challenge and subvert. Moreover, as I observe, in many of his films, the alternative world he creates seems to be not only dramatic but also unchanging. The actors and actresses seem to be dramatically performing some symbolic acts or dramatic monologues that are cut off from the external world. For instance, in *Raise the Red Lantern*, the big mansion seems to be alienated from the outside world, the rich master and his wife and concubines look no more than actors and actresses on a theatrical stage, a world that seems to be presented as a microcosm of Chinese feudalistic society. On the other hand, in Wang’s novels, while ridiculing the snobbishness, stupidity, or misfortune of Taiwanese peasantry, Wang seems to present his characters as fixed personae. His characters are usually “flat or stereotyped characters” that remain unchanged and show only some outstanding trait or feature and thus require little detailed portraiture. For instance, the impoverished peasantry in *An Ox-cart of Dowry* and in *A Portrait of Beauty/Americans* [e.g. Hsiao

Lin's father, who is troubled by his want of some money to get a bride for his second son], or the funny clown figures in *Rose Rose I Love You* [e.g. the brothel owners and Councilman Chian, whose speech and behaviors are extremely funny and vulgar]. In my opinion, just like an American short story writer O. Henry, Wang creates a lot of dramatic stories with an exciting ending yet without profundity. In so doing, Wang seems to intend to present a typical Taiwanese figure in post-colonial Taiwan, and the intention happens to result in his intellectual formation of a prototype of Taiwanese people as intellectually inferior subaltern.

In conclusion, both Zhang and Wang have created a minor/ resistance literature (achieving decolonization through cultural resistance) in their works when re-presenting history/gender/class in a postcolonial condition. Nevertheless, intentionally or not, both of them have appropriated some foreign (Western) aesthetics to present the emerging process of the great movements of decolonization in their motherlands. Paradoxically, both of them have adopted some artistic modes of representation from the Western culture for outlining the marginalized people's stories in an era of great movements of decolonization of hegemonic powers (Chinese feudalistic social modes or the imperial/capitalist power from the West).

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