

Travelling Films: Western Criticism, Labelling Practice  
and Self-Orientalised East Asian Films

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## Abstract

This thesis analyses western criticism, labelling practices and the politics of European international film festivals. In particular, this thesis focuses on the impact of western criticism on East Asian films as they attempt to travel to the west and when they travel back to their home countries. This thesis draws on the critical arguments by Edward Said's *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978) and self-Orientalism, as articulated by Rey Chow, which is developed upon Mary Louise Pratt's conceptual tools such as 'contact zone' and 'autoethnography'. This thesis deals with three East Asian directors: Kitano Takeshi (Japanese director), Zhang Yimou (Chinese director) and Im Kwon-Taek (Korean director). Dealing with Japanese, Chinese and Korean cinema is designed to show different historical and cultural configurations in which each cinema draws western attention. This thesis also illuminates different ways each cinema is appropriated and articulated in the west. This thesis scrutinises how three directors from the region have responded to this Orientalist discourse and investigates the unequal power relationship that controls the international circulation of films.

Each director's response largely depends on the particular national and historical contexts of each country and each national cinema. The processes that characterise films' travelling are interrelated: the western conception of Japanese, Chinese or Korean cinema draws upon western Orientalism, but is at the same time corroborated by directors' responses. Through self-Orientalism, these directors, as 'Orientals', participate in forming and confirming the premises of western Orientalism. This thesis thus brings out how 'Orientals' participate in the formation and maintenance of Orientalism via self-Orientalism or self-Orientalising strategies. As Edward Said (1978; 1985) remarks, 'Orientals' adopt the terms and premises of Orientalism and use them in exactly the same way, or reverse them. Vis-à-vis this point, this thesis shows that self-Orientalism, as a response to Orientalism, is mediated by its relationship with the national and historical contexts of a particular society. Western Orientalism does not fully determine how 'Orientals' define their own culture and respond to Orientalism.

This thesis shows that a national film industry can more easily break into the international film market if internationally recognised auteur directors from the particular country have been recognised at international film festivals. This thesis elucidates the practice of labelling *foreign* films categorised as 'national cinema' and 'art cinema'. While Hollywood films are assumed to possess 'universality', the international art-house circuit and film festival circuits label films from other countries by their specific nationality or national culture, which is assumed to be reflected in high/traditional art. In this circuit, the names of 'auteur' directors from each country act as brand names, moulding audiences' expectations of films from a specific country. Film festivals, meanwhile, seek to become sites for 'discovering' supposedly unknown auteur directors and national cinemas.

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## **Travelling Films: Western Criticism, Labelling Practice and Self-Orientalised East Asian Films**

### **1. introduction**

Films do seem to travel and the scale of the travelling seems to be ever expanding. Hollywood blockbuster films reach the screens of multiplex cinemas in most parts of the world, sometimes within a few hours, sometimes within a month. Some independent, foreign-language and art films travel on the route of the art-house circuits, at a slower speed and to a more limited degree. Film festivals introduce and exhibit films, propelling their travelling and emerging as the key destinations in the itinerary of certain films. Some films are more likely to travel through special retrospectives and art galleries. DVDs, as a new technical means by which films can travel, seem to intensify the ever-growing border-crossing of films and to traverse the 'regions' imposed to block – or at least reduce – circulation.

Travel routes are varied. Certain routes seem open only to certain types of films and hardly accessible to others. As with human travellers, the travelling of films seems to be constrained by external factors. As James Clifford puts it,

The project of comparison would have to grapple with the evident fact that travelers move about under strong cultural, political, and economic compulsions and that certain travelers are materially privileged, others oppressed. These specific circumstances are crucial determinations of the travel at issue – movements in specific colonial, neo-colonial, and postcolonial circuits, different diasporas, borderlands, exiles, detours, and returns. Travel, in this view, denotes a range of material, spatial practices that produce knowledges, stories, traditions, compartments, musics, books, diaries, and other cultural expressions. (Clifford 1997: 35)

Films also travel under ‘cultural, political, and economic compulsions’, which set the route and control the amount and types of films travelling. Certain films are privileged to ‘go anywhere’, whilst others have to be illegally smuggled in as pirate copies. Films, when encountering new audiences in a new place, seem to produce ‘knowledges’ and ‘other cultural expressions’ as well. In order to illuminate the cultural, political and economic cartography of film circulation, Alan Williams (2002) suggests that we need to turn our attention to how films, film industries, film festivals, policies and markets interrelate internationally. Paul Willemen (2002) even claims that to study foreign films, we need to open up a whole new academic area of ‘comparative film studies’.

My interest throughout this thesis is in East Asian films. I deploy the term East Asian Cinema or East Asian films. At the outset I want to make clear that these terms are not used to indicate a clearly demarcated category or a substantial entity. I rather employ these terms technically to indicate Japanese, Chinese and Korean films collectively. The questions this thesis is concerned with are as follows: How do East Asian films travel to the west? On which routes do they travel? On what conditions and under which circumstances is such travel rendered possible? What kind of knowledge do they produce and how do their travelling stories return to make an impact back home? To cite a pertinent example, I remember when Bae Yong-Kyun’s *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* (1989) was released in Seoul, amid massive publicity and jubilation at its winning the Golden Leopard prize at the Locarno Film Festival. The film, hardly known to the Korean public before news of the award arrived, caused a stir among film audiences as well as film critics. Critics were pre-occupied with proving and analysing what was so excellent about the film that it should deserve such a prestigious western award, while cinema-goers struggled to adjust themselves to the slow pace of the image-saturated film. They also tried hard to figure out the answer to the question – ‘why has Bodhi-Dharma left for the East?’. The title of the film became a running joke and was frequently deployed by TV comedians. This may reflect the sense of frustration felt by Korean viewers as they failed to come up with answers, despite their efforts. While at home it constituted a social memory about a rather incomprehensible mystery, Bae’s film remained a staple and almost the only Korean film by which Korean cinema was

recognised in the west for about a decade (Bordwell 2003: 662). Such instances recur in film history and are not confined to Korean films.

Kurosawa Akira's *Rashomon* (1950) exemplifies a more or less similar instance. In 1951, when it won the Golden Lion Prize at the Venice International Film Festival, *Rashomon* seemed to enthuse and at the same time puzzle western critics. The discovery of 'unknown cinema' was both surprising and exciting, but western critics seemed confused, unable to understand the film or explain it in any intelligible way. With the very limited knowledge available, some western critics referred to Japanese traditional art forms or traditional culture, while others resorted to the universal values of humanism that the film supposedly conveys (Smith 2002). Back in Japan, this totally unexpected news instigated a similar phenomenon. While it was celebrated as 'a national achievement', restoring national pride by way of the public media, some Japanese film critics suspected that the success of *Rashomon* in the west was due to western Orientalism. Motivated by this success, *Toei*, one of the major Japanese film studios, continued to produce films based on the formula of *Rashomon*: period dramas with samurai and exotic settings (Anderson & Richie 1982).

Such historical instances raise questions about the relationship between western criticism, the circulation of East Asian films in the west, and East Asian film directors' responses to these. Throughout this thesis, I probe such questions by asking: How are East Asian films acknowledged, conceived and articulated by western film scholars and critics? To what extent and in what ways are western knowledge and criticism involved with the circulation of East Asian films in the west? What are the responses of East Asian directors to western criticism and to its vital influences on 'the economy of the international art-house circuit' (Berry 1998a)?

To get to grips with these questions, I draw upon the critical arguments of Edward Said's *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978). As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, Said's arguments on Orientalism and the ensuing criticisms and elaboration of this position yield crucial vantage points from which to examine western criticism as

knowledge and the distribution of East Asian films as a field in which this knowledge exerts its power. For Said, Orientalism not only denotes a series of negative representations of the Orient, but ‘a system of knowledge’ that constructs the Orient as a reality for any enunciation on the Orient. Said claims that ‘the Orient’ in Orientalism 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’ (1978: 5). As an underlying assumption of Orientalism, Said pinpoints the persistent operation of a binary and absolute demarcation of ‘us (the west)’ and ‘them (the east)’, which is embedded in the conception of radical difference between the two. Also, Said indicates that Orientalism assists western imperial power to prevail over the Orient by providing justifying and encouraging views, ideas, knowledge and attitudes. It is my argument that western knowledge and conceptions of East Asian films are established on this binary dichotomy and draw upon the given ‘otherness’ of East Asian films. The established system of knowledge and the western conceptual framework seem to be intimately bound up with the limited circulation network for East Asian films, such as international film festivals and the art-house circuit. The specific type of film that satisfies the western conception of East Asian films’ otherness is more likely to be celebrated by western critics and international film festivals and gain much wider distribution. In this respect, as a ‘system of knowledge’, western discourses on East Asian films may be a specific mode of Orientalism in Said’s sense.

Critics of Said’s *Orientalism* comment that Said presents a homogenising conception of Orientalism, while ignoring historical variations and national differences among European countries (Ahmad 1991; Lowe 1994; MacKenzie 1995; Thomas 1994; Young 1990, etc.). They point out that his usage of the binary conception of ‘the West’ and ‘the East’ reiterates the totalising binarism innate to Orientalism. In deploying a framework rooted in Said’s articulation, I am well aware that I may provoke the same criticism when analysing the relationship between western criticism and East Asian films. I in fact employ the term ‘western criticism’ as a ‘rhetorical device’ to unravel and displace the binary conception of ‘the west’ and ‘the other’ underlying discourses on particular ‘foreign’ films. We still need to hold on to such terms as a rhetorical device because

deconstruction of these terms as discourses does not mean that this binary dichotomy disappears in practice. It exerts its power, although in more subtle and scattered ways (see Hall 1996). Throughout this thesis, I pay attention to disparities and disagreement within what I call 'western criticism'. I approach each director and his films not in homogenising terms but with a focus on their differing positions. Ultimately, I am not suggesting that 'western criticism', as external and exclusive power, moulds particular films in a straightforward manner. This thesis instead casts light on a reciprocal process in which criticism and films interact and re-shape one another.

Among the critical reconsiderations of Said's Orientalism, the concept of self-Orientalism is particularly useful in comprehending the responses of film directors. I draw on Rey Chow's articulation of Mary Louise Pratt's (1992) conceptual tools such as 'contact zone' and 'autoethnography'. In her book *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (1995) Chow analyses films of the Chinese Fifth Generation filmmakers by applying Pratt's concept of 'auto-ethnography'. By 'autoethnography', Pratt means 'instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's own terms' (1992: 7). Chow argues that when people who have been objects of the western gaze return this gaze by using the same tool (film), they inscribe their subjectivity by asserting this 'to-be-looked-at-ness', not in a passive form, but as a form of self-affirmation. Chow thus disagrees with Said's Orientalism, which limits its focus to the passivity of others as a spectacle.

In light of Chow's argument, I would like to open up a discussion about how Orientals are involved in Orientalism through self-Orientalism. As the case of Zhang Yimou, one of the most renowned Chinese Fifth Generation filmmakers, demonstrates, some East Asian directors adopt a strategy of 'self-subalternising', while their 'self-exoticising' gives the west the 'otherness' it wants to see (Chow 1995: 142-172). As Chapter 5 lays bare, this self-Orientalising is the key element enabling Zhang's films to be widely circulated in the west. Zhang knows this well enough to make it his entry point to the western market. On the other hand, as self-Orientalism is combined with nationalism, it

appears as a 'reverse discourse', which replicates and perpetuates Orientalism and facilitates 'inner-colonisation'. Chapter 6 explores this, particularly in relation to films by Korean director Im Kwon-Taek.

In his article, 'Contemporary Cinema: Between Cultural Globalization and National Interpretation' (2000), Ulf Hedetoft poses a significant question that is rather neglected in film studies. The issue at stake is how a foreign film is understood when it crosses national borders and reaches foreign audiences. In his article, Hedetoft focuses on the way a Hollywood film, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), is understood as it encounters European – French and Danish – audiences, who see the film in culturally different contexts. Hedetoft highlights the role of critics who, in such a 'reframing process', provide 'the expectation horizon' or 'filters' for audiences (2000: 296). As critics mediate between a foreign film — here, *Saving Private Ryan* – and local audiences, according to Hedetoft, they rely upon knowledge of Hollywood films and also refer to a set of local knowledges and cultural conceptions underlying the national culture of the audience.

However, if the subject for analysis is not a Hollywood film but an East Asian one, knowledge of which is far less available to western critics and audiences, what kind of a 'reframing process' occurs? In the case of East Asian films, critics seem to rely heavily upon the western preconceptions of the particular country the film is set in. Once such knowledge is established within film scholarship, it seems to be repeated and reinforced in subsequent criticism and studies. Such knowledge of East Asian films seems to control the flow of films made in this region by way of international film festivals and distribution. Under such circumstances, hoping their films will travel to the west, some East Asian filmmakers seem to be closely involved with the knowledge and power games of western criticism and film festivals. In this respect, Hedetoft's approach is limited. By taking a Hollywood film as an example, he fails to grasp how this comparatively closed system of knowledge and power impinges on the 'reframing process' of watching a foreign film.

While focusing on instances bound up with asymmetrical global power relations, I hope it will cast light, at a more general level, on how a foreign film can be understood in another cultural context. As a foreigner from the region, watching East Asian films in London inspired my interest in this subject. Reading English reviews or criticisms of these films sometimes puzzled me and at other times intrigued me, as critics endowed them with a new horizon of meanings and contexts. Within the current international film scene, it is not only East Asian films that are affected by western Orientalism and self-Orientalism. Iranian films for example seem to face similar issues engendered in the process of being recognised at European film festivals and circulated via the international art-house circuit (Dabashi 2001; Tapper 2002). My decision to focus on East Asian films is due to my familiarity with and interest in these films. I believe that the notions of Orientalism and self-Orientalism can also be productively applied to films from other parts of the world.

Films are undoubtedly received in contrasting ways in different social, cultural, institutional and national settings. This thesis focuses on the relationship between East Asian films and mostly American and British reviews and criticisms as a specific terrain straddling these settings. The cinema of Japan, China and Korea was ‘discovered’ in a particular historical period: this thesis thus grapples with how each national cinema has been differently acknowledged in response to a specific historical configuration.

### **(1) research material**

The main evidence examined in this research includes academic works produced within film studies, articles of film criticism and reviews and interviews in film journals and magazines. To examine western conceptions of East Asian films, I analyse academic works, film criticism and reviews. To elaborate the responses of East Asian filmmakers, I study interviews with three directors – Kitano Takeshi, Zhang Yimou and Im Kwon-Taek – along with academic articles by local scholars and film criticism by local film critics.

This research is interested in how people, trained within the western academic discipline of film studies, deal with unfamiliar and familiar aspects of East Asian films. It therefore pays attention to critical and analytical responses from film scholars and film critics rather than the responses of audiences. The primary concern is with how film scholars and critics articulate films within and against the given frames of western film studies on East Asian cinema. Since limited background knowledge and information on East Asian films is available in the west, the role of film scholars and film critics appears more significant in providing guidance and informational references to audiences. As a result, the ‘advisory and interpretive gatekeeper functions’ (Hedetoft 2000) of film criticism and film reviews seem to be particularly influential in forming audiences’ expectations of and responses to East Asian films.

It is vital to take different approaches to academic works, film criticism and film reviews. David Bordwell (1989) divides film criticism into three sub-categories – journalistic criticism, essayistic criticism and academic criticism, depending on publishing formats and the formal and informal institutions they rely upon. According to his categorisation, journalistic criticism usually appears in newspapers and popular weeklies, essayistic criticism appears in specialised or intellectual monthlies or quarterlies and academic criticism appears in scholarly journals (1989: 20). I categorise journalistic criticism as film ‘review’, essayist criticism as ‘film criticism’ and academic criticism as ‘academic work’.

As discussed in Chapter 3, academic works produce knowledge within the discipline of film studies. Film criticism, while related to the academic discipline of film studies, occupies an autonomous space. It engages, at times, with political and social practice (see Harvey 1978). To explain a film or current cultural phenomena related to films, film criticism organises and creatively re-constructs the views and knowledge involved in theories popular at a given moment, and influences the discipline of film studies (see Caughie 1981). Film criticism also forms aesthetic conceptions of certain groups of films and lays down their value (see Ellis 1996; Klinger 1997: 118-119). It thus fashions audiences’ attitudes to and expectations of these films.

The main function of film reviews is to deliver basic knowledge and information about a new film. To some extent, film criticism shares the same functional role as film reviews, in that both deliver referential frames and information useful to approaching and understanding a film (Allen & Gomery 1985: 90). While film criticism seems to be more concerned with measuring the cinematic, aesthetic and cultural values of a film, however, film reviews seem to be keener on providing information. Film reviews are designed to supply the movie-going public and people in the film business with basic information about a film – storyline, director and leading actors, a few distinctive or interesting points, etc. It usually takes time for films to become the subject of lengthy film criticism and academic analysis. Only an extremely small range of films gets this chance. In contrast, film reviews cover almost all films at the time of release. Film reviewers seem to have much closer ties with the film industry ('publishers, advertisers, film producers, distributors, exhibitors, publicity departments, and press agents'); they are provided with a 'press-kit' and watch films at organised 'press screenings' (Crafton 1996: 461-463).

In light of these differing functions and characteristics, I use these materials for somewhat differing purposes. Academic works are particularly useful in getting to grips with the production of knowledge of East Asian films and its conventions. Film reviews take centre stage in probing how East Asian films are received by western critics and reviewers. Film criticism aids both types of investigation. Film criticism and reviews are the key sources in my discussion of how conceptions of East Asian films are involved with film festival and film distribution practice.

Interviews with film directors are scrutinised to analyse how each director views western recognition and responds to it. To understand the social, cultural and industrial contexts in which each director's response may connote different meanings I pay attention to academic articles by local scholars and film criticism by local film critics.

Given the limits of my capacity to read different languages, I deal mainly with materials written in English, including books, magazines and journals published in the USA, UK, Canada and Australia. I also look at the work of Japanese, Chinese and Korean scholars

and film critics. But, again, only books, articles and reviews written in or translated into English are referred to, with the rare exception of articles in French, Japanese and Korean. Index 1 (pp. 259-260) provides a list of the journals, magazines, newspapers and websites whose articles and reviews I mainly refer to.

## **(2) general introduction**

Since this thesis is primarily concerned with how East Asian films travel to the west, the focus is inevitably limited to the extremely restricted range of films that are widely appreciated and circulated in the west. As the following chapters explore, East Asian films mostly travel to the west via the art-house circuit and critical success at film festivals. On this route, such films seem to be labelled as auteur-cinema or as belonging to a particular national cinema. The name of an auteur director and the nationality (or sometimes ethnicity) of a film seem to function as the names of stars and the film's genre do for Hollywood films (Berry 1998a). Exceptions do however exist; the art-house circuit is not the only available option for East Asian films. Some popular films from Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea have been travelling to the west via the mainstream film distribution companies, even if on a small scale.<sup>1</sup> The array of phenomena investigated in this thesis is far from exhaustive and comprehensive. By limiting the range of films and directors for the purpose of analysis, I do not intend to undervalue films that do not travel well to the west. Nor do I assume that films more apt to travel to the west on a given route, marked by a particular labelling practice, bear higher filmic qualities. My concern lies in grasping why certain types of film are consistently selected for such travelling, while others are excluded.

I examine one director each from Japan, China and Korea: Kitano Takeshi, Zhang Yimou and Im Kwon-Taek.<sup>2</sup> Here, Chinese cinema designates films made in Mainland China by

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<sup>1</sup> Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) was co-produced with Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia and Sony Pictures Classics and was distributed in the USA by Sony Pictures Classics. Zhang Yimou's *The Road Home* (1999) and *Not One Less* (1999) took the same route as Ang Lee's film. Lee Jung-Hyang's *The Way Home* (2002) was distributed in the USA by Paramount Classics.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this thesis I place directors' surnames first, in line with the East Asian convention. I write the names of scholars of East Asian origin as they appear in English language texts.

Chinese directors from Mainland China, excluding Hong Kong or Taiwanese films. I do not intend to suggest that Mainland Chinese films represent all Chinese language films or that they are more significant. Chris Berry suggests that researchers must seriously question ‘when we [should] talk about “Chinese cinema,” and whether or not and under what conditions we should speak of “Chinese cinema” . . . as a national cinema or even a number of national cinemas’ (1998b: 130-131). I believe that the politics and history of the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan and their filmic histories demand that the latter two be dealt with as related to but distinct from Mainland China. ‘Chinese language film’ may thus be a more appropriate term for contemporary Chinese, Hong Kong and Taiwanese films collectively (Lu & Yeh 2001).

North Korean films have rarely been screened outside North Korea and the convention has taken hold that ‘Korean cinema’ means South Korean cinema. This convention is followed here. Recently published books on Korean films, such as Hyangjin Lee’s *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture, Politics* (2001) – which deals with the parallel historical development of North Korean and South Korean cinema and compares films made in each state in terms of gender, class and nationhood – fail to tackle whether the two distinct historical entities of North Korean cinema and South Korean cinema can be embraced within the unitary category of ‘Korean national cinema’. This does not necessarily mean that Lee’s book is flawed, but points to the limits of academic research: ‘Korean cinema’ as a category has never been seriously examined. Korean scholars such as Soyoung Kim (2004) have recently begun to tackle the definition of Korean cinema as a national cinema. Kim asks how the conventional category of Korean cinema can be considered and discussed in terms of national cinema. Articulating a view on the definition of this category lies beyond the framework of this thesis, which, in line with the convention, refers to South Korean cinema as Korean cinema. North Korean cinema is of course worthy of serious study, and South Korean cinema represents only one aspect of Korean cinema.

In my examination of directors and national cinema, I get to grips with the unique historical configuration in which each director is introduced and acknowledged in the

west. As shown below and in the following chapters, each cinema was introduced to the west at different times. More significantly, films from each country seem to be recognised differently depending on the relationship of each country with the west. I illuminate these differences. The following chapters thus focus on somewhat different (but related) aspects most characteristic of each cinema's and each director's western liaisons.

The East Asian film directors considered here are arguably the most renowned in the west at the moment. More often than not, their names are associated with their respective national cinemas: 'Japanese auteur, Kitano Takeshi', 'Chinese master, Zhang Yimou', and 'Im Kwon-Taek, the Godfather of Korean cinema'. Whether they intend to or not, they come to 'represent' each national cinema in the west. This practice, underlying the circulation of these directors' films, makes it essential to scrutinise, in the first place, how each cinema has been introduced and conceived in the west. The films and careers of each director are thus analysed in relation to the western conception of each cinema.

In dealing with three national cinemas I do not presuppose a unity underlying the category of East Asian cinema. These national cinemas have influenced each other to varying degrees and share common and similar characteristics (Dissanayake 1988; 1993). My intention in examining these three national cinemas together, however, is to bring out the contrasting historical and cultural configurations in which each cinema has drawn western attention. I also shed light on differences and similarities in how each cinema is appropriated and articulated in the west. Historically, Japanese cinema, Chinese cinema and Korean cinema were 'discovered', or made a 'breakthrough' in the west in that order. The historical, political and economic contexts in which each cinema was recognised differ enough to justify my analytical approach, which examines somewhat different but related issues concerning each cinema. It is possible that my position as a Korean researcher has shaped my approach to Korean cinema and Im Kwon-Taek. I was able to access much deeper and more subtle background knowledge and my analysis may thus be more reflective of and engaged with the Korean discursive sphere. The following

provides a brief overview of Japanese, Chinese and Korean cinemas' introduction to the west and introduces each director's career.

### **Kitano Takeshi and Japanese cinema**

If we look at the historical momentum of each national cinema as it was 'discovered' in the west, the Japanese came first. The 'breakthrough' came in 1951 when Kurosawa Akira's *Rashomon* (1950) won the Golden Lion at the Venice International Film Festival. Since then, Japanese cinema has enjoyed international recognition and popularity. It has a relatively long history of institutionalisation within western film studies. It is thus revealing to look at the accumulated knowledge of Japanese cinema within western film studies, in order to scrutinise how Orientalist assumptions underlie western approaches to East Asian cinema as 'other'. This also helps us grasp how western knowledge of East Asian cinema is produced and maintains its underlying assumptions.

The first film exhibition in Japan was organised in 1896. The first Japanese films, of recorded scenes of *kabuki*, appeared in 1899. From the 1910s, the Japanese film industry produced films based on the studio system (Komatsu 1996). Japanese films were screened in the west, though rarely, in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> Arguably the best-known Japanese film director in the west is Kurosawa Akira. With the success of *Rashomon* (1950), Kurosawa's films have enjoyed popularity and commercial success in western countries and have been identified with Japanese cinema itself (Yoshimoto 2000b). After Kurosawa, the best-known and respected Japanese directors in the west are Ozu Yasujiro

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<sup>3</sup> Kinugasa Teinosuke's *Crossroads* (1928) was exhibited in the USA in 1932 (Smith 2002) and also in Germany and France (Anderson & Richie 1982). Naruse Mikio's *Apart from You* (1932) and *Wife! Be Like a Rose!* (1935) were screened in the USA (Smith 2002). They failed to draw as much critical attention as *Rashomon*. While Kinugasa's *Crossroads* fell prey to 'the exploitive marketing' of Oriental films, Naruse's *Wife! Be Like a Rose!* was given a lukewarm response (Smith 2002: 116-118). *Rashomon* was not the first Japanese film to appear at the Venice International Film Festival. Films such as *Nippon, Nippon* (1934), *Moon Over the Ruined Castle* (1937) and *Five Scouts* (1938) were screened at Venice in the 1930s (Anderson & Richie [1959] 1982: 229).

and Mizoguchi Kenji.<sup>4</sup> Mizoguchi's films such as *The Life of O-Haru* (1952) and *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953) were celebrated at Venice, winning prestigious awards. In contrast, it was not until the 1970s that Ozu's films drew attention from western critics. Due to western ignorance of his films, in Japan Ozu's films were considered too 'Japanese' to be understood by western people (Burch 1979: 184).

Although many other Japanese directors have become well-known and popular in the west, the names of Japanese New Wave directors such as Oshima Nagisa and Imamura Shohei must be mentioned. These directors<sup>5</sup> emerged in the 1960s, the films of Oshima and Imamura being the most well-known and drawing most academic attention in the west. In particular, being refused screening at the 1977 New York Film Festival and getting involved in a law suit over 'obscenity' in Japan (Richie 2001), Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) has left such a potent impression in the west that since its appearance Japanese films have often been associated with its sensational and pornographic traits (Grindon 2001).

After the appearance of these New Wave directors and the belated discovery of Ozu, Japanese cinema failed to sustain the same degree of western critical attention while the domestic film industry sharply declined in the 1970s. Contemporary Japanese films nonetheless maintain a solid position in the western academic arena, within the international film festival circuit and in the world film market (Schilling 1999). While new young directors draw attention in the west with critically acclaimed *Zeitgeist* films,<sup>6</sup> Japanese popular movies such as horror and slasher movies retain a strong hold in the

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<sup>4</sup> Ozu and Mizoguchi belonged to an older generation of filmmakers than Kurosawa. They started their careers in the 1920s making silent movies.

<sup>5</sup> David Desser defines the Japanese New Wave as 'films produced and/or released in the wake of Oshima's *A Town of Love and Hope* (1959), films which take an overtly political stance in a general way or toward a specific issue utilising a deliberately disjunctive form compared to previous filmic norms in Japan' (1988: 4). In the 1960s and 1970s, this movement generated a number of independent films made outside the major studio system and against its conventional disciplines in an attempt to reflect the reality of Japanese society at the time. This movement is regarded as one of the 'avant-garde' movements corresponding to the French New Wave in the 1960s.

<sup>6</sup> In particular, Iwai Shunji, Suwa Nobuhiro, Aoyama Shinji, Kurosawa Kiyoshi and Kore-eda Hirokaze are eminent Japanese directors whose films have continuously made their mark at international film festivals.

international film market.<sup>7</sup>

Among contemporary Japanese film directors, Kitano Takeshi is most acclaimed in the west for his artistic achievement and unique film style (Yomota 1999). Kitano has been and remains one of the most popular comedians and TV personalities in Japan. He started his career as a film director with no intention of becoming one. He came to direct his debut film, *Violent Cop* (1989), by chance, taking on the role of director when Fukasaku Kinji quit in the middle of shooting. Since then, he has directed films such as *Boiling Point* (1990), *A Scene at the Sea* (1991), *Sonatine* (1993), *Getting Any* (1994), *Kids Return* (1996), *Hana-Bi* (1997), *Kikujiro* (1999), *Brother* (2000), *Dolls* (2002) and *Zatoichi* (2003). Kitano himself played leading characters in *Violent Cop*, *Boiling Point*, *Sonatine*, *Hana-Bi*, *Kikujiro*, *Brother* and *Zatoichi*. Most of his films contain a high degree of violence and feature Japanese yakuza and cops.

Whilst his violence-saturated films such as *Violent Cop*, *Boiling Point* and *Sonatine* rendered him a kind of a cult figure in the west, in Japan his career as a film director was partially eclipsed by his fame and popularity as a TV entertainer in Japan. *Kids Return* was selected by the Cannes Film Festival in 1996 to be screened during the Directors' Fortnight. Kitano's *Hana-Bi* eventually won The Golden Lion Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1997, 46 years after Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. With this award, his position as a Japanese auteur director seemed authorized and his films began to gain a much broader range of recognition in the west as well as back in Japan. Following *Hana-Bi*'s success, *Kikujiro* was selected in the official competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 1999. Produced specifically for international distribution (particularly for distribution in the USA), *Brother* was Kitano's first film shot with American crews and actors in the USA. *Dolls* and *Zatoichi* were successively nominated for the Golden Lion Prize at Venice and *Zatoichi* brought him the Special Director's Award at Venice in 2003.

Throughout his film career, Kitano seems to have to deal with western stereotypes and

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<sup>7</sup> Nakata Hideo's horror movie *Ring* (1998) achieved fame when it was released in the UK. This success was followed by another violent horror film *Audition* (1999), directed by Miike Takashi.

knowledge of Japanese films. Whilst he sometimes attempts to transcend them, he also seems to play with western expectations about the ‘Japanese-ness’ of Japanese films, cautiously and consciously. My main concern is how Kitano Takeshi’s films are conceived and recognised in light of western knowledge, which has been developed in the course of ‘otherising’ Japanese films. Given that Kitano’s films cannot escape being placed within the domain of Japanese otherness and the otherness of Japanese films, how Kitano deals with western expectations is another key question. *Sonatine*, *Hana-Bi* and *Brother* are the main objects of analysis.

### **Zhang Yimou and Chinese cinema**

With the advent of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, Chinese cinema has drawn western attention since the mid-1980s. While Zhang Yimou’s films such as *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) were highly acclaimed in the west, they were severely criticised by the Chinese government and Chinese critics for pandering to western Orientalism. This disparity between western and domestic responses to Zhang’s films invites critical discussions of Orientalism and self-Orientalism. While consistently employing Orientalist elements, Zhang, as a representative ‘Chinese director’ in the west, has had to balance two influential and irreconcilable forces throughout his career: western Orientalism, to secure a place in the western market, and the authoritarian censorship of the Mainland Chinese government, obsessed with the threat of western imperialism. Zhang has had to learn how to deal with a new set of problematic postcolonial power relations between China and the west. The western recognition of Chinese cinema, and the politics and conflicts that Zhang’s films entail, help us to see the configuration of power relations within which western Orientalism affects ‘non-western’ films and how self-Orientalism gets involved in this process.

Chinese cinema has a long history. The first film exhibition was organised in 1896. Early short films were made in the first decade of the twentieth century and long feature films began to be produced in the 1920s (Zhang 2004). Despite this long history, Chinese

cinema, hardly seen in the west during the Mao Zedong era, drew little western attention. Only after Chinese political leaders adopted an open market policy and tried to improve diplomatic relations with western countries in the late 1970s did Chinese films gradually become accessible to the west. Until then, obtaining information on Chinese films was almost impossible, though a few fortunate western scholars were able to visit and stay in China.

The Chinese Fifth Generation filmmakers made a ‘breakthrough’ in the west in the late 1980s. Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* (1984) is the first landmark film of the Fifth Generation. It amazed audiences at the Hong Kong International Film Festival in 1985 and attracted worldwide international attention. With its descriptions of seemingly archaic traditional peasants’ lives in the 1930s and its stunning images, it gripped western critics. ‘Chinese Fifth Generation directors’ usually refers to directors such as Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou and Tian Zhuangzhuang, who were in the same class at the Beijing Film Academy. After graduation, Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou formed a team and collaborated on films at the Guangxi Studio. Apart from *Yellow Earth*, Chen Kaige has made other internationally well-known films such as *King of the Children* (1987), *Life on a String* (1991) and *Farewell My Concubine* (1993). *Life on a String* and *Farewell My Concubine*, which were internationally co-produced and distributed, became particularly popular in the west. The Fifth Generation film directors’ strong presence on the international film scene allowed Chinese cinema studies to evolve from a sub-domain of area studies to a key plank of film studies (Zhang 2002).

Zhang Yimou initially worked as a cinematographer on Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* and *The Big Parade* (1986) and the stunning images of *Yellow Earth* seem to emanate from him. Zhang’s debut as a director, *Red Sorghum* (1987) won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 1988. Its vivid visual images in red seemed to construct the characteristic image – almost a cliché – of Chinese cinema in the west as well as the trademark of Zhang’s films. Whilst Zhang’s following films, *Ju Dou* (1990) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) enjoyed great critical and commercial success abroad, they were banned in China. The main reason for the harsh censorship can be found in the frozen political climate after

the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. The Chinese government was well aware that, in the west, these films would be interpreted as political criticism of contemporary Chinese politics. Domestic critics' and the government's main criticism was that Zhang's films distort and exploit Chinese culture in order to appeal to the western gaze and the western image of 'Oriental' and 'exotic' China (Chow 1995). All three films – *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* – have a sexually suppressed and abused woman as the core character, all played by Chinese actress Gong Li.

In 1990, *Ju Dou* was screened in the official competition section at Cannes. Despite the Chinese government's withdrawal, it was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film at the American Academy Awards in 1991. The same year, *Raise the Red Lantern* won the Silver Lion prize at Venice. In 1992 the film was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film at the American Academy Awards, this time submitted as a Hong Kong entry. After *Raise the Red Lantern*, Zhang made *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992), which satisfied Chinese censors and also won the Golden Lion prize at Venice. This time, Zhang's award was celebrated by the Chinese government. When his next film *To Live* (1994) won the Grand Prize at Cannes, Zhang again got into trouble with the Chinese government, which disapproved of his film along with two others – Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Blue Kite* (1993) and Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993). All of these films look back at the turbulence of contemporary Chinese history from a critical perspective. *Shanghai Triad* (1995) was also selected for the official competition at Cannes. In the middle of production, however, the Chinese government intervened and prohibited Zhang from making films in co-operation with foreign companies. As a result, *Keep Cool* (1997) was made without any foreign capital. *Keep Cool* was also invited to the Cannes Film Festival in 1997, but was prevented from going by the Chinese government. This time, it was not because *Keep Cool* contained politically critical themes, but because another Chinese film which annoyed the Chinese government was also invited to Cannes. The government thus declared an official boycott of the Cannes Film Festival that year. The problematic film at issue was Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West Palace* (1996), which deals with homosexuality in China and was made without the permission of the government.

In the chapter on Zhang Yimou, I explore the ‘in-between’ zone to which Zhang’s films respond. In this ‘in-between’ zone, the Chinese government exclusively authorises and controls a cultural nationalist discourse on Chinese culture, while the Orientalising west continues to dominate the world film market. The chapter on Zhang concentrates on how these forces have affected Zhang’s films and career and how Zhang has dealt with the Chinese government, western Orientalism and self-Orientalism to enable his films to attain popularity within China and travel to the west. In the chapter on Zhang’s films I mainly look at *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, and *Not One Less* (1999).

### **Im Kwon-Taek and Korean cinema**

Korean cinema, obscure until recently, is set to take off in the west, the latest arrival from East Asia. This recognition is driven by the sharp growth of the domestic film industry, which holds 40-50% of domestic market share. Alongside the rise of Korean cinema in the international film market, Im Kwon-Taek is consolidating his name as a ‘representative’ Korean auteur director by having his films – *Chunhyang* (2000) and *Chihwaseon* (2002) – nominated in the official competition section at Cannes and winning the Director’s Prize in 2002. Western recognition of Korean cinema is under construction. Im’s films, such as *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon*, seem to be formulating the initial referential frame for Korean cinema in the west. As yet, unlike Japanese and Chinese cinema, Korean cinema does not seem to be encapsulated within stereotypic images in the west. Looking at how Korean cinema and Im’s films are attracting western recognition may unravel what is happening in this process of ‘discovering’ and ‘being discovered’.

The first public film screening in Korean history was organised in 1903 (Lee and Choe 1988). Early films made in Korea were for ‘kino-drama’, a kind of hybrid genre of film and theatre – ‘a combination of using motion pictures along with a play on the stage’ (Lee and Choe 1988: 25). The first film in a purely cinematic form was made in 1923. From the late 1950s, after liberation from Japanese Occupation and the Korean War, the

Korean film industry began to flourish. The period from the early 1960s to the early 1970s is often considered the golden age of Korean cinema. For instance, in 1970 alone, 231 feature films were produced (Lee and Choe 1988). During the golden age, some Korean films were presented at European film festivals. The first flowering of Korean cinema was forcibly ended by the harsh censorship under the military dictatorship. In the 1980s, Korean films again appeared at western film festivals.

Korean cinema has begun to draw western attention only very recently, coinciding with the exponential growth of the Korean film industry since the mid-1990s.<sup>8</sup> The Pusan International Film Festival, launched in 1996, has successfully drawn international attention to this robust domestic film industry. Through the retrospective organised by Pusan, films by Kim Ki-young and Korean New Wave directors such as Park Kwang-Su and Jang Sun-Woo were introduced to the rest of the world. As Korean films become far more accessible in the west,<sup>9</sup> prominent European film festivals such as Cannes, Venice and Berlin seem to be making an effort to ‘discover’ Korean *auteur* directors. In the last few years Korean directors suddenly began to be invited to these festivals and won prestigious prizes. In the same year, when Im Kwon-Taek won the Director’s Prize at Cannes with *Chihwaseon* (2002), Lee Chang-Dong won the Special Director’s Prize at Venice with *Oasis* (2002). In 2004, Kim Ki-Duk won the Silver Bear Award at Berlin with *Samaria* (2004). The same year, two Korean films – Hong Sang-Soo’s *Woman is the Future of Man* (2004) and Park Chanwook’s *Oldboy* (2003) were selected for the official competition section at Cannes and Park’s film won the Grand Prize of the Jury.

In the 1980s, when Korean cinema was still unknown in the west, the Korean films most celebrated at international film festivals were those of Im Kwon-Taek. Among Im’s

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<sup>8</sup> In 1999, Korean blockbuster *Shiri* (1998 dir. Kang Jae-Kyu) broke the box office record set by *Titanic* (1997 dir. James Cameron). This seemed to signal that the Korean film industry had entered a new phase. Since then, Korean films have maintained an average market share of 35%. With ever more multiplex cinemas, in 2004, its market share reached 40-50%. In March 2004, Korean block-buster films such as *Silmido* (2003, dir. Kang Woo-Suk) and *Taegukgi* (2004 dir. Kang Jae-Kyu) drew more than 10 million viewers.

<sup>9</sup> The export of Korean films is increasing rapidly not only within Asia but also in North America and Europe. The export of Korean films abroad increased by 153% in Asia, 41% in Europe and 104% in North America from the first half of 2003 to the first half of 2004 (KOFIC 2004).

1980s' films, *Mandala* (1981) was invited to the Hawaii International Film Festival and the Berlin International Film Festival; *Village in the Mist* (1982) to the London International Film Festival; *Gilsodom* (1985) to Berlin; *Surrogate Mother* (1986) to Venice and the San Francisco International Film Festival; *Adada* (1988) to the Montreal World Film Festival; *Come, Come, Come Upward* (1989) to the Moscow Film Festival; *The Taebaek Mountains* (1994) to Berlin. As his films in this period mainly dealt with stories of women's suffering, he was often compared with a Japanese director, Mizoguchi Kenji (Sato 2000). Im's appearance at international film festivals was partly due to the military dictatorship's policy during the 1980s of improving Korea's international reputation by promoting Korean films overseas. Im, 'who had cultivated his talent through local aesthetics and national history', but was 'disinterested in the direct political protest' (Kim 2002: 35) was regarded as a safe choice by the Korean government.

Im has made 98 feature films since 1962. In 1990, his gangster action film *The General's Son* (1990) set a new box office record for domestic films in Korea. His *Sopyonje* (1993) broke that record in 1993. As Im admits, *Sopyonje* was not aimed at the domestic box office, but for the international film festival circuit (Jung 2003). Accordingly, its commercial success came as a surprise. Apart from its artistic quality, the success of *Sopyonje* is best understood in light of Korean social realities at the time. Nativist views of Korean culture and nation dominated Korean social discourses and are palpable in *Sopyonje*. In 2000, as Korean films rose to prominence within the international film scene, Im Kwon-Taek became the first Korean director whose film was invited to the official competition section at Cannes. He was regarded as 'a national hero' in Korea for winning the Director's Prize at Cannes in 2002, for the first time in Korean history.

Western critics appear to view Im's films as 'representative' of Korean cinema. His work appears to denote and circulate a type of 'Korean-ness' that corresponds to western expectations rooted in Orientalism and exoticism. At the same time, the nationalism embedded in Im's films functions to forge a referential frame to articulate the 'otherness' of Korean cinema. Im's films thus appear crucial to creating a Korean national cinema inside and outside Korea. The chapter on Im grapples with how his films, in alliance with

the Korean national project, relate to self-Orientalism and western Orientalism. The analytical focus is on *Sopyonjae*, *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon*.

### **(3) thesis narrative**

In Chapter 2, I discuss Said's criticism of Orientalism and the core issues this throws up. My key concern is to examine the characteristics of western knowledge of East Asian films. I thus attempt to lay bare the nature of Orientalism as systemised knowledge and its relationship with power. Given that Said's argument draws upon the relationship between 'the Arab Middle East' and western – English and French – Orientalism, I examine the extent to which it can be applied to western understanding of other cultures. I also draw attention to self-Orientalism, rather neglected in Said's argument, but key to grasping the Oriental's involvement with Orientalism and thus to attaining a richer understanding of East Asian film directors' entanglement with western Orientalism.

In Chapter 3, in light of Said's criticism of Orientalism, I illuminate how western discourses on East Asian films conceptualise East Asian cinema as 'other'. Chapter 3 considers how western discourses – academic works, criticism and reviews – are associated with the practice of labelling East Asian films. It examines western criticism's practical function in controlling the flow of East Asian films to the west. I elucidate how western knowledge of East Asian films draws upon the assumptions of Orientalism. Film criticism's and film reviews' practical role as 'gatekeeper' is scrutinised by probing how they are imbued with Orientalist assumptions. Here, I look at how general categorising concepts used in film studies, such as 'national cinema' and 'auteur cinema' are applied to label East Asian films as valuable commodities while ensuring cultural otherness. I draw attention to the role of international film festivals as a crucial domain in which this labelling practice is initiated and reinforced. At the end of Chapter 3 I speculate about alternatives to these labelling practices. I suggest that films are a product of 'transculturation' in a 'contact zone'.

The following three chapters (4, 5 and 6) analyse western criticism and its role in controlling the flow of East Asian films in the west, probing how East Asian directors Kitano Takeshi, Zhang Yimou and Im Kwon-Taek have responded to this through self-Orientalism. Each chapter analyses western criticism and each director's response to the selected films; each scrutinises related but different facets of Orientalism and self-Orientalism. Chapter 4 casts light on the characteristics of western knowledge that 'otherise' Japanese cinema. Chapter 5 examines the power of Orientalism and self-Orientalism within the contemporary postcolonial political configuration. Chapter 6 underscores the intertwined relationship of Orientalism, self-Orientalism and nationalism.

In Chapter 4 I examine the formation of western knowledge of Japanese cinema by focusing on crucial moments in western film scholars' discussions on Japanese films. In particular, I draw attention to how the 'incomprehensibility' of Kurosawa Akira's *Rashomon* and the unique cinematic features of Ozu Yasujiro's films have been discussed and articulated among western scholars. I show that attempts to understand Japanese films have been dominated and limited by notions of Japanese 'otherness'. Chapter 4 analyses the characteristics of western knowledge of Japanese cinema in relation to Orientalism and examines how Kitano's films are involved with the Orientalist aspects of this knowledge.

In Chapter 5 I tackle how Zhang Yimou's films, in the 'zone in-between' China and the west, are involved with Orientalism and self-Orientalism. It looks at the problems with the ways films of 'the Fifth Generation' directors are considered to represent Chinese cinema in the west. By referring to critical discussions, evoked by the success of Zhang's films in the west, I examine how Zhang's films employ and embody Orientalism and self-Orientalism. In this process, I bring out how Chinese women are doubly otherised as 'the primitive' or 'the native' by western Orientalism and Zhang's self-Orientalism. A further key concern is with how, in the 'in-between zone', western Orientalism and Chinese nationalism conflict and inadvertently collaborate to privilege the geo-political reading of his films. Attention is also paid to how Chinese audiences are positioned in this in-between zone.

Chapter 6 explains how western Orientalism engages with self-Orientalism and nationalism through Im Kwon-Taek's films. It reviews how Korean cinema has been recognised in the west so far and examines how the contemporary west requires the appearance of a Korean auteur director as part and parcel of the 'discovery' of Korean cinema. I also examine how Im's films meet western Orientalism and employ self-Orientalism. In light of the findings, at the end of Chapter 6 I elucidate the entanglement of western Orientalism, self-Orientalism and Korean nationalism. I am particularly keen to uncover how western Orientalism contributes to authorising Im's nativist views in conjunction with the Korean nationalist project. I thus focus on gender in Im's films, an issue which casts a particularly revealing light on how western Orientalism and Korean nationalism collaborate through self-Orientalism.

## **2. Said's Orientalism and Self-Orientalism**

### **2.1 introduction**

This chapter investigates Edward Said's critique of Orientalism. In particular, I focus on the characteristics of Orientalism as systematised knowledge and how such knowledge is linked with power. I explain how Said's concepts inform my research and grapple with criticisms of these concepts. Since my interest lies in East Asian films, I discuss how Said's critique can be applied beyond the Middle East. Lastly I scrutinise self-Orientalism, to which Said paid relatively little attention. This chapter clarifies the framework in which I reflect on the Orientalism embedded within western film criticism and on East Asian film directors' responses to western Orientalism.

### **2.2 Edward Said's Orientalism and criticisms of it**

This section pins down the aspects of Orientalism referred to in this thesis. Drawing on Said, I articulate Orientalism as systematised knowledge linked with western power. My concern here is to show how Orientalism operates beyond the common idea that it signifies nothing more than western misrepresentation or negative stereotypes of the Orient. I demonstrate that Orientalism functions as a well-organised and institutionalised system of knowledge, based on the binary conception of us (the west) and them (others). I then look at Said's and other scholars' attempts to expound Orientalism as a discourse, hegemony and process of cultural understanding. This section thus aims to clarify Said's views and develop an understanding of Orientalism applicable to a broader range of historical instances.

### 2.2.1 Said's Orientalism: knowledge and power

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is not the first critical work on western Orientalism. Aijaz Ahmad emphasises that a vast tradition of colonial criticism along the lines of *Orientalism* has long existed outside the western world (1992: 174). Nonetheless, in the western academy, criticism of Orientalism began to draw attention in the 1960s. Articles in English by Arabic scholars such as Anour Abdel-Malik's 'Orientalism in Crisis' and A.L. Tibawi's 'English-Speaking Orientalists' were published respectively in 1963 and 1964 (Macfie 2002). Said's argument seems to reflect Abdel-Malik's criticism of 'traditional orientalism' (Abdel-Malik [1963] 2000: 50). Abdel-Malik problematises traditional Orientalism's 'general conception': the view of the Orient as a passive 'object' and the tendency to confine Orientals within 'an essentialist conception of the countries, nations and peoples of the Orient' (Abdel-Malik [1963] 2000: 50). Still, arguably, it is Said's *Orientalism* that delivers the most crucial moment in criticism of western traditions and western academic disciplines (Young 2001).

Said draws upon Michel Foucault's articulation of 'discourse' and his explanation of the relationship of power and knowledge. Foucault conceives of power not as authoritative or repressive but as productive, in that it produces knowledge which facilitates the enactment of power. Discourse means a body of texts. More broadly, it means all forms of enunciation – all verbal and non-verbal expressions – of social and historical practice. Discourse operates to construct social realities and to define the way people perceive certain objects and situations (Foucault [1972] 1989). Said adapts these theoretical frames to his analysis of western literature on and knowledge of the Orient. He argues that Orientalism is a discourse principally produced to render the east the inferior Other of the west and to serve the interests of European colonialism. As many scholars have indicated, Said also relies upon Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Gramsci 1975). Said claims that Orientalism leads people to adopt the ideology of the ruling colonial power just as the ruling class solicits consent or voluntary subjection from the ruled through hegemony. Said thus extends and at the same time challenges the horizon of Foucauldian and Gramscian theories, which mainly focus on the inner dynamics of western history

and western societies. Borrowing Said's own phrase, 'revisionist projects of postcolonial intellectuals', Benita Parry suggests that Said's Orientalism is one such project (1992: 20). According to Parry, Said's critical project explores the possibilities and the ethnocentric limits of western theories of metropolitan origin.

By scrutinising texts ranging from Aeschylus' plays in the ancient Greek period to documents on the Orient from contemporary American area studies, Said shows how Orientalism constitutes and maintains the idea of the Orient as an object of knowledge and western domination. While Said provides no clear definition of what Orientalism is, in *Orientalism*, three meanings can be discerned.

Firstly, Orientalism indicates scholarly works about the Orient produced within academic institutions.

Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient – and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist – either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism. (1978: 2)

The first meaning thus underlines the durability of Orientalism within academia 'through its doctrines and theses about the Orient and the Oriental' (1978: 2).

Secondly, in more general terms, Orientalism is considered 'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"' (1978: 2). Orientalism thus comes to include a huge amount of written work invoking the 'radical difference' of the Orient and the distinction between the west (us) and the east (them). Said underlines that the academic meaning of Orientalism and the popular 'more or less imaginative meaning of Orientalism' have constantly interacted (1978: 3).

Thirdly, for Said, Orientalism ‘can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it’ (1978: 3). Said states that this third meaning of Orientalism is rooted in the late eighteenth century and is more ‘historically and materially defined’ than the other meanings. On this view, Orientalism is ‘a Western style for domination, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’ (1978: 3).

However, these three meanings of Orientalism do not define three separable and exclusive spheres. Rather they seem to indicate diverse but overlapping contexts. Meanwhile, as well as deploying the term Orientalism in these three ways, Said relates it to Foucault’s concept of discourse.

My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. (1978: 3)

Hence, Orientalism as a discourse controls, if not determines, what is thought, said, written and done about the Orient. According to Said, anybody who writes on the Orient inevitably has to refer to and rely on ‘some Oriental precedent’ and ‘some previous knowledge of the Orient’ (1978: 20). As a result, any enunciation on the Orient entails narratives, structures, images, visions and themes drawn from Orientalism. Said says that Orientalism is, in very general terms, ‘a form of radical realism’ (1978: 72). This means that it is ‘the habit for dealing with questions, objects, qualities, and regions deemed Oriental’ – the system of knowledge and the style of representation – that gives rise to the Orient as a reality for any discussion or description. As Said recurrently underscores

throughout his book, 'the Orient' is *created* within Orientalism. That is, 'the Orient' in Orientalism 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' (1978: 5). Thus, Said's analysis of Orientalist texts focuses on revealing characteristics of western representations of the Orient '*as representations*', 'not as "natural" depictions of the Orient' (1978: 21; original emphasis). As the Orient is represented by 'various Western techniques of representation', Said claims

Orientalism responded more to the culture that produced it than to its putative object, which was also produced by the West. (1978: 22)

By fusing the Foucauldian articulation of power and knowledge with the Gramscian idea of hegemony, Said is able to illuminate the entanglement of Orientalism with western imperial and colonial power. For Said, Orientalism as 'a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient' (1978: 95) enables western imperial power to prevail over the Orient. Western imperial power requires Orientalism as a hegemonic discourse. Orientalism supports western domination by providing justifying and encouraging views, ideas, knowledge and attitudes.

Bound up with western imperial power, Orientalism is a system of knowledge materially invested and institutionalised in the form of academic disciplines. However neutral and scientific it looks, knowledge produced within Orientalism cannot be considered 'pure' knowledge beyond power relationships. Yet, this does not mean that Orientalism is 'a mere political subject matter or field' that is 'in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw' (1978: 12). Said underlines that Orientalism is a discourse formulated within a specific 'culture' and exists in 'an uneven exchange with various kinds of power' (1978: 12). For Said, Orientalism is 'a certain *will or intention*' to understand and control the Orient (1978: 12; original emphasis).

What then are the characteristics of Orientalist knowledge? Said stresses that Orientalism persistently assumes a binary and absolute demarcation of us (the west) and them (the

east). He argues that this 'absolute demarcation' began in ancient Greece, the east being considered 'other', radically different from the west. Orientalism, according to Said, entered a new phase in the mid-eighteenth century, when it was shaped by 'a growing systematic knowledge about the Orient' and 'a sizeable body of literature' and became infused with intensifying western power and domination. In this later tradition of Orientalism, the Orient is identified with negative dispositions – 'irrational, depraved, childlike, "different"', whilst Europe is described in positive terms – 'rational, virtuous, mature, "normal"' (1978: 40). Said suggests that this reflects the unequal relationship of the west and the east 'as a strong and a weak partner' (1978: 40).

Even in this later tradition of Orientalism, which Said calls 'manifest Orientalism', the 'latent Orientalism' of earlier traditions remains a vital underlying premise. That is, as a prerequisite for any enunciation about the Orient, 'the Oriental' is presupposed to live 'in a different but thoroughly organized world of his own, a world with its own national, cultural, and epistemological boundaries and principles of internal coherence' (1978: 40). When this dichotomy is employed in 'analysis, research and public policy', it once again 'polarizes the distinction – the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western' (1978: 46). Said states that Orientalism thus limits 'the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies' and disguises how the idea of the west is formulated and conceived as such by otherising the Orient (1978: 44-46).

Orientalist knowledge, according to Said, also presupposes 'the Westerner's privilege' to penetrate, acknowledge, name, classify and elaborate the essence of the east. The belief in the superiority of western intellectual and scientific method underlies Orientalist knowledge. The Orient is given 'its intelligibility and identity' only through 'the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations' produced within Orientalism (1978: 40). When Said claims that the Orient is 'Orientalised' (1978: 40), he means that the politically and economically dominant west has made the Orient an object of systematised knowledge and claims to speak for and represent the Orient (1978: 6). In this process, whilst the Orient and the Oriental are made the 'object' of western knowledge, 'intellectual *authority* over the Orient' is established 'within Western culture'

(1978: 19; original emphasis). In other words, the Orientalist is endowed with the privilege to observe, study and ‘write about’ the Orient whereas the Oriental, silent and absent, is given a passive role of being ‘written about’ (1978: 308). As an object of knowledge, Orientals are silenced and the Orient is trapped in a ‘timeless eternal’ essence (1978: 72).

In light of the above discussion I articulate Orientalism as follows. As a discourse, Orientalism controls what is enunciated about the Orient, and persists and thrives as an academic discipline through material and institutional investment. As systematised and institutionalised knowledge, Orientalism is based on the binary conception of the west and the east, essentialising differences between the two. In producing knowledge about the Orient, Orientalism makes the Orient the object of western scrutiny, which requires western representation in order to become ‘visible’ and ‘acknowledgeable’. Western scholars and writers produce authorised knowledge on the Orient in the belief that they can penetrate its true nature or essence. The present work draws upon such perspectives to analyse western scholarly and critical works on East Asian films.

### **2.2.2 critiques of Said’s Orientalism: latent Orientalism**

Said’s *Orientalism* has aroused severe criticisms and inspired a huge volume of scholarly works that elaborate and modify its argument. The criticism most relevant to the present work claims that Said neglects Orientals’ relation to Orientalism. Section 3 of this chapter probes this. I focus here on criticisms which elucidate and modify Said’s argument about latent Orientalism. Criticised for being ahistorical, Said insists on the historical persistence of latent Orientalism. I begin with criticisms of Said’s argument, most of which concern issues that arise when Orientalism is regarded as hegemony and as a discourse.

These criticisms are mainly directed at Said’s emphasis on the historical persistence of Orientalism and at his usage of the binary conception of ‘the West’ and ‘the East’. Above

all, critics attack the notion that Orientalism has continued and remained homogeneous from ancient Greece to the present. While Foucault stresses the 'epistemological breaks between different periods' in his archaeological method, Said appears to evoke 'the unified character of Western discourse over the Orient over some two millennia' (Porter 1993: 152). Aijaz Ahmad explains that this disparity between Foucault and Said results from the fact that Said 'reduces Foucault to a *terminology*, i.e., discourse, regularity, representation, epistemic difference, etc.' and 'refuses to accept the consequences of Foucault's own mapping history' (1991: 146). According to Ahmad, Foucault's articulation clearly marks 'the spatial limits and the temporal constitution of the episteme' (1991: 146). That is, the episteme is Western, constructed 'from roughly the sixteenth century to the eighteenth' (1991: 145). Ahmad criticises Said for claiming that there is 'a *singular* discourse traversing all history and all European textualities' (1991: 146). In Ahmad's view, such a claim is not only ahistorical but also 'anti-Foucauldian in a methodological sense' (1991: 146).

Said's assertion that Orientalism has constantly functioned as a hegemonic discourse throughout history also seems to conflict with the idea of hegemony. Hegemony is contingent upon the specific historical situation of each society. According to Dennis Porter, 'the most important feature of hegemony' is 'that it always implies historical process' (1993: 152). Porter emphasises that, for Gramsci, hegemony generates consent for the reproduction of power relationships, 'as the result of ideological representation and of institutional manipulation' (1993: 152). Porter suggests that hegemony should therefore be understood as corresponding to a specific social formation: as a 'process in concrete historical conjunctures' and 'as an evolving sphere of superstructural conflict in which power relations are continually reasserted, changed and modified' (1993: 152). In Porter's view, Said's Orientalism neglects this point.

Bart Moore-Gilbert claims that Said does pay attention to the development of Orientalism in each historical phase (2000: 47-48). Said posits key historical transitions in *Orientalism*, suggesting four phases: the first from ancient Greece until the Renaissance, the second from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, including the

Renaissance, Napoleon's conquest of Egypt and European expansion, the third beginning with European colonialism from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1950s, and finally the present day, with the USA the globally dominant imperial power. Said describes these periods as 'earlier traditional Orientalism', the 'earliest period of modern Orientalism', 'modern Orientalism' and 'area studies'. Said describes 'earlier traditional Orientalism' as characterised by the geographical and ontological construction of the Orient as other to the west. The second period marks the beginning of the establishment of Orientalism and the beginning of 'a long series of European encounters with the Orient in which the Orientalist's special expertise was put directly to functional colonial use' (1978: 80). The third period is characterised as the intensification of the two previous processes. The contemporary period sees Orientalism turning into 'area studies' in cooperation with American foreign policy, following decolonisation of European colonies.

Nonetheless, Said seems not to offer 'a narrative chronicle of the development of Orientalism', nor does he try to clearly define its features (1978: 201). Rather, in the specific characteristics of each period, Said sees the basic premises of Orientalism remaining constant:

In its most basic form, then, Oriental material could not really be violated by anyone's discoveries, nor did it seem ever to be revalued completely. Instead, the work of various nineteenth-century scholars and of imaginative writers made this essential body of knowledge more clear, more detailed, more substantial . . . (1978: 205)

It may thus be wrong to state that Said fails to 'allow any kind of periodisation in the course of historical inquiry' (Ahmad 1991: 138). Said does not completely ignore the historical development of Orientalism, but rather focuses on the fact that the basic elements of Orientalism – what he calls 'latent Orientalism' – are found at the core of Orientalism in any specific period. By latent Orientalism, Said means 'the doctrinal – or doxological – manifestation' of 'a quintessential Orient', which remains constant and durable (1978: 221). According to Said, latent Orientalism is preserved whatever

alterations take place in manifest Orientalism, which consists of ‘the various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology, and so forth’ (1978: 206). Even in the nineteenth century when ‘existential encounters between East and West’ increased, ‘the separateness of the Orient’ and ‘its eccentricity’ still imbue enunciations on the Orient (1978: 206-222).

Critics assail Said’s approach to the objects of his analysis – western Orientalist texts – for assuming the homogeneity of those texts, claiming that Said disregards plausible differences and disjunctures in the Orientalism within a particular society and between different nations. For Lisa Lowe, it is false to think of Orientalism as a ‘discrete and monolithic’ discourse because ‘discursive formations are never singular’: ‘discourses operate in conflict; they overlap and collude; they do not produce fixed or unified objects’ (Lowe 1994: 8). Lowe draws attention to the fact that ‘the means of representation of any discursive production are uneven, unequal, and more and less enunciated at different moments’ (1994: 8). She remarks that even the Orientalism within texts by a single writer such as Gustave Flaubert is ‘hardly uniform or monolithic’ (1994: 9). Lowe argues that Orientalism is always involved with other discursive formations that emerge at different historical moments. According to her, an Orientalist text should be regarded as

. . . a site in which a multiplicity of heterogeneous discourses engage and overlap, not limited to dominant orientalist formations but also including emergent challenges to those formations. (1994: 9)

Lowe suggests that we should focus on the different ways the Orient is constituted as other ‘at another historical moment, or in another national culture’ (1994: 6).

Said, to be fair, does tackle internal crises within Orientalism. Yet he asserts that Orientalist texts typically resolve the conflict between latent Orientalism and manifest Orientalism by reinforcing the tried and trusted frame of latent Orientalism (1978: 221-225). Moore-Gilbert indicates that Said, at least, recognises ‘differences between the various national versions of colonial discourse’ (2000: 45-48). For instance, Said depicts

the difference between French Orientalism and British Orientalism as follows: 'English writers on the whole had a more pronounced and harder sense of what Oriental pilgrimages might entail than the French' (1978: 192-193). Yet, again, exploring such distinctions is not Said's main concern. He gives this area far less attention than it deserves, referring to it in 'somewhat vague and schematic' ways (Moore-Gilbert 2000: 46). This may be because Said thinks that the work of British Orientalists and French Orientalists ultimately converges in its basic conception of the Orient.

For despite their differences, the British and the French saw the Orient as a geographical – and cultural, political, demographical, sociological, and historical – entity over whose destiny they believed themselves to have traditional entitlement. (1978: 222)

I do not necessarily agree with Said that the same and essential elements of Orientalism dominate all western discourses on the Orient throughout all historical periods. It seems to me that Said's lack of emphasis on the many conflicts and varied dynamics of Orientalism unwittingly leads his criticism to exclude diverse and sometimes anti-hegemonic aspects of Orientalist texts. If Orientalism itself is not a monolithic entity, perhaps not all Orientalist texts align with Orientalism, or serve western colonialism (MacKenzie 1995). In light of this point, I consider different – sometimes, perhaps, anti-Orientalist – features of Orientalism. Nonetheless, my analysis centres on the historical instances in which the premises of Orientalism apparently dominate. Most of the materials examined here thus embody a hegemonic and seemingly monolithic Orientalism. In other words, what seems significant to me is that although intermittent and uneven, the common characteristics of Orientalism mark texts from different historical periods. As Lowe suggests, discourses of Orientalism may not be 'discrete and monolithic', corresponding to each historical configuration and to each national culture. It is clearly vital to examine the concrete, complex contexts in which a particular Orientalist discourse is formulated. A key question nonetheless remains: How can we explain the tendency for common characteristics of Orientalism to crop up repeatedly in different western representations of the non-west?

It is difficult to deny that a portion of western representation shares the premise of the radical difference – the ‘otherness’ – of the non-west and the binary conception of ‘us’ (the west) and ‘them’ (the east), evoking ‘the separateness of the Orient’ and ‘its eccentricity’. Although the selection of Orientalist texts in Said’s *Orientalism* may be somewhat limited and arbitrary, he gathers enough evidence to show that a significant amount of Orientalist texts fit his theory. If we drop the comprehensiveness of Said’s claim, we may be able to find ground on which it can be validated. Latent Orientalism may not always be manifest, but still often appears at the core of dominant Orientalist discourses. As Porter and Lowe argue, as a hegemonic discourse, Orientalism may always be involved with other, sometimes conflicting, discourses and with specific historical or societal configurations. Nevertheless, if latent Orientalism repeatedly appears as an underlying assumption of Orientalist discourses, it requires more explanation.

As mentioned earlier, Said maintains that changes in knowledge of the Orient ‘almost exclusively’ happen within manifest Orientalism whereas ‘the unanimity, stability, and durability of latent Orientalism are more or less constant’ (1978: 206). In his view, latent Orientalism, that is, dichotomising and essentialising theses about the Orient as other, persists as a referential framework for any enunciation of the Orient. Said regards, for instance, differences among nineteenth-century writers as merely manifest differences – ‘differences in form and personal style, rarely in basic content’ (1978: 206). I am open to the idea that Orientalist texts may feature more significant differences than Said assumes. I nonetheless highlight the dominance and persistence of latent Orientalism. My intention is thus not ‘to show the sameness within the difference of colonial discourse’ (Yegenoglu 1998: 36), but to analyse sameness when it recurrently emerges within dominant discourses.

Alternatively, James Clifford (1988) suggests that the underlying assumptions of Orientalism – latent Orientalism – are inevitably involved in the process of understanding other cultures. If we see the premises of latent Orientalism as that which is general and

innate in that process, we end up undermining Said's criticisms of Orientalism. Aware of this danger, Lata Mani and Ruth Frankenberg (1985) claim that Said's criticisms apply only within the specific power relations of western imperialism. I suggest that latent Orientalism shares common characteristics with the process of cultural understanding. At the same time, because latent Orientalism is bound up with western power over the Orient, it uncovers particular components of this process. The west's power relationship with the Orient is historically and nationally variable. Depending upon the specific configuration of the power relationship, latent Orientalism may be corroborated, combined with other discourses and reinvented in another form. It may be weakened, challenged, and disregarded. As long as the power relationship is sustained in any form, however, latent Orientalism tends to emerge as a dominant discourse. I flesh out this claim below.

It is first of all essential to relate critical elements of Orientalism to more general questions about understanding another culture. In *Orientalism*, Said states,

One ought again to remember that all cultures impose corrections upon raw reality, changing it from free-floating objects into units of knowledge. . . It is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness; therefore cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be. (1978: 67)

At times Said suggests that his critique of Orientalism can be linked with more fundamental questions about 'understanding a culture'. Clifford (1988) pays attention to the issues of cultural understanding and representation that Said's criticism entails. Clifford assumes that Said's questions such as 'what is *another* culture?' and 'how does one *represent* other cultures?' can be related to any knowledge-making about culture in any humanistic discipline such as anthropology. Clifford claims that Said's criticism of Orientalism as a discourse that 'dichotomizes' and 'essentialises' cultures also applies to 'a number of important anthropological categories' (1988: 268, 271). Most of all, Said's

work challenges 'the concept of culture'. Opposed to dichotomising and essentialising cultures, Said asks,

Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly? (1978: 45)

Clifford deploys these questions to undermine the totalising presumptions that underlie all anthropological cultural understandings about the west and the non-west. Clifford's account thus recognises the dichotomising and essentialising premises about the Orient as general and inherent in the process of understanding other cultures.

Sadik Jalal al-'Azm also calls our attention to Said's acknowledgement that 'categorisation, classification, schematisation and reduction with the necessarily accompanying distortions and misrepresentation' are necessary to understand 'alien culture' ([1981] 2000: 221). Al-'Azm argues that if, as Said states, 'the unfamiliar, exotic and alien is always apprehended, domesticated, assimilated and represented in terms of the already familiar', and, if this happens 'between all cultures, certainly between all men' (1978: 60), then cultural misrepresentation becomes inevitable and thus universal within any cultural understanding. Al-'Azm's critical point is that if such domestication and schematisation of another culture can be regarded as perfectly natural and general, then Said's criticisms of Orientalism lose ground. Transferring Said's criticism to the general and depoliticised arena may nullify its critical power.

Clifford and al-'Azm overlook Said's emphases on the characteristics of western Orientalism and his comments on Orientalism's relation to western imperialism. For instance, Clifford suggests that Said opens our eyes to 'a more complex dialectic by means of which a modern culture continuously constitutes itself through its ideological constructs of the exotic' beyond the totality of a culture – 'the West', or 'Western culture' (1988: 272). In Clifford's account, 'the West' is conceived as 'a play of projections, doublings, idealizations, and rejections of a complex, shifting otherness', whereas 'the

Orient' is endowed with 'the role of origin or alter ego' (1988: 272). Here, Clifford is not so much concerned with the imbalance between the role of the west and that of the Orient in the complex dialectic of cultural formation. Whilst Said criticises 'Orientalist procedures for enclosing and characterising "the Orient"', Clifford's preoccupation is to deploy Said's critique, which calls the "'natural" entity of culture' into question, to find an alternative way to conceive of a culture in general (1988: 273).

Mani and Frankenberg assert that the 'historical specificity' that defines a specific relationship of power with knowledge evaporates in Clifford's generalisation. They claim that this relationship of power and knowledge in Orientalism should be understood in relation to 'the alliance between Orientalism and imperialism in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century' (1985: 177). Clifford's project cannot proceed productively without consideration of 'the power relations and cultural imperatives that produced existing descriptions' (1985: 182). Mani and Frankenberg thus suggest that we should consider,

. . . what, in existing descriptions, is specific to extreme power differentials or to Western cultural constructions, and what is indeed general to all forms of knowledge about 'Others' by 'Selves'. (1985: 182)

In my view, however, as Said seems to fluctuate between 'the two sets of issues', it may be more meaningful to deploy his ambivalent statements to both ends: to examine how specific power relations influence production of Orientalist knowledge about others and to consider how Orientalism moulds general procedures of cultural understanding. Clifford's articulation of Said's criticism has the virtue of leading us to consider Orientalism within the process of cultural understanding. Said often states his concerns about the general procedure of understanding another culture. He admits that it is natural 'to impose complete transformations on other cultures' (1978: 67). Said however consistently stresses the particular aspects of Orientalism and the relationship between western imperialism and Orientalism.

There is nothing especially controversial or reprehensible about such domestications of the exotic; they take place between all cultures, certainly, and between all men. . . . But what is more important still is the limited vocabulary and imagery that impose themselves as a consequence. The reception of Islam in the West is a perfect case in point . . . (1978: 60)

Orientalism thus seems to share features in common with the general process of cultural understanding. It can also be seen as a particular type of cultural understanding. Orientalist knowledge, like all types of cultural understanding, may also be gained through domesticating the exotic and imposing transformations on other cultures. Orientalism, however, unlike other types of understanding, is associated with the power field of western imperialism. This power relationship leads vocabularies, narratives and dichotomising and essentialising – ‘otherising’ – assumptions about the Orient to mask plurality and diversity within the Orient. Whether dominant or marginal, combined with or disregarded by other discourses, the underlying assumptions of latent Orientalism appear to be invoked whenever the Orient becomes the object of western knowledge. The cultural, geographical and temporal distance constructed by Orientalists cannot be narrowed as long as the Orient is dealt with as an entity bearing a completely different and eternal essence. If manifest Orientalism functions as a set of a concrete and practical methods to conquer and govern the Orient, latent Orientalism may underlie manifest Orientalism as it constantly shapes western understanding of the Orient.

The points above shed light on the general process of understanding foreign films and the specific traits of western understanding of East Asian films; later chapters explore this in greater depth. East Asian films are given a new meaning, and are differently interpreted and appropriated in the west. I probe the extent to which this process is entwined with the underlying assumptions of latent Orientalism – the binary conception of ‘the west’ and ‘the east’ and the assumption of the ‘otherness’ of another culture.

### 2.2.3 representation

Representation is central to Said's critique of Orientalism. Just as his view of Orientalism and general cultural understanding appears ambivalent, however, his thoughts on representation also reveal a certain discrepancy. Because this thesis analyses how East Asian films are represented in western film criticism, clarifying Said's views on representation is crucial. If we take the position that the main problem with Orientalism is misrepresentation, we can criticise this and try to correct it on the basis that there exists a certain cultural substance that can be rightly represented. On the other hand, if we assume that Orientalism is a system of *mere* representation that can never deliver truth, this raises more fundamental questions about understanding between cultures.

In the later part of his book, Said reminds his readers that his point about Orientalism is not 'that it is a misrepresentation of some Oriental essence', but 'that it operates as representations usually do' (1978: 273). In this view, representation innately fails to deliver 'truth'. Whenever reality is represented, it has to be 'embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer' (1978: 272). Said thus seems to agree with the Nietzschean denial of 'objective truth' (1978: 203). Said claims that his work brings up 'a whole set of questions' about general 'human experience': 'how does one *represent* other cultures?' (1978: 325; original emphasis).

The problem with Said's view of representation, as numerous critics have stated, stems from his inconsistency rather than from fundamental flaws in his argument. According to Ahmad, Said wavers between viewing Orientalism as 'a system of mere representations' in a Foucauldian sense and as 'a system of *misrepresentations* wilfully produced by the so-called "West"' (1991: 147; original emphasis). Ahmad holds that Said takes advantage of both positions. To demonstrate this inconsistency, Ahmad quotes from two consecutive pages of Said's book, as follows (1992: 193).

. . . as this book has tried to show, Islam *has* been fundamentally misrepresented in the past . . . (Said 1978: 272; original emphasis)

My whole point about this whole system is not that it is a misrepresentation of some Oriental essence . . . (Said 1978: 273)

Ahmad says that such inconsistency ends up strengthening the Nietzschean idea of representation since Said considers that the difference between misrepresentation and representation is only a matter of degree. According to Ahmad, by leaning on such a view of representation, Said could effectively render the ‘textuality’ of Orientalism the focal point of his criticism. Ahmad contends that in doing this, Said ends up denying the ‘densities of historical experience’ and the substantial difference that misrepresentation and correct representation make (1991: 147).

Clifford (1988) also comments on the inconsistency of Said’s position on representation. According to Clifford, this inconsistency derives from the discrepancy between Said’s asserted view of representation and his actual criticism of Orientalist texts (1988: 261). Clifford claims that whilst Said’s analysis ‘flirts with a critique of representation’ in a Nietzschean sense, Said constantly blames Orientalism for ‘a familiar set of values associated with the Western anthropological human sciences – existential standards of “human encounter” and vague recommendations of “personal, authentic, sympathetic, humanistic knowledge”’ (Clifford 1988: 261). Clifford suggests that as a consequence, in the course of criticising Orientalist texts, Said implies that a reality ‘rooted in oral encounter and reciprocal speech, as opposed to the processes of writing or of the visual imagination’ does indeed exist (1988: 258).

For Said, what matters in Orientalists’ texts is not ‘what lies hidden in the text’, but ‘the text’s surface, its exteriority to what it describes’ (1978: 20-21). Representation is regarded as ‘the principal product of this exteriority’ (1978: 21). Said argues,

The things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original. (1978: 21; original emphasis)

Said believes that ‘cultural discourses’ generally deliver not ‘truth’ but ‘representations’ (1978: 21). In the particular case of Orientalism, ‘the written statement’ becomes ‘a presence to the reader’ while ‘having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such *real thing* as “the Orient”’ (1978: 21; original emphasis). In this account Said again seems to presume the existence of the real Orient. His emphasis on reality and real people may not however contradict his claim that the Orient is created by the west. When he asserts that there is no such thing as the Orient, he may mean that no real thing corresponds to that which Orientalism categorises and represents as ‘the Orient’. In his analysis of Edward William Lanes’ work on Egypt, Said clarifies that ‘a collection of people [were] living in the present’ in Egypt, but they became “‘the Egyptian”, “the Muslims”, or “the Orientals””, as ‘the subject of study’ (1978: 233-234). According to Said, Orientalists manipulate ‘the discrepancy between the two levels’. The ‘greater variety’ among ‘real people living in the present’ is ‘restrained, compressed downwards and backwards to the *radical* terminal of the generality’ (1978: 234). Therefore, Orientalism is problematic not because it is a misrepresentation or a mere representation, but because it is obstructive, suppressing other possible views that represent other cultures as more complex, contradictory, less distant and less different. Whether a misrepresentation or mere representation, we can still ask how a particular type of representation, based on the reified notion of the Orient, prevails and persists. We should also ask why other representations that may reflect more complexity and difference within ‘the Islams’ fail to get off the ground (Turner 1994: 100-104). This approach is echoed in Arif Dirlik’s argument on Orientalist representation. Dirlik claims that ‘metonymic reductionism’ is more problematic than the ‘correctness or erroneousness’ of representation. According to Dirlik, the most serious problem with Orientalist representation is that it erased differences within a society and ‘froze it in the past’, highlighting a very few selected cultural characteristics (1997: 117-118).

In line with this, I do not criticise western representations of East Asian cinema for their wrongness. Nevertheless, obvious factual errors must be pointed out. I do not take the view that such errors appear only in *western* representations. When I examine western academic articles and critical reviews of East Asian films, I focus on the characteristics of that representation: which limited views are applied to explain and contextualise these films? Which view is endowed with authority and assigned a central place in the representation of East Asian cinema?

### **2.3 Orientalism beyond the Middle East? Orientalism in East Asia**

This section investigates how and to what extent Said's criticism elaborates western relationships with areas other than the Middle East. In particular, I turn the analytical spotlight on how criticisms of Orientalism can be related to East Asia.

Said makes 'restrictive choices' about geographical areas and national traditions to develop his theory (Clifford 1988: 267). By 'the Orient' and sometimes 'the East', Said indicates 'the Arab Middle East'. He also deals only with British and French Orientalism and the more recent American version. Other areas subjugated by western colonialism such as Africa, South East Asia, East Asia and South America are almost absent, excepting India, often mentioned in relation to British Orientalism. Other traditions of Orientalism such as Italian, Spanish, Russian, and German Orientalisms are excluded. Many of Said's critics agree that omitting German Orientalism is a major flaw, since it was highly influential within academic Oriental studies (MacKenzie 1995).

Scholars frequently claim that the regional limitation of Said's work is rooted in his personal connection with Palestine (Hovsepian 1992). In *The Question of Palestine* (1980), *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1981) and *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (1986), Said presents a potent exploration of the Palestine predicament. It may thus appear that Orientalism is specifically entangled with the Arab Middle East and its relationship with the west. Said's

spotlighting of the relationship between the Arab Middle East and Europe is understandable given his personal history and engagement. Said states that Islam 'lay uneasily close to Christianity, geographically and culturally': sharing 'the Judeo-Hellenic traditions', borrowing from Christianity and perceived as a threat to European Christian societies because of its 'unrivalled military and political successes' (1978: 74). Said assumes that the Middle East's special relationship with Europe moulded western Orientalism on the region. For Said, the region's special meaning for the west is still reflected in contemporary Orientalism. He compares present 'Islamic Orientalism' with 'other human sciences' and the 'other branches of Orientalism' (1978: 261). He concludes that Islamic Orientalism in the present day exhibits a distinctive 'backwardness' and 'retrogressive position' (1978: 261).

Implied in his phrase 'the other branches of Orientalism' or 'Islamic Orientalism', is the existence of a broad Orientalism of which 'Islamic Orientalism' is one branch. In his later book, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said remarks that two factors were neglected in *Orientalism*: 'a general worldwide pattern of imperial culture' and 'a historical experience of resistance against empire' from non-European worlds (1993: xii). By drawing upon European writings on Africa, India, parts of the Far East, Australia, and the Caribbean, Said begins to recognise that they share certain characteristics with 'Orientalist descriptions of the Islamic world' (1993: xi). While he recognises specific European ways of representing each region, Said underlines that all these discourses converge on one premise: "'they" were not like "us", and for that reason deserved to be ruled' (1993: xi-xii). Thus, it is not only Islam or the Middle East that is designated 'other' to the west on the basis of the ontological binary of 'us' and 'them'. Western writers apply an Orientalism to other regions which exhibits the premises of latent Orientalism and, like Islamic Orientalism, functions to serve European imperialism in those regions.

Before I deal with western Orientalism towards East Asia, it is vital to discuss how best to demarcate this region. Such demarcation often falls into the trap of reifying as a clearly marked-out entity a region whose unity is highly questionable (Bharucha 2001;

Deshpande 2001). From the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century the region, including the Indies, China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia, was called 'the Far East' in the west. Recently, in geographical terms, Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia are classified as part of Southeast Asia and China, Japan and Korea as East Asia. Yet these terms appear 'simply geographical' since neither mirrors 'cultural unity' (Beers and Clyde [1975] 1991: 3). For instance, if East Asia is defined as 'the Chinese cultural area' (Fairbank et al. 1989: 1), it may denote China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. Again, with the exception of Vietnam, China, Japan and Korea are often lumped together to indicate East Asia because they share 'religion (Buddhism), state philosophy (Confucianism), and bureaucratic structure (founded on "administrative law")' (Barnes 1993: 7). Though they share ethnic (Mongoloid) and cultural origins, China, Japan and Korea have developed distinct societies and traversed differing historical trajectories. The present work uses 'East Asia' to indicate China, Japan and Korea, but with no intention of essentialising the region. The three countries indeed share common characteristics, but I do not presuppose a cultural essence among them. In the following, I look at the features of western Orientalism that appear in relation to this region. I consider what Orientalist texts on the respective countries have in common and how they differ.

Richard H. Minear (1980) scrutinises western Japanese studies. Examining three scholars' texts from 1880 to the 1970s, Minear discovers that they share the same tendency: 'to isolate a Japanese essence, an essential Japan, which coincides (at least occasionally) with an Oriental essence, an essential Orient' (1980: 511). At the same time, Minear notes that, 'an idealized "American" and an idealized "West"' recur as 'the other side of the coin' (1980: 513-514). That is, the binary category of 'the West' and 'the East', 'Europeans' or 'Americans' and 'Japanese', and 'we' and 'they' is employed to explain the otherness of Japanese history, culture and society (1980: 513-514). Minear emphasises that although Japan's relationship to the west and imperial history differs from that of the Middle East, 'the attitudes manifested in the discourse on Japan seem to resemble closely those of Said's Orientalists' (1980: 514-515). Compared to the Middle East, Japan's distance from Europe meant that it was relatively unknown until 'Marco

Polo's time'. No foreign country controlled its territory until American occupation after World War II (1980: 514). Minear suggests that other factors than European imperial power must have underpinned the Orientalist attitude towards Japan (1980: 516).

Minear also highlights the obsession with 'Old Japan' and heavy emphasis on aesthetics as characteristics of Japanese studies (1980: 509-510). The obsession with 'Old Japan' resonates with Said's emphasis on how Orientalism ignores the present lives of Orientals. Yet Said pays little attention to this near-exclusive interest in aesthetics. Kojin Karatani (1998) terms the west's mania for aesthetics 'aestheticism'. Karatani argues that what lies behind the aesthetic worship of Orientals, usually projected as 'the very inferior other', is colonial power relationships. According to him, when Japanese crafts influenced western art in the nineteenth century in a similar fashion to African art's influence upon cubism, 'the appreciation was only aesthetic' and 'the intention [was] to absorb it into their own art' (1998: 152). Karatani underscores that such appreciation requires that 'the artists' cultures were or could be colonized anytime' (1998: 152).

Significantly, the aestheticism that appreciated handicraft is inseparable from aesthetic worship (aestheticism) toward colonial cultures that are dominated and destroyed by the worshipper's culture . . . (1998: 152)

Karatani explains that only by bracketing out the colonial reality can aestheticism attitudes be established. Also, when 'respect for beauty' is equalised with 'respect for the other', it again consolidates the sense of the west's superiority. Karatani maintains that aestheticism is 'the most typical subversion of colonialism' and that Orientalism should be understood as 'that which exists within the aesthetic exceptionalization of the other' (1998: 153).

Aestheticism shares the binary conception of 'us' and 'them', based on the radical difference of others. This binary conception is noted by Said as a common characteristic of European writings on non-western regions; Minear finds it in Japanese studies texts. Karatani takes this view further and argues that aestheticism blocks not-so-different

and contemporary aspects of Oriental life and culture from being acknowledged in the west: 'Aestheticism refuses to acknowledge that the other who does not offer any stimulative surprise of a "stranger" lives a life "out there"' (1998: 153).

If Karatani's assertion that the 'coeval-ness', similarities, and relatedness of others are totally ignored in western texts is extreme, the emphasis on 'otherness' and particular interest in aesthetics and eternal characteristics are reflected in western critical writings such as those of Julia Kristeva and of Roland Barthes. Lisa Lowe (1994) examines Kristeva's *Des Chinoises* (1974) and Barthes's *Alors la Chine?* (1975). Lowe categorises such writings as the 'postcolonial form of orientalism' (1994: 138). In her view, 'this postcolonial form of orientalism' is 'opposed to, yet in a dialogue relationship with, traditional orientalism' as it 'departed from, yet was determined by, the discursive conditions of the previous orientalism' (1994: 138).

At the very moment when 'structuralist analysis – self and Other, male and female, culture and nature' is challenged by 'theories of language, psychoanalysis, and anthropology' within western academy, according to Lowe, Kristeva and Barthes 'constituted China as an irreducibly different Other outside western signification' (1994: 138). China, here, is pinned down as an 'irreducibly different other', becoming a referential point for the delivery of criticism. This echoes Homi Bhabha's criticism of 'Western' critical theory for foreclosing 'the knowledge of cultural difference' of the Other. According to Bhabha,

In order to be institutionally effective as a discipline, the knowledge of cultural difference must be made to foreclose on the Other; difference and otherness thus become the fantasy of a certain cultural space or, indeed, the certainty of a form of theoretical knowledge that deconstructs the epistemological 'edge' of the West. (1994: 31)

In his book *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asia and Western Thought*, J. J. Clarke highlights that the east is employed 'to reflect on the inadequacies' of western

culture (1997: 3). Clarke remarks that although the influence of ‘Eastern thought’ in the ‘Western intellectual tradition’ has been relatively disregarded in the west, the east has been ‘a source of inspiration’. That is, religious and philosophical ideas of India, China, and Japan have been used as

. . . an instrument of serious self-questioning and self-renewal, . . . an external reference point from which to direct the light of critical inquiry into Western traditions and belief systems, and with which to inspire new possibilities.  
(1997: 6)

Underlining the need for ‘a more pluralistic, heterogeneous approach’ to Orientalism (1997: 9), Clarke demonstrates ‘the historical discontinuities and changes’ in western attitudes towards ‘Asian thought’ (1997: 10). He shows the different periodical and cultural phases in which Eastern cultures have been introduced and appropriated in the west: the western idealisation of Chinese civilisation and Confucian philosophy in the age of Enlightenment, western interest in India as ‘the realm of Spirit’ in the Romantic period and the fascination with Buddhism, particularly Zen, in the 1960s and 1970s.

Clarke’s approach successfully captures heterogeneity within Orientalism. However, it seems to miss out a particularly consistent characteristic. Through different historical periods in the west, the east or eastern thought – whether Confucian philosophy or Indian spiritualism – is presupposed as an irreducibly different other. As a result, the Orient or the east is required to remain an old and eternal essence and again the ‘coeval-ness’, similarities and relatedness of present Oriental societies to the west are ignored. Equally, heterogeneity within Oriental societies and Orientals’ views are rarely taken into account. It is this characteristic that is common to the analyses of Minear, Karatani, Lowe and Clarke. It also echoes Said’s finding that European writings on ‘non-Middle East areas’ and on the Middle East share the binary notion of ‘us’ and ‘them’, the presumption of radical and essential difference, and a rigid sense of temporal and geographical distance. Latent Orientalism, based on the binary conception of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and the radical difference of others, thus seems to constitute the main conceptual frame of western

Orientalism on East Asian countries as much as it does for Orientalism on the Middle East. In particular, Orientalism on East Asia seems to entail 'aestheticism' and constant western appropriation of otherness as a critical reference for western society. In this process, the cultures of East Asian countries are projected as an old, homogeneous and fixed other featuring a permanent essence.

Bearing this in mind, I now turn to the specific power relationships that Japan, China and Korea have had with the west so as to cast light on the background to the formation of western Orientalism on this region. This also brings out the different ways each country is depicted in western imperialism and colonialism, which may lead to different variants of western Orientalism regarding each country. Geographically and historically, this area has been situated far from the west. These countries have thus not been seen as much of a threat to western culture, until Japan's invasion of USA in World War II and the emergence of Chinese Communism in the Cold War era. While escaping the direct rule of western colonialism, East Asian countries have frequently been perceived as incomprehensible, exotic others with rich cultural traditions. Yet as the modern history of this area shows, it also had to negotiate a turbulent period under the threat of western imperialism and colonialism. Here, however, I am not attempting to generalise about the power relationship between the west and the region. Each country in this area has had a historical relationship with the west specific enough to render generalisation or homogenisation suspect. I therefore highlight facts crucial to understanding these differing historical experiences, which are further scrutinised in later chapters.

First of all, scholars such as Clarke, Minear and Bryan S. Turner (1994) suggest that western Orientalism on Japan should be re-considered since Japan was never colonised by European countries. They also emphasise that Japan wielded imperial power over the Asian region in a manner not dissimilar to western countries. Yet the fact that Japan avoided territorial occupation by European imperial powers does not necessarily mean that it was completely free from its influence and power. The fact that Japan itself acted as an imperial power did not prevent western imperialism from influencing Japanese nationalism (see Sakai 1997). Japan's modernisation, which started much earlier than

other Asian countries, was ignited and carried out under the political and economic pressure of European and American imperialism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Beasley 1987). The Japanese victories in the Russo-Japanese War and the Sino-Japanese War were celebrated domestically as evidence of Japan's strength and superiority as an imperial power. This historical instance also betrays how desperate Japan was to overcome the sense of inferiority to and threat from western imperial power (Ching 1998). Furthermore, it should be noted that it was during World War II and the American Occupation that Japan became the subject of American area studies. At that time the main purpose of founding area studies departments was to provide advice on American war strategy and afterwards to provide information for US foreign policy. Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* ([1946] 1967) is one of the most influential works from this period. The book reinforced the academic tendency to define Japan as an incomprehensible other whose culture is totally different from that of western countries.

Apart from small territories such as the Kowloon peninsula, the Bay of Kiaochoh etc., China was also spared territorial occupation by European imperial powers. However, late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese history shows that European and American Imperialism was indisputably present, imposing its economic and military interests on China. Japan occupied Manchuria and other areas, including Shanghai and Nanking, from the 1930s until the end of World War II. Chinese scholars such as Shu-Mei Shih define this historical situation as 'semi-colonialism' (2001: 30-40). To reach this definition, Shih draws on Said's distinction between 'imperialism and colonialism'. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said writes that

. . . 'imperialism' means the practice, the theory, and the attitude of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; 'colonialism', which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory. (1993: 8)

In light of this distinction, neither 'imperialism' nor 'colonialism' accurately reflects the Chinese historical experience. Thus, Shih's choice of 'semi-colonialism' seems inevitable

‘to describe the specific effects of multiple imperialist presences in China and their fragmentary colonial geography ... and control, as well as the resulting social and cultural formations’ (2001: 31).

The semi-colonial experience of China implies that even though a non-Western country could escape direct colonial rule, it could not avoid the obsessive fear of foreign conquest and of losing its cultural and national identity. The political, economic and cultural threats rooted in colonial power impose themselves on a society and culture long after colonialism per se has waned. Rey Chow (1995) points out that, even in modern China under the Communist regime, though a clearly identifiable foreign coloniser was lacking, ‘the sentiment of opposition’ has been always present and directed towards fortifying Chinese cultural nationalism. The nineteenth-century dictum ‘Chinese learning for fundamental structure, Western learning for practical use’,<sup>10</sup> for instance, is still used by the state authorities to reinforce Chinese mental and cultural superiority over the west and insist on China’s separateness from the west (Chow 1995: 63-65).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Korea, like China, faced semi-colonialism under the impact of European and American imperialism. It fell victim to Japanese colonialism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. After 36 years of Japanese occupation, it was divided into North and South Korea, respectively under Soviet and American influence during the Cold War. Compared to the other two countries the number of western writings on Korea is fairly small. Whilst the East Asian region is frequently represented by China and Japan, Korea has been more or less ignored in western Orientalism. Quoting Bruce Cummings, Rob Wilson states that Korea remains ‘an enclave of sublime forgetting’ despite the American government’s ‘three decades of intense involvement with Korean affairs’ (Wilson 1991: 239). Chungmoo Choi (1998) brings out the multi-layered and contradictory nature of post-colonial South Korean society. Immediately after South Korea gained national independence, following Japanese colonisation, it was again subjected to the neo-imperial domination of the USA. In the process of South Korean social modernisation, the legacy

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Zhong xue wei ti xi xue wei yong’ (中習爲體 西習爲用 )

of Japanese colonialism was mobilised and economic development was pursued, though the country was heavily dependent upon the relationship with the USA.

To sum up, it is crucial to grasp that although western knowledge and images do not always represent East Asian countries in negative ways, they are embedded in a binary dichotomy that essentialises radical difference. In this way, Orientalism involving East Asian countries shares the premises of latent Orientalism. Often, western Orientalism directed towards this region takes the form of 'aestheticism', which functions in a similar way to Orientalism. Emphases on aesthetic aspects of East Asian cultures combine with a tendency to confine them to 'times past'. The contemporary and coeval state of East Asian cultures is disregarded, if not denied. These cultures are trapped within an image of an exotic and incomprehensible other, and this otherness is re-captured and re-appropriated to provide a critical reference for the west. As suggested in Shu-Mei Shih's use of the term 'semi-colonialism', although the countries in this region did not experience the whole range of territorial occupation, they have clearly been affected by the influences and legacies of western imperialism and colonialism in the modern period.

#### **2.4. Self-Orientalism and autoethnography**

Whilst Said's critique of Orientalism focuses on Orientalism in the west, it neglects Orientalism among Orientals. I supplement Said's argument by discussing 'self-Orientalism', which furnishes us with a productive perspective from which to probe the relationship between Orientalism and Orientals. Here, 'self-Orientalism' suggests Orientals conceiving of themselves within the terms imposed by western Orientalism and representing themselves as Orientalism represents them (Chow 1995; Dirlik 1997). I then examine the entanglement of representation and self-Orientalism. To get to grips with the relationship between self-Orientalism, Orientalism and western colonialism, I draw upon Mary Louise Pratt's (1992; 1994) conceptual tools: 'contact zone', 'transculturation' and 'auto-ethnography'.

#### **2.4.1 Self-Orientalism: how are Orientals involved with Orientalism?**

In *Orientalism*, Said frequently underlines the point that Orientals are deprived of the chance to represent themselves. Only white, western Orientalists enjoy the privilege of producing knowledge about the Orient under ‘a statement of power and a claim for relatively absolute authority’ (Said [1985] 1997: 134). For Said, Orientals are ‘absent’ and ‘silenced’, since ‘the Orient as a genuinely felt and experienced force’ is absent. As Orientalists alone are authorised to bring the Orient into reality in western culture, Said states that ‘the Orientalist’s presence is enabled by the Orient’s effective absence’ (1978: 208). Although ‘Eastern travellers’ traversed the west, they made no difference to this absence since they were there ‘to learn from and to gape at an advanced culture’ (1978: 204).

Said only mentions Orientals’ involvement with Orientalism as ‘native informants’ for western Orientalists. Yet he also recognises the influence of western Orientalism on ‘the Orient’: ‘the pages of books and journals in Arabic (and doubtless in Japanese, various Indian dialects, and other Oriental languages) are filled with second-order analyses by Arabs of “the Arab mind”, “Islam”, and other myths’ (1978: 322). Thus, in his view, Orientals swallow western Orientalist knowledge, images and terms whole and reproduce them within their culture. In this process, ‘the modern Orient’ contributes to ‘its own Orientalizing’ (1978: 322). Said also stresses that this reproduction is carried out in the context of ‘a very powerful reinforcement’ in ‘economic, political, and social exchange’ (1978: 325). In spite of his recognition of Orientals’ participation in Orientalism, Said’s remark again appears rather uni-directional, placing emphasis on the power of western Orientalism and imperialism. Said probes Orientalism’s influence on Orientals’ views no further. Said may have stopped there because his book addresses western readers and focuses on the western canon. His main concern is with how the west dominates the east through Orientalism, not with what happens in the east under western domination. Said’s Orientalism thus fails to illuminate not only the effect of Orientalism but also ‘different trajectories of contest and change with lags and disjunctures’ on the part of Orientals (Breckenridge and Veer 1993: 10).

According to Richard G. Fox, Said's theory of Orientalism fails to 'map how far Orientalism travelled and how much Orientalism came to constitute the consciousness' of Orientals (1992: 146). Fox argues that as a result Said neglects a more important point: 'that Orientalism came to enable resistance against Western domination' by taking up that very Orientalism (1992: 146). Lisa Lowe also stresses that the existence of a hegemony that represents 'the interests of a dominant group' is only enabled 'within the context of resistance from, and compromises with, "subaltern" groups' (1994: 17). For Lowe, Orientalism 'exists always amid resistance from subaltern or emergent spaces on the discursive terrain' (1994: 18). In this respect, Orientalism cannot be fully understood without considering 'counter-hegemonic thought and activity' within and against it. Said seems to oversimplify 'the imperial relationship', which may 'produce reversals in apparent power relationships' (MacKenzie 1995: 20-21).

To understand Orientals' relationship with Orientalism, it is worthwhile considering Pratt's notion of 'contact zone':

. . . the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. (Pratt 1992: 6)

Pratt states that the 'contact zone' overlaps with the 'colonial frontier' (1992: 6). However, while 'colonial frontier' reflects 'a European expansionist perspective', 'contact zone' 'invoke[s] the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures' (1992: 7). By placing an emphasis on 'contact', Pratt highlights 'the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters' – 'copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices' between colonisers and colonised (1992: 7). At the same time, Pratt reminds us that this interaction does not presuppose a state void of colonial power, but happens 'within radically asymmetrical relations of power' (1992: 7).

If we reconsider Orientalism in the light of ‘contact zone’, it can be understood as a systematised articulation of the experience of ‘contact zone’ on the part of the west; self-Orientalism as resulting from interaction with the west, on the part of the Orient. Arif Dirlik states that Eurocentrism, historically embedded in Orientalism, functioned ‘to erase the part that non-Europe has played in European development’ and ‘to distance other histories from the European’ (1997: 117). Dirlik underlines that despite its historical disguise as Eurocentrism, Orientalism ‘required the participation of “Orientals” for its legitimisation’ (1997: 117). He claims that Orientalism arose and developed ‘as an exchange of image and representations, corresponding to the circulation of intellectuals and others’ – not only the circulation of Europeans in Asia but also ‘a counter-circulation of Asians in Europe and in the United States’ (1997: 118). Thus, Orientalism is viewed as ‘a product of a contact zone’ where ‘a European modernity produced and was also challenged by alternative modernities as the Others in their turn entered the discourse of modernity’ (1997: 118). At this point, Dirlik claims that the contact zone can be seen as a zone of exchange and mediation as well as ‘a zone of domination’ (1997: 118-119).

Whilst Pratt’s concern lies in ‘how subjects are constituted in and by their relation to each other’, Said’s Orientalism appears rather one-sided. He focuses on explaining how the west, through Orientalism, ‘creates’ the Orient for itself. Articulations of Orientalism such as J.J. Clarke’s (1997), which illustrates how western ideas about the Orient affect western societies, also centres on what happens on the part of the west. Both approaches, to some degree, repeat the underlying assumptions of Orientalism, while dismissing the reciprocal relationship within Orientalism. This one-sided approach presumes that the Orient is merely a fixed object under the gaze of the western knowing subject. It seems indifferent to interactions between the west and the Orient and to what has really happened among Orientals.

Some critics of Said’s Orientalism take ‘Occidentalism’ as evidence that Orientals also constitute a representational frame of the west, which corresponds to Orientalism (MacKenzie 1995). Such criticism is directed chiefly at Said’s comment that:

The very presence of a “field” such as Orientalism, with no corresponding equivalent in the Orient itself, suggests the relative strength of Orient and Occident. (1978: 204)

Occidentalism, the counterpart of Orientalism, exists. It appears to share similar traits, particularly when it ‘constitutes its Western Other’ (Chen [1995] 2000: 935). Unlike Orientalism, however, Occidentalism does not claim priority over western knowledge about the west. This is a significant difference. Said continuously emphasises that Orientalism is not simply a representational frame to conceive the Orient, but presupposes its own authority as genuine knowledge and imposes its views on the Orient in collaboration with western colonialism. In contrast, Occidentalism appears not to assert that it knows the west better than the west itself. It seems to involve domestic politics rather than international relationships. Xiaomei Chen, for example, demonstrates that Chinese Occidentalism, as ‘the Chinese construction of the West’, may take the form of ‘official Occidentalism’ or ‘anti-official Occidentalism’, depending on its ideological function ([1995] 2000: 937-939). According to Chen, the Chinese government employs ‘official Occidentalism’ for the ‘domestic oppression of political opponents’, while political dissidents deploy ‘anti-official Occidentalism’ to attack the government ([1995] 2000: 938). The mere existence of Occidentalism, therefore, does not automatically nullify the unequal power relationship between the west and the east.

Self-Orientalism thus appears most relevant to understanding how Orientalism influences the Orient and how people in the Orient respond to it. Before discussing self-Orientalism further, I want to clarify the term and examine other terms scholars use to denote similar phenomena. By self-Orientalism, I refer to Orientals adopting the views of western Orientalism when they consider and represent their culture. Al-’Azam terms this phenomenon ‘ontological Orientalism reversed’ or ‘ontological Orientalism in reverse’ ([1981] 2000: 236-237). According to him, Islamic revivalism ‘reproduces the whole discredited apparatus of classical Orientalist doctrine concerning the difference between East and West, Islam and Europe’ ([1981] 2000: 234). Rey Chow, analysing the ‘self-

subalternizing' and 'self-exoticising' strategies of Zhang Yimou's films, speaks of the 'Oriental's Orientalism' (1995: 171). Yuko Kikuchi (2004) examines Soetsu Yanagi's theory on Japanese folk art, developed and supported in conjunction with the rise of Japanese nationalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For Kikuchi, Yanagi's appropriation of western Orientalism on Japanese art is an instance of 'inverse Orientalism'. Yanagi's theory was exported back to the west, and this she calls 'reverse Orientalism'. Chinese scholars refer to 'internalized Orientalism' (Heng and Devan 1992), or 'self-orientalisation' (Xiaobing 1993). Since scholars deploy an array of terms, I shall stick to the term 'self-Orientalism' to avoid confusion. Although my view on self-Orientalism owes a lot to Chow, I prefer not to use her term 'Oriental's Orientalism' because this may be confused with 'Oriental Orientalism'. Japanese scholar Kikuchi uses the term 'Oriental Orientalism' to designate Japan's Orientalising of other Asian cultures (2004: 123-124). Chow's usage of 'Oriental's Orientalism', moreover, seems to include Chinese Orientalism directed at minority groups within China, described by scholars such as Louisa Schein as 'internal orientalism' (2002). This thesis also pays attention to 'internal orientalism'. I employ the terms self-Orientalism and internal Orientalism to indicate related but different phenomena. By self-Orientalism, I mean how Orientalised people's view of their own culture and society is shaped by and embedded in western Orientalism. By internal Orientalism I mean how minority groups within one society are 'orientalised', at times involving no connection with western Orientalism.

Conflicting views exist on self-Orientalism. When Orientals recognise and assert themselves within the conceptions of Orientalism, this apparently functions at times to bolster resistance to western colonialism. Fox underlines the effective use of 'affirmative Orientalism' to invigorate nationalist resistance to western colonial power (1992: 152). According to Fox, Indian nationalists like Gandhi transformed negative into affirmative Orientalism, by endowing the images of India presented by Orientalism with positive value (1992: 150-153). In Fox's view, this historical instance demonstrates 'the possibility that Orientals, once Orientalized by Western domination, could use Orientalism itself against that domination' (1992: 146). He suggests that Said's Orientalism fails to see that such counter-hegemonic discourse and action could arise

within Orientalism.

On the other hand, al-'Azm agrees with Said that the Orientalist dichotomy and image have left a 'profound imprint on the Orient's modern and contemporary consciousness of itself' ([1981] 2000: 231). Al-'Azm claims that Arab nationalism is embedded in reversed Orientalism, which 'tries to capture the essence of the "Arab mind" by learning how to analyse Arabic words and texts from the words and texts of the master Orientalists' ([1981] 2000: 232). The 'primordial Arab mind' is presumed to exhibit an 'original unchanging nature' ([1981] 2000: 232). Al-'Azm's view echoes the concerns of Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (1993), according to whom 'internal Orientalism' is 'the most problematic feature of the postcolonial predicament' since 'it is very difficult for both Indians and outsiders to think about India outside of orientalist habits and categories' (1993: 11). After western colonialism in India came to an end, the country's public and political arena remained embedded in Orientalist ideas about India: 'what made Indians qua Indians' (1993: 11). Breckenridge and Veer argue that the nationalist discourse in India inherited from Orientalism the ideas of 'the essence of Indian unity' on which basis 'all group differences could only be seen as dangerous separatisms' (1993: 12).

If self-Orientalism can be seen as Orientals' response to Orientalism in the contact zone, Fox's approach draws attention to Orientals' active participation in Orientalism, and their deployment of it to erect a counter-hegemonic discourse and resistance. Al-'Azm and Breckenridge and Veer are concerned with how Orientalism affects the formation of nationalist discourse when manifest western colonialism is no longer present. For al-'Azm and Breckenridge and Veer, Orientals' involvement with Orientalism is assumed to be passive, since the nationalist discourse simply repeats the language and ideas of Orientalism. In my view, however, what is of more significance than the passivity or activity of Orientals is the 'relatedness' of Orientalism and national discourse. That is, before generalising about the passive or active involvement of Orientals, we need to look the concrete relationship between Orientalism and nationalist discourse.

Here, the notion of ‘transculturation’, articulated by Pratt (1992) as ‘a phenomenon of the contact zone’, helps illuminate why it is worth paying attention to historical specificities. By ‘transculturation’, Pratt refers to ethnographers’ usage of the term to describe ‘how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture’ (1992: 6). She underlines that although ‘subjugated people’ have no power to decide what ‘the dominant culture’ provides, they ‘do determine the varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for’ (1992: 6).

From the perspective of ‘transculturation’, we can see that self-Orientalism is not merely a reversed version of Orientalism. Even if it repeats the same Orientalist terms and the same binarism of east and west, self-Orientalism reveals itself to be serving different power relations. In other words, when self-Orientalism is combined with cultural nationalism within an anti-colonial struggle, the result is an ambivalent, complex relationship between nationalist discourse and Orientalism. Cultural nationalism becomes an effective tool for resistance against colonial rule, but at the same time reinforces Orientalist views about the society involved and generates ‘inner-colonisation’ by repeating the logic of Orientalism. Partha Chatterjee elaborates: ‘nationalist thought accepts and adopts the same essentialist conception based on distinction between “the East” and “the West”’ in Orientalist discourse (1986: 38). Hence, according to Chatterjee, the relationship between nationalism and ‘others’ within a nation tends to reiterate the relationship that is already ‘posed, understood and defined’ by Orientalist discourse (1986: 38). Thus, nationalism, based on Orientalism, appears anti-hegemonic in relation to western colonialism, but may function as another hegemonic discourse within domestic politics.

Notably, in the formation of ‘nationalism’ and ‘traditions’, Orientals sometimes engage with Orientalism to reinforce it, not undermine it. Given that Orientalism contributed to the construction of ‘the self-images of Asians ... at the point of contact’, Dirlik questions the notion of Asian traditions (Dirlik 1997: 111). He contends that the traditions are invented, ‘the products of the contact between Asians and Europeans’ (1997: 111).

According to him, ‘Asians’ and ‘Europeans’ collaborate to consolidate the essentialising concept of Asian traditions by repeating the same underlying assumptions rooted in ‘metonymic reductionism’ (1997: 117-118).

As Orientals are involved with Orientalism through self-Orientalism, Orientalism can no longer be regarded as something simply imposed upon Orientals. It is, even if to a very limited degree, constituted, adapted and appropriated by Orientals. Yet this involvement entails no predetermined relationship with western colonialism. When Orientalism is fused with nationalism as a form of self-Orientalism, it appears to be moulded by a specific historical conjuncture and the multi-layered power relations existing within Oriental society.

Analysing the writings of two Japanese Meiji period intellectuals – Okakura Tenshin and Taguchi Ukichi – Leo Ching (1998) illuminates how they conceptualise Asia. Their writings, according to Ching, reflect the complicated historical needs of Japan. Ching states that they attempt to address three layers of historical requirements arising from Japan’s position as an imperial nation with dominion over parts of Asia: ‘identification with western countries’, differentiation from the west through emphasis on Japan’s Asian characteristics, and differentiation from other Asian countries (1998: 72). In these writings, Ching discovers that Asia is ‘(re)presented as refined, delicate and harmonious, not rational, powerful and competitive’ (1998: 80). That is, Asia is defined as ‘what the West is not’ (1998: 80). Ching also points out that Pan-Asianism, which Okakura upholds, is ‘a historical construction deeply implicated within the historic-geopolitical East-West binarism’ (1998: 70). Essentialising ‘Asian-ness’ is required to justify Japan’s imperialism over Asia, and Okakura’s critique of western modernity and assertion of Asian values thus replay the same binary logic that Orientalism draws upon.

This binary conception is also applied to constitute ‘Japanese uniqueness’ (Gluck 1985; Ivy 1995; Vlastos 1998). Leslie Pincus points out that ‘during the 1920s – Japan’s decade of modernism’, specific cultural elements and historical epochs were selected, restored and essentialised as central to ‘Japanese-ness’ (1991: 149). Japanese-ness was constituted

as a denial of and reaction to ‘the effects of modernization’ in the historical moment when modernisation ‘penetrated deep into the grain of everyday life’ (1991: 149). At the very moment when western influences were irreversibly becoming a part of Japanese life, Japanese-ness was defined as ‘what is not modern and western’ (1991: 149). Orientalism is thus used as a tool to differentiate an Oriental society from the west, by denying the many examples of present relatedness and western influences.

While ‘nationalism’ is often claimed to stand in opposition to westernisation, it nonetheless entails Orientalism. According to Michelle Yeh (2000), ‘China’s fundamental differences’, emphasised in nationalism, are ‘always already framed in Western terms’ – Orientalism. Yeh claims that sinocentrism is ‘the other side of Eurocentrism’ and Chinese cultural nationalism is ‘the other side of Orientalism’ (2000: 270). According to her, cultural nationalism that readdresses traditions within the same reductionist frame ‘cannot be an effective critique of Orientalism’ since it ‘replicates and perpetuates’ Orientalism within its own society (2000: 270). In the same vein, national governments in the East Asian region acclaim Confucian values in conjunction with cultural nationalism, expounding nothing but ‘an Orientalist argument that is the product of collaboration between Euro-Americans and the “Orientals”’ (Dirlik 1996a: 198). Within nationalism, self-Orientalism often appears as a ‘reverse discourse’, which, according to Kwame Anthony Appiah, is rooted in ‘the terms of resistance’ already given and always inscribed within ‘the Western cultural conjuncture’ (1991: 145). As ‘the terms of resistance’ came from within western Orientalism, self-Orientalism, in collaboration with cultural nationalism, replicates and perpetuates Orientalism and facilitates ‘inner-colonisation’.

#### **2.4.2 autoethnography: how do Orientals re-represent themselves to the west?**

When Orientals re-represent themselves to the west, to what extent is self-Orientalism and Orientalism involved? To scrutinise self-Orientalism and self-representation, I focus on Pratt’s articulation of ‘autoethnography’. From the mid-1980s, ethnography emerged

as an ‘interdisciplinary phenomenon’ as ‘culture’ captured academic attention as ‘a newly problematic object of description and critique’ in many different disciplines (Clifford 1986: 3). Ironically, at the same time, ethnography, as a methodological tool for anthropological knowledge, seems to be facing a crisis, challenged by both postmodern and postcolonial critiques (Clifford 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Said 1989). In the light of postmodern criticisms, the scientific authority and objectivity of anthropological knowledge about other cultures are called into question. ‘The West’s ability to represent other societies’ is questioned by ‘the critique of colonialism’ (Clifford 1986: 10). As Said points out,

The difficulty with the question is that there is no vantage *outside* the actuality of relationships between cultures, between unequal imperial and nonimperial powers, between different Others, a vantage that might allow one the epistemological privilege of somehow judging, evaluating, and interpreting free of the encumbering interests, emotions, and engagements of the ongoing relationships themselves. (1989: 216-217; original emphasis)

It is thus vital to probe the cooperation and compliance of anthropological methods and knowledge with western imperialism and colonialism. Faced with this crisis, ethnography seems to be turning away from ‘non-Western’ others towards western society, ‘seeing itself as other’ (Clifford 1986: 23). Reflecting this new trend, researchers have deployed the new concept of ‘autoethnography’ to indicate ethnographic works produced by western ethnographers writing about their own culture and society (Reed-Danahay 1997). According to Deborah E. Reed-Danahay, autoethnography ‘stands at the intersection of three genres of writing’: (1) ‘native anthropology’: people who were formerly objects of ethnography writing about their own culture, (2) ‘ethnic autobiography’: ‘personal narratives’ written by a member of an ethnic minority and (3) ‘autobiographical ethnography’: ethnography that includes anthropologists’ personal experiences (1997: 2). According to Reed-Danahay, Pratt’s usage of the concept of autoethnography links it ‘to relations between colonized and colonizer, and to modes of resistance to dominant

discourses offered by the native account' (1997: 7). Autoethnography thus comes to 'represent a critique of ethnography from a non-anthropologist' (1997: 8).

By 'autoethnography', Pratt means 'instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's own terms' (1992: 7; original emphasis). According to her,

If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations. (1992: 7)

As 'a canonical instance of autoethnography', Pratt analyses Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala's *New Chronicle*, an appeal to the King of Spain written by Andean leaders in 1613. In this text, the writer, as a representative of Andean leaders, uses the Spanish language as 'the mode of communication', since 'no systems of writing indigenous to the Andes' existed (1994: 24). He presents Inca history of the pre-occupation period and Spanish occupation in the frame of 'Christian morality'. According to Pratt, in this text 'the invader's linguistic and ideological apparatuses' are appropriated to express 'the invader's interests' and re-presented to the invader (1994: 25). Pratt indicates that in the process of appropriating 'the representational repertoire of the invaders', Guaman Poma does not simply replicate it, but 'selects and adapts' it 'to express Andean interests and aspirations' (1994: 30). At the same time, autoethnographic texts cannot be considered 'authentic' self-representation. Pratt explains that Guaman Poma's text is 'not a naïve expression of what he thinks his world is and ought to be', but rather 'an engagement with what he thinks the Spanish think his world is and ought to be' (1994: 38). Autoethnographic texts constitute 'a marginalised group's point of entry into the dominant circuits of print culture' (1994: 29). Pratt underscores that autoethnographic texts are 'typically heterogeneous on the reception end' because they are usually addressed 'both to metropolitan readers' and 'to literate sectors of the speaker's own

social group' (1992: 7). These texts are intended to inspire different reactions on both sides.

Yet, Guaman Poma's autoethnographic text failed to reach the Spanish readers it sought. It was written in 1613 but was discovered by a Peruvianist in an archive in Copenhagen in 1908. According to Pratt, before 1908, 'no one knew (knows) how this extraordinary work got to the library in Copenhagen or how long it had been there' (1992: 2). Although it adopted the colonizer's language and appropriated the colonizer's culture, it failed to reach the colonizers it addressed. Unlike Poma's text, the films scrutinised in this thesis have succeeded in reaching western film festivals, markets and the audiences that they address. How could these autoethnographic films successfully reach their targeted audiences whilst Guaman Poma's text failed? This question leads us to consider the impact of factors other than simply taking, embodying and re-representing colonisers/Orientalists' views. The success of self-Orientalised films in the west necessitates consideration of the following two factors. Firstly, such successful travel seems to require a system that circulates auto-ethnographic texts/films to the west. As the next chapter shows, we can conceive of systems – film criticism, the labelling practice, film festivals and film distribution – enabling circulation of 'autoethnographic' films. Secondly, in order to reach their destination, 'autoethnographic' films must be adjusted to such systems.

Drawing upon Pratt's 'autoethnography', Chow (1995) analyses Orientalist elements in films by the Chinese Fifth Generation filmmakers, viewing their films as another example of 'autoethnography'. Chow argues that when people who have been objects of the western gaze return that gaze by using the same tool (film), they inscribe their subjectivity by asserting and turning back this 'to-be-looked-at-ness', not in a passive form, but as a form of self-affirmation. Chow remarks that the Chinese-ness displayed in films by Fifth Generation filmmaker Zhang Yimou retains no real value as a fixed substance. Its value is constructed within the system of distribution embedded in an unequal and western-centred global context. She suggests that, while representing Chinese-ness, which may be understood as such in western countries, Zhang adopts a

strategy of ‘self-subalternizing’ and ‘self-exoticizing’ (1995: 142-172). According to her, this self-Orientalising is the key element enabling his films to circulate well in the west. Zhang knows this well enough to make it his entry point to the western market. In this view, Zhang’s films succeed in travelling to the west by giving the west what it wants to see.

Shu-Mei Shih refers to ‘decipherable localism’: the success of a director like Ang Lee, from a minority ethnic group in the USA, is possible only on the condition that his films present ‘local culture within the anticipation of ready decipherability by the non-local audience’ (2000: 100). In order to reach western audiences, such films must engage with western Orientalism – ‘the anticipation of ready decipherability’ – and become ‘autoethnographic’, representing local or national culture via self-Orientalising. Kuan-Hsing Chen (2000) diagnoses the current situation of world cinema as ‘global nativism’. He criticises the way ‘exotic images of natives and national local histories and signs are employed as selling points in the world cinema’ (Chen 2000: 177). Furthermore, the success of films which draw upon self-Orientalism instigates a self-Orientalist strategy aimed at repeating the same level of success in the west. Such tendencies are demonstrated by Japanese films produced for the western market after the success of Kurosawa Akira’s *Rashomon* (1950). Inspired by the success of *Rashomon* in the west, during the 1950s, Japanese studios ‘embarked on a campaign of filmmaking for Western consumption’ and produced ‘orientalist period dramas’ (Desser 2003: 181).

Rob Wilson (2001) claims that this self-Orientalising strategy has its benefits. Wilson notes that Korean filmmaker Im Kwon-Taek’s nativist localism risks ‘a kind of self-orientalising and regressive gaze upon spaces of exoticism-cum-eroticism’, yet states that this is ‘a means of national-based film’s survival’ in the ‘global world-capitalist market’ (2001: 312-313). Wilson seems unaware that self-Orientalism, strongly combined with cultural nationalism in Im’s case, may co-operate with and perpetuate ‘inner-colonisation’ within Korean society. Wilson’s argument also fails to grasp that such a self-Orientalising strategy strengthens the already dominant western film market by mediating and supporting the western Orientalism that presides over it.

The primary goal of such self-Orientalising films is 'to get into the metropolis' and address western viewers. Unlike Guaman Poma's ambivalent autoethnographic text, such films often seem to lose their critical edge vis-à-vis western colonialism and are not designed to convey different meanings to domestic audiences. It seems improbable that self-Orientalism in such films functions as a critique of Orientalism. Such self-Orientalism in fact fortifies Orientalism in the west.

In summary, if Orientalism can be seen as a product of a 'contact zone', self-Orientalism can also be understood as a product of 'transculturation' in the 'contact zone'. Self-Orientalism is a means by which Orientals are involved with Orientalism. The relationship of western colonialism and nationalism combined with self-Orientalism is dynamic and complicated: although it repeats the same Orientalist terms and the same binary conception of the east and the west, self-Orientalism reveals power relations rooted in a specific historical instance and differing relations between western colonialism and nationalism. Pratt's concept of 'autoethnography' sheds light on 'autoethnographic' films that deploy self-Orientalism to address western audiences. East Asian films such as Zhang Yimou's exhibit a 'self-orientalising' strategy intended to satisfy western Orientalism.

This chapter has laid bare my approach to Said's critique of Orientalism. I focus on the characteristics of Orientalism as systematised knowledge practised and sustained within established institutions and entangled with western imperial power. In line with Said's argument, I look at how we can understand the persistence of Orientalism as a hegemonic discourse. I suggest that although latent Orientalism has traits in common with the general process of understanding another culture, it is a very specific type of cultural understanding embedded within the unequal power relationship between the west and the Orient. I examine how a given representation persists and becomes dominant, rather than attempting to distil a true representation. It is the premise of latent Orientalism – the binary conception of 'us' and 'them' and the presumed radical and essential difference of others – that enables Said's criticism to travel to East Asian countries and to illuminate

western Orientalism directed at the region. I scrutinise self-Orientalism and autoethnographic texts, which Said tends to neglect. In the present work, self-Orientalism means Orientals adopting the views of western Orientalism when they conceive of and represent their own culture.

In light of the discussion of Orientalism in this chapter, the next chapter analyses western scholarly works and film criticism on East Asian films, examining the labelling practice of East Asian films in the west in conjunction with the process of western knowledge-making on East Asian films.

### **3. Western Film Studies, Film Criticism, Labelling Practice and East Asian films as Other**

#### **3.1 introduction**

My purpose in this chapter is to elucidate how western academic works, criticism and reviews of East Asian films share the principal assumptions of western Orientalism. Drawing upon Said's critical arguments, I analyse the core features of western academic works on East Asian films. 1) Since cinema is conventionally believed to be innately 'western', films from other parts of the globe are treated as 'peripheral' or as 'strange others'. 2) Such films are chiefly supposed to exhibit and reveal authentic native culture. 3) When East Asian films gain high critical acclaim in the west, this is often due to their 'otherness'. Such otherness is mostly explained in contrast to 'western' cinematic style. That is, East Asian films are 'discovered' as valuable when they appear nationally, culturally or stylistically 'different enough' from their western counterparts. My main concern is thus to grapple with how such otherness is articulated and how western film theories are related to the otherness of East Asian films.

This chapter also scrutinises the functions of film criticism and how it is involved with the assumptions of Orientalism. I examine how general categorising concepts such as 'national cinema' and 'auteur cinema' are utilised to label East Asian films as a valuable commodity that ensures cultural otherness. I suggest that 'national cinema' and the name of 'auteur' directors operate as a 'brand name' in the international film market.

I thus attempt to bring to the surface the assumptions that western discourses on East Asian films owe to Orientalism: the binary conception of 'us' and 'them' that presupposes an utterly different cultural essence to that of the west; the Eurocentric view that places European historical development at centre stage while regarding others as historically retarded; and an exoticism that projects other cultures as primitive, strange, sensual and incomprehensible. This exploration unravels that which underlies the

labelling practice of auteur-centred 'national cinema' and points to alternative ways to conceive films without or beyond Orientalist assumptions.

I begin this chapter by considering how Said's criticism of Orientalism can be used to analyse film-related issues. I then examine western academic works on East Asian films and probe the extent to which they reiterate and resort to the assumptions of Orientalism. In the next section, I turn to film criticism, reviews and their labelling practices, in parallel with the functions of Orientalism and its usage of taxonomy. I examine international film festivals, significant as a key route in the flow of East Asian films to the west. Lastly, I investigate cinematic or historical instances to affirm that cinema is a transcultural product in a contact zone. As discussed in the previous chapter, Mary Louise Pratt refers to the 'contact zone' as a space for cultural encounters that 'invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures' (1992: 7). This last section considers other possible ways of thinking about (other) cinemas.

### **3.2 Orientalism and film studies**

This section looks at how critical insights into Orientalism can enrich the analysis of film studies. I examine how these insights problematise the mainstream conceptualisation of East Asian films.

The development of cinema in the west was imbricated with the imperial gaze and the formation of the imperial subject (Shohat and Stam 1994). Although imperialism may not be inscribed in the cinematic apparatus itself, according to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, the cinematic apparatus provides the imperial subject with 'the position of superior and all perceiving observer' (1994: 104). Shohat and Stam claim that this furnishes European viewers with 'the power and the pleasure of looking', while turning the colonies into spectacles for the metropole's voyeuristic gaze (1994: 104).

The significant connection between the development of cinema and the imperial historical context is also reflected in the very moments of the invention of cinema. Immediately after making his first films in 1895, Louis Lumière, the inventor of cinematography, dispatched his cameramen to the colonies in order to get exotic film footage. In 1902, Georges Méliès, a pioneer of fantastic films, made *Trip to the Moon*. This film reflects ‘the conquering spirit of the time’, featuring scenes of scientists trying to kill the dwellers of the moon, who resemble tribal people (Sherzer 1996: 3; Shohat 1997: 29-30). These two instances demonstrate that (western) cinematic development is interwoven with imperial or colonial historical contexts. The interesting point here is that whether (western) cinema produces realistic documentaries or formal experiments, it objectifies other cultures or other peoples as an exotic spectacle or as primitives.

From the 1920s, Hollywood films obviously and constantly register Orientalist views and desires (Bernstein 1997; Marchetti 1993; Shohat 1997). Said’s Orientalism is frequently employed to analyse these – mostly Hollywood and European – films. Commonly, such analysis focuses on how Hollywood films represent the Orient and how they reflect Orientalism (Bernstein 1997). From *The Sheik* (1921) to *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* (1999), African, Arabian and Asian regions and their cultures are employed as a background to adventures in a savage world or to project prohibited erotic desires (Marchetti 1993). Ella Shohat (1997) claims that when Hollywood films deploy the Orient as a background for romance and adventure, they project it as a site in which gender politics and the colonial imaginary intersect. In her view, such films reflect ‘the masculinist desire of mastering a new land’ (1997: 27). This metaphor of a virgin land is portrayed as ‘the dark continent of female sexuality’, characterised by ‘irrational primitivism and uncontrollable instincts’ (1997: 27, 32-33). According to Shohat, ‘the Third World’, in the course of being exoticised and eroticised, becomes a place where western fantasies of sexual domination are played out (1997: 47). Shohat’s analysis resonates with Said’s description of the Orientalist imagination of popular culture, which emphasises the feminized Orient.

Orientalism also marks European films with an Oriental setting or with Oriental subjects.

Nandi Bhatia (1996) shows how Jean Renoir, a French filmmaker, worked on his film *The River* (1951), the story of a British family in India, wanted to evoke the ‘simplicity’, ‘serenity’ and ‘religious spirituality’ of Indian life. As a result, India appears in the film as ‘a repository of peace, calm, and wisdom, possessing a sensual and “timeless” quality’ (1996: 51-52). In the film, Indian people are depicted as ‘nonparticipating, passive’, and ‘lacking the will to struggle with what the fates have ordained’ (1996: 51-52). Bhatia argues that this film precisely reflects the basic principles of Orientalism by cinematically portraying the Orient as ‘an essence without history’ based on ‘the simplistic dichotomy of the mysterious and spiritual East versus the materialistic West’ (1996: 51-52).

At times European filmmakers acknowledge that the reality of a foreign culture is completely different from what they believed it to be. They nonetheless have a hard time letting go of the Orientalist imagination. According to Panivoug Norindr (1996), this applies to Jean-Jacques Annaud, who shot *The Lover* (1992) in Vietnam, based on Marguerite Duras’ novel. Though shocked by ‘the tragic reality of contemporary Vietnam, with its Third World pauperization and overpopulation’, he clung to the ‘the mythical Indochina of the ‘30s’ (Norindr 1996: 127-133).

Orientalism thus seems *a priori* to delimit the way Hollywood and European films can represent or relate to another culture. As a consequence, a specific discourse or frame – Orientalism – is confirmed and repeatedly represented as the truth about other cultures. However, in response to such criticism, Matthew Bernstein (1997) underlines that this reading does not exhaust the meaning of filmic texts.

. . . analysts of Orientalism recognize that simplifying films to a structured opposition between East and West cannot account for these films’ specific articulation of power relations and even for their compelling appeal to audiences.  
(1997: 11)

As discussed in the previous chapter, critics of Said’s *Orientalism* claim that Orientalism is not a unitary and homogeneous discourse and that Orientalist texts in fact convey

contradictory or defiant views within Orientalism. Echoing this, Bernstein suggests that 'like all representational texts, Orientalist films sustain a measure of ideological contradiction and incoherence' (1997: 11). A view such as Bernstein's requires us to interpret Orientalist elements of a film text in multi-layered terms. Bernstein also reminds us that such films exhibit 'other qualities'. He points out that 'their authorship and their generic affiliations' may result in different receptions 'among different audiences' (1997: 11). For instance, Bernstein draws our attention to the research of Andrienne L. McLean (1997). McLean's analysis focuses on 'a subculture's reappropriation' of Jack Cole's Hollywood musicals with Orientalist elements (1997: 11). Jack Cole was a jazz dancer and choreographer in Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s. According to McLean, Cole put a subtle expression of Camp culture in his Oriental dancing by satirizing the hegemony of white men and 'emphasizing the physical and spiritual authority of Arabs, Asians and women' (1997: 151). That is, on the surface, Cole's dancing in Hollywood films seems to repeat popular conventions of Oriental dance. Yet, in fact his dancing twists American society's dominant ideology of gender and sex. Reading Hollywood films only in terms of Orientalist representation is thus misleading.

Bernstein's suggestion is relevant to the present work: it claims that a filmic text's meaning is not fixed and can be mediated by 'other qualities' outside the text. This thesis is concerned with how western film studies and film criticism, as 'other qualities' outside the text, articulate East Asian films. As mediators, they often refer to typical Orientalist assumptions and take up Orientalist terms of categorisation, classification, and schematisation. To some extent, the mediation process is shaped by systematic premises within Orientalism and to result in particular types of interpretation and appropriation, not to an arbitrary re-appropriation. The difference between my approach and that of Bernstein's and McLean's is that while they pay attention to the contradictory and possibly subversive domain of film reading, I focus on how the dominant and possibly Orientalist reading is formulated. That is, I probe how Orientalist notions take centre stage despite the fact that multi-layered and anti-Orientalist views about East Asian films are possible.

Analyses of Orientalism in films can unwittingly reinforce the dominant position of Hollywood films, despite their critical intentions (Bernstein 1997). Ironically, they can end up keeping Hollywood films at the centre of academic discussion, where they enjoy a 'superior' position as films worthy of intellectual attention. A conceivable alternative critical strategy may be that which 'decenter[s] the discussion by calling attention to other traditions, other cinemas, other audio-visual forms' (Shohat and Stam 1994: 7).

When we turn our attention to those 'other cinemas', we realize that 'Hollywood . . . despite its hegemonic position, contributes only a fraction of the annual worldwide production of feature films' (Shohat and Stam 2000: 382). The Bollywood film industry, as is well known, is the second largest in the world and thrives in the domestic market and in other regions via diasporic communities. According to Shohat and Stam, the Indian film industry alone annually releases between 700 and 1,000 feature films and Asian countries – including Burma, Pakistan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Bangladesh – produce 'half of the annual world total' (1994: 27). Leaving aside the apparent influence of Hong Kong films on Hollywood, the Hong Kong film industry used to be the world's third biggest film industry in its own right.

Shohat and Stam stress that although non-Hollywood, non-American and non-European films arguably constitute 'the majority cinema', they are 'rarely featured' in 'academic film courses' (1994: 30). Even when they make it into the academic curriculum, non-American/non-European films are 'ghettoized' under the label of 'world cinema' (Shohat and Stam 1994: 30). The category of 'world cinema' is subdivided into the regional categories of Asian cinema, Latin American cinema, African cinema and so on. These regional categories, again, comprise national cinemas such as Japanese cinema, Chinese cinema, Korean cinema and so on. Confined to the world cinema ghetto, these other cinemas are at best viewed as 'dialectal variants' in relation to Hollywood 'as a kind of *langue*' of cinematic language (Shohat and Stam 1994:30; original emphasis). At the same time, they are seen 'as expressive of some unchanging essence' of their respective nation or culture (Dissanayake 2000: 143). While Hollywood films and European cinema are routinely dealt with as central subjects to explain what cinema is, how cinema has

developed and how film theories have emerged, non-American and non-European cinemas seem to attain value only as interesting variants, or as exceptions, loaded with essential cultural characteristics. It is thus no surprise that non-western cinemas are more often than not dealt with as subjects of area studies within western academia (Yoshimoto 2002).

I agree with Shohat and Stam that ‘Third world’ films and directors are marginalized and should be included ‘under the current rubrics of cinema studies’ and given more academic attention (1994: 30). Simply including more non-western films in the canon of cinema studies would not, however, be enough. Moving non-western films to the centre of film studies would require more critical analyses of the conventions and conceptual tools that cinema studies applies to such films. Critical arguments about western Orientalism can be introduced to tease out the underlying assumptions of film studies’ commentary on East Asian films. This is vital, first, because it is very likely that academic approaches to East Asian films exhibit Orientalist assumptions and draw on the knowledge and perspectives of area studies. Secondly and most significantly, the way western film studies otherises East Asian films is analogous to the way Orientalism otherises East Asian cultures: identifying them as essentially different others who live in a separate historical reality from the west.

Bill Nichols once described the experience of viewing films of ‘newly discovered cinemas’ in film festivals as being like that of ‘the anthropological fieldworker, or more casually, the tourist’ (1994a: 16-17):

As an encounter with the unfamiliar, the experience of something strange, the discovery of new voices and visions serve as a major incitement for the festival-goer. Cinema ... induces a vivid but imaginary mode of participating observation. The possibility of losing oneself, temporarily, of “going native” in the confines of a movie theater, offers its own compelling fascination. (Nichols 1994a: 17)

Although Nichols's contemplation concentrates on the initial moments of 'discovery', it betrays the premises underlying the acknowledging of unfamiliar cinemas. Above all, from the beginning, relatively unknown cinemas are presented as something 'unfamiliar, strange and new'; viewers expect them to be. Secondly, viewers are supposed to make an effort to acquire native knowledge or sensibility so as to understand these allegedly incomprehensible objects.

This process of acknowledgement thus casts light on how knowledge of other cinemas is produced and confined within the sphere of 'world cinema'. Other cinemas are 'discovered' in the same way a new land is 'discovered' by adventurous western explorers. A 'new cinema' is conceived through an otherness that makes it different from 'the cinema' in the same way that the natives in a new land are conceived of as others who live in a completely different cultural or social setting and are often assumed to be primitive, strange or inferior. Like the natives in anthropological research and ethnography, the otherness of a new cinema is familiarised and made understandable by western knowledge, which categorises, schematises and then slots these other cinemas into the restricted arena of 'world cinema'.

Critical arguments on Orientalism can help us effectively scrutinize western discourses – scholarly works, film criticism and reviews – on non-western cinemas. Akin to Orientalism, western film literatures seem to deal with other cinemas in 'a style of thought upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between us (the west) and them (the Orient or non-west). Orientalism illuminates film literature and commentary because to a great extent such works depend upon anthropological premises. Anthropology has been recognized as the locus of western Orientalism (Said 1989).<sup>11</sup> This research therefore looks at western film studies on East Asian films to spotlight how these films are 'discovered' and 'made comprehensible'.

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<sup>11</sup> For critiques of anthropology from this perspective, see Talal Asad (ed.) *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973), Edward Said's 'Representing the Colonized: Anthropologists' Interlocutors' (1989), Rey Chow's 'Where Have All the Natives Gone?' (1996) and John Hutnyk's 'Jungle Studies' (2002).

### 3.3 articulating ‘otherness’ of films in academic discussion

In this section, I examine how the otherness of East Asian films is articulated in western academic discussion. While the next section probes how such otherness is substantiated by the labelling practice applied to East Asian films, this section gets to grips with how otherness is recognised and conceptualised theoretically. Here, I examine the extent to which discourses on East Asian film draw upon the principal assumptions of Orientalism – ‘a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction’ between us (the west) and them (the Orient or the non-west).

As shown in the previous chapter, critiques of Said’s Orientalism, such as Porter’s and Lowe’s, suggest that Orientalism should be considered not as ‘discrete and monolithic’, but as historically contingent, socially varied and discursively non-singular. Similarly, western film scholarship may not converge on one single Orientalist prototype, exhibiting diverse perspectives and theoretical backgrounds. Some texts may even convey ‘counter-hegemonic’ elements opposed to Orientalism. The ways East Asian films are ‘otherised’ may also depend upon the historical contexts in each nation. Julian Stringer (2002a) shows that Japanese cinema was introduced as ‘art cinema’, featuring ‘auteur’ directors, as a means to strengthen the position of British filmic institutions such as the bfi (British Film Institute) and *Sight & Sound* in the 1950s and 1960s. Analysing American film scholarship on Japanese cinema, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto (2000; 2002) delineates the differing historical situations of scholarship within which knowledge on Japanese cinema was produced and employed. While not disregarding such historical configurations, this thesis focuses on how Japanese, Chinese and Korean cinema are differently recognised and acknowledged, depending upon the historical period and the specific array of Orientalist discourses within which each cinema was ‘discovered’.

Whilst making no attempt to generalise about the whole range of academic works, I examine noticeable tendencies: East Asian films are presumed as ‘other’ to western cinema and this otherness – whether of the formally distinctive cinematic style, theme, narrative or characterisation – is often ascribed to traditional or authentic native cultural

features. This section analyses how these tendencies appear and how they are critically discussed. First I deal with how the ‘otherness’ of non-western films is acknowledged and rendered intelligible and comprehensible. I then analyse how western theories and cultural knowledge are involved with articulation of otherness. The following chapters on Kitano Takeshi, Zhang Yimou and Im Kwon-Taek include more detailed reviews of western academic works on specific Japanese, Chinese and Korean films. This section focuses on more general discussions on the production of knowledge about non-western films, including East Asian films.

### **3.3.1 the otherness of non-western films: how otherness is acknowledged**

Let me begin with the ‘discovery’ metaphor, widely used when critics discuss ‘new cinema’ or ‘new directors’. The notion of ‘discovery’ of ‘a new land’ bears Eurocentric and imperialistic connotations embedded in western colonial history. In a similar vein, the metaphor of ‘discovery’ of non-European and non-American cinema seems to denote a Eurocentric view: European and American cinemas are regarded as ‘central’ and ‘universal’ while the productions of ‘the rest of the world’ are considered peripheral or inferior (Shohat and Stam 1998: 28). The quotation below, from a 1954 editorial in *Sight & Sound*, betrays how this discovery metaphor aligns with the Eurocentric view of cinema.

The two most important developments in the cinema since the war have been, arguably, the neo-realist movement in Italy and the discovery by the West – a partial discovery, as yet – of the Japanese cinema. (*Sight & Sound* 1954: 57)

In this statement, Japanese cinema is contained within ‘the cinema’, as an other, unknown and strange cinema. Unlike the Italian neo-realist movement, Japanese cinema was believed to contribute to the development of cinema not through serious cinematic achievements but by being ‘discovered’ by the west. This echoes Said’s suggestion that the Oriental’s world gains intelligibility and identity not as a result of ‘his own efforts but

rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations' by the west (1978: 40). The *Sight & Sound* editorial appears to chime with Orientalism. It presupposes that Japanese cinema can be located on the map of 'the cinema' only by being acknowledged by the west. What may underlie this attitude is the 'epistemological and ontological binarism' of the west and the east, which seems to lead to another binarism of 'our western cinema' and Japanese cinema as its other.

As mentioned earlier, Nichols (1994a) provides self-reflective accounts about experiences of discovering 'unknown' cinema in film festivals. According to Nichols, to render the incomprehensible otherness of 'a new cinema' comprehensible, two procedures are essential: referring to the framework of 'universal' film theories for formal understanding, and attaining knowledge about local culture and social contexts to obtain meaning. Nichols explains:

Recovering the strange as familiar takes two forms: first, acknowledgment of an international film style (formal innovation: psychologically complex, ambiguous, poetic, allegorical, or restrained characterizations; rejection of Hollywood norms for the representation of time and space; lack of clear resolution or narrative closure; and so on), and second, the retrieval of insights of lessons about a different culture . . . (1994a: 18)

Nichols describes these two procedures as 'discovering form, inferring meaning'. He asserts that these 'define the act of making sense' of a new cinema and make feasible 'the extraction of more disembodied critical knowledge' (1994a: 18-19). He compares these procedures to those of understanding objects from other cultures. According to him, these procedures are analogous to how 'objects from other cultures have been assimilated to our own aesthetic tradition or made to stand as typifications of that other culture' (1994a: 19). He thus speculates that the experience of discovering unknown cinema is analogous to anthropologists' fieldwork in another culture. He fails, however, to question what makes this analogous thinking possible and valid.

Nichols takes the otherness of a new cinema as given. For him, encountering a film from 'unknown' cinema is similar to researching other cultures. Such analogous thinking seems to stem from a tautological premise: films from 'other' cultures are different because they come from 'other' cultures. Nichols thus seems to accept and reiterate the Orientalist dichotomizing and essentialising premise; he assumes that 'other cinemas' must contain completely different filmic characteristics since they are from 'other' worlds. The whole process of 'discovering' – the project of knowing 'the other' – may thus end up re-confirming otherness and failing to generate genuine understanding of a film.

The Orientalist epistemological and ontological dichotomy has been employed in a broad range of research on East Asian films. It is, for example, evident in academic approaches to Japanese cinema. Yoshimoto (1991) states that Japanese film studies within western academia remain preoccupied with questions of 'inscrutability'. On the question: 'Can we ever know the Other as the truly Other?', Yoshimoto quotes Peter Lehman:

Western film scholars are accusing each other of being Western in their approach to Japanese film. Is this a genuine dilemma with possible solutions or is it a pseudo-issue, which obscures the real issues? (Lehman 1987: 5)

Yoshimoto sees this question as a 'pseudo-issue' (Lehman 1987; Yoshimoto 1991), claiming that 'the problem is not the impossibility of the answer but the formation of this particular question itself' (1991: 257). According to Yoshimoto, what 'this seemingly sincere question' conceals is that

Imperialism starts to show its effects not when it domesticates the Other but the moment it posits the difference of the Other against the identity of the self. (1991: 257)

We thus need to scrutinise the power relations and discursive practices surrounding the initial moments when Japanese cinema is defined and enunciated as other, while

questioning what is meant by ‘being western’ or ‘going native’ and what ‘Japanese’ means in Japanese film, not how ‘western’ scholars can possibly understand ‘Japanese’ films.

As film scholars conceive of ‘Japanese-ness’ as ‘otherness’ – a complete difference from anything ‘western’ –, they regard Japanese films as expressing and drawing upon such difference. Approaches to Japanese films thus often fall into the binary logic of us (the west) and them (Japan). Within this logic, Japanese films are seen either as exactly the same as western cinema or as completely different from it. To demonstrate this, Yoshimoto (1991) takes the example of debates among film scholars about the Japanese director, Ozu Yasujiro. Ozu’s films inspired one of the most polemical arguments among film scholars about otherness – ‘Japanese-ness’.<sup>12</sup> Some scholars discuss his films in terms of Japanese traditional art and ‘Japanese-ness’ (Richie 1974; Schrader 1972). Other scholars are adamant that Ozu is no ‘traditionalist’. David Bordwell (1988) argues that Ozu is a ‘modernist’ filmmaker who developed a filmic mode different from the established rules of Hollywood cinema. Yet, whether Ozu is a quintessential Japanese director or a modernist may be a pseudo-issue. Yoshimoto points out that Bordwell’s argument also draws upon ‘the otherness’ of Ozu’s films: ‘Bordwell has succeeded in freeing Ozu from the image of the quintessential Japanese director only by retrapping him in the discursive field of international modernism’ (Yoshimoto 1993: 114). For Yoshimoto, the two seemingly contradictory positions converge in the emphasis on ‘otherness’. The only difference between Bordwell and other film scholars lies in how he appropriates this otherness. Whether the otherness of Ozu’s films is believed to reflect ‘Japanese-ness’ or a deliberate modernist re-invention of film language, it is recognized, articulated, appropriated and circulated as ‘other’. The otherness of a newly ‘discovered’ cinema is thus established in the initial moments when it is presented as such and becomes an object of intellectual interest.

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<sup>12</sup> Japanese scholars have produced critical discussions probing how western Orientalist scholars formulate concepts of ‘Japanese-ness’ and how these have influenced Japanese discourse on ‘Japanese-ness’ and Japanese society. See Kosaku Yoshino’s *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan: A Sociological Enquiry* (1992) and Naoki Sakai’s *Translation and Subjectivity: On “Japan” and Cultural Nationalism* (1997).

Before I move on to how this otherness is explained, I would like to discuss the tendency for the otherness of films to be acknowledged with greater focus on their distinctive formal qualities. As implied in Nichols's elaboration, 'discovering form, inferring meaning', it seems to be the unfamiliar 'form' that first draws our attention. Meaning is sought with the help of 'cultural knowledge' after the cinematic form is acknowledged by referring to western film theory. According to Andrew Sarris ([1977] 2002), French *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics were able to re-discover and re-evaluate films by American directors because they could concentrate on the films' visual qualities, undistracted by the dialogue.

American movies are often discriminated against in America because the ear takes precedence over the eye. By contrast, the French were able to provide a detailed visual analysis of American movies precisely because they were undistracted by the dialogue. . . . Obviously, their eyes were quicker than our ears. ([1977] 2002: 26)

Sarris's comments were intended to explain the disparity between American and French critics' views of American films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). Yet, in more general terms, his view seems pertinent to explaining differences in local and foreign critics' responses to a certain film. For foreign critics – here, western critics – perhaps 'the eye' takes precedence over 'the ear' when they encounter non-western films.

Laura Mulvey (2002) seems to agree with Nichols that it is the formal innovative quality that, in the first instance, invokes western film scholars' interest in 'new' cinemas. Mulvey surmises that 'questions of social understanding' and 'finding ways to fill in the gaps of ignorance and cultural divergence' come after the formal attraction grows enough to inspire cultural curiosity (2002: 259-261). Mulvey thus implies that the 'aesthetic significance' of non-western films primarily attracts and justifies western scholars' interest (2002: 256). In other words, if non-western films hope to be highly valued as 'cinema', they should bear aesthetic qualities 'distinctive' enough to inspire western scholars to re-consider universal (western) cinematic languages and theories.

Mulvey explicates why Abbas Kiarostami, an Iranian filmmaker, has gained so much attention from ‘Western cinephiles and film theorists’: ‘his films reach out towards key questions about the nature of cinema as a medium’ (2002: 260). According to her, Kiarostami’s films play with ‘the narrow line between illusion and reality’. This quality links Kiarostami’s films with the ‘what is cinema?’ question. In her view, the qualities of Kiarostami’s films intrigue western spectators by reminding them of ‘a cerebral, conceptual cinema of a kind that has more or less completely disappeared in their own countries’ (2002: 260).

This emphasis on the aesthetic value of a non-western film is revealing. Mulvey wrote her account in response to Iranian scholars’ critical question: why do only Kiarostami’s films, which deal with political escapism, attract western interest while other Iranian films with political subjects are ignored? In her account, the exclusive western interest in Kiarostami’s films is defended in light of the universal aesthetic values they bear. Priority is thus given to non-western films that deliver formal novelty. This may be because formal qualities can be easily ‘discovered’, easily detected by foreign eyes, while understanding the meanings and contexts of a film takes more time and effort. In this process, non-western films are endowed with new values as they circulate in the west, while they are detached from their cultural or social contexts. That is, the difference of non-western films is highlighted and comes to function as a key reference point for western film theories. The value of these films thus depends on their potential contribution to western critical debates.

As Nichols’s self-reflexive contemplation betrays, the experience of encountering the films of an ‘unknown’ cinema works in a similar way to the anthropological understanding of other cultures’ cultural objects. Interestingly, ‘the otherness’ of non-western films resembles the way non-western objects functioned in the past. In the western modern art world, the supposed ‘primitiveness’ and otherness of non-western objects ‘serve the function of defining a . . . critical view of the modern’ and ‘it was necessary for a very stable source of alterity or difference to exist’ (Marcus and Myers 1995: 16). Also, the separation of ‘form’ and ‘meaning’ resonates with the

institutionalised distinction between the aesthetic and the anthropological. James Clifford states that the systematic aesthetic-anthropological opposition leaves non-western objects unsettled between 'a world of art' and 'ethnographic museums' (1988: 200). According to Clifford, western scholars deal with 'non-western objects' in two main contexts. They examine formal and aesthetic qualities 'for artistic appreciation', and ethnographic and cultural background for anthropological knowledge (1988: 199-200). Within this systemized distinction, 'tribal objects' can be highly valued as 'art' only on the condition that they are detached from 'the original cultural context' (1988: 200). On the other hand, Clifford maintains that both positions share the same assumptions about the otherness of 'the tribal': 'locating "tribal" peoples in a non-historical time and ourselves in a different, historical time' (1988: 202). Thus, whether they become 'art' objects or objects subject to anthropological explanation, the value of non-western items derives from their otherness. Clifford underscores that, in either process, 'the concrete, inventive existence of tribal cultures and artists' is lost (1988: 200).

The predilection for the aesthetics of non-western objects reminds us of what Kojin Karatani (1998) terms western 'aestheticism'. As discussed in the previous chapter, Karatani warns us that this facilitates the free appropriation of non-western objects' aesthetic characteristics for western purposes, while blocking access to not-so-different and contemporary aspects of such objects. As a result, non-western objects insufficiently strange and different tend to be ignored.

To sum up, the otherness of a 'newly discovered' cinema is already embedded in the preliminary process of its acknowledgement and presentation. When East Asian film is recognized for its otherness, it is generally its formal otherness that grips western interest. This may be because formal qualities can more easily be evaluated in light of 'universal' standards and appropriated to address western critical concerns. Meanwhile, the initial social contexts that facilitated the meaning and value of these films are ignored or arrive late in academic discussions.

### **3.3.2 between (universal) western theories and (specific) cultural knowledge: how otherness is explained**

Above, I argued that films of unknown cinema are acknowledged for their otherness from the first moment that they attain western attention, and that it is often the formal quality that is appropriated and detached from the local context and which functions as a base for western critiques. Here, I elaborate how this otherness is explained and articulated. As discussed earlier, the two positions on Ozu's filmic style demonstrate two distinctive ways of dealing with the otherness of an 'unknown' new cinema: drawing upon western theories as a universal standard and referring to cultural knowledge as a resource to explain the otherness. These two approaches chime with Nichols's portrayal of the two main methods for making sense of new cinema: 'acknowledgement of an international film style' and 'the retrieval of insights or lessons about a different culture' (1994a: 18). I therefore examine the relationship between western theories and non-western films and scrutinise how western accounts of East Asian films rely upon cultural essentialism and 'geo-political realism'. I do this to show the extent to which accounts embedded in cultural essentialism or geo-political realism resort to Orientalism.

E. Ann Kaplan is well aware of the dilemma – or danger – of 'cross-cultural understandings', which she confronts in the course of reading Chinese women directors' films from a 'western feminist's point of view' (1991).

Cross-cultural readings are fraught with dangers . . . But how are we to arrive at a method, a theory, for reading texts from Other worlds until we have first answered some of the questions about how different cultures think about representation in the first place? And second, until we know more about the unconscious of different cultures as it might pertain to the level of the imaginary and to the terrain of the visual artistic text? And finally, whether or not the very construction of social 'phases' (feudalism, modernism, postmodernism) is intricately linked to traditions of Western thought, and not relevant to the Chinese situation? (Kaplan 1991: 153)

Kaplan appears conscious of the danger of applying western theory to Chinese films. Yet she merely seems to reiterate the question ‘can we know the other?’. She presumes that Chinese culture features a different tradition of representation and a different type of unconscious. She also assumes that Chinese culture has evolved through different phases than the west. Chinese cinema is thus conceived as completely different from western cinema. Kaplan’s Chinese cinema becomes nothing but Kristeva’s and Barthes’ China which, Lisa Lowe suggests, is constituted ‘as an irreducibly different Other outside western signification’ (1994: 138).

Kaplan defends cross-cultural analyses such as hers, believing that ‘to read works produced by the Other through the constraints of our own frameworks/theories/ideologies’ can be illuminating (1991: 142-143). According to her, such a reading can uncover ‘different strands of the multiple meanings that critics of the originating culture’ cannot reach (1991: 142-143). She then confronts Chinese scholars’ common approach to rebutting ‘an American reading of a Chinese film’: ‘This is not the Chinese way of thinking’; ‘Chinese do not think that way’ (1991: 142). She analyses representations of Chinese women in Chinese films from ‘the self-conscious perspective of Western feminism, theories of subjectivity and desire’ (1991: 142-143). At the end of her analysis, Kaplan reaches the conclusion that Chinese women ‘wanted a subjectivity we had identified as linked to bourgeois capitalism and to a modernism that we were attempting to move beyond’ (1991: 152). In other words, Kaplan’s analysis starts with the presumption that Chinese culture is a completely different entity. It ends with the conclusion that what Chinese feminism wants is not only different from what western feminists want, but belongs to the past of western feminism.

In response to Kaplan’s reading of Chinese films, Rey Chow stresses the danger of the ‘habit of reading the “third world” in terms of what, from our point of view, it does not have but wants to have’ (1995: 83). Chow states,

. . . our analysis is likely to remain bogged down in a predictable direction, with texts from the “third world” serving as the latest exotic objects, always confirming what makes sense for us (as subjects) and for us alone. (1995: 83)

Kaplan’s approach and conclusion thus demonstrate that Orientalism in Said’s sense is alive and kicking. In Said’s view, any ‘analysis, research and public policy’ that employs the dichotomy of us and them will provide a result that ‘polarizes the distinction’ to make the other look more other (1978: 46). Kaplan’s ‘cross-cultural’ analysis seems to reinforce assumptions of essential differences between western feminism and Chinese women. Kaplan’s example also displays how western scholars posit western views as ‘universal’. She privileges western feminists’ views and experiences as the referential frame, and thus projects Chinese women’s present into western feminists’ past. She assumes that the ‘western’ approach is more credible, though it is not, in fact, necessarily more productive or less specific (local) than ‘Chinese’ readings. That is, she sets up the western spectator – here, western feminist – as ‘a universal entity transcending cultural, historical, geopolitical, sexual, or other kinds of differences’ (Zhang 2002: 78).

An approach such as Kaplan’s is not a new instance but the epitome of the western approach to East Asian films. An editorial in *Cahiers du Cinéma* on ‘discoveries’ of Japanese cinema is perhaps the archetype of this approach. The editorial is clearly aware of the danger of ‘taking up a position in relation to both the attempts to ‘relate’ it [Japanese cinema] to Western thought . . . and the gaps in our perceptions of it [Japanese cinema]’ ([1970] 1990: 146). The editorial intends ‘to avoid any hasty assimilation as well as any fascination with “otherness”’, yet wishes to ‘identify and examine’ the entirely different qualities of Japanese cinema ([1970] 1990: 147-148). The writer’s interest lies in exploring the Japanese conceptions of ‘the subject’, which, unlike the western notion, is ‘decentred’ and ‘diluted’ ([1970] 1990: 147-148).

*Cahiers du Cinéma*’s approach thus aims to find characteristics of Japanese cinema different enough to subvert ‘the history of aesthetics and of technology, of the cinema as *Western* invention’ ([1970] 1990: 147-148; original emphasis). To borrow Homi

Bhabha's phrase, 'the otherness' of Japanese cinema is 'foreclosed' to provide 'the certainty of a form of theoretical knowledge that deconstructs the epistemological "edge" of the West' (1994: 31). Non-western films function as a critical reference point on the basis of which the validity of western film theories is challenged and their limits exposed.

Paul Willemen (2002) probes subjectivity and modernisation by taking Korean films as a critical arena. According to Willemen, Korean films can be best seen 'as a cultural practice in which the pre-capitalist and the (in Korea's case, colonially induced) capitalist cultural formations continue to coexist in different measures' (2002: 178). On the grounds that Korean and western films 'must' feature different narrative and representational forms, Willemen suggests that it is necessary to question the adequacy of western film theories. What ought to be noted here is that 'the dichotomy of Western theory and non-Western texts' is not founded on the otherness of non-western texts (Yoshimoto 1991: 37). Rather, as Yoshimoto acutely states, it is 'a rhetorical device' for concealing the 'problematic relationship of Western theory and Western texts' (1991: 37). No grounds exist for believing that Korean films feature an absolute and unique otherness. Neither does this otherness have to be rigidified as an essential and absolute difference. Yet East Asian films are marginalized within the discipline of film studies on the basis of such assumptions about otherness. While providing a critical reference for subverting western theories, these films are considered ineligible for western – supposedly 'universal' – theories. That is, the 'otherness' of East Asian films is appropriated either to consolidate the universality of western theories or to subvert them. In either case, this limiting emphasis on their otherness pushes East Asian films to the margins of film studies.

Returning to Nichols's elaboration, the 'political' textual understanding follows 'aesthetic' understanding (1994a: 19). According to Nichols, 'the political' reading of a film is partly achieved by referring to 'our own repertoire of theories, methods, assumptions, and values' (1994a: 19). He suggests however that we still need to employ cultural knowledge of 'corresponding concepts in the other cultures to which we attend' (1994a: 19). Nichols emphasises the importance of acquiring 'back region' knowledge

which may be offered by ‘the film-makers and actors’ present on the spot (1994a: 19). I agree with Nichols that cultural or regional knowledge is crucial to illuminating the meaning of a film. Yet ‘cultural knowledge’ plays a significant role not only in ‘political’ but also in ‘aesthetic’ understanding of East Asian films.

Film scholars often consider the unique aesthetic qualities of Japanese films in relation to traditional Japanese painting and theatre or Zen Buddhism. Noël Burch (1979) attempts to explain the ‘presentation’ principles of Japanese cinema in terms of Japanese traditional theatre such as *kabuki*.<sup>13</sup> Paul Schrader (1972) attributes Ozu’s filmic style to Zen Buddhism. Similarly, the aesthetic elements of Chinese films are often credited to the traditions of Chinese painting or philosophies such as Taoism (Ehrlich and Desser 1994).

On the relationship of Japanese cinema with traditional art forms, Yoshimoto (2000) admits that traditional art forms have been appropriated in Japanese films. He underlines, however, that traditional Japanese art forms such as *kabuki* or *noh*<sup>14</sup> have been

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<sup>13</sup> *Kabuki* is one type of traditional Japanese theatre. According to Brandon and Leiter (2004),

*Kabuki* began sometime between 1600 and 1603 when a Shinto shrine priestess-dancer Okuni performed with a small troupe of actors and actresses in the environs of temples and shrines and on the dry Kamo River bed in Kyoto. Okuni’s scandalous modern songs and, especially, a sensuous dance in which she cross-dressed as a samurai were called *kabuki*, meaning “slanted” or deviant. Copying Okuni, scores of female troupes toured from city to city, making *kabuki* an instant national style. The very popularity of these variety shows led government authorities first to ban women from public stages in 1629 and then ban troupes of attractive young boys in 1652. Thereafter only adult males were allowed to perform *kabuki*, with some actors in each troupe designated as female-role specialists (*onna-gata*). Government suppression of these early erotic shows resulted in *kabuki*’s rapid maturation. The complex dramatic pieces and sophisticated acting styles that characterize *kabuki* today began in the late 1600s. By the early eighteenth century, *kabuki* was firmly established as the most important and vital theatre art of the Tokugawa feudal era (1603-1868). (2004:1)

<sup>14</sup> *Noh* evolved from the *kusemai* or *kuse* section of a traditional song and dance performance in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It was transformed from a vulgar theatrical form to a subtle art by Zeami Motokiyo under the strong influence of Zen Buddhism.

Noh is not a storyteller’s art; it does not (in most cases) present the unfolding of a human action. Rather, through recollections of the past, it evokes a mood, an emotion, a religious state. Human characters appear on the stage, but they are not three-dimensional figures living the usual round of daily routine. At the most extreme they are

continuously invented and transformed in interaction with specific historical and social contexts. In this respect, Yoshimoto claims that it is misleading to attribute ‘formal resemblances’ between films and traditional art forms to ‘the ahistorical unity of Japanese culture’ or to the essence of Japanese culture (2000: 101). Yoshimoto argues that Japanese cinema does not necessarily reflect traditional aesthetics, stressing that we must look at how traditional forms are adopted and utilised in a specific social context and within a particular film.

Woodblock prints, traditional music, or classical theatres do not have any fixed meanings when they are appropriated or quoted in films. Their significance and function can be determined only by examining how they are specifically used in a particular film. (Yoshimoto 2000: 266)

Commenting on *Cinematic Landscape: Observations on the Visual Arts and Cinema of China and Japan* (1994), Yingjin Zhang claims that the book is based on the ‘area studies model’ (2002: 63). According to Zhang, all the articles except that by Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar understand the visual features of Chinese films through traditional Chinese aesthetics (2002: 63). For Zhang, this devotion to ‘aesthetic, philosophical, and formal or compositional elements’ ends up excluding academic study of ‘how innovative film styles function in the cultural and political context of contemporary China’ (2002: 63). Zhang takes special note of Berry and Farquhar’s article, ‘Post-Socialist Strategies: An Analysis of *Yellow Earth* and *Black Cannon Incident*’ (1994). Zhang states that their article illustrates how innovative film style appropriates traditional aesthetics in response to specific social contexts: these scholars analyse filmic features of *Yellow Earth* and *Black Cannon Incident* in the context of ‘the opening up of postsocialist space, where tradition may be revived for contemporary intervention and Western modern art invoked for Chinese purposes’ (2002: 64).

In general, western film scholars employ cultural or regional knowledge to interpret or

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quite literally momentary manifestations of the spirit world; at the very least, they exhibit an unworldly degree of composure and restraint. (Brandon 1994: i)

infer the meaning of a film. Scholars have long approached films of almost all types and cultures in this way (Bordwell 1989). The issue at stake is that East Asian films – and a broad range of non-western films – are more likely to be rigidly confined through this way of reading – ‘the analytically reductionist readings . . . of non-Western cultural work’ (Chow 1999: 32). Accordingly, such films are far less likely to be read in ‘universal’ terms (Chow 1999). Western writers tend to see East Asian films as reflecting the ‘national character’ and cultural essence of the country involved, unless they are believed to reflect ‘geo-political’ reality. Whilst the former presupposes that a film conveys the authentic culture or essence of a culture, the latter assumes that a society’s political and economic situation is inevitably reflected in films made in that society.

Key academic works on Japanese films in the 1960s exemplify the former approach. Yoshimoto indicates that these texts depend largely upon Japanese-ness or the ‘Japanese mind’, that is, ‘national character’, to explain the ‘thematic motif, formal features, and contextual backgrounds of Japanese films’ (2002: 370). For instance, in his book *Ozu* (1974), Donald Richie states that Ozu’s films are, almost without exception, about ‘the Japanese family in dissolution’ (1974: 1). In Richie’s view, the main theme and style of his films reflect traditional Japanese attitudes and aesthetics. The problem with this approach is that ‘national character’ or ‘cultural essence’ is assumed to be permanent and essential and is deployed as ‘a determinate factor’ (Yoshimoto 2002: 370). Accounts like this based on cultural essentialism disregard the fact that national or cultural characteristics are transformed, utilized and sometimes created in specific historical or social contexts.

‘National allegories’ or ‘geo-political realism’ also shape understanding of non-western films. The films of Im Kwon-Taek for instance are clearly rigidly understood as allegories of modern Korean history and contemporary social conditions (Wilson 1994). Although Fredric Jameson’s article ‘Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’ (1986) does not deal with third world (non-western) films, its response to third world cultural products is typical of first world intellectuals. Jameson claims that third world texts are necessarily read as national allegories since they remain within the

realm of realism, while first world literature has already progressed to the aesthetics of postmodernism. He later seemed to retreat from this claim. In a meticulous analysis of the Taiwanese film *The Terrorizer* (1986), Jameson (1994) states that it deploys the modernist and even postmodernist aesthetics he once asserted only appear in first world cultural products. Nonetheless, Jameson consistently seeks to locate this filmic text within ‘the newly industrializing First World tier of the Third World or Pacific Rim’ (1994: 148-149). Thus for Jameson this Taiwanese film must, to a degree, exhibit a unique aesthetics corresponding to the nation’s location within the late capitalist world economic system. Such analysis reflects western writers’ tendency to explain third world texts or non-western films through their regional, political or economic situation rather than universal human conditions.

Those two approaches – cultural essentialism and geo-political realism – converge to posit a ‘distance in space and time’ between western viewers and East Asian (or, more broadly, non-western) films. The former approach appropriates non-western films by ascribing to them nationally or culturally distinctive, essential and ahistorical characteristics. The latter approach, typified by Jameson, relegates non-western films to the west’s past or to a third world that supposedly exists separately from the first world. Both approaches reiterate Orientalist conceptions, viewing the non-west/third world as other, located in a different historical epoch and construing it as a separate world with a totally different culture. Such distancing resonates with Johannes Fabian’s (1983) description of the knowledge-producing process within the academic discipline of anthropology.

Most importantly, by allowing Time to be resorbed by the tabular space of classification, nineteenth-century anthropology sanctioned an ideological process by which relations between the West and its Other, between anthropology and its objects, were conceived not only as difference, but as distance in space *and* Time. (Fabian 1983: 147; original emphasis)

Binary pairs, based on distance in space and time, mark such scholarship: west/other, First world/third world, realism/postmodernism, universal/local, and western film/non-western film. The constant effort to maintain this imaginary distance in space and time triggers a tendency to conceal ‘the proximity of the two worlds’, which threatens ‘the cultural hierarchy’ between the west and the non-west (Lu 2002: 157-172).

The film scholar’s key task is thus to explore ways of approaching the proximity and ‘coevalness’ of East Asian films. This requires re-configuring the relationship of western theories and specific regional/cultural knowledge. Between ‘the pseudo-universalism of Eurocentric theorizations’ and ‘nativism’, Wimal Dissanayake asks:

Is it possible to broaden the European-American referents that guide Western film theories so as to accommodate the cinematic experiences of the non-Western world? Do these American, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American intellectuals and film scholars who are vigorously antipathetic to these Western theories subscribe to a merely spurious notion of cultural authenticity and purity? (2000: 147-148)

Chow (2002a) argues that we do not need to entirely discard ‘western theories’ to study Asian cultures. Simply emphasising ‘indigenous theory’ and ‘indigenous culture’ denies the extent to which non-western cultures – non-western films, here – are related to western cultures in the global present in which we live. For Chow, essentialist and nativist thinking is precisely what Eurocentrism, in the disguise of multiculturalism, encourages (2002a). This way of thinking not only denies the contemporaneity of East Asian films but also the global characteristics of cinema and the fact that all cinemas are engaged with each other.

Equally, it is vital to grasp western scholars’ privileged position and their belief in the superiority of western intellectual method. Their certainty that they can ‘penetrate, acknowledge, name, classify and elaborate’ the essence of East Asian films, seems to endow them with the intellectual authority ‘to speak for’ such films (Teo 2002; Zhang

2002). We must also be alert to how western scholarly works are linked with the power-laden postcolonial context and how they affect the production and distribution of non-western films. Overall, film scholars must strive to produce a balanced analysis that pays attention to western theories, traditional art forms, and cultural and social formations. In particular, each film's specific entanglement with cultural and social formations should be examined to cast light on how traditional elements evolve and are utilized, while not necessarily remaining authentic or pure.

### **3.4 critical approaches to film criticism and the labelling practice applied to East Asian films**

The previous section focused on how western film studies conceives and articulates East Asian films as other. This section addresses how this conception of otherness functions in the selecting, labelling, framing, reviewing and distributing of films. I attempt to discern the tendencies that western criticism and the labelling practice share with Orientalist approaches. In particular, as typical ways of labelling East Asian films, I scrutinise conventional categories such as national cinema, art cinema and auteur directors. Film festivals' functions are often mentioned, since they are the primary location for the evaluation of a film and for construction and regulation of its basic framework of understanding (Zhang 2002: 33-36).

In her book *Film Culture* (2002), Janet Harbord argues that 'the purported value of film, and our understanding of it' cannot be determined by analysing its text 'as the singular object' (2002:40). Harbord claims that it should be considered in terms of 'particular film cultures' developed 'within specific institutional and social spaces' (2002: 40). The value of a film, like other commodities, is not pre-determined but emerges as it moves through 'larger networks of circulation'. To illuminate this point, Harbord focuses on spatial institutions like galleries, art-houses, multiplexes, film festivals and related film cultures. This chimes with Chow's account of the films of the Chinese Fifth Generation directors. Chow (1995) also suggests that the value of a Chinese film and its 'Chinese-ness' are

constructed as it circulates in the west. These Chinese films are given new value and become recognised as bearing ‘Chinese-ness’ through western institutional spaces and circulation networks such as international film festivals, western film criticism and art-house cinemas.

Here, I draw attention to western film criticism and reviews as a discursive site as well as institutional dimension allied with networks of circulation. I am interested in how western film criticism is involved in the labelling practice of East Asian films and its role in the circulation of these films. Western criticism’s influence over the selecting, acknowledging, labelling and distributing of films is of course far from absolute. Other important factors include East Asian film directors’ responses, the intervention of East Asian governments and domestic film industry interests. Later chapters examine these factors by analysing each director’s stance more concretely.

### **3.4.1 the role/function of film criticism**

To explain the relationship between western film criticism and non-western films, I address the two main roles of film criticism. The first is to report moments of ‘discovery’ and provide initial information and basic frameworks to help ‘discovered’ films gain acknowledgement (Stringer 2001). The second is to function as a ‘gatekeeper’ or ‘mediator’ between foreign films and domestic audiences (Hedetoft 2000). Since knowledge of East Asian films is still largely restricted to specialists, western film criticism offers a referential framework that guides audiences’ choice and understanding.

Let me begin with the first role. In the previous section, I discussed how Nichols (1994a) articulates the experience of ‘discovery’ of unknown cinema at festivals. According to him, through the festival circuit, ‘the local’ is made to ‘circulate globally’ ‘within a specific system of institutional assumptions, priorities, and constraints’ (1994b: 68). At the same time, he contends that by entering film festival circuits, ‘national cinemas and the work of individual filmmakers’ are given ‘new meanings’ (1994b: 71). In his view, it

is the ‘new meanings’ that ‘festival-goers’ discover. What are these ‘new meanings’, then?

As Nichols himself points out, the new meanings are constructed ‘within a specific system of institutional assumptions, priorities, and constraints’ rather than on an arbitrary basis. As discussed in the previous section, this specific system tends to embody the prevailing assumption of the otherness of non-western cinemas and the ‘pseudo-universalism’ of western cinema and western theories. When reporting on newly ‘discovered’ films, film criticism tends to focus on the otherness of these films with an ‘aura of exoticism’ (Stringer 2002a: 35-42). In such texts, the more ‘unseen’ and ‘exotic’ a film is, the better: the unknown-ness and incomprehensibility intensify the need for ‘explication by the qualified critic’.

‘Discovery’ reports from film festivals for example play an important role in forging a western version of the history of a non-western national cinema. In this western version, Japanese cinema emerged with Kurosawa Akira’s *Rashomon* (1951), followed by the discoveries of Ozu Yasujiro and Mizoguchi Kenji; Chinese cinema is usually identified with the films of Chinese Fifth Generation filmmakers like Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou and Tian Zhuangzhuang; Korean cinema had been identified until very recently with the festival-winning film, *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* (1989) (Stringer 2001: 135). In response to this, Yingjin Zhang asks: ‘Who speaks for Chinese cinema in the West? To whom do they speak? About what subjects? In whose or what name? And to what effect?’ (2002: 26).

Zhang’s questions can also be applied to the second role of western criticism. Borrowing from Ulf Hedetoft (2000), I would describe this role as that of a ‘gatekeeper’. The ‘taste-brokering’ role of film criticism mediates between a film and domestic audiences when a ‘foreign’ film is imported and distributed (Crofts 2002). Hedetoft is interested in the roles of ‘national mediatic gatekeepers’ – reviewers and ‘framers’ – who are

. . . authors of articles and interviewers in dailies and periodicals intended to place films in historical context, to ferret out directors' underlying motives, to introduce the cast, to discuss sociological or philosophical implications of films and so on. (2000: 279)

Hedetoft's analysis focuses on these gatekeepers' role in 'culturally transcribing, translating and mediating' a global/American film *Saving Private Ryan* to local/national audiences (2000: 279). He claims that as mediators these 'framers' make up a 'transnational ecumene' (2000: 284-286). They belong to 'the same transnational community of identity, passing critical judgement on the basis of universal (i.e. non-national) values, knowledges and assumptions' (2000: 284). At the same time, as their main 'communicative spaces' are nationally based papers or journals, they are bound to a 'fundamentally national framework of the critics' gatekeeper function' (2000: 286). The role of gatekeepers is to decode and reframe the content and message of a foreign film in terms of the 'indigenous frame of national reference' (2000: 282-283). Through this reframing process, according to Hedetoft, 'the critical establishment (reviewers, critics and 'framers')' completes 'its advisory and interpretive functions' to guide 'the general public' (2000: 282-283).

Hedetoft's account is relevant to the analysis of how western critics mediate East Asian films for western audiences, though it requires considerable adjustment: critics construct the East Asian films they mediate neither as global nor universal. The gatekeeper function of critics is thus more significant: they are endowed with authority to deal with specific, rarefied knowledge. That is, critics take part in this reframing process not as 'transnational ecumenes' but rather as 'area studies experts' who are equipped with fairly exclusive knowledge. Like area specialists, western critics are referred to at times as national or regional cinema specialists (See Jones 2003). The reframing process is also more likely to involve 'western frames of East Asian films', not 'indigenous frames of national reference'. What is considered specific and locally embedded is not 'audiences' but films. Here, (western) audiences, not 'films', attain a universal and global position. This mediating process from the local to the global thus involves not 'reframing' but

‘framing’. Western critics speak for East Asian films to western audiences about what they think and what they know about these films.

As a part of the framing process, western critics construct a list of canons of other national cinemas (Crofts 2002). For instance, the canons of Japanese cinema consist of Japanese films well-known and highly thought of in the west: films by Kurosawa Akira, Ozu Yasujiro, Mizoguchi Kenji, Imamura Shohei, Oshima Nagisa and so on. Other Japanese films and directors less exposed to the west are excluded from the list. Japanese critics’ writings are treated with respect, but enjoy fewer opportunities to appear in western journals. The selective, partial canons established by western critics take the role of a guide to Japanese cinema in the west (Stringer 2002a: 49-50).

Like other films defined as art cinema ‘against Hollywood’s mass entertainment film’, East Asian films circulate via ‘the networks of film festivals and reviewing practices’ (Higson 2002: 59) which appear to play a determining role, forming ‘a prefixed cycle’ for East Asian films.

. . . favorable reviews at international film festivals lead to production of more “ethnographic” films, and the wide distribution of such films is translated into their availability for classroom use and therefore influences the agenda of film studies, which in turn reinforces the status of these films as a dominant genre. (Zhang 2002: 35)

Since receiving good reviews increases the chance of being distributed in the west, many East Asian films, with the intention of travelling to the west, attempt to slot themselves into the frames of western criticism. When such films succeed in travelling to and being accepted in the west, this corroborates the frames of western knowledge on East Asian films within ‘the ghetto of the “foreign film”’ (Shohat and Stam 2000: 382).

### 3.4.2 Orientalism and western film criticism

Before I move onto the labelling practices denoted as ‘national cinema’ and ‘art cinema’, I now briefly scrutinise the key Orientalist characteristics of western criticism.

Like western academic texts, western criticism tends to devote copious attention to the ‘otherness’ of the visual and formalistic style of non-western films. Hong Kong film critic Stephen Teo suggests that western critics’ prioritisation of cinematic style derives from their enthusiasm ‘for discovering new “auteurs”’ (2002: 189). Since the content of a film may flummox western critics, they often opt to concentrate on the ‘style’, over which they can more easily assert their critical authority (Teo 2002). That is, the visual qualities of a non-western film are often used as the main criteria to justify its importance. According to Julian Stringer (2002a: 35-36), Catherine De La Roche, covering *Rashomon*’s award at Venice in 1951 for *Sight & Sound*, underscores the visual qualities of the film. Stringer explains that this was the first time *Sight & Sound* had covered a Japanese film; no knowledge whatsoever was available to contextualise the film’s value. Stringer points out that critics’ inability to understand the film dialogue and subtitles may have led to their striking emphasis on visual qualities as the only element about which they could meaningfully comment. Western critics who can ‘afford to ignore the peculiar historical inscription or economic determinants that might have marked the films’ (Elsaesser 1989: 300) tend to evaluate films in terms of cinematic style. This may explain why East Asian films featuring visually sumptuous images and unusual cinematic styles are more likely to draw western critical attention.

Western critics exhibit particular tendencies in trying to grasp the content or meaning of East Asian films. Like western academics, critics frequently draw upon native traditional aesthetics, cultures and philosophy, in combination with popular exotic imaginings. What is noteworthy is that this involves not only exotic otherness but also political otherness. As Orientalism projects not only exotic but also primitive images of others, critics often interpret East Asian films as conveying East Asian nations’ political backwardness. This strengthens the imaginary line between ‘the democratic West’ and ‘the despotic East’.

For instance, as Chapter 5 discusses, the films of the Chinese Fifth Generation directors are often interpreted in terms of political criticism or allegory about the contemporary political backwardness of Chinese society. The more a director appears as a political rebel opposing the non-democratic government, the more critical interest he/she receives. The career of Zhang Yimou, one of the most eminent Fifth Generation filmmakers, illustrates this. Among his films, *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, which were banned by the Chinese government, won more critical acclaim and more press interest in the west than his other work.

Last but not least, I want to highlight the power relationship between western criticism and non-western films. As with western film scholarship, the problem lies not only in the partiality or limitedness of western criticism but in its privileged status. Teo expresses discontent about western critics taking privileged positions to produce knowledge about Hong Kong films while denying 'Asian critics their fundamental right of interpretation' (2002: 189). The issue at stake, for Teo, concerns 'the Lawrence-critics' – western critics who believe themselves the saviours of Asian films like T. E. Lawrence – whose subjective views become the standard and dominate all discussions (Teo 2002: 186-187). Asian critics whose views confront those of western critics are disregarded as non-objective or too local (Teo 2002: 192-194).

. . . they [Asian critics] are also thought to be too local, of interest only to a highly localised home constituency. Hence, it is felt that Asians must still rely on the West for a more "internationalised" view of their culture. (Teo 2002: 192-193)

Teo's claim is consonant with Said's analysis of western Orientalism. Said underlines the fact that Orientals are deprived of the chance to represent themselves. Only western Orientalists possess the privilege to produce knowledge about the Orient under 'a statement of power and a claim for relatively absolute authority' (Said 1997: 134). When East Asian films are noticed for their otherness, this raises questions about the

relationship between power and discursive practice. As Zhang asks: ‘Who speaks for Chinese cinema in the West?’.

### **3.4.3 the labelling practice of East Asian films in the west**

East Asian films that are particularly highly acclaimed in western film criticism and at film festivals are mostly labelled as ‘national cinema’ and ‘auteurism’. Regarding ‘films made in diaspora’, Hamid Naficy places emphasis on the fact that ‘classifying these films into one of the established categories’ – like ‘national cinema’, ‘auteurism’ and ‘ethnic’ films – evades ‘the very cultural and political foundations which constitute them’ (2003: 204). Furthermore, according to Naficy, ‘such traditional schemas’ confine these films to ‘discursive ghettos’ that hinder appreciation of ‘the filmmakers’ personal evolution and stylistic transformations over time’ (2003: 204): ‘Once labelled “ethnic” or “ethnographic”, transnational filmmakers remain so even long after they have moved on’ (2003: 204).

Although the East Asian films I am dealing with in this thesis are not ‘made in diaspora’, they face the same fate when it comes to the practice of categorisation. Critics may categorise any film as ‘national cinema’ or ‘auteurism’. The effect of ‘ghettoisation’, however, appears more severe for non-western films, as they are circulated in very limited routes and critics have limited access to information about them. Western categorising or initial labelling is thus of key significance. It shapes distribution of non-western films and the formulation of intellectual interest in these films. It also seems to have an impact upon East Asia, including government subsidies and how the film industry produces and promotes films. To examine this labelling practice, I look at how East Asian films are recognised and defined and gain western critical interest within the frameworks of ‘national cinema’ and ‘art cinema’, re-considering the economic and political aspects of these conventional categorising tools.

I begin with East Asian films' pattern of travel to the west. Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, for example, was 'discovered' at Venice in 1951. Its huge success may have been due in part to its cinematic excellence but appears to owe much to its Orientalist attractions (Smith 2002). Since then, Akira Kurosawa's name, as an auteur director, and *Rashomon*-type films are conflated with the category of national cinema as 'Japanese cinema' (Yoshimoto 2000). Japanese films that satisfy expectations derived from western experiences of Kurosawa and *Rashomon* – such as Kinugasa Teinosuke's *Gate of Hell* (1953) – are constantly well received in the west. Such films, which deliver Orientalist elements reminiscent of *Rashomon*, are produced by the Japanese film industry and its filmmakers in pursuit of similar critical and commercial success in the west (Desser 2003). When more contemporary Japanese films entered the west, critics discussed and measured them within the framework initiated by the western discovery of Japanese cinema. That is, films labelled as 'Japanese cinema' fulfil western expectations of the 'Japanese-ness' of Japanese cinema. Simultaneously, these Japanese films must exhibit the features of art cinema according to European standards, endorsed by the director's status as an 'auteur'. This also describes Chinese cinema's route to the west since the 'breakthrough' of the Chinese Fifth Generation filmmakers. This same route is trodden by some Korean films aiming to gain western critical confirmation.

This Orientalist path seems still to be the main course by which East Asian films reach western cinemas and art-house circuits. Certainly, films have travelled to the west and attained popularity outside of this path. Some East Asian films have been co-produced with Hollywood or taken up by Hollywood distribution companies for world-wide release. Otherwise, East Asian films tend to circulate through the sub-structure and networks of 'art cinema' with its focus on auteur directors' names. If it is Japanese, a film is expected to confirm the western framework, including the 'Japanese-ness' of Japanese cinema as the west knows it and wants to see it.

Bearing this in mind, I respectively examine the extent to which 'national cinema' and 'art cinema' are related to the labelling practice of East Asian films. To do this, it is vital to critically review the categorising terms 'national cinema' and 'art cinema', their

practical roles and economic space. When labelled ‘national cinema’ or ‘art cinema’, East Asian films are seamlessly contained within a rigid conception of ‘otherness’ and expected to remain within the domain of foreign – other – cinemas.

Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie affirm that during the initial period – the late 1960s – when film studies was first established within the academy, ‘the study of national cinemas – in conjunction with *auteur* theory’ was extensively accepted as ‘the categorical framework’ for organising university film courses in the USA (2000: 2). Stephen Crofts (2000) states that until the 1980s critics saw national cinema as a potential antidote to Hollywood’s take-over of the world film market. As critics defined national cinema in reaction to Hollywood films in Europe (Hayward 1993), it ‘has served as a means by which non-Hollywood films – most commonly art films – have been labelled, distributed, and reviewed’ (Crofts 2000: 1). The recent crisis of ‘national cinema’ as an adequate category of film studies seems to result from two inter-related aspects. First, the unity of the nation has been undermined by critical discussions of the modern nation and nationalism instigated by Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). By showing how modern nations in Europe are historically formed as a ‘discursive object’ in the era of imperialism and nationalism, Anderson’s book shatters the myth of the nation as a stable entity and brings out its fictional nature. The unity of nation-ness is put in doubt. It appears increasingly implausible that this nation-ness or national culture is inevitably represented in national films: ‘national culture does not represent what is there but asserts what is imagined to be there: a homogenized fixed common culture’ (Hayward 2000: 99). Second, in practice, as international co-operation in filmmaking and distribution increases sharply, it becomes very difficult to define the nationality of a film (Crofts 2002; Higson 2000). As a result, the basic premises of ‘national cinema’ are undermined. The belief that there exist discernible films that can be clearly demarcated by nationality is weakened (Hayward 2000; Higson 2002; Willemsen 1994).

Debunking the myths of national cinema reveals the practical and economic functions of national cinema as a category. For Andrew Higson, histories of national cinema are,

. . . histories of a business seeking a secure footing in the marketplace, enabling the maximisation of an industry's profits while at the same time bolstering a nation's cultural standing. (2002: 54)

That is, the categorical conception of national cinema functions to secure a marketplace for films defined as the opposite of the Hollywood mainstream: art cinema, independent cinema and 'national cinema'. National cinema is, at one and the same time, international. According to Thomas Elsaesser,

. . . while the Hollywood product dominates most countries' domestic markets, as well as leading internationally, each national cinema is both national and international, though possibly at different ends of the market. (1987: 167)

Elsaesser continues,

Nationally, it participates in the popular or literary culture at large . . . Internationally, national cinema used to have a generic function: a French, Italian or a Swedish film set definite horizons of expectations for the general audience – a prerequisite for marketing purposes. (1987: 167)

At this point, it becomes clear that not only Hollywood cinema but also other national cinemas need and aim to occupy a given commercial space – market and distribution – in the international realm as well as in the domestic market. To fulfil this need, each national cinema constructs and utilises generic expectations related to conventional conceptions and stereotypical images of a certain nationality. These generic expectations related to the nationality of a film seem to work in a similar way to those of Hollywood genre films (Elsaesser 1989: 303). Genre 'creates the unifying principle of the hyper-text, facilitating the role of marketing in pre-selling audiences to a film' (Harbord 2002: 71). The nationality of a film seems to play the same role. 'For an international success',

Elsaesser argues, ‘countries without a strong and continuous tradition of film-making’ should be able to ‘market “the national history” as international spectacle’ (1989: 293). For instance, the ‘renaissance’ of British cinema, through films such as *Chariots of Fire* (1981) and *Gandhi* (1982), was made possible by rendering national history as an international spectacle (Elsaesser 1993). In this respect, Higson underlines how ‘national cinema’ becomes a ‘brand name’ to sell a film.

To promote films in terms of their national identity is also to secure a prominent collective profile for them in both the domestic and the international marketplace, a means of selling those films by giving them a distinctive brand name. (Higson 2000: 69)

When films are exhibited in ‘foreign’ countries, they are evaluated under this ‘brand name’ – such as ‘British cinema’ – and interpreted within ‘the generic expectations’ attached to a particular nationality. Regarding American and British critical responses to New German Cinema directors’ films, Elsaesser mentions that as often as they take an ‘auteurist’ approach, critics refer back to ‘Germany’s notorious past or its contemporary political troubles’ (1989: 293). It is far easier to form one opinion about stereotypes of German films as they are seen ‘from the outside’ (Elsaesser 1989: 293).

These ‘generic expectations’ are also applied to East Asian films. When these are circulated under the brand name of ‘nation-ness’, the route they travel imposes upon them the imaginary nation-ness of ‘a closed and coherent community with an already fully formed and fixed indigenous tradition’ (Higson 2000: 70). These films are thus subjected to ‘foreclosed otherness’. Harbord argues that ‘film . . . does not float freely above national borders, but attains part of its value and meaning from its perceived origin and the paths of its circulation’ (2002: 73). In her view, the paths films travel are a ‘force-field’ buzzing with ‘the tension between national and global economies’ (2002: 73).

National cinema as ‘a brand name’ functions to control the value and meaning of East Asian films ‘on the paths of its circulation’. For instance, Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* and

Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* appear 'equally alien, remote and "other-looking"' to Chinese audiences and may remind Chinese audiences of the ethnic differences within China (Wang 1989: 35). When these films cross the border and reach the west, however, they are seen to express 'a presumably unified Chineseness' (Wang 1989: 35). The inner differences within Chinese society are ignored; these Chinese films are circulated as reinforcing 'Chinese-ness'/otherness – the alleged cultural essence of Chinese society as 'a closed and coherent community'. Critics may also apply such practices to other films – such as New German Cinema. What seems largely to decide the extent to which films are contained within such otherness is the variety of films circulated and the amount of information available about them. Limited circulation and lack of information are working to ensure that generic expectations of East Asian films based on nationality continue to flourish.

Another category that often accompanies 'national cinema' is 'art cinema'. Art cinema extols 'auteur-directors' 'as a structure in the film's system' (Bordwell 1979a). Authorship – auteur theory, or auteurism – emerged in the 1950s with a group of *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics and Andrew Sarris' transportation of their ideas to the USA. Auteur-centred theories and analyses have been institutionalised as the primary principle of 'most Western film reviewing and criticism, film books, film festivals world-wide, and film studies syllabuses' (Crofts 1998: 311). Amid the plethora of contemporary critical discussions on authorship, this thesis is interested in the practical function of 'auteur-centred' criticism in relation to a film's circulation.

According to Steve Neale (1981), 'art cinema' as a category plays a crucial role in differentiating films from Hollywood productions. To 'counter American domination' in the domestic market,

. . . the films produced by a specific national film industry will have . . . to differentiate themselves from those produced by Hollywood. One way of doing so is to turn to high art and to the cultural traditions specific to the country involved. (Neale 1981: 14-15)

Circulated 'as the signs of art in established cultural institutions', art films occupy 'different cinemas' and 'different distribution networks' from those of Hollywood films (1981: 14-15). Within 'the economic infrastructure of art cinema', Neale claims that

The name of the author can function as a "brand name", a means of labelling and selling a film and of orienting expectation and channelling meaning and pleasure in the absence of generic boundaries and categories. (1981: 36)

Timothy Corrigan shows that auteurs become 'stars', enacting a similar role to that of film stars in the 'promotion or recovery of a movie or group of movies' (1991: 105). According to Corrigan, contemporary marketing strategy turns 'international art cinema' into a 'cult of personality' (1991: 105). As a result, auteur-directors 'have become increasingly situated along an extratextual path in which their commercial status as auteurs is their chief function as auteurs' (1991: 105). The name of an auteur-director is considered part of a 'commercial strategy' and becomes a 'critical concept': distribution and marketing rely on 'the potential cult status of an auteur' (Corrigan 1991: 103). Art cinema requires and thus creates the aura surrounding auteur-directors' names, thereby constructing and securing its own slice of commercial space.

Like 'national cinema', art cinema is as much 'international' as 'national'. It is national in that it always involves 'the context of pre-defined national boundaries, cultures, governments and economies' (Neale 1981: 34). It is international in that art films are 'produced for international distribution and exhibition as well as local consumption' (Neale 1981: 35). Neale shows that film festivals are significant sites for art films: the place where 'international distribution is sought' for such films and their status as 'art' is 'confirmed and re-stated through the existence of prizes and awards' (1981: 35). The author-centred introduction of national/art cinema in the international arena, at film festivals for example, enables each national cinema to circulate: auteur-directors' names are conflated with it (Elsaesser 1989; Sieglohr 2000). As a result, an auteur cinema accepted as representing Germany in a kind of 'parliament of national cinemas' such as 'the big festivals of Cannes, Venice and Berlin' (Elsaesser 1996: 16) has become 'a kind

of cultural ambassador' (Sieglöhr 2000: 83). Stringer casts light on such branding of 'international star directors' by referring to James Naremore's term, 'boutique cinema' (2000: 35-36). Naremore (1999) argues that directors' names, like a brand name, are promoted, through the cooperation of film festivals and distribution companies, as the main criteria by which audiences choose films.

The name of an 'auteur-director' is placed at the locus of the circulation of films, their names given 'symbolic or representative currency'. Above, I stressed the role of film festivals and western criticism for the circulation of films that sell otherness. Yet governments are also involved. Through subsidies, governments support auteur directors who can earn international honours for the nation abroad (Neale 1981; Elsaesser 1989). For a director, the amount of press coverage they obtain abroad is 'the very material basis which might decide how big a slice a director might get of the subsidy cake, and how often' (Elsaesser 1989: 300-301). Their films are presented at film festivals with the support of their government; they are thus considered 'official representations, sanctioned and sponsored by a country', regardless of directors' intentions (1989: 302). Auteur-directors can thus sell films with Oriental images that fit very well with western Orientalist assumptions and convey no criticism of the national government. It is nonetheless possible for auteur-directors to sell films that play with or challenge Orientalist assumptions while criticising the political or economic conditions of their own society.

According to Marvin D'Lugo, Latin American 'film authors' such as 'Ripstein in Mexico, Solanas in Argentina, and Alea in Cuba' have been 'authorial icons' who represent 'their respective national culture within the global market' (2003: 110). Their names, as 'national authors', are established in international film festivals; their reputation is 'as oppositional, anti-status quo, resistance figures' (D'Lugo 2003: 110). In his analysis of Fernando Solanas' film *Tangos: the Exile of Gardel* (1985), D'Lugo claims that Solanas effectively employs the most sellable item of national culture – the tango – and transforms it 'into cultural capital in the global market', at the same time as delivering political criticism (2003: 108).

Solanas' example implies that we can discern two different positions: the critical deployment and transformation of elements of national culture and the packaging of allegedly 'authentic' culture to sell otherness. Concerning the latter position, Hamid Dabashi warns us of the danger of a 'nativism' that unwittingly cooperates in the 'aggressive exoticization of the so-called Third World' in international film festivals (2001: 246-256). According to Dabashi, if these auteur directors want their films 'to have a public function beyond the film festivals', naïve nativist approaches should be modified in light of 'a critical awareness of globality' (2001:259). That is, one must take into account how this nativism will be appropriated within global circulation.

D'Lugo also finds virtue in globally successful Argentinean films because they 'serve a double pedagogical function': they critically employ 'well-established rhetorical tropes' to undermine exoticism for international audiences and create 'an internal distance' for national audiences. This distance enables national audiences 'to see their own culture from a position of renewed critical distance' (2003: 113-114). This resonates with Chow's (1995) view of Chinese films' ideal role as 'cultural translation'. Chow suggests that in the course of cultural translation, films should undermine the foundations of 'Western domination' and pull the rug from under 'Eastern traditions' at the same time (Chow 1995: 185-201).

Most East Asian films – at least those I deal with in this thesis – fall into the category of auteur-director-driven national/art cinema. By meeting the criteria and generic expectations of auteur-director-driven national/art cinema of East Asian origin, they are 'discovered' at film festivals, given good critical reviews and distributed in the art-house circuits of the west. Like New German Cinema, these East Asian films are, more often than not, recognised as representative of a national cinema. Selling a spectacle of national history in the style of European art cinema has been one of the few routes through which they could enter a distribution network dominated by the west.

This restricted route means that only a small fraction of East Asian films gain the attention of western critics and make it into the distribution network and film festivals.

The generic expectations of the west lead auteur-directors to continue to produce films that conform to expectations, with the support of the domestic government. Western critics thus establish canons of East Asian cinema, encouraging 'internal cultural colonialism' by enabling the film industry and film policy to exclude films that are more popular and recognised as more representative of a particular society by domestic critics and audiences. Meanwhile, in the west, East Asian films are consistently confined within the ghetto of 'national/art cinema', an imaginary terrain marked by rigid concepts of nation-ness and pure cultural traditions. Auteur-directors, their names endowed with cultural and symbolic currency through western circulation of their films, seem forced to deal with western Orientalism, self-Orientalism, and a nationalism supported by the domestic government. As D'Lugo's analysis shows, by critically transforming otherness, auteur-directors can open up a new critical space for domestic audiences while simultaneously undermining western Orientalist expectations.

### **functions of film festivals**

As emphasised above, film festivals play a vital role as the main gateway through which East Asian films travel to the west. Since the elaboration of their functions was scattered through the previous sections, I now provide a brief critical review of these functions.

Film festivals are regarded as 'an alternative space to the common vernacular of Hollywood', which circulates and organises non-Hollywood local films (O'Regan 2002: 113). They evaluate and 'naturalize' local products 'as internationally acceptable' (O'Regan 2002: 113). Harbord describes the function of film festivals as 'providing a material text for the otherwise abstract circulation of film across national spaces' (2002: 11). For Crofts, film festivals are a crucial 'commercial' place, a 'meeting point of national cinema product and potential foreign buyers' (2002: 39). These commentators seem to agree that film festivals operate as an alternative space for promoting and circulating non-Hollywood cultural products. Yet in the course of fulfilling this function, film festivals face a dilemma when they 'brand film nationally and circulate it beyond the

borders of the nation state' (Harbord 2002: 12). In the name of 'cultural diversity', they become 'the Olympics of the show-business economy', to borrow Elsaesser's expression (1989: 61). It is an irony that film festivals are only able to help films circulate 'beyond national borders' by consolidating national boundaries and an imaginary national entity, in a similar way to the Olympic Games. The way that East Asian films can join this alternative space is to adopt the alleged 'national look' – Japanese, Chinese or Korean – and act out the clichés of art and traditional culture.

The relationship between non-western films and film festivals appears more troublesome: western film festivals have a 'disproportionate influence' on non-western films 'as place of public exhibition and discussion, as place of judgement, and as market-place' (Bhabha 1994: 21). To quote Bhabha again, he reminds us that 'even an alternative or counter-cultural event' like the Third Cinema Conference was held at the Edinburgh film festival. He highlights how 'an Indian film about the plight of Bombay's pavement-dwellers' achieved distribution in India only after it won an award at the Newcastle Festival (Bhabha 1994: 21). Film festivals in the west are central to allowing non-western films to be discussed in academic terms. They are also places where the value of non-western films is decided and endorsed. Having access to few circulation routes besides film festivals, many East Asian films are subject to the power of western film festivals.

Film festivals are also sites where the 'mutually orchestrated disclosure' is unfolded (Nichols 1994a: 20). According to Nichols, film representatives from each country or region, involved with co-ordinating screenings, are well aware of what festival goers want to see, hear and know about films. On the other hand, festival-goers know 'we know that they calibrate their information to our preexisting assumptions' (1994a: 20). Thus, whilst films are celebrated as 'art' or believed to convey 'authentic' culture, Yingjin Zhang criticises the fact that in 'the back stage areas', reproductions of films that stir up 'immense fascination for Western festival-goers, especially critics and scholars' 'are planned, packaged, and marketed' (2002: 30). For an Iranian film scholar, Dabashi, film festivals are one of the 'homogenizing institutions that exoticize the globe to presume moral ascendancy for "whiteness"' and they are 'on the lookout for indigenous nativists

like Kiarostami' (2001: 258). Under the disguise of cultural authenticity and the myth of the national entity, what is really traded in western film festivals is western generic expectations of East Asian films and films that satisfy expectations, selling 'indigenous nativism' – selling otherness.

### **3.5 cinema in the contact zone**

As the basis for a critique of such labelling practice, I want to draw attention to historical and cultural phenomena indicating that cinema can be regarded as a global medium in a contact zone. I thus suggest alternative ways to conceive and deal with supposedly foreign and 'other' cinemas. Although some East Asian films appear authentically 'Japanese', 'Chinese' or 'Korean', they may be an already 'impure' product of this contact zone. If particular East Asian films can be viewed as 'autoethnography', as discussed in the previous chapter, this implies that they embody or at least are deeply in touch with Orientalism via self-Orientalism.

In the previous chapter, I drew upon Pratt's conceptual tools such as 'contact zone', 'transculturation' and 'autoethnography' to elaborate how Orientals are involved with Orientalism through self-Orientalism. For Pratt, the contact zone designates 'the space of colonial encounters' where people from geographically and historically separate origins meet and form ongoing relationships, mostly under 'coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict' (1992: 6). Can we extend the use of the concept of 'contact zone'? Can we extend it beyond that which colonialism initiates and sustains to embrace the social and cultural interstices where different cultures meet and intertwine with one another within a more subtle web of power relationships? If so, we can consider cinema in the light of the cultural or filmic phenomenon of 'transculturation', which, again, must be redefined in its extended usage: shifting from the interest in how 'subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture' (Pratt 1992: 6) to how cultures in contact have constantly influenced each other. Looking at cultures through 'transculturation' is vital for grasping

the extent to which cultures are interwoven and mixed beyond the binary of us (the west) and them. Stuart Hall suggests that 're-reading the binaries as forms of transculturation' will permanently 'trouble the here/there cultural boundaries' (1996: 247).

Considering cinema as existing in the contact zone means giving up dependence upon the binaries of 'the West' and 'others' when thinking about cinema. In fact, full of transcultural moments, film history itself shows us how much films, 'as a travelling medium', have been international, if not global (Shohat and Stam 2000). Shohat and Stam claim that 'the cinema ... is now, and arguably always has been, a thoroughly globalized medium' (2000: 382). In terms of personnel and aesthetics, as Shohat and Stam point out, international exchanges and mutual influence have always marked cinemas in different regions. We can make a long list, including German directors' emigration to Hollywood in the 1930s and the recent emigration of a group of Hong Kong directors to the same town (Saunders 1994; Stokes 1999). Aesthetic inter-influences include those shaping American western films and Kurosawa's samurai films (Anderson 1962; 1973). Hong Kong action movies and Hollywood action blockbusters have also influenced each other. As is well known, Hong Kong cinema owed its plots, genre clichés and special effects to Hollywood, while Hollywood has recently adopted action styles from Hong Kong cinema (Dargis 1997). Furthermore, film production and distribution is becoming a multi-national global rather than nation-based business. Even outside Hollywood, it is not unusual for multi-national crews to work together under conditions of increasing international co-production. Considering cinema as a product of a contact zone thus suggests that we can discuss some aspects of cinema most productively not on the basis of national boundary and cultural difference, but rather in 'transcultural' and 'international' contexts.

Looking at 'transcultural' or 'international' aspects of films reveals that art cinema and national cinema, as categorizing terms, are rigid concepts that deny the complex reality of films. Discussing European cinema, Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (1992) claim that we ought to turn our attention to European popular films. In his analysis of 'pan-European popular films', Tim Bergfelder (2000) shows that successful films in this genre

have drawn on diverse elements of European popular culture and Hollywood genre films, aiming at ‘cross-cultural appeal’ across Europe. Popular films, like popular culture, are less likely to strive for the ‘genuine’, ‘authentic’ and ‘pure’ look pursued by art cinema, tinted with élite high culture. For popular films like those of Bollywood and Hong Kong, no national border is evident: they take anything from anywhere and blend different elements into a unique aesthetics (Rai 1994; Rajadhyaksha 2000). Popular films seem to blur all boundaries.

In contrast, film scholars generate the category of art cinema by emphasising high art and cultural specificity, presupposing their authenticity and purity. As mentioned earlier, to secure a space in a film market dominated by Hollywood, national film industries turn to art cinema (Neale 1981). Art cinema differentiates itself from Hollywood films by referring to ‘high art’ and ‘the cultural traditions specific to the country involved’ (Neale 1981: 15). This tendency is reinforced when the domestic government uses films to boost nationalist sentiments among domestic audiences and to promote its national image abroad. When East Asian films attempt to fit into the generic expectations and the standards of ‘art cinema’ in western film festivals and markets, domestically, they tend to be combined with nationalism that seeks to bolster national pride by recruiting traditional art forms. Here, traditional art forms are assumed to bear a pure and authentic essence. In other words, whilst East Asian art films satisfy a western Orientalism that presupposes cultural otherness, at home they often facilitate rigid belief in nationalism through the essential otherness derived from Orientalism.

There exist other films such as ‘popular films’ and ‘experimental films’ within the terrain of ‘national cinema’ (Dissanyake 2000: 146). It may thus be misleading to conceive of a particular national cinema only on the basis of art films. Popular films are often disregarded by nationalist governments as impure and westernised (Dissayanke 1994; Rai 1994). For the same reason, popular films are often denied access to western film festivals and excluded from distribution in the west. Mixed with western influences, such films threaten the belief in the essential otherness of western Orientalism and nationalism. I suggest that films should be conceived not in the limited terms of otherness – cultural,

national or even cinematic – but as bearing traces of mutual influence and cultural blending, while remaining distinctive as individual films in their own right.

This thesis investigates cinema in the contact zone, particularly films that can be considered as ‘autoethnography’. In the previous chapter, I explained how ‘autoethnography’ can be regarded as the means of expression of self-Orientalism. I do not believe that ‘autoethnographic’ films are most representative of cinema in the contact zone. Rather, they point up one of the very specific situations in which certain films are associated with Orientalism in the contact zone. In examining ‘autoethnographic’ films, I scrutinise how they embody self-Orientalism and gain access to western markets by satisfying western expectations.

In light of Said’s critique of Orientalism, this chapter has fleshed out how I approach western academic works and western criticism on East Asian films. I looked into how the otherness of East Asian films is conceived and articulated in western academic work and how western criticism mediates East Asian films in relation to Orientalism. I analysed how the labelling practice of East Asian films in the west is involved with their confinement within the realm of ‘other’, foreign cinemas. Film festivals seem to be a primary site where ‘unknown’ cinemas are ‘discovered’ and where labelling practices regulate these cinemas. Borrowing Pratt’s terms, I suggest that films are more productively viewed as transcultural products in the contact zone, beyond the rigid boundaries that national/art cinema categories draw.

In the next three chapters I explore key instances in which Japanese, Chinese and Korean cinema have been conceived of in the west. First, by analysing western discussions evoked by the films of Kurosawa Akira and Ozu Yasujiro, I look at how the western conception of Japanese cinema as other is formulated and sustained, examining Kitano Takeshi’s relationship to western Orientalism and self-Orientalism. Secondly, I investigate how the Chinese Fifth Generation filmmakers have come to represent Chinese cinema in the west. I focus on how Zhang Yimou employs self-Orientalism and how he

deals with postcolonial power relations in which the Orientalism that imbues the western film market and the nationalism pushed by the Chinese government conflict. Lastly, I look at how Korean cinema is conceived of in the west and how western Orientalism is involved with self-Orientalism in Im Kwon-Taek's films.

## 4. Kitano Takeshi: Japanese Cinema as Other

### 4.1. introduction

Compared with Chinese and Korean cinema, Japanese cinema has a relatively long history as an object of western academic interest. The popular recognition of Japanese films is also relatively high in the west and a number of western books and articles on Japanese directors and films have been published. Japanese cinema thus provides a terrain in which the production of western critical knowledge on East Asian films can be scrutinised. According to Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto (2002), while Japanese cinema receives plenty of attention within western academic disciplines, it nonetheless functions as other to western cinema.

In this chapter, I discuss the key characteristics of western knowledge on Japanese films and examine how such knowledge continuously understands and presents Japanese cinema as other. I look at two instances in detail: how Kurosawa's *Rashomon* was rendered comprehensible after its discovery and how Ozu's unique filmic style is appropriated to sustain the otherness of Japanese cinema. Kurosawa and Ozu are not only two of the most highly respected Japanese directors in the west but are also frequently referred to in discussions of Kitano Takeshi's films. A large number of English-language articles and books were produced after the western 'discovery' of these two directors. For reasons of space, this chapter focuses only on issues that illuminate Kitano's work.

My primary concern is to probe the extent to which western film scholars conceive and appropriate Kitano Takeshi's films through a pre-given system of western knowledge of Japanese cinema. While Kitano is one of the most eminent contemporary Japanese directors in the west, his fame and popularity in the west are overshadowed by popular recognition of Kurosawa's films and academic interest in Ozu. He has gained a reputation as a new Japanese auteur-director whose filmic style tackles death and violence in a unique way (Yomota 1999). I examine how western critics acknowledge and elaborate this style and his film *Hana-bi* (1998) in particular. I discuss how western conceptions of

Kitano's films relate to western discourses on Japanese cinema. I am equally interested in Kitano's self-Orientalising strategy. Kitano seems to be aware of western expectations of Japanese films; he utilises stereotypical images of Japan and familiar Japanese filmic conventions. I investigate how Kitano responds to western concepts and dominant views. Kitano cannot, in fact, avoid involvement with western conceptions of Japanese cinema, which pervade international film festivals and international film distribution.

I first examine the crucial issue of how western Japanese film studies facilitate the 'otherisation' of Japanese cinema. I then take stock of two critical moments in the production of western knowledge of Japanese cinema: the initial western understandings of Kurosawa's *Rashomon* and debates on Ozu Yasujiro's films. I apply the insights of the first two sections to scrutinise western conceptions of Kitano's films and get to grips with how Kitano deals with western expectations of Japanese films. I primarily focus on *Hana-bi* (1997), which established Kitano as a Japanese auteur-director in the west.

#### **4.2. Japanese Cinema as other**

My analysis of western scholarship on Japanese cinema reveals how Orientalism's ontological and epistemological distinction between 'us' and 'them' – '(western) cinema' and 'Japanese cinema' – deals with the unfamiliarity of a newly 'discovered' cinema. Western scholars mostly perceive and explain Japanese cinema in terms of its radical difference. Such difference is, without much consideration, absorbed into another Orientalist knowledge of otherness – 'Japanese-ness'. Western scholars emphasise the otherness of Japanese cinema, evoking it as a world completely separate from western cinema. At the same time, the otherness of Japanese cinema is appropriated to consolidate western theories about western cinema. In the following, I look at the basic premises through which western film studies conceives and utilises Japanese cinema as other. Drawing on Yoshimoto's historical study of American scholarship on Japanese cinema, I then examine two distinct approaches: a) a 'humanistic approach' based on 'national character' and 'auteurism' and b) a formalist approach.

Donald Kiriwara claims that film historians return again and again to key premises in order 'to explain what makes a Japanese film Japanese' (1996: 501): 'Japanese film is different because of its isolation'; 'Japanese cinema is different because its creators (and to a lesser extent, the viewers) have a different aesthetic sense'; 'Japanese cinema is different because Japanese culture is a non-Western culture' (1996: 501-503). The first premise can be easily dismissed on the basis of the factual evidence. All canonical western scholarly works seem to agree that Japanese cinema has developed under the strong influence of western – Hollywood and European – cinema (Anderson and Richie [1959] 1982; Bordwell 1988, 1992; Burch 1979). While western film scholars frequently dismiss the first premise, they nonetheless repetitively make use of it, combining it with the other two, which explain the characteristics of Japanese films in terms of the otherness of Japanese culture and aesthetics.

The three premises appear to reflect the binary structure of the Orientalist world vision. Japanese cinema is assumed to be isolated from western cinema. Its features are explained in terms of a radical difference rooted in the otherness of Japanese aesthetics and culture. The Orientalist view appropriates Japanese cinema by extending the presumptions about Japanese culture to Japanese cinema: Japanese culture, as a non-western culture, bears a pure and completely different essence since it is isolated from the west. Based on the belief in 'a persistent mystique of the "otherness" and purity of Japanese cinema', Japanese cinema is considered the antithesis or an alternative 'to compositional and narrative norms that dominate films in Western cultures' (Goodwin 1994: 6). Yoshimoto states,

In the case of film studies, it is important to note at the outset that Japanese cinema was not simply added to the disciplinary canon some time after the successful legitimation of film as an object of serious academic research; on the contrary, Japanese cinema played a significant role in the establishment of film studies as a discrete discipline. The position of Japanese cinema is inseparable from the question of how film studies has constituted itself,

legitimated its existence, and maintained its institutional territoriality through a double process of inclusion and exclusion. (2002: 369)

Yoshimoto suggests that western studies on Japanese cinema are not only implicated in the development of western film studies as an academic discipline, but have also helped legitimise and maintain it. This resonates with David Bordwell's criticism of western approaches to Japanese cinema. Bordwell deploys the metaphor of 'the *femme fatale* in a *film noir*' to describe the role of Japanese cinema in western film studies (1979b: 45-46). According to him, 'by its impassive otherness', Japanese cinema becomes 'our dream-cinema', an object upon which 'we' – western film scholars – can 'project ... what we like' and 'everything we want cinema to be'.<sup>15</sup>

For some Westerners, the Japanese cinema is exemplary in giving the director his proper status as artist. For others, this cinema has shown how the Holy can be represented on film. More radically, the Japanese cinema has been seen as a bold display of the most profound possibilities of film form: in the East, the European avant-garde's old dream of 'pure cinema' may finally have been realised. (Bordwell 1979b: 45-46)

Clearly, the otherness of Japanese cinema is encapsulated and employed to lend authority to interpretive and analytic approaches within western film studies – auteurism, transcendentalism, formalism, avant-gardism and so on. Japanese cinema becomes 'a resource of material evidence' for each theory, especially theories at the radical and critical edge of conventional knowledge. Japanese cinema, when contained within a western academic discipline, is identified as other in relation to western cinema. The otherness of Japanese cinema has to be claimed in order to sharpen the critical blade of western film theories. At crucial moments, as 'the site of cultural difference', Japanese cinema functions as 'Barthes's Japan' and 'Kristeva's China' (Bhabha 1994: 31) for western film studies.

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<sup>15</sup> It is unclear to what extent Bordwell himself escapes the desire for 'dream-cinema' in his scholarship on Japanese cinema and in particular on Ozu Yasujiro. Bordwell's approach to Japanese cinema is tackled at several points in this chapter.

Which concrete issues and what type of knowledge does this otherising disposition generate? Yoshimoto's historical review of American scholarship on Japanese cinema provides specific cases which illuminate this question (1991; 2000; 2002). He summarises its evolution as follows:

- 1) humanistic celebration of great auteurs and Japanese culture in the 1960s.
- 2) formalistic and Marxist celebration of Japanese cinema as an alternative to classical Hollywood cinema in the 1970s.
- 3) critical re-examination of the preceding approaches through the introduction of the discourse of Otherness and cross-cultural analysis in the 1980s.

I focus mainly on the first two phases, which played a key role in the development of western film studies on Japanese cinema and are most relevant to the analysis in this chapter. Yoshimoto's sources for articulating the third phase, moreover, seem limited, comprising only two articles by the same scholar. In the following, I briefly outline each phase then discuss the first two phases in more depth.

Regarding the first phase, Yoshimoto states that 'one of the most enduring legacies of the 1960s humanist criticism' is 'the use of "national character"' (2002: 37). In such criticism, 'Japanese national character and cultural essence' are used as 'a determinate factor' in explaining 'thematic motif, formal features, and contextual backgrounds of Japanese films' (2002: 370). Joseph L. Anderson and Donald Richie's *Japanese Film: Art and Industry* ([1959] 1982), Richie's *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* ([1965] 1998), and Paul Schrader's study of Ozu in *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (1972) are identified as the main publications reflecting this tendency.

In his discussion of the second phase, Yoshimoto (1991) stresses that while Japanese-speaking scholars from humanistic and anthropological backgrounds led the study of Japanese cinema in the 1960s, the main figures of this next period were well-equipped with theories of film studies, semiotics and Marxism, among others. These film scholars showed less interest in Japanese history and culture. With a limited degree of Japanese language ability, they focused on the formal characteristics of Japanese films.

To explore the third phase, Yoshimoto examines two articles by Scott Nygren: 'Reconsidering Modernism: Japanese Film and the Postmodern Context' (1989) and 'Doubleness and Idiosyncrasy in Cross-Cultural Analysis' (1991). Nygren highlights how the west and Japan have influenced each other culturally. According to him,

Japan borrows humanism from the West as a component of Japanese modernism, just as the West borrows anti-humanist elements from Japanese tradition to form Western modernism. (1989: 14)

Nygren's emphasis on cross-cultural influences seems to nullify the rigid western conception of the otherness of Japanese culture and Japanese cinema. Yoshimoto, however, is far from impressed. Nygren, he asserts, begins with the stereotype or cliché already 'constructed by the "Western" reader' (2002: 378). Nygren limits Japanese modernism to trends rooted in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, thus failing to 'differentiate various modernist movements in Japan' (2002: 377). Accordingly, Nygren's cross-cultural analysis reaffirms 'the fixed identities of both' Japan and the west (2002: 379). Secondly, by presupposing equal exchange and an equal relationship between two cultures, Nygren's cross-cultural analysis ignores the 'hierarchical relationship of Japan and the West' (2002: 379). Yoshimoto reminds us that cross-cultural exchanges have always been bound up with the unequal power relationships between the west and the non-west.

There is no need for us to remind ourselves that the West and the non-West do not voluntarily engage in cross-cultural exchange. The relation between the two has always taken the form of political, economic, and cultural domination of the non-West by the West. (Yoshimoto 1991: 247)

If we go back to the first phase, the main problem with the 'national character' approach seems to be that 'the Japanese' are assumed to feature a 'homogeneous, ahistorical collective essence called the "Japanese mind"' (Yoshimoto 2002: 370). While western scholars continue to rely heavily on this concept to analyse Japanese films, Yoshimoto

attacks the absolute lack of ‘consideration for its relationship to social practices and history’ (2002: 370-371). Western scholars make no attempt to grasp the variation, change over time and modern adaptation of archetypal cultural values; they explain Japanese films through a very small number of reified cultural forms and values, often presented as irrational or incomprehensible. ‘The Buddhist view’ or ‘Zen’ are often applied as ‘magic words’ to unlock the secrets of Japanese films. Even in analysing films made after the 1950s, ‘how Zen Buddhism has been reorganized and appropriated ... in modern Japan’ (Yoshimoto 2000: 74) is barely taken into account. Writings drawing on ‘Japanese-ness’ thus tend to relegate Japanese films to ‘olden times’ and attribute to them a timeless, homogeneous cultural essence.

Approaches stressing the Japanese national character seem to have prospered in the 1960s. Yoshimoto explains the emergence of this tendency in terms of ‘auteurism in film criticism and the legacy of American military intelligence activity during and after World War II’ (2002: 371). Yoshimoto suggests that Donald Richie’s *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* ([1965] 1998) is more significant than Anderson and Richie’s *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry*. *The Japanese Film* is a pioneering book, introducing the historical and industrial background of Japanese cinema to the west. Yet, according to Yoshimoto, ‘in the context of 1960s auteurism’ Richie’s book is key because it substantiates ‘auteurism’. Richie claims that Kurosawa’s films convey universal humanist values, despite cultural and historical settings that western audiences may perceive as exotic and strange. Yoshimoto argues that Richie’s book initiates the prevalent tropes of auteurism. The book thus helps incorporate the ‘seemingly exotic films’ of Japanese directors such as Kurosawa and Mizoguchi ‘into a canon of ... “world cinema”’ produced by auteur directors (Yoshimoto 2002: 372).

As Yoshimoto states, Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* ([1947] 1967), which appeared after World War II, is one of the most influential books on the Japanese national character. Benedict aims to identify the basic cultural patterns of Japanese society – ‘the nature of the enemy’ ([1947] 1967: 1). Benedict begins by describing Japanese as ‘the most alien enemy’ and as having ‘exceedingly different habits of acting

and thinking' ([1947] 1967: 1). As this phrase suggests, from the outset her research was tainted with Orientalist presumptions: Japanese society is seen as possessing a totalised unity and an otherness that 'makes Japan a nation of Japan' and differentiates it from western countries ([1947] 1967: 9). Yoshimoto shows that Japanese scholars<sup>16</sup> are most critical of Benedict's failure to consider the heterogeneity of Japanese society (1953: 406-410). In the view of these scholars, Benedict extrapolates from her findings on the 'patterns of Japanese soldiers' or 'patterns of the ultra-nationalistic group of Japanese soldiers' to the patterns of Japanese people in general (1953: 407). Japanese scholars also agree that she is ignorant of 'temporal distinctions', for example using 'materials of the Tokugawa period currency to draw generalizations about present-day behavior' (1953: 408). Such ignorance of 'differences in social strata, region, occupation, age' and 'temporal distinctions' leads her merely to re-confirm Orientalist assumptions of Japanese society as 'static', 'pre-modern' and bearing 'a simple unity' (1953: 408). Film analyses that draw on Benedict's articulation of Japanese national character are destined to repeat her mistakes, straightjacketing Japanese films as mere embodiments or reflections of a unique, unified culture stuck in the 'olden days'.

In the second – formalist – phase, Noël Burch's *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (1979) is regarded as 'the most important book' to emerge from the 'radicalised scholarship' of the 1970s (Yoshimoto 2002). Burch concentrates on illuminating the 'essential difference between the dominant modes of Western and Japanese cinema' (1979: 11). Although he chiefly analyses Japanese films, his ultimate goal is to provide 'a critical analysis of the ideologically and culturally determined system of representation from which the film industries of Hollywood ... derive their power and profit' (1979: 11). That is, his project is a *detour through the East*, the ultimate goal of which is to scrutinise the dominant Western mode of representation

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<sup>16</sup> Yoshimoto refers to the article 'Echoes: Reactions to American Anthropology' (Bennet and Nagai 1953). In this article, Bennet and Nagai offer an analytical summary of the articles in *Minzokugaku Kenkyu* (The Japanese Journal of Ethnology): Special Issue on *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* and the two symposiums focusing on Benedict's book, held in Japan in 1948 and in 1951. The main contributors to the journal are Kawashima Takeyoshi, Minami Hiroshi, Ariga Kizaemon, Watsuji Tetsuro and Yanagida Kunio. The main participants in the two symposiums are Iizuka Koji, Isoda Susumu, Kawashima Takesyoshi, Nobukata Naokichi, Ishino Iwao, Nakamura Hajime and Ninda Noboru.

back home and to criticise it more effectively. Burch describes the 1930s and the early 1940s as the golden age of Japanese cinema. This contradicts the usual convention which identifies the 1950s and the 1960s as such. Burch asserts that during this period Japanese cinema consummated its unique style, which he considers an alternative to ‘the dominant mode of representation’ (1979: 75-83). According to Burch, the films of Ozu and Mizoguchi are examples of this style.

Burch (1979) calls western cinema’s dominant mode of representation the ‘Institutional Mode of Representation (IMR)’. Kirihara elaborates on Burch’s IMR as follows:

IMR developed in the United States and Europe between 1907 and 1928, with an emphasis on psychologically motivated characters and continuity. It was inextricably linked with the rising dominance of bourgeois preferences, not just in what they wanted depicted, but how they wanted it shown. Moreover, after the imposition of synchronized sound in 1928 contributed to the constriction of formal and political experimentation in the European art cinemas, the possibilities for alternative modes effectively ended and the IMR attained a self-sustaining dominance. (1996: 504)

In Japanese films of the 1930s and the early 1940s, Burch sees the Japanese counterpart of ‘the primitive mode’. This was the dominant mode of representation in western cinema before IMR replaced it. According to Burch, whilst IMR has a ‘representational’ character with emphasis on narrative development and illusionary ‘diegetic effects’, Japanese films have a ‘presentational’ character. Burch argues that this presentational character is inherent in Japanese traditional theatre such as *kabuki*, *noh* and *bunraku*<sup>17</sup> (Burch 1979: 81-86; Kirihara 1996: 505). He insists that this ‘presentational’ character derives from ‘a Japanese unified cultural practice’ rooted in the aesthetics of the Heian period (794-1185) and revived and imposed in the Tokugawa period (1633-1867) (1979: 25-26). In Burch’s account, the role of *benshi* is highlighted as one of the main factors

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<sup>17</sup> *Bunraku* is a traditional Japanese puppet theatre that evolved in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in close interaction with *kabuki*. Usually three puppeteers work as a team along with chanters, *shamisen* players and ‘offstage’ musicians.

underpinning the aesthetics of a unique film style and delaying the transition of the primitive mode to IMR (1979: 146-147).<sup>18</sup>

For all its lucid analyses of film texts, Burch's book appears to be 'an Orientalistic project' (Yoshimoto 2002: 373). Crucially, in this project, Japan is invented as a 'cultural Other' featuring 'a unitary cultural practice' which preserves the aesthetics of pre-modern times in a pure and untouched form (Malcomson 1985). Burch seems here to share Roland Barthes' approach. In *Empire of the Signs*, Barthes presents Japan not as a 'reality' but as a 'fictive nation' through which he can play with 'the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own' (Barthes 1982: 3). Scott L. Malcomson points out that although Barthes admits that 'his reading of Japan' is 'simply a manipulation of handy cultural features', it ends in another 'mystification', which, not unusually, entails 'non-specific, purely theoretical attempts at reflectivity' (1985: 24). In *Empire of the Signs*, Barthes analyses Japanese culture and 'discovers' the absence of meaning and emphasizes on presentation which display the process of production. Barthes contemplates these traits mostly in relation to the philosophy of Zen. Ironically, however, Barthes' findings are given authenticity and regarded as substantial knowledge about Japan by subsequent scholars such as Burch. In the view of Malcomson, that is what is anticipated, if not pre-determined. Since Barthes' primary interest is in using Japan to prove the authority of his semiotic analysis, the knowledge he produces through this now legitimised method is supposed to be true (Malcomson 1985: 25-27).

The influence of Barthes is evident in Burch's book. Barthes' findings shapes Burch's approach in his examination of Japanese films. As a result, not surprisingly, Burch reaches the same conclusion. Burch apparently wanted to see a 'presentational' character, a 'rejection of anthropocentrism' and 'the irrevocable dismissal of content', – all of which were articulated by Barthes – in Japanese films, and duly found them (Burch 1979: 14). Above all, with its exoticness and remoteness, Japanese cinema plays the same role

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<sup>18</sup>*Benshi* was a kind of 'speaking narrator' during the silent era in Japan, who stood beside the screen and explained the narrative or characters' state of mind during the screening of silent films. The popularity of *benshi* is believed to have delayed the Japanese film industry's shift to the sound era. They are also called 'katsuben'. For more details, see J.L. Anderson (1992).

in Burch's project as Japan did for Barthes. If Barthes' view depends upon the absolute dichotomy of the west and Japan, Burch relies upon the dichotomy of western cinema and Japanese cinema. Japanese cinema is defined merely as that which western cinema is not. Ironically, Japanese cinema is identified solely 'in relation to dominant film practices' of the west (Kirihiro 1996: 509). Japanese cinema is otherised and marginalized while the western, dominant mode of representation retains its central position.

Philip Rosen (1984) comments that Burch assumes that Japanese society is 'classless' and has no 'bourgeois' class. Burch bases this postulation on the fact that, with no experience of colonisation by western countries, Japan experienced rapid industrialization immediately after opening itself to the western world. His assumption that Japanese society is classless, and thus homogeneous and untouched by western influences, allows Burch to believe that Japan features 'a unified cultural practice' derived from the Heian period. Ultimately, Burch constitutes his own dream-land through Japanese cinema, for his own radical theoretical ends.

Another important figure with a formalistic approach to Japanese cinema is American scholar David Bordwell. With Kristen Thompson, Bordwell published an article 'Space and Narrative in the Films of Ozu' in *Screen* in 1976. This article claims that Ozu's films can be most productively read when considered as 'modernist, innovative works' (Bordwell and Thompson 1976: 41-42). They see Ozu's films as differing radically from the 'paradigm of "classical Hollywood cinema"'; their analysis centres on 'the relation between space and narrative logic' in Ozu's films. They argue that Ozu's films undermine 'the supremacy of narrative causality' by emphasising 'other aspects of space' not subordinated to the narrative development (1976: 42, 44). Bordwell and Thompson believe that Ozu has thus departed from what they describe as the main principle of the classical paradigm.

Ozu's films diverge from the Hollywood paradigm in that they generate spatial structures, which are not motivated by the cause/effect chain of the narrative. ... Ozu's most radical uses of space lack both 'compositional'

motivation (i.e. motivation according to narrative economy) ... and 'realistic' motivation (i.e. motivation according to canons of verisimilitude); the motivation is purely 'artistic'. (1976: 45)

Sharing similar views on Ozu's films, Bordwell and Thompson's article appears to lay the ground for Burch's book, published three years later. Burch's IMR and Bordwell and Thompson's paradigm of 'classical Hollywood cinema' overlap in their explanations of the dominant film language of Hollywood cinema. Both see Japanese films – Ozu's films – as an alternative to the canonical norms of Hollywood films and examine the otherness – the radical difference – of Ozu's films in light of Hollywood film language norms; both use this otherness to develop a much clearer understanding of the film language of Hollywood films.

Bordwell's subsequent work on Ozu, however, shows greater sensitivity to Orientalist assumptions. He underlines the fact that Japanese cinema has been influenced by American cinema, just as Japan was influenced by American culture (1979; 1985; 1988). He also suggests that Burch ignores the 'crucial mediating' role of the Japanese film industry. In his view, it was the film industry that established the dominant filmic mode for transferring culture, whether native or American, into filmic forms (1985; 1988). Lastly, for Bordwell, it is erroneous to claim that Japanese audiences are more familiar with 'native traditional forms' than 'despised Western codes' simply because they are 'Japanese' (1985: 72).

Bordwell thus seems to avoid falling into the trap of Orientalist mystification. He does not suppose the isolation of Japanese cinema. Neither does he claim that Japanese films are different because Japanese directors and viewers have a profoundly different aesthetic sense stemming from a unique Japanese cultural practice. Yet the relationship between Japanese cinema and western cinema – here, Hollywood films – is neither changed nor challenged. Apparently, for Bordwell, Ozu's films have value as long as they are a significant alternative to or variation on 'classical Hollywood cinema'. Bordwell, like Burch, solidifies the central position of western cinema – in this case Hollywood cinema

– by evoking its marginal Other. It is no coincidence that Bordwell highlights Ozu's films as he attempts to develop a formalistic approach while criticising the discipline of film studies. 'Bordwell's Ozu' thus provides another example of how western critical theory employs otherness as an object of knowledge.

Overall, both approaches involve Orientalist premises about Japanese culture. Just as Japanese culture is conceived as ahistorical, essential and completely different from western cultures, Japanese cinema is considered in terms of its 'otherness' – 'Japaneseness' – or the radical cinematic difference embedded in more traditional Japanese aesthetics. The value of Japanese films seems to depend on strictly limited criteria: the extent to which they reflect Japan's national and traditional distinctiveness and their potential contribution to elaborating (western) film language, as its antithesis or alternative. That is to say, Japanese films seem to draw western attention in line with how 'Japanese' they seem or how different they appear from western films.

#### **4.3. western conceptions of Kurosawa Akira and Ozu Yasujiro**

In the previous section, I illustrated how western film studies conceptualises and utilises Japanese cinema as other. I identified the two main approaches to Japanese cinema: a) a 'humanistic approach' based on 'national character' and 'auteurism' and b) a formalistic approach. For reasons of timing, in the earliest, formative moments of 'discovery', western interest in Kurosawa's films was likely to lean towards a 'humanistic approach' centred on 'national character' and 'auteurism'. Interest in Ozu's films was more likely to express a formalistic approach. Scrutinising western conceptions of these two directors can help us understand these distinct approaches. In this section, I demonstrate through concrete examples how both approaches 'otherise' Japanese films.

Below I examine the western 'discovery' of Kurosawa Akira's *Rashomon*: How did western commentators understand and evaluate this film? How did Japanese film critics and the Japanese film industry respond to its unanticipated success? Western reviews and

criticisms of *Rashomon* provide tangible examples of how western knowledge of ‘unknown cinema’ is formulated. In particular, such western texts illuminate how ‘national character’ is used to explain a seemingly inscrutable film. Then, I investigate the critical debates sparked off by Bordwell’s radical, formalist contention that Ozu is a modernist rather than a traditionalist. I examine Bordwell’s key arguments as well as other scholars’ criticisms of his work, bringing out how Bordwell’s study of Ozu’s films otherises Japanese cinema.

### 4.3.1 the incomprehensibility of *Rashomon*

Here I look at western reviews and criticisms of *Rashomon*; I suggest that they rely upon an Orientalist, binary conception of the west and Japan which assumes the otherness of Japanese culture. At the end of this section, I sketch a pattern one might call *a detour through the west*. I provide an example of this pattern and outline the impact in Japan of *Rashomon*’s success in the west.

Kurosawa Akira<sup>19</sup> is undoubtedly the most widely known and popular Japanese director in the west. His *Rashomon* became a landmark in world film history, bringing the little-known subject of ‘Japanese cinema’ to western attention. The success of *Rashomon* also

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<sup>19</sup> In 1943, Kurosawa Akira made his debut film *Sanshiro Sugata* for Toho, one of the major Japanese film studios. During his film career, spanning five decades, he made thirty-one feature films, his last being *Madadayo* (1993). *Rashomon* was his 11<sup>th</sup> film. After *Rashomon*, many of his films won prestigious awards at international film festivals. His period film *Seven Samurai* (1954) won the Silver Lion prize at the Venice International Film Festival. Another period film, *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), won the Best Direction Prize at the Berlin International Film Festival; another, *Kagemusha* (1980) won the Palme d’Or prize at the Cannes International Film Festival. The Japanese actor, Mifune Toshiro, who also appeared in *Rashomon*, appeared in many of Kurosawa’s films and won the Best Actor’s Prize at Venice twice for performances in Kurosawa’s films *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Red Beard* (1965). Kurosawa’s period films such as *Seven Samurai*, *The Hidden Fortress*, *Yojimbo*, and *Sanjuro* (1962) are considered to have influenced and been influenced by American westerns (Anderson 1962; Anderson 1973; Desser 1983b). *Seven Samurai* was remade as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) by John Sturges. Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (1957) was based on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. During his career, Kurosawa made as many films set in contemporary Japan (*gendai geki*) as period films (*jidaige ki*). *Drunken Angel* (1948), *The Quiet Duel* (1949), *Stray Dog* (1949), *Ikiru* (1952), *High and Low* (1963) and *Red Beard* (1965) are examples.

opened the west's door to an increasing number of Japanese films. *Rashomon* was thus clearly, perhaps decisively, involved with the initial formulation of western expectations and conceptions of Japanese films.

Among western reviews of *Rashomon*, Veron Young ([1955] 1972) provides an honest portrait of the various delusions to which western reviewers were subject, forced as they were by a severe lack of information to draw upon limited and sometimes unreliable sources.

Most of us who write about films may as well relax and confess that we know nothing at first hand about Japanese movie production; that all we have as data has come to us from press sheets, from quick consultation with the nearest Japanese bystander, or from a handful of factual essays; that whatever else we may know of Japanese art is the sum ... of having taken an 'intelligent interest' in Japanese prints ... of having read two Japanese novels and a few poems ... whatever we have been able to find useful in the way of analogy and of seeing the 'unaccredited' performance of *Kabuki*. ([1955] 1972: 110)

What did western reviewers, with such limited experience and deficient knowledge of Japanese cinema, have to say about the seemingly inscrutable *Rashomon*?<sup>20</sup> Greg M. Smith's analysis gives us a glimpse of American reviewers' 'critical strategies'. Smith

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<sup>20</sup> The story of *Rashomon* was developed on the base of Akutagawa Ryunosuke's two short stories *Rashomon* (1915) and *In a Grove* (1921). A black and white film, it has a rich and stunning visual style. The narrative structure is complicated: the main characters give different versions of the same event. The period background of the story is medieval Japan. At the decaying Rashomon gate, three people gather to avoid a heavy shower. A woodcutter who was called to the court as a witness of this event, and a monk who was also present at the court tell the story to a commoner. A samurai (Mori Masayuki) and his beautiful wife (Kyo Machiko) are making their way through a forest on horseback. When they stop to rest, a bandit (Mifune Toshiro) approaches them, rapes the wife and kills the samurai. Later the bandit is caught and states his version of the story at the court. According to the bandit, the wife of the dead samurai asked him to kill the samurai. According to the wife, she was raped and killed her husband out of shame. According to the ghost of the samurai, summoned by a shaman, his wife was raped and he died while fighting the bandit.

(2002) scrutinises American film reviews that appeared when *Rashomon* was released in the USA in 1952. American film reviewers' critical reception of this film reveals the initial moment when conventions of referring to specific Japanese traditions and cultures took shape. American reviewers had to respond to *Rashomon* with almost no relevant knowledge at hand. They knew nothing about the director as a person, his previous films or the historical and cultural context of Japanese films. According to Smith, in order to make comprehensible 'the strange and disturbing fascination of this conspicuously uncommon film', reviewers tended to compare it to 'various Japanese cultural forms: Japanese fretwork, an Oriental glass puzzle, *kabuki* theatre, or simply Japanese aesthetics in general' (2002: 121). Smith states that this approach is Orientalist. In his account, reviewers constructed 'a unified Japanese aesthetic' and assumed that 'all Japanese cultural forms reflect these aesthetic principles' (2002: 121). Another Orientalist approach that Smith identifies is a belief that 'Japan is being presented' in the film. *Rashomon* is generally believed to 'reveal truths about the present-day Japanese condition' although it is set in 9<sup>th</sup> century Japan, 'as if little had changed' (2002: 122). Smith claims that this view reflects the Orientalist assumption of the 'timeless and unchanged character' of Japanese society.<sup>21</sup>

How differently would a western scholar, well equipped with supposedly 'genuine' knowledge of Japanese culture and films, interpret *Rashomon*? Richie, who is regarded as a Japanese film expert, seems to want to explain the incomprehensibility of the narrative of *Rashomon* through Japanese culture. Richie suggests that it was *Rashomon*'s mysterious narrative that gripped audiences: 'There is, however, much more to the film than this. There is an apparent mystery, an elliptical intent, which has fascinated audiences all over the world' (Richie [1965] 1998: 71). In his meticulous analysis of the film, Richie shows how he can resolve what he calls 'the Great *Rashomon* Murder

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<sup>21</sup> Smith's analysis draws upon David Bordwell's critical claims about interpretive conventions within the film studies discipline. Bordwell regards academic film criticism as 'a set of practices operating with certain shared hypotheses, schemata, and knowledge structures'. As examples of such schemata, genre and personification could not be applied to interpreting *Rashomon*, due to the lack of information. As a result, according to Smith, other types of personification – personified style/narration and 'the mimetic hypothesis' appeared. See David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (1989) pp.129-146.

Mystery' ([1965] 1998: 71-76). However, Richie rejects the possibility that *Rashomon* was meant to be a mystery film whose structure is deliberately contrived, a puzzle. He claims that considering the film as a 'murder mystery' is 'really irrelevant' ([1965] 1998: 75). For him, *Rashomon* is about nothing but 'relative truth' ([1965] 1998: 75).

Five people interpret an action and each interpretation is different because, in the telling and in the retelling, the people reveal not the action but themselves. This is why Kurosawa could leave the plot, insofar as there is one, dangling and unresolved. The fact that it *is* unresolved is itself one of the meanings of the film. ([1965] 1998: 75; original emphasis)

Richie argues that 'subjective reality' and 'relative truth' underlie *Rashomon*'s seemingly contradictory and incomprehensible narrative. According to him, it is this that inspires different responses in the west and Japan (1972: 3). In his view, all 'the most basic assumptions' of academic disciplines and 'traditional religion and philosophy' were questioned in the west in the early 1950s (1972: 4). As a result, 'doubt and uncertainty' prevailed in western minds (1972: 4). Richie suggests that under such circumstances *Rashomon* seemed to 'both describe and comment upon the predicament of Western man' (1972: 4). This is why western scholars were so surprised by *Rashomon* and responded to it 'with a great deal of theoretical argument' (1972: 3). By contrast, he claims that if *Rashomon* is viewed as intriguing but also 'disturbing' in Japan, this is due to 'how the mystery is presented', and not to the strangeness of the idea of 'subjective reality' and 'relative truth' (1972: 5-7). As in Zen philosophy, he explains, such notions are 'taken for granted in Eastern philosophy, religion and aesthetics' (1972: 5-7).

The Japanese audience, in other words, was quite ready to accept the story and its implications, but some of them could not understand the way the story was told – a situation precisely the opposite of that in the West. (1972: 6)

Richie apparently presumes that *Rashomon* naturally reflects common cultural practice in Japan, 'the perfectly mundane notion that reality and/or truth is relative' (1972: 6). At the

same time, Richie shows that in Japan *Rashomon*'s presentational style – ‘analytic, logical, and speculative’— is recognised as ‘western’ (1972: 6-7). Yet the claim that Japan's response to the film is exactly ‘the opposite of that in the West’ is problematic. In fact, *Rashomon* appears incomprehensible even for Japanese audiences. Richie himself mentions Japanese who were at a loss to understand the film. Some Japanese theatres even hired *benshi* to help audiences understand the story. In his view, *Rashomon* is a ‘Japanese’ film that delivers ‘Japanese’ thought in a ‘western’ manner. For Richie, this explains its universal appeal. He asserts that if Kurosawa's film had not adopted this western manner, it would most likely have failed to ‘join the world at large’ beyond ‘the confines of Japanese-ness’ (1972: 93). In this respect, Richie's explanation seems to draw upon a binary epistemological conception of Japan and the west, and of Japanese and western cinema. Although the content of *Rashomon* is automatically assumed to reflect ‘Japanese-ness’, the film's techniques and stylisation are firmly believed to be ‘western’. Japanese-ness or Japanese cinema is regarded as a passive object whose value becomes acknowledgeable and realised only with the help of western means.

The binary notion of Japan and the west crops up again and again in western understandings of Kurosawa's films, in the form of a radical distinction between Japanese tradition and westernisation. While Japanese traditions are often evoked as ‘traditional aesthetics’, or ‘Japanese cultural heritage’, westernisation is frequently referred to as ‘modernism’ or ‘modernisation’. David Desser's *Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa* (1983a) and Stephen Prince's *Warrior's Camera* (1991), employ this binary view as the basic conceptual tool to explain Kurosawa's films. For Desser, Kurosawa is a ‘dialogic director’ who ‘adapt(s) Western modes in a deliberate manner so as to explore the nature of Western ideals as they impact upon Japan’ (1983a: 5-7). Prince states that Kurosawa's films attempt to reflect the cultural conflict and confusion of the Japanese experience of modernity (1991: 23-27).

Regardless of the amount of information at hand, western writings on *Rashomon* seem to share the same critical strategy: they deploy ‘stock images of national character, tradition, and fixed cultural traits’ in order to produce an intelligible explanation (Yoshimoto 2000:

35). According to Yoshimoto, utilising ‘such stock images’ is ‘a powerful interpretive machine’ invented in film studies with the aim of containing ‘unfamiliar national cinema’ (2000: 35). As shown in Smith’s analysis above, evoking ‘national character’ entails Orientalist assumptions about Japan and confines Japanese films as other vis-à-vis western cinema. Even Richie’s meticulous analysis expresses Orientalist presuppositions of Japan’s ‘other’ culture and a binary conception of Japan and the west. In particular, Richie re-confirms the superiority of western cinema, which he believes has led Japanese cinema to enhance its artistic quality and transcend the confines of Japanese culture. As a consequence, as Yoshimoto (2000) states, Japanese cinema is contained within western film studies only by being otherised by the dual strategy of inclusion and exclusion.

### *A detour through the west*

Before moving to the next section, I briefly look at how the international success of *Rashomon* was received in Japan and its influence on the Japanese film industry.

In 1951 when Japanese film industry selectors considered films for submission to the Venice International Film Festival, *Rashomon* was not their first choice. It was not even a promising candidate. It was the head of the *Italifilm* branch in Japan who was impressed by *Rashomon* and insisted that it be sent to Venice. Japanese film industry selectors thought twice about this selection, believing *Rashomon* was not a film suitable ‘for export’, that is, accessible to western audiences. With almost no expectation of winning, no Japanese attended the festival (Sato 1998: 31). Accordingly, *Rashomon*’s triumph in Venice came as a big surprise in Japan (Anderson and Richie [1959] 1982: 233). At the same time, it aroused a sense of embarrassment, as did the subsequent success of other Japanese period films in the west. In the eyes of some Japanese, such films failed to show ‘the new Japanese way of life’ in ‘modern Japan’, often held to be the mission of Japanese films abroad (Anderson and Richie [1959] 1982; Sato 1998: 31).

While the success of *Rashomon* and other period films such as *Gate of Hell* (1953) was celebrated as a national achievement (Anderson and Richie [1959] 1982), Japanese film

critics were under pressure to explain why *Rashomon* was far more highly appraised in the west than in Japan. They also had to face the question of why Japanese period films, some of which were ignored in Japan, attracted so much attention in the west. If the incomprehensibility of *Rashomon* as an unfamiliar foreign film puzzled western critics, the film burdened Japanese critics with the task of explaining, in an intelligent way, its success in the west.

According to Richie (1972: 93), Japanese critics ‘decided’ that *Rashomon*’s success was due to its ‘exoticness’ and that it was this that ‘foreigners’ like to see in Japanese films. By using the word ‘decided’, Richie implies that mere reference to ‘exoticism’ is unconvincing. Yet ‘exoticisation’ does appear to have played a significant role in the film’s reception in the west. Jay Leyda’s questions help shed light on this issue. Leyda (1954) asks what would have happened if one of Kurosawa’s other films such as *Drunken Angel* (1948) or *Living* (1952) had been sent to Venice. In his view, these two films, both set in modern Japan, exhibit ‘nearly unprecedented form’ and an ‘uncompromisingly modern subject’ (1954: 77-78). Leyda states that they involve similar themes and cinematic features as Italian Neo-realist films such as *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and *Umberto D* (1952). Leyda wonders whether such similarity would have helped these films win at Venice or damaged their prospects of doing so. Whilst *Rashomon*, set in medieval Japan, brims over with mystic atmosphere and beautiful images, *Drunken Angel* and *Living*, set in Japan not long after World War II, deal with the social issues and existential problems of human beings living in a contemporary society. Leyda implies that *Rashomon* was more likely to win the award than the other two films, thanks to ‘the novel physical beauty’ that makes ‘Kurosawa’s originality seem more acceptable’ (1954: 78). In other words, since it is set in the past and its atmosphere is beautifully conveyed by a lush and sensuous visual style, *Rashomon* may be more appealing to western audiences than Kurosawa’s modern films, which look very similar to Italian Neo-realist productions. As Japanese critics suspect, *Rashomon*’s success may be partly due to western exoticisation: a desire to see a beautiful, exotic Japan of the past, rather than the ruins of war or a contemporary society full of isolated individuals.

After the success of *Rashomon*, the Japanese film industry began to take international film festivals and the international market seriously. Mizoguchi Kenji's *The Life of Oharu* (1952) and *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953) won in Venice in 1953 and 1954. Kinugasa Teinosuke's *Gate of Hell* won the 1954 Grand Prize at Cannes. All of these are *jidaigeki* period films,<sup>22</sup> although their artistic qualities in fact make them somewhat untypical of this genre. The unremitting success of period films backs up Japanese critics' suspicion that the west wants to see exoticism, based on Orientalism, in Japanese films (Anderson and Richie [1959] 1982). In search of further success in the west, a number of Japanese films were made according to the formula of 'spectacular and artistic period films', thought to have underpinned *Rashomon*'s appeal in the west (Anderson and Richie [1959] 1982: 225-228; Davis 1996: 220-227). *Gate of Hell*, for example, was tailor-made for success in the west. Although Japanese film companies stopped producing films targeting the western market a few years later, films like *Gate of Hell* remain exemplary of how a specific type of western recognition could influence Japanese filmmaking.

The 'detour through the west' pattern appears to emerge repeatedly. *Rashomon*, a Japanese film, not regarded as the best Japanese film in Japan, is 'discovered' and highly praised in the west. As it returns home in the wake of such western attention, it becomes an object of serious study and is given the status of a 'representative' Japanese film. Films embodying the successful prototype are then produced to meet western appetites.

#### **4.3.2 Is Ozu Yasujiro a traditionalist or a modernist? Japanese cinema as other to Hollywood cinema**

In this section, I focus on Bordwell's approach to Ozu's unique filmic style, which Yoshimoto identifies as formalist. Since his first article (1976) on Ozu's style, Bordwell has refined his argument in response to criticisms by other scholars. Here, I show how Bordwell's formalist approach to Ozu's films results in the otherising of Japanese

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<sup>22</sup> According to the Japanese genre distinction, *Rashomon* belongs to *jidaigeki* whose period background is before the Meiji Reform of 1868. On this criterion, another key genre that parallels *jidaigeki* is *gendaiigeki*, indicating films set in modern Japan.

cinema. If the humanist approach otherises Japanese films on the basis of the otherness of Japanese culture, the formalist approach seems to locate Japanese cinema as other vis-à-vis Hollywood cinema. That is, if the humanist approach depends upon the binary conception of the west and Japan, the formalist approach seems to draw upon the binary premise of Hollywood cinema and Japanese cinema. I illustrate how Bordwell's approach marginalizes Japanese cinema as cinematic other by privileging the film language of classical Hollywood films.

While Kurosawa made his debut in the west in 1951 and Mizoguchi Kenji the following year, Ozu Yasujiro<sup>23</sup> seems to have had a harder time making it in the west. Ozu's films went unnoticed until 1957 when *Tokyo Story* (1953) won an award at the London International Film Festival. Nevertheless, it was not until the 1970s that western film scholars 'discovered' and showed an interest in Ozu's films. In Japan, Ozu's films were considered too 'Japanese' to be understood by western people (Burch 1979: 184). The scant attention that Ozu's films garnered in the west seemed to confirm this (Burch 1979). Ozu is generally considered 'Japan's most Japanese director' whereas Kurosawa has gained a reputation as 'Japan's most Western director' (Desser 1983a: 2). Yet, ironically, Ozu's films later sparked off a highly controversial debate within Japanese

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<sup>23</sup> Ozu Yasujiro started his career as a film director making black and white silent films. From his first film *Sword of Penitence* (1927) to the last *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962), Ozu made fifty-three feature films in total, working for Shochiku, one of the major Japanese film studios. Almost all of his films are about small events in the ordinary lives of middle class people in modern Japan. His later films such as *Late Spring* (1949), *Early Summer* (1951), *Tokyo Story* (1953), *Equinox Flower* (1959), *Late Autumn* (1960) and *The End of Summer* (1961) deal with recurrent themes such as one family member's departure through marriage or death. *Tokyo Story* (1953) is considered 'quintessential Ozu' and is one of his well-known films in the west. It was popular in Japan and was released in the USA in 1972. The story is as follows. An old couple, Shukichi (Ryu Chishu) and Tomi Hirayama set off to visit their son and daughter in Tokyo. As their children are occupied with family matters and work, the couple are not welcome at their homes. The only person who welcomes and looks after them is Noriko (Hara Setsuko) the widow of another son. The couple are sent to Atami near Tokyo by their son and daughter. When they come back to Tokyo, there is nowhere for them to stay. While Tomi spends the night at Noriko's place, Shukichi meets old friends for a drink. Tomi suddenly falls ill when the pair visit Osaka on the way home. Tomi dies not long after they get back home. Their children hastily gather for Tomi's funeral, but soon after they depart for Tokyo. Only Noriko stays. As she is leaving, Shukichi advises her to remarry.

film studies in the west, centred on the question: is Ozu a Japanese traditionalist or a modernist?

In their article 'Space and Narrative in the Films of Ozu' (1976), Thompson and Bordwell argue that Ozu's films can 'most productively be read as modernist, innovative works' (1976: 41). Through a formal analysis of the spatial devices applied in Ozu's films, Thompson and Bordwell claim that his filmic style clearly diverges from the dominant Hollywood style, always subservient to causal narrative development: 'Seen against the background of the classical paradigm, the modernity of Ozu's work involves the use of specific spatial devices which challenge the supremacy of narrative causality' (1976: 42).

Thompson and Bordwell first identify 'the system for constructing space ("continuity style")' in 'the classical paradigm' (1976: 42). The basic rule of this paradigm is that 'spatial and temporal structures' are supposed to serve 'the logic of narrative, especially ... the cause/effect chain' (1976: 42). According to this rule, in the classical paradigm, spatial devices concentrate on characters who lead the development of the narrative; the 180-degree rule is maintained to minimise spatial disorientation; objects are present only on the condition that they are "used" for verisimilitude or as "props" or that 'they reveal something about the characters'; the overall continuity of graphic configurations should be maintained (1976: 42-43). In contrast to the Hollywood paradigm, Thompson and Bordwell point out the frequent use of 'intermediate space' in Ozu's films: 'a short series of shots of landscapes, empty rooms, or other actionless spaces' – 'spaces between points of narrative action' (1976: 46-55). According to them,

The cutaways and transitions not only elide time and 'spread out' the cause/effect chain but also, by means of the dominant/overtone structure, present a 'scene' constructed as much by relations among 'empty' spaces as by the logic of the narrative. In such ways, all the stylistic figures for presenting intermediate spaces enter into a formal dialectic with the narrative logic. (1976: 55)

These scholars also highlight Ozu's use of '360-degree shooting space' and his emphasis on objects irrelevant to the development of the narrative, and on 'graphic configuration' by matching 'one or more objects, shapes and/or colors' between two continuous shots as examples of Ozu's non-Hollywood filmic style (1976: 55-70). On the basis of this formalist analysis, they claim that Ozu's films are modernist and diverge from the classical Hollywood cinematic paradigm.

Calling Ozu a modernist was provocative, contradicting the interpretation that had previously held sway. The notion that Ozu was 'the most Japanese of all their directors' is exemplified in Richie's book, *Ozu* (1974). Richie explicates Ozu's films by underlining their links with traditional Japanese aesthetics. For Richie, thematically and stylistically, Ozu's films reflect traditional Japanese attitudes to life and aesthetics and almost all of them revolve around 'the Japanese family in dissolution' (1974: 1). He explains traditional Japanese attitudes to life and aesthetics in terms of *mono no aware*, which according to him means 'the "sympathetic sadness" caused by the contemplation of this world' and is also used to describe 'a serene acceptance of a transient world, a gentle pleasure found in mundane pursuits soon to vanish, a content created by the knowledge that one is with the world and then leaving it is, after all, in the natural state of things' (1974: 52).

Drawing again on Yoshimoto's categorisation of American scholarship on Japanese cinema, Richie's study of Ozu exemplifies 'the humanistic celebration of great auteurs and Japanese culture' (2000). Thompson & Bordwell's and Burch's approach represents the 'formalistic and Marxist celebration of Japanese cinema as an alternative to the classical Hollywood cinema' (Yoshimoto 2000). Peter Lehman states that for Richie and Schrader, 'everything is made meaningful with reference to the Oriental character and religion' (1987: 6). For these scholars, according to Lehman, Ozu's films are imbued with 'the mysterious Orient', which can only be 'penetrated' by 'being there' and learning the native culture (1987: 6). By contrast, for Bordwell and Thompson, 'it all seems crystal clear' (1987: 7).

They will study Ozu exactly the same way they study Jacques Tati. The films will be carefully analysed and scrutinized, their organizational systems will be laid bare, and they will be fully comprehended without any mysterious references to Japanese states of mind and religion. (Lehman 1987: 7)

In Lehman's view, if Richie explains everything by invoking their 'authentic' knowledge of Japanese culture, Bordwell and Thompson presume that everything can be explained through 'a clear system of easily observable and knowable patterns' (1987: 12).

For Thompson and Bordwell, Ozu's otherness is an alternative to the norms of classical Hollywood films. It is in this sense that Ozu can be regarded as a modernist director like Jacques Tati, Jean Luc Godard or Robert Bresson. Paul Willemen (1978) brands this approach cultural imperialism. Willemen argues that by calling Ozu a modernist, Thompson and Bordwell make the same mistake as the cubists and surrealists who labelled African sculpture modernist. Willemen further states that Thompson and Bordwell's approach is compromised by their ignorance of Japanese society and history and specific ideological configurations. Willemen underlines that 'the systematic set of differences pointed out by Thompson and Bordwell' have always been noticed in the Japanese reading of Ozu's films and are always considered merely 'a form of traditionalism' (1978: 57).

Thompson and Bordwell thus move Ozu's films to a new socio-historical and ideological conjuncture, in order to verify their formalist film analysis. Tellingly, the original proponents of the formalist approach heralded it as a new critical theory that transcended the conventions of film studies (Lehman 1987: 8). Thompson and Bordwell's claim reflects a desire to cram a plethora of filmic forms into a single category: an alternative other opposed to classical Hollywood norms.

Lehman agrees with Willemen that categorisation of Ozu's films should be informed by how 'social, cultural, historical, and ideological positions' shape their perception (1987:

8). For Lehman, calling Ozu a modernist is pointless, and the western scholar's intervention unnecessary.

What is the point of calling a style 'modernist' if nearly everyone who has been watching it in every country for fifty years has been calling it traditional? ... What kind of modernism masks itself so well that the Japanese critics and public both immerse themselves in it as a beautiful traditionalism? Indeed, why did it take Western scholars to uncover this modernism? We in the West didn't need anyone from Japan or Africa to tell us that cubism *was* something new. (1987: 8; original emphasis)

In response to these criticisms, Bordwell has refined his approach to Ozu (see Bordwell 1979b; 1985; 1988; 1992). He has stopped insisting that Ozu is a modernist. Bordwell began his research on Ozu's films by drawing a rigid line between traditionalism and modernism; in his earliest article on Ozu (1979b), he ignores Japanese tradition completely. In later works, Bordwell identifies traditional Japanese aesthetics as a key factor in the unique Japanese film style of the 1930s. He has recently explored the influence of Japanese classicism in Ozu's films (1992). He increasingly emphasises traditional aesthetics and refers to the specific social and cultural contexts in which Ozu's films appeared (1988). Bordwell thus appears to have taken criticisms of his argument into account and now approaches Ozu in a more comprehensive manner, sensitive to Japanese social and historical contexts. He also claims that Japanese traditions are reflected in Ozu's films through a mass culture that blends Japanese and western elements.

Bordwell's view of Japanese culture distinguishes his work on Ozu from that of Richie, Schrader and Burch. For Bordwell, Japanese culture is not 'a unitary cultural practice' based on traditional aesthetics as it is for Burch. Bordwell emphasises that even in the 1930s, Japanese culture was already fused with western culture. He rejects the notion that Ozu's films reflect 'some amorphous entity called "Japanese tradition"', 'a pure "Japanese-ness" or traditional art', evoking instead the 'mass culture of his moment' and

‘specific post-Meiji materials’ that are ‘synthesized by the encounter with the West’ (1988: 29-30). Ultimately, Bordwell’s later work on Ozu melts the rigid binary conception of Japanese tradition/traditionalism vs. western modernisation/modernism and rejects the notion of pure Japanese-ness.

Nonetheless, a persistent tendency runs through Bordwell’s studies of Ozu. While his view of the relationship between Japanese traditions and Japanese film style have changed, his underlying assumption about the relationship between Japanese cinema and Hollywood has not changed at all. According to Bordwell, in the 1930s, Japanese directors used ‘a wider range of “stylistic devices” than Western cinema of that period’ (1992: 330). This yields ‘the *ornamental* or *decorative* function of style’ (1992: 331; original emphasis). Japanese cinema, then, is characterised by a style that does not function ‘denotatively, thematically, or expressively’, but ‘stands out in itself, as a device utilizing concrete materials and processes’, unlike Hollywood films (1992: 331-332). Although these ‘stylistic devices’ were also deployed in Western cinema, it was Japanese traditional aesthetics that encouraged the development of this ‘decorative style’. Ozu’s 1930s films exhibit ‘adherence to classicism, that of Hollywood as well as that of Japan’ (1992: 343). That is, when the ‘ornamental or decorative function of style’ became a norm of Japanese cinema, Ozu’s films seem to have simultaneously adopted the norms of Hollywood and of Japanese cinema. While the ‘decorative elaboration’ of stylistic devices can be also found in the work of Ozu’s colleagues, Ozu pushes ‘the decorative possibilities of film style’ further, making them into ‘a unique parametric system’ (1992: 343).

Bordwell starts out regarding Ozu’s film style as an alternative to classical Hollywood norms, but later views it as a variation on these. Bordwell now terms the unique Japanese film style of the 1930s ‘decorative style’ or ‘decorative classicism’. Nevertheless, the criteria defining its ‘decorativeness’ are based on the use and function of stylistic devices in ‘classical Hollywood cinema’. Thus, for Bordwell, Japanese cinema is still ‘other’ cinema, always understood in relation to *the* cinema – classical Hollywood cinema.

As we have seen, whether analysing Kurosawa's or Ozu's films, western critical writings explain them primarily through the extent of their Japanese-ness, the traditional Japanese aesthetics they drawn upon, and how they balance western cinematic influences and Japanese-ness. 'Japanese-ness' here is a monolithic cultural entity in which pre-modern traditions remain in their essential form, regardless of the passage of time, as in Burch's Orientalist view. Otherwise, as in Thompson and Bordwell's argument, the differences found in Japanese films such as Ozu's are appropriated as otherness – as an antithesis of the dominant western cinema. Either way, analysis of Japanese directors like Kurosawa and Ozu seems first to declare that they are 'quintessentially' Japanese, or that they are 'not' Japanese. A binary conception of the west vs. Japan and Hollywood cinema vs. Japanese cinema underlies such analysis. In the next section I look at how such western knowledge and conceptions of Japanese cinema colour the reception of Kitano's films.

#### **4.4. Kitano Takeshi, 'another Japanese auteur'?**

In this section, I focus chiefly on differing western conceptions of Kitano's *Hana-bi*: do these depart significantly from the humanist and formalist approach applied to Kurosawa's and Ozu's films? Far from being free of Orientalist assumptions of 'Japanese' otherness, western scholarship understands *Hana-bi* through western knowledge that otherises Japanese cinema. Certainly, the western knowledge initiated by the discovery of Kurosawa has been refined through greater factual knowledge of Japanese society and Japanese film history (e.g. Anderson and Richie [1959] 1982; Bordwell 1988). Darrell William Davis states that contemporary Japanese film studies seems to have reached a more mature stage, understanding Japanese films through a 'contamination model' that explores their syncretic nature under the influence of 'globalisation' (2001: 65-67). Despite this refinement, critics continue to address Kitano's films in familiar binary terms: 'Japanese-ness'/Japanese traditions vs. American influences, 'old Japan' vs. modern/contemporary Japan. Kitano's films are slotted into the western memory and knowledge of Japanese cinema; Kitano becomes another 'Japanese' auteur director, his films immediately related to 'Japanese-ness'. Bearing this

in mind, I analyse how his films are understood in relation to other Japanese ‘auteur’ directors like Kurosawa and Ozu. I also analyse how his films are articulated in terms of ‘Japanese-ness’ and the otherness of Japanese cinema.

I first examine how western critics conceive *Hana-bi* in terms of western knowledge of Japanese films. Kitano’s film *Hana-bi* (1997) won the same prize – the Golden Lion – that *Rashomon* won more than four decades earlier. Kitano seems to distance himself from stereotypical Kurosawaesque ‘samurai films’.

I would like to get rid of the typical Asian traits, cultures, and aesthetics in our film. I don’t mean to put down Kurosawa, but I would rather see contemporary Japanese films succeed over samurai films. I hate seeing people sell a blatantly stereotypical Asian look. (Kitano quoted in Davis 2001: 55)

Whether or not Kitano challenges such stereotypes in his films, he appears to harbour an ambition to go beyond western stereotypes of Japanese film. According to Davis, Kitano is attempting to emerge from the shadow of Kurosawa and gain recognition as ‘an auteur who breaks out of the constraints of national cinema’ (2001: 57).

*Hana-bi*,<sup>24</sup> however, fails to escape the constraints of national cinema imposed by western critics. Despite Kitano’s rejection of ‘a blatantly stereotypical Asian look’, it is impossible to prevent western critics from locating his film within the lineage of Japanese cinema that the west knows best.

I didn’t realise how much I’d missed Japanese movies until I saw Takeshi

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<sup>24</sup> *Hana-bi* (1997) is Kitano’s seventh feature film, released as *Fireworks* in some countries. In this film, Kitano plays the main character, Nishi, a policeman whose daughter recently died and whose wife is dying of cancer. His partner and friend Horibe is shot and paralysed during a stakeout, after Nishi had left to visit his wife in hospital. Horibe is disserved by his family and considers committing suicide. In a shootout that ensues as the police pursue Horibe’s assailant, a young policeman is killed. Nishi borrows money from yakuza and robs a bank. He posts painting tools to Horibe and gives the widow of the young dead policeman some money. He leaves the police force and takes a trip with his wife. On the seashore, Nishi shoots himself and his wife dead as his police colleagues arrive.

Kitano's *Hana-bi* at the Toronto Film Festival this fall, just a few days after it had won the Golden Lion in Venice. Here was a film, in the unlikely form of a violent crime thriller crossed with a domestic melodrama that captured a sense of sublime transcendence not much felt since the golden age of Mizoguchi, Ozu and Naruse. Yet Kitano's sensibility remains resolutely modern; his is a world of jagged discontinuity, of harsh contrasts in tone and style, that is deeply indebted to postwar ironists like Oshima and Imamura. (Kehr 1998: 31)

Here, Kitano's cop/yakuza film, set in contemporary Japan, seems to successfully avoid being connected with Kurosawa's samurai films, set in old Japan. Instead of Kurosawa, the names of all the other famous Japanese directors in the west – Mizoguchi, Ozu, Naruse, Oshima and Imamura – are evoked to place *Hana-bi* as a 'Japanese film' in the western version of Japanese cinema. Kitano's name is thus inscribed into the western history of Japanese auteur directors, reconfirming its validity.

Western commentators have tended to emphasise the unique visual styles and formalism of the Japanese directors mentioned in the quotation above. While *Hana-bi* is linked to such formalist directors, Kurosawa's name is absent. This implies that *Hana-bi* initially intrigues western critics because of its formal features. Serious interest in the stylistic characteristics of *Hana-bi* make western critics think of Ozu.

... a true appreciation and understanding of the contemporary cinema of Kitano stems from this recognition of its roots in the cinema of Ozu, whose spatial and temporal world refuses to concede to narrative emptiness. (Freeman 2000)

Mark Freeman (2000) provides several examples to prove that Kitano's filmic style borrows from the legacy of Ozu. Among the various stylistic elements of *Hana-bi*, he identifies empty space, use of exterior spaces, silence, transitions between scenes, visual narrative elisions – elision of key scenes – and framing of frontal posture as clear

examples of Ozu's influence.<sup>25</sup> A scene featuring hospital corridors that shows empty space is compared with a corridor scene in Ozu's *Equinox Flower* (1958). According to Freeman, as this empty space conveys a sense of 'the void' in Ozu's films, Kitano's scene evokes the same sentiment. Another significant parallel, for Freeman, is Kitano's use of non-diegetic images between scenes. The images are of paintings Kitano himself drew. According to Freeman, unlike 'the classical narrative form', Ozu's transitions 'offer far more meditative material' that creates a kind of 'gap' – another space that 'seems to be non-narrative'. In Freeman's account, the images Kitano uses as transition between scenes also 'create space, deflect impetus, and yet still impact directly on our understanding of the diegetic world'. Freeman states that another feature of *Hana-bi* reveals a more direct link to Ozu's *Tokyo Story*. In the latter, an old couple go on a journey and end up sitting by the sea, where they face the realisation that their life is full of disappointment. Freeman maintains that this use of 'exterior space' where people realise the truth about their lives is repeated in *Hana-bi*, where another couple go on a journey and die by the sea. For Freeman, this similarity between the two films cements Kitano's connection with Ozu.

In his comments on Ozu's film style, Freeman clearly draws on Bordwell's articulation of Ozu's films; he too characterises Ozu's filmic style by referring to empty space, transitions, stillness, silence, and narrative ellipsis (Bordwell 1976; 1988). Regardless of the time gap, Freeman believes that Kitano's filmic style is clearly influenced by Ozu. His style certainly shares features in common with that of Ozu. Silence is a recurrent element in Kitano's films. Scenery which seems meaningless and irrelevant to the narrative appears in transitional shots; ellipsis is likewise a key element. Despite these similarities, however, the world that Kitano creates through these filmic elements is far from the balanced and peaceful world of Ozu. In Ozu's films, ellipsis is used to skip over major events in the life cycle like marriage and death, resulting in a transcendent view of

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<sup>25</sup> Despite Kitano's fame in the west, few analytical articles on his films have appeared. Here I refer mainly to Mark Freeman's article 'Kitano's *Hana-bi* and the Spatial Tradition of Yasujiro Ozu' (2000) in *Senses of Cinema*, July 2000. It is significant as it was written relatively soon after *Hana-bi* raised Kitano's profile in the west, revealing the formation of the western academic approach to Kitano's films in its early stages.

life and time rooted in natural and seasonal cycles. Desser (1988) explains that Ozu eliminates 'climactic' moments of the narrative, counterbalancing this strategy of ellipsis by including mundane everyday events. By contrast, Kitano frequently employs ellipsis to stir up deeply shocking and highly unpredictable moments of violence. Kitano shows no interest in portraying the ordinary daily life of his characters: he builds a chain of violent incidents, major and minor, just and unjust, to depict a merciless contemporary world. Given that the ellipsis of Ozu and Kitano not only yields such different cinematic effects but also creates contrasting cinematic worlds, to what extent does stylistic similarity mean that Kitano's films are rooted in Ozu's? Kitano, moreover, often mentions traditional Japanese aesthetics and values as stylistic or thematic inspiration, but never mentions being influenced by Ozu.

Freeman also recognizes that Kitano's *Hana-bi* delivers a radically different filmic experience.

Kitano's world is light years away from the families of Ozu. This is a world of violent acts and moral quagmires, where action takes a central role in the construction of the film. (2000)

Freeman understands this difference by leaning on the binary conception of traditional and contemporary – 'old' Japan and 'new' Japan: 'The traditions of the past are reflected throughout the film, yet the influences of the present are also evident. This is not the world of Ozu, but the world of the "new" Japanese cinema' (2000). For Freeman, Kitano's achievement in *Hana-bi* is 'to unite these two worlds'. The binary conception of the traditional and the modern/contemporary is again evoked as the most significant factor in explaining Kitano's films, as so often in western discussions of Kurosawa and Ozu.

As quoted above, Dave Kehr (1998) also tries to explain the seemingly incongruous gap between Ozu and Kitano by asserting that Kitano's violent modern world is 'deeply indebted to postwar ironists like Oshima and Imamura'. For Kehr, the virtue of *Hana-bi*

is Kitano's ability to construct an equilibrium between the transcendent feelings of Ozu and Mizoguchi and the more turbulent world-view of Oshima and Imamura. That is, Kehr attributes each aspect of *Hana-bi* – traditional and modern – to the influence of different Japanese directors whose names are familiar to the west. This kind of understanding confines Kitano's films within limited western knowledge of Japanese cinema.

As *Hana-bi* becomes the focus of western attention, it is constrained within the frame of western knowledge, which conceives of Japanese cinema through its memory of partial and intermittent discoveries of Japanese directors. In particular, *Hana-bi* inspires formalist interpretations that compare it with Ozu's films. Western critics' belief that, despite 'the forty year bridge from Ozu to Kitano', Ozu's old Japan is alive and well in Kitano's films may reflect their desire to maintain the status of Ozu's films as the most memorable Japanese cinema of all time. This though is an Orientalist's dream: 'old Japan' – the film style that Ozu consummated in the 1950s – is believed to prevail at the very centre of Japanese contemporary cinema, in almost the same form. For such critics, Ozu signifies the eternal essence of Japanese film to which explanations of contemporary Japanese films must be related. At the same time, Kitano is placed within the same lineage of Ozu, and is regarded as another representative 'Japanese' director. Kitano's new Japan is claimed only to prove his ability 'to unite these two worlds', new and old Japan – traditional and modern. Above all, western critics confine Kitano's filmic style within memories of Ozu, identifying it as 'other' in the same way that they recognise Ozu's filmic style as 'other' to Hollywood cinema.

On the other hand, some critics understand *Hana-bi* by means other than such appropriation. Ozu's name is not always mentioned. In most criticisms and reviews, Kitano's unusual filmic style is remarked upon but no link to Ozu is made. The most frequently mentioned elements of Kitano's films are violence, death, silence, stillness, expressionless faces and his peculiar editing style. In the following, I examine how these features are explained in terms of 'Japanese-ness' – distinctive Japanese traditions, aesthetics and philosophies.

Kitano is not only a director but also an actor who plays the main character in most of his

films. Of his eleven films, he appears in all but three: *A Scene at the Sea* (1991), *Kids Return* (1996) and *Dolls* (2002). It is noteworthy that these films do not entail the high level of violence thought to be his trademark. *Hana-bi* has Kitano in the main role and contains high levels of violence; the film's unusual and unsettling impact seems associated with Kitano's own cinematic presence (Rayns 1994a; Jones 2000).

Daniel Edwards (2000) suggests that Kitano's cinematic presence 'creates a subjectivity alienated from the audience, generating an unsettling "otherness" on screen'. For Edwards, shots showing Kitano motionless and silent with an expressionless face arouse 'the sense of distance' that leads 'non-fictional elements to enter our experience of the image' (2000). In this account, Kitano's body becomes a focal point that evokes the 'otherness' of *Hana-bi*. This 'otherness' unsettles the classic narrative development. Here, Edwards' contention converges with Freeman's argument that *Hana-bi* features cinematic moments that halt narrative development. The difference is that, for Edwards, it is the main character embodied by the silent, motionless and expressionless Kitano that brings this about.

Western writers often link the inscrutability generated by expressionless faces in *Hana-bi* to traditional *noh* theatre (Stephens 1995; Kehr 1998; Murray 1998) whose masked actors show no emotion. As shown in the previous section, the incomprehensibility of *Rashomon* is explained in relation to Japanese traditional philosophy (Richie [1965] 1998). The influence of *kabuki* is also mentioned in explaining *Rashomon* (see Anderson and Richie 1958). In a similar vein, the sense of 'incomprehensibility' – the unsettling otherness – of Kitano's films is attributed to Japanese traditional aesthetics such as those of *noh*. Likewise, for Freeman (2000), Kitano's filmic style is believed to reflect Japanese traditional aesthetics like 'ikebana'<sup>26</sup> and 'a philosophical sense of *mu* and *ma*'. Ascribing filmic features to traditional theatres is not wrong in itself. The problem is that the 'historical specificity of Kabuki's influences on Japanese cinema' and the 'historical specificity of traditional theatre' are often disregarded (Yoshimoto 2000: 93-106). Stephen Vlastos underlines that some 'familiar emblems of Japanese culture' are modern

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<sup>26</sup> *Ikebana* is the art of arranging flowers, leaves and cut stems in vases aesthetically, originating in 16th century Japan.

inventions. Vlastos emphasizes the importance of examining ‘historical and contextual’ backgrounds in which ‘certain practices and ideas’ are ‘formed, institutionalised, and propagated as *tradition*’ (1998: 3-5; original emphasis). Without consideration of these historical specificities, traditional theatres such as *kabuki* and *noh* are often understood to bear a pure, essential and ahistorical ‘Japanese’ form and aesthetics. Likewise, when western scholars think *Rashomon* and *Hana-bi* reflect the traditions of *kabuki* and *noh*, they ascribe to these films a pure, essential and ahistorical ‘Japanese-ness’. Kitano’s filmic features are slotted into a given ‘Japanese-ness’ and Kitano is recognized not as an auteur-director but as a *Japanese* auteur-director. This becomes clear if we compare the different ways in which Kitano and Quentin Tarantino, who made his debut on the international film festival circuit around the same time, are recognized (Davis 2001).

According to Davis, Kitano and Tarantino both engendered a new category of ‘festival gangster film’ by infusing new innovative filmic styles into the conventional genre of gangster films (2001: 70-71). Even with evident references to American pop culture, the films of Tarantino are barely discussed in terms of ‘American-ness’. Tarantino’s link with French *nouvelle vague* directors, especially Jean Luc Godard, is emphasised while the large debt *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), his first film as a director, owes to Hong Kong director Ringo Lam’s *City on Fire* (1987) is often ignored (Dargis 1994; Dowell and Fried 1994). By contrast, as seen above, western writers’ understanding of the uniqueness of Kitano’s films tends to be prefixed by ‘Japanese’ – Japanese traditions, Japanese values and Japanese film style.

While Tarantino’s films are also known for their highly violent scenes, Kitano’s films display more cinematically ‘inventive’ ways of portraying violence, cinematically effective since it is not only brutal but arrives unexpectedly (Gerow 1999; Edwards 2000). This is mainly due to his unique style of editing violent scenes rather than the high body count. Kitano frequently shows a situation where the eruption of violence is imminent and then cuts to the result of that action. This editing leads us to an illusory feeling that the ‘action is too fast to see. . . . all over in a moment’ (Seymour 2001).

Remarking on such features, Aaron Gerow (1999) claims that Kitano's unique film style results in a new cinematic experience of violence. In particular, when this editing style is combined with 'the lack of characters' reaction to violence', it

. . . leaves the killing ambiguous and disturbing since it escapes delineation as what we are used to as 'screen violence'. . . . violence and comedy intersect and the audience is caught between laughing and feeling disturbed. (Gerow 1999: 112)

Gerow claims that Kitano's violence provides a 'liminal experience' because it is both brutal and funny. It arouses 'ambiguous and disturbing' feelings; audiences do not know how to respond. Certainly, Kitano's violence differs from that to which Hollywood action films over-expose us. This new intersection between violence and comedy can be regarded as a new cinematic experience although it is not necessarily an alternative or antithetic to Hollywood. Gerow's article is a rare example of an attempt to explain Kitano's filmic style without reference to the adjective 'Japanese' or to 'Japanese-ness'.

What often most bothers American critics seems to be the 'savage' use of chopsticks and violence that cannot be rated on the Hollywood scale.

. . . jamming chopsticks up both his nostrils. That nasty little scene, by the way, may well be the most jarring set piece in a movie that keeps raising the bar on its own straightforward or implied displays of savagery. (Seymour 2001)

The possibility of a new cinematic experience of violence is denied here. Kitano's violence is disparaged as 'extreme' and 'savage'. One of the popular stereotypes of Japanese films is that they entail explicit sexual scenes and extreme violence. In the 1960s, films such as Teshigahara Hiroshi's *Woman of the Dunes* (1964), Imamura's *The Pornographer* (1966) and Shindo Kaneto's *Onibaba* (1964) were given wide distribution in Europe and USA. They seem to have attracted audiences with a level of sex and violence beyond that permitted under European and American censorship (Rayns 1991a).

This may contribute to the western Orientalist expectation that Japanese films will combine exoticism with eroticism. Japanese films are recognized as the extremity that confirms the strangeness of Japanese culture. Films that satisfy this expectation are more likely to be given distribution in the west and are thought to form a marginal genre.<sup>27</sup> The violence in Kitano's films may thus be one of the main factors that attracts western attention.

In the meantime, along with the stylistic affinity with traditional aesthetical forms, familiar 'traditional values' are brought up to explain the behaviour of characters who seem to live or die for them (Rayns 1998a). In particular, Kitano himself stresses the importance of 'how to die', once an important issue in Japan that disappeared under the influence of the west, which emphasises 'how to live' (Smith 1998: 32). For Kitano, the philosophy that underlies *Hana-bi* is closer to 'Bushido', or 'the ancient samurai philosophy' (Smith 1998: 32). What is striking here is that this venerable Japanese value, which Kitano himself finds fairly anachronistic in contemporary Japanese society, is readily accepted in the west.

Kitano expected this traditional value to be better understood among Japanese, likely to have a basic understanding of it, even if most of them are no longer sympathetic to it. On the contrary, these values which Kitano believes *Hana-bi* conveys were better received in the west than in Japan (See Sato 1999).

However, it turned out that they might have understood the message better than the Japanese. That was a nice surprise, but also kind of frightening. . . . I think it may reflect a time lag in terms of cultural understanding. Now, when people in Europe look at Japan, they are beginning to understand the soul that we Japanese

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<sup>27</sup> For instance, the UK distribution company Tartan recently set up a new label named Asian Extreme. Under this label, they have imported Japanese, Korean and Thai horror films and violent films. In particular, Miike Takashi's films, introduced to the UK under this label, feature extreme violence, which is allowed under Japanese censorship; most of his films are made for the video-film market in Japan.

treasured some decades ago, but have almost forgotten these days. (Kitano quoted in Sato 1999: 84)

Kitano's insight suggests why the west is more receptive to his films: a 'lag' in cultural understanding. These old-time Japanese values fit western ideas about Japan while Japanese regard them as anachronistic and remote. That is, Kitano's filmic style fits in with memories of previous Japanese directors in the west, while the Japanese values in his films are consistent with the western idea of 'old' Japan. In this respect, western critics' conceptions of Kitano's films appear to draw upon the same Orientalist frame within which, in earlier decades, their forebears welcomed and appreciated other Japanese films, mostly *jidaigeki* (period) films including those of Kurosawa. The west continues to feel more affinity with the 'old Japan' which earlier Japanese films delivered to the west.

Kitano is well respected as an auteur director in Japan but Japanese film critics consider his films to be located outside mainstream Japanese cinema. This may be the price he has to pay for ensuring his films satisfy an Orientalist desire to see an 'old Japan' in which traditional values are alive and kicking.

If *Hana-bi*'s success in the west is built upon such an Orientalist frame, this illuminates why Kitano is always recognised as a 'Japanese' director. *Hana-bi* is acknowledged within the western Orientalist frame of Japan and Japanese cinema: old Japanese values and a uniquely 'Japanese' film style. As a result, Kitano's unique style and filmic world gain attention, but do not necessarily guarantee him the status of international auteur, because western recognition of Kitano's films is embedded in their 'Japanese-ness' – Japanese traditions and Japanese cinema.

To sum up, when western film critics celebrate *Hana-bi*, they instantly slot it into the western knowledge constructed through the discovery of Japanese auteur directors. *Hana-bi*'s unique style is often considered to be 'rooted in' Ozu. Despite the fifty-year gap, Ozu's film style, which critics heralded as an alternative to classical Hollywood cinema,

is believed to survive in *Hana-bi*. At the same time, critics tend to believe that the ‘old Japan’ supposedly embodied in Ozu’s films is also present in Kitano’s work. As Kitano himself is aware, a ‘time-lag’ colours western knowledge of his style and themes, knowledge that betrays an Orientalist frame privileging ‘old’ Japan and Japanese-ness.

#### **4.5. Kitano’s self-Orientalising strategy**

In this section, I consider how Kitano’s self-Orientalising strategy is deployed in his films. I do not mean by this that his films involve strong self-Orientalism or that they are nationalist. In fact Kitano seems to be very cautious about asserting a clear-cut ‘Japanese-ness’. This may be due to a fundamental dilemma of Japanese nationalism: its assertion cannot but entail traces of the Japanese imperial past. Japanese nationalism evolved in the Japanese imperial period, sharing and internalising Japanese imperialist values (Beasley 1987; Stegewerns 2003). Nonetheless, *Hana-bi* shows that Kitano is aware of western Orientalist expectations of Japanese films and attempts to satisfy them. Kitano was ‘discovered’ first in the west and made a glorious return to Japan with the Golden Lion prize won at Venice in 1997. *Hana-bi* is one of the most celebrated films in his filmography and is also the first film in which Kitano included iconographic Japanese images. Kitano thus abandoned his policy of avoiding ‘the typical Asian look’, thereby re-confirming western Orientalist premises regarding Japanese cinema.

I now examine the influence of film festivals on Kitano’s films and attempt to show how *Hana-bi* reflects Kitano’s self-Orientalising strategy. To do so, I compare *Hana-bi* with his other films *Sonatine* (1993) and *Brother* (2000), which deal with similar themes – death and violence – and use a similar filmic style. Kitano’s recent films such as *Dolls* (2002) and *Zatoichi* (2003) are also suitable material for such analysis. In *Dolls*, Kitano utilises traditional Japanese marionette theatre, *bunraku*. *Zatoichi* is a remake about the wandering blind swordsman *Zatoichi* whose story was made into a popular TV and film series. Here, though, my main interest is in the moments when Kitano broke into the international film scene: I therefore focus on *Hana-bi*.

Kitano has directed eleven films since 1989. His sixth, *Kids Return* (1996) was invited to the Cannes' Directors Fortnight in 1996. In 1997, *Hana-bi* won a prestigious award at Venice, garnering Kitano a good reputation as director not only in the west but also in Japan. Until then, his career as filmmaker had been overshadowed by his long career as a TV personality and comedian. His films were first discovered and supported by western critics (Udo 1999a; 1999b). Eventually, after a detour through European international film festivals, peaking at Venice, he acquired a reputation as a serious film director back home. In fact, Japanese audiences and critics had not totally ignored Kitano's films. His director-debut *Violent Cop* drew critics' attention and was a box office hit.<sup>28</sup> Yet, it was after *Hana-bi*'s award at Venice that Kitano and his films gained serious critical attention and popular recognition. *Kinema Junpo* (キネマ旬報), a leading Japanese film magazine, for instance, established a special section introducing his films, with coverage of the film-making process, interviews with Kitano and his actors and actresses, and critical reviews.<sup>29</sup>

Kitano's recognition as an auteur-director, following the success of *Hana-bi*, repeats 'the detour through the west' pattern exhibited by *Rashomon*: Kitano is 'discovered' and highly evaluated in the west; when he returns to Japan with this western recognition, Japanese critics show serious interest in him and endow him with the status of 'representative' Japanese director. Crucially, this detour reflects how the value of Japanese traditions such as *ukiyo-e*<sup>30</sup> – woodcraft – may come to be recognised in Japan

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<sup>28</sup> In the special section of *Kinema Junpo* dedicated to reviewing Japanese films made in 1989, Ken Terawaki describes *Violent Cop* as an excellent, profound and powerful film. According to the same issue of *Kinema Junpo*, *Violent Cop* was one of the thirty most profitable films of the year (*Kinema Junpo* February 1990 no. 1028 p.106, 181).

<sup>29</sup> *Kinema Junpo* (January 1998 no.1245) allocates a special section of more than twenty pages to images of *Hana-bi*, interviews with Kitano, two critical reviews of *Hana-bi*, information on international distribution and a list of international film festivals in which *Hana-bi* participated and the awards it garnered. *Kinema Junpo* gave his next film, *Kikujiro*, a similar degree of coverage – thirty-three pages – consisting of images from the film, two critical articles, discussions among film critics and a film-making diary (June 1999 no.1285).

<sup>30</sup> The term *ukiyo-e*, or "pictures of the floating world" refers to a style of genre painting and woodblock printing that arose in Japan in the seventeenth century and fell into decline in the nineteenth. Originally associated with a Buddhist world view and alluding to the ephemerality of

(Yoshimoto 2003: 65-66). The beauty of *ukiyo-e* was rarely acknowledged in Japan until its ‘discovery’ and celebration in the west. Apparently, the west has the knowledge and authority to establish which Japanese objects have value. The western view then shapes Japanese constructions. In the course of such detours through the west, prominent European film festivals like Venice and Cannes become the sites of decisions on which Japanese films are best and which should represent Japanese cinema.

Festivals also increase the chances that a Japanese film will be distributed widely, especially in the west. By winning first prize at Venice, *Hana-bi* became qualified to travel to the west. After the success of *Hana-bi*, Kitano’s other films – previous and subsequent – are guaranteed the same chance. Kitano’s 1994 film *Sonatine*, whose US distribution rights had been bought by Miramax, had to wait on the shelf for release in the USA until *Hana-bi* had won its prize and had been released there. Not surprisingly, *Hana-bi* was the first Kitano film to be distributed on such a huge scale in the west. His subsequent films, *Kikujiro*, *Brother*, *Dolls* and *Zatoichi* achieved almost the same scale of distribution as *Hana-bi*. His previous films, *Violent Cop*, *Boiling Point*, *A Scene at the Sea* and *Kids Return* were, one by one, released on video or DVD in the west. Recognition or awards at famous film festivals controls or at least greatly influences the distribution of Japanese films in the west.

Considering the crucial role of international film festivals, Kitano must find it difficult to ignore their impact. Moreover, while he may not be dependent on what foreign journalists say about his films, he certainly appears to be sensitive to their commentary. *Kikujiro*, chosen for the official competition at Cannes in 1999, featuring Kitano as a yakuza, is a non-violent film for children, unlike *Hana-bi*. In interviews about *Kikujiro*, Kitano states that he was fed up with ‘foreign journalists’ asking about violence in his films and decided to make something ‘non-violent’ (Rayns 1999: 14). Asked why *Brother* uses the conventional clichés of yakuza films, he answers,

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man’s existence, the phrase “floating world” subsequently came to suggest a hedonistic preoccupation with the present moment, with the latest fashions, pursuits, and life styles of urban culture, and implied a certain chicness. The pictures of this life, this “floating world”, were called *ukiyo-e* (Kobayashi 1982: 65).

I knew that eventually I would make a traditional yakuza film ... but you might be surprised at the real reason I decided to make such a traditional genre film. It's because, whenever I go to film festivals, I'm always overwhelmed by the number of foreign journalists who want to ask me questions about yakuza movies. (quoted in Stephens 2001a)

While Kitano does not always try to fulfil the expectations of western journalists, he is highly conscious of their expectations.

Furthermore, despite protestations to the contrary, Kitano does appear to pander to Orientalist expectations to some degree (Clarke 2003). Whilst *Hana-bi* brought him international fame and domestic recognition as a 'Japanese' auteur director, Davis (2001) indicates that it was the first film in which Kitano displays iconographic images of Japan.

Kitano invokes Japanese tradition in a direct, iconographic way. Images of Mt. Fuji, kare-sansui (raked sand) gardens, a famous Buddhist temple, cherry blossoms, a Japanese ryokan (inn), and other Japanese landscapes not only are metonymic, standing in for Japanese tradition ... but also are strongly coded as timeless, sacred, and feminine. (2001: 71-72)

According to Davis, in *Hana-bi*, iconographic images of Japan are given 'a casual, once-over-lightly treatment' and used 'as ornamentation and packaging for a modest redemption story that enjoyed unexpected international triumph' (2001: 73). Despite the light touch in dealing with such 'stock images', for Davis, these images clearly convey 'potent symbols of Japaneseness' (2001: 73). As discussed in the previous section, even if it is loaded with no symbolic meanings whatsoever, the image of Mt. Fuji immediately inspires memories of Ozu's *Tokyo Story* in western critics' minds.

Kitano included iconographic Japanese images first in *Hana-bi* then in subsequent films. *Kikujiro* contains a scene of a traditional fair at a shrine. Casio Abe remarks that

‘traditional folk elements’ have a special place in *Kikujiro*; he considers this an example of the ‘Japanification’ of Kitano’s films (1999: 38). *Dolls*, whose title makes clear its direct relationship with Japanese *bunraku* theatre, brims over with colourful ‘picture-postcard’ images of the Japanese seasons. *Brother* conveys ‘ritualistic yakuza traditions’ like finger cuttings and *seppuku*, as in conventional yakuza films made by Toho studios in the 1960s and 1970s (Stephens 2001a). Although these are not iconographic Japanese images, they are familiar Japanese rituals in the west, emblematic of the weirdness and strangeness of Japanese culture.<sup>31</sup> Kitano thus clearly adopted a self-Orientalising strategy starting with *Hana-bi*, through which he established himself as a Japanese auteur director in the west. Whether he adopted this strategy intentionally or not, the success of *Hana-bi* must have opened his eyes to the ‘use-value’ of typical Japanese images in the west.

Kitano’s self-Orientalising strategy inadvertently uses old nationalist symbols to express Japanese identity. The use of national images is inherently problematic, inevitably invoking the politically charged myth of Japanese nationalism (Davis 2001: 73), which developed in association with Japanese imperialism and was interwoven with its values (Stegewerns 2003). As a consequence, ‘free or open discussion’ of Japanese nationalism remains taboo since

The Japanese blend of considerations of national pride, honour and purity suggests a rootedness in the historically privileged representations of Japanese identity built around the quintessential Japanese self derived from the unsullied and sublime imperial essence. (McCormack 2000: 115)

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<sup>31</sup> Kitano’s latest film *Zatoichi* is a period film; Kitano thus has to deal with all the filmic elements that embody ‘old Japan’. Yet here Kitano seems to succeed in subverting the stereotypes of old Japan and transforming the generic conventions of samurai films: Kitano himself appears as blond-haired Zatoichi, the main character. Villagers tap-dance together for a village festival. Comic scenes, seemingly irrelevant to the story, are often inserted. In terms of Kitano’s self-Orientalising, *Zatoichi* suggests that Kitano, now famous and successful, can confront and play with Orientalist expectations about Japanese films. *Zatoichi* recalls the stereotypes of Japanese culture and films, yet playfully deconstructs and transcends them.

Hence, public discussions about national identity have been beyond the pale in Japan because the symbols of national identity still bear and can imply traces of ultra-nationalism and imperialism. Kitano employs images of Japan stereotypical in the west, unwittingly launching an impossible national mission by referring to ultra-nationalist symbols of Japan. To some extent, the symbolic icons of Japanese-ness found in Kitano's films are hollow, not reflecting any substantial issues of Japanese nationalism.

Kitano's self-Orientalising strategy is distinctive in that he himself displays no particular belief in traditional Japanese values or nationalism. As Davis indicates, the deployment of iconographic Japanese images in *Hana-bi* is light and superficial; it appears not to reflect conscious nationalist intent on the part of the director. Although Kitano has mentioned on several occasions that Japanese traditional arts have inspired him, he has not connected this with nationalism. As discussed above, iconographic Japanese images inevitably recall dangerous liaisons with ultra-nationalist militarism, and Kitano thus has to avoid lending this dogma credence. Perhaps aware of this, he makes use of these images while denying belief in their national connotations.<sup>32</sup> Kitano thus appears to benefit from invoking Japanese national images but is keen to avoid promoting the values they entail. Kitano thus adopts a highly cautious approach to dealing with stereotypical, exoticising images of Japan, always employing them in a subtle or superficial way.

Arguably, other elements of Kitano's oeuvre corroborate the view that he panders to the western Orientalist frame of Japanese cinema. Compared with his other films, *Hana-bi* seems overloaded with profound philosophy (Jones 2000). None of his other films, before or after *Hana-bi*, entail such overt meditations on life and death. None of them is as emotional or so keen to appear transcendent (Harper 2000). *Hana-bi* thus gains recognition as 'more elaborate' and 'self-reflexive' with its 'contemplative tone' while Kitano's later film *Brother* is 'a hollow genre piece, distinctly lacking the meditative depth of the director's best work' (Edwards 2001). Critics find more subtle but significant differences when they compare *Hana-bi* with the earlier *Sonatine*. One critic familiar

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<sup>32</sup> Rumours have suggested that Kitano is involved with ultra-national political groups. While it is impossible to prove whether or not this is true, even if it is, he would be unable to openly express such beliefs in his films or public pronouncements.

with Kitano's films before he received the award for *Hana-bi* states that this film reveals the self-conscious attitude of 'an artist who starts reading ... admiring reviews too carefully' (Jones 2000). If *Sonatine* delivers 'elegantly understated existentialism' and 'uncorked insanity', *Hana-bi* appears to be 'an unreconciled mix of ultra-violence and sticky sentimentalism' (Jones 2000). *Hana-bi* certainly appears to be Kitano's most emotional work, featuring a 'moody and contemplative tone' (Edwards 2001). In this regard, whether its explicit emotional and philosophical content is seen as positive or negative, *Hana-bi* is unrepresentative of Kitano's filmography.

It is vital to keep in mind that the films of Kurosawa and Ozu were also highly esteemed because of their profound philosophical meaning. Western scholars have understood philosophical and existential contemplation of life and death as Kurosawa's central themes, calling this 'humanism' (Yoshimoto 2000; Prince 1991). Ozu's filmic aesthetics are considered an embodiment of religious transcendentalism or are related to traditional Japanese philosophy (Schrader 1972). It is possible that Kitano intentionally adopts an overtly emotional and philosophical tone to gain western recognition; this would explain why *Hana-bi* stands out from his other violent films. Even if this is not the case, we can assume that, with some exceptions mentioned above, western commentators warmed to *Hana-bi* because it slotted so smoothly into the western understanding of Japanese cinema. On the other hand, some western critics, interested in Kitano's films from an early stage, notice the difference in tone that marks *Hana-bi* out from his other films.

Kitano makes a striking turn towards 'traditional values' with *Hana-bi*. He underscores that the motivations driving Nishi, the main character, are anchored in Japanese values of the past. *Hana-bi* is the first film in which Kitano addresses such old-time values. His earlier films such as *Violent Cop* (1989), *The Boiling Point* (1990) and *Sonatine* show no hint of concern for traditional Japanese values such as 'Bushido' – the codes of the Samurai – which Kitano mentions vis-à-vis *Hana-bi*. Kitano does not assert that these are 'representative' or 'essential' Japanese values, emphasising that they are so old as to appear strange, incomprehensible, and remote to contemporary Japanese audiences. As Kitano clearly acknowledges the gap between the values in *Hana-bi* and contemporary Japanese society, his films may not reflect self-Orientalism within that society. Kitano in

fact practices self-Orientalism by implanting ‘traditional’ Japanese values in his films without, it appears, himself believing or claiming that these values are ‘representative’.

*Brother* (2000) happens to be the first violent film that Kitano made after *Hana-bi*; the intervening films – *Kikujiro* and *Dolls* – were non-violent. In *Brother*, Kitano seems to put yet greater emphasis on traditional values, this time embodied in yakuza codes. For instance, one of the Japanese yakuza who flies from Tokyo to Los Angeles to support Yamamoto (Kitano) sacrifices himself to help Yamamoto win over the local yakuza in little Tokyo. This film also features yakuza film clichés, including scenes of finger-cutting and *seppuku*. Although Kitano’s earlier films also involve yakuza and include a finger-cutting scene, they mock or adopt a sarcastic view of the conventions of the yakuza film. In this regard, his films have been regarded as an innovation within the genre, remote from conventional yakuza films. Kitano once clarified that he hates conventional yakuza films and attacks the romantic and un-realistic description of violence and yakuza in them (Stephens 2001a). Accordingly, if *Brother*, targeted at the American film market, appears to return to the conventions of Japanese yakuza films, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Kitano is shelving his aversion to make the film more approachable to western audiences, to whom the conventions of yakuza films are rather familiar.

Kitano thus deploys a self-Orientalising strategy to gain western attention, using stereotypical Japanese images and the conventions of Japanese films with which western viewers are familiar. He refers to traditional values, which, he acknowledges, are better received in the west than within Japan. Contrary to his rejection of films with the typical Asian look, he thus allows western film scholars to straightjacket his films within their narrow vision of Japanese cinema and otherness. Kitano thus consolidates his fame in the west while reconfirming western constructions of Japanese-ness as otherness and of Japanese cinema as other. At the same time, he attributes no essence to such Japanese-ness, nor does he claim that his films represent Japan as a cultural entity. I use the term ‘self-Orientalising strategy’ to describe Kitano’s involvement with western Orientalist expectations of Japanese culture and films.

In this chapter, I have concentrated on how western knowledge of Japanese film has been constructed through different approaches – ‘humanist’ and ‘formalist’ – and how these reaffirm the binary conception of the west and Japan and that of western cinema and Japanese cinema. I devoted one section to examining the premises of western knowledge of well-known Japanese directors such as Kurosawa Akira and Ozu Yasujiro. In light of the western discovery of Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* and the debates on Ozu’s unique filmic style, I explained how each is anchored in Orientalist premises. Western criticism and Richie’s analysis of *Rashomon* showed how the film is articulated on the basis of national character – Japanese-ness – and Japanese traditional culture. I also identified a pattern that may be called ‘detour through the west’ to illustrate the impact in Japan of *Rashomon*’s success in the west. In the section on debates about Ozu, I demonstrated how scholars like Bordwell appropriate Ozu’s filmic style as other to the dominant film language of classic Hollywood cinema. Kitano Takeshi is recognised as a contemporary Japanese auteur-director in the west. I analysed how his film *Hana-bi* is acknowledged within the western framework of knowledge of Japanese films and western Orientalist expectations. In the last section, I brought out how Kitano self-Orientalises in an attempt to satisfy western Orientalist expectations of Japanese films without asserting an absolute form of ‘Japanese-ness’.

In the next chapter, I focus on how Zhang Yimou’s films appeal to western Orientalism by self-Orientalising. The present chapter has primarily scrutinised western knowledge; the next deals with the power relationships between the west – in the shape of international film festivals and western criticism – and the Chinese government as these connect with Zhang’s self-Orientalising films.

## 5. Zhang Yimou in an 'in-between' zone

### 5.1. introduction

When Zhang Yimou's name came up, I mentioned the sharp division of opinion over his movies: all my American friends love Zhang's movies, all my Chinese friends hate them. Everybody at the dinner table was puzzled by this: Why? What offended the Chinese in these movies? Well, I told them, it could be all summed up in one thing: selling oriental exoticism to a Western audience. (Zha 1993: 329)

Zhang Yimou was one of the leading figures of the Fifth Generation filmmakers. His films such as *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) established the iconographic images of Chinese films in the west in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At the same time, his films provoked critical and academic discussion of western Orientalism and self-Orientalism. Zhang's films engendered patently different responses abroad and in China, as illustrated in the quotation above. While his films were criticised by Chinese critics for misrepresenting Chinese culture and serving western Orientalism, western commentators frequently believe them to convey 'Chinese' culture and 'Chinese-ness'.

In this chapter I discuss how Zhang Yimou's films and his career as a film director are entwined with western Orientalism and self-Orientalism. This chapter probes the 'in-between zone' in which the disparity between the domestic and western response to Zhang's films arises. To illuminate this zone, I refer as often to discussions by Chinese scholars and critics as to those of their western counterparts. Scrutinising these diverse vantage-points means delving into the critical conversations provoked by Zhang's films.

I first cast light on how western criticism constructs the films of the Fifth Generation as representative of Chinese cinema. The initial template for western recognition of Chinese films is limited, anchored in the Fifth Generation directors' oeuvres. Before turning to the

critical instances that Zhang's films evoke, I provide background context by investigating problems with the 'Fifth Generation' label and with the notion of 'Chinese-ness': the main conceptual tools western critics apply to the work of the Fifth Generation directors. Second, I analyse how Zhang's films are bound up with western Orientalism and employ self-Orientalism in relation to western film criticism and reviews. I examine how Zhang's films are discussed in terms of self-Orientalism and how this feature of his films appeals to Orientalism. Third, I draw attention to the power relationships that shape and control Zhang's films' travels to the west. While not supporting the authoritarian Chinese regime, I trace how western Orientalism identifies the west as political superior and China as politically and economically retarded. In the last section I extend the discussion of Zhang's self-Orientalism to the internal Orientalism in his later films such as *Not One Less*. If Zhang's films – whether earlier work such as *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, or later productions such as *Not One Less* – rely on Orientalist elements, this raises the question of why the earlier films are accused of 'catering to western Orientalism' while his later films are not. I attempt to resolve this question by investigating the position of Chinese audiences in 'cross-cultural' viewing situations.

This chapter mainly deals with Zhang's earlier films, *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*. I also include *Not One Less*, one of his later films, because it exhibits 'the specificities of Zhang's filmmaking' found in *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, despite being made in quite a different economic environment (Chow 2003).

## **5.2. the Fifth Generation: representing Chinese cinema in the west**

In this section I discuss how western critics recognise the Fifth Generation filmmakers. Few Chinese films were shown in the west until the mid-1980s. Other than a few early works such as Jay Leyda's *Dianying Electric Shadows: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China* (1972), English language books on Chinese film were few and far between. The number of such books began to increase at the same time as special retrospectives of Chinese films were organised in western countries, following efforts to

improve relations between China and the western world in the late 1970s (Meek and Rayns 1980). Yingjin Zhang comments that the development of western scholarship on Chinese cinema depends upon ‘the availability of Chinese films in the market’ (2002: 33). In other words, western scholarly works privilege the very limited range of Chinese films available in the west, centred on those Chinese directors whose names have become familiar through western film festival and art-house distribution networks.

In light of this, I bring out the problematic nature of the process by which western critics recognise Fifth Generation films as representative of Chinese cinema. I examine discussions of the label ‘Fifth Generation’, which designates an extremely limited range of directors and films. In connection with this, I draw attention to the problems that arise when Chinese cinema is identified with the films of the Fifth Generation directors.

When the Fifth Generation is mentioned in the international press, reference is typically made to three directors – Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou and Tian Zhuangzhuang.

Fifth Generation films tend to take place either in the countryside (Chen’s *Yellow Earth*, *King of the Children* and *Life on a String*; Tian’s *The Horse Thief*, *On the Hunting Ground*; Zhang’s *Red Sorghum*) or in enclosed, semi-abstract spaces (Chen’s *The Big Parade*; Zhang’s *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*; Tian’s *Li Lianying*). (Reynaud 1991: 17)

Here, ‘the Fifth Generation’ is employed to indicate a very limited number of directors. While films such as *Black Cannon Incident* (1985) by Huang Jianxin and *Army Nurse* (1985) by Hu Mei are often dealt with in English critical articles (Berry 1988; Kaplan 1991; Pickowicz 1994), they are rarely mentioned in western reviews and journalistic articles, which privilege Chen, Zhang and Tian. A film’s degree of exposure in the west and its availability on the western market tend to determine which directors ‘represent’ the Fifth Generation and Chinese films in the west. The films mentioned in the above quotation, for example, were exposed to the west through international film festivals and were made widely available as a result of co-production or distribution by foreign

companies. *Yellow Earth* was screened at the Hong Kong International Film Festival in 1985; Chen's *King of the Children* (1987) at Cannes in 1987; *Life on a String* (1991) was the product of international co-production and was distributed in the USA. Zhang's *Red Sorghum* was screened at the Berlin Film Festival in 1988 and won Zhang the Golden Bear prize; *Ju Dou* was funded by a Japanese company, screened at Cannes and distributed in the USA by Miramax; *Raise the Red Lantern* was funded by a Hong Kong company, won a prize at Venice and was distributed worldwide. Tian's *Li Lianying* (English title: *The Last Eunuch*, 1991) was screened at Berlin.

The Fifth Generation includes many other directors who may be less known internationally but are as well known as Chen, Zhang and Tian domestically. Xudong Zhang (1997) provides a list of Fifth Generation filmmakers including Wu Ziniu, Zhou Xiaowen, and Zhang Junzhao, director of *The One and Eight* (1984). Huang Jianxin, Zhang Zeming, Hu Mei, Li Shaohong, and Peng Xiaolian are also categorised as Fifth Generation (Rayns 1989a; 1991b). The term 'the Fifth Generation' derives from the name of the fifth class of the Beijing Film Academy. The Academy was closed during the Cultural Revolution and reopened in 1978; the fifth class entered the school in 1978 and graduated in 1982. Graduates from the Department of Directing comprise the majority of 'Fifth Generation' directors. *The One and Eight* (1984), in which Zhang Yimou was a cinematographer, is often mentioned as the 'breakthrough' Fifth Generation film (Rayns 1991b: 107). It was *Yellow Earth* (1984), however, directed by Chen Kaige with cinematography by Zhang Yimou, that signalled the emergence of a new generation of Chinese filmmakers outside China. Other early films from this group include Tian Zhuangzhuang's *On the Hunting Ground* (1985) and *Horse Thief* (1985), Huang Jianxian's *Black Cannon Incident*, Zhang Zeming's *Swan Song* (1985) and Hu Mei's *Army Nurse*, among others.

Not everyone is convinced that 'the Fifth Generation' is the best way of describing this group of directors and films that emerged in China during the 1980s (Rayns 1991c; X. Zhang 1997; Y. Zhang 2002). Yingjin Zhang believes that 'New Chinese Cinema' is a 'more accurate term' (2002: 22). Tony Rayns prefers the term 'Chinese New Wave'; he

includes 'New Wave' films from Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong under this rubric (1989a; 1991c). Some Chinese critics and scholars, though, are content with the term 'the Fifth Generation', viewing such classification on the basis of 'generation' merely as a handy convention (Ma 1993; Dai 2002). For Rayns, the term is a Chinese way of 'saying that [films] represent a "new wave"' (1989a: 16). Peter Hitchcock (1992) objects to the term 'new wave' to indicate the Chinese Fifth Generation, claiming that this immediately implies 'a European development in Chinese film' and involves 'a very 'Western' ideological position vis-à-vis Chinese culture'(1992: 118). On this view, terming a group of new films from China another 'new wave' reaffirms a Eurocentric pigeonholing of new cinematic movements. Hitchcock seems to prefer the Fifth Generation label. This term, however, appears to be arbitrary and inaccurate, adopted on the basis of limited information and insufficiently comprehensive to designate recent cinematic developments in China (Rayns 1991c; Zhang 2002).

Yingjin Zhang identifies three problems with the category 'Fifth Generation': the term leads to 'the inaccurate assumption that Fifth Generation films share a homogeneous style'; it tends to 'gloss over the marked differences in any director's work over time'; and it is near-impossible 'to fix precise dates for the Fifth Generation in Chinese film history' (2002: 23). These problems are particularly evident in the western labelling practice applied to the Fifth Generation directors' films.

As Rayns (1989a) indicates, the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 1985, when *Yellow Earth* was screened at the Hong Kong International Film Festival, has usually been regarded as the starting point of the Fifth Generation. It should in fact be referred to as the beginning of the western 'discovery' of Fifth Generation films: their emergence in China is ignored in the conventional view. As Rayns himself states,

There were enough non-Chinese present that evening to ensure that news of this 'breakthrough' film quickly reached festival directors and distributors in other countries. The torrid enthusiasm of the Hong Kong audience was

repeated when *Yellow Earth* had its western premiere at the Edinburgh and Locarno festivals four months later. (1989a: 2)

If 12 April 1985 can be thought of as the starting point of anything, it was the point when the Fifth Generation began to gain recognition outside China. Viewing this date as the starting point of the Fifth Generation itself implies that it came into being at the point when it stirred western attention. If this is the case, the Fifth Generation's destiny was shaped by the west. Although 'partial and limited', the western view of the Fifth Generation plays a key role in international film distribution and is influential in China. *Yellow Earth* gained attention from Chinese intellectuals when it returned to China after success at international film festivals (Ma 1993; Rayns 1991c).

According to Yingjin Zhang, the so-called Fifth Generation directors not only exhibit diverse styles but also dramatically shift from one set of themes and styles to another. Designating the end of the Fifth Generation era is thus a tricky business. Some scholars mark the year 1987, when Chen Kaige's *King of the Children* (1987) and Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* were made, as the end (X. Zhang 1997; Dai 2002). Xudong Zhang sees Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* as the beginning of the end of the Fifth Generation, claiming that the avant-garde spirit wanes in this film (1997: 315). Many Chinese scholars agree that Zhang's *Red Sorghum* marked a transition in Fifth Generation films (Zhu 2003). By contrast, western narratives appear confused about when the Fifth Generation era came to a close or ignore the issue. The Fifth Generation label is usually applied to the later works of Chen, Tian and Zhang (Francke 1995): 'His glorious second feature, the art-melodrama *Ju Dou*, may be the strongest Fifth Generation film so far' (Chute 1991: 65). Films such as Chen's *Farewell My Concubine*, Tian's *Blue Kite* and Zhang's *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* are mentioned as representative works of the Fifth Generation (Reynaud 1991).

Rather than identifying a clear end to the Fifth Generation, the western narration of Chinese cinema, preoccupied with the notion of generations, inevitably claims to have discovered a 'Sixth Generation'. As Chinese scholar Dai Jinhua (2002) remarks, Chinese

film circles as well as the international film scene were increasingly yearning for, and expecting, a new generation of directors to emerge.

The question constantly popping up at international film conferences that I attended was ‘Which generation is it now? The Seventh?’ When I responded, ‘Still the Fifth Generation’, they always greeted the news with disappointed expressions. Ever since the Fifth Generation appeared, expectations of the appearance of a Sixth Generation have been simmering in Chinese film circles. Obviously, since the Beijing Film Academy’s Department of Direction is the only national film academy, such an expectation was pinned on the next graduating class. (Dai 2002: 79)

Chinese directors like Zhang Yuan, Zhang Wen, Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye and Wang Xiaoshuai are typically recognised as the Sixth Generation (S.F. Said 2002; Cornelius 2002), which largely consists of directors who entered the Beijing Film Academy in 1985 and 1987. Yet, since no conscious and collective movement appears to have emerged, commentators seem first to have dreamt up the label ‘Sixth Generation’ then applied it to individual filmmakers. According to Dai, ‘the naming of the Sixth Generation preceded its praxis’; the Sixth Generation, in fact, ‘does not refer to a specific group of creators, aesthetics, or even a sequence of works’ (2002: 74). According to the standard definition, Sixth Generation filmmakers happened to make their first films, often illegally, in the early 1990s, films portraying ‘the hardships of urban living for disaffected youths and intellectuals’ (Cornelius 2002: 5). Their films tend to suffer harsh censorship – being cut, banned, withheld and smuggled out to be presented at western film festivals, winning ‘praise at festivals around the world’ (Corliss 2002). Rather than identifying characteristics supposedly common to these filmmakers, Dai highlights how young directors in the Beijing Film Academy ‘obviously internalized this attitude’ (i.e. the notion that a Sixth Generation was now bound to emerge), leading to the formation of a ‘generational consciousness’ (2002: 73-80).

The terms ‘Fifth Generation’ and ‘Sixth Generation’ thus seem closely linked to western acknowledgement and labelling practices applied to Chinese films; these labels centre western attention on the few directors whose names have risen to prominence through the international film festival network. This is clearly a partial representation of Chinese cinema. Within China, films of the Fifth Generation have been marginal to mainstream Chinese entertainment and propaganda. Most of them failed to achieve domestic box-office success and have remained unfamiliar to the Chinese public (Rayns 1991c). I am not suggesting that a national cinema should be represented by mainstream films rather than those at the cutting edge. It is however evident that western commentators tend to privilege art films circulated in the west over other Chinese films unavailable in the west. Western discussions of Chinese cinema make much of Fifth Generation films, while ignoring contemporary Chinese films little known in the west. The exclusive western focus on the Sixth Generation, the presumption that it represents Chinese cinema, is as flawed as the earlier preoccupation with the Fifth Generation. As the Chinese studio system and film market become more market-oriented, commercialised and transnational, western narratives of Chinese cinema neglect the diversity of emerging films and filmmakers (Xiao 1998; Hao 2000).

Western commentators often analyse films by the Fifth Generation directors – especially Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige – in relation to traditional Chinese aesthetics. Zhang’s *Ju Dou* is believed to employ the tradition of Chinese portraiture and ethnic paintings and crafts (Lau 1994). *Yellow Earth*, a collaboration between Chen and Zhang, is claimed to depart from ‘conventional’ Chinese film language by drawing on ‘classical Chinese aesthetics’ – particularly that of Chinese landscape painting (Berry and Farquhar 1994). These films are considered to represent ‘Chinese’ cinema, while their ‘Chinese-ness’ ensured by linking them with traditional aesthetics. To what extent can the employment of such aesthetics establish the ‘Chinese-ness’ of these films? To put this question in much broader terms, how should the ‘Chinese-ness’ of Chinese cinema be articulated?

How can the cinema – an institution developed entirely within the ideological framework of Western technology, capitalism, and consumer-oriented economy

– and in particular, its visual aspects, be ‘Sinicized?’ Can Western modes of cinematography, linked to the very mechanism of the camera through the dominant postmedieval perspective system, be replaced by modes which are linked to traditional Chinese aesthetics? (Wilerson 1994: 40)

Douglas Wilerson’s questions imply that cinema comprises ‘western and modern technology’, and that Chinese cinema thus has to ‘sinicize’ cinema to assert its ‘Chineseness’. ‘Sinicization’, moreover, appears to necessitate ‘being linked to traditional Chinese aesthetics’, not to Chinese modernity or to contemporary Chinese society. In a similar vein, Chinese filmmakers face the dilemma of ‘the Third World critic and the native artists’, who have to learn to use western technology to make films.

The nightmare of the Third World critic and the native artists is that there is no other way to express themselves than by resorting to Western theoretical discourse and Western artistic means. (Lu 1997b: 129)

Roy Armes remarks that third world filmmakers ‘straddle ... two cultures’ (1987: 229-230), combining indigenous culture with the western culture on which cinema, as a modern western technology, is based. The 19<sup>th</sup> century dictum, *zhong xue wei ti, xi xue wei yong* (中習爲體 西習爲用) – ‘Chinese learning for fundamental structure, Western learning for practical use’ (Chow 1995: 63) – captures China’s attempt to keep up with the west while asserting its own importance. From this perspective, the ‘sinicization or sinification’ of cinema as ‘an imported medium’ has been pursued as ‘one of the imperatives’ of the Chinese film industry (Zhang 1997: 363).

Crucially, whether it is mentioned by western scholars or in Chinese official rhetoric, the ‘sinicization of cinema’ replicates the dichotomy between China and the west. Orientalism works by distinguishing between the west and its others, these ‘others’ recognised only through essential differences from the west. If ‘mimesis’, for example, is the main feature of ‘Western writing’, Chinese writing comes to be characterised by ‘non-mimesis’ (Chow 2002b: 141-143). Likewise, amongst all Chinese films, the

distinctively 'Chinese' film is often conceived as most essentially different from western films.

When discussing visual systems, the tendency is to point to those films which have most successfully integrated the new technology with the style of visual art which appears to be most distinct from that of the West, and therefore most distinctively Chinese. (Wilson 1994: 41)

In this view, Chinese cinema is defined only in terms of 'essential ethnic difference' (Chow 2002b: 143). This overlooks the historical paradox that 'the sinification of cinema may be achieved by an internationalization of film in China' (Clark 1988: 175). Paul Clark emphasises that the young directors of the 1980s 'have had more exposure to a wider range of international cinemas' than their predecessors. With 'this awareness of international film styles' they could 'more thoroughly' experiment with 'indigenous styles' (1988: 183).

The Fifth Generation turns inwards to explore the cultural space suppressed under the Communist national narrative; this it does under the influence of western cinema and modernism. These directors learn filmmaking through 'modern world cinema' – 'Visconti, Bergman, Fellini, Antonioni, Truffaut, Godard, Fassbinder, Pasolini and Tarkovsky' (Zhang 1997: 227). It was in the 1980s that 'western' theories – film theory, philosophy, art, literature – were introduced to China 'in a radically synchronic, ahistorical pattern' (Zhang 1997: 383). Xudong Zhang claims that in this environment, the Fifth Generation directors 'appropriate the international cinematic experience as a natural component of their own experience, an integral moment of a temporal growth' (1997: 383). Whether they turn towards traditional Chinese aesthetics or western Orientalism, I believe that the work of the Fifth Generation filmmakers features the common film language of 'modern world cinema'.

It is also possible to interpret the themes in Zhang's films in relation to western theory. Yuejin Wang reads Zhang's *Red Sorghum* as a complete cinematic embodiment of 'the

Nietzschean celebration of the Dionysian spirit' and sees it as 'a cinematic carnival enacting almost every aspect of Bakhtin's scenario' (1991: 87-89). Wang's interpretation stands on concrete historical ground since the writings of Nietzsche appeared and became popular among Chinese intellectuals when Zhang was making this film. *Raise the Red Lantern* appears to bear theoretical affinities with Michel Foucault's articulation of 'punishment and surveillance' and the 'invisibility of power' (Delamoire 1998). Shelly Kracier (1997) speculates that Zhang's *Shanghai Triad* expresses Foucauldian insights into 'power' relationships.

The Fifth Generation stands out for its conscious efforts to innovate and depart from 'the Chinese film tradition' (Rayns 1991c). Rayns regards this tradition as a product of 'the marriage of 1940s Hollywood and Soviet socialist realism' attributing to it 'the literary and theatrical quality' and conventions of melodrama (Rayns 1991c). Chinese Communist Party doctrine has required films to educate and propagandise, leaving no room for artistic ambition or the filmmaker's individual views. The Fifth Generation was 'the first in the history of Chinese film' who 'presented filmmakers themselves as artists' and considered films 'as object of aesthetics' (Zhang 1997: 215-219). The cinematic experiment of the Fifth Generation is recognised as an attempt to 'modernise' a film language. The self-conscious and unusual framing of *Yellow Earth* results from Fifth Generation filmmakers' obsessive pursuit of a new and different film language through which to deliver a 'new vision of reality' (Ma 1993; Zhang 1997).

Chinese scholars and film critics regard the emergence of the Fifth Generation as expressing 'an undercurrent of modern Chinese thinking' in Deng Xiaoping's reformist New Era, which changed Chinese society significantly (Ma 1990: 64). Xudong Zhang claims that the Fifth Generation would have been inconceivable without 'the radically postrevolutionary everyday experience and its ideologies and imaginations' and 'a new visual reality' to which the films of the Fifth Generation respond (1997: 373). Scholars such as Paul G. Pickowicz (1994) and Chris Berry (1988) also view films such as Huang Jianxin's *Black Cannon Incident* as reflecting postsocialist Chinese society in the mid-1980s.

Fifth Generation films should not, therefore, be circulated as essentially 'Chinese' merely on the basis of presumed 'ethnic difference'. The 'Chinese-ness' of such films is most productively understood by examination of their imbrication with contemporary Chinese society, western influences and other Chinese films. While Zhang's *Red Sorghum*, for example, is known for its 'Chineseness' in the west, Chinese critics emphasise its 'overt use of the Hollywood technique of shot-reverse shot' and characterisation closely resembling that of Hollywood narrative films (Zhang 1997: 325).

Admittedly, some western scholars are aware of such problems and attempt to locate the influence of Chinese mainstream film on the Fifth Generation (Berry 1989; McGrath 2003). Compared with western scholarship on Japanese cinema, that on Chinese cinema appears more aware of the dangers involved in 'cross-cultural understanding' and of the importance of scrutinising Chinese history, culture and society (Berry 1989; Kaplan 1991). Berry criticises J.L. Anderson, Donald Richie and Noël Burch for appropriating Japanese films and inserting them into western discourses (1989: 87-88).

What is missing from these pieces on Japanese film is any consideration of what film means to the Japanese themselves, or to be more precise, what it means to various Japanese social groups and how it relates to their own various understandings of what Japan is. (1989: 88)

To avoid making this mistake, Berry suggests that we 'examine Chinese film criticism' to better understand 'the relation between the film made available to us by the Chinese authorities and Chinese cinematic output as a whole' (1989: 88). Although Chinese film criticism has rarely been translated into English, Chinese scholars and critics have contributed to English writings on Chinese films from the early 1980s. Rayns and Scott Meek's *Electric Shadows: 45 Years of Chinese Cinema* (1980) included two short articles by Sun Yun and Xia Yan. The first version of Berry's edited book, *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (1985) contains four articles by Chinese scholars about Mainland Chinese films. Another book, *Chinese Film: The State of the Art in the People's Republic* (1987), edited by George Stephen Semsel, also features two articles by Chinese scholars

Xia Hong and Ning Ma. Since then, numerous English articles by Chinese and Chinese diasporic scholars have appeared. From the mid-1990s, a growing number of books in English by Chinese scholars have been published, from Rey Chow's *Primitive Passions: Visualty, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (1995) and Xudong Zhang's *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema* (1997) to Ying Zhu's *Chinese Cinema During the Era of Reform: the Ingenuity of the System* (2003) and Shuqin Cui's *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (2003). As Chow's book exemplifies, these trends have enabled western, Chinese and Chinese diasporic scholars to engage in critical conversations featuring a variety of contradictory and competing perspectives. Chow (1995) for instance argues against Chinese film critics who assail Zhang's films as superficial. Yingjin Zhang, in turn, draws attention to the limited number of films Chow analyses, claiming that, by focusing on the few Fifth Generation films circulating in the west, Chow over-generalises, disregarding the 'diversity and complexity' of contemporary Chinese cinema (2002a: 111-112). The following discussion refers to these conflicting critical standpoints.

Yet these attempts to broaden the discussion of Chinese cinema fail to transform the underlying premises of most western film reviews. It may be inevitable that a limited number of films represent a national cinema abroad, but critics and reviewers, along with scholars, need to pay attention to the social and cultural context in which a group of films emerge and construct specific meanings. They would also do well to scrutinise the relationship between a group of films and their mainstream counterparts. Some western commentators not only tend to ignore non-Fifth Generation mainstream films, they appear equally oblivious to how Fifth Generation productions are related to and consciously depart from the mainstream. Some commentators in the west thus adopt a limited, partial approach, labelling only a few directors and films as Fifth Generation: the multifaceted nature of the Fifth Generation is neglected, as is that of mainstream Chinese films.

### 5.3. no authentic China? How Orientalism and self-Orientalism meet in Zhang's films

Zhang's and Chen's films appear to have constituted the initial referential frames and stereotypical images of Chinese cinema in the west: 'No film had a more startling effect in the west than Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern*' (Malcolm 2000). On the other hand, within China, Fifth Generation films have been suspected of being 'un-Chinese', appealing to 'foreigners' rather than Chinese audiences (Rayns 1991c: 111). While not all Fifth Generation films are viewed in this way, Zhang's and Chen's 1990s films – *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Farewell My Concubine*, in particular – were criticised for selling exotic images of China to the west (Zhu 2003). In this section, I discuss how Zhang's films attract and fit with western Orientalism and how this phenomenon is related to self-Orientalism. By taking both western and Chinese discussions into account, I root my argument on Orientalism and self-Orientalism in Zhang's films in the critical spheres from which conversations between China and the west are initiated and on-going. The key films dealt with in this section are Zhang's early films *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern* and one later film, *Not One Less*. Western scholars often identify these films with their 'Chinese-ness'; their circulation in the west emphasises this supposed quality. I bring out how this alleged 'Chinese-ness' is constructed through the interaction of Orientalism and self-Orientalism.

Before proceeding further, it is helpful to clarify the differences between these films. *Red Sorghum*, Zhang's directorial debut, must be considered separately from *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, especially in discussions of self-Orientalism. Unlike the other two films, *Red Sorghum* was produced at the Xi'an Film Studio, with no foreign investment involved. It was distributed worldwide after winning the Golden Bear Prize at Berlin. When shown in China, it enjoyed box office success (Berry 1991). The success of *Red Sorghum* appears to have laid down a new path for other Fifth Generation directors to follow, after their films flopped at the box office in China despite critical acclaim (Berry 1991). Despite its popularity, *Red Sorghum* provoked 'huge controversy' among its supporters, the China Film Bureau and 'outraged audiences' (Lau 1991: 2). *Ju Dou* and

*Raise the Red Lantern* were co-produced by foreign companies; from the beginning, distribution outside China was considered. Since the Chinese government banned these films, Chinese audiences and critics got no chance to see them. Meanwhile, in the frozen political climate after the Tiananmen Square Massacre, the regime's suppression of the films won them western enthusiasm and critical acclaim. Critics attacking Zhang focus on these two films (Dai 1993; Zhang 2002). In particular, Tonglin Lu argues that 'the Zhang Yimou Model' – a cinematic strategy that 'reifies the fantasized difference' between the west and China – reaches maturity in *Raise the Red Lantern* (Lu 2002: 170). *Red Sorghum* also features many elements that can be seen as Orientalist. Yet it is often claimed to touch upon key contemporary social issues of China (Wang 1991). I therefore discuss *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* separately from *Red Sorghum*.

Criticisms of Zhang's early films – particularly *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* – tend to claim that they 'misrepresent the "real" China in their desire to cater to the West's taste for an exotic other' (Lu 1997b: 128). Many scholars and critics agree that, at the time, winning awards at prestigious international film festivals was almost the only way for Fifth Generation filmmakers to continue making films (Dai 2002; Lu 1997b; Rayns 1992). By winning awards, they aimed to secure foreign investment and co-production as a means of survival. According to Dai, the Fifth Generation filmmakers thus avoided following 'the commercial tide' within the Chinese film industry, but 'fell into a different trap' (2002: 50). Dai states that 'the representation of an Orient that was palatable and intelligible for Western viewers' became essential to their filmmaking (2002: 50). Dai underlines how these films became ensnared with western Orientalism, which necessitates 'putting on display the spectacle of an imagined preindustrial China' (2002: 51).

Most criticisms of Zhang's films express similar views. Yet they emphasise different aspects in elaborating how Zhang's films serve western Orientalism. One of the central issues, frequently mentioned in such criticisms, is cultural misrepresentation. Zhang is accused of presenting historically and culturally 'fake' customs such as 'hanging red lanterns' (Q. Dai 1993). Second, along with other films of the Fifth Generation, his films

are accused of ‘exhibiting the ugly, dark, backward sides of China’s past on screen’ (Lu 1997b: 129). The most powerful critic was the Chinese government, which seemed offended by western enthusiasm for *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, both produced after the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. It banned both films. Such criticism is directed at the film’s depiction of poverty and repression of women within the patriarchal order. Third, his films are claimed to offer ‘exotic’ China to western viewers. This issue of ‘exoticisation’ is associated with the first two issues mentioned above. Here, I use the term more particularly to mean depiction of a remote landscape, visually gripping settings and customs and women’s suffering. Lastly, some Chinese critics were unhappy that Zhang’s films adopted a strong Hollywood-style narrative. In this view, his films were suspected of losing ‘the avant-garde spirit of the Fifth Generation’ (Zhang 1997) or of undermining the ‘cultural identity of Chinese cinema’ (Zhu 2003). In this section, I focus on ‘misrepresentation’ and ‘exoticisation’ to develop my discussion of Orientalism and self-Orientalism in Zhang’s films. The second criticism, centred on the portrayal of the backwardness of Chinese society, is dealt with in the next section.

Mark Freeman (2002) summarises the appeal of Zhang’s films to the west as follows.

... the cinema of fellow graduate Zhang Yimou, offers a striking, exotic China, a highly ritualised, mythologised but ultimately supremely accessible China to the West. His films dwell on the practice of unusual customs, rural life in feudal villages, the industry and musicality of the country presented with a deep, lush cinematography, rich in colour and tone. . . . His films, such as *Raise the Red Lantern* explore China in an intimate, magnified manner, commenting on feudal culture, Chinese history, dramatising untold stories and fables of the peasantry. (2002)

While they appeal to western audiences with distinctive ‘Chinese-ness’, these productions carefully arrange and even invent ‘the practice of unusual customs, rural life in feudal villages, the industry and musicality of the country’ to generate a particular visual image (Chow 1995; Kong 1996/1997; Rayns 1991b). As Rayns acutely points out, the cinematic

vision of the past in *Red Sorghum* is ‘not what it was but what it should have been’ (1989b: 80). The film does not represent an authentic Chinese culture of the past, but an imaginary cinematic world anchored in a ‘folk myth’ retold by Mo Yan, whose short stories the film is based on (Rayns 1989b; Wang 1991). Also in *Red Sorghum*, ‘the carnivalesque jolting of the marriage sedan, the ceremonial worship of the wine god’ and the winery are ‘fake customs’ (Freeman 2000). The dye-mill – the main set in *Ju Dou* – does not appear in the novel of Liu Hong on which the film is based (Chow 1995). Most significantly, the dye-mill bears no relation to the authentic Chinese dye-mills of the 1920s that appeared in the novel; Zhang designed it to attain the best cinematic and visual effects (Chow 1995). In *Raise the Red Lantern*, the lanterns are of key symbolic significance and dominate the film visually. Zhang invented them; the original novel by Su Tong makes no mention of them. Foot massage, a crucial ceremony repeatedly performed in the film, is entirely absent from Chinese culture (Dai 1993). Zhang’s inventions appear to have offended viewers possessing ‘basic knowledge about Chinese society and culture acquired in a lifetime of living in that society’ (Dai 1993: 334). The cinematic employment of ‘fake customs and settings’ is likely one of the main factors provoking criticisms of misrepresentation.

Zhang’s attitude to what he calls ‘packaging’ traditional culture is rather pragmatic. As Xudong Zhang describes,

Instead of evoking a national stock of images, customs, and modes of behaviors, Zhang tears it apart, reducing it to a warehouse of ready-to-use costumes and serving the contingent effectiveness of presenting a dreamworld and ensuring its marketability. (1997: 314)

By packaging culture, Zhang succeeds in ‘presenting a dreamworld’. As Wang (1991) suggests, Zhang’s *Red Sorghum* for example provides Chinese viewers with what they unconsciously desire, creating a mythic setting imbued with fake exotic customs. The trouble starts when these films cross borders and reach the west. They inevitably become embroiled with ‘the economics that enable the distribution and circulation of these films

in the West' (Chow 1995: 58). Chow argues that Zhang's cultural packaging becomes 'a subalternized commodification and/or a commodified subalternization' (Chow 1995: 58). When these 'fake' rituals and customs are presented in Zhang's films, their detailed cinematic realisation helps convey a 'collective hallucinatory signification of "ethnicity"' (Chow 2002b: 144). Their presence on the screen signifies, as Chow puts it, 'I am an ethnic detail; I am feudal China' (1995: 145). While western viewers 'want *from* China a film *about* China' (Larson 1997: 332; original emphasis), this invented China is received and circulated as *the* authentic China in the west: 'The Western world unquestionably embraces them [Zhang's films] as a cinematic representation of Chinese culture which presents a recognizable cultural identity' (Wang 1989: 36).

Zhang's films enter the western market portraying an invented and highly visualised China; western Orientalism rapidly absorbs these films into its discursive sphere. The marketing strategy promoting *Raise the Red Lantern* invokes and appeals to western Orientalism: Era International, which produced *Raise the Red Lantern*, focused on Zhang's 'use of color' and 'objects that could be taken as representative of a Westerner's perception of "exotic" China' – the red lantern (Havis 1995:62). This company discovered that the story of *Raise the Red Lantern* could play upon 'the Western vision of what China is like, both sexually and visually' (Havis 1995:62). Having identified these exotic elements, it made full use of them to promote the film in the west.

This marketing of Zhang's films is problematic in that it may confine western understandings of his films to a limited Orientalism. This exotic and highly visualised China may be wrongly perceived as 'real' and 'authentic'. It thus re-consolidates the 'otherness of China'. In *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, China is again constructed as the 'other' featuring absolute cultural differences and existing in the western past, in this case the feudal era. The dye-mill, *Ju Dou*'s cinematic space, designed to facilitate experimentation with colour as part of the film's visual language (Chow 1995; Kong 1996/1997), is now perceived as authentically Chinese: 'the "third world" is given an identity as a pure other space with distinctive "otherworldly aesthetics"' (Chow 1995: 59).

Whether or not Zhang consciously constructs this seductive Orientalism in his films, it is undeniable that such otherness – alleged Chinese-ness – is produced through China's relationship and cultural exchange with the west. Chow claims that 'the graphic aspect of *Ju Dou*' was inevitably dishonest, because 'the "ethnicity" of contemporary Chinese cinema – "Chineseness"' has already been produced through Sino-western cross-cultural relations (1995: 58-60). For Chow, the Chinese-ness presented in Fifth Generation films is 'already the sign of a cross-cultural commodity fetishism' (1995: 59). That is, this Chinese-ness is not given *a priori* but always exists in relation to the west. Chow refers to modern and contemporary Chinese history: threatened by western imperialism, Chinese nationalism has asserted a pure and essential 'Chinese-ness'. According to her, 'the notion that "China" is first and original is already a response to the exchange with the West' (1995: 64). It is 'a claim that is made after the onslaught of the West has become irreversible' (1995: 64). Accordingly, this 'Chinese-ness' has always been contaminated by the western gaze; it reflects the problematic relations between China and the west. Michelle Yeh underlines that 'China has sought to define and assert itself always against the West' and that Chinese nationalism historically derives from 'China's traumatic encounters with the West and the resultant identity crisis' (2000: 268). The historical fact that 'Chinese culture has always assimilated foreign elements and Western culture was introduced to China long before the nineteenth century' is often disregarded: China is reified vis-à-vis the west.

Chow points out that Orientalism is enmeshed with Zhang's and the Fifth Generation filmmakers' 'self-reflexive and self-analytical perspective'. In an effort 'to see China anew', the Fifth Generation directors go to a remote area and find 'the "authentic" ways China was and is' (Chow 1995: 43). They become 'their culture's anthropologists and ethnographers' (Chow 1995: 38). As they turn the anthropological gaze towards the past, a remote landscape, and the marginal cultures of minority groups, they enter 'the space of "autoethnography"' (Chow 1995: 38). Drawing upon the scholarship of Mary Louise Pratt, Chow argues that Fifth Generation films constitute autoethnography by Orientals who have themselves been objectified and represented by the western gaze; they now adopt this Orientalist gaze to represent their own culture through a modern technological

medium – cinema. In this autoethnographic space, they employ ‘the colonizers’ own terms’ to represent their culture, fetishizing the otherness of China. In search of the roots of Chinese culture, they end up constructing ‘an authentic Other’ (Donald 1995: 327). As autoethnography, Zhang’s films constitute a sphere in which self-Orientalism lures Orientalist attention and Orientalism cooperates with self-Orientalism to doubly otherise ‘the primitives’.

The Fifth Generation directors project ‘primitive passions’ onto nature and ritual and view women and ethnic minorities as ‘primitives’ who stand for and consolidate the national/cultural essence of China (Chow 1995; Lu 1997b; Ma 1990). Chow explains that in *Yellow Earth*, for example, nature becomes the filmic and symbolic site through which Chen Kaige can instigate ‘ways of reconceptualizing the Chinese culture’ (1995: 39). Chow argues that Zhang presents a woman as a ‘pragmatic’ and visible ‘primitive’ to display Chinese culture (1995: 47). She explains ‘primitive passions’ as follows.

... primitive passions emerge not simply because of the love of what is past or old; they are not simply feelings of nostalgia. Rather, they involve a coeval, co-temporal structure of representation at moments of cultural crisis. Because, as I explained, the makeup of the film image is such that its transcriptive, reflective function is inseparable from its projective, futuristic technicality, the crisis-laden, ambivalent time of primitive passions finds in the filmic image its most pertinent material articulation. If the repeated filmic invocation of nature, together with the many ‘primitive’ customs, rituals, and practices of local regions in Chinese cinema, may be thought of in terms of a ‘process of formalization and ritualization’ that E. J. Hobsbawm calls ‘the invention of tradition’, then film, too, must be included among the continual attempts to (re)invent ‘China’ in the twentieth century. (1995: 42)

Zhang’s films are notable not only for the Orientalist fetishization of women but also for inscribing national wounds into women’s bodies. As discussed earlier, the Chinese woman is portrayed as ‘primitive’ in the ‘new’ cinematic exploration, an expression of

‘the ongoing Chinese intellectual attempt to rejuvenate itself into modernity and [forge a] link to the high modernism of the West’ (Zheng 1997: 351). In films such as *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, a woman’s suffering is used to critique Chinese culture based on feudalism. A woman’s body functions as a visible site ‘to localize China’s “barbaric” cultural institutions, from which she seeks to be set free’ (Chow 1995: 47). Zhang states:

What I want to express is the Chinese people’s oppression and confinement, which has been going on for thousands of years. Women express this more clearly on their bodies because they bear a heavier burden than men. (Zhang quoted in Yang 1993: 300)

Zhang Yimou confronts historical burdens by projecting them onto women: women’s bodies are again usurped as the essential locus on which a male director can enunciate criticism of his own culture. Dai claims that, faced with ‘rapid social changes’, male writers and filmmakers project ‘their personal crises and social angst onto the female roles’ not unlike 1930s Chinese urban literature (2002: 132). Women and their bodies are reified to convey national, social or male anxieties as metaphors or symbols. Jerone Silbergeld asserts that any western or Chinese feminist reading of Zhang’s films is misleading, since female gender is used only as an allegory of the nation or of Chinese culture in Zhang’s films, in keeping with its role in traditional Chinese aesthetics (1999: 132-187).

And yet, addressing the general through the particular, through the exemplary, through the analogue, is not so much male as it is Chinese, and any Chinese rhetorician would be left to wonder, with gender effectively used to draw a more general truth that embraces gender along with various other imaginable particulars, why would one prefer to deal with gender ‘for its own sake’? Why deal ‘just’ with it? (Silbergeld 1999: 148-149)

This comment betrays a cultural essentialism that explains every feature of a cultural artefact through a single, ahistorical, unified logic. Silbergeld closes off any possibility that Zhang's films – a Chinese cultural product – may not follow *the* traditional convention of Chinese literature and may be comprehensible from different angles. While essentialising Chinese aesthetics, moreover, Silbergeld leaves no room for consideration that using women as a means of rhetoric – 'the particular', 'the exemplary', 'the analogue' – may silence women. Silbergeld's dismissal of a feminist approach to Zhang's films resonates with what E. Ann Kaplan pinpoints as Chinese critics' negative response to foreigners' readings of Chinese films: 'This is not the Chinese way of thinking' (1991: 142).

Chow (1991) calls into question western feminists' frequent assumption that gender can be applied as a universal critical tool for grasping any historical or cultural instance. Equally, however, she suggests that we discard 'modes of description and criticism' that are 'articulated on the presumed certainty of what *is* "Chinese"' and that use 'the notion "Chinese" as a way to legitimize the authority of tradition and thus exclude the fundamental instability of any ethnic category' (1991: 89; original emphasis). For Chow, the historicity and instability of gender as an analytical category should always be taken into account. Equally, scholars must attend to the historicity and instability of the ethnic category 'Chinese'. Modes of criticism which assert "'This is Chinese" and "This is not Chinese"' (1991: 89) hinder appreciation of the diversity of Chinese culture, of how it has changed and continues to change, by persistently evoking it through a single archetypal ideal rooted in the past.

Zhang's films assuredly feature filmic moments that invite feminist readings. In *Red Sorghum*, for instance, Wang sees 'the woman working herself into an ecstatic state through the agency of the structure of shot-reverse shot editing' (1991: 94-96). Wang considers such cinematic moments highly subversive, working 'against the deeply ingrained myth of female passivity' in Chinese cinema (Wang 1991: 94-96). Generally, *Ju Dou* is read as a 'feminist' film; Richard Corliss (1991) asserts that *Ju Dou*, the main character, moves 'from shame to rebellion to cool majesty'; Caryn James (1990) believes

that the film is about ‘the oppression of women and passion challenging tradition’; Lawrence Chua (1991) states that *Ju Dou* portrays ‘a woman struggling for control of her own body against a vicious feudal order based on the power of the extended family’ (quoted in Callahan 1993: 56). *Raise the Red Lantern* has also inspired a number of critical readings centred on female oppression under the patriarchy (Delamoir 1998; Fong 1995; Lee 1996 etc.).

*Ju Dou* also contains an intriguing visual moment. While Tianqing – the adopted son of Ju Dou’s husband and thus Ju Dou’s stepson – is peeping at her through the hole, Ju Dou, aware that he is watching her, turns around to reveal her naked body. As Jenny Kwok Wah Lau suggests, this may not be ‘a simple act of narcissism’ (1991: 3).

Indeed, her tired, dirty, and bruised body, together with the melancholy accompanying music, offers no ‘visual pleasure’ for Tianqing or the film audience. Ju Dou’s turning around represents a decisive move against the gerontocratic and patriarchal rule that operates against her. And I propose that it is her implicit attack on this rule that has aroused the Chinese authorities’ antagonism and the Chinese audience’s unease. (Lau 1991: 3)

In this regard, Ju Dou’s turning can be viewed as a struggle for empowerment or a woman’s defiance of traditional Confucian mores. Viewing this cinematic moment through the lens of ‘western feminist film criticism’, Ju Dou takes ‘control of the representation of her body’ and becomes a subject ‘seeking to possess the vision’ instead of an object of the male voyeuristic gaze (Callahan 1993; Cui 1997: 310-311). Reversing the male gaze, Ju Dou overturns the power relationship inscribed in women’s bodies and in the voyeuristic gaze of cinematic experience. According to Chow, at the moment when Orientals exhibit themselves in this way, they turn the western Orientalist gaze back upon western viewers, drawing attention to their ‘gazed upon’ status. Chow argues that,

This exhibitionism – what we may call the Oriental’s orientalism – does not make its critique moralistically or resentfully. Instead, it turns the remnants of

orientalism into elements of a new ethnography. Like a Judou turning around, citing herself as fetishized woman and displaying to her voyeur the scars and wounds she bears, this ethnography accepts the historical fact of orientalism and performs a critique of it by staging and parodying orientalism's politics of visibility. In its self-subalternizing, self-exoticizing visual gestures, the Oriental's orientalism is first and foremost a demonstration – the display of a tactic. (1995: 171)

Briefly, Chow claims that in order to enter the metropolis, Zhang's films must fit western expectations, evoking an exotic China of the past or China as a third world country. Yet the exhibitionism in his films simultaneously criticises western Orientalism by returning the very gaze of western Orientalism to the west, as Ju Dou does by turning.

Against this view, Zheng Yi points out that the moment of Ju Dou's 'primacy of to-be-looked-at-ness' does not last long enough to transcend 'Zhang's filmic narrative of the all-consuming destructive forces of the "old" Chinese tradition' (1997: 352-354). Ultimately, Ju Dou's 'defiance' and suffering are bounded by Zhang's narrative manipulation. The ephemeral moment of her defiance, embedded in the power of visibility, is subject to the film's narrative as a whole, which nullifies her struggles and eventually ends her life in a tragic manner. Ju Dou's body and her power to control her own life are usurped to provide the very locus for 'masculinist cultural critics/filmmakers' to enunciate cultural criticism on their own culture. The critique of Orientalism performed by Ju Dou's turning seems, equally, subjugated to Orientalism: the film sets out to attract western Orientalism and to 'enter the metropolis' by 'performing its critique' within Orientalism, not transcending it.

Tonglin Lu suggests that in Zhang's films 'the oppressed Chinese woman' becomes 'the object of a (Western) male gaze' (2002: 168). According to Lu, as it is 'turned into commodified images in a global market', women's oppression no longer speaks to Chinese audiences, but 'has become the symbol of China's Otherness' in the west (2002: 168). Lu maintains that such portrayal of oppressed women for exoticising ends reaches

its peak in *Raise the Red Lantern* which, she contends, completes and crystallizes the 'Zhang Yimou model' (2002: 166). Since commentators can attribute woman's oppression to cultural difference, as Silbergeld does, such oppression 'becomes exotic' and can be aesthetically appreciated (Lu 2002: 168). As western viewers recognise the beauty of oppressed women as 'the otherness' of another culture, they can appreciate it 'without emotional involvement or identification' (2002: 168). Lu contends that 'oppression itself almost has a decorative dimension in relation to female beauty' (2002: 168). This may explain why in Zhang's films, 'the more a woman is oppressed, the more beautiful she looks' (2002: 168). Oppressed beautiful 'third world women' function as 'the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse' (Mohanty 1991: 53). Echoing this, Shuqin Cui emphasises that the 'socially repressed yet sexually seductive' female image in Zhang's films engages with 'a sense of colonial imagination – sympathy for the poor Oriental woman in need' (2003: 113). In this process, the oppressed beautiful Chinese woman consolidates the 'fantasized difference' between China and the west (Lu 2002: 170). In Lu's view, otherness as 'fantasized difference' is 'the foundation of cultural hierarchy' between China and the west. Zhang's films reinforce a western Orientalism that asserts the otherness of China and thus reconsolidate a cultural hierarchy that is, in fact, groundless and already severely undermined and threatened by 'the proximity of the two worlds' (Lu 2002: 170).

Zhang thus turns the Orientalist gaze towards Chinese culture; the primitive passions which occupy a focal point of his cinematic visuality seem to be inherently involved with Orientalism. Self-Orientalism captures women and cultural rituals as 'primitives' through whom the (new) national identity and culture can be asserted, reflected, criticised and consolidated. Chinese films such as Zhang's travel to the west featuring the face of the Chinese woman as 'the primitive': These 'primitive others' signify 'Chinese-ness' as otherness. While Zhang's films have travelled successfully to the west with the help of Orientalism, they may have contributed to a vital transformation of film language (Orr 1998: 94). I agree with Chow that

... the ‘original’ that is film, the canonically Western medium, becomes destabilized and permanently infected with the unforgettable ‘ethnic’ images imprinted on it by the Chinese translators. (1995: 202)

Such travel, however, comes at a price. Chinese-ness – otherness as difference – takes a highly constrained form: Chinese cinema is required to remain as ‘the native’, bearing essential ethnic difference. In this process, ‘the primitives’ – women, landscape, rituals – are ‘doubly otherised’ by Zhang’s self-Orientalism and by western Orientalism, which assimilates Zhang’s films into its unitary conception of ‘Chinese-ness’.

#### **5.4. Zhang between the west and the Chinese government**

Caught between two modes of ideological signification — the West and the Chinese — contemporary Chinese films are situated in an awkward in-between zone of global/local interaction . . . (B. Zhang 1998)

Zhang Yimou’s career and his films can be seen as the epitome of such ‘an awkward in-between zone’ of global/local interaction. While films such as *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* were well received in the west, Chinese commentators accused them of selling an exoticised China to the west. When Zhang attempted to appeal to domestic audiences with films such as *Keep Cool* (1997), these achieved scant critical or commercial success in the west. When the Chinese government banned domestic release of his films and prevented Zhang from participating in international film festivals, Zhang and his films received huge attention at western international film festivals.

In this ‘in-between zone’, Zhang’s films seem to be caught between Chinese cultural nationalism and western Orientalism. The point here is not how Zhang’s films evoke western exoticism about China. Another, relatively neglected, dimension of Orientalism is vital to understanding the characteristics of this in-between zone — a dimension related to international politics. Western commentators often seize upon films from non-western

countries with more or less authoritarian governments and understand them solely through political reductionism and geo-political realism. The more hot water a film gets into with its domestic government, the more celebrated it tends to be abroad. Western films are sometimes subject to such dynamics, but western responses to 'Third World' films influence their directors' filmmaking to a far greater degree.

Western commentators read Zhang's films as geo-political allegory or critique of the Chinese government, reinforcing the western notions of China as a Third World country stricken with 'poverty' and bedevilled by an authoritarian regime. The more Zhang's films are subject to censorship and the intervention of the Chinese government, the more they gain attention; this is 'reflected' in their circulation in the west. To continue making films and have them shown inside and outside China Zhang largely has to yield to Chinese censorship.

Economic factors, particularly the domestic film market and film industry, also affect the reception of Zhang's films (Zhu 2003). Zhang has never been indifferent to commercial success in China or on the international art-house market. His first film, *Red Sorghum*, was the first Fifth Generation film to break through to the mainstream and achieve box office success (Berry 1991). Immediately after this success, Zhang was confronted with a rapidly changing filmmaking environment in China. In the 1990s, the Chinese film industry entered a state of transitional crisis with the removal of state subsidy and a sharply declining domestic market.

... given the shrinking domestic film market, the system of film censorship, and the changes in China's film industry, what is termed 'Orientalism', or the exit to the global cultural market, is also a strategy of survival and renewal for Chinese filmmakers. (Lu 1997b: 132)

In these circumstances, the western market was the only one open to Zhang if he wished to access foreign capital. According to Sheldon Lu, this predicament has generated 'stylistic and thematic changes in [Zhang's] film art' (Lu 1997a: 11). Zhang's films – *Ju*

*Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* – were released in China after he submitted to censorship. Like in *The Story of Qiu Ju*, Zhang attempted to repeat his domestic box office success by changing themes and style.

Bearing these points in mind, in the following I explore the in-between zone in which Zhang and his films seem to be located. I first look at the context in which Chinese censorship and the authoritarian, nationalist regime react to western Orientalist responses to Zhang's films. I outline the conflicts between the regime and western film festivals and analyse western responses to such events and to Zhang's films.

Chow uses the phrase 'between two colonisers' to describe the cultural dilemma that Hong Kong, a postcolonial city, faces after handover to China (1998). According to her, Hong Kong's westernised culture has now fallen under the scrutinising gaze of the nativist regime. Zhang's film career seems to resonate exactly with such a predicament. Zhang seems to be trapped in 'the double gaze of the Chinese security state and the world's, especially the West's orientalism' (Chow 1998: 168). What has often been ignored is that while his films were formulated to satisfy western Orientalism, the censoring gaze of the nationalist government has moulded this Orientalist reception of Zhang's films in the west.

In her critique of Chinese nationalism, Chow (2000; 2002b) underlines the historical fact that China's construction of its culture, society and history as a nation was always embroiled in western Orientalism and colonialism. Chow explains that a 'historically conditioned paranoid reaction to the West' rendered Chinese nationalism obsessed with a rigid and pure Chinese-ness (2000: 5). According to her, this obsession resulted in a narcissistic fantasy that 'everything Chinese' is better than anything from the west: such obsession with 'Chineseness' – sinocentrism – is anchored in 'past victimization under Western imperialism and the need for national "self-strengthening"' (2000: 5). Chow emphasises that this preoccupation with China's 'victimization' by the west persists in contemporary China. Chinese nationalism took shape as a response to western imperialism and always defined China as the victim of the west.

Chinese censorship may share these basic premises of Chinese nationalism. In the era of western imperialism, western cinematic representations of China were mostly negative. Zhiwei Xiao (1997) shows that in the 1920s, when film censorship was imposed for the first time in China by the KMT (Kuomintang) nationalist government, a number of foreign films imported to China at the time contained appalling depictions of China and Chinese people. The introduction of censorship was thus due to ‘nationalistic resentment toward negative portrayals of China and the Chinese people’ (Xiao 1997: 41). Censorship primarily aimed to make sure ‘no films offensive to China and Chinese people’s dignity’ were shown in China (Xiao 1997: 37).

Western representations of China have changed little. Chow demonstrates that contemporary China is still represented as the primitive other in the western media.

... even as the history of humiliation that officially began with the treaty of Nanking (signed as the result of the First Opium War, which led to the ceding of Hong Kong Island to Britain in 1842) formally closed on 1 July 1997 – without violence or bloodshed – the media in the West, led by Britain and United States, continued their well-worn practice of broadcasting all news about China as crisis, picking on the smallest details in a militant goading-on of so called democracy in order to demonize China and thus affirm Western moral supremacy. (Chow 2002b: 136)

In this regard, Chinese film censorship, which has been so harsh on the Fifth and Sixth Generation, reflects the historical and contemporary political relationship between China and the west. As China is endlessly represented as a politically, economically and culturally backward society in the west, films representing China exactly as the west wants to see it may be the last thing the Chinese government wants to allow.

I do not however believe that the censorship of Fifth and Sixth Generation films was justified or reasonable. Rather, I want to bring out how seemingly over-sensitive and irrational Chinese censorship may be a product of the evolving Chinese nationalist

response to western Orientalism. In some degree, Chinese nationalism is a reaction both to western Orientalism and to a sense of political insecurity generated by political pressure from the west. State censorship is one of its key manifestations. To borrow Chow's phrase on Chinese nationalism, in a 'paranoid reaction to the west', Chinese censorship forms its views as a response to western Orientalism and takes part in it. Such censorship certainly limits the creative freedom of directors. As another coloniser, it imposes nationalist sentiments of victimisation on directors' minds, making them conscious of western eyes as well as those of the censors.

Zhang commented 'Every director in China has a kind of censor inside his mind: even those independent film-makers who claim they only tell the stories they want to tell. If you are to live and work in China, automatically you have that self-censorship, even before you choose a subject or write a script'. (Zhang quoted in Klindo 2000)

As Chinese censorship inflicts itself on directors' minds, it also seems to insert the views embedded in such censorship into the minds of western critics. In an effort to understand why a specific film causes such controversy with the Chinese government, such critics interpret and examine only the political implications of Zhang's films. In other words, Zhang's films tend to be understood and examined through 'the eyes of the Chinese censors', which become the eyes of western critics. Zhang's films are thus understood merely as political allegory. Chinese censors thus reinforce western views of China as a primitive other that the west must enlighten and teach a more civilised form of modern politics – democracy.

The Chinese government recognised that Fifth Generation films 'could be read as a criticism of the failure of the Chinese Communist party' after the critical success of *Yellow Earth* at The Hong Kong International Film Festival in 1985 (Ma 1990). Zhang's *Red Sorghum* seemed not to arouse the censors' ire regarding political matters, although it caused some sexual controversy (Lau 1991). Even with no intervention from censors, some Chinese assailed *Red Sorghum* for exposing 'the backward side of Chinese culture'

(Zhang 1989: 43). This critical response shows that, because many Chinese have tended to balk at all criticism of China, it has proved hard to ‘tolerate any negative criticism of China’s traditions’ (Ma 1990).

Zhang first came into conflict with the Chinese government after making *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*. Both films were banned in China; both were consecutively nominated for the Best Foreign Language film at the American Academy in 1991 and 1992. Regardless of whether these films criticise the Chinese government, external factors seemed to play a more important role in their prohibition. The embarrassed Chinese government tried to withdraw *Ju Dou* from the nomination just after the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, stating that the film had never been screened in China. The American Academy turned down this request on the basis that a small number of paying viewers had seen the film in Hong Kong (Lau 1991). Since *Ju Dou* was produced by a Japanese company and *Raise the Red Lantern* by a Hong Kong company, they could be released in countries beyond China. The ban on these films was lifted when *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) won the Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival. This time, the Chinese government approved the film and celebrated Zhang’s success in Venice. This approval too mirrored the Chinese political situation. *The Story of Qiu Ju* happened to be released ‘at the behest of Li Ruihuan, head of the Communist Party’s Propaganda Department – timed just right for a renewed liberalization push by Deng Xiaoping’ (Zhang 1997: 128-129). Some critics suggest that this film, about a peasant-woman living in contemporary rural China, was approved because the bureaucrats in the film are all depicted as good people (Rayns 1995).

Along with Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* and Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *Blue Kite*, Zhang’s *To Live* (1994) deals with modern Chinese history, including the Cultural Revolution. Coincidentally, these three films were made around the same time and all were disapproved of by the Chinese government. *To Live* was not only banned in China, but was barred from going to Cannes when nominated in the official competition section. Despite this, *To Live* was sent to Cannes and screened there. As punishment, Zhang had to stay in China during the Cannes Film Festival and write ‘a kind of “self-criticism”’

(Rayns 1995). More punishment was to follow. When Zhang started on his new project, *Shanghai Triad*, with a French company, the Chinese government halted the foreign production by force and compelled him to establish a wholly Chinese production and re-write the script. Even worse for Zhang, the Chinese government prohibited him from collaborating with foreign companies for the next five years. Accordingly, *Keep Cool*, the story of which had to be changed following censorship and which had to be made only in association with Chinese film studios, ended up his least known film outside China. *Keep Cool* was also invited to the 1997 Cannes Film Festival, but its participation was again prohibited. *Keep Cool* contained no troubling political themes: the government wanted to boycott the Cannes Film Festival that year because it invited Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West Palace* (1996), a story about Chinese homosexuals.

Although both depict feudal China before the communist revolution, *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* are often understood in the west as allegories of Chinese politics just after the events of June 1989.

The film is taken as an allegory, where the critique of feudal Confucian society in which male gender and old age ruled is taken as a veiled critique of present-day communism with its regime of old men. (Holley 1992)

The tale also can be viewed as a metaphor reflecting on the fate of China itself, which today is ultimately controlled by a tiny clique of old men, headed by Deng Xiaoping, 86. (Callahan 1993: 59)

*Raise the Red Lantern* too is seen to embody 'socio-political cosmology' and 'theatrical aspects of contemporary Chinese politics' (Rayns 1991d). The film's avoidance of clearly showing the patriarch's face is seen as a cinematic device reflecting 'an unseen core of power' in Chinese politics (Rayns 1991d). According to Verina Glasessner, *Raise the Red Lantern* 'inevitably invites a reading as a comment on the state of affairs since Tiananmen Square' (1992: 42). Such interpretations draw upon the fact that these two films were banned in China. What is noteworthy is that during the period when

diplomatic relations between China and the United States were frozen after the Tiananmen Square Massacre, *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* happened to be the only films by Zhang nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film Award in the American Academy until his very recent film, *Hero* (2002).

William Rothman ([1998] 2004) describes the sentiments of American scholars studying Chinese cinema after the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989 as follows.

Americans studying Chinese film in this period found themselves swept up in these events and, indeed, called upon to play a role. Bearing witness to the Fifth Generation's struggle against villainous forces of repression, we were championing the films, taking their side. . . . And we envisioned film in China, and ourselves as champions of Chinese cinema, as playing roles in this melodrama. The appeal of being swept up in a grand melodramatic struggle between virtue and villainy was inseparable from the appeal, for Americans, of studying Chinese cinema during this period . . . ([1998] 2004: 363)

I have no intention of criticising American scholars' sympathy for a good cause. I do however want to draw attention to the power relationship between China and the west. I suggest that this interaction between Chinese nationalism and western Orientalism privileges and authorises political readings of Fifth Generation films. The convention that privileges banned (underground) films and reads them only in political terms is also applied to films of the Sixth Generation. Dai contends that 'independent' films of the Sixth Generation are critically acclaimed since they reflect 'Western liberal intellectuals' anticipations or expectations of the nineties Chinese cultural condition' (2002: 90): 'Created as a mirror image, it again validated Western intellectuals' mapping of China's democracy, progress, resistance, civil society, and the marginal figure' (Dai 2002: 90). Dai terms this convention of reading Chinese films – supposedly 'Third World texts' – as a 'new-imperialist cultural interpretation' (2002: 90). Dai (2002) underlines that the Chinese government privileged the western 'misreading' of Sixth Generation films when it banned them on the basis of this reading. The Chinese government thus verifies and

endows with authority the western convention of reading Chinese films solely in political terms.

Ultimately, this political projection of non-western films can be explained through Orientalism. Chen Xiaoming comments that politics is a determinant factor in ‘the cultural imaginary of China’ in western Orientalism (1997: 130). According to Chen, this is because ‘the cultural imaginary of Oriental culture’, in western Orientalism, always assumes ‘an invisible, but omnipresent, nexus of absolute power and totalitarianism’ (1997: 130). Since ‘the cultural imaginary of Oriental culture is fundamentally timeless’, Chen states that ‘whether such a power nexus refers to ancient feudalism or despotism, or to the “proletariat dictatorship” of modern China’ makes no difference: in the cultural imaginary of Orientalism, the present ‘is all but a reappearance of the past’ (1997: 130). China is always represented as a politically retarded ‘Third World’ country whose government ruthlessly exerts its power by limiting freedom of expression. The west is repeatedly confirmed as morally and politically superior to China, supporting dissident Chinese films. At the same time, the Chinese government has a hand in this phenomenon: it over-reacts to the western anticipation and cultural interpretation of Chinese political backwardness, ultimately obstructing other possible readings and validating western views.

Stephanie Donald suggests of films banned in their native country:

... in international political terms, they might be heard quite distinctly, and highly valued as voices of truth – to an outside ear with its own narcissistic agenda. They then lose the freedom . . . of the inauthentic, and are promoted as the authentic soul of a troubled regime. (1995: 328-329)

As a result, according to Donald, ‘banned films’ gain ‘a moral authority’ and are viewed as an authentic representation of a troubled society ‘in the eyes of a select international spectatorship’ (1995: 329). This halo effect of ‘moral authority and authenticity’ may explain how Zhang’s *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* gained an exceptional degree of

respect in the United States. Ironically, the Chinese government's intervention always seems to fail to repel international political attention and ends up attracting it.

In contrast to the political and allegorical interpretations in the west, among Chinese critics, *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* are understood as a criticism of feudalism as it appears in the films. Responses to these two films in Hong Kong were reportedly 'lukewarm' (Lau 1991). According to Cui, if *Ju Dou* offends the Chinese censorship and Chinese audiences, it is because the film defies the two basic moral principles that constitute Chinese familial and social structure – filial piety for men and chastity for women (Cui 1997: 316). As a modernist criticism of the feudal values that still dominate Chinese society, *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* may have retained the original Fifth Generation spirit.

Western commentators exhibit political reductionism in their debates on Zhang's films, raising their eyebrows in suspicion whenever the Chinese government welcomes them. After winning the Golden Lion in Venice with *The Story of Qiu Ju*, Zhang was celebrated and gained popularity back in China. While it would be going too far to describe *The Story of Qiu Ju* as a 'sell-out' to the Chinese government, Zhang does appear to have attempted a reconciliation with both the regime and Chinese viewers. *The Story of Qiu Ju* shows 'a succession of uncorrupt and considerate officials' and has 'an uneducated peasant woman' as the main character (Ebert 2002) in a 'moderately prosperous village' (Rayns 1993). With its quasi-documentary style, *The Story of Qiu Ju* was received as 'a fresh approach to the age-old challenge of constructing a "realist" aesthetic' in Chinese cinema (Rayns 1993). This positive portrayal of bureaucrats seemed to raise the hackles of a 'critical American audience': 'Why was this bold, rebellious director passing so light on Chinese officialdom?' (Silbergeld 1999: 125) Paul G. Pickowicz responds to this indignation by describing Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige as 'quasi-dissident film-makers' and 'highly privileged insiders' (1995: 212). Pickowicz remarks that the idea that they are 'political renegades' is simply 'what their foreign audience wants to hear' (1995: 213). With a new realistic style, *The Story of Qiu Ju* leaves no space for allegorical readings, which reinforces the impression that it was a compromise. Zhang explains, however, that

he intended to make a film dealing with a real-life situation that any ordinary Chinese person might have experienced; he emphasises that the film's ironic ending<sup>33</sup> reveals the flaws of the Chinese bureaucratic system (Silbergeld 1999: 129). *The Story of Qiu Ju* was highly popular among Chinese audiences. Zhang's subtle criticism of the absurdity of the Chinese bureaucracy appears to have resonated with other Chinese (Stone 1993).

When Zhang's next two films, *To Live* and *Shanghai Triad*, again provoked the ire of the Chinese government, western commentators again slotted them into a political frame. On the international marketing of *To Live*, Richard James Havis comments,

... marketers realize that the 'special' attention Chinese authorities pay their filmmakers is good for publicity. Journalists and marketing managers alike know that Western editors are more amenable to running articles on Chinese film directors if there is a political angle. (Havis 1995: 63)

When Gong Li sat alone 'next to an empty chair bearing the name-card Zhang Yimou' at a press conference, it ironically helped add political spice to *To Live*'s publicity (Havis 1995: 63). When *Shanghai Triad* was invited to the 1995 New York Film Festival, Zhang was prevented from participating because an American documentary about the Tiananmen Square Massacre was also being screened. Lu underlines that under such circumstances, *Shanghai Triad* cannot escape being 'read as an allegory of contemporary Chinese politics' in 'transnational film reception' (1997b: 125). Western writings otherwise categorise the film as having been completely 'distorted and destroyed' by repression of the freedom of expression. For instance, Rayns (1995) views this film as 'the first Zhang Yimou film' that 'doesn't reflect its director's inner life or political situation at any level' (1995: 60).

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<sup>33</sup> The entire plot of *The Story of Qiu Ju* develops through Qiu Ju's pursuit of justice after her husband is kicked by the village chief. At the end of the film, after Qiu Ju has given birth and achieved reconciliation with the village chief, she hears that the chief has been arrested and is going to be prosecuted by the high court.

After a five-year ban from working with foreign companies following *Shanghai Triad*, Zhang Yimou returned to the international film scene with *The Road Home* (1999) and *Not One Less* (1999). Both were produced by Columbia Pictures Production and distributed worldwide by Columbia TriStar International. Zhang, though, could not entirely escape the impact of Chinese censorship, which, he states, compelled him to re-edit the films and modify their narratives (Thompson 2000). However, while these two films caused no conflict with the Chinese government, *Not One Less* stirred up controversy about the politics of international film festivals.

Before it won the second Golden Lion for Zhang at Venice, he withdrew *Not One Less* from Cannes as it would not have been placed in the *Palme d'Or*, the official competition section, but in *Un Certain Regard*, the unofficial section – and also because *The Road Home* had been turned down. Cannes officials stated that these films were not as good as his previous films that were invited to Cannes (Kracier 2000). It was however reported that the film was ‘rejected by a jury who feared it might have been propaganda on behalf of the Chinese Government’ (Thompson 2000). In his public announcement, Zhang criticised Cannes for its political prejudice towards Chinese films.

It seems that in the West, there are always two ‘political criteria’ when interpreting Chinese films, (they are perceived as being either) ‘anti-government’ or ‘propaganda’. This is unacceptable. (Zhang quoted in Kracier 2000)

Whether this was the true reason for the Cannes rejection or not, western commentators certainly appear to have employed ‘political criteria’ to assess Chinese films, including Zhang’s previous work. With *Not One Less*, Zhang loses the halo effect as a dissident director, but the effort to understand his films in terms of criticism of contemporary Chinese society continues. ‘The arbitrary happy ending’ is considered a result of Chinese censorship (Young 1999). The film is understood to reveal ‘the disastrous effects of the restoration of capitalism in China’ (Klindo 2000) and ‘the sharp schisms in contemporary Chinese society between the cities and the country’ (Thompson 2000). Since *Not One*

*Less* uses a documentary style, it is believed to deliver the authentic reality of China – ‘a true portrait’ (Olesen 2002). Even when it seems certain that Zhang compromised in line with censorship, this is considered ‘the winning formula in Zhang’s struggle against the purveyors of censorship’ (Klindo 2000). More often than not, changes in his film style are defined in his relation to the Chinese government. They are partly explained in terms of his ‘cunning strategy’ to beat Chinese censorship (Rayns 1995). However, the Chinese government – the political factor – is not the only source of pressure that causes Zhang to modify his films. He seems keen to tailor his films to film market fluctuations – domestic and international.

Zhang’s return to the western market with *The Road Home* and *Not One Less* demonstrates that Chinese filmmaking has become more transnational and oriented towards the needs of the international market (Hao 2000). For western critics who remember Zhang for ‘the great images and cultural allegories’ of *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, his two come-back films – *The Road Home* and *Not One Less* – are a ‘disappointment’, although they appeal to cinema-goers (Kracier 2000). Apparently, *The Road Home* and *Not One Less* feature simple stories involving universal themes – innocent love, children living in a poor and remote area. These films were clearly made, from the outset, with world distribution in mind (Young 1999). These films show the impact of transnational investment more clearly than Zhang’s previous work. On the surface, ‘obvious plugs for sponsors Coca-Cola and Sony are so overdone, they will get a laugh in the West’ (Young 1999: 21); after hard work, children share a can of Coca-Cola in a village shop, saying ‘They taste good!’; The shot showing Wei Minzhi – the main character – on television lasts long enough to make the Sony TV set hard to miss. ‘The rather conformist and Hollywoodish happy ending’ is seen as so over-the-top as to ‘embarrass even Hollywood’ (Klindo 2000). Some commentators mention that Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami’s influence is discernible in *The Road Home* and *Not One Less* (French 2000; Holden 2001). The children-centred films of Kiarostami were well received at international film festivals around the time of Zhang’s return. Zhang also admits that the work of Kiarostami had ‘a major influence’ on these films (Holden 2001).

Such swift adaptation to international market trends seems to defy the presumption that Zhang's films always involve political allegory or geo-political realism.

To sum up, the west wants to see its inferior other – politically retarded China – in Chinese films, and Chinese censorship authorises and privileges such views by applying the very same western viewpoints to interpret Zhang's work. In this process, the western reading works to 'construct the reading of these films within China' (Dai 2002: 92). By banning Zhang's films, the Chinese government convinces the west of the authenticity of a political reading. Western critics respond by adopting the Chinese censors' views and rigidly reading these films as political allegory or critique. The Chinese government, in an attempt to dominate the representation of the Chinese nation, perpetuates the rigid western Orientalist reading. This interaction between western Orientalism and Chinese nationalism tends to obscure the possibility of reading Zhang's films in multiple ways.

### **5.5. Orientalism and the position of Chinese audiences**

This section examines Chinese audiences' relation to western criticism. Assuming that Zhang's self-Orientalising films also appeal to Chinese audiences, under what circumstances do Chinese viewers become critical about this Orientalism? When Chinese viewers discuss authentic cultural representation, how do they position themselves in relation to western views? As Chinese scholars agree, *Red Sorghum* contains Orientalist elements that appeal to western audiences. Nevertheless, criticism of Orientalism in his films mostly focuses on *Ju Dou* and *Raise The Red Lantern*, and to a lesser extent *Red Sorghum*. *Not One Less*, Zhang's much later film, seems to involve Orientalism through self-Orientalism; it was not only popular in China, but escaped being attacked for its Orientalism there. In the following I compare the contexts in which *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou*, *Raise The Red Lantern* and *Not One Less* evoke different responses from Chinese audiences.

From the very beginning of his career, Zhang Yimou was eager to avoid alienating Chinese audiences (Wei 1997). He aspired to 'steer midway between the art cinema and

the commercial blockbuster' (Freeman 2002). Zhang's films thus aim to appeal both in the west and in China. Chinese audiences have warmed to *Red Sorghum*, *The Story of Qiu Ju*, *To Live, Keep Cool* and *Not One Less* and recently *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004). When the ban was finally lifted, *Ju Dou* and *Raise The Red Lantern* failed to attract the same degree of attention they did in the west (Lau 1991). It is tempting to rush to the conclusion that Chinese audiences prefer films that eschew Orientalist elements. 'Primitive passion' is, however, a common 'structure of feeling' in Fifth Generation films (Chow 1995). As discussed in section 3, Chow reminds us that 'primitive passion' is associated with an 'Orientalist gaze' in the form of self-Orientalism.

Many Chinese scholars highlight the fact that Chinese audiences as well as western ones find Zhang's films, like many Fifth Generation productions, unfamiliar, strange and therefore 'exotic'. They suggest that these films may have been consumed as 'ethnographic films' within China as well as in the west (Wang 1989; Chow 1995; Zhang 2002). For urban Chinese, the remote Chinese landscape in *Yellow Earth* appears 'equally alien, remote and "other-looking"' as it does to most western viewers (Chow 1995: 81). *Yellow Earth's* cinematic style and the landscape it portrays seem to 'defamiliarise' Chinese audiences (Lu 1997b: 131). *Red Sorghum* is claimed to do the same; it is also described as reflecting the anxiety and desire of Chinese popular culture. According to Yuejin Wang, in the early 1980s,

. . . average theatregoers became fascinated by the charisma of 'tough guys' in Japanese and Western movies. Suddenly there was an excruciating realisation of the fundamental 'lack'. (Wang 1991: 85)

Wang suggests that *Red Sorghum* became 'a cinematic milestone that proposes a powerful Chinese version of masculinity as a means of cultural critique' (1991: 85). In this light, *Red Sorghum* is regarded as a 'popular' film that fills a cultural 'lack' and fulfils Chinese viewers' desire by bringing to the screen 'collectively repressed' and 'historically exiled outlaws' (Wang 1991: 86). Wang underlines that 'the outlaws,

drunkards and rebels could be enjoyed for their beauty of characterisation from the safe distance of another age' (1991: 86). While those characters are received as 'Chinese primitives' from a far away country – a Third world country – in the west, Chinese audiences can also keep a 'safe distance', enjoying these characters as 'primitive others' from the mythic, primordial past.

Yanmei Wei indicates that from the beginning, Zhang's films 'adopted a time-honored genre'— 'family melodrama'— that has 'the widest appeal' domestically and internationally (1997: 20). According to Wei, family melodrama, as one of the dominant genres in Chinese cinema, may be Zhang's most effective means of delivering cultural criticism and gaining popularity. *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou* and *Raise The Red Lantern* converge in that all seem to be 'family melodrama'. All, moreover, deploy 'fake' rituals and settings to achieve maximum cinematic effect. *Red Sorghum*, intriguingly, seems to escape the criticism applied with vehemence to *Ju Dou* and *Raise The Red Lantern*.

Sheldon Lu claims that *Ju Dou* and *Raise The Red Lantern* decentre 'the position of Chinese viewers' while 'the field of vision of the West takes the central seat' (Lu 1997b: 126). For Lu, the main factor in this decentring is foreign capital. *The Story of Qiu Ju*, however, was also a product of foreign investment and was highly popular with Chinese audiences: the mere presence of such investment fails to fully explain the Chinese viewers' position. It is true that foreign capital may have caused Zhang to consider how best to appeal to the international market. Yet it would surely be going too far to state that it led him to regard western viewers as the priority. Zhang may also have taken censorship, the domestic market, Chinese audiences and contemporary Chinese cultural discourses into account.

*Ju Dou* and *Raise The Red Lantern* were banned by the Chinese government, thus depriving Chinese audiences of the chance to see them first. Well received in the west, both are assailed in China for pandering to Western Orientalism. Such criticism suggests that the Chinese government, critics and audiences are aware of how the characters, setting and cultural rituals in both these films are recognised as 'Chinese' in the west and

that they are uneasy about it. Western commentators understand these films to denote not an ‘ancient’ and ‘primordial’ China but contemporary China. In this process, Chinese audiences seem to lose ‘the safe distance of another age’ that enabled them to enjoy the ‘primitive’ others in films such as *Red Sorghum*. In other words, Chinese audiences are forced to adopt a ‘western gaze’, and become aware that ‘the primitive’ on the screen is identified with ‘the Chinese’. Chinese audiences inevitably end up examining how authentically Chinese these films in fact are.

Chinese audiences could enjoy watching ‘primitive others’ in *Red Sorghum* as the subject of the Orientalist gaze. *Ju Dou* and *Raise The Red Lantern* deprive them of the ‘central seat’ as viewers; they find themselves the object of the Orientalist gaze. This predicament was intensified as the films were banned from domestic screening and celebrated under the label of ‘Chinese’ films outside China. Chinese audiences can only watch these films as Orientals critically aware of a western gaze that identifies everything on the screen as ‘Chinese-ness’.

Zhang’s domestically successful films like *The Story of Qiu Ju* and *Not One Less* apparently appeal to Chinese audiences on the basis of ‘internal’ Orientalism. The main female characters, Qiu Ju in *The Story of Qiu Ju* and Wei Minzhi in *Not One Less* appear as ‘primitive’ others – poor and uneducated, from a remote area – to Chinese as well as western audiences. *The Story of Qiu Ju* tends to arouse much laughter from Chinese audiences (Stone 1993); Qiu Ju, a peasant woman, seems to create a safe distance from which Chinese audiences can enjoy watching their primitive others from remote rural areas.

Unlike Zhang’s previous films, *The Road Home* and *Not One Less* contain no exotic and Orientalist Chinese culture. They do however share the main characteristics of Zhang’s other films. They bring young lovers in past times (*The Road Home*) and poor children from a remote rural area of China (*Not One Less*) onto the screen as primitives. Both films show children, poverty, women and a remote landscape in a natural but still ‘visually elegant’ style (Kempley 2001). *Not One Less* is perceived as bringing a ‘sense

of authenticity' to the portrayal of contemporary Chinese poverty (Thompson 2000). Wanning Sun claims that the film's authentic aura is anchored in a conventional, 'default' image of 'poverty, women, children and rural life' (2001: 33). Zhang seems to have intended to slot into the default image of poverty and children, that is, the default image of China in the west. China is thus again confined to a realm of 'poverty'.

Poverty seems to be a selling item in western metropolises, especially poverty of the third world variety. *Not One Less* inspired an American film critic to write:

A few months ago, an upscale New York furniture emporium was selling little wooden desks from a rural school in China. Somebody had wagered that their patina of age and fragility would appeal to cash-flushed sensibilities. Perhaps our taste for the exquisite poverty revealed in national cinemas like that of Iran and China is just another symptom of our decadence. But in those places, a battle [over poverty] is still being waged; here it's already been won. (Camhi 2000: 56-57)

*Not One Less* plays on exactly the binary thinking that requires a 'here' — the western metropolis — and a 'there' — 'third world' China living in the past. *Not One Less* can be seen as a film grounded in a western Orientalism that insistently projects the image of the past and poverty onto the other. If Zhang's early films — *Ju Dou* and *Raise The Red Lantern* — can be called 'Orientalist' films, *Not One Less* is no less so.

This film also appeals to Chinese audiences through internal Orientalism. Evidence suggests that *Not One Less* was well received in China. Audiences 'lost sight of what it is like to be living outside the main centres' and 'instantly take money out of their pockets to donate [to schools in poor and remote areas]' (Thompson 2000). Sun underlines that, for Wei, a peasant girl, to appear on television and at the same time gain 'maximum cinematic appeal', she should remain 'the pitiable, recognisable other' for Chinese urban viewers (2001: 34).

Helpless, clueless, Wei appeals to the ‘metropolitan gaze’ of urban television viewers within the film – as well as the film audience itself – not in spite of, but precisely because of, her gracelessness and clumsiness. (Sun 2001: 34)

As modernisation and transnationalism shape Chinese society, Sun states that a transnational and modern subject produces ‘a ... form of “internal orientalism”’ (2001: 35). While transnational capital needs ‘the marginalized community’ and requires people like Wei Minzhi to remain impoverished, those ‘who fail to assimilate to the transnational ethos become the new Other’ (Sun 2001: 35). However, although Sun describes ‘internal orientalism’ as an entirely new phenomenon arising in the wake of Chinese modernisation, Orientalism is certainly not a new element in Zhang’s films, which continuously bring ‘the primitive’ to the screen. Whether from ‘another era’ or a remote and marginal rural area, Zhang persistently places in the foreground ‘primitive others’ upon which viewers – whether Chinese or western – can project otherness.

*Red Sorghum* and *Not One Less* appeal to Chinese audiences through internal Orientalism. They were not criticised for being Orientalist in China. In contrast, because they were banned, *Ju Dou* and *Raise The Red Lantern* were deprived of the chance of being shown to Chinese audiences. Only western audiences were able to savour their Orientalist appeal. When such western responses travel back to China, these films come under critical scrutiny. While these films are presumed to represent ‘Chinese’ culture and reflect Chinese reality in the west, Chinese audiences feel compelled to examine the authenticity of their cultural representations. Marginalised by western audiences, Chinese audiences end up critically examining these films’ Orientalist articulation as well as western Orientalist readings. Yet as *Not One Less* laid bare, Chinese audiences too enjoy the Orientalist appeal of Zhang’s films at times, as long as they, like privileged western viewers, can maintain a ‘safe distance’ from ‘the primitives’.

In this chapter, I have attempted to show how Orientalism and self-Orientalism work in Zhang's films. Western commentators see films by Fifth Generation directors, including Zhang, as representative of Chinese cinema. Yet the term 'Fifth Generation' reveals the problematic nature of the labelling practice applied to the national/art cinema of non-western countries. Not only does such practice exclude many significant art and mainstream films, it also functions to confine academic and popular interest to the films available and thus familiar in the west. Chinese cinema is thus defined in relation to the west. Problematically, these films are automatically assumed to represent 'Chinese-ness', which is at times directly linked with traditional Chinese aesthetics. In contrast to Japanese cinema, western scholarship on Chinese cinema has developed with the active participation of Chinese and Chinese diasporic scholars in the critical conversation.

Zhang turns a self-Orientalising gaze towards China's past and remote areas to search for Chinese culture. This self-Orientalism attracts Orientalist interest in the west. While westerners assume that Zhang's films represent 'Chinese' cinema and Chinese culture, Chinese critics attack them for pandering to a western Orientalism that projects China as the exotic, primitive other. The Orientalist seduction embedded in Zhang's films not only involves western criticism and western film festivals, but also the Chinese government, critics and audiences. In the zone 'in-between' the west and China, the Chinese government's reaction to western Orientalism appears to reinforce rigid Orientalist understandings of Zhang's films. On the other hand, immediate western identification of Zhang's films with Chinese culture often leads to the examination of their cultural authenticity back in China. This interaction appears to work against the development of non-Orientalist readings of Zhang's films.

In the next chapter I look at how Korean cinema and Im Kwon-Taek's films in particular are acknowledged in the west. I analyse how Im's films are recognised through Orientalism and how Im employs self-Orientalism to capture western attention and consolidate the male subject as the Korean national subject. Finally, I explore why western criticism of Im's films often neglects gender.

## 6. Orientalism, or how did Im Kwon-Taek become a *Korean* director?

### 6.1 introduction

This chapter explores Orientalism and self-Orientalism by looking at how Im Kwon-Taek became established as a representative South Korean auteur director. Since the early 1980s, Im's films have appeared frequently at international film festivals. Western commentators have recognised them as representative of Korean cinema. In this process, his films seem to have helped formulate the western referential frame used to comprehend Korean films and the stereotypical features attributed to them. Im's career as a filmmaker spans more than four decades, from the early 1960s until today, with ninety-eight films to his credit; covering all his films is beyond the scope of the present work. The focal point of this chapter is the mutual imbrication of western responses, Im's self-Orientalism and Korean nationalism. I thus examine those of Im's films that have appeared and attracted most attention in the west, paying particular attention to Western responses to *Sopyonje* (1993), *Chunhyang* (2000) and *Chihwaseon* (2002).

In the first section of this chapter, I review how Korean cinema in general has been acknowledged in the west. I focus on how western commentators conventionally recognise Korean films and unearth the primary concerns underlying such recognition. This section describes western recognition of Korean films before Im's *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon* attracted western critical acclaim.

In the second section, I demonstrate that Orientalism is entrenched in western critical recognition of Im's films. *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon* are the films most celebrated and widely released in the west, thus far.<sup>34</sup> *Chunhyang* was the first Korean film selected for the *Palme d'Or* – the official competition section – of the Cannes International Film

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<sup>34</sup> After Im's success, films by other Korean directors such as Lee Chang-Dong, Park Chanwook, Hong Sang-Soo and Kim Ki-Duk were invited to prominent European film festivals and won awards. These films also achieved wide distribution and drew western critical interest. Admittedly, recent interest in these films does not necessarily entail discourses on Korean traditional aesthetics or values or on 'Korean-ness' as a national cultural essence.

Festival in 2000. *Chihwaseon*, also selected for the *Palme d'Or* at Cannes in 2002, brought him the Best Director award. As a result, *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon* were the first films to achieve wide commercial release in Europe and the USA. Compared with these two films, *Sopyonje* is less well known in the west. However, it seems important to include domestic and western critical responses to *Sopyonje* as it set a new box office record for domestic films in 1993, when Korean society was overwhelmed by an unprecedented degree of globalisation. *Sopyonje* embodies Im's nativist views, perpetuated in later films such as *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon*. The phenomenal success of *Sopyonje* was accompanied by a nativist discourse epitomized by *shintobuli*,<sup>35</sup> some commentators like Rob Wilson consider the film a local response to globalisation. It has sparked off discussions of gender and nation, national cinema and globalisation.

The third section of this chapter looks at how Im's films embody his views on the Korean nation and national culture and how his work is linked to western Orientalism. This section aims to bring out how Im's films attract, formulate and respond to western recognition and how the inner colonization that Im's nationalist views entail is corroborated by a partial and oppressive projection of 'the national'.

In the last section I look at the issue of gender, which perhaps more than any other issue brings the problems of this 'fragmentary' nationalist projection into the open. A number of Korean feminists assailed *Sopyonje* in particular. It is remarkable that such feminist critique rarely appears in the west. I delve into why and how western commentators tend to ignore the issue of gender when Im's films travel to the west. I contend that Im's nationalism, which asserts 'Korean-ness' as a seamless nation-ness, is complicit with western Orientalism.

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<sup>35</sup> *Shintobuli* is a phrase that was primarily and widely used in support of nativism in the early 1990s. Literally, it means that the body and the earth from which it was born are not two different things. This phrase signified that Korean people should eat and wear things produced from the Korean soil; it was used to attack westernisation and globalisation. The term reflected and corresponded to Korean public sentiment at that time to the extent that it was also used to advertise national products.

## 6.2 Korean cinema in the west: 'ignorance' and 'blockage'

Japanese cinema was 'discovered' by the west in the early 1950s. Chinese cinema made a 'breakthrough' in the west in the mid-1980s. Korean cinema, in contrast, remained obscure until the late 1990s. Not a single English language book on Korean cinema was published outside Korea until 2001, but western academic and critical interest in Korean films has recently been growing. Five English books entirely dedicated to Korean films have been published: *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Culture, Identity and Politics* (Hyangjin Lee 2001), *Im Kwon-Taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema* (David James et al. 2001), *Korean Cinema: The New Hong Kong* (Anthony Leong 2002), *Korean Film: History, Resistance and Democratic Imagination* (Eungjun Min et al. 2002), and *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (Kyung Hyun Kim 2004). Western conceptions of Korean cinema are at an initial stage of formulation. In this section I examine western recognition and conceptions of Korean cinema thus far. I also draw attention to the nature of the otherness typically attributed to Korean cinema in this process.

For the most part, Korean cinema has been located outside western interest, or outside western 'film scholars' mental maps of world film production' (Crofts 2002: 42). Until very recently, the most common form of western recognition of Korean cinema was 'ignorance', if this can be regarded as a form of recognition. As Kyung Hyun Kim (2002) points out, the most recent version of *The Oxford History of World Cinema* fails to mention Korean cinema even once in the entire volume. 'Korean matter' is mentioned once only: the Korean War is mentioned in the introduction to American film *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970).<sup>36</sup> Some western writers who have recently begun to introduce Korean cinema to the west express surprise at its delayed 'discovery': it has been 'criminally understated', is an 'inexplicably ignored cinematic tradition'; 'the world's better-kept secret' (Server 1999: 95).

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<sup>36</sup> It is rather ironic to see that the film *M\*A\*S\*H* provides the only occasion when Korean matter is brought up. This film completely misrepresents Korean villages and towns, which are made to look like Vietnamese ones.

The ‘discovery’ of Korean cinema was markedly different from that of Japanese and Chinese cinema. Whilst the decisive moment of western ‘discovery’ of the latter two is relatively easy to identify, it is much more difficult to determine the precise moment of the ‘breakthrough’ of Korean cinema in the west. Although Korean films were presented in European and American international film festivals from the early 1960s, Korean cinema was paid extremely limited and rather intermittent attention. Im Kwon-Taek’s films, for instance, began to appear in European film festivals such as Berlin, London and Venice from the early 1980s. Im’s *Surrogate Mother* (1986) won the Best Actress Award at Venice in 1987. In spite of this, the film failed to attract as much western critical attention as Kurosawa Akira’s *Rashomon* or Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* did in their time. In the mid-1990s, the Korean New Wave directors emerged on the international film scene (Rayns 1994c). Simultaneously, the robust and rapidly growing Korean film industry began to gain exposure through the Pusan International Film Festival, launched in 1996 as a launch pad for Asian films into the world market (Rayns 1998b). It was not however until 2001 that the weekly international film business magazine *Screen International* began providing regular coverage of the Korean film industry. That is, although Korean films were presented in the west from the 1960s, Korean cinema failed in both critical and distributional terms to attain an established position as a national cinema. The frequent appearance of Korean films in the west in the 1980s precipitated neither avid nor consistent critical attention. Korean cinema was ignored and remained invisible in the west, despite its persistent presence.

In his book *Third World Film Making and the West*, Roy Armes states that ‘hardly any of South Korea’s huge output is shown abroad, and there are no internationally known film directors’ (1987: 156). Armes’ comment is however only partly true. It was not until the mid-1990s that a large number of Korean films were exposed through a systematically organised special screening or retrospective. Yet, as mentioned earlier, from the 1960s – the first golden age of Korean cinema – a number of Korean films appeared at European film festivals: *As the Clouds Flow* (dir. Yu Hyun-Mok) at Berlin in 1960, *The Coachman* (dir. Kang Dae-Jin) at Berlin in 1961, *Song Chun-hyang* (dir. Sin Sang-Ok) at Venice in 1961, *The Guest and My Mother* (dir. Sin Sang-Ok) at Venice in 1963 and so on (Lee and

Choe 1988: 139-140). It is true that Korean films were hardly seen in the west in the 1970s, usually considered the dark age of Korean cinema, shackled by the military dictatorship's severe censorship (Lee and Choe 1988; Min et al. 2002). Yet Korean films again appeared in Europe in the 1980s: *Pimak* (dir. Lee Du-Yong) at Cannes in 1982, *Mulleya Mulleya* (dir. Lee Du-Yong) at Cannes in 1984, *Mandala* (dir. Im Kwon-Taek) at Berlin in 1982, *Ttaengbyot* (dir. Ha Myong-Jung) at Berlin in 1984, *Surrogate Mother* (dir. Im Kwon-Taek) at Venice in 1987, *Adada* (dir. Im Kwon-Taek) at Montreal in 1988, among others (Lee and Choe 1988: 249-250). Armes ignores this presence and fails to recognise the names of Korean directors whose films appeared repeatedly at these film festivals – such as Shin Sang-Ok, Lee Du-Yong and Im Kwon-Taek. While it is true that 'there has never been any tradition of exporting Korean films to other markets', the assertion that 'Korean cinema was virtually unseen outside Korea until very recently' is problematic (Rayns 1994b: 5).

This kind of recognition – 'ignorance' – reverberates with how Korea as a nation is recognised (or ignored) in the west. Rob Wilson once stated,

If Asia is a territory of vast representation subject to recurring tropes of Western orientalism, Korea remains more simply an enclave of sublime forgetting. (1991: 239)

According to Wilson, in the USA, Korea comprises 'a forbidding and forgotten landscape of belligerency' with lingering memories of the Korean War (Wilson 1991: 239). Korea thus became the nation whose presence the west wants to forget. Since the country recalls bad memories of the Cold War, it is required to remain invisible. Alternatively, when Korea enters western awareness, it is, more often than not, framed with memories of the Korean War, or with the still unresolved division of the Korean peninsula. In a similar vein, Korean cinema is occasionally mentioned in the western press when North Korea emerges as a major political issue (e.g. Abramowitz 1991; Brooks 2001).

Western commentators sometimes suggest that this ‘ignorance’ of Korean films is rooted in characteristics of Korean cinema that ‘block’ Korean films from achieving wide distribution through the international art-house circuit (Berry 1998a; Willemen 2002). As mentioned in chapter 3, film festivals function as a route through which films enter the world art-house circuit. Yet this did not apply to Korean films until very recently. Although Korean films were present and sometimes garnered awards at prominent European film festivals, international distribution through the art-house circuit rarely followed. None of Im’s films presented at international film festivals since the 1980s, for instance, achieved broad international release until *Chunhyang* (2000) and *Chihwaseon* (2003).

What is this blockage preventing Korean films from travelling on the route of the international art-house circuit? Due to their persistent presence at international film festivals, Korean films at least conjured up a few common expectations and stereotypes among western viewers, associated with Buddhism or Shamanism, violence and rape, and emotional excess. This last is the feature believed chiefly responsible for putting off western viewers (Armes 1987; Berry 1998a; Gilmore 1989). Before scrutinising why and how this is believed to operate as a blockage, I briefly review the other characteristics.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, Julian Stringer suggests that histories of non-western national cinemas tend to draw on western memories of films’ appearance at European film festivals. In *Film History: An Introduction*, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson ([1994] 2003) identify the appearance of Bae Yong-Kyun’s *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* (1989) as ‘South Korea’s breakthrough to the western art-house market’ ([1994] 2003: 662). This film was selected for *Un Certain Regard* at the Cannes Film Festival in 1989 and won the Golden Leopard prize at the Locarno Film Festival in the same year. This was the first time a Korean film had won a director’s award (Ehrlich 1994). Unlike other Korean films that won awards abroad, such as those of Im, Lee and Shin, Bae’s film was widely distributed through the international art-house circuit. If, by ‘breakthrough’, Bordwell and Thompson mean worldwide distribution of a single film, Bae’s film indeed marked a breakthrough. Nevertheless this film did not seem to ‘pave

the way for other Korean filmmakers' as Bordwell and Thompson claim. After Bae's film, no other Korean films won a director's award or were circulated on such a scale for an entire decade. Besides, until Jang Sun-Woo's *Hwaomkyung* (1993) was screened at the Berlin Film Festival in 1994, no other Korean films dealing with Buddhism appeared. Jang's film was less successful than Bae's. Furthermore, Bordwell and Thompson's narrative depicting the history of Korean cinema seems severely flawed in that they introduce Im and Im's films as if they followed the route laid down by *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* in the west.<sup>37</sup> As for Korean films about Buddhism, Im's film *Mandala* (1981) preceded Bae's film, appearing in Berlin and London in 1981. Such errors reveal how western partial and episodic memory, based on the limited range of films available, can distort the narrative of a national cinema. Buddhism seems central to western stereotypes and preferences vis-à-vis Korean films, *Mandala*, *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* and *Hwaomkyung* being prime examples. (Zen) Buddhism, Korean traditional art and the Korean countryside become the keys to understanding those films (Ehrlich 1994; James 2002).

Korean cinema also acquired notoriety amongst western critics. Chris Berry cautiously states,

More than one foreign critic has been heard to remark off the record that it cannot be a Korean film unless there is a rape and a large amount of gratuitous violence of all sorts. (1998a: 42)

Commentators such as Peter Rist (1997) and Chuck Stephens (2001b) confirm the prevalence of such views. Given that these perspectives seem to have been constructed during the 1980s (Stephens 2001b), they are likely anchored in the characteristics shared by Korean films presented at international film festivals at that time. As mentioned earlier, the Korean films shown most often in the west at that time were by Lee Du-Yong,

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<sup>37</sup> Although Bordwell and Thompson's section on Korean cinema consists of less than two pages of the whole volume, it contains a couple of crucial mistakes. For instance, the surname of a contemporary Korean director to whom one paragraph is devoted is wrong. His name is not Hang Sang-Soo, but Hong Sang-Soo.

Chong Jin-Woo and Im Kwon-Taek. In the 1980s, the censorship imposed by the Korean military dictatorship loosened its grip on ‘expressions of overt sexual content’, while ‘the expression of socially conscious material’ was strictly repressed (Min et al. 2002: 63). As a result, ‘melodramas and historical films with soft-core pornographic elements’ flourished in the 1980s. Such historical films, blending ‘local flavor with eroticism’, were regarded as ‘truly Korean’ and sent to international film festivals (Min et al. 2002: 64).

These films typically deal with women’s suffering in the past or in a remote village. They convey an effective combination of eroticism and exoticism, aestheticising women’s suffering. These films reminded western critics of the work of Mizoguchi Kenji, and gained some attention, as the record of their awards demonstrates. Im’s *Surrogate Mother* won the Best Actress Award at the Venice Film Festival in 1987 and his *Adada* won the Best Actress award at the Montreal World Film Festival in 1988. The main theme of both films is women’s suffering under the feudal patriarchy. While the suffering of women can be interpreted as allegorical social criticism or criticism of women’s situation in contemporary society (Rist 1997; James 2002), the gratuitous scenes of rape and violence inflicted on women generate negative conceptions of Korean cinema as savage and extreme. Such constructions are in a sense a product of collaboration between the policies of the Korean military dictatorship, Korean directors and western film festivals: the regime determines which type of film can be sent abroad; directors make films in conformity with official guidelines; western film festivals hail these films and recognise them as representative ‘Korean’ cinema.

The third type of western recognition of Korean cinema may be related to the second. Emotional excess is claimed to limit ‘Korean film’s accessibility to a more international audience’ (Gilmore 1989: 23). The uniqueness of Korean film is seen as ‘exceedingly sentimental and melodramatic’ and full of violence and sex (Gilmore 1989: 23). This excess is often understood as a national allegory of ‘traumatic colonialism and modernization’ (Berry 1998a: 42). Otherwise, it is ascribed to ‘strict censorship’ (Armes 1987: 156). Because this excess is also assailed by Korean critics, it is believed to be the

main factor rendering Korean films ‘unattractive to the allegedly refined tastes of international festival audiences’ (Berry 1998a: 41).

Berry (1998a) analyses how the ‘excessive’ and eccentric films of Kim Ki-young managed to break into the international art-house circuit.<sup>38</sup> According to Berry, Kim’s films also contain a certain type of excess, but this differs from that of other Korean films. First, in Kim’s films, women are also raped and exposed to physical violence. Yet they are not ‘passive, saintly women’ who endure abuse ‘without anger’ (Berry 1998a: 42). They are ‘very much active sexual agents’ and sometimes embody ‘the monstrous feminine’ (Berry 1998a: 42). Kim’s films were thus able to avoid the ‘blockage’ typical of Korean films, which may be anchored in the discomfort of watching violence against women (Berry 1998a). Second, Kim’s unique style fits the ‘critical organisation of the international art-house circuit’, which seeks films by auteur directors that are stylistically and nationally distinct (Berry 1998a: 44-46). For Berry, being ‘distinctively Korean’ means asserting a ‘regional’ space easily distinguishable from other East Asian cinemas, such as Japanese and Chinese, in the globalised art-house circuit (1998a: 46). As ‘the globalised art-house’ functions on the basis of differentiated ‘representation of national cinemas’, Korean cinema is expected to clearly present itself as a national cinema (Berry 1998a: 46). In Berry’s view, Kim’s films have the potential to establish the ‘image of Korean cinema’ and place it on the world map of national/art cinema.<sup>39</sup> Whilst the supposed otherness of Korean cinema seems to operate as a ‘blockage’, Berry sees a

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<sup>38</sup> Kim’s (1919-1999) films were exposed to western viewers, for the first time, through the retrospective organised by the Pusan International Film Festival in 1997. After making quite an impressive debut in the international film scene through Pusan, retrospectives showing his films were organised in several places in Europe. For more details about Kim Ki-young and his films, see *Kim Ki-young: Cinema of Diabolical Desire & Death* (1997 2<sup>nd</sup> Pusan International Film Festival).

<sup>39</sup> Derek Elley, film reviewer of *Variety*, specialising in East Asian films, analyses box office records of Korean films distributed in European countries and the USA. His conclusion is that so far, the only Korean films able to achieve even small-scale success are films like Kim Ki-Duk’s *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter . . . and Spring* (2003), which involves a very simple story with stereotypical Asian images, not particularly emphasising Korean cultural characteristics. Elley observes that a certain conception of Korean cinema as ‘strange’ and ‘extreme’ is emerging, for instance, in the UK, but no general and popular conception of it is yet established. See Derek Elley ‘International Hit? Or Storm In a Teacup?’ in *Cine21* no. 478 (November 23 2004) pp. 44-46.

possibility that another ‘otherness’ may emerge at the moment Kim Ki-young’s films break through internationally, potentially transcending the prevailing concept of Korean-ness and avoiding the ‘blockage’.

Paul Willemen explores ‘the blockage’ of Korean cinema further, probing ‘the possibility that Korean cinema had difficulties inserting itself into the art cinemas of the world because of a blockage *within* Korean cinema’ (2002: 173; original emphasis). Willemen finds the cause of “‘the impossibility” for Korean films to reach a global market’ in the ‘impossible tension’ within Korean historical and cultural constellations (2002: 173). Korean films, at least those of the 1970s and 1980s that he saw, lay bare the ‘no-way-out’ situation in which Korean society is trapped, able neither to move on to modernity nor to regress to its authentic traditions (2002: 173-174). For Willemen, the otherness of Korean cinema reflects

. . . the cultural practice in which the pre-capitalist and the capitalist cultural formations continue to coexist in different measures, the tensions between these formations being negotiated in different ways depending on the prevailing historical situation and the forces contending within it. (2002: 178)

Korean films appear at odds with ‘western film theory’s emphasis on realism and subjectivity’ and ‘western cinema’s notions of spatial and psychological coherence’ (2002: 172). According to Willemen, this should be understood in terms of the different histories of Korea and the west as different responses to ‘the same question of modernization and subjectivity’ (2002: 181). Willemen thus contends that when Korean cinema appears to ‘escape, or resist western film theories’, this does not signify a deficit of Korean cinema, but reveals the limits of western film theory (2002: 178).

I agree with Willemen that western film theories should not be imposed on other national cinemas as the universal yardstick through which to ‘measure’ a film. Yet, equally, we must be cautious not to essentialise the otherness or differences of Korean cinema, even when a certain type of otherness crops up again in a limited number of films. More

research is vital before we can conclude that this specific otherness is the inevitable expression or reflection of a specifically Korean cultural or social constellation. A specific historical situation does not determine the character of all the films made in that particular period. Not all Korean films register a specific cultural constellation in the same way. Kim Ki-young's films for instance are distinguished by a cinematic style different from other Korean films made in the same period. Kim's films can be compared to German Expressionism (Berry 1998a: 41; PIFF 1997: 59); the influence of Hollywood or European films on Korean films must thus be taken into account. *The Aimless Bullet* (dir. Yu Hyon-mok 1961) for example bears the influence of Italian Neo-realism. According to Jinsoo An, Korean film critics in the 1950s saw Italian Neo-realism as a model for Korean cinema. This was their critical response to the proliferation of Korean commercial films modelled on Hollywood (An 2003). An's account shows that the mainstream Korean film industry was greatly influenced by Hollywood and that Korean critics and directors were aware of and in constant contact with other European film trends. Korean cinema is clearly anything but pure. Its otherness cannot be essentialised as reflecting a specific historical situation or a specific type of 'nation-ness'.

Korean cinema has gained far more international recognition since the mid-1990s; special retrospectives on Korean cinema were organised in several places in Europe and North America.<sup>40</sup> Pusan International Film Festival, launched in 1996, has successfully drawn international attention to the ever-growing domestic film industry. Special sessions on Korean films have been held at several international film festivals. The export of Korean films is growing rapidly, not only within Asia but also in the North American and European film market.<sup>41</sup> Korean films are thus becoming far more available. Does the

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<sup>40</sup> In 1990, a retrospective dedicated to introducing Im's films was held at Munich Film Festival under the title of *Im Kwon-Taek: Filmemacher aus Korea*. In 1993, Centre du Pompidou in Paris held a retrospective season of Korean films under the title *A La Découverte du Cinéma Coréen: Le Cinéma Coréen*. In this retrospective, Im Kwon-Taek's films were introduced and received much attention. In June 2001, a special retrospective showing Im's films was organised by Cinémathèque française, under the title of *Im Kwon-Taek: un maître du cinéma coréen*. In February 2004, MoMA in New York organised a retrospective of Im's films, entitled *Im Kwon-Taek: Master Korean Filmmaker*.

<sup>41</sup> For instance, 111 Korean films were exported to thirty-nine countries in the first half of 2004 (KOFIC 2004). For more detail, see 'Korean Film Exports Results from the First Half of 2004' in

otherness of Korean cinema, the blockage that many critics refer to, still permeate western acknowledgement of Korean films, or has it finally ceased to be a factor?

The tendency to conceive Korean cinema in terms of the haunting memory of the Cold War, sex, violence and emotional excess persists. Among Korean films released or screened in North America and Europe, films from Kang Jae-Gyu's *Shiri* (1999) to Park Chanwook's *Joint Security Area* (2000) recall Cold War tensions (Brooks 2001). Films from Jang Sun-woo's *Lies* (1999) to Kim Ki-Duk's *The Isle* (2000), *Bad Guy* (2001) and *Samarita* (2003) fit western expectations of 'extreme cinema', full of violence and sex. *Silmido* (dir. Kang Woo-Suk 2004), the recent Korean box office smash hit, is considered to convey 'a characteristically Korean melancholy' (Russell 2004). Films that match western expectations are more likely to be acceptable to western distribution companies than other Korean films.<sup>42</sup> Thus, within 'the critical economy of the international art-house circuit', to borrow Berry's term, the otherness of Korean cinema still seems to be at work, no longer blocking but now controlling the flow of Korean films.

On the other hand, western commentators are establishing a label or 'brand image' to broaden the circulation of Korean films. A British film critic, Tony Rayns, seemed to be attempting to create a certain image of Korean cinema when he introduced the films of the Korean New Wave directors in the UK for the first time. Rayns (1994c) parallels the Korean New Wave with other New Wave trends: French, German, Japanese and Chinese New Wave. The social context of the New Wave trend of Korea is explained as a parallel to the situation in China. Each director of the Korean New Wave is compared to other famous directors from other New Waves: Park Kwang-Su is compared to Wim Wenders; Jang Sun-Woo to Oshima Nagisa; Lee Myung-Se to Alain Renais (Rayns 1994b). To overcome the blockage of Korean cinema, Rayns draws on the familiar conceptual tools

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*Korean Film Observatory: Quarterly Herald about the Film Industry and Policies in Korea* No.12 Summer 2004.

<sup>42</sup> There are a number of examples of this. In Australia, Jang Sun-Woo's *Lies* (1999), which has gained a reputation for explicit sex scenes, became the first commercially released Korean film, while none of his other films, well-known in Korea for their political content and creative cinematic style, have been distributed outside Korea. In the UK, Korean films such as *Shiri* (1999) and *Bad Guy* (2001) are distributed under the label of 'Asian Extreme Cinema' by Tartan.

of 'New Wave' and familiar directors' names drawn from other New Wave movements. This reflects the fact that the 'Korean New Wave' was the first retrospective that Pusan International Film Festival organised to introduce Korean films to the west. 'New Wave' is a familiar and convenient label used to introduce a new group of films to the west. Critics like Rayns are apparently attempting to create another label through which Korean films can be understood, introduced and circulated.

As well as discussing the Korean New Wave, western commentators frequently draw attention to the booming local film industry. The growing Korean film industry, which takes 40-50% of the domestic market share, has often made news with its triumphs over Hollywood films. The news that *Shiri* (dir. Kang Jae-Gyu 1999) broke the box-office record of *Titanic* (1997) in Korea was reported as a device to introduce the proliferating Korean film industry. Ever since, the expanding Korean film market and the growth of the Korean film industry have been the focal point of attention.<sup>43</sup> Since the export of Korean films to other Asian countries is expanding, the Korean film industry is often compared to that of Hong Kong. Some reviewers draw upon Hong Kong films to understand Korean films (Leong 2002; Stephens 2001b). This may be because, as Berry suggests, Korean cinema has not yet created a distinctive 'image' of otherness to surmount the blockage. Finding no appropriate conceptions of Korean cinema, western reviewers may refer to the Hong Kong cinema that is more familiar to them. Otherwise, they identify Korean cinema as similar to that of Hong Kong because of emotional excess or superfluity.

The critical economy of the international art-house circuit appears to require national cinema to exhibit a certain otherness as a kind of 'cultural currency'. Through their persistent presence at film festivals, Korean films have already generated a certain otherness and set of expectations. While the otherness of Korean cinema seems to 'block' Korean films from travelling to the west, Korean cinema faces the need to formulate a new type of otherness, tailored to the critical economy of the international art-house.

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<sup>43</sup> The international film industry magazine *Screen International* and *Variety* have continued to cover the Korean film industry and film market since 1999 when domestic films such as *Shiri* dominated the Korean box office.

Clearly, as discussed in the following sections, otherness is not only imposed by the west in the course of circulation: Koreans seek it as a prerequisite for enhancing Korean films' prospects of achieving circulation in the west. The otherness of Korean cinema thus provides a critical terrain for discussions about Orientalism and self-Orientalism, a terrain in which different types of otherness conflict and compete. Both Koreans and westerners create, project, pursue and discard the distinctive otherness of Korean cinema. As in the case of Kim Ki-young, some films show the potential to surpass and modify prevailing notions of otherness. While it is unclear to what extent Kim's films succeeded in creating a totally new type of otherness, Im's recent films set out to overcome the blockage of Korean cinema and make the presence of Korean cinema felt in the international film scene.<sup>44</sup> In the next section, I examine how Im's films are involved in notions that construct Korean cinema as other and what kind of otherness western responses to Im's films form and confirm.

### **6.3 Im's films in the west: engaging with Orientalism**

In 1994, British film critic Rayns introduced Im Kwon-Taek as 'the only veteran Korean film-maker on the cusp of (deserved) international recognition as a great director' (1994c). As mentioned earlier, Im's films have appeared frequently at European film festivals since the 1980s and he became the first Korean director to win the Director's Award at Cannes in 2002. Whilst his films consciously place Korean history and traditional culture to the fore, western commentators appear to understand them through Korean national culture and national cinema, to a greater degree than other Korean films recently circulated. This section explores how Im's films converge with western Orientalism and with the national/art cinema labelling practice based on national specificity. I examine western views of his films, mostly drawing upon western responses

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<sup>44</sup> For instance, KOFIC (Korean Film Council) publishes an annual report on Korean films participating in and gaining awards at international film festivals. The 2004 report remarks that prestigious awards like those gained by Im's films will improve the sale of Korean films in Europe and the USA (KOFIC report <http://www.kofic.or.kr/contents/board/index.aspx?Op=bv&MenuId=161&id=1929&rootid=1929&noticenum=988&currentpage=0>).

to three of them: *Sopyonje*, *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon*. I identify which cinematic elements of Im's films critics tend to focus on and how they understand his films in relation to the Korean nation and Korean culture.

Im's films include themes central to western conceptions of Korean cinema: Buddhism, Shamanism, the division of a nation and excessive sex and violence. To some extent, those of his films presented at international film festivals in the 1980s and 1990s are responsible for the conceptions of Korean cinema in the west. Amongst his films, *Mandala* (1981) and *Come, Come, Come Upward* (1989) involve Buddhism and eroticism (James 2002); *Daughter of the Flames* (1984) Shamanism; *Gilsottum* (1985) and *The Taebaek Mountains* (1994) the Korean war and the division of a nation; *The Surrogate Mother* (1986) and *Adada* (1988) women's suffering. Yet, Im's films lack one of the salient characteristics of Korean cinema in the 1980s – namely, 'emotional excess', regarded as the main cause of the blockage of Korean films. Free of such excess, Im's films seem more accessible to western viewers.

Im made some films in this period with the express aim of sending them to film festivals abroad (Ahn 1998/1999). Im seems well aware of his films' potential. In an interview with a Korean newspaper, he says,

I sincerely hope that my films will serve as cultural ambassadors by introducing not just the film itself, but also Korean culture, aesthetics and history in general.  
(Im in interview with Jang 2001; my translation)

Western commentators do indeed deem Im's films 'cultural ambassadors' for Korea, believing them to reveal Korean culture and history and illuminate 'specifically Korean issues' (Rayns 1994b; Rist 1997). They are thought to bear the essence of a national culture; their cultural authenticity is assumed. His films are thus consumed as 'ethnographic' in the west. According to Jean-Michelle Frodon, a *Cahiers du Cinéma* critic, Im's films enable foreigners to learn about several aspects of Korea: history, contemporary society, the Korean spiritual world and daily customs and culture (Frodon

2002). That is, the content of Im's films is assumed to reflect Korea as a nation. Im's work, which refers to Korean traditional culture and art, is believed to convey the essence of Korean national culture.

Western responses to *Sopyonje* and *Chihwaseon* appear to echo Fredric Jameson's comments on third world literature: they never fail to associate these films with Korea as a nation. Im wished to highlight the fate of the vanishing traditional folk music *pansori* in *Sopyonje*. Thus it is understandable if westerners read this film as reflecting the fate of Korean culture, under threat from westernisation (Wilson 2001). Yet reading the separation of brother and sister in the story as a metaphor for the division of the Korean peninsula (Totaro 1999) seems far-fetched, especially given that the film does not deal with historical themes related to the division. In *Chihwaseon*, the historical background of late 19<sup>th</sup> century *Chosun* seems to worry western reviewers, who often underline the need to understand Korean history if one is to comprehend the film: 'For viewers not versed in Korean history, the movie's broader narrative currents may be hard to follow' (Scott 2002); 'The broader context is occasionally hard to follow for audiences unfamiliar with Korean history' (Johnston 2002). This emphasis on understanding concrete historical situations, which reviewers tend to depict in a brief and erratic manner, seems to derive from a desire to read the film in terms of national history. The life and art of the main character, Jang Seung-Up, a famous late 19<sup>th</sup> century Korean painter, is also understood in terms of national allegory: 'Jang's divided nature is mirrored by that of Korea itself, at the mercy of revolt from within, and invasion from the outside' (Smith 2003); 'His work, undertaken at a time when the country was struggling to retain its identity in the shadow of its more powerful, imperially minded neighbors, Japan and China, is understood as an expression of the strength and uniqueness of Korean culture' (Scott 2002).

According to one interview with Im, he himself was uncertain about the extent to which Jang's art responded to the historical situation. Im therefore ended up simply presenting Jang's life and the historical surroundings without suggesting a crucial or causal relationship between them (Jung 2003: 477-481). Seen in this light, another western

critic's view that Im lets 'this outsider figure witness some of the tumultuous events affecting Korean society at the time' seems more valid (Macnab 2003). Geoffrey Macnab discusses Im's deployment of historical background as follows.

Throughout Im touches obliquely on the social and political chaos of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Korea, as peasants revolt, Catholics are persecuted and the Japanese threaten invasion. None of this turbulence finds its way directly into Jang's exquisite paintings of birds, trees and flowers, but we're always made aware of the context in which he is working. (Macnab 2003)

This account corresponds to Im's directorial intention. Criticism does not, of course, necessarily have to be anchored in the filmmaker's intentions. Nonetheless, this example brings out how misleading an infatuation with reading films as national allegory can be.

Second, since *Sopyonje*, *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon* draw on traditional culture (*pansori* and Korean painting), these films are considered to represent the essential forms of Korean national culture. Im's much earlier film *The Genealogy* (1978) includes a scene in which the main character appreciates the beauty of Korean ceramics. This scene operates as a sign enabling the whole film to be read as 'an aesthetics model' embedded in the art of traditional Korean ceramics (James 2002: 55). For David James, traditional Korean ceramics undoubtedly 'embody an essential form of Korean culture' (2002: 55). In his view, the essential form of Korean culture can be understood in relation to 'female-gendered conceptualization of the nation' and 'the trauma of Korean history – *han*'.<sup>45</sup> In

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<sup>45</sup> It is very difficult to define '*han*'. There exist various definitions even among Korean scholars. In general, *han* is understood as an emotion that has accrued in the mind of people who suffered for a long time harsh social, historical and personal situations beyond their control. In this definition, *han* does not seem a specifically Korean experience. When *han* is articulated as a particularly Korean historical experience, it is believed to represent the common emotional experience of the Korean nation, which suffered foreign invasion and Japanese colonisation. Often it refers to Korean women's collective sense of deep sadness suffered under the Confucian order of the Chosun Dynasty. See Lee Younghee, *Ideology, Culture, and Han: Traditional and Early Modern Korean Women's Literature* (2002). Jinsoo An indicates that domestic discourses of cultural nationalism on *han* verge towards a certain degree of mythicism when they stress its 'incommensurability' (2003:70-71). See Jinsoo An (2003) '*Money, Localism and the Agricultural Economy of the 1950s*'.

the same vein, *Sopyonje* and *Chunhyang* are thought to convey the essence of Korean national culture since their themes and cinematic aesthetics are bound up with traditional *pansori* folk music. *Chihwaseon* is believed to express national culture by dealing with the life and work of a prominent Korean painter in parallel with historical events (Heilman 2002).

Steve Neale points out that films ‘produced by a specific national film industry’ tend to turn to ‘the cultural traditions specific to the country involved’ as an effective means of differentiating themselves from Hollywood films (1981: 14-15). Im’s employment of *pansori* and Korean painting reflects the same underlying practice of national/art cinema. Western commentators assume that films that refer to cultural traditions express the essence of the nation involved. I question this practice, underlining how particular cultural traditions are selected and mobilised as national culture for various purposes in specific historical periods (Choi 2002). According to Chungmoo Choi, *pansori*<sup>46</sup> was an almost forgotten popular music genre until the 1970s, when it was re-discovered and mobilised for contrasting purposes both by South Korean antigovernment activists and the government. Antigovernment groups revived *pansori* as a means to boost the spirit of resistance among the *minjung* (socially repressed). The military dictatorship was also interested in preserving *pansori* as a cultural symbol to mobilise and unify people through an essential national spirit – *han* (Choi 2002: 111-113). The fact that *pansori* requires preservation and conscious efforts to resurrect it implies that it has already lost its popular base within Korean culture. Korean audiences probably found it a strange and unfamiliar genre. Thus, a film whose basic cinematic form draws on *pansori* can be received as nothing other than ‘Other’ by Korean audiences. That is, the traditional culture represented by *pansori* is only *one* of many possible national cultures, which is legitimised by a governing group. It is thus misleading to presume that films that refer to

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<sup>46</sup> *Pansori* is a form of traditional Korean music dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is performed by a singer, who tells a story through song and a drummer who controls the tempo by giving the singer the appropriate rhythm for each part of the story. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was mostly enjoyed by the lower classes and declined in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century during the Japanese colonial period.

traditional culture naturally convey national culture or national essence. The contexts in which it was made ‘the national culture’ ought to be taken into account.

In newspaper film reviews, traditional art forms often fail to attract attention. By contrast, film critics and reviewers invariably mention the visual images and sensual quality of Im’s films. *Pansori* is merely introduced as ‘a musical of sorts’ (Strohmeier 2001), ‘the opera’, or ‘the national song-dance theatrical medium’ (Wilmington 2003). The sensuality of the set design, the costumes, the locations and the cinematography are mentioned as the film’s main attractions. Critics claim that *Chihwaseon* interleaves ‘the lyrical, recreated beauty of the painting’ with ‘lush cinematography’ (Kermode 2003) to create images that are ‘beautiful to look at’ (Kermode 2003; Musetto 2003; Parekh 2003; Smith 2003 etc.): ‘Mr. Im’s aesthetic command is evident in the movie’s wealth of beautiful, perfectly framed images of nature – shots so full of passion and perception that they could almost be paintings themselves’ (Scott 2002). Rayns highlights Im’s ‘preference for the visual over the verbal’ and ‘his consistent sensitivity to pictorial values’ (1994a: 7). Overall, the sensuality and the beauty of the visual image seems to be the key element attracting attention.

In *Sopyonje* and *Chihwaseon*, the Korean landscape is presented through beautiful cinematography – ‘the spectacular tableaux of . . . Korea’s mountains and shorelines’ (James 2003: 75; Wilson 2001). James states that, in Im’s films, ‘the body of the Korean landscape’ is utilised ‘to represent the nation in its pristine precolonial state’ while ‘the bodies of Korean women’ represent ‘the recent historical fate’ of Korea (2002: 56). James points out that, in attracting the foreign tourists’ gaze, the spectacular landscape of South Korea involves ‘the imbrication of the cultural tourism of cinema with the global politics of the tourist industry’ (2002: 57-58). At the same time, the spectacular landscape constitutes the representative image of Korea as a nation, which circulates as a stereotypical image for tourists’ postcards. The scenery is the nostalgic and imaginary space of the pre-colonial and the pre-modern. For this reason, this landscape is rather unfamiliar and exotic even for Korean audiences (Choi 2002). While this is rarely noticed

nor mentioned, images of the beautiful landscape co-operate with traditional cultural practice to constitute an *authentic* national image.

Third, Im's films are not only considered to represent Korea and Korean culture but also as an allegory of Korean national cinema. For James, Im's films are a part of his project of resuscitating 'a national cinema subject to neo-colonial political control and censorship, and marginalized by the global hegemony of the American capitalist film industry' (2002: 48). James emphasises that against 'the absence of a stable infrastructure', Im has made efforts to make films that 'confront the manifold traumas of Korean history' and to 'create a specifically Korean art film style' (2002: 49-51). The scholar here suggests that through *Chihwaseon*, about an artist's struggle to create a distinctive style of painting, Im is striving 'to create a cinematic alternative to Hollywood' (James 2003: 76). For Wilson, whilst *Sopyonje* can be read 'as a global/local market allegory', it is 'a film allegorizing the very fate of contemporary Korean national film production' (2001: 311). Wilson claims that in the course of confronting the threat of globalisation and Hollywood, Im 'turns inward' – to express 'distinctly Korea-based history and "local" sensibility' (Wilson 2001: 311). Wilson argues that Im's films and his career as a filmmaker have come to represent Korean cinema itself. Such a view recurs in various reviews, which introduce Im as 'the godfather of Korean cinema' or 'the best filmmaker in the history of Korea' (Beech 2002; Wilmington 2003).

Lastly, I want to bring out how Im's conscious efforts to attract international attention to his films are perceived. Western critics' responses to Im's films are ambivalent. While Im's films meet the requirements of national/art cinema and are acclaimed as such, some sceptics claim that Im adopts a reliable formula for success in film festivals and the international art-house circuit: *Chihwaseon* is equipped with all the right elements for festival film acclaim (Rechtshaffen 2002); since Korea is 'not a country known for making films of wide taste', *Chihwaseon* is considered to aim at 'universality' by developing a 'mini-genre' of 'screen lives of the great artists' (Macnab 2003); the main character, Jang Seung-Up, fits the 'western archetypes of the artist' (Macnab 2003); the

casting of the female characters seems to take cues from the films of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige (Brenner 2003).

In practice, *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon* seem to gain quite different recognition from *Sopyonje*. Im's *Sopyonje* leads one to ask:

Why . . . have these Korean films remained so trenchantly localist, so haunted by the national imaginary of trauma and division and self-redemption, given the era of transnational globalization? (Wilson 2001: 314)

In contrast, *Chunhyang* is recognised as a romantic love story paying homage to Judy Garland (Mitchell 2000; Stratton 2000). Critics compare it with other films about artists such as Jackson Pollock, describing it as the 'most accessible' Im film so far and as good for 'distributors and TV programmers seeking out quality fare' (Johnston 2002). Also, as *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon* were consecutively included at the official competition section of the Cannes Film Festival, Im's conscious efforts to produce films suitable for western circulation as art cinema seem to have paid off. Almost every reviewer of *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon* mentions the award or nomination at Cannes as if this guarantees the quality of the films and Im's position as an auteur director. The Cannes film festival thus functions to authorise the cinematic quality of films and thus to control the flow of 'art films'. After inclusion at the official competition section at Cannes, *Chunhyang* became the first Korean film to be distributed in North America by Kino International, while *Chihwaseon* was distributed in Europe by the prominent French distribution company Pathé.

On the other hand, *Sopyonje* was a big success at the domestic box office in South Korea, setting the record for a domestic film in 1993. It failed however to impress international film festivals as much as the breakthrough film of the Chinese Fifth generation – Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou's *Yellow Earth*.<sup>47</sup> Berry suggests that the failure of *Sopyonje*

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<sup>47</sup> *Sopyonje* was only invited to the *Un Certain Regard* section at Cannes; Im turned down this invitation.

results from ‘sharing too many characteristics with the historical and exotic recent films of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige’ (1998a: 46). While the films of the Chinese Fifth generation aroused western critical interest, they provoked a number of influential critical works about western Orientalism and self-Orientalism. Critical works examining the Orientalism and self-Orientalism in these films had made their mark on western critics. In such circumstances, Korean films are bound to be subject to western scholars’ and critics’ self-reflective views on the western Orientalist gaze. As mentioned earlier, James shows that Im’s films employ the spectacular South Korean landscape to attract the tourist’s gaze of the foreign spectator (James 2002: 57-58). While appreciating Im’s ‘attempts to fashion a specifically Korean film language’, James keeps an eye on the environments in which Im is working. In James’ view, these overflow with ‘the temptation for Im to sell himself to the international film market’ (2003: 76). In a similar fashion, Wilson celebrates Im’s ‘strategic localism’ as a means of overcoming the threat of globalisation, but reminds us of ‘the risk of such nativist localism’, which may lead to a ‘self-orientalizing and regressive gaze upon spaces of exoticism-cum-eroticism’ (2001: 311-312).

In this section, I have shown how Im’s films – especially, *Sopyonje*, *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon* – elicit particular responses. Almost as a rule, Im’s films are instantly appropriated and slotted into limited notions of national history and national allegory. These notions refer to traditional cultural practices; western commentators almost always believe them to convey the Korean national essence. While Im’s films fit the labelling practice and expectations of ‘national/art cinema’ in the west, they are also believed to reflect the vulnerable situation of national cinema under the threat of globalisation. On the other hand, Im’s conscious efforts to satisfy the expectations of the international art-house circuit and film festivals seem to have hit home. His recent films have been distributed in Europe and North America as a result of nomination and awards at the Cannes film festival. In this process, western critics and scholars, some of whom are aware of the influence of Orientalism on East Asian films, detect the self-Orientalist elements of Im’s films. This section has dealt with the western contexts in which Im’s

films are constructed as ‘representative’ of Korean cinema; the next examines the domestic contexts of this phenomenon.

#### **6.4 making Korean national cinema and self-Orientalism**

As shown in the previous section, Im’s films are thought to signify Korean-ness as a unique ‘nation-ness’. This type of western recognition fits with the nationalist view of Korean culture and Korean cinema underlying Im’s films.

The people who live in the Far East, in the small cornered region called Korea, need to find their unique characteristics. . . . In my films, I have attempted to feature the lives of Koreans, what we have lost, what we find tragic, the source of this tragedy, the barriers in our lives, why we have these barriers, and so on. These feelings can possibly be displayed in the medium of film, then I find it tempting to do so and send this regional culture abroad to gain some kind of recognition for it. (Im 2002: 250)

As this quotation demonstrates, Im has great faith in the unitary essence of Korean culture. For him, ‘Korean-ness’ – Korea’s ‘unique characteristics’ – is something already given, and which thus can be found. He also assumes that it is something all Koreans naturally share and are able to understand. Equally, Im is aware that a film that places the regional ‘Korean’ culture in the foreground can easily draw attention abroad. My contention is that the Korean nationalism embedded in Im’s films is complicit with western Orientalism. Korean nationalism not only involves self-Orientalism as ‘inverted’ Orientalism, but also reinforces itself in co-operation with western Orientalism. This section examines these two inter-related aspects of self-Orientalism in Im’s films. I illuminate how the self-Orientalism in Im’s films is entangled with Korean nationalism and western Orientalism.

Before *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon* were selected for Cannes, *Sopyonje* was the film western commentators most frequently described as representative of Korean cinema; it also proved extremely popular within South Korea (Jackson and Kim 2004: 74-75). In this and the following section, I focus on *Sopyonje*. This film denotes a significant moment not only in Im's career as a filmmaker but also in the social context of Korean discourse on globalisation. Im's views on Korean traditions and cinematic aesthetics seem to be consummated in this film (Min et al. 2002: 131-137). They also pervade his subsequent work. The domestic success of *Sopyonje* seems to interlace domestic discussions on globalization and local nativist views prevalent at the time – discourses on 'saegaehwa'<sup>48</sup> and 'shintobuli' (Cho 2002; Willemen 2002).

In 1993, 1.16 million South Korean cinema goers watched *Sopyonje*, breaking the box office record for domestic films set by Im's *The Son of General* (1991). Stimulated by the entirely unexpected success of the film, domestic reviews appraise *Sopyonje* highly (see *Sopyonje Film Story* 1993). Korean commentators tend to locate its virtue in its enabling Koreans to rediscover the beauty of the Korean landscape and the artistic value of the 'near-defunct' traditional *pansori* music (Min et al. 2002: 131-132). These reviews confidently assert that *han* – Korean national pathos – is the film's central motif (Cho 2002; Choi 2002; Chung 1993). The phenomenal success of this film boosted popular interest in *pansori*. It precipitated the nativist discourse whose motto was *shintobuli*. Simultaneously, *Sopyonje* was believed to show how Korea as a nation can engage with globalisation. Through *Sopyonje* and accompanying nationalist discourses, forgotten 'Korean' culture is re-discovered to endorse the uniqueness of Korea as a nation, a uniqueness only comprehensible to Korean people (Kim 2002). The value of Korean culture is re-confirmed and becomes the object of national pride; even 'westerners'

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<sup>48</sup> *Saegaewha* was a catchphrase that was put forward as the primary goal of the nationalist project pursued by the Kim Young-Sam government which replaced the military regime in 1991. *Saegaewha* is a Korean term which can be translated as 'globalisation'. The Kim Young-Sam government opened the Korean domestic market to American products, joined the WTO and attracted international capital investment. Domestically, it urged Koreans to achieve international standards of professional skills and knowledge in order to succeed in the world market. Nativist discourses were brought into the public domain as a reaction to this policy. See Soyoung Kim (1998) and Samuel S. Kim (2000).

appreciate it. Nationalist discourse thus proclaims that re-embracing ‘our culture’ and selling it abroad is the most sensible way to participate in globalisation.

Chow, exploring how ‘primitive passion’ marks the Chinese Fifth Generation directors’ self-Orientalist films, remarks that the landscape, primitive or exotic cultural rituals and women become the object of this self-Orientalist gaze in search of a national culture (1995). In a similar vein, Im also turns to the landscape, women and *pansori* as a vanishing traditional culture. His nativist approach, locked in a firm embrace with Korean nationalism, is self-Orientalist in that he repeats and embodies the views of western Orientalism. He also clearly attempts to satisfy western expectations entrenched in Orientalism, while verifying his nativist approach on the basis of western recognition.

In *Sopyonje*, Im turns a nostalgic gaze towards ‘the landscape of the memorialized past’ (Choi 2002). In this recalled nostalgic past, *pansori* is presented as beset by crisis, as the process of modernization replaces it with Japanese or western music. *Pansori*, here, is presented as a fundamentally Korean traditional cultural practice that preserves the essence of national spirituality. Choi emphasises that ‘the nostalgic gaze’ and ‘the tourist’s gaze’ found in *Sopyonje* ‘exoticizes and eroticizes Korea by rediscovering it as “the sacred, uncontaminated, that is, undeveloped virgin land”’ (2002: 116). According to Choi, *Sopyonje* thus wipes out ‘the intensely developed industrial country that lies outside the camera frame’ (2002: 116).

In an interview, Im expressed his notions of nature and his native land as follows.

Furthermore, nature symbolizes our homeland . . . (W)e also long for our native land which is hard to find again. The need – it is a collective need – for our home is basically nothing other than the desire for our cultural identity. (Im in interview with Flubacher-Rhim 1998/1999: 51)

For Im, nature symbolizes the native land, ‘our homeland’, which has already disappeared. Although he is aware that the homeland as such no longer exists, he wants to

bring it back to solidify ‘our cultural identity’. As Choi indicates, modernisation is the main cause of the disappearance of ‘our homeland’; the beautiful Korean landscape presented in Im’s films disguises the highly industrialised, culturally mixed, ‘impure’ reality of Korean society. Through *Sopyonje*, Im tries to bring back the ideal and ‘purified’ – thus, imaginary – homeland.

Im revives *pansori* as ‘national’ culture, declaring that he is motivated by a desire to save ‘our traditional culture’, which a ‘new international and more aggressive culture’ is decimating (Min et al. 2002: 131). Just as the ‘pure’ homeland is purely imaginary, *pansori* was a ‘bygone’ traditional culture in the minds of the Korean public. While *pansori* is presented in Im’s films as a genre exuding the pure essence of national culture, its revival has been pursued for specific reasons within a unique social matrix. In the 1970s, when *pansori* attracted dissident political groups, it also attracted the interest of the government, which wanted to preserve vanishing traditional art forms as an ‘Intangible Cultural Asset’ (Choi 2002: 112). Such preservation was pursued through ‘the Cultural Preservation Law’ introduced by the military regime. This law reinforces invented ‘traditionalism’ to justify state-nationalism – the main ideology of the military dictatorship (Moon 1998). Both ‘the subversive cultural resistance movement’ and ‘the government’s official cultural nationalism’ (Choi 2002: 112) made *pansori* central to ‘national culture’. In the early 1990s, *Sopyonje* again revived *pansori* and hailed it as *the* national culture, reflecting a nationalist concern to revivify and essentialise vanished culture in the face of the reality of contemporary South Korea, a country profoundly imbued with western influence and the effects of globalisation.

The nativist turn to the past that Im has performed is sometimes appreciated as ‘strategic localism’ vis-à-vis the ‘global/local plight’ (Wilson 2001: 308). According to Wilson, in *Sopyonje*, Im ‘turns inward towards Korean history and native tradition’ to confront globalization that attempts to devour local culture (2001: 310). In Wilson’s account, Im’s return to ‘distinctly Korean-based history and “local” sensibility’ is conjectured to be his ‘own crafted strategy’ for local resistance and ‘nation-based survival’ (2001: 311).

In response to the celebration of the nativist turn, Arif Dirlik warns that localism entrenched in nativist discourse tends to ‘overlook past oppressions’ involved in the resistance to modernisation and globalisation (1996b: 37). Dirlik argues that ‘in the name of recovery of spirituality’, such localism verifies past ‘religiosity’ as an ‘excuse for class and patriarchal inequalities’ (1996b: 37). Thus, according to Dirlik, ‘insistence on local “purity”’ often functions as an excuse ‘for a reactionary revival of older forms of oppression’ (1996b: 37). Dirlik emphasises that this nativist response also blinds us to the culture ‘of the present, of the living’, ‘an ongoing construction of everyday practice’ (1996b: 39). He contends that culture should be considered as full of ‘conjunctures between past and present, between different social and cultural structures’ (1996b: 39).

Dirlik is surely right: while mobilising and drawing upon nativist discourses, nationalism operates to justify present oppression, based on the reactionary revival of old forms of oppression. *Sopyonje* perpetuates a patriarchal nationalism that degrades women in the name of tradition. In this film, the main character, *pansori* singer Yu-Bong, intentionally blinds his daughter Song-hwa to help perfect her *pansori* skills. The female body is seized by the patriarchal nationalist project. This project creates a ‘spiritual’ inner domain which bears ‘the “essential” marks of cultural identity’ and imposes this domain on women (Chatterjee 1993: 6). Patriarchal nationalism was adopted by the military dictatorship to serve its modernisation project (Kim 2002; Moon 1998). The nativist discourse that *Sopyonje* embodies thus seems to be employed to validate the project of modernisation in the name of the nation. While modernisation of the material domain is propelled by the nationalist project, certain traditions are reinvented and remobilised to prove that the national ‘spiritual’ realm is thriving despite modernisation. Attempts to revive *pansori* as a distinctive national tradition are thus a vital part of the modernization process, not opposed to it. Partha Chatterjee (1993) states that when non-European nationalism pursues modernization, it faces a problem: modernisation implies subjugation to the west. To annul the superiority of the west, according to Chatterjee, nationalist thought splits the social sphere into two separate domains – ‘the spiritual’ and ‘the material’. It claims that the spiritual domain requires a pure and uncontaminated cultural essence. Nationalism thus becomes complicit with western Orientalism, constructing the

spiritual domain with ‘the same essential characteristics depicted in Orientalism’ (Yeegenoglu 1998: 123-124). *Pansori* became a cultural object in need of preservation through ‘the Cultural Preservation Law’ in the 1970s, signalling that Korean society was in a phase of intense modernisation. Modernisation required the myth of an intact spiritual domain, embodied in traditions such as *pansori*.

Equally, the conscious pursuit of a pure local culture or distinctive national culture reveals how much the local culture is already enmeshed with western culture. It is precisely when one finds the daily life and contemporary reality of a society irrevocably infused with the influence of western culture that conscious efforts begin in earnest to define a national culture, supposedly completely different from western culture (Lu 2002; Narayan 1997). This partly explains the phenomenal success of *Sopyonje* in Korea in 1993. As Im mentions, Korean society had achieved a high degree of material affluence, the chief aim of the nationalist modernisation project (Im in Flubacher-Rhim 1998/1999). At the same time, Koreans became aware that Korean culture had been profoundly and irreversibly westernised in the course of modernisation. *Sopyonje* acutely depicts the nationalist anxiety caused by this realisation. It attempts to resolve this anxiety by bringing back the purified homeland on-screen and reviving *pansori* as a cultural practice that allegedly preserves the essence of national culture.

Im’s films make Orientalist assumptions when they define national culture as completely different and detached from western culture. National culture is presumed to be something of the past, eternal and essential. In the concomitant nationalist discourse on *Sopyonje*, *pansori* and its underlying emotion – *han* – are asserted to be something ‘we Koreans’ naturally understand and ‘only we Koreans’ can understand, while foreigners will never be able to understand these things (Cho 2002: 138-149). Such a view of national culture reiterates western Orientalist assumptions, in a simply inverted way. Uma Narayan pinpoints how anti-colonial nationalists shared the colonising powers’ views on the ‘differences in ... cultures and values’ (1997: 15). According to Narayan, ‘the contrast between the values of “Western” culture and the values of colonized cultures’ emphasised by such nationalism was ‘initially something insisted on by the colonizing

powers' (1997: 14). That is, while Orientalism incarcerates other cultures in a prison of permanent otherness with a completely different cultural essence, such nationalism claims the absolute and essential difference of its own culture from western culture.

Arguably, Im's self-Orientalist approach to Korean national culture requires western confirmation to secure its authority. Ironically, the national culture that is allegedly incomprehensible and completely 'other' to foreigners needs western appreciation to consolidate its value. Western critics' and audiences' appreciation of *pansori* and *Sopyonje* seems to play a crucial role in affirming the cultural identity of Korea as a nation and the identity of Korean cinema. In an attempt to gain western recognition, Im 'self-Orientalises' and 'self-exoticises' in his films. This co-operative network consisting of western Orientalism, self-Orientalism and nationalism disregards and alienates the 'here and now' reality of Korean culture.

While Im's films were made for festivals, the awards he received abroad seemed to reinforce his determination to make *Korean* films.

Only the films that contain Korean feelings and Korean style will be universal. I believed Korean filmmakers must provide a Korean viewpoint.  
(interview with Lent 1995: 91)

The claim that only genuinely Korean things can achieve universality disguises the fact that it is the self-Orientalist features which capture western interest. In other words, if Im's films appear more appealing to western critics than other Korean films, it is not because Im's films achieve 'universality' while other Korean films fail to do so. It is rather because Im's films satisfy western Orientalist expectations by embodying the 'Korean', as understood in western Orientalism. Western acclaim for Im's films is used not only to validate Im's films' status as 'representative' of Korean cinema, but to authenticate Im's claim that 'we need to pursue a certain essence of Korean-ness to achieve universality'.

In fact, in order to garner prestigious awards in the west, Im was apparently forced to accommodate his films to western expectations of Asian – Korean – films. If *Sopyonje* reflects Im's self-Orientalism as a nationalist and nativist response to the westernisation of Korean society, *Chunhyang* and *Chiwaseon* reveal him employing self-Orientalist elements more strategically to capture western attention. *Chunhyang* (2000) had to be re-edited before travelling to Cannes. In the international version, three *pansori* scenes were cut while sex scenes remained.<sup>49</sup> Given that Im's primary concern in making *Chunhyang* was to instruct the public about *pansori*, such re-editing for Cannes could not be more self-contradictory.

The two different versions of *Chunhyang* seem to instigate different responses. The majority of Korean reviews introduce the domestic version of *Chunhyang* as a film that beautifully visualises traditional Korean culture – *pansori*. Domestic reviews mostly emphasise the formal experiments pursued in this film, which attempts to visualise the rhythm and emotion of *pansori* in cinematic forms.<sup>50</sup> American and French reviews of the international version tend to pay attention to the love story, not *pansori*. The formal experiments are usually acknowledged by describing *pansori* merely as 'a kind of musical'.<sup>51</sup> Whilst most Korean reviews ignore the film's eroticism, French and American reviews characterise *Chunhyang* as an erotic film. In other words, while the domestic version leads domestic reviewers to focus on the aesthetic value of *pansori* and the formal cinematic experiments of the film, the international version allows western reviewers to interpret the film as a high quality erotic and exotic love story.

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<sup>49</sup> See Yong-Kwan Lee, 'Three Readings: One Text – Im Kwon-Taek's *Chunhyang*', *Cinemaya* No.49, Autumn 2000. A Korean newspaper, *The Chosun Ilbo* also reports that the three scenes explaining *pansori* were cut by the director, following advice from Cannes. May 16 2000.

<sup>50</sup> For instance, see Kim Young-Jin, 'Beautiful appearance, but does not know how to play' (my translation) – 김영진, '고운 그 자태 놀 줄은 모르는구나' in *Cine 21*, February 07 2000.

<sup>51</sup> For instance, see Elvis Mitchell, "'Chunhyang': How a Korean Folk Form Freshens a Fairy Tale Love', in *The New York Times* September 23 2000, Robert Strohmeier, <http://www.filmcritic.com/misc/emporium.nsf/ddb5490109a79f598625623d0015f1e4/f16924b28f1e9fe75882569e600234d12?OpenDocument> and see also Jean-Claude Loiseau, 'Le Chant de la Fidèle Chunhyang' in *Télérama* no. 2654, November 22 2000.

Why then did Im need to produce a ‘Cannes’ version, more erotic and with fewer instructive scenes about *pansori*? Korean film scholar Yong-Kwan Lee says that ‘the Cannes version voluntarily conformed to the flawed notion of Orientalism’ in an attempt to ‘catch the attention of international viewers by adding carnal ingredients such as sex and nudity’ (2000: 18). This criticism is backed up by the fact that ‘the Cannes version’ appears to conflict with Im’s own statements – that the subject matter of Korean films must be ‘something that couldn’t have been conceived unless you’re a Korean’ (Im 2002: 250). *Chunhyang*’s international version would have had to retain the instructive scenes rather than the erotic ones to remain in line with Im’s notion. Ironically, Im’s nationalist approach to making ‘Korean’ films requires western endorsement attainable by satisfying western Orientalism. The Cannes version of *Chunhyang* reveals that when Im wishes to assert Korean national culture by making genuinely *Korean* films, his primary concern is giving westerners ‘what they want to see’.<sup>52</sup>

On the other hand, Im’s quest for western recognition must be considered in relation to domestic politics and the condition of the Korean film industry. As mentioned earlier, in the 1980s, the military regime wished to improve Korea’s image in the world, an image tainted by brutal repression. As Im’s films deal with ‘local aesthetics and national history’, but steer clear of ‘direct political protest’, the regime considered them ‘a perfect fit’ and allowed them to appear at international film festivals (Kim 2002: 35). Im’s *The Surrogate Mother* and *Sopyonje* for example were made with the intention of sending them to festivals, as Im himself admits (Jung 2003).

At the same time, international film festivals present Im’s films as representative of Korean cinema and describe them as examples of ‘Korean cinema’s survival tactics after the Hollywood onslaught’ (Kim 2002: 35). Berry highlights how the art-house circuit constructs ‘countries of origin’ – nationality – and ‘auteurs’, just as commercial cinema and Hollywood evoke ‘genre and stars’ (1998a: 44). Formulating a stereotypical image of

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<sup>52</sup> In the interview with Jung Sung-Il, Im reveals that one member of the Cannes committee was very concerned about whether *Chihwaseon* would include sexual scenes and persistently asked him to include some. Im had been considering doing so, and put sexual scenes in a rather unexpected part of the film.

a national cinema thus seems significant within the art-house circuit. Korean critics and the Korean film industry are well aware of this fact. From the late 1980s, ‘awards at international film festivals’ were sought as ‘one of the most effective ways for a film from a developing country to get international recognition’ (Ho 1989: 35). In line with this, Korean film critics and the Korean film industry came to place ever greater emphasis upon the reception of Korean films in the west and their success at international film festivals.<sup>53</sup> The Korean film industry, thriving domestically, sought export routes into the world market; an auteur director became urgently necessary to put Korean cinema on the map of world cinema and establish its image (Jeon 2001; Frater 2003). With the help of his nativist approach and the awards garnered by his previous films, Im was once again promoted as a national auteur director abroad.

The Korean media hail Im’s film festival awards as they might the winning of an Olympic gold medal by the Korean national team (Han 2000). *Chihwaseon*’s award-winning at Cannes is not simply regarded as Im’s personal achievement as a filmmaker. Rather, it is reported as honouring Korean cinema or the Korean nation as a whole. Cannes is believed to finally confirm the excellence of Korean cinema. Im was even awarded a national medal by the Korean government for honouring the nation (Han 2000). Im thus becomes a national hero; *Chihwaseon* becomes representative of Korean national cinema. Im’s promotion as a national auteur director is thus about more than the film industry’s desire to get Korean films into the world art-house circuit. The obsession with winning awards at Cannes signifies that Im’s nationalism and Korean nationalism in general depend on western endorsement. In a similar fashion, the obsession unravels the vulnerable process of making Korean *national* cinema. Endorsement from the west is pursued as a prerequisite for certifying the aesthetic achievement of Korean cinema and assuring the quality of Korean films.

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<sup>53</sup> Korean film journals such as *Film Critiques* (영화비평 ) and *Cine 21* have frequently dealt with the subject of ‘how Korean films are recognised in international film festivals’, ‘what kind of Korean films appear more appealing to western audiences’ and ‘how Korean films are received among western critics’ as a special topic. See *Film Critiques* (영화비평 ) no.1, no2. and *Cine 21* no.355.

In conclusion, as Im constitutes the nostalgic past with uncontaminated landscapes and supposedly essential national culture, his nationalism becomes self-Orientalist, internalising western Orientalism. To authorise his nationalist claims, Im needs western endorsement, gleaned by winning awards at international film festivals. Im's films such as *Chunhyang* reflect his effort to capture western attention by meeting western expectations. Through Im's self-Orientalist films, Korean nationalism thus collaborates with western Orientalism, which confines Korean cinema to an 'exotic other' ghetto. Meyda Yegenoglu comments that 'although the notions of authenticity and nativism appear to be the opposite of Orientalism, they are in fact the very product of Orientalist hegemony' (1998: 121). Yet, although the self-Orientalism in Im's films may be the product of such hegemony, we must take into account the national and social settings in which it is formulated and employed. As discussed in the previous chapters, Kitano's self-Orientalist strategy and Zhang's self-Orientalism were formulated and employed in response to their respective national and social contexts. The self-Orientalism in Im's films is supported by Korean nationalist discourses and the economic interests of a domestic film industry which is increasingly eyeing the international market.

In the next section, I examine further the relationship between western Orientalism, self-Orientalism and nationalism. I have here elaborated the self-Orientalist elements of Im's films and explained their entanglement with nationalism and western Orientalism. The most significant finding in this section is that the nationalist claims underlying Im's films rely on western endorsement. His films attain such endorsement by satisfying 'Orientalist' assumptions. The next section sheds light on the issue of gender, which is sidelined by nationalist and Orientalist discourses.

### **6.5 making the myth of 'Korean cinema': the fragmentary nature of the national project and the issue of gender**

Im's films allegedly represent the Korean national essence and are acknowledged to do so in the west. Korean audiences, however, do not entirely accept 'the national essence'

asserted by Im's films. Domestically, many feminists have denounced his films. Stringer suggests that *Sopyonje* provides a critical vantage-point from which western critics can glimpse 'the fragmentary nature of Korean national identity' (2002b: 172). Stringer though pays little attention to how this fragmentary identity is concealed or to how Im's nationalist project depends on western confirmation. In the following, I investigate how the fragmentary nature of the national project is overlooked as western commentators embrace Im's films as representative of Korean cinema and of Korea as a nation. I probe gender in Im's films to get to grips with how and why discussions of this issue are taken far less seriously when his films travel to the west.

Let me begin with Stringer's phrase – 'the fragmentary nature of Korean national identity'. Stringer asks why, in the last scene of *Sopyonje*, supposedly the climax of the film, the diegetic sound of *pansori* has to be mixed with inserted instrumental synthesizer music. He puts forward two plausible explanations: 1) 'the "hidden" *pansori* in the reunion scene calls forth a myriad different emotional investments around a common perception of feeling'; 2) 'there is no such thing as a unified entity called "the Korean people" who all experience the same sense of *han* when watching *Sopyonje*' (2002b: 172). These explanations seem not to satisfy Stringer. He eventually reaches the conclusion that Im is rejecting the 'cultural objectification' of *pansori*, the musical form so central throughout the film. According to Stringer, Im thus aims to preserve "'inner meaning" – the spiritual core of *pansori*' (2002b: 177).

Stringer however seems to miss the most clear sense in which *pansori* reveals the 'fragmentary' nature of Korean national identity. As he mentions, when *pansori* is broadcast on TV or radio, it is always played in fragments, not as a whole piece. For most Koreans, listening to *pansori* is an unfamiliar, even strange experience. Im may have expected Korean audiences to leave the cinema rather than stay and watch/listen to the film until the *pansori* ends. Also, as Im states in an interview, he found it difficult to convey the emotion of the final scene by relying only upon the sound of *pansori* (Jung 2003: 307). He thus needed to add non-diegetic music to the sound of *pansori* in order to boost the emotional impact of the climax. *Pansori*, then, may fail to make a sufficient

emotional impact on Korean audiences. *Pansori* is generally alien to the daily life of Koreans. Accordingly, *pansori* appeals to Korean audiences as an example of a strange other culture from the past, and *Sopyonje*'s domestic success seems indebted to its appeal as an ethnographic film, even for Korean audiences (e.g. Chung 1993).

My contention is that Im's project, which claims to convey the essence of national culture, is intrinsically incomplete. Anne McClintock argues that '(n)ations are contested systems of cultural representation that limit and legitimize people's access to the resources of the nation-state' ([1991] 1996: 260). Asserting that a specific cultural form represents the nation means oppressing others. Andrew Higson underlines that 'proclamations of national cinema' often involve a 'form of "internal cultural colonialism"' (2002: 63). Higson states,

Cinema never simply reflects or expresses an already fully-formed and homogeneous national culture and identity, as if it were the undeniable property of all national subjects; certainly, it privileges only a limited range of subject positions which thereby become naturalized or reproduced as the only legitimate positions of the national subject. (2002: 63)

On this view, when Im's films claim to be representative of national cinema, they cannot but become 'institutions' that hinder 'diverse and contradictory discourses' and 'contain difference and contradiction' (2002: 63). Gender, more than any other factor, lays bare the failure of Im's films to represent Korean national cinema and undermines the national subject his films promote.

The fact that Yu-Bong intentionally blinds his stepdaughter Song-Hwa, by giving her poisoned medicine after her stepbrother Dong-Ho abandons them, is particularly contentious. Yu-Bong's motive for such cruel behaviour is to inflict *han* onto Song-Hwa; this, he believes, will help her perfect the art of *pansori*. Feminist criticism of this film primarily focuses on gender and nation. In *Sopyonje*, women are victimized to deliver the 'experience of postcoloniality' (Choi 2002: 116). Women's bodies are usurped by

patriarchal nationalism, forced to bear ‘the burden of reclaiming national identity’ (Choi 2002: 116). Women’s suffering is aestheticised to produce beautiful images of Korean-ness and enhance ‘the beauty of the national cinema’ (Cho 2002: 91).

Choi finds a striking parallel between the father’s cruel behaviour and patriarchal nationalism’s implementation of the modernisation project. According to Choi, as capitalist development ‘deprived a nation of its voice and devastated its land in the name of nationalism’, the father is allowed to violate his daughter’s body to perfect his national art (1998: 22). As capitalist development proceeds under the name of nationalism, women are marginalised and blinded to the influence of ‘modern culture’. At the same time, the state encourages their devotion to and participation in the modernisation project (Byun 2001; Kim 2001). According to Seungsook Moon, in official Korean nationalism, women are constrained ‘as a part of nature producing for the community of men’ (1998: 57). Moon states that while ‘economic growth in Korea relies upon women’s identity as primarily reproductive and domestic beings’, official nationalism provides an excuse for ‘the incorporation of women workers into the process of industrialization as “cheap” labor’ (1998: 57). In this process, ‘a double-edged, paradoxical allegory of a postcolonial nation’ is created (Choi 1998: 23). Choi asserts that ‘anti-colonial nationalism’ entails the construction of ‘the feminine Other’, who supposedly bears the ‘pure’, uncontaminated and unchanged national spirit (1998: 23). Choi’s claim resonates with Chatterjee’s argument on the characteristics of nationalism and the modernisation project in post-colonial settings. According to Chatterjee (1993), while the nationalist project propels material modernisation, it requires the spiritual domain – women and the home – to remain ‘traditional’. Nationalists could thus assert that western colonial power ‘had failed to colonize the inner, essential identity of the East’ (Chatterjee 1993: 120-121).

Choi wonders if the ‘perfection of national art is worth a woman’s lifetime of misery’ (2002: 121). When nationalists believe it is, feminists’ criticism of Korean nationalism is surely an imperative intervention. Most film reviews in the public media and even serious film criticism ‘approves’ of the father’s cruelty, tending to argue that it is justified for the

preservation of national culture and the enhancement of national cinema.<sup>54</sup> The book *Sopyonje Film Story* (1993) describes the making of *Sopyonje* and includes a compilation of reviews; these heap praise upon *Sopyonje* for reviving national culture and identity. One review by a film critic states that ‘criticising the father’s blinding his stepdaughter as inhumane reflects audiences’ inability to appreciate artistic subjects’ (Lee Se-Ryong 1993: 175; my translation).

Choi’s analysis of *Sopyonje* reflects another concern of Korean feminists regarding Im’s film. According to Choi, ‘a visual tour of Korea’s recent past’ in *Sopyonje* ‘eroticizes and exoticizes Korea’ (2002: 114-116). Choi emphasises that while presenting Korea as ‘a virgin land’ untouched by modern technology, *Sopyonje* disguises crucial ‘historical facts’, for example that ‘Korea was the industrial outpost of the Japanese Empire during the colonial period and that U.S. bombing deforested and scarred this very land during the Korean War’ (2002: 116). This ‘intensely developed country’ is pushed out of sight; only ‘the pristine land’ fills the frame ‘with a tourist’s gaze’ (2002: 116). In this respect, Choi claims that *Sopyonje* adopts a ‘self-primitivizing, internalized colonial male gaze’ (2002: 116).

The self-primitivising gaze of Im’s films objectifies women, facilitating an Orientalist gaze. In *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon*, women are merely used to provide erotic and exotic images. Feminist critics point out that although the female character – the title role of *Chunhyang* – is supposed to lead the story, the film centres on the male character, Mong-Ryong.<sup>55</sup> The film also contains plenty of sex scenes.<sup>56</sup> In *Chihwaseon*, a number

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<sup>54</sup> The Korean title of the book is 서편제 영화 이야기 (1993). The original Korean sentence is as follows: ‘딸 눈을 멀게 한 아버지의 행위를 비인간적인 처사라고 못마땅해 하는 우리 동네 관객들의 이해수준에서 비롯된다’ (이세룡 1993: 175).

<sup>55</sup> An article that appears in *Women’s Paper* points out this deficit of Im’s *Chunhyang* and also brings up the issue of why Choon-Hyang has to include explicit erotic scenes. ‘Choon-Hyang is Missing in This New Film *Choon-Hyang*’ (my translation) *Women’s Paper* no.562 — ‘새영화 ‘춘향년’, 춘향년에는 ‘춘향이’가 없다?’ 여성신문 562호 .

of women appear, all playing marginal roles in recurring sex scenes. It is no surprise that western PR and advertisements for *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon* mainly show female characters, although they play rather minor roles. In contrast, the main images used to promote *Chihwaseon* within Korea show the male character alone.<sup>57</sup>

What is remarkable is that western responses to Im's films often fail to examine these issues related to gender. Even when they refer to domestic feminist criticism, the primary emphasis is generally on Korean culture and national history. One American review of *Chunhyang* expresses a sense of shock that the film's key theme – the celebration of chastity as a woman's virtue – provoke no feminist responses in the USA (Strohmeyer 2001). The treatment of women in Im's films is explained away by reference to 'cultural difference'. This indifference to gender seems related to how these films are presented to western audiences. When presented as 'ethnographic films' through which foreign audiences can learn about another culture, their underlying misogyny apparently becomes more acceptable, or is simply neglected. Tonglin Lu (2002), as discussed in the previous chapter, explains that women's suffering in Zhang's films becomes more acceptable and thus less troublesome since it is viewed from 'a safe distance': western viewers can watch and enjoy films from a supposedly primitive 'other' culture, without getting too worked up about them. This safe distance is reinforced by the aestheticisation of women's suffering. When Im's films are consumed as 'ethnographic' inside and outside Korea, such self-Orientalising presentation of women's suffering becomes the point at which Korean patriarchal nationalism and western Orientalism converge. Women are there to signify the essential otherness that western viewers safely appreciate and that Korean viewers identify as embodying 'nation-ness'.

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<sup>56</sup> Because it includes sexual scenes acted by teenagers, *Chunhyang* became the target of public disputes over the sexual exploitation of teenagers in general. The debate was provoked by another Korean film, *Lies* (1999), in which a high school girl is depicted having a sexual relationship with a sculptor in his thirties. As *Chunhyang* was released in the middle of this debate, Im could not avoid coming under attack for depicting teenage sex in the film and for sexually exploiting adolescents since the main actor and actress were sixteen years old.

<sup>57</sup> For instance, whereas *Chunhyang* is promoted in the west mainly through the image of Chun-Hyang alone, in Korea, it is promoted through the images of Mong-Ryong and Chun-Hyang together. Whilst *Chihwaseon* is promoted through the image of Jang Seung-Up and Mae-Hyang, together, or Mae-Hyang alone in the west, the main images used in Korea show Jang Seung-Up alone.

Im's previous films such as *The Surrogate Mother*, *Adada* and *Come, Come, Come Upward* contributed to the template of Korean cinema that privileges rape and violence against women. Of Im's films, these were most highly acclaimed outside Korea. James remarks that Im is using 'the body of Korean landscape' and 'the bodies of Korean women' as 'the two privileged symbols' to refer to 'the historical trauma of the nation' (2002: 56). James also acknowledges that the visual and metaphorical use of landscape and women derives from 'patriarchal spectacularity' (2002: 56). He does not justify these tropes in terms of traditional culture, but pays attention to their contemporary use. 'The idealization of the Korean landscape', for James, is nothing but 'prostitution' to attract foreign audiences, and leads to 'the cultural tourism of cinema' (2002: 57-58). However, James argues against the domestic feminist criticism that Im's films function to corroborate 'the ideological conditions for the ongoing exploitation of women' (2002: 58). Referring to films such as *Mandala* (1986), *The Surrogate Mother*, *Adada* and *Sopyonje*, James admits that 'the historical exploitation of working class women' is expressed through 'graphic images of sexual victimization' (2002: 58). Following this admission, James tries to defend Im in two ways. First, according to James, the objectification of women from 'the position of a masculinized national subjectivity' should not simply be dismissed as 'the self-orientalising gaze'. James considers this an attempt to engage with popular terms. In James' view, by employing the common terms of national subjectivity, Im intended to use his films to encourage significant change in Korean society (2002: 58-59). Second, James argues that working class women in Im's films are used to represent not the Korean nation but the working class (2002: 59). Yet James' efforts to defend Im overlook crucial points. He fails to adequately account for the blinding of the daughter in *Sopyonje*. In practice, in modern Korean history as well as within this film, 'the masculinized national subjectivity' seems reinforced rather than undermined by the violence inflicted on women. Whilst James argues that working class women are portrayed as the saviours of the working class as a whole, he simply ignores Im's disinterest in class throughout his career.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> The main philosophical theme underlying his film career is usually described as 'humanism'. In several interviews, Im has declared that he does not want to deal with the historical traumas of the

For Wilson, that the ‘wilful father’ blinds his daughter ‘to the outer world’ – to intruding western culture – seems justifiable (2001: 311-312). Wilson reads *Sopyonje* as a ‘global/local market allegory’, viewing Im as an artist facing ‘the imperatives and blindness of the export-driven transnational market’ (2001: 312). Wilson notices that in the national project ‘the feminine body’ is ‘encoded’ as the bearer of cultural traditions (2001: 312). Women’s suffering is used only as an abstract metaphor within this allegory. He fails to consider how this metaphorical use of women is bound up with the ideological cartography of Korean nationalism. In modern Korean history, it is the nationalist government that has pursued capitalist development in cooperation with global capitalism. Korean nationalism suppresses and exploits women in the process of modernization in the name of the nation (Kim 2001; Park 1996). Pre-occupied with the local struggle against global capitalism, Wilson fails to see that within the local sphere, different social groups exist, while the hegemonic ideology – here, patriarchal nationalism – justifies oppression of other viewpoints in the name of resistance to global capitalism. Western commentators tend to consider Im’s films representative of the nation or of the local as a unitary entity, while neglecting the voices of socially disadvantaged groups – here, Korean women – and authorising the domination of patriarchal nationalism.

Stringer hesitates to accept Choi’s reading of the blinding of the daughter, concerned that it may hinder other readings. For Stringer, *Sopyonje* and the blinding of the daughter cast light on ‘how differently situated audiences may identify with the feminine Other’s virtuous suffering’ (2002b: 171): ‘What emotional ambivalences constitute the mix of attraction and repulsion many Korean and international viewers will feel toward Songhwa?’ I agree that ‘differently situated audiences’ may respond differently to *Sopyonje* and the thorny issue of the blinding. Yet it is vital to probe how the main international responses to *Sopyonje* are formed ‘at moments of historical reception’ (Stringer 2003:

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Korean peninsula in terms of class. Because of his personal experience in war-time Korea, Im does not want to stand for a particular political ideology. His film *The Taebaek Mountains* (1994), dealing with a war-time story, reflects this view and is claimed to convey his ‘humanism’ (Ahn 1998/1999; Jung 2003).

15), i.e., when the film appeared on the international film scene. In another article, Stringer analyses how the critical fate of Hong Kong film *Boat People* (1982) was decided ‘at moments of historical reception’ (2003: 15). Here, Stringer is keen to look at issues ‘both internal and external to the ‘text’’ of this film to explain why it met such an unexpectedly hostile international reception. How then do the international contexts in which Im’s films (texts) were received help explain their favourable international reception, despite the manifestly misogynist elements they contain?

As Chow states, the insistence that gender is a ‘universal and timeless’ analytical category obviously disregards ‘the historicity that accompanies all categorical explanatory power’ (1991: 82). Feminist critiques are not universally applicable as the primary criteria for cultural analysis. I do not attack western reviews and criticism simply for failing to make their judgements from feminist perspectives. Rather, I wish to elaborate why the feminist critiques provoked by Im’s films among Korean feminists rarely resonate in western criticism. I also wish to expose the effects of such neglect of gender in the Korean context. I earlier attempted to explain this in terms of filmic aestheticisation of women’s suffering and the safety zone that distances western viewers from ‘the primitives’ on the screen. In addition, western responses that ignore the misogynist elements of Im’s films reinforce the nationalist discourse that overrules feminist critiques back in Korea.

It is worthwhile reflecting on the situation of film scholars such as Stringer watching and considering this film. Choi remarks that the nostalgic gaze constitutes a certain ‘safe’ distance ‘between the city and the country, between center and periphery, and between the sense of now and the most recent past as “Othered” spectacle’ (2002: 115). With the help of this safe distance, Korean audiences can also watch and appreciate the misery of one family in a remote other (pre-industrialized) time. I would argue that films depending upon the effects of (self-)Orientalism *must* constitute such a safe distance. When *Sopyonje* is presented and consumed as an ‘ethnographic film’, western viewers such as Stringer enjoy a solid security zone. Western viewers watching *Sopyonje* remain at a safe distance both historically and culturally. Since the suffering woman on the screen is not a

western woman and since the film is set in a supposedly pre-modern 'other' culture, the violence is more likely to lead to 'mixed emotions' of acceptance and repulsion than to a 'monolithic' feminist reading.

That is, in western responses to Im's films, the issue of gender seems easily marginalised. The same tendency marks the introduction, marketing and consumption of Im's films as 'ethnographic'. When Im's nostalgic gaze turns to the past, with its uncontaminated, pristine landscape and beautiful suffering women, the 'coeval-ness' of his films is concealed. By presenting the aestheticised suffering of women against the background of a nostalgia-laden landscape, Im's films appeal to western Orientalism, which projects other cultures as 'the primitive' from a different time zone. This cinematic setting creates and maintains the safe distance between western viewers and the films. Violence against women is taken less seriously than in western films. Critical views of the practical implications of such violence can easily be dismissed in an allegorical reading, or rejected as monolithic. Im's films thus satisfy western Orientalist assumptions which relegate other cultures to the remote time zone of 'other'. As western viewers respond to his films in this way, western Orientalism and Korean nationalism collaborate to justify women's suffering. The travelling of Im's films to the west thus leads to a complicit relationship between Korean nationalism and western Orientalism.

When Im's films are presented as representative of 'Korean cinema' and confirmed as such in the west, the idea of 'Korean cinema' as an integrated entity is complete. In this process, other voices which confront and disperse 'the national subject' implemented by patriarchal nationalism are suppressed. Gender reveals most strikingly the oppressive and fragmentary nature of the national project, which renders Im's films representative of Korean cinema. Western Orientalism contributes to this project by endorsing Im's position as a *Korean* auteur director and hailing his films as representative of Korean cinema. Western criticism of Im's films frequently ignores gender. It seems significant that the travels of Im's films both expose and fortify the complicit relationship between Korean nationalism and western Orientalism. As Im put it in one interview, he hopes that his films 'will serve as a cultural ambassador' by 'introducing the overall Korean culture,

aesthetics and history' (Im in interview with Jang 2001). It is vital to ask which Korean culture, whose aesthetics and which history is privileged by western critical claim of Im's films.

In the next chapter, I review the last three chapters' findings, tying them in with the arguments of Chapters 2 and 3.

## **7. conclusion**

Every film is a foreign film, foreign to some audience somewhere – and not simply in terms of language. (Egoyan and Balfour 2004: 21)

The present work has laid bare the patterns and routes typical of East Asian films' travels to the west. I have analysed western criticism, labelling practices and the politics of European international film festivals and probed films' impact in their countries of origin – how they travelled back. In broad terms, I wanted to examine how the 'foreign-ness' of a film is acknowledged and articulated. The terrain I have looked at is nonetheless limited and specific: how are the travel and reception of East Asian films to the west involved with, or regulated by, western Orientalist discourse and postcolonial power relationships? I also scrutinised how three directors from the region have responded to this Orientalist discourse and investigated the unequal power relationship that controls the international circulation of films. I discovered that each director's response largely depends on the particular national and historical contexts of each country and each national cinema. The processes that characterise films' travelling are interrelated: the western conception of Japanese, Chinese or Korean cinema draws upon western Orientalism, but is at the same time corroborated by directors' responses. Through self-Orientalism, these directors, as 'Orientals', participate in forming and confirming the premises of western Orientalism.

The films I deal with in this thesis make up only a fraction of the East Asian films that travel to the west. As discussed in the last section of Chapter 3, there exist other potential travel routes. Marvin D'Lugo's research on Argentinean directors illuminates how travelling films can create a critical distance for domestic audiences and play with/against the Orientalist preconceptions of the west. The critical focus of the present work, however, is the flow of films that rely mainly on western criticism, labelling practice, film festivals and the art-house circuits, which are embedded in western Orientalism.

I here compare the differing situations and strategies of Kitano Takeshi, Zhang Yimou and Im Kwon-Taek, discussed in the previous chapters. I thus elaborate the present work's key critical insights into Orientalism and self-Orientalism.

As mentioned earlier, each cinema – Japanese, Chinese and Korean – is in a specific historical, cultural, political and economic phase. These cinemas differ in how they were 'discovered' – introduced, recognised and studied within western film studies. Japanese cinema is relatively well-established within western film studies and has enjoyed popular recognition since the 1950s. In Chapter 4, I showed how Japanese cinema is positioned as 'other' within western film studies. Chinese cinema began to gain western recognition in the mid 1980s and is now making regular appearances on the international art-house circuit. As discussed in Chapter 5, in the course of its establishment, the films of the Fifth Generation filmmakers inspired critical discussions of Orientalism and self-Orientalism. This thesis owes its intellectual inspiration to these discussions. It is less than a decade since Korean cinema began to gain an international reputation. Its emergence casts light on how 'Orientals' consciously consider the need to formulate otherness.

I have used the term, 'self-Orientalising strategy' to analyse Kitano Takeshi's employment of self-Orientalist elements in his films. At the initial stage of his establishment as a 'Japanese auteur', his film *Hana-Bi* was first recognised in conjunction with other Japanese 'auteur' directors – in particular, Ozu Yasujiro – who were well-known in the west. Western critics thus align Kitano with other 'Japanese auteur directors' by fitting his films into western knowledge and the western historical narrative of Japanese films. After *Hana-Bi*, Kitano's usage of iconographic Japanese images and settings increased. This seems to involve a conscious but subtle process. Kitano himself attaches no particular value to these images and settings. He has never claimed that the traditional Japanese values that his films embody represent Japanese culture. This may be due to the dilemma of Japanese nationalism, the enunciation of which inevitably entails traces of imperialism. It is likely that Kitano takes advantage of Orientalist conceptions of Japan without necessarily believing in them. Kitano, recognised in relation to other Japanese directors and the western preconception of 'Japanese-ness', has successfully

achieved the position of ‘Japanese’ auteur director, but has failed to gain recognition as an auteur director without a nationality tag.

As one of the representative figures of the Fifth Generation, Zhang Yimou’s films have opened a completely new chapter in the circulation of Chinese cinema in the west. Sheldon Lu claims,

By funding his production through transnational capital, and by distributing his films in the international film market, Zhang has created what might be called ‘transnational Chinese cinema’. (Lu 1997b: 109)

Defining ‘transnational Chinese cinema’ is beyond the scope of this thesis. Yet Lu’s claim illustrates the influence of Zhang’s films inside and outside China. Not only do they contribute to fixing western conceptions of Chinese films, but their success in the west has fuelled criticisms of his films among Chinese scholars and led to constructive debates on Orientalism and self-Orientalism. Rey Chow (1995) explains Zhang’s films and their success in the west in terms of self-Orientalism. Unlike western debates on Ozu’s films, the critical debates prompted by Zhang’s films involve the engagement of Chinese or Chinese-diasporic scholars. Their contributions may have shaped western scholarship on Chinese cinema to some extent. It nonetheless seems undeniable that Zhang’s films are circulated within the frame of Orientalist conceptions of ‘Chinese-ness’ and that Zhang takes advantage of this.

Like Kitano, Zhang seems well aware of why his films thrive in the west. Despite this, I attempted to distinguish Zhang’s position from Kitano’s, calling it ‘self-Orientalism’ rather than a ‘self-Orientalising strategy’. As discussed in Chapter 5, films of the Fifth Generation, including Zhang’s, are the cinematic outcomes of self-Orientalism, which these artists adopted when they turned towards Chinese history and landscape in search of the cultural or national essence of ‘China’. In this process, according to Chow, these filmmakers turn an Orientalist gaze towards remote landscapes, ethnic minority groups and women. Thus, from the very beginning, whether these filmmakers intended to attract

western attention or not, the Orientalist gaze – western Orientalism – is already apparent when they produce films about Chinese history and culture. Zhang's earlier *Red Sorghum* features such self-Orientalism. *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* do so as well, but here Zhang's 'self-orientalising' leans more towards attracting western Orientalism. In his later *Not One Less*, Zhang also employs self-Orientalising elements while presenting a stubborn young woman from the remote countryside. Yet this film escaped the charge of 'catering to western Orientalism' frequently applied to his early films. I attempted to explain this by focusing on the position of Chinese audiences in relation to films banned in China and those shown there, such as *Not One Less*. While films such as *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* were banned within China, they were distributed in the west, where they were believed to represent 'Chinese culture' and to reflect 'Chinese-ness'. Aware that these films had been seen in the west, Chinese audiences reflected upon them and judged whether they represent *authentic* Chinese culture. In contrast, Chinese audiences can also enjoy Orientalist representation of 'others' on the screen, as long as they have no need to worry about western Orientalist views, and remain within 'the safety zone', as western audiences always do with Zhang's films.

Whilst Kitano avoids association with Japanese nationalism, Zhang often comes into conflict with the nationalist, authoritarian Chinese government. By exploring the 'in-between zone' that Zhang has to work in, I showed how the Chinese regime complies with and corroborates the image of China as a politically and economically retarded country projected by western Orientalism. While controlling the cultural representation of China, the regime ironically ends up supporting and privileging the western reading of Chinese cinema, which confines these films to the realm of political criticism and allegory.

The relationship between Im Kwon-Taek and Korean nationalism reveals another sense in which nationalism co-operates with western Orientalism. The Korean film industry formulates 'otherness' in Korean films in order to enter the international film market. Im's films are thus extolled as representative of Korean cinema, while Im is promoted as a 'Korean' auteur director whose name helps mark out a place for Korean cinema on the

map of world cinema. In response, prestigious international film festivals such as Cannes, a significant site in which the 'discovery' of Korean cinema takes place, authenticate the value of Im's films by selecting them and bestowing awards on them. Im's films and their circulation in the west support Korean nationalism, which uses western endorsement to help justify its ideological stance. Unlike Kitano, Im is able to promote nationalist values. In contrast to Zhang, Im's self-Orientalism is in firm alliance with Korean nationalism. By appealing to western Orientalism, Im's films attain western endorsement which in turn verifies his nativism and nationalism.

Im's self-Orientalism seems to be constructed through vigorous interaction with western Orientalism. Im decides what 'Korean' films should be about through western responses to his films. *Sopyonje*, *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon* all exhibit self-Orientalism formed in interaction with western Orientalism. In particular, *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon* features characteristics that can be described as a self-Orientalising strategy. At the request of Cannes Festival personnel, key scenes in *Chunhyang* were cut out, while in *Chihwaseon* unnecessary sexual scenes were included.

In this coalition of western Orientalism and Korean nationalism, gender is neglected, if not ignored. Western criticisms that pass over the aestheticisation of women's suffering contrast with Korean feminists' criticism of Im's films. While women in Zhang's films are 'doubly otherised', his films are nonetheless often viewed as feminist by western critics. Women's suffering in Im's films is typically viewed as an allegory of the nation – a metaphor for something other than the women's problems themselves. At other times, women's suffering is seen as cultural difference, or as an arena in which multiple readings, other than the unitary feminist one, are possible. I elaborated this issue by probing the effect of aestheticisation and of the 'safety zone', which allows western audiences to see a foreign film as ethnographic, supposedly from a different – remote and primitive – culture.

The present work thus brings out how 'Orientals' participate in the formation and maintenance of Orientalism via self-Orientalism or self-Orientalising strategies. As

Edward Said (1978; 1985) remarks, ‘Orientals’ adopt the terms and premises of Orientalism and use them in exactly the same way, or reverse them. Vis-à-vis this point, I show that self-Orientalism, as a response to Orientalism, is mediated by its relationship with the national and historical contexts of a particular society. In the interests of local nationalism, certain expressions of self-Orientalism are suppressed or supported. Local nationalism engages with Orientalism by acting against it or by seeking endorsement from the west. Ironically, the local nationalist responses to Orientalism often corroborate Orientalism. Self-Orientalism, as inverted Orientalism, ‘otherises’ minority groups and women as western Orientalism otherises Orientals. Western Orientalism does not fully determine how ‘Orientals’ define their own culture and respond to Orientalism.

Due to its limited scope, this research leaves some significant terrains untouched. As mentioned earlier, I focus on the films that fit the frame of western Orientalism, rather than those which create critical distance for domestic audiences and consciously play with western Orientalism in the course of their travelling. The critical approaches deployed in this thesis can be enhanced by further research on how such films travel. I would also hope to see more detailed research examining film institutions – how they are involved in introducing, evaluating and interpreting foreign films in response to concrete historical contexts – such as Julian Stringer’s ‘Japan 1951-1970: National Cinema as Cultural Currency’ (2002a). It will also be intriguing to see the fruits of similar research that grapples with how western films appear ‘foreign’ to audiences in other parts of the world, how they are interpreted by local critics and what kind of Occidentalism these responses entail.

This thesis focuses on the impact of western criticism on East Asian films as they attempt to travel to the west and when they travel back to their home countries. I admittedly pay relatively little attention to the concrete historical dynamics of the relevant film institutions in western countries. This thesis instead elucidates the practice of labelling *foreign* films categorised as ‘national cinema’ and ‘art cinema’. While Hollywood films are assumed to possess ‘universality’, the international art-house circuit and film festival circuits label films from other countries by their specific nationality or national culture,

which is assumed to be reflected in high/traditional art. In this circuit, the names of 'auteur' directors from each country act as brand names, moulding audiences' expectations of films from a specific country. A national film industry can more easily break into the international film market if internationally recognised auteur directors from the particular country have been recognised at international film festivals. Film festivals, meanwhile, seek to become sites for 'discovering' supposedly unknown auteur directors and national cinemas. As shown in Chapter 5, international film festivals sometimes come into conflict with foreign governments for supporting domestically banned or censored films. On such occasions, film festivals offer resources and networks from which domestically banned or alienated directors can benefit. At the same time, they appear as defenders of democratic values, effectively consolidating Orientalist conceptions of western moral superiority.

This thesis opens up a new theoretical and empirical sphere ripe for further research, shifting the issue of how best to define national cinema into another dimension. It is vital to probe how national cinema is presented within the international film scene and how it is bound up with filmic institutions and industries abroad. The present work encourages open discussion about the extent to which art cinema represents national cinema abroad; how the relationship between films and traditional cultures can be articulated in critical terms; and how to understand mainstream popular films through national cinemas, which often exhibit westernised, hybrid characteristics and strong Hollywood influences.

## **index 1**

This research mainly draws on articles in the following film journals.

USA: *Asian Cinema* / *Cineaste* / *Cinema Journal* / *East-West Film Journal* / *Film Criticism* / *Film Comment* / *Film Quarterly* / *Wide Angle*

UK: *Framework* / *Monthly Film Bulletin* / *Screen* / *Screen International* / *Sight and Sound*

Canada: *CineAction*

Australia: *Screening the Past* (web-based journal) / *Senses of Cinema* (web-based journal)

France: *Cahiers du Cinéma*

India: *Cinemaya*

Japan: *Kinema Junpo*

South Korea: *Film Culture* / *Cine21*

### Film Magazines

USA: *Variety* / *Première*

### Other types of magazines

*The Times* (USA)

*Time Asia*

*Time Out* (UK)

### Newspapers:

*Chicago Tribune* (USA)

*Chicago Sun-Times* (USA)

*Herald Tribune* (USA)

*Los Angeles Times* (USA)

*New York Times* (USA)

*New York Post* (USA)

*Washington Post* (USA)

*Guardian* (UK)

*Independent* (UK)

Websites:

[www.rottentomatos.com](http://www.rottentomatos.com): USA-based website providing film reviews from the American printed media on films released in the USA

[www.mrqe.com](http://www.mrqe.com): USA-based website providing a wide range of film reviews from the USA, Europe, Canada, Australia and so on

[www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)

[www.filmcritic.com](http://www.filmcritic.com)

[www.filmjournal.com](http://www.filmjournal.com)

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