Asian-Australian Cinema, Asian-Australian Modernity

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Recent discourses pointing to alternative Asian modernities have extended the hegemonic epistemes underpinning Western modernity.¹ In particular, studies on (especially the rise of) Asia, postcoloniality and cultural globalisation have attended to the expression of subaltern counter-consciousness, developmental capitalism and minority heteroglossia in challenging the orthodoxy of colonial progress and representation. This essay speaks to such emergent discourses by examining the cinema as a site for the articulation of Asian-Australian modernity.

The cinema as a site for the emergence of Western modernity has been widely written about in reference to theories of shock and distraction,² the formation of subject/object relations, the construction of nationhood, the constitution of spectacle and the representation of the body. Here, I argue that the cinema can also challenge Western modernity, giving rise to an alternative modernity, which, in the case of Australia, results from the disjunctions exposed by postcoloniality, immigrancy and indigeneity.

Asian-Australian modernity is marked by two phases that are distinct in Asian film-making in Australia. The first phase in the early 1990s articulates a discourse of post-ethnicity. This discourse, exemplified by the films of Pauline Chan, Teck Tan and Laleen Jayamanne, was enabled by the then emerging academic theorisations of Australia's postcolonial cultural location. Post-ethnicity interrogates Australia's Euro-centric postcoloniality. The second phase reflects the rise and fall of Asia, inflects the Asian turn in Australia, and articulates a discourse of transnational Asian mobility. Notable film-makers in this group include Clara Law and Tony Ayres. Transnational Asian mobility also expresses post-ethnicity but with a distinct self-consciousness that extends its theoretical reach.

The next section of this essay introduces the first phase of contemporary Asian film-making in Australia so as to contextualise its historicity. My argument examines post-ethnicity within the representational politics of 'Asia' in Australia. The subsequent analysis focuses on the second phase, demonstrating the self-consciousness modes of post-ethnicity by using selected films to map three characteristics underpinning Asian-Australian modernity. These characteristics include an immigrant trajectory of 'going south', a reconfiguration of ethnicity, and a reconstitution of desire. The films discussed are by no means representative of a category called Asian-Australian cinema, if such a category exists at all. What they have in common is an emergent Asian-Australian consciousness. This consciousness highlights a transnational Asian-Australian modernity as an alternative modernity that disrupts normative Asian and Australian ontologies.

Postcolonial Post-Ethnicity in Asian-Australian Cinema in the Early 1990s

Mainstream Australian cinema in the early 1990s reflected the cusp of its postcolonial phase with commercially successful features like *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* (Stephen Elliot, 1994), *Muriel's Wedding* (P J Hogan, 1995) and *Strictly Ballroom* (Baz Luhrmann, 1993) characterising Australian 'national cinema' in Hollywood.³ Australia's postcoloniality during this period was marked by what Ross Gibson defines as its decentred position: south of the West. Such an identity is constituted in Australia's colonial history and its relation to 'the West', wherein the distinction of south conjures a representation of Euro-Australia that is similar to the West, and simultaneously foregrounds a representation of Aboriginal-Australia that is fetishised and disavowed. 'South of the West' positions Australia's postcolonial culture in a global and transnational frame: Australia is 'both a long way from the world (as it always has been) and it is nowhere in particular, in the swirl of electronic information and entertainment'.⁴ This postcolonial identity is reflected in Australian cinema through, for example, the reclamation of the suburb in *Muriel's Wedding* and the queering of the outback in *The Adventures of Priscilla*. In both films, sound (global popular music) and image (ubiquitous suburb and camp desert) jettison the hegemonically masculine outback and ocker discourse of *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986), previously endorsed by mainstream Hollywood interests, and highlight instead the subsequent repositioning of Australia's national cinema. At the heart of this relocation is an Anglo-Celtic Australian nationalist project that is problematic in its conflation of the placelessness of the global mediated postmodern with the placelessness of the postcolonial settler condition. The nationalist movement also reflects the racist in/visibility of the specificities of indigeneity and non-English-speaking background (NESB) immigrancy. Framed by a decentred West, Australia's postcoloniality emerges as its (post)modernity, an unfinished project marked by an ambiguity highlighting the irreducibility of cultural difference. The result is a regional specificity that demands analysis of the geographical location of Australia as distinctly south of 'Asia'.⁵

This regional specificity is highlighted in Asian-Australian film-making in the early 1990s by a disparate group of independent film-makers such as Pauline Chan (*The Space Between The Door and The Floor*, 1990; *Hang Up*, 1990; *Dusty Hearts*, 1991), Teck Tan (*Silk Dreams*, 1988; *My Tiger's Eyes*, 1992) and Laleen Jayamanne (*A Song of Ceylon*, 1985; *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*, 1991). Trained in film school, these film-makers mostly made experimental works funded by the Australian Film Commission (AFC) and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). Their films were circulated outside of the mainstream, mostly through film festivals, and later on television through SBS and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

These films problematise the representation of 'Asian' ethnicity in Australia. Three modes of debate on ethnicity are evident when the films are considered in relation to form, content and the film-makers' biographies. Because Pauline Chan's Cannes Film Festival entries are Anglo-identified, feature Anglo-Australian characters and do not appear to signify 'Asian' content, she is generally considered not authentically 'Asian'. Teck Tan's films, on the other hand, are too issue-oriented; hence he is seen as too nativist in his conspicuous consumption and commodification of Chinese ethnicity. Laleen Jayamanne, with her theoretically informed and

deconstructive approach to film-making, is too avant-garde. In other words, the films are either perceived as too stereotypically Asian, not Asian enough to reflect the film-makers' background, or too esoteric for an Asian audience. Clearly, implicit in these considerations is the politics of authenticity and essentialism in the representation of ethnicity.

I have argued elsewhere that what characterised these films was not the content, the form, or the inflections from biographical inferences: to suggest an absence of Asian signifiers as an absence of experience/culture is to ignore the fact that alliances can be forged without the tokenistic representation of that certain difference and that certain name.⁶ In the context of film-making and telling stories, these works highlight 'post-ethnicity' as a discursive site of both Asian and Australian historicities, and past and present temporalities. They mark a space where the temporality of Asian people, as objectified historical presences in Australia, is injected into a self-generative and self-constitutive space of cultural production. This is an ambivalent site of emergent consciousness: between pedagogy and performance,⁷ between 'being told' and 'telling'. These disparate films confront the absence of a named Asia, they confront the predetermined familiar and visible stereotypes, and they confront Australian modernity constituted in a settler history of colonialism, racism and imperialism. In doing so, they produce an emerging Asian-Australian identity, comprising 'a continually evolving contemporaneity of not just crossing the territorial boundaries of one or the other, but of confronting them in their controversies'.⁸ Clearly then, any attempts at theorising the Asian diaspora in Australia has to take into account not just Australia's postcolonial cultural position as south of the West, but also its location as south of Asia. The second phase of Asian film-making in Australia exemplifies this by highlighting the self-consciousness of post-ethnicity as a space of cultural production and reconfiguration.

Transnational Asian-Australian Modernity and Its Cinematic Cultural Production

Underpinning the formation of a transnational Asian-Australian modernity is a critical trajectory called 'going south'. It is an interventionist attempt at elucidating the landscape of encounters that are produced at the intersections of Asia, Australia, and Asia in Australia.⁹ As both a referent and a reference, 'going south' functions as a geographical distinction (that differentiates the Asian diaspora in Australia from Asian diasporas elsewhere) as well as a theoretical paradigm. Inscribed in a migratory movement of literal displacement and reoriented in the racialised scape of a postcolonial settler Australia, the trajectory of 'going south' aligns itself with (Australia as) south of the West, (Australia as) south of Asia, and (both Australia and Asia as) south of the East and the West.

Implicit in the trajectory of 'going south' is an interrogation of how Australia, as south of the West, has also come to construct itself as specifically south of Asia. In this respect, the borderland between Australia and Asia has a modern history inflected by its regionality. It must be acknowledged that alongside Australia's postcoloniality is a disjunctive modernity that simultaneously accords Australia the status of a notional western country with a degree of superiority over Asia. If south designates the space of postcolonial decentring that marks Australia's difference from the West, it is also the space in which its modernity emerges to differentiate Australia from

Asia. 'Going south' thus requires recognition that these two postcolonial-postmodern spaces are overlapping and disjunctive. It attends to the politics of location occupied by the history of Asian migration into Australia. This history produces a transnationalism that characterises the modernity of the Asian diaspora in Australia.

Asian-Australian cinema in the mid to late 1990s highlights this modernity as a site of cultural negotiation. Some features underpinning the cinema include: a sensibility that inscribes the history of a literal southward migration; a contingency of identity that interrogates (via the politics of Asia) the politics of Australia and the politics of Asia *in* Australia; an aesthetics of multilingualism and cosmopolitanism informed by hybridity; an emphasis on narratives of cultural mobility within multiple times and spaces; and an interest in transnational Asian alliances. Made by artists who are self-conscious and aware of their liminal positioning between Australia and Asia, the films to be discussed contain diasporic themes and produce new economies of belonging mediated by displacement, transformation and pride. My analysis of these features falls under the following rubric: a) an immigrant trajectory of 'going south'; b) a reconfiguration of ethnicity; and c) a reconstitution of desire. In the next section, I argue that these three characteristics delineate the cultural formation underpinning Asian-Australian modernity.

***Wonton Soup*: Mobile and Transnational Chinese Routes**

Wonton Soup (1994) is Hong Kong émigré film-maker Clara Law's contribution to the omnibus, *Erotique* (Lizzie Borden, Monika Treut and Clara Law, 1994). Although Law's film was financed by Japan, it mirrors her transitional and transnational immigrant status in Australia.¹⁰ Presenting on one level as a light comedy about sex and sexuality, *Wonton Soup* uses different Chinese accents from Australia, Hong Kong, France and mainland China to explore the authenticity of Chineseness. The film demonstrates the trope of 'going south' through the emergence of transnational routes facilitated by interrogating the meaning of roots. The narrative, about a visit to Hong Kong by an Australian-born Chinese man, Adrian, reveals the ways in which diasporic cartographies of desire and pleasure are mediated through the quest for one's cultural origins and a sense of authenticity. The film begins from the point of view of Adrian's girlfriend, who was born and raised in Hong Kong and has now returned there to work after immigrating to Australia. Hong Kong is also the original homeland of Adrian's parents. After six months of separation from his girlfriend, Adrian goes to visit her and to see the place of his parents' origins, only to realise that she wants to end the relationship because she considers him 'not Chinese enough'.

Wonton Soup highlights the trajectory of 'going south' by inscribing an immigrant and diasporic discourse in Australia through a politics of return (re-turn). The discourse of return reiterates, on the one hand, a consciousness of return to the motherland, but produces, on the other hand, a movement that turns away from the motherland. In such a trajectory, the signifier of return displays the mobile routes of Chinese roots, accented, in this case, from Australia to France to Hong Kong.

Adrian functions as a site of interrogation when the accent of his voice and the references it invokes are constantly at odds with the codifications of his skin colour and cultural origins. Labelled by his uncle as a 'banana', he is 'yellow' on the outside but 'white' on the inside, 'a foreign boy sleeping with a Chinese girl'. His strong Australian intonation becomes a cultural marker for locating the status of his

experience. He consumes McDonald's burgers, is only capable of making analogies through the Australian cultural discourses of football and cricket, and offers his girlfriend a jar of Vegemite as a romantic gift. Whilst conceding that he is Chinese, he nevertheless proceeds to map the place of his cultural roots through his second-generation Australian-Chinese lenses. For him, Hong Kong is akin to a big homogeneous Chinatown in Australia. Ignorant of the value of Hong Kong real estate, he laments the worth of the costly penthouse apartment (where he is staying) through its lack of 'Australian' suburban amenities — the house on the quarter acre block with its rumpus room, backyard, swimming pool and spa. Unenlightened about the specificities of China, its culture, its language and its roots, he confuses the names of provinces and dismisses the values of Chinese artefacts.

For Adrian, who is only capable of locating a hyperrealised Chineseness through Chinatown, consuming a bowl of wonton soup is as close to being as 'Chinese' as he is able to be. After consulting with his uncle and learning from him how to be 'Chinese' by studying the 'traditional' Chinese erotica of love-making from the seminal book, *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, Adrian still fails to be 'Chinese' enough in the eyes of his girlfriend. The litmus test surfaces in the last scene when, pleading, he asks her what he has not done to save the relationship, and she tells him that he never takes her out to have a bowl of wonton soup. He confidently announces that he will take her out immediately, only to hear that there is no such thing as wonton soup. His girlfriend argues that 'real' Chinese only serve wontons with noodles. Like the staging of Chinatown, wonton soup is an Anglicised invention. In her eyes, his 'Chineseness' (or lack thereof) is as fake as the supposed authenticity of the wonton soup.

Underlying *Wonton Soup*'s narrative is the anagrammatical deconstruction of the meta-identity of Chineseness. When reversed, the word 'wonton' in the title, *Wonton Soup*, becomes an anagram that exposes what it means to be 'Chinese'. That is, at the same time that the allegory of wonton soup stages the (in)authenticity of Chineseness, the metaphor of wonton, when inverted, signals the emergence of a temporal present that can only be read in the space of a 'not now'. In the film, the space of the 'not now' becomes the clearing space that is, according to homeland authenticity, not ever Chinese enough. Indeed, what the film paradoxically exposes, through the narrative use of different languages and accents is the impossibility of attaining a singular 'authentic' Chineseness. Adrian's uncle teaches him the Chinese traditions of erotica, calligraphy and cooking in a mixture of French, English and Chinese. His girlfriend speaks to her Shanghainese counterparts in a Cantonese-accented Mandarin whilst yearning for a 'real' 'Chinese' lover. Through these linguistic inconsistencies, the precariousness of identity, of Chineseness, is interrogated.

In *Wonton Soup*, Law explores different routes of diasporic Chineseness by questioning the legitimacy of its roots. In Anglo-European multicultural Australia, notwithstanding the fact that it is the place of his birth, upbringing, education and cultural affiliations, Adrian is caricatured as 'a Chinaman with two small eyes'. But Australian-Chineseness, when positioned in a Hong Kong-within-China context, is considered 'not Chinese enough'. For Adrian, this lack signifies his place of disempowerment when his 'real' Hong Kong-Chinese girlfriend (not blond!) abandons him. At the same time, Adrian's notional lack of authenticity is problematised through his juxtaposition to his Chinese uncle, whose cultural mix of French, English, Mandarin and Cantonese undercuts his role as the 'authentic' teacher of 'real' and 'pure'

Chinese 'traditions'. Highlighting the parody that is implicit in the narrative of *Wonton Soup*, this form of pastiche disrupts the ontology of the 'true origins' of a homogeneous Chineseness, and opens up the mobility of routes.¹¹

Floating Life: Performing Ethnicity, Interrogating Suburbia

Clearly, implicit in the trajectory of 'going south' is the interrogation of ethnicity. My next example, Australia's first foreign-language film, *Floating Life* (Clara Law, 1996), jointly financed by SBS and the AFC, explores ethnicity by defamiliarising and redefining the suburb. Promoted as every migrant's story, the film maps the arrival of a Hong Kong family, the Chans, in Australia. It locates the cultural meaning of home through the context of dwelling — in Hong Kong, Australia and Germany. The film is multilingual, transnational and mobile; its themes of displacement and alienation highlight the diasporic condition of homesickness and the longing for belonging. Like *Wonton Soup*, it showcases the heterogeneity of Chineseness. This heterogeneity interrogates hegemonic ethnicity.

The film begins with a brief scene that captures the claustrophobic interior of a teahouse in Hong Kong using a soft focus and sepia hues. The next cut jolts viewers with a stark contrast: a bright, overexposed film showcases an iconographically Australian mise-en-scene with long shots of a typical suburb, replete with expansive space, clear blue skies, uniform brick-veneer houses on quarter-acre blocks, stylised nature and sterile domestication. As the intertitle reads 'A house in Australia', the identity of a new country is contextualised through the characteristics of a particular location, the quintessential suburb. Thus the narrative begins with the suburb functioning as the transitional site: in other words, the suburb operates in this film as the middle landscape of Australia, as well as the middle landscape of migration.

Theorisations on suburbia in Australia, Britain and America have characterised the suburb as the borderland between the city and the country: it is an interstitial place that reflects 'the contradictory aesthetic and moral value of residents torn between rural and urban life'.¹² Kim Dovey has described the model home as 'the mirror in which a suburban subject is constructed, which, at once reflects and reproduces the great Australian Dream'.¹³ Dovey's theorisation of the suburban model house delineates it as the social engine of Australian society. John Hartley has also suggested that 'suburbanality' is the 'condition of stability, visibility and competence to which we ['Australians'] aspired'.¹⁴

Floating Life exposes the migrant as the transitional figure that must be reconstituted as the ideal Australian subject through the reproduction of the Great Australia Dream. The suburb stands in as a site/test for the migrant to pass (as in master) in order to take up cultural citizenship; in other words, in order for the migrant to pass as Australian, s/he has to be transformed into an ideal subject marked by stability, acceptance and visibility. The suburb in a sense then becomes a prosthesis — an aid, or a frontier — that signifies the aspiration to become part of Middle Australia: it connotes a cultural value that signifies Middle Australian ethnicity as ideal citizenry. The opening sequence of the film exposes the assimilationist politics of such an ethnicity by seizing on the iconic status of suburbia, reproducing and defamiliarising it.

In this scene, Middle-Australian suburban ethnicity is familiar: it is middle-class, modern, clean and uniform. It has houses with swimming pools, schools with footie

fields, parks with jogging tracks and living rooms with television sets. It is also uncanny, evoking a two-dimensional flatness that is hostile, alien, isolationist, and indeed somewhere far away, mediated through the electronic connectedness of the media, which airs programs ranging from *The Boxing Kangaroo*, segments of Hong Kong Martial Arts cinema, and Hollywood movies such as *Basic Instinct* and *Terminator*, to local sensationalist news bulletins about illegal Asian immigrants and boat people. This ambivalent discourse of sameness and difference used to portray Middle Australia is characterised by a strategy of differential repetition. Ethnicity is denaturalised through reiteration: old paradigms are defamiliarised through new rituals and new routines as the Chan family reproduces and relearns the practice of everyday life. Beginning with their misreading of signs (from an exaggerated discourse about wasps, home security, the ozone layer and the pit bull terrier), the sequence progresses to show a hybrid mediation comprising redefined consumption and socialisation practices. Making a home in Australia becomes a process of reordering and reinventing everyday practice; in doing so, ethnicities — both Middle Australianess and Hong Kong Chineseness — are reconfigured. The collective aspirations attached to both spaces are mediated, not through assimilation, but by confronting their differences and intersections. The mother and the brothers watch soapies; the father listens fervently to diasporic Mandarin radio; and the second sister, Bing, disavows tradition.

This sequence self-consciously exposes the suburb as a middle landscape of privatised public domesticity. By re-enacting the iconicity and indeed the ethnicity of the site, the film evokes a community that is homogeneous, conservative and narrow. It highlights suburban ethnicity as a prosthetic technology for cultural citizenship, and in doing so, exposes the values constituting the ideal Australian subject. Its hyperreality calls to task the middle landscape as a real space, not just of dreams but also of nightmares and horrors. Bing's hysteria and subsequent breakdown instantiates the liminality of this phobic space. Clearly, the interrogation of hegemonic ethnicity must result in the reconfiguration of such a site. One way to enable such reconfiguration is through the reconstitution of desire, a process that implies self-consciousness and a form of agency. The following section illustrates this by using examples from gay Asian-Australian cinema.

From Postcolonial Rice and Potato Queens to Sticky Rice Consciousness

China Dolls (1997) and *Sadness* (1999), both made by film-maker/writer Tony Ayres, and *Boy-Serpentine* (Heng Tang, 1999) are three very different films with one common theme: they reconstitute desire by redefining sexuality through a retrieval of cultural memories. *China Dolls*, a documentary about Asian gay men in Australia, uses first-person narration, interview accounts, family snapshots, Mardi Gras archival photographs, and popular gay erotica footage to interrogate the constructions of Asian masculinities and Anglo-Australian gay sexualities. The film also re-enacts segments of the narrator's biography, including cruising stories from club scenes, as well as representing a close-up of Ayres (as narrator), captured looking into the camera as a mirror while he daubs on and finally wipes off a Chinese opera face. *Sadness* is a documentary that re-stages William Yang's play of the same name. It is filmed in a self-consciously theatrical mode that shows Yang's performance of a

slide presentation consisting of a monologue juxtaposed to visual images of his friends and family projected onto a screen. These are threaded together by a stylised re-enactment of Yang's journey, by car, 'up north' to Queensland in a subplot that explores his uncle's murder in the 1920s. *Boy-Serpentine*, Heng Tang's debut film about a boy with an erotic obsession for snakes, is a stylised short work that uses the snake metaphor to articulate the politics of religion, tradition and assimilation. Comprising three segments, which move from '1976: Year of the Dragon', when the boy was 6 years old, to '1977: Year of the Serpent', to '1988: Year of the Dragon', the film maps the coming of age of an adolescent plagued by the conflicts surrounding his individual desires, his mother's desperate bid to be absorbed into an Anglo-Celtic culture and the xenophobia of a White Australia.

These three films redefine normative gay sexual identity using the device of self-consciously performing tradition in order to re-describe cultural memory. *China Dolls* deploys Chinese opera make-up — the painted face — as a metaphor for unmasking; *Sadness* utilises the retrieval of oral and vernacular family history in a travel motif; *Boy-Serpentine* images Chinese astrology as a theme for adolescent desires. In *China Dolls*, the metaphor of the painted face reveals the Orientalised construction of an emasculated Asian gay sexuality in Australia constrained by the hegemonic, pumped-up, blond-hair and blue-eyed Anglo-Celtic muscularised body. The film documents the limits of desire and desirability in the mainstream gay culture as it is traversed by Ayres's self-reflexive narration, delineating different sexual models in a community comprising the 'banana', the 'rice queen', the 'potato queen', the 'sticky rice' and the 'fruit salad'.

The film tells us that the rice queen is an older Anglo man who only goes out with younger Asian men. It also describes the potato queen as an Asian man who is only attracted to Anglo men. In the two segments that explain these identities, the film examines the desexualisation of Asian men and argues that the same Orientalised values of passivity and docile femininity that position Asian women as desirable in the West are those which marginalise Asian gay men. Using the cultural memories of colonialism, these two segments open up a discourse about postcolonial sexuality: the potato and rice queens together articulate a model for hybridity. The rice constitutes the potato and vice-versa. In other words, like Joan Nestle's butch/femme model and Gilles Deleuze's theorisation of sado-masochism, the potato queen and the rice queen cannot exist without the other.¹⁵ Evident in the film through the narrative of cross-cultural desire, the rice-and potato hybrid opens up a platform for the proliferation and recognition of different sexual identities. Such identities are affirmed through the segment on Madame Butterflies. Here, the image of Asian gay men parading the stage in drag repositions the subcultural practice of the annual Miss Gay Asia-Pacific pageant in Melbourne's queer scene. The pageant's reproduction in the film highlights the Orientalising and self-Orientalising techniques in the production of new Asian queer desirabilities.

The shift in the film, from the potato and rice segments to the sticky rice segment, captures a shift in consciousness and visibility in Australia's recent gay and lesbian politics. The sticky rice is an Asian who is only attracted to other Asians. This desire speaks to a new affirmation politics constituted in the emerging visibility and consciousness of Asian queer pride.¹⁶ It highlights an Asian-Australian queer identity produced by transnational Asian alliances. The sticky rice is a sexual identity modelled on diasporic post-national regionality, not nativist ethnocentrism. Underpinning this

model is the culture of diaspora as a spatial trajectory narrativising the dispersion from a nation-space or a homeland. Diasporic post-national regionality, then, is a narrative about dispersed groups coming together, forming neo-tribes, outside of the nation-state. This connectedness is enabled by the disjunctive flows of globalisation.¹⁷ Included in these flows are the forces of hyper-capitalist success stories emanating from Asia, postcolonial modernities in contemporary Asia, and international Asian queer pride. Nativist ethnocentrism, on the other hand, evokes insularity, based on a prejudicial and xenophobic fear of outsiders and strangers. Instead of imagining people coming together as a result of dispersion, nativist ethnocentrism is about people closing in as a result of the fear of dispersion. As a diasporic postnational regional model, the sticky rice disrupts the Anglo-Celtic sexual model of coming out of the closet as a narration of sexual identity. For the Anglo-Celtic post-Stonewall model, coming out literally means going into a community in order to seek sameness, security and comfort.¹⁸ For the sticky rice model, coming out literally means connecting through the mobility of dispersion. It means new Asian alliances formed by transnational networks, global cultural flows and subterranean circuits: through the media and popular culture, through the forces of Asian modernities in Asia, through guanxi and through shared stories. These factors enable the emergence of a sticky rice consciousness.

Sadness tells Yang's story, and this is not a story about sticky rice, or, at least, not overtly. Ayres's film shows Yang showing various photographs (of his life with his Anglo friends and his life with his family) that collectively image his personal and cultural history. These images narrate two separate discourses: a discourse of sexuality through the cultural memory of post-Stonewall gay politics, Mardi Gras, urban gay clubs and AIDS; and a discourse of ethnicity/origins through a documentation of three generations of Chinese settlement in Northern Queensland during the era of the White Australia Policy. Beyond the surface of the two separate discourses, the film speaks to the emergence of an Asian queer desire constituted in the politics of sexuality and ethnicity. Sticky rice consciousness constitutes this new desire informed by a new spectatorship: from the discursive gaze of an Asian gay man (Ayres) looking at the body/history of another Asian gay man (Yang), comes an ethnography about the modernity of Asia in Australia. Ayres writes about this kind of inter-Asian desire in his article, 'China Doll: The Experience of Being Gay Chinese Australian':

I had sex with a Chinese man for the first time in my life. It was in a gay sauna in Hong Kong called "Game Boy". All I ever found out about him was that his name was Robert. He was tall and solid — a physical type I like. Touching him was a foreign sensation. I am used to the touch of Caucasian skin — hairier. Chinese skin is smooth, yet there is also a hardness to it, a polished ivory muscularity. I found myself giving way to it, being swept away by a desire which I had never experience before. It was desire which had nothing to do with politics. He did not want me because I was Chinese. I did not reject him because he was Chinese. We just wanted each other. It was simple. For a brief moment, I felt that for the first time in my life I understood what desire was about.¹⁹

Ayres's cinematic version of *Sadness* fulfils this desire at a different level. As a form of ethnography, the film represents a self-reflexive and self-conscious re-telling of a body politic by an emergent community: it expresses for Asian gays and

lesbians living in Australia a desire that the narrative of race be seen as indeed the narrative of sexuality.

And this is what emerges in *Boy-Serpentine*. On the surface of a naked thigh we see the tentative strokes of a Chinese boy's pen passionately scribing an insignia of a serpent onto the smooth, clean and firm skin of the Chinese boy sitting next to him. Caught by the authoritarian Anglo schoolmaster, who is distracted by the minor sideshow in his classroom, the boy defiantly kisses the other boy on the lips. As we hear the schoolmaster's forceful teachings about the image of the evil serpent, which I read as metonymic of the stereotypically evil and cunning Asian, the power of the kiss strips bare the erotic charge of desire. There are two gazes here: first, the look of the protagonist at the drawing as he recuperates the image and redefines desire as sticky rice; and second, the gaze of the schoolmaster, which foregrounds the racist history anchored by the image. Thus, the signifier of the serpent as both racist and erotic exposes the ambivalence underpinning both Asian-Australian cultural memory and Asian-Australian sexual identity.

Face Culture: The Ambivalence of Modern Asia in Contemporary Australia

This essay has mapped a transnational Asian-Australian modernity through its cinematic cultural production. Keeping in mind the context of the last decade of Australia's relationship with the signifier, Asia, I have demonstrated that the films discussed expose the episteme of hegemonic racism and celebrate the defiance of assimilation through new tactics of resistance. In doing so, these films disrupt the ontologies underpinning the status of Asia, Australia and Asia in Australia. They point to an emergent sensibility in an economy that has produced the forces to instantiate an alternative form of social organisation and mobilisation. Asian-Australian modernity is a formation traversed by the forces of xenophobic racism, minority identity reclamation, multicultural re-formation and transnational re-imagination.

If social mobilisation through new cinematic cultural production has attested to an Asian visibility in Australia, this image paradoxically also signifies the rise of a modern Asian culture materialised through the values of capitalist middle-classness and neo-Confucian patriarchy. And if visibility involves an encounter with many different gazes — imperial Australian, Asian-Australian, Asian-Asian — spectatorship must also entail visualising the unequal exchanges within the heterogeneity of the diasporic Asian class. These exchanges speak to the practice of everyday survival as an event articulated in a culture of ambivalence. The politics of sticky rice — desiring Asia within Australia — is a racialised and sexualised circuit that is also produced by a materialism mediated through the regulation of resources and the distribution of democracy. It demands an activism that must look beyond the image of the (sur)face.

**'That's What Rice Queens Study!':
White Gay Desire and Representing Asian Homosexualities
Peter A Jackson**

- 1 See, for example, Russell Leong (ed.), *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996; also contributions by Kent Chuang, Damien Ridge, Amos Hee, Victor Minichiello, Tony Ayres, Long-Yen Chua and Audrey Yue, in Peter A Jackson and Gerard Sullivan (eds), *Multicultural Queer: Australian Narratives*, Haworth, New York, 1999.
- 2 I reflect here only on the minoritisation of Asian men in Australian gay cultures, although as Audrey Yue indicates Asian women face similar issues within lesbian cultures. See Yue, '<interface: reflections of an ethnic toygirl>', in Jackson and Sullivan, op. cit., pp 113–34.
- 3 See Peter A Jackson, *Dear Uncle Go: Male Homosexuality in Thailand*, Bua Luang Books, San Francisco, 1995; also Peter A Jackson and Gerard Sullivan (eds), *Lady Boys, Tom Boys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*, Haworth, New York, 1999.
- 4 Rosalind C Morris, 'Three sexes and four sexualities: redressing the discourses on gender and sexuality in contemporary Thailand', *Positions*, vol 2, no 1, 1994, p 15.
- 5 I have elsewhere analysed Western gay fantasies of Thai homosexualities. See Peter A Jackson, 'Tolerant but unaccepting: the myth of a Thai gay paradise', in Peter A Jackson and Nerida Cook (eds), *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*, Silksworm Books, Chiang Mai, 2000, pp 226–42.
- 6 See Christopher Lane, *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1995; and Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1995.
- 7 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, (trans. Robert Hurley), Vintage Books, New York, 1978, p 69.
- 8 Peter A Jackson, *The Intrinsic Quality of Skin*, Floating Lotus Books, Bangkok, 1994.
- 9 Chris Berry, *A Bit on the Side: East-West Topographies of Desire*, EmPress, Sydney, 1994.
- 10 Rosalind Morris, 'Educating desire: Thailand, transnationalism, and transgression', *Social Text*, vol 15, nos 3–4, 1997, p 67.
- 11 See Chris Berry, 'A bit on the side: thoughts after seeing Dennis O'Rourke's "documentary fiction"', *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, in Berry, *A Bit on the Side*, pp 59–67; and Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton and Laleen Jayamanne (eds), *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute: Dennis O'Rourke's 'The Good Woman of Bangkok'*, Power Publications, Sydney, 1997.
- 12 Berry, *A Bit on the Side*, p 51.
- 13 *ibid.*, p 52.
- 14 *ibid.*, p 56.

**Asian-Australian Cinema, Asian-Australian Modernity
Audrey Yue**

- 1 The term 'Asia' in this essay is strategically mobilised as a signifier. Clearly, 'Asia' is imagined differently in different regions. In the popular consciousness of Australia, 'Asia' is delineated through a discourse of racial difference, which prescribes inferiority through the essentialism of biology. Although 'Asia' is a heterogeneous category, it functions in Australia as an Orientalist codification to connote a certain South-East Asian kitsch and pastiche. Regardless of where one is from or where one grew up, one is labelled 'Asian' as long as one 'looks' the part: with yellow skin and 'slant' eyes. Because of Australia's historical interactions with Asia, from the White Australia Policy to the Vietnam War and, more recently, to Pauline Hanson's One Nation notoriety, 'Asia' has tended to function as a metonym for the ethnic category, 'Chinese'. In this essay, I use the terms 'Asian' and 'Chinese' strategically whilst acknowledging their disparity.
- 2 See Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction', in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, Fontana, Suffolk, 1973, pp 219–53; Paul Kelley and Susan Lord, 'Driven to distraction: going to the movies with Walter and Siegfried', *Cineaction*, no 34, pp 20–5.
- 3 Tom O' Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, Routledge, New York, 1996.

- 4 Ross Gibson, *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1992, p xi.
- 5 Recent theorisation of Australia's regional identity has focused on the discursive locations of both Asia and Australia. Issues discussed range from Asian representations in Australian media, to the Asian turn in Australian cultural studies, to the inclusion of NESB specificities in Australia's tripartite identity. See, for example, Chris Berry, *A Bit On The Side: East-West Topographies of Desire*, Empress Publishing, Sydney, 1994; Suvendrini Perera (ed.), *Asian and Pacific Inscriptions: Identities, Ethnicities, Nationalities*, Meridian, Melbourne, 1995; and Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, 'Asianising Australia: towards a critical transnationalism in cultural studies', *Cultural Studies*, vol 10, no 1, 1996, pp 16–36. While these theorists are exemplary in forging an emerging Asian-Australian cultural consciousness, they have not taken into account the specificity of the route negotiated by the southward movement of Asian migration into Australia. This essay argues that such specificity is imperative to adequately inscribe the situatedness of the Asian diaspora in Australia and delineate it from Asian diasporas elsewhere.
- 6 Audrey Yue, "'I am like you, I am different': beyond ethnicity, becoming Asian-Australian", *Artlink*, vol 13, no 1, 1993.
- 7 Postcolonial theorists suggest that national culture is positioned in a liminal site between history (the pedagogical) and practice (the performative). See Homi Bhabha, 'DisseminNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation', in Homi Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, London, 1990, pp 291–322.
- 8 Yue, op. cit., p 21.
- 9 Audrey Yue and Gay Hawkins, 'Going South', *New Formations*, no 22, 2000, forthcoming.
- 10 Law began this transition with her earlier film, *Temptation of the Monk* (1993), which was post-produced in Australia using an Australian-trained team.
- 11 Ien Ang has argued that 'not speaking Chinese' signifies the loss of 'authenticity' in hegemonic definitions of Chineseness. See 'On not speaking Chinese: postmodern ethnicity and the politics of diaspora', *New Formations*, no 24, winter 1994, pp 1–18. She argues for the recognition of a heterogeneous 'Chineseness' as a contingent signifier whose meanings are not fixed and pre-given, but constantly renegotiated and re-enunciated, both inside and outside China. Rey Chow has also urged that a major imperative in the task of writing the Chinese diaspora is to destabilise the ethnicity of Chineseness as a fixed entity. See *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1993. More recently, Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini also suggest that a transnational Chineseness is constituted through an engagement with the Chinese diaspora rather than with China. See Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini (eds), *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, Routledge, London, 1997.
- 12 Garry Cross, 'The suburban weekend: perspectives on a vanishing twentieth century dream', in Roger Silverstone (ed.), *Visions of Suburbia*, Routledge, London, 1997, p 109.
- 13 Kim Dovey, 'Dreams on display: suburban ideology in the model home', in Sarah Ferber, Chris Healy and Chris McAuliffe (eds), *Beasts of Suburbia: Reinterpreting Cultures in Australian Suburbs*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p 128.
- 14 John Hartley, 'Suburbanality (in cultural studies)', *Meanjin*, vol 51, no 3, Spring 1992, p 460.
- 15 Joan Nestle (ed.), *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, Alyson Publications, Boston, 1992, and Gilles Deleuze, 'Coldness and cruelty', in *Masochism*, Zone Books, New York, 1989.
- 16 In the last five years or so, there has been an emerging Asian consciousness constituted in Asian queer pride. In the Melbourne community for example, the early 1990s witnessed only one support group for gays and lesbians from minority background. In the last five years, at least ten other support groups have been formed. The sticky rice segment of Ayres' film reflects this consciousness and visibility.
- 17 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996. Appadurai uses the term 'ethnoscape' to describe the shifting world of the diaspora, consisting of refugees, migrants, tourists and expatriates.
- 18 Alan Sinfield characterises the Anglo-Saxon narrative of coming out by highlighting it as a reverse diaspora. See 'Diaspora and hybridity: queer identities and the ethnicity model', *Textual Practice*, vol 10, no 2, 1996, pp 271–93.
- 19 In Peter Jackson and Gerard Sullivan (eds), *Multicultural Queer: Australian Narratives*, Haworth Press, New York, 1999, p 97.

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