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Experience of Individual Time as Repudiation of the Subject of History in *Lust, Caution*

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Ang Lee's film *Lust, Caution*, is based on Eileen Chang's story of the same title. It has been in discussion since the release of the film on how much Ang Lee's film draws from the story by Chang and how much it enriches its historical aspects and emotional contents of the story. However, it has been a consensus that Ang Lee's film is a reaction to the "master narrative" of modern Chinese history (Lee, Leo 227; 238). The script writer of *Lust, Caution*, James Schamus comments on Ang Lee's filmic adaptation of Chang's story, "one of the things that drew Lee, and the rest of us with him, toward Zhang Ailing's work was a feeling that her writing itself is just this kind of 'act'—a profound cry of protest against the warring structures of domination that so cataclysmically shaped mid-century China and made her life a long series of displacements" (66). However, as Leo Lee points out, James fails to specify what the "warring structures of domination are" (Lee, Leo 235). According to Leo Lee, Ang Lee purposely parts way from Chang in his film "because he comes from a totally different cultural background and has a different sense and sensibility about both the story itself and the historical context of the story" (Lee, Leo 235-6).

I agree with Schamus and Leo Lee on the alternative and subversive nature of the film as demonstrated through an obsession of historical authenticity which challenges and revises the

dominant master narrative which has been in modern Chinese history. In this paper, I further propose that the film *Lust, Caution* challenges the master narrative of modern Chinese history not only through its adoption of body but also through a feminist consciousness and sensitivity of time. I argue that, the filmic treatment of time, including flashbacks, repetitions and pauses, anchors on the protagonist's private sensitivity of time and of the world, and thus deconstructs the progressive Hegelian concept of time and history, a modern concept upon which nationalism ideology functions.

Before we explore the presentation of time in *Lust, Caution*, it is helpful to trace the modern notions of time. Hegel's *Philosophy of Time* remains the most fundamental work on the modern concept of linear time. According to Hegel, the telos of History is the self-awareness of Spirit which is Reason. There are two aspects of the Spirit: first of all, Spirit itself is embodied objectively in the rationality of religion, laws, and the State and also in the individual subject; secondly, progressive self-awareness of the individual involves his identification and unification with Spirit (Duara 17-8). Social Darwinism took over Hegelian notion of Spirit and developed a discourse on history, insisting that the only justification for nationhood was whether a race could be shown to fit in or to advance Historical progress. National ideology, according to Duara, bases itself on the Hegelian concept of linear history and the Darwinian notion of progressiveness and developed the notion that nation-state as the Subject of Hegelian linear history progresses itself toward an ultimate self-awareness.

Paul Ricoeur approaches the issue of time and history from another perspective. Ricoeur holds that human beings have existential fear of time: we experience eternal time in the form of temporality, infinite instances. Hence we are faced with a dilemma, that is, "on the cosmic scale our life span is insignificant, yet this brief period of time when we appear in the world is the

moment during which all meaningful questions arise” (Duara 28, Ricoeur, 343). In this sense, the linear historical time provides certain comfort and release to human being’s anxiety by the means of the subject of History: even though everything evolves, including the individual subject, but the Subject of History keeps its existence intact. Therefore, “the subject of History is a metaphysical unity devised to address the aporias in the experience of linear time: the disjuncture between past and present as well as the non-meeting between time as flux and time as eternal” (Duara 29).

However, the linear progressive concept of the Subject of History, which is “people” in the ideology of nationalism, does not completely release modern persons’ anxiety about time. In Duara words, linear histories as way to address “aporias” actually “expose the uncertainty of a voyage into the future without return” (28). Here in this paper, I interpret modern human beings seeks the Subject of history as ways to conceal their anxiety in linear and ever evolving history and sometimes realizes its inefficiency in fully addressing the psychological state of aporias. I consider that Wang Jiazhi, the protagonist in *Lust, Caution*, is withdrawn to ideal of the Subject of history as her peers but eventually fails to fully identify herself with the Subject of history as she is supposed to.

The film *Lust, Caution*, enriches the historical contents of Chang’s story. It endeavors to reproduce the complexity of political powers in the 1930s and the ethos of nationalism before and during the Japanese military evasion. It has been discussed why Ang Lee is drawn to the murky and under-discussed historical period of this time. One explanation might be that 1920s and 1930s was a time where vocabulary of nationalism was quickly built and increased because of the military threats and crisis by Japanese invasion. People of different social classes were promoted to identify themselves with the Subject of History out of fear and uncertainty of their

future. The concept of the Subject of history as core of ideology of nationalism was prevailing at that time. In my opinion, it is exactly what is termed by James Schamus and Haiyan Lee as the master narrative.

The film emphasizes the concept of the Subject of history as grounding of the personal story of Wang Jiazhi. In the play staged by the drama club, Wang Jiazhi in the role of a peasant woman, has a conversation with the wounded soldier. She says, “You’ve given everything to save China! Every time you kill an enemy, you are avenging my brother! I am only sorry that I am a girl. I need to take of my mother...” Here, Wang Jiazhi in the mouth of a fictional character is voicing the national ethos, i.e, in the time of political and military emergency, she identifies her family with the nation-state, the soldier’s killing of enemy as her personal avenge. Here, the boundaries between family and nation-state are blurred. She further expresses her desire of identifying her personal life to the course of nationalism when she says she wishes she could be in battlefield two. These lines were participating the nation-wide ethos and they move the audience to tears and make them rise up and shout, “China will not fall!”

The shouting of the audience “China will not fall” portrays human beings’ anxiety of the future in the Hegelia-Darwinian concept of linear history. There underlines the conception that China, if not progressively evolves, could fall, so is each individual. This premise is very much what Ricoeur considers to be aporias of linear history, though here not seemingly so existential but rather politically specific. Out of uncertainty of future, under this grand narrative frame, people consciously seek an openness with the Subject of history, here rather specific, the nation-state. After the celebration on the success of this play, this group of young people are heading school. They are singing a song which was popular in 1930s and 1940s:

There are clouds in the sky. Students in sweet

Youth day, Pillars of society tomorrow. Tomorrow
 We'll make waves to save our nation, Huge waves,
 Huge waves, forever surging! Fellow students,
 fellow students—
 Come forward with your strength now, And take
 Into our hands the fate of our land! Huge waves,
 Huge waves, forever surging!

The lyrics of this song carry rich images of Hegelian concept of progressive linear history. Huge waves encompassing individuals of all social walks, particularly youth, forever progresses forward toward future and call on submission from individual selves to a collective self-consciousness by promising a release from anxiety toward the future.

Wang Jiazhi answers the call to overcome her anxiety toward her future. In one sense, her anxiety of future is part of the historical age of the war-time. Because of the war, she has to stay in Hong Kong, waiting for an opportunity to join her family in Britain. However, apart from this social wide anxiety, some of her problems are personal. She experiences loneliness more acutely than others by being abandoned by her father and her father's new marriage. She does not have consanguineous support to address the issue of anxiety toward the future. Out of her desire to hold onto something certain, she chooses to join the drama club and be part of the resistance movements even before she understands mentally what it means. The self-identification with a group, not even the whole society or the nation-state, brings her certain insurance and release. After she met K'uang Yumin again in Shanghai, Wang eagerly inquires about the existence of that little group of former drama club. In turn, she has been ensured that this small group still exists after much evolvment, and after many changes in her personal life. This is the collectivity

Wang seeks to overcome her anxiety about the eternity and temporality of time. She chooses to remain in it through the rest of her life.

However, as Duara has pointed out, identification with the Subject of history does not bring individual subjects full comforts. Though with a conscious openness with the Subject of history, individual self still constantly experiences an anxiety of time. In Haiyan Lee's analysis, the aporia and dilemma come in the form of the conflicts between individual purpose and collective purposes, private sphere and public space. I argue that Wang Jiazhi's action is a result of experiencing the aporias which cannot be fully addressed and resolved through her attempt of identifying herself with the Subject of history.

Though part of the resistance movements, and despite of her sincere efforts of identifying her personal adventure in the course of nationalism, she is oblivious of what is going on the volatile political events in Shanghai during the war-time. It can be interpreted that her self-identification with the Subject of history is not successful. What keeps her in her spy-role is not the ensurance and confidence of the future but rather the capability of holding firm to the present through sex. When ideology does not work, the reliance upon physical experience becomes an important way to assurance one's existence. Body, instead of mind and rationality, becomes the source of strength for her to deal with the uncertainty of the future. There are three major scenes of sex of the protagonist and her lover Mr. Ye. In the last scene of sex, during which Wang Jiazhi has more agency in their relationship. Mr. Yi, out of his fear, stays alert and keeps looking at window during sex. Wang Jiazhi pulls over a pillow and covers his eye. The message in Wang's behavior is very clear and firm: Stop worrying about future! Hold onto the present! Her distancing from the Subject of history eventually culminates in the moment when she calls out "Run!" to Mr. Yi at the Jeweler's place.

Ang Lee as director of this film has shown full sympathy to the protagonist's experience of time and history. The major part of the film which unfolds Wang Jiazhi's student background and her participation in the Resistance movement is one of the main changes Ang Lee makes to the original story written by Chang. This part of film is in a long flashback sequence which takes place in Wang Jiazhi's sojourn at the coffeehouse. We watch her make a phone call, walk to a table by window, and take out her perfume out of purse and apply it by ear. Here time is divided into a series of instants of the protagonist. During the flashback, the view is mostly limited to that of Wang Jiazhi. We follow her view and find out what it happens. The only scene is beyond her focal point of view is the time when Lao Wu burns her letter to her father once she leaves the room. After the flashback, we come back to a repetition of what she does before the flashback sequence. 3 years of history is one of the present instants of the protagonist.

While the master narrative of the Subject of history anchors around the concept of linear history, we find there are several places in the film that points to another way of perception of time, through the flows of mind by the protagonist. After Wang Jiazhi walks out of Jeweler's place after she made the doomed warning, she looks into the shop windows, in which we see the chaotic mass. Time, as what shows up in the glasses of shop windows, does not leave much trace. The tricycle cab she gets on has a little red-green-white pinwheel tied on the crossbar, spinning wildly. It has been a question whether the pinwheel is a sign indicating that driver is an undercover. Nonetheless, the film gives much attention to the circling motions of this pinwheel. It conveys the feeling of Wang Jiazhi who is greatly perplexed. Possibly, as I hold here in this paper, it also transmits the director's protesting message of against the Hegelian linear concept of history which requires individuals to submit their individual subject to Spirit of history.

While the ideology of nationalism advocates individuals to submit their subjectivity to history, Ang Lee seems to have a different opinion. The lyrics of songs Wang and her peers sing after their celebration are confident of the positive outcomes of this submission. But Ang Lee repudiates it with the last scene of Wang Jiazhi and her friends. They are facing a bottomless abyss at the time before their execution. Does this abyss represent an nihilistic vision of the Subject of history? Why does the openness with the Subject of history by Wang and her friends lead not to the final and ultimate self-awareness of Spirit of history as Hegel asserts but rather to a dark abyss? It is interesting that the trailer of *Lust, Caution* ends up with a scene of Wang Jiazhi, who is nude and gazes at a blooming tree out of window. It seems that Ang Lee, like Wang in the film, tries to hold onto body, the temporality, as a repudiation of the legitimacy of master narrative which upholds the necessity of unifying with the subject of history.

There have been many aspects in *Lust, Caution* that poses questions and challenges the legitimacy of the master narrative of history. For instance, while nationalism usually emphasizes the scenes in which women are raped by foreign invaders, in *Lust, Caution*, the protagonist is raped by a person appointed by a small group with their ambition of nationalism. It is important to note these details deconstruct our previous understanding of nationalism. However, it is also important, as I explain in this paper, that the film is dealing with a more basic and fundamental concept of time and thus poses a challenge to the Hegelian linear concept of the Subject of history.

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