Competing Narratives: Choosing the Tiger in Ang Lee's *Life of Pi*

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<small>ABSTRACT</small>

Life of Pi's global resonance, international production team, and cosmopolitan director are mainstream Hollywood's answer to the demands of a "world cinema" marketplace. Having grossed over $600 million at the box office, with $482 million coming from theaters outside North America, *Life of Pi* earned more in mainland China than the United States and was Hollywood's highest earning release in India for 2012. Ignoring these notable facts, reviewers often focus upon the film's spiritual themes and impressive visual effects, but Lee's interpretation clearly resonates in the global political climate. Though his films speak to an international audience, for whom does Ang Lee speak? Scholars such as Rey Chow, Emilie Yeh, Darrell Davis, Shu-mei Shih, and Gina Marchetti examine Lee's work through a transnational lens, though much of this work remains framed within a regional discourse. By reviewing this scholarship, this paper discusses the critical connections between these interpretations and my own reading of *Life of Pi* as a cosmopolitan allegory of migration and survival.

No director embraces the idea of "world cinema" quite like Ang Lee. His latest film, *Life of Pi* (2012), grossed over $600 million at the box office, with $482 million coming from theaters outside North America. The film grossed more in mainland China than the United States and was Hollywood's highest earning release in India that year. Life of Pi's global resonance, international production team, and cosmopolitan director are mainstream Hollywood's answer to the demands of a "world cinema" marketplace. Lee himself is the most successful Asian director in terms of box office receipts and Oscar statuettes. Ignoring these notable facts, reviewers often focus upon the film's spiritual themes and impressive visual effects, but Lee's interpretation clearly resonates in the global political climate.

Robert Stam and Ella Shohat argue that contemporary film spectatorship in a global economy allows for an "analogical structure of feeling," in which spectators might associate or identify with a protagonist or narrative, despite

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differing subjectivities.[1] By allowing for a heteroglossia of meaning that empowers audiences and critics, this theory of spectatorship demonstrates how audiences might find commonality and identify with the diverse narratives, settings, and casts of Ang Lee's films. Moreover, Stam and Shohat insightfully demonstrate that the appeal and interpretations of a text also implicates the viewer's subjectivity. The diversity of scholarly positions surrounding Ang Lee's cinema demonstrates that polysemy.

In "Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* and Its Reception," Leo Ou-fan Lee outlines the differing opinions on the film and Ang Lee's directorial skill from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States. American critics see Ang Lee as a master craftsman lacking originality and "auteur status," while Chinese critics see him as a Chinese director transplanted successfully in America whose films symbolize "a cinematic equivalent of 'fusion food'—appetizing initially but ultimately lacking in genuine 'local' flavor."[2] Leo Lee argues that the notable contrast in critical reception and box office performance of *Lust, Caution* (2007) in greater China versus the United States demonstrates "a difference of taste and preconception."[3] Moreover, the reception amongst Chinese critics differs significantly by region. While labeled the work of a "traitor" by Beijing critics and filmmakers and criticized by literary circles in Shanghai, *Lust, Caution* enjoyed popularity for lasciviousness in Hong Kong and near-universal acclaim in Taiwan.[4] Tellingly, these opinions parallel the political fault lines surrounding Ang Lee's cultural identity. Yet critics and audiences from the United States, where Ang Lee has spent the majority of his adult life, regard the film only as a "cheap Chinese copy" of classical Hollywood's spy noir.[5] The particular Chinese subjectivity and historical associations still matter to audience understanding and appreciation of the film.

The unifying "analogical structure of feeling" in Ang Lee's films is a uniquely Chinese conception of repression, Leo Lee argues. Differentiating from the Freudian sense of sexual repression, Leo Lee defines this leitmotif "as a cultural and ethical burden that members of a society have inherited and internalized over a long period of time" understood as a traditional Chinese conflict with a father figure and characterized by "restrained emotionality."[6] Similarly, Rey Chow argues that contemporary Chinese cinema collectively expresses a Chinese discursive concept translated as "sentimental," defined by a "sense of moderation" and "*an inclination or a disposition toward making compromises and toward making-do with even—and especially—that which is oppressive and unbearable.*"[7] However, Chow explains, the "sentimental" functions not as an emotional back-and-forth between repression and

1 "To explain the public's attraction to a text or medium one must look not only for the 'ideological effect' that manipulates people into complicity with existing social relations, but also for the kernel of utopian fantasy reaching beyond those relations, whereby the medium constitutes itself as a projected fulfillment of what is desired and absent within the *status quo.*" Ella Shohat, Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the media.* (New York: Psychology Press, 1994), 398.

2 Leo Ou-fan Lee, "Ang Lee's Lust, Caution and Its Reception." *Boundary 2* 35, no. 3 (2008): 224.

3 Leo Lee, 223.

4 Leo Lee, 230.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Leo Lee, 226.

7 Rey Chow, *Sentimental fabulations, contemporary Chinese films: attachment in the age of global visibility,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 18.

deluge, but instead as a "mode of endurance" that perseveres not in spite of, but because of ideological tradition.[8] This primary need to maintain filial piety and a deep-rooted shame of failing to do so characterizes many protagonists of Ang Lee's films. *Sentimentality* circumscribes even those outside of historical China as well as some non-Chinese characters, such as the star-crossed lovers of *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), whose "obligatory participation in society—their separate lives in the midst of hostile and uncomprehending gazes, emanating from that impersonal 'they' that constitutes the only communities they know. . . makes this film so incomparably heartwrenching."[9]

In the case of Taiwanese cinema, the *idealization of filiality* prompts a much more complicated question: which father to venerate? In *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island*, Emilie Yeh and Darrell Davis argue that "the history of Taiwan evolves around negotiations over patrimony," a struggle that is "not just political but also cultural, linguistic, and ethnic."[10] Un-*sentimental*, Taiwanese cinema illustrates a confrontation with a cinematic and cultural inheritance, mirroring the island's political and historical struggle. Yeh and Davis regard Ang Lee's "father-knows-best" trilogy as a prime example of this conflict, further positing that his films are best understood "in terms of their cinematic ancestry, their references to and updates of Chinese literary and film classics."[11] This divergent reading of Lee's cinema demonstrates why the above-mentioned reception of *Lust, Caution* falls along territorial and political boundaries: if Ang Lee's films represent the usurpation of a cultural and cinematic legacy, then naturally critics in Beijing will consider him a "traitor" while those in Taipei see him as an innovator.

Oftentimes, these interpretations of Ang Lee and his films signify critics' own political subjectivities, or at the very least, how that critic specifies Lee's subjectivity. Discussing *The Wedding Banquet,* Gina Marchetti demonstrates that an allegorical reading neither need align with territorial borders nor signify a singular hegemonic meaning. Citing Lee's own admission that *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) is a "comedy about identity," Marchetti articulates multiple interpretations as a function of different political, gendered, sexual, or ideological identities the characters might represent. While such an approach might seem an extreme reaction to an over determined national allegorical reading, these interpretations fit snugly with the diasporic protagonist's flexible identity as a first generation, Taiwanese, American, gay, immigrant, slumlord. Within the American cultural and political imaginary, Wai-tung embodies progressive liberal values. However, within a gendered and political P.R.C. vs. K.M.T. context, he becomes an apparatus of patriarchy victimizing his faux-bride Wei-wei.[12] The political, cultural, gender,

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8 "*At the heart of Chinese sentimentalism lies the idealization of filiality*: as a predominant mode of subjectivization, filial piety is not simply a matter of respecting one's biological or cultural elders but also an age-old moral apparatus for interpellating individuals into the hierarchy-conscious conduct of identifying with—and submitting to—whatever preexists them—from the ancestral family to the ancestral land, the province, the country, and the ethnic community in a foreign nation—as authoritative and thus beyond challenge." Chow, 21-22.

9 Chow, 198.

10 Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, Darrell William Davis, *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 5.

11 Yeh and Davis, 2.

12 "Wei-wei is not a 'victim' of traditional patriarchy but a 'victim' of its dissolution. Going back a step to the political dimensions of the film as a national allegory, Wei-wei represents a 'feminist' mainland, liberated from the 'feudal' and Confucian principles embodied by Mr. and Mrs. Gao. . . She is constructed as a bourgeois bride, marrying a slumlord for a green card and working menial labor, she is transformed, "leaving behind her 'feminism' and her working-class

sexual, labor class and national identity of these characters and the concep-
tual framework function like hydraulic switches that translate and magnify
different, but still coherent and related, allegorical interpretations of the
film.

Marchetti's scholarship on *Hulk* (2003) offers similarly fluid meanings.
Conceived in the 1960s, the comic book character's Jekyll and Hyde-like per-
sonality disorder, anger management issues, and nuclear-fueled superpowers
once signified the repressed libidinal desires of a society unable to control its
own scientific creations – a sort of Dr. Frankenstein meets Mr. Freud.
Marchetti argues that by updating and recontexualizing the Hulk in 2003,
Ang Lee's adaptation speaks to its historical moment, offering a blistering
critique of American imperialism:

> The A-bomb be damned— the Hulk condenses the Viet Cong and Osama Bin Laden/
> Saddam Hussein into one gargantuan challenge to the U.S. military-industrial com-
> plex. . . An Orientalist fantasy gone awry, *Hulk* shows that within the white, Western,
> establishment male (and, by extension, the American body politic) lurks the repressed
> man of color, perpetually angry, on the margins and on the loose, waiting to emerge as
> the apocalyptic destroyer of Western civilization or, perhaps, its ultimate salvation.[13]

This dense passage demonstrates the transitional ease with which shifting
identification produces variegated allegorical interpretations. Marchetti ar-
gues that the climactic battle between the Hulk and his father is both Oedi-
pal *and* Confucian. She compares Bruce Banner to would-be spy Wen Ho
Lee, who also hails from Taiwan, found his career ambitions stuck at the
American Los Alamos labs, and made a bumbling attempt at espionage on
behalf of the PRC. This formulation favors a transnational Asian American
subjectivity through which the Hulk represents repressed Asian Americans
breaking free from the model minority stereotype.

Despite the topicality and convincingness of these allegorical readings,
Marchetti notes, the Hulk's subjectivity and political allegiance remain nebu-
lous, "Over-determined ideologically as a disgruntled worker, an angry mi-
nority professional outraged by the glass ceiling, a displaced child of the
KMT, an Asian American targeted by racial profiling, and as a rebellious son
unable to cope with the patriarchy, the Hulk can never represent a clear
political position."[14] The monster is in fact only a computer-generated image
that signifies much but consists of very little. Similarly, with regards to *Lust,
Caution*, Marchetti concludes that, "*Lust, Caution*—and any depiction it offers
of Chinese politics and its history—exists within the media marketplace and
remains subject to its rules."[15] This is Marchetti's most trenchant point. The
variable subjectivity with which Ang Lee approaches his films, as well as the
critical scholarship about them, demonstrate a measured and calculated self-
reflexivity, effectively rendered to produce a desired result.

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roots. . . Wai-tung fits into the space created for him as a viewer of this spectacle [Wei-wei becom-
ing bourgeois traditional chinese marriage material], an overdetermined locus of Chinese and
Western visions of heterosexuality and bourgeois patriarchy." Gina Marchetti, "The Wedding
Banquet: Global Chinese Cinema an the Asian American Experience," in Darrell Hamamoto,
Sandra Liu, eds., *Counterversions: Asian American Film Criticism* (Philadelphia: Temple University
Press, 2000), 288-289.

13 Gina Marchetti, "Hollywood/Taiwan: Connections, Countercurrents, and Ang Lee's
HULK", *Film International: journal of world cinema*, (2004, v. 12), 42-51.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Gina Marchetti, "Eileen Chang and Ang Lee at the Movies: The Cinematic Politics of
LUST, CAUTION," in Kam Louie, ed., *Eileen Chang: Romancing Languages, Cultures and Genres*
(Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 136.

For good reason, the above-mentioned allegorical interpretations of Ang Lee's films all seemingly apply to varying degrees. In the "symbolic battle-ground of the mass media,"[16] Lee is a veteran gladiator, having honed his craft in mass appeal to multiple markets. "Lee relishes commercial success and makes his films as accessible as possible to a vast international audience," Hsiu-Chuang Deppman explains. "An astute student of Hollywood, he writes and adapts scripts that appeal to critics and general viewers. From Jane Austen to Wang Dulu to Elliot Tiber, Lee has embraced a wide range of popular fiction and used camera movement, quick cut, and editing to build dramatic tension to enhance the entertainment value of his films."[17] Aihwa Ong theorizes a cultural community of Chinese diasporic elites, like Ang Lee, capable of negotiating national boundaries because of a historically situated economic flexibility.[18] This privileged group capitalizes upon the fractures in the global marketplace to benefit economically and socially, while disregarding national allegiance and ideology in favor of self-interest. In a sort of cultural performance, described as a "boutique cultural manifestation" by Regina Lee in "Theorizing Asian Diasporas," diasporic communities understand the ways in which they are read by native groups, and "play up" this otherness in order to profit in some way. "The diaspora knows what the host society wants," she explains, "and feeds it to them, by self-consciously re-enacting for the dominant community their ethnicity."[19] Similarly, Darrell Hamamoto considers transnational Asian Americans directors such as Ang Lee and Wayne Wang part of a post-1965 immigrant generation that neglects the political cause of Asian America for financial gain.[20] By manipulating and capitalizing upon the very image of Asians to appeal to the western market, these diasporic and flexible communities "convert political constraints in one field into economic opportunities in another, to turn displacement into advantageous placement in different sites, and to elude state disciplining in order to reproduce the family in tandem with the propulsion of capitalism."[21]

Such a suspicious view of these transnational directors as ultra-rational capitalists neglects several other factors such as intrinsic motivators.[22] Yeh

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16   *Ibid.*

17   Deppman, Hsiu-Chuang, "Seduction of a Filmic Romance: Eileen Chang and Ang Lee," in Kam Louie, ed., *Eileen Chang: Romancing Languages, Cultures and Genres.* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 157.

18   "Perhaps more than other travelers and migrants, international managers and professionals have the material and symbolic resources to manipulate global schemes of cultural difference, racial hierarchy, and citizenship to their own advantage. Today, flexibility reigns in business, industry, labor, and financial markets, all technologically enhanced innovations that have effects on the way people are differently imagined and regulated." Aihwa Ong, "Flexible citizenship among Chinese cosmopolitans," in Pheng Cheah, Bruce Robbins, eds., *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and feeling beyond the nation,* (Vol. 14. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 134-162.

19   Regina Lee, "Theorizing Diasporas: Three Types of Consciousness," in Robbie B.H. Goh, Shawn Wong, eds., *Asian Diasporas: Cultures, Identities, Representations,* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 53-76.

20   "Those directors who decide not to foreground Asian American characters and themes have made a political choice to hide behind the mask of a 'color-blind' race-neutrality in the name of a false universalism and bourgeois humanism that nevertheless defers to Whiteness as the presumptive standard of superiority." (Hamamoto, 15)

21   Ong, 156

22   "It is not surprising that Lee was accused of catering to the West, of perpetuating Orientalism. Because of the calculation with which Chinese materials were packaged in Hollywood wrapping, he was accused of self-Orientalizing. But such critiques do not help in understanding the intermingled layers of genre and national cinema, its transnational operation and cross-cultural apparatus. Particularly, they cannot explain some of the more interesting issues of film-

and Davis argue that Ang Lee should instead be seen as a deterritorializing force in cinema production, bringing Confucian values to the Hollywood system by incorporating the western production values with the narrative and generic norms of Chinese cinema. His efforts are meant to change the system from within and can be seen as an almost noble activity as opposed to expressing Ayn Rand-like self-interest.[23] This heroization of Ang Lee's virtue in an amoral corporate system similarly lacks nuance. Moreover, the veneration of Confucian ethics can take multiple routes and be channeled through different, and often times competing, discursive forces. As mentioned above, what is considered filial in one region might be perceived as rebellious in another. If Ang Lee is indeed "Confucianizing Hollywood," he uses his particular version of Confucianism, or at least the version that Yeh and Davis articulate. However, the argument notably illustrates how Lee's efforts and production style is an epistemic activity meant to construct and disseminate visuality, as opposed to merely reproducing images that Western audiences want to see.

In his dissertation entitled "Worldly Desires: Cosmopolitanism and Cinema in Hong Kong and Taiwan," Brian Hu arges that cosmopolitanism does not necessarily mean disappearing into the global, but an opportunity to "carve a distinct place in the world as opposed to simply disappearing into it."[24] In this context, filmmakers such as Ang Lee might be seen under a different light that looks at the adoption of global standards as a means of political legitimacy. Given the geopolitical realities of Taiwan and Hong Kong, a politics of pragmatism guides the push towards cosmopolitanism, which by necessity appeals to the global political body of the developed world. Hu argues that Lee's great success at the Academy Awards represents the apotheosis of Taiwanese cosmopolitan strivings: "[Winning the 2006 Best Director Award is] a testament to Lee's ability to don the costumes of any nation and empathize with the sensibilities of any race or lifestyle."[25] Such an optimistic formulation marginalizes other identities that do not fit neatly into this cosmopolitan cinematic identity, including one of queer identity and other underrepresented groups. Marchetti warns that seeking legitimacy through a global marketplace bound by market forces then occludes the expressions of less marketable communities and their narratives, "Within a transnational cinema with a multicultural, cosmopolitan vision of diversity, hierarchies of power and structures of silence still exercise a heavy burden on the emergent desire for social change, harmony, and understanding."[26] The pertinent inquiry then becomes what are these hierarchies of powers, whose voices do they silence, and how does that silencing power manifest?

Shu-mei Shih's *Visuality and Identity* offers a conceptual framework that uses Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as a case study to articulate the

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makers who are caught in conflicting frameworks of cultural and identity politics." (Yeh and Davis, 184)

23 "But Confucianizing means more than a Chinese director who just happens to make movies in Hollywood; it is an injection of righteousness into the production process itself upholding merits of patience, decency, and concern for the entire community and the whole process, not just oneself. A Confucian workplace would inoculate all against cynicism and exploitation. It is the polar opposite of every-man-for-him-selfishness and the kind of savage, Hobbesian excess thought to characterize the conducting of show business and especially that of Hollywood movies." (Yeh and Davis, 178-179)

24 Brian Hu, "Worldly Desires: Cosmopolitanism and Cinema in Hong Kong and Taiwan" (PhD diss., UCLA, 2011).

25 Hu, 322.

26 Marchetti, "Wedding Banquet," 293.

various agents and processes at play in the identity wars over "Chineseness." By examining the discursive formation of global media identifiers of Chinese identity through visual signifiers,[27] such as the martial arts genre, Shih notes that its "authenticity" has always been suspect and largely produced outside of territorial China, "Inauthenticity and incoherence aptly describe [*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*] and the setting and expose the illusion that such martial arts films must necessarily reference an eternal China and an essential Chineseness."[28] The blatant linguistic inaccuracies and revisionisms of the film actually reveal the fractures and inconsistencies of that original media produced conception of classical China—*the simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none.*[29] Shih elucidates the historical and political forces behind these constructions of Chineseness,[30] and argues that "Classical Chinese culture" as understood by global audiences is a late 20th century invention, whose dissemination followed the trajectories of Sinitic-language speaking communities outside of territorial China, who Shih labels Sinophone,[31] as well as media consumers within the PRC. For Ang Lee to deconstruct these norms in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* makes him a "traitor" to some, not because he misrepresents Chineseness but because such an act reveals the politically and culturally constructed nature of that identity,[32] thereby delinking cultural Chineseness from the nation-state.

Life of Pi articulates similar choices regarding both the narrator and the director's subjectivity. In the film, adult Pi offers two competing versions of his narrative: in the first, Pi and the tiger reach the shores of Mexico intact through sheer force of ingenuity, luck, and human fortitude; in the second,

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27 Shih argues that in the global system, the visible is the main currency of identity: "If vision is an analogical form of cognition, then traveling images would trigger imaginative leaps to engender new affinities as well as new discords between two terms previously not related to each other, thus making possible multiple fields of meaning. Effectively, terms of relationship exceed binarisms and dichotomies." Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and identity: Sinophone articulations across the Pacific*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) 2:13.

28 Shih, 3.

29 Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and simulation.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

30 "Classical Chinese culture" was one of the legitimizing mechanisms for the Guomingdang government's rule of Taiwan—the logic being that the Republic of China on Taiwan, not Communist China, was the preserver of the authentic Chinese culture, and by that, the Chinese mainlanders in Taiwan were culturally superior to the local Taiwanese, the Hakkas, and the aboriginals. As for Hong Kong, British colonialism engendered nostalgia for China among Hong Kongers. With China safely tucked away behind the 'iron curtain,' Hong Kong and Taiwan were free to claim their versions of authentic Chineseness through nostalgic reconstructions of Classical Chinese culture in popular media. Even though a degree of ambivalence existed and contradictory implications of nostalgia, reinvention, and resistance to the continental center of China proper could be detected (especially the anticommunist variety), the politically motivated valorization of the nostalgic mode helped the martial arts genre to serve as a privileged form for the fantasy representation of "Classical Chinese culture." (Shih, 4)

31 For a detailed discussion of the Sinophone conceptual framework, see Lu, Sheldon H. "Notes on four major paradigms in Chinese-language film studies." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6.1 (2012): 15-25.

32 Shih posits 6 forms of identity in global capitalism: 1) fundamentalist, such as religious identity; 2) commercial, such as the consumable identity performed in boutique multiculturalism; 3) legitimizing identities, which function to maintain the "status quo of power distribution" for state and neocolonial apparatuses; 4) epistemic, theoretical conceptions of identity used to understand the world; 5) resistant, self chosen identities used to react against dominant forces; and 6) transformative, used to "aid the emergence of new communities and bring about change." (Shih, 23) The Sinophone identity is thus a resistant and transformative identity, used against the legitimizing identity of "Chineseness."

there is no tiger and Pi survives by murdering and cannibalizing other survivors. In both stories, Pi suffers, his family dies, and the ship sinks, but the remaining details can never be proven either way. "So which story do you prefer?" the older Pi asks. Of course we prefer the one with the tiger, but why?

Stories of immigrant success are essential to the American historical psyche, inspiring millions to leave their ancestral homelands for a shot at the American Dream. *Life of Pi* is a film about someone who makes it — while making plain that some did not. Pi's success where others failed mirrors the unlikely rise of the film's director. Ang Lee is by far the most successful Asian director to cross over into Hollywood. His triumphs at the American box office and on awards night eclipse even the world's most famous Lee, who left Hollywood for Hong Kong because his potent fists and star power could not break through the bamboo ceiling. Director Lee managed a relatively smooth transition from Taiwan's tiny and underfunded film industry to Hollywood's blockbuster productions, but his work consistently speaks to the difficulties of hybrid identities and cross-generational conflicts endemic to diaspora. With *Life of Pi*, Lee again finds room for scenes that are most telling of the immigration experience.

In one such scene aboard the ill-fated freighter, Pi's mother politely asks the French cook for a vegetarian option. She receives a racist reply and an argument ensues between the chef and Pi's father, who transitions from English to French with ease and eloquence. He berates the chef, stating, "You can't speak to her that way. You're just a cook!" But despite being merchant class and Western-educated, Pi and his family must face the reality of migration to the West: even uneducated lower-class whites are entitled to abuse them. A Taiwanese crewmember and self-described "happy Buddhist" discloses that he flavors his white rice with tiny amounts of meat gravy to get through the long voyage. Pi's family declines to do the same, but this scene foreshadows the impending moral concessions Pi must make in order to survive his journey to the New World.

Life of Pi's specific references to cannibalism and animalism further resonates within the framework of global biopolitics as theorized by Sheldon Lu in *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*. Lu speculates that the processes of globalization produce a neoliberal libidinal economy wherein labor value stems from *being* as opposed to *producing*, "Affective labor is immaterial and intangible yet corporeal and in-person. The physical dimension is palpable in this new global service industry."[33] By investigating various phenomena, including the cultural, political and social, Lu demonstrates the changing nature of affective labor upends hierarchies through labor of representation, information, and bodily service.

> Although the era of colonialism and imperialism has ended, what we witness is a living postcolonial and post-imperialist imaginary of vindication, satisfaction, and prestige on the part of third-world subjects. This is the domain of desire and fantasy. The global market economy of affect thus prepares the ground for the reversal of old economic and power relationships between the rich and poor, the empowered and dispossessed.[34]

Consumption in *Life of Pi* relates to the economy of affect, wherein survival entails the cannibalization of others, including the white working-class chef who represents the previous domination of Eurocentric modernity. In Pi's

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33 Sheldon H. Lu, *Chinese modernity and global biopolitics: studies in literature and visual culture*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 5.

34 *Ibid.*

allegorical tale, humans become zoo animals of display, not beasts of burden. When discussing the "successes" of Pi or Ang Lee, the advantages of choosing to "be a tiger" in a global economy of affect come to the fore.

Pi's willingness to "be a tiger" represents the darker side of the immigrant success story. Not everyone has the economic and political privileges afforded to Pi and Lee. Pi survives not through idealized heroics but through ruthlessness and skills acquired through his colonial background such as swimming and English literacy. Similarly, those trumpeting Chinese Americans and Canadians as more "successful," such as self-proclaimed "tiger mother" Amy Chua,[35] might consider what factors are actually in play and who is excluded by such a false generalization. The model minority myth is not victimless and often overshadows the underprivileged majority of immigrants who arrive on American shores without recourse and scant opportunity.

Though they cloud the truth, enchanting and explanatory narratives of cultural essentialism or exotic cats are far more palatable than those of lost humanity and cannibalism. This particular use of magical narrative to disguise or allegorize traumatic experience has roots in the literature of the Jewish diaspora. Martel was inspired by *Max and the Cats,* by Brazilian Jewish émigré Moacyr Jaime Scliar, in which an escapee from Nazi Germany is stranded on a lifeboat with a jaguar. Similar fantastical trauma narratives include the graphic novel *Maus* and the animated film *An American Tail,* in which anthropomorphic mice representing Jewish migrants are on the run from evil cats standing in for Nazis and anti-Semitic groups. The thematic relations of *Life of Pi* to holocaust narratives underscore their use of narratives of enchantment to sanitize or allegorize a brutality that is difficult to comprehend.

Like Pi's story of the tiger, these narratives do not ease the unspeakable atrocities committed, but rather present the experiences in a more digestible format from which we can more easily extract meaning from the traumatic events. In addition, these narratives imply an element of survivor guilt. Famed intellectual and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl once stated, "We who have come back, we know — the best of us did not return." Pi too admits as much: "[The cook] was such an evil man," but "worse still, he met evil in me — selfishness, anger, ruthlessness. I must live with that." It's no coincidence that the Buddhist sailor and Pi's mother do not survive; the zebra is weak and the orangutan too human. Pi knows the truth of his own depravity but ultimately prefers to tell the story with the tiger. We too can be partial to a more enchanting narrative that camouflages our pain, while acknowledging the privilege of surviving to tell the tale.

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35 Yale law professors Amy Chua and her husband Jed Rubenfeld argue in their latest book *The Triple Package: How Three Unlikely Traits Explain the Rise and Fall of Cultural Groups in America* that certain cultural groups, including Chinese and Jewish Americans, are likelier to succeed economically and educationally because of three core values: superiority complexes, impulse control, and insecurity. Also see Amy Chua, *Battle hymn of the tiger mother,* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011).