

## Chapter 2

# Hollywood North, Asiawood West

### *Vancouver as a Transpacific Film Location*

Helen Hok-Sze Leung

#### VANCOUVER PLAYS PYONGYANG

During the last week of November 2013, my twitter feed was suddenly abuzz with strange photographs of a massive statue of the late North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il erected in the middle of Robson Square, a public plaza in the heart of downtown Vancouver. The hashtags #SethRogan #JamesFranco appeared alongside the photographs, accompanied by textual squeals of “WTF” and “OMG” as well as sarcastic asides about the “communist” look of architect Arthur Erikson’s signature concrete design. It soon became clear that a location shoot was taking place in the city for the upcoming film *The Interview*, directed by Seth Rogan and Evan Goldberg. Both filmmakers grew up in Vancouver and were instrumental in bringing the production to be filmed here, even if it might not appear to be the most logical choice as a location for the North Korean capital, Pyongyang.

Two years later, when *The Interview* became embroiled in a controversy that resulted in Sony Pictures Entertainment being hacked, with thousands of the company’s revealing emails leaked and threats issued against cinemas scheduled to screen the film, Vancouver residents would marvel at the fact that our city never became a target for the hackers, even though *The Interview* was filmed almost entirely in and around the city. Vancouver stood in not only for various sites in Pyongyang but also for New York City, where the studio of James Franco’s character is located. The most controversial scene – showing present leader Kim Jong-un’s exploding death – was filmed at a gravel field near the scenic Sea-to-Sky highway, which appeared often in the 2010 Winter Olympics coverage as it connects Vancouver to its sister competition site, Whistler. Yet, despite global events such as the Olympics that are aimed at optimizing the city’s international profile, no one but the

city's residents recognized that the film was filmed in Vancouver. As Gasher notes in his analysis of how Vancouver is used as location, the city does not appear to have "sufficient signifying power – sufficient star power, in Hollywood parlance – to play itself" (Gasher 2002: 118). In other words, as a setting, Vancouver is a character actor that always disappears into its role unrecognized. As Pyongyang in *The Interview*, it also highlights its capacity to double as both a North American and an Asian city, with a highly skilled crew that is capable of translating between English and Asian languages as well as a pool of local Asian actors available for supporting roles to populate an Asian city (O'Keefe 2014).

Off screen, Vancouver has actually been called an "Asian city" frequently, and in many different contexts. Media reports play up the city's Asian demographic and migrant culture (Todd 2014). Aiming to diversify the province's economy and to increase competitive advantages nationally, provincial politicians in British Columbia court closer business ties with Asia, often through touting Vancouver as an "Asian city" while leveraging the city's migrant communities' social and economic connections for their trade initiatives (Parry 2014). White supremacists who are alarmed by Vancouver's rapid urban development indulge in racist fantasies of the city's transformation from a "serene, community-oriented British city" to a "loud, congested Asian city" plagued by unwanted urbanization (Duchesne 2014).<sup>1</sup> Urban planners, by contrast, laud the city's urban style – known as "Vancouverism" – as an exportable brand that has influenced planning in the Pacific region from Dubai to Melbourne (City of Vancouver 2013; Saunders 2013; Lowry and McCann 2011: 182–204).

These discourses all signal the city's rising importance to what Henry Yu calls a "new Pacific Canada" (Yu 2009: 1013). Yu argues that a "wholesale shift in immigration pattern" in Canada during the last three decades has resulted in a national reorientation towards an engagement with the Pacific rather than the Atlantic world (Yu 2009: 1011). Vancouver's hitherto marginal location – being "out west" and far away from the nation's political and financial centres – is now repositioned for a different regional imaginary. The city's *remoteness* from central Canada and Europe becomes its *proximity* to the U.S. west coast in the south and to Asia in the east. This strategic repositioning is nowhere more apparent – and more effective – than in the development of the city's film industry.

## HOLLYWOOD NORTH

Dubbed "Hollywood North," Vancouver is one of the most successful runaway production sites for Hollywood's film and television industries,

currently generating more than C\$1 billion in annual revenue for the province of British Columbia. Since the globalization of Hollywood's production practices during the 1970s, the model of runaway production as it is practised in Vancouver has emerged as a template for other cities that want to capitalize on this transnational production culture.<sup>2</sup> Vancouver's film industry has been shaped by provincial policies that traditionally approach culture industries as more "industry" than "culture," which leads those who are concerned with the city's cultural identity to view its success with some ambivalence.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, Vancouver's prominent role as Hollywood's satellite industry, in conjunction with other creative sectors such as video games and digital media, has brought about urban revitalization, the convergence and clustering of diverse creative industries, and a vibrant and highly skilled creative workforce at all levels of film production and post-production.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the city's role as a service industry weakens its cultural identity and relegates it to a perpetually marginal status in global Hollywood's production hierarchy. Not only does Vancouver seldom play itself on screen, it is, moreover, actively constructed as a generic "no place" or a versatile "any place." The Film Commission markets Vancouver as a pliant and malleable city that can substitute for just about anywhere, offering "a worlds of looks" consisting of "sceneries from nine different climate zones," in addition to its generous tax incentive, skilled labour force, and convenient time zone (British Columbia Film Commission 2012: 1). Local filmmakers have taken issue with this cultivation of the city's "placelessness" and focus on its mere instrumentality. Larry Kent, whose films "set a standard and ethos for Vancouver's independent filmmaking," suggests that, when films set Vancouver as Seattle (or any other American city), they already "start off with a lie" by conflating the radically different "emotional feeling" of these cities (Spanner 2003: 44). Bruce Sweeney, who in the late 1980s was a formative member of the "West Coast Wave," calls filmmakers who knowingly set Vancouver as elsewhere "reprehensible" (Spanner 2003: 159). Indigenous filmmaker Kamala Todd compares Hollywood's annihilation of place in location sites to colonial practices that erase local languages and cultures (Todd 2013: 9).

Cultural anxiety aside, there is also ambivalence over who benefits the most from the economic impact of the location industry. In Gasher's account of the "industrial approach" of provincial film policies, he notes the resemblance that Vancouver's film industry bears to resource extraction: the industry is highly dependent on foreign investment and primarily responsible for producing raw materials (scenery and below-the-line labour) that are processed by out-of-province producers. The final product (U.S. feature films) is then imported back and consumed here (Gasher 2002: 44). Nonetheless, Gasher argues against understanding Vancouver's inferior position in this hierarchy simply as a victim of Hollywood's production imperialism. Hollywood's

presence, Gasher reminds us, has, ironically, also “*enabled* a local cinema to emerge” (Gasher 2002: 142). Tinic further observes that, while Hollywood’s productions abroad resemble a kind of resource extraction, they “do not first exhaust the labour, resources, or sites needed for domestic production and then move on to the next locations, leaving Vancouver a depleted resource town” (Tinic 2011: 13). On the contrary, the very labour, resources, and sites that are developed for Hollywood have nurtured a parallel scene of local productions that, despite being disproportionate in quantity by comparison, would not otherwise have existed. Due to the concentration of Canada’s film industries in Ontario and Quebec and the failure of national film strategies during the 1970s and 1980s to support regional development, there had never been a vibrant local production culture in Vancouver prior to its success as a runaway production site. Local independent initiatives – including those by filmmakers cited above who are critical of Hollywood – have arguably benefited from the service industry, as evidenced by the “permanent” local indie film scene that has persisted through the decades alongside the thriving service sector (Spanner 2003: 219).

Hollywood’s presence in Vancouver may be best understood as an enabling form of exploitation, characterized thus by Tinic: “It absorbs labour and resources while simultaneously creating opportunities for local producers to fund and distribute their own programs independently” (Tinic 2011: 13). Ironically, Vancouver’s struggle with its (lack of a) sense of place is both caused and remedied by its role as Hollywood North, which demands the city’s eradication of identity to serve as location while simultaneously enabling the emergence of a local film culture that is invested in cultivating its sense of place.

### ASIAWOOD WEST

While on a trade mission to India in 2014, British Columbia provincial premier Christy Clark touted the fact that the province “has become the least American-dependent province in Canada” (Meissner 2014). Clark’s rhetoric reflects an overall economic strategy: to cultivate trade relations with Asia through regional migrant ties as a means to offset dependence on the United States and, in turn, gain competitive advantage nationally. This logic is also reflected in the film industry’s more recent aspirations. Despite its continual success, the industry’s dependence on Hollywood renders it vulnerable to competition from other cities, nationally and globally. It also remains susceptible to uncontrollable external factors such as the vagaries of the exchange rate and protectionist domestic U.S. policies, both of which would threaten the city’s competitive advantage. Given Vancouver’s long history of Asian

migration and deep kinship ties that facilitate the mobility of labour and capital across the Pacific, especially intensified after the 1970s with the region’s increasing incorporation into the “Pacific Basin” system of flows,<sup>5</sup> it is no surprise that, as with other sectors, the film industry is turning its attention to Asia – China, in particular – for new sources of financing, markets, and collaborative opportunities.

The rise of China as an untapped and expanding source of film financing and markets, as well as location sites, has resulted in a still-evolving set of new dynamics for film production in Asia. What kinds of impact China’s aspiration for soft power globally will have on the development of its film industry and on other film industries in the region is still uncertain, although its corroding effect on the once vibrant Hong Kong cinema is well documented (Chu 2013: 91–120). DeBoer’s study of the emergence of a new Asian co-production culture – dubbed “Asiawood” by *Newsweek* (Newsweek Staff 2001) – shows that China plays a complex role in this developing regional network. She argues that China is neither the much-touted essential link without which no Asian film would be viable globally nor, simply, an expansionist force akin to Hollywood that is poised to destroy local and regional cultural expressions (DeBoer 2014: 153). Rather, she shows that trans-Asia co-productions have to “work through China,”<sup>6</sup> and, in doing so, they consolidate a certain hegemonic imaginary of “China” while also opening new possibilities to critique it (DeBoer 2014: 181–2). In Audrey Yue’s study of China-Australia co-production, she also finds that, in spite of Australia’s marginal “junior partner” relationship, the transnational nature of co-productions leads to “competing national logics” that result not only in “post-identity interrogation” in the content of the films but also in the emergence of new partnership networks, internationalization of Asian Australian talent, and the emergence of a special-effects industries creative cluster in South Australia (Yue 2014: 185–202).

These global/local conduits of filmmaking show that the consolidation of a hegemonic production regime – be it centred on Hollywood or on China – can result in unpredictable possibilities for local and regional developments. Vancouver is strategically positioned, albeit firmly on the margin, vis-à-vis the production cultures of both Hollywood and Asiawood. Tinic suggests that the city is best understood as a “media capital”<sup>7</sup> that is able to develop in three directions: it “allows for the expansion of markets and productive resources ... but also [relies] on the creativity of a workforce that is equally dedicated to the task of cultural expression and to economic profit ... and the promotion of the ‘local’ as a means to address niche markets” (Tinic 2011: 15). Vancouver, as one of the so-called second-tier cities, is thus able to be simultaneously the most creative and the most entrepreneurial, and actually “extracts resources from the ‘first-tier’ global cities” (Tinic 2011: 17). While this has been borne

out in Vancouver's relation with Hollywood, this dynamic is also relevant to Vancouver's developing relationship with the film region emerging in Asia.

## TRANSPACIFIC COLLABORATIONS

As defined by Telefilm Canada, the federal agency that oversees the audio-visual industry, there are three options for collaborating with foreign partners: official co-productions that are governed by existent treaties, unofficial co-ventures, and provision of production services. While Telefilm boasts of Canada being the "only country in the world to have signed co-production agreements with more than 50 countries" (Telefilm Canada 2015a), and there are long-standing treaties (Telefilm Canada 2015b) in place with Asian countries such as China (1987), Japan (1994), Singapore (1998), Hong Kong (2001), and, most recently, India (2014), the number of official Asia-Canada co-productions in British Columbia, the province with arguably the closest ties to Asia, is still very low (only five in the past five years, according to the Telefilm co-production directory [Telefilm Canada 2015c]). Outside treaty provisions, however, there are a slew of recent and ongoing initiatives that are incubating a range of long-term partnership possibilities, with varying degree of success. There are efforts that simply aim for an expansion of markets for the location services that the city is already successfully providing for Hollywood. Eastern Gate Productions, for example, was set up by producers with long-standing experience working with Hollywood productions, who now specialize in providing Chinese productions with the same full package of "end-to-end" services (Eastern Gate Productions 2015). Likewise, the visual-effects industry in Vancouver, which has had tremendous success in serving high-profile Hollywood productions, now markets the same skills to Asia. Gener8 Media Corp, for example, which specializes in 3D conversion and was responsible for the 3D version of Wong Kar-wai's *The Grandmaster* (2014), signed a C\$15 million deal with a Chinese company in 2013 to out-source some of their technical expertise while gaining access to the Asian market (Crawford 2013). Similar export of talent in exchange for access to financing and markets also motivates the joint venture between Vancouver Film School and the University of Shanghai, which opened a facility in Shanghai in 2014. The two institutions signed a fifteen-year agreement that projects C\$50 million in revenue for the Vancouver Film School, which will provide the majority of the teaching staff and play a significant role in building the infrastructure and training a skilled workforce for the still nascent film industry in Shanghai (Griffin 2014).

By contrast, efforts to secure Chinese financing for Canadian films prove more challenging and reveal some regional differences in production ethos

that are not easy to overcome. The China Canada Gateway for Film Script Competition, launched at the Whistler Film Festival in 2012, aims to match pitches by Canadian filmmakers with Chinese production companies that are interested in financing North American films. The three projects that "won" deals at the highly publicized inaugural competition all fell through within a year. While Canadian producers remain optimistic about the competition as a platform for securing financing, filmmakers seem more cynical about the prospects. The three filmmakers whose deals from the script competition fell through cite hurdles such as problems dealing with Chinese state-run productions companies, which operate on a large and impersonal scale; differences between expectations of turnaround time, which is perceived by Canadian filmmakers to be unreasonably demanding on the Chinese side; and reluctance on the part of Canadian scriptwriters to work "on spec" (working without a contract or agreement in place) as expected by the Chinese companies, as well as an overall difficulty in communication (Lederman 2013b).

These hurdles suggest that many of these efforts would benefit enormously from interpersonal relations and close social ties that help to facilitate communication and bridge differences. Not unlike an earlier generation of producers who worked at cultivating similarly personal relations with companies in Los Angeles, the more successful transpacific collaborations have involved industry players with personal ties and experience with film communities on both sides of the Pacific. Moreover, these players are often invested in more than economic opportunities. They have an additional interest in facilitating creative initiatives that reflect their own migrant location, sense of belonging, and pathways of mobility. In a study of local film and television productions in Vancouver, Coe shows how independent producers, through navigating interpersonal networks at the local, national, and international levels, are able to develop home-grown productions in the context of an industry dominated by location service for Hollywood (Coe 2000: 391–407). Similarly, many producers who are now capitalizing on interpersonal networks to foster collaborative opportunities with the thriving Asian film region also find ways to simultaneously develop local productions, many of which focus on Asian migrant experiences in the city.

## SERVICING LOCATION, PRODUCING PLACE

Holiday Pictures, an independent production company in Vancouver, founded by husband-and-wife team Shan Tam and Michael Parker, provides an example of how service provision for Asian films can go hand in hand with nurturing local Asian Canadian productions. The company – together with its sister company Maple Ridge Film, which specializes in location services for

foreign productions – has produced a body of work in the past two decades that, in Parker's words, "leapfrog[s]" between service production and local projects (Lewis 2013). Much as Vancouver has emerged as a model for servicing Hollywood while preserving an indie film scene, Holiday Pictures may well provide a similar model for transpacific collaborations.

Long before the current scramble for the Asian market, Tam and Parker established a history in providing location services during the 1980s and 1990s for the then thriving Hong Kong cinema. Whether it was Vancouver playing Seattle as the setting for a CIA plot in *In the Line of Duty 4* (dir. Yuen Woo Ping 1989); the glacier in Atlin, British Columbia, as a fantasy snowy mountain where a heroine is trapped in *Saviour of the Soul 2* (dir. Corey Yuen 1992); or Vancouver infamously (barely) passing as New York City in the Jackie Chan vehicle *Rumble In the Bronx* (dir. Stanley Tong 1995), Tam and Parker's work as line producers in these films acquainted Asian filmmakers with Vancouver as a viable location for their films. This track record, along with the personal relations that developed through the decades, positions the company exceptionally well for the current climate. The company's biggest success to date is the sleeper hit *Finding Mr. Right* (dir. Xue Xiaolu 2013), which is one of the all-time top ten grossing domestic films in China. It was Tam's personal connection with the film's Hong Kong producer Matthew Tang that brought the Seattle-set film to Vancouver. Even though the film was not a co-production, Tam and Parker believe that scoring such a big box-office hit as a location service provider will open doors for many different kinds of future partnerships (Lederman 2013a).

Alongside these service projects, the company has produced a body of local films, many of which are focused on the Asian migrant experience and expressed in a diverse range of genres and subject matters. These include, for example, Asian Canadian filmmaker Julia Kwan's first feature drama, *Eve and the Fire Horse* (2005), which tells the story of Vancouver's Cantonese community in the 1970s through the eyes of a fantastically imaginative child. Parker himself has directed films produced by the company, two of which document the surprisingly under-represented experience of a short but intense wave of Hong Kong immigrants into Vancouver during the 1980s and 1990s. The documentary short *Hong Kong Express* (2004) follows Vancouver-born beauty pageant winners who became celebrities when they went to Hong Kong to pursue acting careers. This transpacific trajectory of celebrity, which applies to many other young Hong Kong stars, including Edison Chen, Nicholas Tse, and Joyce Cheng, is a fascinating story that has remained otherwise undocumented. Parker's feature film *Lunch With Charles* (2001), the first official treaty co-production with Hong Kong, tells a funny and affecting story about a Hong Kong couple separated by careers across the Pacific and their respective adventures on separate road trips across British Columbia.

The company has also produced a number of shorts meant for television broadcast, including *Floored By Love* (2005), directed by Malaysia-born lesbian filmmaker Desiree Lim and first broadcast on CHUM television. The film features a "sticky rice" (Asian-Asian) lesbian love story in the context of an ethnically diverse queer community, another thriving scene in Vancouver that has rarely found representation on screen.

Taken together as a body of work, these films illustrate how an independent production company is able to simultaneously pursue service production and develop local films that, in economic terms, have limited niche market appeal but, in cultural terms, are crucial for a city's sense of identity, history, and place. When studied together, these films also defy national, ethnic, or linguistic frameworks of analysis. Rather, they are products of a site of film production that is located in the city of Vancouver but involves the transpacific circulation of finance, ideas, creative and technical talent, and labour.

In the rest of the chapter, I will examine more closely three dramatic features produced by Holiday Pictures. In addition to being products of a company that participates in transpacific film production, the films also thematize transpacific mobility in their content. I will explore Vancouver's significance as a film location – and not always as a recognizable setting – for these films.

### FINDING MR. RIGHT

*Finding Mr. Right* situates its romance within the topical context of "maternity tourism": the phenomenon of expectant mothers from China going to North America to give birth. While the film's treatment of this social context is superficial, some interesting details are sketched in. Various motivations behind the "tourists" are presented through different characters. Protagonist Wen Jiajia is pregnant from her affair with a married man and, thus, does not have access to state healthcare and fears her illegitimate child would not be properly registered into a state-defined unit. Her two roommates also face circumstances that drive them towards maternal tourism: Zhou Ye is in a lesbian relationship, and the couple's only recourse to have a child is through sperm donation by an American friend; Chen Yue is having a second child and wants to avoid paying fines she would incur for violating the one-child policy. Furthermore, it appears that maternity tourism is run like a cottage industry: Mrs Huang owns the house where the pregnant "tourists" live and takes care of their everyday needs until they have given birth and are well enough to return to China. Jiajia's love interest, a soft-spoken former doctor named Frank, runs errands for the women and chauffeurs them around. There also seems to be a group of Chinese-speaking obstetrics/gynaecology staff

available to take care of the women's health needs and take advantage of their overflowing cash.

Details aside, however, the issue of maternity tourism ultimately serves as no more than a springboard for the romance, which is the film's main focus. The box-office success (over US\$84 million) of a relatively simple, low-budget romantic comedy in China was surprising, as it usually takes big-budget, special-effects-heavy genres for domestic films to compete with Hollywood imports for audience. This "underdog" success actually echoes the film's theme, which suggests that China's affluent middle class may be fatigued with its own excess and nurture a secret longing for simple, low-key pleasures. The emotional narrative of Jiajia is plotted along just such a trajectory: she starts off as a materialistic spendthrift but, during the course of the film, falls in love with Frank, a sensitive man who gave up his medical career to take care of his daughter, while his high-powered, careerist wife pursues her ambition and, ultimately, leaves him. The contrast between Jiajia's initial and ultimate states of mind is played out in the Chinese title, *Beijing Meets Seattle* (*Beijing yushang Xiyatu*). Much more so than the generic English title, *Beijing Meets Seattle* puts emphasis on the significance of the titular cities, as symbolic of not only the romantic protagonists but also the two types of masculinity and the two kinds of lifestyles that Jiajia is choosing between.

Given the symbolic value of Seattle as a geographic metaphor for sincerity, simplicity, and frugality – in contrast to Beijing as superficial, glamorous, and extravagant – one might have expected the film to take a lot of care to disguise its location as Seattle. Yet, aside from a few exterior shots of Seattle's downtown landmarks, the film actually makes very little effort to make Vancouver look like Seattle. Instead, many of Vancouver's distinctive "looks" (such as Stanley Park, Hotel Georgia, and the Seawall, all of which make regular appearances on tourist brochures) are allowed to be visually front and centre in many scenes. Ironically, because of the high Asian demographic in Vancouver (43 per cent of Asian heritage in general, 18 per cent of Chinese heritage specifically) and kinship ties across the Pacific, the film's Chinese audience seem to recognize Vancouver much more readily than their American counterparts. In Chinese-language discussion forums such as Baidu and Sina, discussions about the film always include topics on why Vancouver is used instead of the "real" Seattle. Many fans also like to prove their knowledge of Vancouver by listing all of the shooting sites from the film. On *Zhihu*, a Chinese-language equivalent to Ask.com or Yahoo Answers, the question of why the film is not simply called *Beijing Meets Vancouver* has inspired this answer: "Because there is no such movie as *Sleepless in Vancouver*!" (Zhihu 2015). The succinct response sums up simultaneously why Seattle is important as a setting and why it is not all that necessary to disguise Vancouver properly. In the film, Seattle is less a place

than a cinematic reference. In the opening sequence, when Jiajia arrives at the airport, she informs the customs officer that her motivation to visit Seattle is due to the film *Sleepless in Seattle* (dir. Nora Ephron 1993). The throwaway reference is used for comedic effect, showing the clumsy way in which Jiajia tries to avoid divulging her real motive. The amount of knowledge she has invested in the city – no more than its appearance in a popular Hollywood film title – parallels the setting's relevance to the film. It serves primarily as a cinematic reference. Later in a scene, where Jiajia watches *Sleepless in Seattle* with Frank's daughter, Julie, she is given a self-referential line of dialogue, calling the film an "illusion ... made to beguile little girls," which also accurately sums up *Finding Mr. Right*! Jiajia's cynicism in that scene is, of course, belied by the plot itself, which offers its own beguiling version of true love and a happy ending. What is interesting is that, despite the titles, Seattle is not at the heart of the romance, either in *Finding Mr. Right* or in *Sleepless in Seattle*. The U.S. film grounds its romance in another cinematic reference, *An Affair to Remember* (dir. Leo McCarey 1957), in which the lovers famously miss meeting each other at New York's Empire State Building. *Sleepless in Seattle* turns this tragedy into romance by setting its scene of true love at the Empire State Building. Marketed to a different generation of audience who will have memory of *Sleepless in Seattle* but not *An Affair to Remember*, *Finding Mr. Right* simply skips over the original reference and incorporates the plot of the lovers reuniting at the Empire State Building into its homage to *Sleepless in Seattle*.

In this circuit of cinematic references, Seattle matters only in so far as it serves to signify *New York* as a site for love. Seattle as a *place* does not matter in the film. This emptying out of Seattle as a place, ironically, makes Vancouver as film location more authentic: it is not so much playing Seattle as playing a film set, thus, in effect, *playing itself*. This fact seems to resonate also with the city. In response to a media report that the film has brought an upsurge of tourist and even real-estate activities to Seattle, even though the audience is really seeing Vancouver on screen, a representative at Tourist Vancouver places more importance on the film's role in showcasing the city as a film location for Chinese productions (Sauer 2013).

Vancouver has, indeed, showcased its versatility as location in the film, with its YVR airport doubling as both Seattle's Sea-Tac and New York's JFK, its downtown streets playing Seattle as well as New York, and its lush Dunbar-Southlands neighbourhood, despite being one of the most affluent in the city, performing as a space of simplicity and frugality where Jiajia and Frank's love blossoms. Yet, one scene in the film shows a strange fray at the seams between location and setting, one that betrays a small moment when the local complexity of a location city momentarily disrupts its make-believe role on film.

The scene takes place after Jiajia picks Julie up from school and suggests that they go “have some fun downtown.” The film cuts to a street scene that is recognizable as the Vaisakhi parade in Surrey, a large municipality south of Vancouver that comprises a large South Asian demographic (over 30 per cent in the 2011 census). Visually, Surrey is characterized by the low-density sprawl typical of North American suburbs and quite unlike the glassy, towering high rise of downtown Seattle, or of the footage of downtown Vancouver-disguised-as-Seattle that the film has used previously. Filmed during the Vaisakhi parade, an important event for the city’s Sikh community to celebrate the Punjabi harvest festival, the scene plays more like an event coverage than an “afternoon out in town.” Even more jarringly, the scene was shot in 2012, when the parade became politically controversial as its organizer reportedly dedicated it to convicted militant Balwant Singh Rajoana, who belongs to the group Babbar Khalsa, which was responsible for the 1985 Air India bombing. The bombing was one of the worst attacks in Canadian history, killing, among others, 268 Canadian citizens, most of them of South Asian descent. The disaster belongs to a traumatic and deeply fractured history that is far from resolved, either in the city or countrywide. While this context may not be discernible for the film’s audience, the film, incomprehensibly, includes in the scene a clear shot of a float visibly proclaiming support for Khalistan, a nationalist movement for an independent Sikh nation – an image that can trigger intense debates among South Asian audiences anywhere.

It is difficult to rationalize why the film would include, without disguise, such a politically complex image in such a frivolous scene. It may be as superficial as the fact that the director likes the colourful atmosphere of the scene, or that she wants to convey some sense of multiculturalism in Seattle. The result, however, is an awkward and jarring scene where location actually intrudes on the setting, and when the complexity of one Asian community’s migration history unwittingly leaves a mark on the escapist fantasy of another’s.

### EVE AND THE FIRE HORSE

*Eve and the Fire Horse* won a Special Jury prize at Sundance in 2006 and was, in the words of the late film critic Roger Ebert, “one of the most beloved films” at that year’s festival (Ebert 2006). Yet, as director Julia Kwan recounts, the film was less popular with U.S. distributors, who viewed it as a “specialized sell” (Ebert 2006). At first sight, the premise of *Eve and the Fire Horse* seems to tell a familiar story of first-generation Asian migration. Narratives about the clash of cultures and the experiences of children torn

between the worlds of the migrant community and mainstream society may appear marketable along the lines of *The Joy Luck Club* (dir. Wayne Wang 1993). However, once the film has grounded itself in the context of a Cantonese family living in Vancouver during the 1970s, it quickly veers away from familiar ground. Instead of the expected tropes of sentimental melodrama and turbulent conflicts, the film presents the migrant experience in far more subtle and intriguing ways. The film’s protagonist, Eve, is a child with a vivid and intense interior life. Through Eve’s eyes, we view the trauma and conflict around her: her grandmother’s death, her mother’s miscarriage, her uncle’s ill health, and her father’s decision to donate his kidney for her uncle, in addition to the pressure and conflicts that children always experience in school. Eve copes with these events through her imagination, which peppers the realist narrative with sequences of odd and surreal images. A slow-motion sequence of a horse being drowned in the ocean accompanies Eve’s musings on the unsettling lore that children like her, who were born under the sign of the fire horse, would be drowned in the past by parents too scared to raise them. A musical sequence of a fat, jolly Buddha dancing with a handsome young Jesus expresses Eve’s reconciliation between the Buddhist stories she heard throughout her childhood from her grandmother and her sister’s sudden and uncompromising embrace of the Catholic faith. Most comical of all, a smoking, faucet-fixing, foul-mouthed but friendly young Guanyin – the Chinese name for a bodhisattva, the Buddhist deity of compassion – appears from time to time to give Eve advice and comfort her when she feels lonely or confused.

The film shies away from setting up too stark a contrast between “migrant” and “mainstream” society. Instead, it paints with subtle details a picture of what suburban middle-class life is like in a city like Vancouver during the initial years following the official multiculturalism act. When Eve wonders why Sally, a girl with “long blond hair,” is unpopular in school, her sister Karena explains that it is because Sally is “PWT” – poor white trash. When Eve worries whether *they* are PWT, her sister briskly dismisses her anxiety by proclaiming that they are not white. Karena herself has a crush on a Sikh boy, Surinder. Sadly, because Surinder feels embarrassed that Karena saw him being bullied at school, he rejects her attention by taunting her and calling her a “chink.” These scenes reveal the complexity of racial and class privileges, the ways they intersect and when they do not, as well as the unknowing but often brutal ways that children negotiate them among themselves.

The film also illustrates how the boundary between “assimilation” and “multiculturalism” at times blurs humorously. At Karena’s urging, her mother takes her sister-in-law and the girls to see a Cantonese-dubbed version of *Exodus*. The scene shows us the family’s reactions while we hear the dubbed soundtrack, which makes the story of Moses crossing the Red Sea sounds like an epic martial arts drama. Afterwards, musing on how “handsome” Moses



looks, the girls' mother decides to send the girls to Sunday school because, after all, "having two bodhisattvas guarding us at home must be better than just having one."

While the film evokes with rich nuance a Vancouver community at a specific time period, it does so with very little visual reference to the city. Most of the film is set in interior spaces: the family house, the church, the school. Exterior shots mainly reference a generic leafy suburban neighbourhood that can be found in many North American cities. Ironically, it is much more difficult to identify Vancouver in *Eve and the Fire Horse* (where it is set) than in *Finding Mr. Right* (where it is supposed to stand in for Seattle). While there may be a practical reason for not shooting many scenes in the city – one of the negative outcomes of the location industry is that it has become prohibitively expensive to film on the streets of Vancouver – the film's focus on interior spaces and suburban surroundings also expresses a very salient part of the migrant experience at the time. Households such as Eve's family often remain within their close-knit communities, with a cloistered day-to-day outlook that does not reproduce the city's urban, metropolitan atmosphere. Thus, while *Eve and the Fire Horse* does not give Vancouver a star turn, it evokes, with deep intimacy and closely observed details, a place and time that form an important part of the city's history.

### LUNCH WITH CHARLES

*Lunch with Charles* was the first official treaty co-production for Holiday Pictures and an early venture outside the company's work as line producers providing location services for Hong Kong films. Directed by the company's co-founder, Michael Parker, the film takes advantage of the co-production model – which gives the film access to talents from the Hong Kong film industry – to tell a fresh and quirky story about a specific migrant experience. In contrast to *Eve and the Fire Horse*, which is set during the 1970s around the time of the multiculturalism act, *Lunch With Charles* is set in the 1990s, during which an intense wave of Hong Kong immigrants came to Vancouver, spurred on by fears around Hong Kong's imminent return to China in 1997. The film focuses on this specific migrant experience through the criss-crossing adventures of two couples, both of whom are on the brink of a breakup. The first pair is married couple Tong and April, who at the beginning of the film are dealing with career problems, respectively, in Hong Kong and Vancouver. Tong is an aspiring musician who works as a realtor by day. He has obtained resident status in Canada but has avoided officially "landing" (after which he would be required by law to spend at least six months every year in Canada, something he appears to be reluctant to do). Meanwhile, his

wife, April, works in Vancouver as a marketing executive whose company is trying to break out of its niche Chinese clientele. April is tasked with dealing with the demanding owner of a beer company from Ireland, who questions April's ability to handle a promotion event for his product that is due to take place in the picturesque town of Banff, Alberta. As April, in her loneliness and frustration, presents an ultimatum to her husband to either come to Canada or break up, the two are set on separate paths of self-discovery. Put into their paths are Matthew and Natasha, a bed-and-breakfast owner and a singer-songwriter in Princeton, a small town of barely 2000 off the Cascades Mountain, about 300 km east of Vancouver. The roles – played, respectively, by Hong Kong actor Sean Lau; Vancouver-raised actress Theresa Lee, who became very popular in Hong Kong during the 1990s; Vancouver actor Nicholas Lea (of *X-Files* fame); and singer-songwriter Biff Naked – bring together celebrity and talents across two different entertainment cultures, playing out the encounters thematized by the film at a meta-level.

Unlike the working-class origins of many 1970s migrants, and unlike the so-called millionaire migrants most talked about in the media currently, many among the 1980s Hong Kong wave are like Tong and April: middle-class, white-collar professionals who are Westernized from being brought up in a British colony, but very urbanized and culturally quite distant from the relaxed and "chilled out" ethos of the North American west coast. The film takes care to bring out this specific character of Hong Kong migrants in that period, signifying their difference not only from Anglo-Canadians but from other generations of Asian migrants in Vancouver. For example, April's assistant, Cora, laments that, unlike April, she has never been to Hong Kong and cannot speak Cantonese without being laughed at. She belongs to the generation who are encouraged by their parents to assimilate, only to find out in adulthood that the social and economic environment now favours polyglots who can move easily between worlds. During April's first encounter with Matthew, she stresses to him that she is from Hong Kong and is "not Chinese," muttering that "there is a difference, you know." This disidentification from China also characterizes Hong Kong migrants of that period, which, in turn, equips mainstream Vancouver with a more complex understanding of Sinophone difference among the many different Chinese-speaking migrant communities.

The film uses location to bring out a contrast between settings. Interestingly, the contrast highlighted is not between the cities of Hong Kong and Vancouver. The film opens with some signature shots of Hong Kong: crowded streets, neon signs, street noodle stalls, the harbour. By contrast, scenes of Vancouver only include shots of the airport and the interior of April's company office, which looks out to the skyline of Richmond, a municipality to the south of Vancouver that is heavily populated with Chinese



migrants. The location makes sense, as April's company primarily serves the city's Chinese businesses and so would, logically, be situated in the heart of those businesses. As the plot develops, April is en route to Banff but needs to make a detour to Princeton to deal with the fallout over a band she has hired for the promotion event. Tong, meanwhile, has arrived in Vancouver (although still refusing to officially "land") but hears that his wife is heading towards Banff, so he follows her on a bus. Both end up in Princeton but without crossing paths with each other. On the night that Natasha breaks up with Matthew, she decides to sing at a gig in Banff and ends up giving Tong a lift. April, who has been staying at Matthew's shoddy bed and breakfast, ends up giving Matthew a ride to go after Natasha. These road trips take the now switched-up couples across the small towns and wilderness of British Columbia. Yet, this very absence of Vancouver turns out to express a great deal about Vancouver, as well as how the city is thought of by Hong Kong migrants like April. In a lovely and funny scene when April is busy conducting business on her phone while driving, Matthew admonishes her to take note of their surroundings:

*Matthew:* It's really dangerous, you know, driving and yakking on the phone ... (April dials another number) like that ... (laughs) My God!

*April:* (looks suspiciously at him, still on the phone) What?

*Matthew:* Well, we're driving through postcard heaven and you're running a telethon. Take a second, look around, look at how beautiful it is.

*April:* It looks like Vancouver. (On the phone) Oh, yes, Kimberly, please.

*Matthew:* It looks nothing like Vancouver! How can you say that? I mean, for example, we get winter here, we get real winter. Everything goes under a blanket of snow and it's *so* beautiful. In Vancouver things just sort of go under water for three or four months.

*April:* (on the phone) I need a listing for all hotels.

*Matthew:* January, it's cold and wet, and yet the grass is still green. It's morbid. It's like mourning the living. *Here* things die, you know. Hmm? That's good. It reminds you to get on with your life.

This short exchange brings out Vancouver's crucial character through its moderate climate: it is wishy-washy and genteel; it lacks extremes. The description of Vancouver's natural climate, arguably, also applies to its social environment. Moreover, the conversation reveals a character trait of many Hong Kong migrants, who are so focused on Vancouver's difference from Hong Kong that they remain blind to the city's difference from its

surrounding environment, which comprises wide open spaces, spectacular wilderness, and a harsh, extreme environment. The scale of these differences contributes to the complex character of the region, where the moderation and civility of Vancouver are always in close proximity to extremity and wildness. For new immigrants like April, the startling foreignness of a new place can mask the nuance of its complexity. Matthew's good-humoured outrage in this scene reveals to April some of her blind spots and opens a channel of communication between them.

Matthew, in turn, is blinded by his own assumptions about Hong Kong immigrants, assuming that April must be married to a banker or developer or – funniest to him – a realtor. Ironically, even though Matthew guesses correctly – Tong is, in fact, a realtor – he is also wrong. He does not realize until later that the realtor is also (or really) a musician and that he and April have something in common: they are both “in love with singers!” Those singers – Tong and Natasha – are in the other car heading towards Banff. In contrast to Matthew and April, who communicate perfectly well but bicker with each other, Tong and Natasha's scenes highlight their fluid and comfortable connection, despite Tong's halting English and efforts at communication.

The film ends with both couples separating. Tong and April realize that they cannot make it work. Tong returns to Hong Kong and writes a song about Natasha, who has meanwhile left Canada for Glasgow in search of new adventures. After surviving the accident-prone road trip and the crisis-ridden promotion event relatively unscathed, April heads back to Vancouver, but stops by Princeton to look up Matthew, suggesting the possibility of a new romance. The film, thus, does not try to resolve the conflict it begins with. Rather, it reveals how people “get on with it” as they find their ways across differences to make unlikely connections.

## CONCLUSION

The example of Holiday Pictures and the body of films that the company has produced shows that the provision of location service for Asian films can go hand in hand with the development of local films on the Asian migrant experience. It is possible to leverage the economic benefits of the former for the cultural significance of the latter. As a film location, Vancouver provides international productions with a site that can accommodate virtually any cinematic setting. While it does not have the signifying power on screen as “star” cities such as New York, Hong Kong, or Paris, Vancouver plays versatile character roles that stretch from Pyongyang to New York to alien cities in outer space. When it serves as an actual setting for local productions, its

sense of place is established less through spectacles of identifiable landmarks than through storytelling, characterization, and attention to regional details.

As the most Asian city in North America, located at the interface of two powerful film production regions, Vancouver's role as both Hollywood North and Asiawood West is dynamic and still evolving, with much remaining to be explored and studied.

## NOTES

1. Duchesne's views were criticized as racist by two city councillors in Vancouver, who filed a complaint to the University of New Brunswick, where Duchesne teaches. The university, however, defended Duchesne's right to academic freedom. For details about the context of this incident, see CBC News 2015.
2. For a detailed study of the globalization of Hollywood's production practices, see Toby Miller et al. 2004. For studies of Vancouver's success in providing location services for Hollywood productions, see Scott and Pope 2007: 1364; and Tinic 2011.
3. For a history of British Columbia's "industrial" approach to film policies, see Gasher 2002: 24–44.
4. For the relation between Vancouver's urban revitalization and the video games and digital media industries, see Hutton and Tung 2009: 139–60. For a study of the convergence and clustering of Vancouver's creative industries, see Barnes and Coe 2011: 251–77.
5. For studies on Vancouver's integration into the Pacific Basin system, see Hutton 1998: 71–101; and Ley 2011: 32–65.
6. DeBoer borrows this expression from Vivian P. Y. Lee (2011: 235).
7. Tinic is citing the notion of "media capital" first introduced in Curtin 2003: 202–28.

## Chapter 3

# The Yellow Pacific

## *East Asian Pop Culture and East Asian Modernities*

Younghan Cho

## INTRODUCTION

From Hong Kong pop culture, J-pop, and the Korean Wave to the emergence of Pop Culture China, East Asian pop culture has provided unprecedented venues and opportunities for Asian people to encounter neighbouring countries and their cultures. Each regional pop culture flow shares continuities and differences with regional and even global counterparts. Such differences and sameness in various regional pop culture flows become resources for imagining coequality among regional audiences, which can be comprehended as the modern contemporaneity of the region. Given that the development of communication media is an integral part of the rise of modern societies, the extensive exchanges of the regional pop culture flows in East Asia are also "interwoven in complex ways with a number of other developmental processes which, taken together, are constitutive of what we have come to call 'modernity'" (Thompson 1995: 3). Hence, this chapter traces how the historic trajectories of East Asian pop culture reflect and impact the construction of East Asian modernities. In so doing, I attempt to utilize East Asian pop culture for theorizing a particular condition of East Asian modernities, which is heuristically termed as the Yellow Pacific. In this chapter, I introduce this concept of the Yellow Pacific and explore how East Asian pop culture epitomizes the seminal elements of the Yellow Pacific.

In the mid-2010s, it is no longer surprising to see regional pop cultures that have been extensively circulated and enjoyed by their transnational fandom within and beyond the region. Propelled by the regional popularity of media and pop cultures, more Asians have chosen to travel to their neighbouring countries, which inevitably entails the consumption of local food, clothes, cosmetics, etc., as well as daily encounters with local sojourners. Such a