

Asia/Canada Reframed

Perspectives from a Transpacific Film Location

In *The Interview* (2014), the controversial political comedy that sparked the hacking scandal at Sony Pictures, Seth Rogen and James Franco's characters confer next to a giant statue of the late North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and his children. In *Finding Mr. Right* (2013), one of the all-time highest-grossing domestic films in China, Chinese star Tang Wei swaggers into Seattle airport showing off her character's flashy designer bling. In *Everything Will Be* (2014), a documentary funded by the National Film Board of Canada, director Julia Kwan's unassuming camera follows the inhabitants of Vancouver's Chinatown with quiet grace as they go about their daily business. In *Lunch With Charles* (2001), the first official Hong Kong-Canada coproduction and Leo Award winner, Hong Kong star Theresa Lee and Vancouver actor Nicholas Lea drive across British Columbia's spectacular wilderness, their characters bickering and bonding with each other on a road trip to Banff.

At first sight, this montage appears to comprise scenes that are randomly selected from films that have very little in common: they were financed by investors or state bodies from different countries, made in markedly different genres and aesthetic styles, and marketed to distinct audiences. Viewers who are Vancouver residents, however, would quickly recognize that these films were all shot in their city. As a location, Vancouver is used very differently by each film: it is skillfully disguised as Pyongyang for *The Interview*, casually passed as Seattle in *Finding Mr. Right*, lovingly evoked through a changing neighbourhood in *Everything Will Be*, and creatively deployed as a contrast to its surrounding wilderness in *Lunch With Charles*. Vancouver's prolific character as a film location is well documented. Writer Michael Turner's two-part moving-image series *On Location 1* and *On Location 2*, which compiles titles and scenes from Vancouver-made films, highlights the city's versatility

as a location.¹ The Vancouver edition of the *World Film Location* series, edited by Rachel Walls, details a history of Vancouver-made films dating back to the 1950s while highlighting the exponential growth of the industry in the past two decades. There is, however, a distinctive trait in the montage of recent films I open with here, which signals a newer development that has not yet inspired much discussion. All of the films mentioned above facilitate flows and exchanges between Asia and Canada, whether through the employment of Vancouver's Asian Canadian actors to produce images of Asia for Hollywood, the provision of Canadian resources such as location sites and a creative labour force for Chinese investments and consumption, the documentation on screen of how Asian migration impacts a neighbourhood in a Canadian city, or the collaboration of industry talents between Hong Kong and Vancouver through state-sanctioned audiovisual coproduction treaty provisions.²

As examples of cinematic transactions across the Asia/Canada axis through Vancouver as a film location, these films signal the need for a new transnational framework to approach Asian Canadian filmmaking practices. Within the established terms of reference in current articulations of Asian Canadian cinema, only one amongst the aforementioned films—*Everything Will Be*—counts as an Asian Canadian film. It is the only film in the group that is made by an Asian Canadian director and that features content about Asian Canadian experiences. It is a publicly funded documentary with a non-commercial aesthetic that aligns the film more closely with Asian Canadian cultural activism. The notion of Asian Canadian cinema as defined within these parameters performs important critical functions but it also has some significant limitations. In his schematic genealogy of the ongoing transformation of Asian Canadian as a signifier, Roy Miki posits four pivotal moments in the history of Asian Canadian cultural politics, beginning with: the cultural homogeneity enacted through national agencies such as the Canada Council and the National Film Board that results in racialized exclusion; followed by the multiculturalism debates from which critiques of exclusion and concerns for social justice emerge; to the ascendancy of the discourse of globalization, neoliberalism and the commodification of culture; and more recently, the “uncertain and unpredictable” transnational flows that occur under ongoing processes of “highly indeterminate and volatile globalization” (265-66). The current definition of Asian Canadian cinema is most effective in highlighting concerns from the first two—arguably national—moments. However, to analyze concerns arising from the latter two moments, especially the unpredictable impact of globalization, a

more expansive framework is needed to accentuate the many transnational aspects of Asian Canadian filmmaking.

In this article, I examine how Asian Canadian filmmaking has been defined in primarily authorial terms, and as part of a broader Asian Canadian cultural activism. I consider some of the limits of this approach and explore recent transnational analyses in film studies to reframe Asian Canadian filmmaking. As a case study, I examine filmmaking practices in the transpacific city of Vancouver. The focus on a location reveals how global, regional, and local forces across the Asia/Canada axis produce a distinctive filmmaking culture that is not defined by authorship. I also propose the study of film location as a possible methodology for Asian Canadian cultural critique. While the current framework for Asian Canadian cultural critique has focused on the history of anti-racist activism, the emergence of diasporic identity and community formation, as well as resistant art and cultural productions, there are concurrently critical interrogations of “Asian Canadian” as a coherent signifier, examining its internal contradictions, its history of ruptures, and the generative potential of these complexities. For example, in tracing the emergence of Asian Canadian identity, Chris Lee notes the foundational “instability” of this identity while also calling attention to how “extraordinarily generative” such instability is as a catalyst for “a flourishing body of work by critics, activists, and artists” (31-32). In her study of the formation of Asian Canadian literature, Larissa Lai characterizes the designation “Asian Canadian” as “porous” (5), a signifier that is “not a consistent category, nor one that develops in a generally progressive manner, but rather one that does different kinds of social, political, and literary labour depending on context and historical moment” (33). Roy Miki goes even further to suggest that “Asian Canadian functions in a kind of virtual mode with always-provisional references to socially constituted groups and . . . has no essential reason to be” (266). He argues it might “sever its connection to Canadian to become Asian” or “come to signify Canadian alone without the Asian qualifier” but would nonetheless “remain the floating signifier it has always been” (266). In a spirit similar to these interrogations, I tap into the generative potential of destabilizing what “Asian Canadian” signifies in filmmaking by examining what has been left out in the current critical discourse and expanding its capacity for transnational analyses.

Asian Canadian Filmmaking Outside the Frame

In “Tracking Shots: Mapping the Asian Canadian Filmscape,” Alice Shih notes the *absence* of Asian Canadian filmmaking until the 1960s, the fact of

which is a powerful critique of the cultural homogeneity of Canadian cinema and its long history of racialized exclusion. Shih's main goals in the article are to account for the "seventy-year gap between the introduction of film in Canada and the first examples of Asian Canadian filmmaking," and to ensure the "continued production, dissemination, and visibility" (38) of Asian Canadian cinema. Drawing a close parallel between the history of Asian Canadian filmmaking and that of diasporic identity formation, she locates the nascent moment of Asian Canadian filmmaking in the late 1960s and early 1970s, pointing to television documentary work by Adrienne Clarkson and Jesse Nishihata, and to Keith Locke's early experimental feature films as "pioneering" works.³ Shih describes the 1980s and 1990s as a "planting and germinating period" (41), producing works that reflected different generations of migrant experience:

These films were usually made by struggling first-generation Asian immigrants, or roots-searching second- and third-generation Asians. Other second- and third-generation Asian filmmakers who had completely assimilated into mainstream society produced works that did not present visible Asian content at all. Stories that went beyond such dominant concerns as racial discrimination, immigration, and issues of identity to explore other problems and issues and themes gradually emerged. (41-42)

While Shih notes the diversity of voices and styles of these films, she also views their non-commercial and experimental style as a shared trait that results from the filmmakers' Asian background: "Yet their stories are always personally significant, uniquely Canadian with an Asian flavour; and never genre pieces" (42).

The history of this "filmscape" thus follows a developmental narrative: beginning with a minority group's exclusion from both participation and representation in national filmmaking, followed by an emergent diasporic consciousness that leads to more inclusive representations of migrant experiences, culminating into Asian Canadian filmmakers' participation in the national conversation "beyond" minority concerns. This narrative also aligns Asian Canadian filmmaking with non-mainstream aesthetics ("never genre pieces") and activist goals on the one hand, while associating mainstream culture with assimilation and "non-visible" Asian content on the other.

Shih's account is similar in spirit to Xiaoping Li's broader mapping of Asian Canadian cultural activism in *Voices Rising*. Li documents the emergence of Asian Canadian identity through the production of, and participation in, cultural practices, of which filmmaking is discussed as an important part. Li understands Asian Canadian identity as a consciously constructed category

and a product of resistant politics. It aims at reclaiming subjectivities that have been erased or marginalized by racism while projecting a new identity that is neither English nor French into mainstream Canadian society (26). Li regards cultural activism to be an essential part of this narrative of resistance and empowerment. In her account, Asian Canadian cultural production, including filmmaking, forms part of a larger social movement that works towards community building and social change.

Both Shih's and Li's narratives provide important documentation of how hitherto marginal voices negotiate institutional, social, and cultural exclusion. They also highlight the inextricable relation between filmmaking, migrant experience, and resistant aesthetics. However, both accounts risk reproducing what Larissa Lai, in the context of Asian Canadian literature, has cautioned as a "linear and heroic history" that overlooks ruptures and contradictions (1). Further, they promulgate a primarily authorial understanding of filmmaking. Asian Canadian films are defined by the diasporic identities of their directors, whose migrant experience and oppositional consciousness are perceived to be organically linked to the content of their films, which presumably must articulate "the Asian Canadian experience." Such an approach regards film as primarily an aesthetic text and overlooks—even implicitly devalues—filmmaking's "industrial" aspects, which are by nature collective, frequently transnational, and inextricable from commercial concerns. Most film productions—even the lowest-budget independent features—involve multiple sources of financing; material resources such as locations and equipment; below-the-line labour from gaffers and camera operators to drivers and caterers; as well as all levels of creative labour, including actors, editors, and the post-production crew. To approach Asian Canadian filmmaking as primarily the expression of a director's cultural activism and resistant consciousness glosses over less readily recognized forms of Asian Canadian cultural labour as well as other forms of flows and exchanges across Asia and Canada that are mediated through filmmaking practices. It weakens the capacity for Asian Canadian as a term of analysis to explore the effects of globalization, the unpredictability of its various transnational pathways, and the volatile—and not always simply oppositional—relations between resistance and consumption, commercial interests and cultural investments, global homogenization and local specificity.

For instance, going back to the examples I raised at the beginning of the article, *The Interview* and *Finding Mr. Right* are made by US and Chinese filmmakers, respectively, but they rely significantly on Asian Canadian

resources and creative labour to produce transnationally circulated images of Asia and Asians. While these images may not be politically oppositional, and the economic conditions under which they are produced often involve inequality and exploitation, such film productions also provide ample economic and creative opportunities for Asian Canadian cultural workers at the locations of production. Paul Bae, a Vancouver-based writer and actor who plays one of Kim Jong-un's uncles in *The Interview*, recalls how the film "did wonders for Vancouver's tiny Korean acting community" (qtd. in O'Keefe n. pag.). Similarly, while *Finding Mr. Right* was made for the mainstream Chinese market, the film was serviced by line producers Shan Tan and Michael Parker, whose Vancouver-based production company, Holiday Pictures, has long maintained a balance between providing location services for Asian films and producing local independent films, including the works of Asian Canadian filmmakers such as Julia Kwan and Desiree Lim.⁴ *Lunch With Charles* provides an even more complicated example. The film is directed by Michael Parker, who is not Asian Canadian but whose involvement in Holiday Pictures has facilitated collaborations between Asian and Canadian film projects for decades. The film itself was enabled by a state-negotiated audiovisual coproduction treaty that brought together investments as well as acting, writing, and producing talents from the entertainment cultures of Hong Kong and Vancouver. Quite aside from its content (which does tell the story of the adventures of two Hong Kong immigrants during a road trip in the British Columbia interior), then, the film also facilitates and enacts Asian Canadian encounters at various levels of its own production. Thus, even though these films would not fit within the Asian Canadian filmmaking traditions mapped out by Shih and Li in 2007, the flows and exchanges they facilitate across Asia and Canada provide a useful point of departure to develop a transnational understanding of "Asian Canadian" filmmaking that is broader in scope and more heterogeneous in style, content, and political significance.

Transnational Shifts in Film Studies

In film studies, there has been a shift towards transnational critical frameworks, and scholars have already begun to speak of a "transnational turn" (Khoo, Smaill, and Yue 12). The shift has been further accentuated by the establishment of the journal *Transnational Cinemas* in 2010, and by major events such as the Transnational Cinema/Media Studies Conference held in Abu Dhabi in 2014. Amongst the burgeoning range of approaches,

Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim highlight three main lines of inquiry that deploy transnational frameworks in film analyses. First, the transnational is harnessed as a critique of the notion of “national cinema” and analytical frameworks that take national parameters for granted. Such critiques tend to focus away from the film as text to address issues around production, distribution, and reception (9). Second, the transnational is interpreted primarily as a regional formation that shares cultural, linguistic, political, or other affinities (9). Third, the transnational is explored through diaspora, exilic, and postcolonial formations, with a focus on issues of racism and colonial histories as well as resistance and oppositional politics (9-10). Wary of transnational analyses that homogenize differences or gloss over influences exerted by or through the nation-state, Higbee and Lim advocate a “critical transnationalism” that remains alert to both the complexity of transnational practices and the persistence of national forces (17-18). They point out the importance of specifying where in the filmmaking process transnational movement occurs, as well as ways in which transnational exchanges are in negotiation with national forces, “from cultural policy to financial sources, from the multiculturalism of difference to how it reconfigures the nation’s image of itself” (18). Furthermore, they point out the importance of approaching the transnational not only as boundary-crossing between nations and national cinemas, but also as flows and exchanges across regional, translocal, or other emergent forms of clusters and networks (18). As I will explore in detail through my case study of Vancouver, Higbee and Lim’s insistence on specifying how transnational, national, and local forces impact on particular aspects of the filmmaking process as well as the attention they bring to emergent forms of clusters and networks in filmmaking are crucial for developing a more complex picture of Asian Canadian filmmaking.

Another transnational inquiry in film studies that is especially relevant to examining Asian Canadian filmmaking is a recent study of transnational Australian cinema by Olivia Khoo, Belinda Smaill, and Audrey Yue, which provides a cogent example of how a “critical transnationalism” reframes the study of diasporic cinema. Similar to the author-centred designation of Asian Canadian cinema discussed earlier, Asian Australian cinema has also typically been defined as “a body of films directed by filmmakers of Asian descent who are identified through diasporic ties to Australia” (1). With the broader aim of reframing Australian cinema in transnational terms, Khoo, Smaill, and Yue argue that “foregrounding the connections and engagements

between Australia and Asia as these have shifted over time” is a necessary requirement (14). They thus view films by Asian diasporic filmmakers not as discrete forms of cultural production but as part of a larger transnational filmscape that also includes “Australian films featuring images of Asia and Asians, films produced by Australians working in Asia’s film industries or addressed at Asian audiences, as well as Asian films that utilize Australian resources, including locations and personnel” (1). This wider framing of Asian Australian cinema approaches filmmaking from all levels of its production, distribution, and reception. It pays attention to “different forms of encounters” in the cinema: “between individuals, populations, communities”; or “between audiences and texts” (2). Transnational flows across Asia and Australia are thus examined not only in the authorship, content, and style of the films, but also much more broadly in economic dynamics and trade policies that affect financing and coproduction possibilities, migration policies and national security concerns that affect how images of Asia are negotiated on screen and received off screen, and creative industry policies that affect the development of film-related resources and creative labour in cities and regions.

In studies of Asian Canadian cinema, comparisons are often made with the Asian American context. In Shih’s article, the discussion of early Asian Canadian cinema is largely a comparative portrait with Asian American cinema, which, she notes, predates its Canadian counterpart by many years despite roughly contemporaneous patterns of Chinese settlement (38). There are many close interconnections between Asian American and Asian Canadian cultural production, as well as between the two countries’ histories of Asian migrant and diasporic identity formation. However, with regard to the film industry, Canada and Australia are closer to each other than to the US, whose film industry has historically exerted a hegemonic influence globally through Hollywood. By contrast, Canada and Australia occupy the position of “junior partners,” a term from coproduction studies that Audrey Yue uses to describe Australia’s marginal relation to the rising hegemony of China’s film industry (187). It is a term that is applicable also to both Australia’s and Canada’s relation to Hollywood. As junior partners, the film industries in both Australia and Canada provide services and resources for Hollywood while also striving to lessen their dependence through cultivating alternative partnerships with film industries in Asia. The expanded framework being developed for examining Asian Australian cinema is therefore useful for illuminating the transnational trajectories of Asian Canadian filmmaking in junior partner relation to both Hollywood and Asian film industries.

Drawing from these transnational approaches, I propose an alternative framework for Asian Canadian filmmaking that takes as its point of departure not the diasporic identity of filmmakers but rather the pathways of mobility across the Asia/Canada axis facilitated by a film location. While I use Vancouver as my case study, it is not the only location that facilitates these transnational flows. Other thriving filmmaking cities such as Toronto, Edmonton, and Calgary would provide comparable yet also distinctive examples. Whether it is Toronto's established relation with Bollywood as a site of both production and consumption (Longfellow 85-104) or the little known role of the North West Centre (the regional office of the National Film Board in Edmonton) in fostering a thriving group of Asian Albertan documentary filmmakers (Ouchi 173-85), or Calgary's recent investment in a brand new film production facility to compete for foreign productions ("\$28M Calgary" n. pag.), a focus on location provides an opportunity to study how a confluence of global, regional, and local factors produce distinctive filmmaking practices across the Asia/Canada axis. One of Vancouver's distinctive characteristics as a film location is the symbiotic relation between its marginal position vis-à-vis Central Canada, its proximity to the US west coast, and its transpacific ties to Asia.

The recent emergence of transpacific studies provides an analytical model to examine with more specificity the transnational forces that are at work within the regional imaginary of the Pacific. Variouslly imagined as the Pacific Basin, the Pacific Rim, and Asia Pacific, the region as a "space of interaction" has continued to facilitate "relationships of conquest, commerce, conversion, and collaboration" amongst peoples in the region (Nguyen and Hoskins 2). The term *transpacific* refers not to an area or region but to what Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Hoskins articulate as a "contact zone" across which peoples, cultures, capital, and ideas travel, and which may result in "the possibility of collaborations, alliances, and friendships between subjugated, minoritized, and marginalized peoples who might fashion a counter-hegemony to the hegemony of the United States, China, Japan, and other regional powers" (3). Vancouver's development into a transpacific contact zone results from its migration history, which represents a culmination of what historian Henry Yu calls Canada's "national reorientation towards an engagement with the Pacific rather than the Atlantic world" (1011). The 2011 Census shows that 40% of Metro Vancouver residents are foreign-born, amongst whom two out of three are originally from Asia (Metro Vancouver 1). In a recent report prepared for Citizenship and Immigration Canada,

geographer Daniel Hiebert projects that by 2031, 59% of the population of Metro Vancouver will be predominantly Chinese, South Asians, Filipinos, Koreans, and West Asians (n. pag.). These rapidly intensifying migrant ties to Asia reposition Vancouver's remoteness from the nation's political, financial, and cultural centres toward the city's proximity, in travel distance and time zones as well as social and economic ties, to Asia. As a film location, Vancouver has already successfully leveraged its proximity to the US west coast as a competitive advantage vis-à-vis the much more established film production sites of Montreal and Toronto. It has, moreover, done so by promoting a thriving location service industry while simultaneously maintaining a local independent film scene that is both constrained *and* enabled by the former. Just as Vancouver has succeeded as a flourishing hub for Hollywood productions, it is now aspiring to become the same for the growing film industries in Asia. At the same time, a distinctive west coast film culture persists as part of the city's vibrant counter-culture scene. Through this triangulated prism, we are able to see Asian Canadian filmmaking from a perspective that highlights its transnational character.

From Hollywood North to the Vancouver Asian

Since the globalization of Hollywood's production practices during the 1970s (see Miller et al.), the model of runaway productions—the making of US films and television shows outside of the country—has created massive demands for “location industries” all over the world. Vancouver was one of the earliest and most successful cities at capitalizing on this transnational production culture. Dubbed “Hollywood North,” Vancouver's model of location service has become a template for other cities to emulate (Tinic 2). In Mike Gasher's study of the history of British Columbia's film industry, he points out that provincial policies have traditionally approached culture industries as more “industry” than “culture” (24), to the extent that the film industry's production model actually resembles traditional resource extraction. It 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 (Hollywood films and television shows) is then imported back and consumed in Canada (Gasher 44). However, far from being simply an exploited victim under Hollywood's production imperialism, the service sector of the film industry has also *enabled* the existence of a local cinema. Due to the concentration of Canada's film industries in Ontario and Quebec, and the failure of national film strategies

during the 1970s-1980s to support regional development (Gasher 66-67), there was a lack of cultural infrastructure and support for developing creative talents in Vancouver prior to the location industry boom. The prominent role of Vancouver's film production as a Hollywood satellite industry, in conjunction with success in related creative sectors such as video games and digital media, has brought about urban revitalization (Hutton and Tung 139-60), the convergence and clustering of diverse creative industries (Barnes and Coe 251-77), and the concentration of a highly skilled creative workforce at all levels of film production and post-production. Serra Tinic observes that Vancouver's success as a location city for Hollywood is double-edged: "It absorbs labor and resources while simultaneously creating opportunities for local producers to fund and distribute their own programs independently" (13). In other words, the very labour, resources, and location sites that are developed for Hollywood have also nurtured a parallel scene of local productions that has persisted both in spite of *and* because of Hollywood's hegemonic presence.

The industry's heavy dependence on Hollywood, however, renders it vulnerable to competition from other cities nationally and globally. It also remains susceptible to external factors such as the vagaries of the exchange rate and protectionist US domestic policies, both of which have threatened to undermine Vancouver's competitive advantage. Following trends in other sectors, the film industry has sought diversification by cultivating relations with Asia, especially China, which has a relatively untapped and expanding source of film financing and markets. Stephanie DeBoer has identified the emergence of a new pan-Asian coproduction culture—dubbed "Asiawood" by *Newsweek* as early as 2001 ("The Birth" n. pag.)—that can rival Hollywood. By positioning itself as Asiawood's "gateway" to North America, Vancouver aspires to replicate its unequal but thriving relation to Hollywood vis-à-vis this emergent film region in Asia. China's rising dominance as a film production centre is producing a still-evolving set of new dynamics, both regionally in Asia and globally in competition with Hollywood. DeBoer's study portrays China in a complex role in this developing regional network (153). As DeBoer suggests, China provides both an essential source of investments and a viable market, without which no Asian film could be globally competitive. She notes, however, that it is also feared as an expansionist force akin to Hollywood that is poised to destroy local and regional cultural expressions (153). In Chinese-language film criticism, the emergence of a new term *Huallywood* (which puns on the Chinese word *hua*, denoting "Chinese") underlies the industry's aspiration for Hollywood-like economic and cultural hegemony as well

as the inevitably intertwined nature of two global powers (Fu, Indelicato, and Qiu 48-53). Despite this unequal power dynamic between China and its Asian coproduction partners, DeBoer argues that the very collaborative nature of coproduction offers possibilities for alternative images, narratives, and networks to emerge (181-82). In Audrey Yue's study of China-Australia coproductions, she finds that in spite of Australia's "junior partner" role, the transnational nature of coproductions has led to "competing national logics" (189) that result not only in "post-identity interrogation" in the content of Australian films, but also in new partnership networks, an internationalization of Asian Australian talent, and the emergence of a cluster of special effects industries in South Australia (200).

In Canada, there are three options for collaborating with foreign partners: official coproductions that are governed by existent audiovisual coproduction treaties, unofficial co-ventures, and the provision of production services. While there are official agreements in place with many Asian countries including China, Japan, Singapore, and India, the number of official Asia-Canada coproductions in British Columbia is relatively low.⁵ Outside of official coproductions, however, there are many other types of initiatives that cultivate Asia-Canada partnership possibilities. Some efforts aim for an expansion of markets for the location services the city is already providing for Hollywood. Eastern Gate Productions, for example, was set up by producers with longstanding experience working with Hollywood productions who now specialize in providing Chinese productions with the same full package of "end-to-end" services. As previously mentioned, Holiday Pictures has been providing location services for Asian productions since the 1990s. Its most high-profile work includes the Jackie Chan vehicle *Rumble in the Bronx* in 1995 and the Chinese box-office hit *Finding Mr. Right* in 2013. As a company that also produces local independent films, Holiday Pictures is a micro example of the double-edged effect that Tinic attributes to Vancouver's film industry in general. The company provides local resources and labour for mainstream transnational productions. Economic benefits from those productions in turn provide the company with opportunities to nurture and distribute local films.⁶ In a different way but with similar aspirations, Vancouver Film School (VFS)'s joint venture with the University of Shanghai represents an attempt to secure new financing and markets for Vancouver's creative labour force. At the new facility in Shanghai, which was opened in 2014, VFS provides the majority of the teaching staff, and plays a significant role in building the infrastructure and training a skilled

workforce for the nascent film industry in Shanghai. Aside from providing location services and exporting technical and creative expertise, there are also efforts to secure Chinese financing directly for Canadian films. For example, 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 increased participation of Canadian filmmakers in Asian industry events such as the Hong Kong International Film and TV Market (FILMART) and the Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) show similar efforts to look for alternative sources of funding in Asia.

Overall, these initiatives aim at both expanding the service sector to Asian film industries as well as securing new financing and markets for local film productions, even if the former would inevitably be disproportionately much larger in scale than the latter. As much as “industry” is often pitched against “culture” and “mainstream” against “independent,” these two sides of Vancouver’s film industry are symbiotic rather than antagonistic. Film journalist David Spaner even sees this “polarization” between the service industry sector and the stubborn permanence of an independent film culture as a distinct character of the city, in the same way that the urbanity of downtown Vancouver is minutes’ drive way from the wilderness, or that an internationally celebrated punk scene thrives within a culturally middlebrow city (16).

Su-Anne Yeo’s sketch of the “Vancouver Asian,” which she articulates as part of a “west coast film culture” (114), also, in my view, highlights this double-edged or polarized character. Yeo portrays an Asian Canadian presence in Vancouver’s film culture that is characterized by its transnational affinities and its difference from Toronto and Montreal. One example is the distinct documentary style of Vancouver’s Asian Canadian filmmakers. Yeo points out that while visible minorities were historically encouraged to document rather than fictionalize their lives and that, as a legacy of John Grierson (the first commissioner of the National Film Commission), documentary realism is a dominant national style, Vancouver’s filmmakers are under far less pressure to conform to these conventions because of the city’s relative isolation from the established cultural institutions concentrated in Toronto and Montreal (115-17). From Yeo’s perspective, the experimental and hybrid style of Ann Marie Fleming’s or Karen Lee’s documentary works, for instance, stem at least in part from the freedom afforded by their location in a film city that has historically been snubbed and marginalized by the nation’s purported cultural centres.⁷ Interpreted thus, I would

argue that these works may well have more affinity with the punk-inspired experimental aesthetics of Vancouver filmmakers such as Larry Kent and Lynne Stopkewich than with the films of Asian Canadian filmmakers from Toronto or Montreal.

Vancouver's location also prompts Yeo to consider cultural workers other than film directors. She points to a sizeable group of working actors of Asian descent who are active across the transpacific cluster of Vancouver, Los Angeles, and various Asian film industries (120). This phenomenon has also been documented in Michael Parker's film *Hong Kong Express* (2005), which follows a group of Hong Kong actresses, including Theresa Lee and Christy Chung, whose professional trajectories move across this regional cluster during the 1990s. Andrew Ooi, a film producer and manager whose Vancouver-based company Echelon Talent Management specializes in managing these mobile careers, predicts that such movement will be even more common in the future (Seno n. pag.). As transpacific co-ventures proliferate, there will be an increasingly diverse group of cultural workers, from actors and producers to various production and post-production crews, who will traverse similar trajectories across the transpacific cluster.

Furthermore, there is a similar "Vancouver Asian" character to the city's film festival culture. Both the Vancouver International Film Festival (VIFF) and the Vancouver Queer Film Festival (VQFF), the city's two biggest film festivals, are renowned for their respective histories of Asian film programming. The "Dragons and Tigers" program at VIFF was started in 1985 and is credited with presenting the "largest annual exhibition of Pacific Asian films outside Asia" (VIFF n. pag.). It provides a significant transpacific venue for filmmakers, film scholars and critics, and industry professionals in the region to forge connections and collaborations. VQFF's "Spotlight on Asia" or "Focus on Asia" programming has been a regular feature at the festival for over a decade.⁸ A diverse range of queer Asian films, including mainstream Asian feature films with queer themes, experimental videos by queer video artists in Asia, and documentaries on queer Asian lives are regularly screened in the festival.

In sum, conceiving of a place-based "Vancouver Asian" film culture, as distinct from an author-centred definition of Asian Canadian cinema, calls our attention to a confluence of local and global factors, which include the city's migration history, its distance from central Canada's cultural institutions, its proximity to Hollywood, its countercultural lineage, its mobile industry careers across the Pacific west coast and Asia, as well as its

diverse film festival culture and film-going demographic. It expands our interpretation of what “counts” as Asian Canadian cultural work, highlights regional specificity, and reveals the complex character of transnational flows.

Location as Method

These global/local conduits of filmmaking in Vancouver also complicate our understanding of the relation between complicity and resistance. They show that being positioned within an unequal relationship as a “junior partner” to hegemonic production regimes—be they centred in Hollywood or in Beijing—can result in unpredictable possibilities for local developments. Tinic has argued that Vancouver, as one of the so-called “second-tier cities,” is able to be simultaneously the most creative and the most entrepreneurial by extracting resources from the “first-tier” global cities that it services (17). As a film location, Vancouver has had to eradicate its own identity by playing other places, from Pyongyang to Seattle and every other place in between. The city is marketed by the British Columbia Film Commission as a generic “no place” or a versatile “any place” that offers “a worlds of looks” and “sceneries from nine different climate zones” (1). At the same time, this service industry has also nurtured a creative workforce that has the skills, aspirations, and opportunities to (re)produce the city in a different light. While there have been discussions about the cultural ramifications of Vancouver as a film location from diverse perspectives, such as Colin Brown’s historical account (Walls 6-7), Kamala Todd’s critique from an Indigenous viewpoint (Walls 8-9), and Lindsay Steenberg’s analysis of the city’s role on crime television (Walls 92-3), there is perhaps no better embodiment of the issue than Tony Zhou’s 2015 short film *Vancouver Never Plays Itself*. The film is a skillfully edited and wittily narrated montage of Vancouver’s various roles as a location (including scenes from both Hollywood and Asian films such as *The Interview*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Underworld*, *Finding Mr. Right*, *Rumble in the Bronx*, and many others). As Zhou laments the service industry’s ruthless erasure of his hometown on screen, he also showcases the technical expertise and creative labour that make such erasure possible. Demonstrating the skillful use of the establishing shot, the placing of props, the manipulation of lighting and camera angles, post-production visual effects, and versatile editing, the film is unwittingly also demonstrating the filmmaking expertise that has been nurtured and developed by the service industry.

At the end of the short film, Zhou’s narration pays homage to the “local movement of films and television shows where Vancouver does play itself.”

It connects the filmmaker's experiences "as a child of immigrants who mostly explored the city on foot" with the need for Vancouver to play itself, from different angles and as setting rather than location. The lovingly made film gets to the heart of the conundrum of Vancouver as a transpacific film location: it is at once exploitative and productive. The economic benefits as well as the technical and creative expertise that result from the production of location service, in combination with the service industry's inherent cultural exploitation of the city and the concomitant anxiety it induces, make a film like Zhou's possible. While Zhou's film would obviously be cited as an example of Asian Canadian filmmaking because of its filmmaker's diasporic identity, it is in my view more productively understood as an example of a "Vancouver Asian" film culture. Much more than simply the expression of a filmmaker's migrant experience, the film embodies the entangled transnational and local trajectories of a film location, the price exacted on it by globalization, as well as the possibilities and reflections of home and identity that are nurtured in its wake.

Transnational methodologies in film studies provide ample possibilities for expanding the critical framework of Asian Canadian filmmaking. My focus on Vancouver as a film location provides one possible approach to consider the flows and exchanges across the transpacific axis as well as the unpredictable dynamics of a city's participation in a globalized regime of film production. As both an art form and an industry, film is especially suited to transnational analyses that examine a broad range of issues from policy to aesthetics. As globalization and transnational forces have ever more intense impact on literary and other artistic productions, insights from film studies are also timely and relevant to Asian Canadian cultural critique in general.

NOTES

- 1 Michael Turner made two short films, respectively entitled *On Location 1: Elvy Del Bianco's Annotated Film Collection* and *On Location 2: Four Double Bills*, for the exhibition *WE: Vancouver – 12 Manifestos for the City*, presented at the Vancouver Art Gallery from February 12 to May 1, 2011. The first film is composed of synopses and title sequences of 167 films shot in Vancouver, while the second film edits together exterior scenes from eight well-known Vancouver-made feature films.
- 2 Audiovisual coproduction treaties refer to the agreements that govern the terms of coproductions, defined and administered by Telefilm Canada as "joint film and television productions that are shared between two or more countries." For details of existent international treaties, see: <https://www.telefilm.ca/en/coproductions/coproductions/agreements>.

- 3 While Adrienne Clarkson did not make her first feature-length film until *Artemisia* in 1992, she played a prominent role in the production of television documentary programs that were broadcast on the CBC during the 1970s, including *Take Thirty* and *The Fifth Estate*. Jessica Nishihata's *The Inquiry Film: A Report on the Mackenzie Pipeline Inquiry* (1977) won a Canadian Film Award for Best Documentary, while Keith Locke's *Flights of Frenzy* (1969) and *Everything Everywhere Again Alive* (1975) were notable works in the experimental genre.
- 4 Holiday Pictures produced Julia Kwan's award-winning first feature *Eve and the Fire Horse* (2005) and Desiree Lim's queer comedy *Floored By Love*, which was first broadcast on CHUM television as part of the *Eight Stories About Love* anthology series (2005).
- 5 Detailed figures for the annual number of coproductions in each region are available from the Telefilm Canada coproduction directory: <https://www.telefilm.ca/en/coproductions/coproduction-directories/coproduction-directories>.
- 6 For a list of the company's productions, see http://www.holidaypictures.ca/Holiday_Pictures/Productions.html.
- 7 See, for example, the documentary feature *The Magical Life of Long Tak Sam* (2003) by Ann Marie Fleming and the experimental biography *Comrade Dad* (2006) by Karen Lee.
- 8 Wayne Yung has spoken about the festival through his personal experience as a gay Asian Canadian filmmaker and the festival's "pro-active strategy to diversify at the organization level" (Chang 262). For examples of the festival's Asian programming, see the "South Asian Spotlight" program in 2004, the "Spotlight on Asia" series in 2005, the "Focus on Asian Voices" program in 2009, and the "Focus on India" program in 2013 (VQFF n. pag.).

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