

ASIAN DIASPORA DOES VEGAS: WAVES OF WORKING- AND First-CLASS GAMBLERS

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When Asian Diaspora plays, it oftentimes comes to Las Vegas or any casino or venue with gaming devices. Las Vegas and the like provide the culmination of Asian Diaspora, which is, in essence, taking risks in casting oneself out of home and into the unfamiliar, a gamble in view of all the variables and pitfalls. The euphoria of possible winning is always haunted by the keen or repressed sense of loss over homeland, identity, or even youthful dream on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. Metaphorically, every facet of diaspora resembles gambling, with the high stakes involved for the speculation with one's money and life and the uncertainty of return, pun intended. The wager gets increasingly steep, from one's possession (weekly or monthly wages) to one's body (indentured laborers or illegal aliens) and to one's identity and soul (e.g., sham marriage as a Faustian exchange). The parenthetical examples already illustrate that the material transaction alchemizes into psychological, even spiritual ones. From Marx's *Das Kapital* to Freud's head or capita, the Marxist economy of gamble turns Freudian in that throwing the dice or whatnot come to represent wish-fulfilling dreams. Gamblers are dreamers, whose inhibitions recede in their daydreaming contextualized by Sin City, giving free rein to Freudian id, particularly greed and lust for money and sex. Hence, the title alludes to gambling as well as to the slew of adult films *XXX Does Vegas*. For Asian gamblers, dreaming of gold is never far from wet dreams. Etymologically, Las Vegas is wet: early

settlers named it Las Vegas, or “the meadows” in Spanish, after the magical spring and wetland three miles west of the downtown area that had since been depleted by population growth. Once upon a time, though, the spring must have suggested the opening of the earth’s life-giving womb amid the Mojave Desert. That association with female anatomy continues unabated today in terms of the highest urban consumption of water in the U.S. and of the city’s identity as what Maia Hansen wryly dubs the “Skin City.”¹

Although the human life is routinely divided into work and play, Asian Diaspora at play—particularly those holiday working-class gamblers from metropolitan areas, whether bussed into Las Vegas from Los Angeles or into Atlantic City from New York—does not so much play as work with a near-pathological intensity in hope of neutralizing the deficits accrued in a working-class life. The demand on a blue-collar immigrant’s life collapses the separation of work and play, absorbing the latter into the former. (The thriving convention business in close proximity to the sex industry and the Las Vegas Strip also combines business and pleasure for white-collar conventioners, American or international.)² Play or obsessive-compulsive betting at the slot machine, the stock market,³ or, as I am prone to do, the academic marketplace of ideas and meats is symptomatic of Asian diasporic’s dissatisfaction with the other half of life—work—or with life in general. Georges Bataille associates the realm of play in this binarism with transgressions against taboos and imbues it with religio-psychological significance, which quenches the thirst beyond physical and material want.⁴ It appears ironic that in this mirage of what Hal Rothman calls “Neon Metropolis” and sensory overload in the middle of a desert, Asian Diaspora should be seeking spiritual rejuvenation, as Moses, John the Baptist, and then Jesus once did in the wilderness. Nonetheless, the night-blooming city amidst total darkness and aridity perfectly exteriorizes the human desire for magical deliverance from the fate of a nobody out of nowhere amounting to nothing. The biblical gamblers who repeatedly won silhouette and ultimately mock the urgency of the gaming motif in trans-Pacific literature and film, ranging from the earliest wave of

¹ In *The Desert of Desire*, William L. Fox discusses water use: “Las Vegas, however, use more water than any other urban folks in the country, 307 gallons” per person per day (103). Hal Rothman in *Neon Metropolis* puts water consumption at “nearly 400 gallons per day per person in greater Las Vegas” (210). David Littlejohn in *The Real Las Vegas* concurs that Las Vegas use “more water than the residents of any other city in the world: currently 325 gallons per capita per year” (8). For the female anatomy, see also Kathryn Hausbeck’s “Who Puts the ‘Sin’ in ‘Sin City’ Stories?”. Hausbeck writes: “With the phallic grandeur of Bob Stupak’s wet-dream casino fantasy, the Stratosphere Tower, situated midway between the heart of Las Vegas Boulevard casino development to the south, and the newly renovated Fremont Street Experience at its northern base, the Strip opens up like a woman’s legs straddling the spectacle” (338). Amie Williams echoes such allusion to female bodies: “Whether you’re making beds for ‘em [men] or in the bed with ‘em. This town has been built on the backs of women” (“Looking into a Dry Lake” 293).

² See Maia Hansen’s “Skin City.” The sex industry experiences an upswing of business whenever there is a big convention in town.

³ Unu Shim in Min Jin Lee’s *Free Food for Millionaires* (2007) is both a Wall Street stock broker and a Blackjack addict.

⁴ See Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality (Eroticism)* (1962).

nineteenth-century Cantonese dreaming of striking it rich at the Gold Mountain (*Gumsan* for San Francisco or America more broadly), to the wave of war-time and postwar sojourners whose lifelong itinerary revolves around gambling houses, to a classic in the contemporary Korean Wave which opens and ends with Las Vegas,⁵ and finally to the reverse flow to the mushrooming, Vegas-affiliated casinos in the Macau Special Administration Region in Southern China dubbed by journalists “the Vegas of Asia,” attracting the nouveau riche from China and all over the world. The global flow of labor and capital across the ocean has now come full circle, fidgeting for the next round, for we are forever driven to and fro by blind forces across a giant pinball machine, some scoring more points than others, all heading for the same exit.

Among others, John M. Findlay maintains that the U.S. from its earliest European settlers to the present is a “people of chance,” the title of his 1986 book, yet arrivals from the time of Jamestown to that of Vegas are progressively secured in their belief that the New World is theirs. With respect to this white assumption of Las Vegas and gambling, the minority pleasure-seekers, especially male, differ dramatically. Although both groups share the pursuit for relaxation and sudden fortune, Asian working-class male gamblers carry the burden of what David Eng describes as “racial castration,” the effeminization imposed by their work conditions and social status. The figurative shrivel-up of the fifth limb—penis—may be less conspicuous than losing one of the four limbs, but it is as psychologically devastating as any other form of disabilities. The lack of control over one’s life, illegal aliens in the worst case, intensifies the longing to be in control at the poker or the mah-jong table. This appears to contradict Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s contention of “necessity” and “extravagance” demarcating the immigrant generation’s struggle for survival and the American-born generation’s penchant for luxury. But the two modes are not mutually exclusive: FOBs (Fresh off the Boat) are given to periodic excesses; ABCs (American-born Chinese) to self-doubt and angst plaguing their predecessors. Tony Chan’s *Combination Platter* (2005) enacts this generational ambiguity during an immigration officers’ raid of illegal aliens at a Chinese restaurant. The ABC receptionist, American by birth, becomes one of the usual suspects when asked for her identifications, while kitchen hands scurry and hide. Aside from this precarious moment, one particular waiter, Sam, an inveterate gambler, embodies the immigrant’s yearning and disillusionment as he frequents Atlantic City, plays mah-jong, and bets on horse races. To pay off his debts, Sam pockets tips meant for a communal pot to be equally distributed among waiters, hence ripping off his coworkers. Despite Sam’s egregious offense and eventual exile from the restaurant, he is not the lone gambler. All the Asian characters teeter on the edge: the restaurant owner worries about slow business and breaks the law by hiring illegal aliens; the employees experience linguistic and cultural problems with American customers and within the kitchen itself divided by Mandarin- and Cantonese-speakers; the protagonist Robert from Hong Kong dates an American woman in hope of a green card through a sham marriage. Slow-paced and seemingly uneventful,

⁵ The 2001 Korean TV series *Hotelier* starring Yong-jun Bae of the *Winter Sonata* fame is remade into a Japanese TV series also titled *Hotelier* in 2007 and also starring the Korean actor.

Combination Platter captures the assortment of challenges facing the Chinese working class in New York. More importantly, Chan does this from an insider's perspective, reminiscent of Wayne Wang's early film *Chan is Missing* (1981) based in San Francisco's Chinatown.

Chan and Wang's insider, sympathetic filmic portrayal of gambling men contrasts sharply with the Asian American literary tradition of warrior women. Ever since Maxine Hong Kingston's archetype or stereotype of Brave Orchid in *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Asian American female writers—Amy Tan, Gish Jen, Ruth L. Ozeki,⁶ and many more—never cease to regale us with pidgin-speaking, stupid and superstitious, yet wisdom-imparting and mystery-bestowing immigrant mothers. These mothers survive against abusive husbands and Asian patriarchy through perseverance and certain innate, Asian indigenous magic. That Asia torments these women just as it, inexplicably, heals them suggests the self-Orientalizing impulse of an insider-outsider engaged both in self-representation and in exoticization of the Orient, with immigrant mothers as Orientals. To rephrase the Pledge of Allegiance, such Asian American female writers constitute “one nation under mom,” a construct of matrilineage to satisfy the psychological need of empowerment for minority women, doubly disenfranchised by Asian patriarchy and American racism, yet no less of a form of self-Orientalizing. This does not decree a simplistic division of representation according to writers' and artists' gender. For instance, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) with its proliferation of immigrant mothers is turned into a film by Wayne Wang in 1993; likewise, some ensuing depictions of male gamblers are penned by females. Nor are the twin traditions of representation—gambling fathers, warrior mothers—all that different. Both hinge on a transformational desire, realized to various degrees.

The gambling fathers contribute but little to the formation of ethnic identity other than as part of the general backdrop of racism and ethnic pain, from the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882-1943) and bachelor communities to the internment of Japanese Americans and more, against which Asian American writers and artists fashion a panethnic solidarity. As such, these gambling men serve as *negative* moral lessons for the abyss to which Asian Americans could fall. By contrast, warrior women emerge as *positive* role models for the height to which Asian Americans could aspire. Once again, the dichotomy is not to be taken at face value. Despite all the attempt to exorcize him, the gambler remains very much the shadow to the “model minority” on the threshold of the twenty-first century, hauntingly evoked in recent “Manchurian candidates,” those alleged conniving, duplicitous Asians who are, in effect, scapegoats for American xenophobia—Vincent Chin in Detroit and Wen Ho Lee in Los Alamos. The Asian

⁶ In Ruth L. Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998), the duality of Oriental women is embodied by two Japanese women: the protagonist's Japanese mother, in her comical pidgin, advises putting an American coin under the tongue during love-making to ensure conception; the American protagonist's Japanese doppelganger, Akiko, a submissive family abuse victim who develops a clairvoyant vision of her fetus' growth in the wake of her husband's violent rape. Both the passive, pitiable and the mystical Oriental women are the two sides to the same Orientalizing stereotype.

American championing of justice in the 1980s over the Chin case and from 1999 onward over the Lee case appears to gainsay any separation of Asian American and Asian immigrants; both legal maneuvers seem to refute that Asian American psyche would ever displace onto Asian immigrants in diaspora the role of gambler. However, both Chin and Lee are naturalized Americans, their constitutional rights violated as they are deemed either “Jap” amidst Japan-bashing or “communist spy” amidst China-fear mongering. Strictly speaking, the Asian American defense of Chin and Lee is self-defense against American racism that excludes them rather than defense of the racial other. It is unclear whether this “us vs. them” strategy should be diagrammed, from the Asian American perspective, as two circles side by side for Asia and America, barely touching each other, with Asian America at the heart of the second circle, or as two overlapping circles with Asian America in between. Conceivably, the former diagram dominates in legal defense, whereas both play a role in artistic expression: Asia both empowers and imprisons Asian America. Kingston writes, “[e]ven now China wraps double binds around my feet” (57).⁷ The irony is that just as the mountain of a patriarchal, oppressive China presses down on Kingston’s protagonist, the other matrilineal, mythical China lifts her up. More intriguingly, Kingston’s famous dictum whitewashes the other mountain on her shoulder: American racism as a result of her presumed Chineseness. The double bind is knotted by both her Chinese face and her American culture.

In texts of male nostalgia, however, gambling men exemplify not so much negative moral lessons as paragons of daredevil courage. Along with boxers and gangsters,⁸ gamblers embody masculinity in the aggressive entering into the unknown tantamount to self-abandoning. In this embrace of danger, gamblers are no different from Kingston’s feminist warrior or from Frank Chin’s masculinist Guan Gung, Chinese God of War. For example, faced with a Chinaman’s chance, the protagonists in Milton Murayama’s *All I Asking for Is My Body* (1975) deploy boxing and craps game as means to free themselves from mounting family debts and “inherited” misery in Hawaii’s sugar cane plantations.⁹ But such male nostalgia belongs to a later generation. The first wave of Cantonese workers around the turn of the last century suffer racist laws and racist mobs. As new Chinese workers are barred from entry under the Exclusion Act, many resort to the “bluff” of “paper sons,” purchasing forged identities as blood relations or “dependents” to those Chinese already in the United States. Granted that such impersonation is a means to survival, the rationale for this bald-faced cheating can be put idiomatically: once reduced to feeding off the crumbs from the master’s table, the undesirable spits in the master’s soup for revenge and skirts the discriminatory and unjust

⁷ See Sheng-mei Ma’s *East-West Montage* (2007), especially chapter 11, “Asian Immigrants with ‘Magical’ Disabilities: Oriental Tongues and Bound Feet,” for an exegesis of Kingston’s subtext on bound feet here.

⁸ Peter Bacho uses Filipino boxers to illustrate masculinity in *Dark Blue Suits and Other Stories* (1997). Carlos Bulosan deploys boxers and gangsters to illustrate the futility in Filipinos’ ceaseless movement in *America Is in the Heart* (1943).

⁹ See Ma’s *East-West Montage*, especially chapter 2, “Camp Scatology: A Comparative Study of Body (as) Waste in Japanese American Literature,” for a Freudian interpretation of craps game that produces money or gold.

laws. The duplicity of paper sons stems from a power imbalance similar to those that give rise to the colonized “mimic man” (Homi Bhabha) or to African Americans’ “double consciousness” (W. E. B. DuBois). The play *Paper Angels* (1982) illustrates the fate of these paper sons by focusing on detainees on San Francisco Bay’s Angel Island, the Ellis Island of the West Coast, where males and females, even husband and wife, are segregated, living in limbo, with the Gold Mountain so tantalizingly close, yet so far. Some inmates gamble; one scholar (soon-to-be coolie) carves poems of sorrow and resentment on the walls of the wooden barracks; one impersonates woman, thus enacting the castration complex. Ironically, the scholar, who should excel in rote memorization, has not destroyed the coaching papers for his paper son identity for fear of giving wrong answers in the immigration interrogation, consisting of such preposterous questions as the number of steps leading up to one’s home in Canton, number of livestock, and disease of alleged relatives. The scholar’s coaching papers are nearly found out by the immigration officer, if not for the inmates’ concerted effort to sabotage the search. Fearing mistakes during interview and weary of taking chances, the scholar is ill-suited for diaspora, i.e., a gambler’s life. The true cause for the scholar’s inability to commit to memory simple facts may be that he subconsciously refuses to take on the new peasant or working-class persona.

Gambling of another sort is inherent in the practice of “picture bride” in early Asian American history when lonely laborers in the U.S. arrange marriages with women from their home countries through the assistance of matchmakers and photographs, hence the nomenclature. Similar to the exchange of paper money and male labor, marital transaction depends on exchanges of pictures, money, and female bodies. Quite a few picture brides in Wakako Yamauchi’s play *And the Soul Shall Dance* (1977) and Hisaye Yamamoto’s *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories* (1988) are disgraced women who venture abroad to escape scandal. The New World offers, instead, relentless hardships and often abusive relationships, a total loss for picture brides and all those involved—spouses and children. That the picture brides in Yamauchi’s play and Yamamoto’s title story “Seventeen Syllables” (1949) exhibit artistic sensibilities in traditional dance and haiku writing deepens the chasm with their farming husbands and surroundings. Although the picture bride in Yamamoto’s “Las Vegas Charley” (1961) comes to offer a semblance of family life, Charley slowly drifts into “flower cards” and a familiar trajectory that ends in Las Vegas. Many such disenfranchised immigrants seek a total reversal of their fortune in the Nevada desert, only to die ignominiously there, including Chun, the one-time Korean grocer in Kim Ronyoung’s *Clay Walls* (1987). Even if the gamblers do not conclude their lives in Sin City, they orbit around gambling dens, such as Yamamoto’s compulsive loser in “The Brown House” (1951) and Carlos Bulosan’s Pinoys restlessly traversing the American West in *America Is in the Heart* (1943). The frequency of gamblers’ demise in Asian American literature appears to validate Freud’s reading in “Dostoevsky and Parricide” that betting constitutes a form of subconscious self-punishment where debts equal mounting guilt. The Freudian interpretation attributes Charley’s and other gamblers’ irrevocable path to self-destruction to guilt rather than to the motive of sudden fortune.

Dwelling on neither paper son nor picture bride, neither migrant worker nor legendary fighter, Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961) portrays the bachelor community in postwar New York's Chinatown. Much of the action is set at Wang Wah Gay's Money Come Club, where "bachelors," a misnomer for most of them cannot unite with their wives in China, while away time at the mah-jong table. The only professional gambler, Ah Song, seduces the club owner's daughter-in-law Mei Oi and loses his ear—symbolically, his face and penis—to Wah Gay's razor-sharp knife. Despite his transgression and subsequent banishment, the outsider-gambler Ah Song sires a son who is brought up as the bachelor community's own. As Mei Oi and her husband, whose impotence—individual and communal—is healed by a herbalist's "bowl of tea," contemplate inviting their fathers for the son's second haircut party, the gambler's bloodline within Asian Diaspora is not only legitimized but it, like bitter tea or pill, magically cures racial castration.

In Asian American literature, Ah Song belongs to a coterie of professional Asian gamblers vis-à-vis the mass of working-class, amateur gamblers. Well-dressed with "neatly combed black hair" and "a white handkerchief always adorn[ing] the breast pocket" (16), Ah Song never seems to have to work. As such, Ah Song is an embryonic "first-class" gambler, merely glimpsed at in Louis Chu, in Kim Ronyoung (the character Gilbert Lyu), and others. Despite these early "sightings," the racial metamorphosis from working- to first-class, from second- to first-rate, from weekend to professional, gamblers takes almost a century, the new crop springing full-grown from the millennial Asia, readily apparent in the Korean Wave, films and television serial dramas from South Korea popular in Asia and Asian diasporic communities, which formulaically features Korean stars at such exotic locations as the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, or Caesars Palace. The element of crisis is only suppressed, though, under the razzle-dazzle, erupting throughout the length of any TV drama. It is a cliché to mention that the Chinese phrase for "crisis" consists of two words: danger and opportunity, the change of which requires, of course, a gamble. With crisis or gamble in its very makeup, the part of the Korean Wave comprised of television series wins big with the Asian (diasporic) communities, but is virtually unknown to the mainstream American audience. The Asian minority and the Caucasian majority constellate into two parallel universes in leisure activities, if not at work. The main reason for such divergent reception is that notwithstanding its "first-class" glitz of stars and modern cityscape, Korean TV drama has never quite, insofar as the distribution and consumption is concerned, taken leave of the working-class gambling roots, which subliminally turns on the diasporic and turns off the mainstream viewers.

Most Korean TV series are distributed as cheaply-made VCDs with quality far inferior to DVDs. Negotiating the amorphous copyright laws in Asia and the nascent concept of intellectual property, VCDs, often pirated, allow the Korean Wave to swamp the Asian market in no time. For the Asian diasporic market, Korean TV dramas are unavailable anyway through standard channels of entertainment. Moreover, these VCDs carry the added cachet of subversiveness, circulated underground, so to speak, among fellow diasporic Asians beyond the normal circuit of American companies and movie

rentals, a guerrilla tactic that forks into the stars' "first-class" images (self-images really because of Asian faces and sentiments) on screen and into "working-class" trumping of the authorities in the diskettes' acquisition. Putting a shoddy Asian VCD into a shoddy Asia-manufactured player (it rarely plays smoothly on a high-quality DVD player) to watch at times fuzzy pictures with no chapter or language to choose from satisfies the Asian diaporic's trickster instinct, or the secret desire of beating the system in that this entertainment from home is well-nigh free. A sense of power is perversely derived from the sleight of hand in bypassing the laws and the mainstream tastes that dictate television programming. This ethnic pleasure is no different from the erstwhile practice of paper sons.

Rather than a complete switch, the intertwining of working- and first-class gamblers is the central motif in the 20-episode TV series *Hotelier*, broadcast in 2001.¹⁰ The series revolves around a Seoul hotel's struggle to stay afloat, headed by the manager Taejun Han (played by Seung-woo Kim) with the assistance of associate manager and his love interest Zhenyin Xu (Yun-ah Song). Repeatedly, the hotel fends off hostile takeover by the corporate raider, self-professed "hunter" Frank Shin (Yong-jun Bae) in the employ of an unscrupulous businessman Kim. An outstanding Harvard Business School graduate, Frank Shin has an exquisite sense of timing for bluffing and deception, which stands him in good stead in the financial battlefield, until he falls in love with Zhenyin at a Las Vegas hotel restaurant. Arriving from Seoul, Zhenyin is entrusted by the hotel staff to find and bring back Taejun, who is in self-exile after an incident three years ago when a nymphomaniac hotel guest accused him of attempted rape. The bulk of *Hotelier* soon turns into a contest between Taejun, erstwhile Vegas dishwasher, and Frank, riding on his winning streak across the U.S., over the hotel and the girl, the dual prizes for the contestants. Despite their lofty positions as hotel manager and corporate hunter, both Taejun and Frank are similarly flawed. Taejun has never quite shed his humble origin as a hotel bellhop, to the extent that he masochistically gives up Zhenyin to Frank and another admirer, Yunxi Kim (Hye-kyo Song), daughter to Frank's employer, to a younger man. Although winning the bid to salvage the hotel, Taejun loses both women due to subconscious self-abjection. Providing hotel services, Taejun exhibits the posture of a perpetual stoop, the forward tilt of his upper body suggesting an attitude poised to oblige. Hotel's success spells the hotelier's failure in his private life; making others happy is such a habit that Taejun twice sacrifices his love. A pun on his surname Han, Taejun embodies what some describe as the Korean national sentiment of *han*, regret or hate akin to the martyr or sacrificial victim mentality.

Opposite to the "giving" Taejun Han looms Frank Shin, impeccably dressed and groomed, ever so ready to "take." Yong-jun Bae who plays Frank has a masculine, powerful physique paired with a face of soft, curving, and almost androgynous lines, a yoking of masculinity and vulnerable sensitivity that has won Bae not only the leading role of *Winter Sonata* but also millions of female fans, especially in Japan where women

¹⁰ *Hotelier* is also the subject of investigation in Ma's *East-West Montage*. See chapter 8, "Tradition and/of Bastards in the Korean Wave."

see in him an alternative to stern-faced patriarchy. In addition, Bae's modern, Western look, including his reddish hair in *Winter Sonata*, seems forever "betrayed" by the stereotypical Korean eyes—smallish, epithanic, almond-shaped "slant" eyes—veiled behind designer glasses. This mix of Western modernity and traditional Asia appeals to Asian women, who yearn for having and eating the cake, for having a strong man who feels, and for being Western and Asian simultaneously. In the frenzy for cosmetic surgery in East Asia nowadays, Bae's resistance to the relatively simple procedure to acquire round, double-folded, Western-looking eyes further deepens the female fantasy over Bae being the best of both worlds and both sexes.

This doubleness of Bae's character Frank includes his working- and first-class entanglement. Frank assumes the façade of a ruthless, "big-game" hunter to mask a painful, "working-class" past: he, along with sister Jenny, are given up for adoption by an alcoholic widower-father. The post-Korean War history of international adoption has been so disparaged in public opinion that President Kim Dae Jun apologized to Korean adoptees in 1998 for this national shame of trading babies as commodity. Raised by a Christian pastor family in the U.S., Frank revolts against his Korean ancestry and Christian upbringing, becoming more capitalist than the capitalist America, turning his back on the motherland that abandoned him and looting corporations across his adoptive land that swallowed up his former identity. Notwithstanding his stylish suit and tie, cold and businesslike demeanor, Frank resembles Asian diasporic tricksters, those working-class gamblers, in his opportunistic angling for a win when both he and fellow blue-collar diasporics have long ago lost themselves in the transoceanic crossing. Jenny, separated from Frank since adoption, also demonstrates the inextricability of the two types of Asian gamblers. While Frank may have made it, sipping champagne high up at a Las Vegas hotel penthouse, Jenny is down on the streets, dogged by debts and thugs. Jenny is rescued from violence by an equally down-and-out Taejun, another of Hisaye Yamamoto's dish-washing, floor-scrubbing "Las Vegas Charley." Condensed in Vegas are the riches of the first world Frank indulges in and the low-skilled labor of the third world Taejun signifies. The compulsive gambling for these floating specters thus carries the dream of a rebirth. Dangling between wooden performance of a pretty face and understated minimalism, Bae exudes a charisma that goes beyond his female fans to symbolize the New Asia in the twenty-first century, shedding the colonial burden, wearing the halo of the miracle of the four mini-dragons and the ascent of the Pacific Rim. Frank Shin rises from a poor Korean childhood to a white-collar adulthood, yet he is no less of a hollow man. All the strategizing and high-stake speculations mask his inner void: passion for money in place of passion for true love; Western capitalism in place of motherland. To sum up, Frank epitomizes the core of the Korean Wave, pivoting on, concurrently, a transformation into Western modernity and a return to Asian "essence," which is when Zhenyín Xu comes in.

Zhenyín and Frank do not engage each other until episode 3, but Frank has quietly observed and grown enamored with her in episode 2. The second episode succinctly introduces Frank the corporate conjurer, who blackmails a jailed American hotel owner through the poker tactic of bluff. Based on a gambler's instinct, Frank pretends to have

secured the cooperation of the owner's chauffeur as the witness to his crime, hence coercing him to sell the hotel. A fine line separates bluffing from cheating. Given that bluffing seeks to deceive, it is usually justified by the context of game where players are fully cognizant of the possibility of falsehood. Bluffing could also be elevated into an enviable art form, as the universal trickster tradition testifies: Odysseus and Cyclops, Monkey King in China, the donkey-riding wise man Avanti from Xinjiang,¹¹ Ananzi the spider in African folktales, coyote in Navajo and other Native American tribes,¹² and more.¹³ In each of these tricksters, the power structure is so lopsided that the trickster has no chance of winning except through guile, thus redeeming cheating as a heroic trait. Between Frank and his antagonist in a prison jumpsuit, the power imbalance seems to favor Frank, whose bluff is in danger of lapsing into plain cheating. Seen through Asian eyes, however, Frank as one of "us" is applauded in subduing one of "them," the raging bull of a white male, his orange jumpsuit hinting at the criminality of Western hegemony. Frank even does this by mastering the master's language: at crucial moments, Bae mumbles some thickly-accented English phrases, quite strange in an Asian adoptee, Harvard graduate, and transnational finance wizard. His "speech defect" notwithstanding, Frank strikes a chord with Asian viewers because he personifies both West and East, both first-class carriage and working-class chameleonic audacity. Lapsing perhaps into an Occidental outstripping of the Occident, which is no different from Orientalist discourse in the West, the Korean Wave, nevertheless, seeks to (over)compensate for historical traumas and psychological inferiority, which is different from Orientalism.

Episode 2 then cuts from the prison scene to what feels like a victory helicopter ride above the night-blooming cereus of Las Vegas. A triumphant Frank Shin busies himself with his palm pilot, totally oblivious to the sea of lights outside the helicopter window. His headphone further detaches him from the surrounding. Sauntering from the airport to the waiting limousine, Frank displays the same regal insouciance vis-à-vis solicitous Caucasian valets. Zhenyin arrives on the heels of Frank, but her exhilaration at the Las Vegas Strip and her awe-struck expression at his white limousine diverges from Frank's indifference. Also at variance with Frank, Zhenyin enjoys the tourist view of the brightly-lit dancing fountain and photographs the night view and the hotel room layout for professional interest. The diasporic audience is doubly pleased as s/he identifies both with Frank the King descending upon Vegas and with Zhenyin the commoner in its midst. The drama quickly moves to the hotel restaurant, where Zhenyin loudly complains to the hotel manager about the poor food, utensils, and service, while Frank at the adjacent table is enthralled by her charming straightforwardness. Rude by Western standard in raising her voice and making a scene in public, Zhenyin exhibits a forthrightness that draws Frank to her, as the camera pans closer and zooms in on his entranced face, where a knowing smile, as if a smile of recognition of a long-lost friend, gradually blooms.

¹¹ The Chinese animation *Avanti* was produced by the Shanghai Movie Studio based on Xinjiang's Uighur folklore.

¹² Stith Thompson selects and annotates many such Native American tales on tricksters in *Tales of the North American Indians*.

¹³ See Peter Nazareth's *In the Trickster Tradition* for the trickster imageries in three novelists.

Melodramatic love at first sight, this dining room encounter, nevertheless, sets in motion Frank's return to an essentialized Koreanness, crystallized in Zhenyin's duality—assertive feistiness as a guest in Vegas and customer-always-right submissiveness as a hotelier in Seoul. (This echoes Taejun Han's aggressive managing of hotel and passivity in personal life.) Zhenyin's outburst comes, serendipitously, in reaction to Frank's casual remark to his associate Leo that "I love money now and [marriage] will wait till I fancy women." That one woman, whom Leo later surmises to be Korean for her fiery temperament, materializes miraculously. Zhenyin's parting shot at the hotel establishment is a rude awakening to the money-grubbing Frank. She flourishes the credit card to pay for the food and a single cent for the "teep" (tip). A paradox nestles at the heart of the Korean value of hospitality with which Zhenyin judges Vegas service and which the series proceeds to unfold in Seoul: emulation of Vegas opulence yet adherence to *cheng* (Korean heart-felt sincerity). That penny pokes fun at the poor service, or the lack of heart, within the urban extravaganza, a fitting metaphor for the dashing yet hollow Frank. Unbeknownst to Zhenyin, she initiates Frank's journey back to Korea to find himself and "Koreanness." By the series' end, when Taejun orchestrates their reunion, Frank whispers to a teary Zhenyin that he would stay "forever": an Asian adoptee has not only made it there but also made it home, in fiction if not in reality.

Throughout episode 2 set in Las Vegas, called *ducheng* or the gambling city in Chinese, not a single shot of casino or gambling is shown, only restaurants, hotel rooms, the Las Vegas Strip, Taejun's shabby trailer, and a street gang. One wonders if the adamant erasure of gamble is due to Korean TV censorship. In view of the business wrangling and high stakes in *Hotelier*, the erasure of actual casinos only accentuates the latency of gamble, even in episode 3 set in the Mojave Desert when Taejun drives Jenny and Zhenyin to Los Angeles to flee Jenny's creditors. A squabble breaks out between Zhenyin and Taejun still reluctant to return to Korea to rescue the hotel. A furious Zhenyin forces Taejun to stop and gets off. Taejun drives off in a fury, and he takes a bit too long before turning around his red convertible, for Zhenyin has been picked up meanwhile by Frank's limousine chancing by, where the two begin to know each other. The outcome of the two men's gamble in Seoul has already been decided by happenstance and luck in the Mojave Desert, what William L. Fox calls "the desert of desire" where some love blooms, others dry up.

Because the version of *Hotelier* I watched is Mandarin-dubbed, the voice of Yun-ah Song who plays Zhenyin is never heard except in such sequences as the English dialogue in the restaurant. Along with Song's genuine voice in English, one also notices more background noise and richer sound quality than the rest of the series when dubbing mutes not only performers' real voices but the soundtrack at large. This auditory trade-off is obviously one non-Korean viewer must decide whether to accept or reject. Yet dubbing is a fact of life in multilingual globalization, as I have just translated into English certain Mandarin-dubbed scenes originally delivered in Korean. Dubbing contributes to the dissemination of the Korean Wave in Asia long accustomed to dubbing due to the myriad linguistic communities. Western viewers are less inclined to take for granted the divorce of on-screen body and voice (mind), another reason for the sparse attention to the Korean

Wave. How exactly do the practices of dubbing and/or subtitling affect *Hotelier* and other TV series? How do the increasingly transnational, at least East Asian regional, production and distribution of Asian cinema with the cast, crew, financing, marketing strategy, and remake trend from China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and elsewhere shape the product and the culture? What role does the reception of multilingual and transnational audience play in the conceptualization and execution of Asian cinema? While physically removed from Asia, I compose under similar market constraints. Have I not selected episodes from *Hotelier* most accessible to English-speaking readers, such as scenes set in Las Vegas and in English? Is any given moment throughout the twenty episodes on the tug-of-war over the Seoul hotel less revealing than Las Vegas? Forever beachcombing for bottled messages from home, I choose to share with English-speakers those passages they tend to connect fairly easily, whereas the detritus left on the beach, like the Korean voices silenced, tell stories that escape me.

I have herein concentrated on Asian gamblers in Asian American literature and Asian cinema, crossing the boundaries between genres and geography. Beyond these specific representations of gamblers, Asian Diaspora as a voluntary scattering of oneself runs the risk that the dispersed seed may or may not put down roots and blossom. The next question to ask is whether there is something in Asian culture that predetermines Asian Diaspora's proclivity to gamble; the spotlight thus turns from American conditions back to Asia, especially to Macau boasting of the highest revenue from gambling in the world since 2006.¹⁴ Rather than a racialist, genetic interpretation of Asian compulsiveness, my argument from working- to first-class gamblers has suggested a cultural viewpoint hinging on the ambivalent desire of the Asian mimic man trying to catch up with Western modernity. Gaming and gaming tropes, including the Korean Wave's emplotment of gamble, enable the underdog of Asia and Asian Diaspora to envisage triumph and to release tension, at least for a while, until the next wave arrives from somewhere called home.

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¹⁴ Among other journalists, Gary Rivlin reports that Macau becomes "the world's largest gambling center" since 2006. See Rivlin's "Las Vegas Caters to Asia's High Rollers" in *New York Times*, June 13, 2007.

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ABSTRACT

When Asian Diaspora plays, it oftentimes comes to Las Vegas or any casino or venue with gaming devices. Las Vegas and the like provide the culmination of Asian Diaspora, which is, in essence, taking risks in casting oneself out of home and into the unfamiliar, a gamble in view of all the variables and pitfalls. The euphoria of possible winning is always haunted by the keen or repressed sense of loss over homeland, identity, or even youthful dream on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. The gaming motif in trans-Pacific literature and film, or in ethnic Asian American and Asian diasporic texts, ranges from the earliest wave of nineteenth-century Cantonese dreaming of striking it rich at the Gold Mountain (*Gumsan* for San Francisco or America more broadly), to the wave of war-time and postwar sojourners whose lifelong itinerary revolves around gambling houses, to a classic in the contemporary Korean Wave which opens and ends with Las Vegas, and finally to the reverse flow to the mushrooming, Vegas-affiliated casinos in the Macau Special Administration Region in Southern China.

Keywords: Asian diaspora, Las Vegas, gamble, Asian American

提要

當亞洲離散開演時，幾乎都在拉斯維加斯、賭場，或任何有賭博器具的地方上演。拉斯維加斯和諸如此類的地方提供了亞洲離散的大本營。這些地方根本上是冒險遠離家園，走向未知，一場充滿變數和險惡的賭博。縱然可能僥倖贏得賭博，狂喜之餘，卻總被一股強烈和壓抑的情感壟罩著，如對家的迷惘，身分認同，或甚至是年少時對太平洋另一端的憧憬。這種賭博的主題常出現在跨太平洋的文學和電影中，或是在亞美和華人離散的文本，此現象最早是從十九世紀從廣東一舉發掘金熱而遠到舊金山致富的熱潮開始。(金山就是指舊金山或是廣義的美國)，爾後到大戰期間，戰後旅居終其一生沉醉在賭場，一直到當代韓國風隨著拉斯維加斯開始和結束，而最後又反轉這股熱潮，反在中國南方澳門特區如雨後春筍般可見附屬拉斯維加斯的賭場。

關鍵詞：亞洲離散、拉斯維加斯、賭博、亞美

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