

MILA ZUO



vulgar beauty

ACTING CHINESE IN THE GLOBAL SENSORIUM

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THE GLOBAL SENSORIUM

MILA ZUO

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Tasting Vulgar Beauty

A young woman in a tight cheongsam saunters languidly past a handsome man in their shared apartment hallway, granting him a canted profile as she glances at him. His eyes glisten with interest. Later, when the man apologizes to her for a misunderstanding, he enters her apartment, bearing a wrapped gift. Arms folded, hips swaying, the woman feigns disinterest, a fatigued annoyance. She avoids eye contact, repeatedly pushing the man's hands away and saying *buyao* (I don't want it). Yet the familiarity she generates through impudent gestures, paired with a distinct vocal whine, drive him to insist. She finally accepts. In the next scene, when she is alone and unwrapping the package (a pair of sheer stockings), her glee confirms the speciousness of her earlier resistance. Mainland film star Zhang Ziyi, playing an escort, is vibrantly performing the Chinese flirtation style known as *sajiao* (unleashing tenderness) in Wong Kar-wai's sumptuous *2046* (2004).

Sajiao refers to the childish behavior, edging on tantrum-throwing, that women exhibit with their romantic, presumably male, partners. Acting like a spoiled child, the woman makes her demands through aggressively cute behavior, making it clear that her partner must dote on and attend to her. Constituting a behavior that could be described as vulgar, or what the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “lacking in refinement or good taste;

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uncultured, ill-bred,” particularly to cultural outsiders unfamiliar with it, sajiao enacts an overflow of desire encoded through demand.¹ As a vulgar grab for attention and legitimacy, sajiao exhibits a form of bad taste inasmuch as childish behavior is regarded as immature and unripened.

This scene in *2046* may baffle western audiences, even challenging models of feminism that might understand this sequence as a woman’s complicity in her own oppression through self-infantilization. What we overlook in such an assessment, however, is that such performativity constitutes a woman’s negotiation with entrenched, gendered power dynamics. It is a ludic act of seduction whereby one plays within a system of power, not to overthrow it but rather to exploit it, a process that resonates with Jean Baudrillard’s theory of seduction wherein “one can ‘play’ with networks, not in order to establish alternatives, but to discover their state of optimal functioning.”² With Baudrillard in mind, what interests me are the ways in which Bai Ling (played by Zhang), in unleashing tenderness, engages in a beauty act, whereby her seduction of Mr. Chow (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and of the viewer depends on stimulating moods, or the exploitation of affective-aesthetic agitation, for maximal attention.

Bai Ling’s tensile flexibility, in spite of the constricting tightness of her dress, is conveyed through her restless energy (lightly swaying shoulders and hips), refusals to hold Mr. Chow’s gaze (let alone his hand), and the way her head slackens like a floral pistil in a breeze (thereby giving us access to multiple, moving angles of her face). Such details become pervious bodily signals provoking response from both Chow and the spectator. Zhang’s corporealized boredom, the ways she keeps spilling out of stillness, in turn produces irritation in the viewer, an effect heightened by the film’s aural textures. Bai Ling’s theme song, Connie Francis’s haunting 1960 version of “Siboney,” originally a 1929 Cuban song by Ernesto Lecuona featuring echoing vocals and bongo drums, inflects Zhang’s body with piquant promises of foreign dislocation and exotic Latin sexuality. Through an assemblage of minor gestures, Zhang’s performance of dissatisfaction is an invitation to play a seduction game of artifice, appearance, and surface. Although Bai Ling’s beauty game arguably ends in loss as she falls into unrequited love with Mr. Chow, this segment nevertheless stands as the film’s most memorable sequence for unleashing volatile tenderness onto its spectator, beguiling us with temperamental outbursts. Indeed, the beauty aesthetic of sajiao, forged through stirring angles of Zhang’s moving face and body, grips our attention, as our eyes dance to her agitated

form. The turbulence of affect in these scenes indicates that beauty is not sedative, but rather comprising and evocative of undulating intensifications of excessive feeling. Appositely, Mr. Chow and Bai Ling's affair takes place during the Hong Kong communist-led protests of the late 1960s, a volatile historical backdrop that coincides with, and is allegorized through, the lovers' inflamed sexual affair (and it is worth noting that Mr. Chow is Hong Kongese and Bai Ling is from the mainland).³

What this sequence demonstrates is that beauty performativity, or the unleashing/acting out of feminine beauty through embodied behavior, engages in *worlding*, by which I refer to Donna J. Haraway's concept of "becoming with" wherein "partners do not precede their relating."⁴ In this way, partners are symbiotically coconstituted, becoming relative or kin through the *beauty encounter*, a concept I address shortly. Extending Haraway's concept of relationality, an ethics of making "a mess out of categories in the making of kin and kind," this book discovers a worlding that not only cosmologically reimagines nonhierarchical relations between objects and subjects, but also forges human community and belonging through such intimate encounters.⁵ The worldly beauty with which this project is concerned discovers the Chinese female body in assemblage with the vulgarity of other material objects, including clothing, foods, colors, atmospheres, and animals. Such assemblages generate new worlds by way of beauty's affective shocks.

As the above reveals, a beauty encounter describes an affective response to an aestheticized gesture or movement. Affect, which is "asocial" and "autonomic," as Brian Massumi informs us, can transmute into "perception of one's own vitality, one's sense of aliveness, of changeability."⁶ Following this moment of self-reflection, or "perception of this *self-perception*," we may turn our thoughts to others like us; affect can seed feelings of relation and kinship with other lives.⁷ In this book, I explore how beauty affects can in particular produce feelings of Chineseness, especially as they are provoked by mediated encounters with cinematized star beauty. What is more, I argue that global identity (racial, gendered, cultural) is imagined precisely through the affective sensorium, and should therefore be understood through *vulgarity*, which draws together material, aesthetic, and racialized conditions and significations. In this way, *Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium* offers a new theoretical framework for understanding the affective consumption of screen stardom and in particular, the racio-aesthetics (aesthetics that cannot be disassociated from racialization) of

performance. Departing from transcendental assessments and definitions of beauty, I deploy vulgarity as a critical methodology through which we can better understand beauty's materiality, its objecthood, and the ways in which we (as film spectators) consume beauty. This project challenges the ocular-centrism in film, visual studies, and western philosophy by demonstrating the centrality of one modality of vulgarity, that is, *taste* in the cinematic consumption of racialized-sexualized bodies, and demonstrates how flavor functions as a theoretical analytic. Flavor, from the Chinese concept *weidao*, enables us to examine the nonrepresentational qualities of cinema in conjunction with the ways in which sociocultural tastes are "cooked" into representation, becoming inextricable from, and absorbed into, our experience of on-screen figures. *Weidao* is a textural additive to the filmic engagement, one that operates phantasmatically as affective intensity and conscious feeling. As such, *Vulgar Beauty* thinks with and through the intimacies of tasting vulgarly beautiful bodies.

Star images circulate in visual economies as aspirational embodiments of lifestyle, conspicuous consumption, and gender and sexuality, positioning them as flavorful objects within cultural, national, racial, and global imaginaries. To this end, "acting Chinese" gestures to the fluid and slippery signifier of Chineseness, which is affectively renewed through embodied performativity. Such acts, which evoke flavor affects, in turn generate tastes and appetites for a sensorial formation of Chinese identity and feelings of belonging. If the body has a flavor, there thus remains the question of its edibility, which is historically situated—that is, shaped by cultural, political, and social axes that define the coordinates of race, gender, and sexuality. Crucially pointing out that there are the eaters (the white body) and the eaten (the Black body) in nineteenth-century literary productions, Kyla Wazana Tompkins notes that "the fantasy of a body's edibility does not mean the body will always go down smoothly."⁸ Meanwhile, Minh-Ha T. Pham uses the term "racial aftertastes" to describe the limitations of racial tolerance toward Asian style bloggers, noting the threatening quality of raciality that lingers upon a reluctant white palate.⁹ Tompkins's and Pham's work exposes the violence undergirding the eroticism of racial tasting and eating, a prominent motif in the following case studies of Chinese women in multicultural, transnational fantasies of sexual assimilation. Digestion of such figures depends upon the limits of racial and national toleration and the bounds of ideological-political sensibilities. Moreover, the enjoyment of beauty is not simply sweet. Like the complex palates of love and romance,

beauty routes us through the affective dimensions of not only the sweet, but also the “bad tastes” of the bitter, salty, pungent, and sour—the aesthetic-affective flavors that form the structure of this book.

Because of the prodigious and long-winded legacy of beauty in aesthetic theory, any study of beauty calls for spinning ideas and centripetal force in order to pull us closer to beauty’s elusive and slippery center. Within the forthcoming sections, we constellate and bring into orbit a creative skein of salient terms, keywords, and digressions including femme, flavor, seduction, shock, passion, charisma, and face in order to gravitate toward an open system of conceptual and cosmological possibilities of feminine beauty.¹⁰ In what follows, I examine the key terms of the book’s title, *Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium*, beginning with the notion of acting Chinese, before returning to a conceptualization of vulgar beauty and a flavorful theory for analyzing film and media performance within a global sensorium.

Acting Chinese: Seduction, Staring, and the Feminine

Like other immigrant, ethnic children growing up in the United States, I did not often encounter in dominant visual cultures persons whom I or my family members physically resembled. However, when on rare occasion I did see an Asian woman’s face on television, a blush of shame and fascination blanketed me, a cathexis wherein a libidinal attachment was forged through a longing for identification. Celine Parreñas Shimizu similarly describes the intense pleasures in viewing hypersexual representations of Asian women as “coexist[ing] with a terrible pain regarding racialized hypersexuality,” a realization that enables her to retool the “productive perversity” of such enjoyment to recuperate Asian/American women’s formation of “bad subjectivity” through performativity and representation.¹¹ Shimizu’s rehabilitation of perverse enjoyment permits minoritarian subjects to move beyond moralistic judgments of image making, as her work interrogates the entangled powers and pleasures of shame-in-identification. We can test the applicability of this concept with a sexist colonial fantasy like *The World of Suzie Wong* (Richard Quine, 1960), which Peter X. Feng suggests is one that Asian/Americans “love to love” because Nancy Kwan’s rupturing star performance exceeds the narrative’s efforts to contain and subjugate her character, the titular Hong Kong prostitute.¹² If ethnic self-love offers a fraught prospect, our love of stars like Kwan can nevertheless

become an externalized projection of loving ourselves, and loving (to love) Chinese/Asian/American women stars can offer a mediated stage wherein thwarted self-love transforms into transpersonal affection. As one negotiates one's own social position through a kind of nonreciprocal devotion to another, this can in turn nurture affective belonging to a global ethnic and racial community. The phrase "acting Chinese" therefore suggests intersubjective slippages between spectatorship and performance, and on- and off-screen bodies, in order to account for a mediated bodily contact within cinematic and televisual engagements.

Following and modifying David Palumbo-Liu's example, I employ the slash in Chinese/Asian/American to denote the uncertain status of "Chinese," "Asian," and "American," which mark each of these categories as unstable and always-becoming in the context of global visual cultures.¹³ Although Palumbo-Liu interrogates the "dynamic, unsettled" assimilation of Asians in the United States, I find that the slash is particularly useful when discussing transnational and immigrant stars who frequently travel to live and work in multiple countries (including the United States), and whose identities suggest the split, sliding, and flexible nature of their global citizenship. On other occasions, I suspend the slash with regard to Asian American stars based primarily in the United States, in order to situate and localize my concerns around the marked racialization of Chinese and Asians within a distinct American context. The critical term "acting Chinese" lets me draw together these two groups, as it signifies the performative, contingent, and nonessentializing nature of Chineseness, which concerns a global, transnational identity. Moreover, as "acting" connotes the slipperiness and instability of the sign "Chinese," it also foregrounds the pressures under which Chinese women negotiate their public performativity under a persistent state of gendered, sexualized, and racialized uncertainty and contingency within trans-national contexts.

Within the mode of acting Chinese, *Vulgar Beauty* in particular re-thinks femme heterooperformativity, defining "femme" as apparently consenting to conventional, stereotypical, and even normative beauty image making. Femme is not about sexual allure *per se*, but rather a ludic play with coded appearances and their significations. Femme can destabilize, if not subvert, heterosexist, phallocentric order through feigned complicity. Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh offer an apt description that also returns us to Zhang's bored performance in *2046*: "Fem(me) is put on, a put-on, fetish production at the hands of subject becoming object, becoming fetish, while always retaining a sense of the performance, always amused

yet (here is the challenge, the gauntlet she throws down) possibly *bored* by its effects.”¹⁴ The seduction that interests me therefore cannot be regarded as subversion or resistance in toto. Instead, it must be understood as the reversibility of power through the appearance and disappearance of signs, outside the realm of law *qua* production. Baudrillard writes, “Seduction does not consist of a simple appearance, nor a pure absence, but the eclipse of a presence,” noting that “absence here seduces presence.”¹⁵ Seduction is the play of appearances and signs, which is to say that rather than aiming to reveal meaning, truth, or reality, it engages in an “aesthetics of disappearance.”¹⁶ Seduction is interested in seducing the real through a mode of nonlinguistic artifice, not in service of constructing a stable subject, but only to persist as seduction. The acts of vulgar beauty by femme stars, like Zhang’s performance of *sajiao*, may therefore exhibit an apparent apathy toward autonomy, agency, subjectivity, and desire, foregoing such tokens of liberation insofar as the acquisition of such objects is geared toward accumulative production, a capital formation of subjectivity premised upon transparency, visibility, and proliferation. In relation to the threatening femme fatale, who, as Mary Ann Doane notes, overrepresents the body “because she is attributed with a body which is itself given agency independently of consciousness,” the femme star’s superficial embodiment (just the right amount of body and beauty) appears to placate masculine anxiety through acquiescence to the gaze.¹⁷ This tractability, however, belies the complex force fields of meaning and affect that reside in the aesthetic encounter between women spectators and women’s screen bodies, an engagement that is always already an understanding of feminine glamour as deception, or rather as a Baudrillardian seduction that “lies in the transformation of things into pure appearances.”¹⁸ Seduction erupts through the nonspaces of the visible, wherein affective surplus and agitation are discharged through the interplay between presence and absence. Moreover, although feminine seduction cannot be produced, in the aforementioned sense of productive or capital subjectivity, filmic beauty is coproduced, not only through cosmetic transformation but also through cinematic technique and the luminescent majesty of screen projection. Through the parallels between feminine beauty and film, film reveals itself to be a mode of beauty and a dis-appearing seduction.

It can also be said that cinema beckons a different regard of stars; star-gazing elicits a different look than what Laura Mulvey famously characterized as the “male gaze,” which is situated and emplotted in films that reinforce male/active and female/passive roles.¹⁹ It would be more apt to

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say that stardom, an amplification of the actor as mythic and exceptional, engages the eye through an incitement to stare and an intensification of the gaze—although not always, as I contend, toward the direction of voyeuristic mastery. Stardom, or what we could call *staredom*, replicates the medium of cinema, which encourages continuous looking through the persistence of vision and the illusion of relentless continuity. Insofar as film stars appear to invite staring as a perfectly acceptable mode via such a look (whereas in everyday contexts, staring is often regarded as unmannerly and rude), this provocation (seeing without being seen) only increases the star's disarming possession of charm, a term to which we later attend. Nevertheless, whereas the gaze connotes mastery, as 1970s feminist and apparatus theory inform us, staring produces both power and powerlessness in the beholder. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains in regard to the stares received by differently abled and other nonnormative bodies, staring can create apertures that enable deeper contact between two subjects, as staring is an act that seeks and attains knowledge and higher learning.²⁰ When one party is unable to stare back, and permission to stare is always already operationally permitted by the apparatus, the unrequited stare enhances the sense that voyeurism is enabled by the generosity of the star—a gift bestowed. Moreover, when one encounters something novel, the impulse to stare intensifies. Due to underexposure and underrepresentation, racial beauties can elicit such staring, which can also take the form of curious gawking, and accompanied by a looking away in embarrassment, or perhaps a tentative look askance.

Nevertheless, since seduction “removes something from the order of the visible,” the more one stares at a seductive image, the less one knows about it.²¹ A project of staring at the Chinese femme therefore grapples with the ways in which she unsettles dominant modes of seeing and knowing. With this in mind, Rey Chow, Anne Anlin Cheng, and Olivia Khoo all address the centrality of Chinese female bodies in cultural constitutions of nationhood, modernity, gender, and race.²² Chow, for example, remarks on the ways in which the production of the modern Chinese subject resounds in the interstices of western theory and Chinese tradition, erupting most graphically through the representational problems of Chinese femininity. For Chow, the feminine detail, located throughout the works of modern fiction writers like Lu Xun, Ba Jin, Mao Dun, and Eileen Chang, reveals the crisis point within transparent, narrative, and unified attempts to construct nationhood. This literary detail is a type of feminine ornamentation and what Chow refers to as a “cinematic blowing up,” deploying negative

affect and acting destructively upon the idealistic, moralistic notions of humanity that ground modern ideological rhetoric.²³ It is the fetishistic attention paid to the detail that can redirect our attention to the small, the minor, and the overlooked, which opens onto new worlds of meaning and inhabitance. A “cinematic blowing up” of feminine detail in particular opens onto a sensual worldliness that is always incomplete and in the making, and it is, as we will see, via the feminine through which we may glimpse this unfinished, nontotalizing world. Expanding upon such reflections of the feminine detail, not as observation by typically male authors but rather as women’s performance, I observe how film beauty takes form in corporeal details and what I refer to as “minor acts,” those micro and macro expressions of the face and body that edge along the performative and the natural: eyes tearing, skin perspiring, smiles cracking, fingers pointing, legs waddling, to name a few. Related to Erin Manning’s conceptual “minor gesture,” which attends to the ways nonneurotypical minor gesture can produce “germs of experience in-forming, opening the act to its potential,” the “minor act” can similarly be thought of as the non/volitional movements of the performing, on-screen body that graze new possibilities of being.²⁴ Limning the boundary between the performative and the biological, such acts glimpse the sensual curvature of feminine signs, splintering away and disappearing into the horizon as soon as they are perceived. Such acts of beauty are located in their vanishing, which underscores the ephemeral (non)basis of their subject making.

As I have suggested thus far, staring at Chinese femme stars is not a process of gaining mastery, even as its apparent fixity and fetishization may suggest otherwise. Not only does staring destabilize power relations, it can allow us to engage in a practice of noticing how the minor opens onto new definitions of Chineseness. The concept of acting Chinese is also therefore a refrain or a rephrasing of the problems of Chineseness as an open signifier, a discussion beginning with Ien Ang, Allen Chun, Chow, and others in the 1990s.²⁵ Chow, for instance, elaborates upon the selfsame split within the performativity of Chineseness by reflecting upon the modern formation of Chinese subjectivity fractured by technologies of visuality (and film in particular) into seeing and being seen: “National self-consciousness is thus not only a matter of watching ‘China’ being represented on the screen; it is, more precisely, watching oneself—as a film, as a spectacle, as something always already watched.”²⁶ If for Chow it is the feminine detail that brings readers of modern Chinese literature to the limits of intellectual thinking, it is in her treatment of Fifth Generation cinema the “ethnic

detail” that marks China’s fascination with “its own datedness, its own alterity.”²⁷ Where Chow interprets women in Fifth Generation cinema as the invention of the primitive—China’s internal other—in order to sustain such visual fascination, *Vulgar Beauty* demonstrates how women stars, often recognizing themselves as Chinese representatives on a global screen, act Chinese as subjunctive self-stylization that exceeds language, nation, and culture. Doing so through agitational, vulgar acts of beauty constitutes a refusal of meaning, even as it generates novel styles of being. It is not only that seeing Chinese stars is for the Chinese-identifying spectator “watching oneself—as a film, as a spectacle, as something always already watched.” Rather, the jouissance of this experience lies in the elusiveness of seeing the act of seeing oneself, as well as fantasizing about others seeing us seeing ourselves as a validating act. This narcissistic process is revealed when we feel and express pride in our imagined community, but it is also flavored by the ways ethnic subjects are barred from self-love because of the disparaged status of nonwhite race and ethnicity in white society. Reframing Chow to account for the objectifying processes of racialization, Cheng interrogates the double bind of “the yellow woman” who is perceived as “someone too aestheticized to suffer injury but so aestheticized that she invites injury.”²⁸ Acting Chinese therefore accounts for the hall of mirrors involved in regarding oneself as what Cheng terms an “aesthetic being.” Cheng however rethinks the possibilities of objecthood, or “synthetic personhood,” and augments Chow’s earlier remarks about watching oneself with an observation of enjoyment: “Watching the object allows us to enjoy the fantasy of being objects.”²⁹ In other words, the ways in which Asiatic femininity slides into objectness, what Cheng refers to as “ornamentalism,” can enable pleasures found outside of exclusionary, violent, and colonial conceptions of the human. I examine this possibility in chapter 2, when Maggie Cheung plays “herself” (the Hong Kong film star) and becomes-latex in the French film *Irma Vep* (Olivier Assayas, 1996). Through her elastic, superficial accommodations of French erotic desire, Cheung remains cryptic and unknowable, a preservational racial condition I conceptualize as “salty-cool.” Cheung demonstrates through performances of racial deference and gentility how disavowals of subjectivity allow the Chinese femme to deflect acts of racism by retreating into object seductions.

Because of the complexities of the signifier “Chinese” and its multivalent meanings in relation to geopolitical territories, languages, and cultures (“Chinese” can refer to people who live in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore, in addition to Chinese diasporic and mixed-race

individuals in other parts of the world), “acting Chinese” recedes further into an abstract fantasy of being (Chineseness), rather than fulfilling an indexical function. A Hong Kong or Taiwanese actor may act Chinese in a way that differs meaningfully from a Chinese mainlander, in deliberate and unintended ways. For example, the duplicitous performances of Chineseness by Taiwanese stars Shu Qi and Vivian Hsu under the monolithic mythology of One China in cross-strait romance films directed by mainland male directors, even as the myth of the unified Chinese state looms over such texts, threatening to eclipse such performances as the real star of the show. As we see in chapter 4, Hsu’s embodiment of aboriginal Taiwanese beauty and her performances of cute aggression soften and defer the question of hard-line Chinese politics while Shu’s minor acts of hesitation betray a Taiwanese refusal to unify with China. Such acts of refusal and waiting reveal the multidimensionality of performing Chineseness, not only appealing to diverse taste cultures, but also in revealing screen performance as deferral and postponement. Screen acting, because it is recorded well before it is seen by audiences, is always conceptually elsewhere and later and simultaneously here and now, a kind of quantum entanglement. Acting Chinese in particular discloses this always-already mode of simultaneity *and* displacement and delay (a spooky action at a distance)—for other places and times—as its phenomenal fantasy resides in the ticklish elisions of subjectivity.

Beauty and the Vulgar: Moving Images and Shocks

Acting Chinese is a deixis both in the sense that Chineseness points to multivalent geopolitical, cultural, and linguistic contexts, and insofar as screen acting points to action that has occurred elsewhere and earlier. Nevertheless, acting Chinese also affectively hails its subjects into feeling Chinese; as the Chinese femme film performer slides into objectness, the Chinese-identifying spectator drifts into a shared kinship with the performer, affectively sparked. So, to return to affect, what role does beauty play in this interpellation of the feeling of one’s own “vitality” and “aliveness”? We are always caught off guard by beauty, its breathtaking effect perforating our mundane rhythms. In this way, beauty throws us into small crisis, and the ways in which it startles us into being are crucial for subject formation. For Cheng, beauty “as a phenomenon calls into being in the viewer an instantaneous, complex process of identification, disidentification, projection, and rejection.” It is a project of self-making,

as there “can be no untouched, discrete ‘self’ contemplating a beauty without; the experience of beauty has always already called that ‘self’ into profound relation with beauty.”³⁰ However, where Cheng in particular addresses the woman of color who is interpellated into selfhood through beauty, Elaine Scarry, via Iris Murdoch, describes a universal beholder of beauty who does not return to the self but who indeed “unselfs” and who is decentered in an encounter with beauty.³¹ Furthermore, based upon an analogy between beauty’s formal symmetry and distributive justice or equality, Scarry argues that because we strive to reproduce beauty, we also seek to redress the imbalance of inequality and unfairness, which movement toward justice she describes as a weight or lever. Scarry writes, “In the absence of its counterpart, one term of an analogy actively calls out for its missing fellow; it presses on us to bring its counterpart into existence, acts as a lever in the direction of justice.”³² Because justice and equality are challenged in several of the historical backdrops explored throughout *Vulgar Beauty*, which begins in reform-era China and moves concentrically forward in time and outwardly to present-day western multicultural spaces, the types of beauty with which this project is concerned arouse, agitate, destabilize, and even offend their spectators—even as they unself the viewer and call out for justice. As I demonstrate, to feel Chinese involves an unselfing in our encounter with the star, which in turn facilitates a sense of self that recognizes a communal identity within what I call the *global sensorium*, a sensorial and sensuous participation in events and communities that may include but also exceed frameworks of nationality.

Although one can argue that many of the stars addressed here embody normative and ideal beauty conventions (in terms of both Chinese beauty traditions and western racial exotica), I am not interested in cataloging beauty features, but rather in asking how beauty gesticulates. That is, I am not concerned with taxonomies of physical beauty that have become *sensus communis* or, if you will, *sensus vulgaris*. Rather, I am interested in rethinking the apparent superficiality of beauty to reframe it through its gestural expression and its capacity to move in and through particular spaces. I am interested in face and body work in terms of its affective labors, and what Elena del Río refers to as the “elusive force of [a] body” that “thinks without thinking.”³³ By analyzing beauty as kinesthesia, we approach beauty as fluid and unstable motion, rather than as a static object or as a still image.

Enter the moving image.

Only by recognizing the conjunctions and alignments between the shocks of feminine beauty and the shocks of cinema as an affective medium can we attend to the phenomenologically remarkable qualities in the mediated consumption of women film stars. Indeed, the spectacular appeal of the early “cinema of attractions” provoked a series of visual shocks, which in turn prompted uncanny, anxious, and agitating sensations.³⁴ Vivian Sobchack elaborates upon the astonishment at the new technological ability to showcase movement, noting that the spectator’s gasps “at this sudden ‘presencing’ are not only inspirational, but also inspirational—an intake of existential *breath* and an intake of existential *breadth*.³⁵ With regard to feminine beauty, the screen inflates, amplifies, and mythologizes human beauty by light and scalar augmentation. Photographed in ephemeral light, women’s beauty becomes mythical, spatial, and virtual.³⁶

Cinema’s spectacularization of feminine beauty not only animates these crises of identification, but through agitation it also beautifies the spectator’s desiring look. The beholder of beauty, in their surrender to the beauty image, merges with the spectacle and becomes with the beautiful. Film beauty is a grand matter; it is *breathtaking* and *brea(d)th-giving*. Think about the way the eyes dilate, the face softens, and blood flows when we see someone we like. Our features round, our body yields to the other. Nevertheless, beauty, similar to technological modernities like the cinema, flirts with disaster and produces fundamental ambivalence in its beholders. As we will see, every star bursts onto the screen and scene promising unexpected fleshed ecstasy and, like early cinema itself, produces a shocking new flavor.

The Bland and the Flavorful

I would shake out the most beautiful cotton candy, and it wouldn’t be white, either. It would be a color I couldn’t even imagine.... And the flavor certainly would not be a sugary taste, but would be a sweetness that had never existed before. It would be better... No, I couldn’t imagine what it would be better than.

—Can Xue, “Cotton Candy”

In contrast with the Cartesian mind-body split, Chinese somatic knowledge proceeds from ancient, cosmological mind-body holism. This concept of the mind-body has inflected various body cultures and aesthetic understandings, from mundane practices of eating and sexuality to the

spectacular experiences of art, beauty, and film.³⁷ Whereas western medicine privileges etiology, anatomy, and scientific diagnosis, Chinese medicine centers on the sensual experiences of the lived body. Through analyses of the correlations between consumable herbs and wellness, Judith Farquhar characterizes the body as understood by Chinese medicine as a “flavorful temporal formation.”³⁸ That is, the herbal, organic flavors of Chinese medicine and medicinal meals correspond with physiological-biological changes in the body, as “flavors not only generate a fleeting aesthetic response” but also “produce bodily changes that generate experience at a more lasting level.”³⁹ Rather than examining the aesthetic responses embedded in flavor, *Vulgar Beauty* conceptualizes flavors of aesthetic encounter with mediated bodies. Inspired by the five Chinese medicinal flavors (bitter, salty, pungent, sweet, and sour) and their bodily manifestations, I develop an original framework that draws upon the concept of flavor as a capacious material substance that traverses literal and metaphorical significations. In other words, in turning to flavor as a way to understand beauty, I theorize beauty as something of the other that is tasted, consumed, and digested in order to arrive at the extra/sensorial dimensions of aesthetic difference, and to examine the matter of beauty—its vulgarity.

Before turning to the distinction, irregularity, and shock of flavorful beauty, we should first address the prominent role of the bland in Chinese aesthetic tradition. The aesthetics of the bland predate and foreshadow Baudrillardian seduction wherein the intended outcome is not termination qua acquisition, but rather to indefinitely extend its activity, its *conatus*. François Jullien tracks the concept of “blandness” as the highest aesthetic ideal in Chinese aesthetic philosophy throughout Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, describing the ways in which *dan* (blandness) does not seek to seduce through sensuality but rather to intimate an inexhaustible potentiality in infinitude. In contrast to the bland, “[individual] flavors disappoint even as they attract” since they persuade the “passerby merely to ‘stop,’ [and] lure without fulfilling their promise.”⁴⁰ Flavor here is a metaphor for a broad aesthetic or style. The bland, meanwhile, by combining all the flavors, represents the ways in which “the strongest presence is conveyed in the greatest reserve”; that is, by encompassing all flavors, it lacks any distinct flavor. It suggests plenitude as it recedes.⁴¹ The neutrality of blandness gestures to the infinite possibilities not outwardly expressed; thus, one of the highest manifestations of the bland aesthetic exists in the fading sound of a musical note, whereby a lingering tone rejoins an anterior, undifferentiated cosmology at the boundary between emergence and

loss. In one example, Jullien offers Tang poet Li Bo's verse about a singing and dancing woman who is wrapped in "filmy robes of gauze," a feminine beauty perceived in material and aural assemblage: "A light breeze carries the songs into emptiness: / The melody entwines itself with the passing clouds and flies off."⁴² The woman's beauty, conveyed through movement, song, and breeze, transmutes into atmosphere and ephemerality before ascending toward loss, a kind of bland potentiality. Similarly, in Can Xue's surreal short story "Cotton Candy," a child becomes obsessed with an old cotton candy vendor after she discovers that she cannot taste the candy. Its blandness provokes in her a deep desire to supplant the vendor, whose "breath and body both smelled sour," and whose words, if not the candy, the narrator is able to taste. Never tasting the sweetness of the candy, the narrator experiences an unrelinquishable pining toward this object, spurring her to imagine "a sweetness that had never existed before."⁴³ Since this thought is immediately followed by a rumination that she "couldn't imagine what it would be better than," Can Xue observes that the narrator's pleasure is located in the attempt to imagine the unimaginable. This analogously recalls the elusive process of "watching oneself—as a film, as a spectacle, as something always already watched," another pleasurable walk up to the thresholds of the thinkable.

The bland therefore delivers us to a contemplative practice that removes us from reality. The metaphysical properties of the bland prompt reflections of a transcendental infinitude, while individual flavors satiate and stop the imaginative process. Whereas blandness is Oneness and inclusion of all (what western philosophers refer to as immanence), flavor excludes by privileging one quality as distinctly exceptional. Jullien, interchangeably referring to quality and flavor, also describes physiognomy as flavor incarnating through the physical body: "All inner qualities [or flavors] possess their unique signs through which they recognizably manifest themselves in the world: through comportment, attitude, countenance, and even the more general aspect of the face, voice, or the expression conveyed in a look."⁴⁴ Jullien equates quality with flavor because both belong to terrestrial, earthly matters. Moreover, Jullien regards beauty as flavor, rather than as blandness, and suggests that beauty constitutes a terminal point. For Jullien, beauty does not reach into lingering realms of invisibility; it does not recede. Rather, "beauty 'dumbfounds,' 'terrifies,' grasps and ravishes in an instant, but it does not give rise to the sense of savor which 'flattens and fades' and so leads through a continuous process, to the 'flavour beyond flavour' (*wei wai wei*); or to the 'vague' or the 'thin' (here

and there dispersed) that leads to the ‘landscape beyond the landscape’ (*jīng wài jīng*).⁴⁵ In other words, beauty is for Jullien flavorful and terminal, its shock too instantaneous, short lasting, and unsustainable to hold great aesthetic value.

I take departure from Jullien by arguing that not only does beauty hold great aesthetic value, but that this value derives precisely from its instantaneous, short-lasting, and unsustainable terrestrial nature, or what I wish to characterize as its vulgarity. Jullien’s interpretation of Chinese aesthetic theory falls short in its underestimation of the material aspects of beauty, even as it recognizes them. This can be seen in his consideration of Li Bo’s poem, where Jullien conveys the notion that the aforementioned material and aural assemblage of feminine beauty generates an aperture into the lingering transcendental beyond of loss (flavor beyond flavor), before later stating that beauty is also a terminal point (full of flavor, but not a flavor beyond flavor). While this analysis contains delicate nuances and clashes between the flavorful, the full of flavor, and the flavor beyond flavor, it also betrays Chinese aesthetic theory’s ambivalence toward feminine beauty, the embodied nature of which it professes to acknowledge, even as it denies it. It is the underestimation of the embodied nature of female beauty that I wish to rethink and rehabilitate. For if, in relation to passion and charisma, feminine beauty has a long-standing history of being both celebrated and disparaged not only in Chinese aesthetic theory but also in western philosophy, embodied female beauty (and embodied beauty in general) nonetheless possesses a material power that enlivens, and which materiality we have already defined as vulgar. As earlier discussed, the vulgar “lacks good taste; [is] uncultured, ill-bred.” However, it also provides beauty with new forces with which to dilate and distend nonvisual realms of sense and feeling. Indeed, we will stay with the terrifying and ravishing moment of beauty in order to make sense of its vulgar flavors and their worldly, terrestrial consequences.

In this way, it is timely to recuperate and rethink the “vulgar”—a word that appears repeatedly throughout aesthetic theory and philosophy to tacitly denote the undesirable, unwanted, common, and bad—not least to sunder the canonical criteria of beauty itself, which are exploited to debase and exclude nonwhite, nonwestern, lower- and working-class, and (dis)abled bodies. As Asian American historians observe, the Chinese body has long been associated with vulgarity in western societies.⁴⁶ From distorted stories and images of depraved Chinese bachelors, infected Chinese prostitutes, and the dirty opium dens of Chinatown through to twenty-first-century concerns over

hordes of Chinese immigrants and the pandemic-causing, virally loaded Chinese body, the Chinese person is persistently associated with that which is “uncultured, ill-bred”: amorality, disease, contamination, contagion, and pollution. On the other end of racial hygienics, the Chinese are also associated with techno-orientalist tropes, or what Stephen Hong Sohn refers to as the threatening “Alien/Asian” or the unfeeling, hyperadvanced, and disembodied cyborgs who remain perpetual alien others in the west.⁴⁷ The Chinese body therefore has often been characterized as abject within western culture.⁴⁸ Thus if vulgarity stains and makes ugly the Chinese within ethnonationalist constructions, then we must also bring it forward in our orbital movement around the (extra)terrestrially beautiful.

Methodologically, vulgarity also aligns us with new ways of knowing beyond dominant, masterful epistemologies. Academic connotations of “going low,” introduced through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s influential notion of “weak” or “reparative” theory, offer a methodological alternative to paranoid, phobic, and suspicious hermeneutics that favor negative affects. Sedgwick recognizes the possibilities of vulgarity in reparative theory when she refers to camp as a “variety of reparative practices” and, in particular, “the ‘over’-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste, or leftover products.”⁴⁹ My turn to the pleasurable overattachments to waste, for example, resides in a kind of sour ressentiment whereby the racial subject overperforms narcissistic self-love through loving her bodily waste (her vaginal secretions, her shit), in order to rescue her body from social disavowal—as we will see with vulgar comedian Ali Wong in chapter 5. Such evocative waste, rendered into abject comedy, creates pleasures for inspiring existential breath and breadth, abiding by comic rhythms and delivering punchlines in order to create communal in/exhalations of laughter.

To persist with waste, G. W. F. Hegel writes that “we only smell what’s wasting away, tasting by destroying.”⁵⁰ In other words, taste succumbs to time, and vulgar flavor in particular marks putrefaction, rot, and disappearance. Vulgarity thus marks a particular passage of time. Returning to Farquhar’s notion of the Chinese medical body as a “flavorful temporal formation,” vulgarity marks the embodiment of time’s decay, its movement toward death, and the destructiveness of life. In terms of this project, it is vital to rescue a vulgar beauty that demands a different taste *palate* and *palette*, as taste and vision are synesthetically conjoined in film spectatorship. Racialized bitterness, envy, pain, and anger can vivify new aesthetics into being, even as they act (femme) fatally and destructively. Moreover, such animated feelings threaten the aesthetic order in the west, where I suggest



that the attention economy primarily favors, in a perverse and unauthorized appropriation of Jullien, bland (white) mainstream beauty, which is neither irregular nor shocking in its overwhelming and constant ubiquity.

If vulgar beauty lies primarily at the margins of mainstream attention, it nevertheless does make vulgar grabs for it, as demonstrated through numerous examples in this book. We could also equate these vulgar grabs for recognition to the constitutively evicted abject who must nevertheless assert the desirability of the interior, particularly in racial terms and particularly as it is cast in outsider and/or criminal roles. Our turn to racial abjection recalls Chow's reading of ethnic abjection, in which narcissism becomes a "transindividual issue of attachment and belonging" when marginalized groups like Asian Americans are prohibited from loving their Asian Americanness, precisely because their ethnicity is associated with the pathological.⁵¹ It is an emergent paradox then that vulgar beauty must steal attention, a criminal act that serves to undermine the abject status of the Asian/American. As vulgar beauty is a property stolen, we explore its connections with lawlessness and the underworld in chapters 2 and 3, where respectively I discuss Joan Chen's illicit Cold War plots in David Lynch and Mark Frost's television series *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990–91), and Bai Ling's role as an incestuous femme fatale in Alex Proyas's neo-noir film *The Crow* (1994). In these examples, the powers of such beauty yield to corrosive but generative aesthetics. The crisis provoked by vulgarity is that it comes from the wound that is minoritarian suffering, but it also has the ability to wound, its disturbing effects reminding us that difference is often coded as undesirable and indigestible.

Tasting Beauty Flavors

When explaining his decision to cast Gong Li in his debut film, *Hong gao liang* (*Red Sorghum*, 1987), Fifth Generation Chinese director Zhang Yimou stated that she was chosen because of her evocative *weidao*.⁵² A common polysemous phrase, "weidao" (味道) bears two primary, everyday usages. First, the English word closest to *weidao* is "flavor," commonly used to refer to the scent, smell, or taste of food and drink. Second, it also refers to the style or presentation of a person, object, or environment. There is no English equivalent to this secondary usage, although "flavor" comes closest with its multiple significations across discourses of gustation, olfaction, and aesthetics. Eluding a concrete or fixed definition, *weidao* denotes a

fluid, contextual, and subjective process. As a phrase, *weidao* gestures to internal processes of imagination, judgment, and taste, as one assimilates objects through empirical encounter. *Weidao* is composed of the words *wei* (taste, smell, odor, delicacy) and *dao* (path, road, street, method, way), a combination of words that implicitly suggests a methodology through what Cartesian epistemologies characterize as lower, vulgar senses in contrast to the higher senses of vision and hearing.⁵³ According to Kantian tradition, while the distal eyes and ears perceive beauty, other sensory organs can only perceive pleasant, agreeable, or enjoyable sensations, and therefore cannot access the moral or virtuous modes of contemplation associated with beauty. As Carolyn Korsmeyer observes, taste in the western tradition “perceives neither objects of beauty nor works of art.”⁵⁴ However, Chinese epistemologies follow another genealogical account of sense making whereby tasting and eating provide foundational understandings of beauty.

Chinese etymological conceptions of beauty, 美 (consisting of the words “ram” and “large” in vertical formation) are tethered to notions of food and eating (the ram is large and is therefore tasty/beautiful) and reinforce taste as a mode of perceiving beauty.⁵⁵ Li Zehou points out that, similar to the German *geschmack* and the English word “taste,” the Chinese etymology of “beauty” indicates that “early experiences of beauty, whether based upon practical utility or moral goodness, were inseparable from the sensory pleasure associated with taste, sound, and color.”⁵⁶ In contrast with the Kantian regard of pleasure as degraded, uncontemplative comfort, *weidao* as sensory pleasure was directly connected to beauty as a moral education. Such notions of eating beauty extend as well to notions of gender and sexuality, as contemporary Chinese vernacular attaches metaphors of taste to desirable bodies. For example, young women are “tender” (*nennü*), while older women are “ripe” (*shunü*); young effeminate male stars are “little fresh meat” (*xiao xianrou*), and an erotic desire for the strange and unconventional is referred to as a “strong appetite” (*zhong kouwei*). Beauty and sexuality are thus sensed holistically through the tongue, nostrils, and stomach.⁵⁷

Nondistal senses, including taste, reveal intimacies that radically break down the distinction between subject and object. Nicola Perullo, linking film and taste in his analysis of food, identifies how, for Gilles Deleuze, cinema provides a “vivid and direct relationship with objects” before then suggesting that “this is even truer with taste, where there is a tight and very

personal relationship between subject and object, a bond where the object is consumed in the body in order to sustain or transform the subject.”⁵⁸ Not only does tasting thus succor and alter the subject by incorporation of the food object, but, Perullo also notes, “I can derive enjoyment from being in a beautiful and hence satisfactory situation (for example, I am in the company of the person I am in love with) in such a way that the taste of the sandwich is completely charged with my amorous energy.”⁵⁹ If, for Perullo, love is an example of beauty, I wish to reverse his argument and suggest that beauty evokes love, and that this has a material basis, permeating atmospherically and transforming taste. Thinking in associative reciprocity, taste also transmutes into beauty affects.

If beauty is a *feeling* of taste, how do we ground our critical inquiry in the tangible and observable? To put the problem differently, if one of the objections to the study of beauty is that it is all a matter of subjective taste, then perhaps an inquiry into taste and its affective-aesthetic implications is in order. Eating with a loved one may infuse food with “amorous energy”; however, insofar as love feelings are complex, colorful, and manifold, an analysis of love’s affects requires closer, thicker description in order to avoid reproducing what Eugenie Brinkema, in criticizing affect studies, describes as “the same model of vague shuddering intensity.”⁶⁰ Thinking beyond the shudder requires us to draw upon epistemological traditions of embodiment and aesthetics outside of continental philosophy, necessitating inquiry into what Jullien refers to as the “unthought” of European philosophy and reason’s prejudices by facilitating intracultural epistemological rendezvous.⁶¹ Such promiscuous cross-cultural encounters can generate new lines of flight in cultural studies. Weidao as an embodied, sensed quality offers new and vital understandings of our consumption of on-screen bodies, the sustenance of star cultures, and the ways in which social tastes, habits, and politics wrap around public figures in performative, affective, and sensational ways. As a charismatic and excessive modality, flavor/weidao minimizes the distance between subject and object while maintaining the alterity of “difference.” If, as Jullien states, flavors “lure without fulfilling their promise,” weidao can be said to be a form of embodied allure.⁶²

Using the cosmological aspects of Chinese elemental thinking, not as objects of historical or anthropological concern but rather as a methodological/theoretical frame for analysis, we can differentially and meaningfully apprehend aesthetics and embodiment through epistemologies relevant to the formations of China (and Asia by proxy and influence).⁶³ We could, for instance, apply as a classificatory system the related traditional cosmology

of Wuxing (Five Elements or Five Phases), which is based upon the notion that the world is composed of water, wood, fire, earth, and metal, positing that the manifold manifestations of these elements reveal the cyclical and interactional correspondences between cosmic movement, elements, odors, tastes, colors, tones, seasons, and directions. Within the realm of traditional Chinese medicine, elemental thinking identifies linkages between the body's inner processes and changes in the material world. The boundary between interior and exterior is previous and even illusory. For example, a bitter taste in the mouth denotes a disturbance of the element wood in one's body, which is internally related to nerves and locomotion, and externally related to the season of spring, the direction of east, and the period of dawn. Such connections account for the development of forms, systems, and events as interconnected aspects of a holographic paradigm, whereby each part reflects the whole, and all movements or phases are part of a continual cosmic unfolding. In a similar vein, *Vulgar Beauty* reveals how flavor affective-aesthetics, in addition to their embodied, performative expressions, are laterally related to properties like viscosity, dosage, temperature, texture, duration, atmosphere, and rhythm. In other words, *Vulgar Beauty* provides us with a *cosmoaesthetics* that draws together qualia and objects in order to analyze the entangled assemblages of the beauty experience. A principle of classical Daoist thought is that the world is harmonious and unified in totalizing ways; elements are both material and semiotic, taken as both literal and expansively interpretative and abstract. Taking a cue from this exegetic model, this book finds generative the critical slide between different analytical registers when discussing flavor/weidao, and it is precisely that the semiological and metaphorical are coproduced alongside the literal and material that we pursue such shifts. As such, this book is itself an assemblage of texts and palimpsests that foreground the unstable and volatile interconnectedness between language and matter, and between objects and events.

Indeed, this book's methodology pursues a logic of deconstruction insofar as it assembles an eclectic array of unstable terms and concepts, in order to reveal the collisions within, erasure of, and transformative becoming of language and their effects on the minoritarian subject. By so doing, we unsettle the universalist and static grounds upon which western philosophy approaches Being and, by extension, matters of identity. Rather than rehearsing Jacques Derrida or Judith Butler here, however, I wish to draw upon nonwestern theorizations of deconstruction. Arguing that Chinese philosophy was always already deconstructionist, Byung-Chul Han describes

Chinese thought as that which “does not trace essence or origin, but rather the changeable constellations of things (pragmata).”⁶⁴ Han thus traces the notion of *quan* (the weight on a sliding-weight scale) across various Chinese terms, including human rights (*renquan*), tactical course of action (*quan yi zhi ji*), and power (*quan li*) in order to demonstrate how Chinese thought believes that “power belongs not to subjectivity but to situativity.”⁶⁵ That is, one’s position ought always to remain mutable in order to achieve (counter) balance, like the sliding weight on a scale. Applying this approach to theory, one eschews dogmatic or faithful reproductions of philosophical masters and opts for sliding, even messy, interactions between philosophical, vernacular, casual, and cosmological concepts—“*gravitation* is replaced by *situation*.”⁶⁶ For this project, I wish to emphasize Chineseness itself as a kind of *quan* that is processual and multiple, precisely to distinguish it from how it has historically been and is continually enframed within racist, colonialist western discourse. As such, the present study creates and pursues a theoretical engagement with stars and texts that models the ways in which, as I will argue, such texts persistently wrestle and negotiate with Eurocentric and American systems of language and knowledge through play, subversion, or conformity. Simply put, there is no existing framework within western thought and philosophy with which to approach Chinese beauty without a kind of recommitment to the very mechanisms of subject-object binarisms that subjugate the Chinese woman. Therefore, a new kind of (nonwesternized) deconstructive theory around identity grapples with the textures of linguistic indeterminacy as well as attending to ontoethical concerns within different cosmological orders.

By pursuing a kind of Chinese deconstruction such as Han describes, one perhaps more aptly called “decreation,” one rejects notions of originality, authenticity, and inviolable truth, and can thus generate transformative thought. Indeed, Han points to the gazelessness, fakery (*shanzhai*), and destructiveness of Chinese aesthetics. Following Han, the deconstructive work of this book is to offer a model of sliding critiques to reveal the processual projects of intertextual and intersubjective viewing and reading, which are themselves acts of drifting, tracing, and echoing inside the fullness of erasure, emptiness, and darkness. In this way, I hope that the reader will enjoy the slippery, even if occasionally turbulent, ride through various analytical registers from the material to the metaphorical, and from the philosophical to the vernacular and cosmological. Indeed, it is via the messy velocities of intertextual encounter that the reader (and spectator) makes sense of palimpsestic acts of interpretation and becoming. As this

book reveals, the sensorium ecstatically “interrupts,” to borrow Christina A. León’s term for minoritarian deconstruction, the Platonic grounds upon which epistemology asserts universality and static objects of study.⁶⁷

To reiterate, I am not suggesting that we directly, uncritically apply Chinese elemental or cosmological claims to film analysis. Nor is this project interested in recuperating what Michel Foucault terms a “subjugated knowledge” as a better or truer episteme to, and against, the powerful currents of western skepticism, strong theory, and scientific epistemologies.⁶⁸ Nor do I intend to essentialize or authenticate Chineseness. Furthermore, the historicization of cosmological knowledges within Chinese society and civilization also lies outside the scope of this project. Nevertheless, *Vulgar Beauty* finds generative the methodological impulse within Chinese cosmology and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) that seeks to explain correspondences between subjects, objects, and phenomena.⁶⁹ A cosmological approach is attuned to the conditions of possibility whereby such belief systems constitute a common sense that shapes the structural ways in which Chinese audiences encounter visual culture—especially considering the ubiquity of TCM clinics, herbal pharmacies, and vernacular folk knowledge in urban and rural Chinese and Chinese diasporic communities.

An understanding of beauty wherein the recuperation of vulgarity and the lower sensorium emerge as privileged domains of knowing, thereby shifting the register of beauty away from the visual and toward the sensual, is also crucial in decentering and decolonizing western thought. As such, I pursue a reparative theory of tasting beauty that reveals the ways in which mediated Chinese bodies produce new sensational and affective spectatorial positions, as understood through what I term “abject epistemologies,” which, unless they happen specifically to be the object of study, are often ejected from hegemonic western knowledges via paranoid hermeneutics. Through the medium of weidao, this book offers a model through which we bypass ocular-centric post/colonialist subject-object relations and power dynamics by highlighting the ways in which taste, scent, and flavor draw bodies into coiled entanglements.

Indeed, our comprehension of the holistic, synesthetic responses within the spectatorial process is deepened by understanding olfactory and gustatory imaginations. Just as 1960s cinephiles described themselves as being “bitten by the cinema,” spectators also bite back at the screen, attempting to synesthetically taste what they see.⁷⁰ In unintended agreement with traditional Chinese epistemologies, film philosophers like Vivian

Sobchack, Laura U. Marks, Elena del Río, and Jennifer M. Barker demonstrate in their phenomenological inquiries that cross-sensory synesthesia and haptic visuality define the carnal experiences of film spectatorship—that is, we touch, taste, and smell in addition to seeing and hearing a film, imaginatively consuming cinema with all our senses.⁷¹ Cinematic bodies are archives of flavor-feeling through which global Chinese audiences become cathected to mediating beauty acts and interpellated into the affective labors of identity. As a diasporic Chinese/Asian/American woman wherein I am the visitor to and beholder of screen beauty, I feel the fibrous pull of these images of femininity, the soft tug of racial, ethnic, and gendered recognition, and the beckoning magnetism of their seductive charisma.

We desire to be embraced by beauty, that is, to be held by its splints, the invisible phenomenal structures that spark and then ascend our attention toward it. As with cinema, much has also been written about beauty's powerful ability to capture and to captivate. When people speak of an actor's presence, they refer to a magnetic attunement to her affective energies, which offers the possibility of unseating us from our own preoccupations, anxieties, and neuroses. Beauty's seductive powers are inexhaustible, if we are to understand, after Baudrillard, that seduction is not accumulative or additive, but rather "removes something from the order of the visible."⁷² Therefore, one cannot gorge or overdose on beauty, as it always withdraws from view, as was suggested earlier when we discussed Jullien's notion of the bland that recedes (and which I conversely apply to flavorful beauty). To borrow from Graham Harman, beauty is a withdrawn object that nevertheless possesses a "cloud of gaseous qualities that *are* present."⁷³ Therefore one cannot become sick from exposure to too much beauty. Nevertheless, beauty has been abandoned by many cultural theorists because it bears a stain, carrying patriarchal consumer capital's residues as a signifying catchall too global to mean anything. Even as we are reluctant to identify it, beauty is still perceived as a suspect object, a dubious property that harms and injures by reproducing embodied inequalities.⁷⁴ However, attempts to destroy or deconstruct beauty ideals fail to recognize the accretive force of beauty's circulation in visual realms; a more salient political project of unthinking and deterritorializing conventional beauty involves a committed attunement to beauty in Other forms, including in its vulgar (and grotesque and indecent) expressions. Embedded in representations of feminine beauty is always already a charge, an accusation of inequity, exclusion, oppression, and illusion—a lack on the precipice of exposure,

a humiliation lurking around the corner. Yet, in understanding beauty as the corruption of a stable system of meaning making, we are reminded of Theodor W. Adorno's words that "every work of art is an uncommitted crime," possessing the capacity to violate convention and law.⁷⁵ Just as vulgar Chinese beauty is associated with the criminal underworld, it also contravenes the boundaries of common sense, delivers enlivening shocks to the body, and edges toward the thresholds of the visible and of thought. Therefore, while the risks of beauty are well documented, we ought also to consider the spellbinding rewards of beauty's transgressions, its corrupting and criminal aspirations—even if its crimes are uncommitted.

Beauty is not a finite resource, nor is it a zero-sum contest; one person's beauty does not deprive another's possession of the coveted property. Therefore, this book is not concerned with the trouble that beauty has caused (although when we discuss the western objectification of Asian bodies, this too becomes an unavoidable subject); rather, this project makes the argument that we have not troubled beauty enough—that is to say, in taking beauty now not as *sensus communis* but as *sensus vulgaris*, we take it for granted as something that does not require critical interrogation. The fault lies not with beauty but rather with our inability to recognize or admit it beyond conventional, categorical, and (white) western definitions. Relatedly, a focus on beauty's oppressive power can overlook the ways in which its beholders enjoy, desire, and take pleasure in their capitulation to beauty, a point repeated in psychoanalytic observations that the gaze does not seek to master or overpower its object, an idea that in turn is echoed in Deleuzian feminist arguments regarding the pleasures of submission, as examined further in chapters 2 and 3. Massumi reminds us that "force is not to be confused with power. Force arrives from outside to break constraints and open new vistas. Power builds walls."⁷⁶ By distinguishing force from power, Massumi suggests an alternative to strong theory and pessimistic accounts of power, punishment, and control. Although Foucauldian approaches and texts critiquing beauty's powerful inequities are crucially valuable, even paranoiacally incontrovertible, this project invests in different sets of questions. How do we make cultural sense of the forces of beauty? How does feminine beauty navigate space by modeling hospitality? What forms of mutual sociality are enabled between beauty's possessors and beholders? How does beauty service and subvert politico-ideological projects like tolerance, multiculturalism, neocolonialism, and work? How does screen beauty generate a space of becoming between formations of desire and love? How does beauty as affect shape our engagements with



gender, race, sexuality, and nationality? Situating these questions within the global sensorium requires flexible geopolitics, productive confusions of local and global, and an undogmatic pursuit of sense making through the unruliness of touch, smell, and taste.

Hungry Passions and Charismatic Presence

Although many can attest to the ways in which the sight of beauty arouses passion, Kant insists that we must be wholly indifferent and disinterested in order to make a judgment about beauty, which he believes to be an absolute and unchanging Platonic object.⁷⁷ In less austere accounts, beauty is taken as a capricious and undeserved accident, and we are reluctant to raise it to the status of event, or that which shocks us such that common sense is shattered. However, even if there is no apparent logic to explain beauty's seeming uneven, unequal dispersals across bodies, it does not mean that beauty is a-signifying or meaningless. Indeed, beauty understood as *sensus vulgaris* not only shatters common sense/*sensus communis*, but it also reorients the sensorium such that the lower senses (taste, smell, touch) shift to dominance, and through their proximal dissolutions of subject and object, insist upon embodied interest and intimacy. Beauty is a relational affect, a force that we can relate to charisma, which enacts impassioned desire.

Indeed, for Nietzsche, charisma provides the means by which one seeks to "drag victim[s] down with the weight" of the stupidity of one's passions; it is explosive material and energetic form through which its possessor exerts his or her desire upon others. Exalting the *Übermensch*, Nietzsche writes, "Great men, like great epochs, are explosive material in whom tremendous energy has been accumulated."⁷⁸ History is therefore dictated by the strength of a few individuals' desires, the most felt, the most legibly expressed of the human (read white, European, male) group. Thus, as Charles Lindholm explains, "the claim made by Nietzsche is simply that if desire is all that exists, then let desire be gargantuan, and may the more powerfully passionate devour the world to fill their insatiable appetites."⁷⁹ While this vision of charismatic desire is not so much prescriptive (how does one inflate one's desire?) as a subjunctive extolment of ruthless wish, the important point to appreciate here is that desire plays a significant role in our understanding of charisma (the more a person wants, the bigger his or her charismatic expression). However, while desire is entangled with charisma, the latter is always circumscribed

by expectations of gender and race, as Lindholm admits when he confesses that “the study of charismatic women is a task [he has] not been able to undertake,” restricting his study of destructive charisma to three white males (Adolf Hitler, Charles Manson, and Jim Jones).⁸⁰ Indeed, if women are relegated largely to being the elusive object of pursuit and are discouraged from exerting their desire and want upon others, how do we make sense of feminine charisma? In particular, as we think of the ways in which women film stars generate on-screen charisma as an active, persistent, and grand force, then cinematic stardom and projection reveal scalar enhancement of charisma, and hence a monstrous appetite. Moreover, what of racialized charisma, whose materiality arguably incarnates through formal and aesthetic difference?

In contrast with Nietzsche’s appetitive passion, Amber Jamilla Musser uses “hunger” to explain how insatiable appetite becomes part of the ongoing projects of racialized self-making, describing brown *jouissance* as a “fleshy mixture of self-production, insatiability, joy, and pain.”⁸¹ As beauty is one such hungry project of self-making, one always seeks to put oneself in its path. If, as contemporary internet slang suggests, we “hunger” or “thirst” for selfhood and attention from others, then perhaps we might also become expansive in our taste for different flavors. Because it does not “go down smoothly,” racial beauty possesses a compulsive animacy and an energetic weight that beckons its beholder into volatile interaction. In contrast to the stupid drag of Nietzsche’s passion, can racial beauty thus stand as an ethical, com-passionate counterweight or, to recall Scarry and Han, a lever with which to balance (quan) appetites for white beauty?

In the following chapters, then, unconventional vulgar beauty compels our hungry passions not only through haptic vision, but also through taste, scent, and voice. If bodily beauty is immanent, or folded into a singular plane of existence, then we can mobilize new materialist frameworks to further comprehend its ontological status in the world. Such a task prompts theorizations of beauty that reckon with emerging conceptualizations of (post)humanist ontologies and matter. Appositely, Mel Y. Chen has, among others, drawn attention to the ways in which we situate objects, things, animals, and people within biopolitical animacy scales.⁸² For Chen, animacy is itself “a specific kind of affective and material construct that is not only non-neutral in relation to animals, humans, and living and dead things, but is shaped by race and sexuality.”⁸³ Beauty occupies a contradictory position on animacy scales because it is often perceived as a passive and inert object, even as it animates its beholder (as mentioned, hearts palpitate, eyes dilate

and enlarge, while eccrine glands secrete). Nevertheless, if we regard beauty as a kind of Nietzschean energetic material, with the capacity to shock, explode, and generate a shattering event, or as an accident, unselfing, disaster, or a criminal transgression, then a critical engagement with beauty's matter must also grapple with the biopolitical implications of beauty's affective detonation in cultural spheres—particularly when one accounts for racialized beauty. Indeed, questions of beauty must also engage with the animacies of racialized embodiment. As Sianne Ngai observes, the Asian stereotype is one that is “silent, inexpressive, and, like Bartleby, emotionally inscrutable,” while other racially and ethnically marked American subjects are characterized by what she calls “animatedness,” or hyperemotional expressivity qua physical, bodily exaggeration.⁸⁴ Whereas the Black body produces “overscrutable” gestural surplus in American representation, the Asian body is stoically reserved, demonstrating an economy of movement wherein no gesticulation is without its overdetermined meaning, even as its meaning is nevertheless underscored as inscrutable. However, as Vivian L. Huang observes, “the judgment of something inscrutable alerts us to the dawning articulation of a new form.”⁸⁵ Thus, the inscrutable is not *devoid* of meaning but rather pregnant with plenitude, bringing inscrutability into meaningful proximity with Baudrillard’s seduction, Jullien’s blandness, and what I am here describing as vulgar beauty.

Pursuant to the possibilities of inscrutability, we can attend to the fact that Asian/Americans have long been portrayed as underanimated and cunning in western cinemas, regurgitating Fu Manchu and Dragon Lady stereotypes since its advent. Let us peer, for example, at the moment when Anna May Wong, the first Chinese American star in Hollywood, appears onscreen as the vengefully murderous Princess Ling Moy, daughter of Fu Manchu, in one of her most memorable films, *Daughter of the Dragon* (Lloyd Corrigan, 1931). After the advertised “celebrated Oriental dancer” finishes one of her stage performances, Wong appears in an arched recess in a white wall, adorned in a heavy metallic silver dress and matching headpiece. An off-screen man, whose shadow appears on the wall adjacent to her, compliments her: “You are incomparable, superb!” In a medium shot, Wong slowly pivots her face, giving the camera a three-quarter profile, which has been readied with a coy smirk before her swivel. In contrast with Zhang Ziyi’s slackened pose in *2046*, Wong’s body is taut with tension and calculation. Her smile, lips tightened across her teeth, expends no surplus energy in communicating her delight in the man’s praise, and

her oversignified, minimally expressive body is frugal in its prohibition of kinesthetic waste. The slow velocity of her head turn indicates her hyperawareness that the headpiece she dons, a fanlike object with dangling silver chains, hyperbolizes her feminine gesture, inflates the detail, and visually exaggerates what Cheng refers to as an ornamental personhood.⁸⁶ Framed within an oval cutout, Wong's body is inscribed as a picture within a picture, a cinematic *trompe l'oeil* that signifies Ling Moy's suspicious character, as well as the racialized, decorative circumscriptions that accentuate her exotic appeal.

Such prudent economies of body language indicate the ways in which the Asian female body in western cinemas carefully negotiates public space through deanimated constraint, so that its vulgar excess is contained. Adorned in platinum, Wong is restrained into a pose of inscrutable charm, rather than expressing a hungry charisma. As forces that engage and manage attention, the intelligence of mundane charm resides in knowing when to recede. In performing inscrutability, or blandness, Wong demonstrates that "plenitude is all the greater for its refusal to show itself."⁸⁷ But while charm can be pleasing, calming, or even possessing a palliative effect, it lacks the insistent intensity of charisma.⁸⁸ Indeed, charisma is vulgar precisely because it insists rather than coerces, and, much like the example of *sajiao* that we discussed at the start of this introduction, it makes a forceful appeal, not least because it is particularly effeminized and childish in its mode of attention grabbing. Of course, the magnificent specimens of human beauty that we regard as stars possess both charm and charisma, the ability to impress and imprint themselves, pressing or overwhelming their presence upon the beholder. By this token, Wong is not without charisma. But whereas charm pulls pleasant, smiling feelings from its recipient, charisma elicits a multitude of affects and reactions, including negative and, after Ngai, "ugly feelings." Unlike charm, charismatic power also operates as a repellent, and understanding charisma as a form of vulgar beauty is one of the critical moves in this book, especially because we often fail to recognize it as such—a failure that is paradoxical, since the relentlessness of charisma insists upon the possessor's unremitting presence. All the same, this often unrecognized presence helps me to suggest that Asian feminine charisma, especially in western racial contexts, often takes circuitous, undetected, or indirect paths, generating furtive and unexpected affective and aesthetic engagements, as I indicate throughout *Vulgar Beauty*.

Giving Good Face

The face resists possession, resists my powers.

—Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

While feminine charisma can take deviant or “ugly” forms, narrative films work hard to capitalize on the presence of the star actor. Screen beauty is analogous to the close-up and to the face itself, which Deleuze describes as the “affection-image,” conveying power and quality through “the compound affect of desire and of astonishment—which gives it life—and the turning aside of faces in the open, in the flesh.”⁸⁹ As Doane observes, “The face, more than any other bodily part, is for the other. It is the most articulate sector of the body, but it is mute without the other’s reading.”⁹⁰ However, the Chinese face, articulated through epidermal, muscular, and osteological difference in a white western context, contains another kind of legible muteness that requires a reading practice (via the circuitous, undetected, or indirect paths mentioned above) attendant to the shocks of its dissemblance from underexposure. The reading of a Chinese face in such a situation is always already a misreading because of the visual legacies of discrimination and stereotype. Therefore, encountering nonwhite faces prompts a persistent confrontation and negotiation with misrecognition.

In order to contend with such misrecognition, we could briefly consider other physiognomic hermeneutics, for instance the traditional Chinese practice of *mian xiang* (face reading)—even as its musings are typically relegated in the west to the degraded, abject epistemologies of “new age” thought. We do this not in order to systematically explain spirit through facial sign, but in order to better understand a Chinese cosmoaesthetics whereby physical human form incarnates earthly desire and becomes the means by which one becomes worldly as a terrestrial social being. Cheng, referencing Gottfried Semper, reminds us that the Greek *kosmos* meant both “decoration” and “world order,” drawing together “cosmetics” and “cosmology.” Therefore, “ornament aims to align itself with cosmic laws,” for instance, remapping space along directional paths.⁹¹ To propose a fantastic reconciliation of this understanding with Chinese face reading, beauty as a surface ornament materializes to attract people with whom the beauty bearer has karmic business. Beauty incarnates in flesh so that its possessor (and its affected viewer) can learn the lessons and consequences of its material appearance.

While it is taboo in the west to speak about the mechanics of physiognomy, we nonetheless exercise and implement physiognomic preferences all the time. Moreover, if in the west “beauty” carries a stain, “physiognomy” bears an even more incriminating stigma because of its historical ties to racist eugenics. All the same, western philosophies on “the face” as a broad concept have motivated thinkers to address the significance of faciality in the formation of an ethical engagement with the Other, most notably Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of the face-to-face encounter that instantiates an ethical and relational reckoning with the Other’s irreducible difference.⁹² While this unspecified face prompts ethical and moral conduct, however, the beautiful face is for Levinas superficially trivial and only “skin deep”—pure exteriority. Giving the example of a building’s façade, for instance, Levinas contends that its essence of beauty is only “indifference, cold splendor, and silence.”⁹³ Giving a beautiful face, however, has greater implications beyond “indifference, cold splendor, and silence.” Indeed, the vernacular phrase “giving good face,” for which Madonna credits Rita Hayworth in “Vogue” (1990), reflects upon the animated, lively labors of expression. Referring to a particular type of what Erving Goffman terms “face-work,” “giving good face” suggests the responsive reciprocity of the face-as-surface, its ability to accommodate its beholder’s desires.⁹⁴ Meanwhile, in the Chinese vernacular, to give or to save *mianzi* (face) acknowledges what Goffman refers to as “the traffic rules of social interaction” and constitutes a long-standing cultural tradition that makes sense of social-ethical engagements through facial encounter.⁹⁵ Rather than abiding by good traffic rules, however, face-giving in the following case studies more often than not projects enigma, inscrutability, and charismatic disturbance, qualities that bring to the fore social instabilities—thereby linking cosmetics to cosmology (“world dis/order”).

For Richard Dyer, stars “articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society.”⁹⁶ As such, the study of stars compels us to interrogate the divisions between private and public self-making, and the consumption of other selves. In this book, stars are treated as intertextual intersections of race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and nationality. I read stars not only as sociocultural projections of desire and un/belonging, but also as authors whose gestures, affects, and charisma impress upon us vast appetites and desires through which we examine and construct our own, even as we hold dubious space toward what Dyer refers to as “the insistent question of ‘really’”—that is, our engagement with the construction

of stars makes plain our commonsense skepticisms toward notions of authenticity and essentialism.

Vulgar Beauty endorses the notion that star beauty is a call to which we feel compelled to respond, an attempt to forge relationality with and through corporeal form. Star faces are thus always “for us” in a conventional narrative film, and we know this because feminine beauty is always already discovered by the camera (invention under the guise of discovery), as flattering lighting is already in place when the camera casts its look upon the star’s face, signaling beauty’s tautology. Such a shot, in which the face is photographed in high-key lighting, surfaces what are often the taut pillars of high cheekbones and luminous eyes (we might here refer to Wong Kar-wai’s lighting of Maggie Cheung’s beautifully wide, high cheekbones—talk about being held by beauty’s splints!). It implicitly exposes cinema’s seemingly innocent belief in love at first sight. However, our screen propinquity is crucially defined not by a mutual g(r)aze, but by frustrated eye contact and a concomitant lack of mutual contact with our beloved stars. Indeed, the impossibility of eye contact sustains cinema’s unquenchable jouissance. Screen beauty is always already an incomplete project, then, an indefatigable pursuit of mutuality and relationality. We persistently stare at performers because we know they can and will never look at us. Thus the return gaze becomes *objet petit a*, the Lacanian impossible object of desire never attained or, in other words, the Barthesian punctum, the out-of-frame “blind field” that endlessly replenishes the lure that draws our desire beyond the margins of visuality. As such, the prohibitive aspect of stargazing demands that we engage with other senses and sensibilities with which to apprehend our intimately estranged relationship with stars.

Despite the lure that operates from beyond the field of vision, stars’ luminescent bodies phenomenologically center a film’s specular focus and attention. Even when they are photographed at the margins of the screen, their bodies magnetize our eyelines to the frame’s edges and sidelines, making us aware of cinema’s aesthetic constraints. Possessing charismatic luminescence, star bodies set a bio-aesthetic rhythm within a film, provoking wakefulness amid the otherwise slumbering, dreamlike qualities of cinema. In other words, when a star “lights up the screen,” we feel awakened by her presence, just as morning light is our circadian cue to rise.

Five Minor Spices

Each instantiation of vulgar, flavorful beauty as affect thus offers a wakeful interruption, a rupture, and a minor shock to the major chord. In this way, beauty's flavors correlate with what Deleuze refers to as "style," or "managing to stammer in one's own language."⁹⁷ Nevertheless, to perceive beauty, particularly in bodily manifestation, is to interpret it in assemblage, a synchronicity correlated with possibilities of becoming. Therefore, it is not just that we stare at the beautiful star's face and body on display; we also simultaneously ingest her binding clothing, the insects buzzing around, the food she prepares, the nocturnal rain and glass architecture surrounding her body, and the wind in the trees—all of which animate the body-in-assemblage and atmosphere. Beauty is cosmological and world making, participating in the production of undifferentiated ecologies. Accordingly, this book demonstrates how the Chinese feminine is a cinematic invention invested in dislocating, relocating, and repopulating Chineseness throughout the world by generating imagined encounters with minor acts (performative gestures, coproduced by cinematic technique, which heighten parasensualities between spectator and performer). Adapting global optics of inquiry with regard to Chinese women stars in the contemporary era, spanning the post-Mao 1980s until the present, this book addresses national, cultural, racial, and gendered formations and (mis)recognition of flavorful beauty. Whereas Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese stars serve a national myth-making function in Chinese and Sinophone cinemas, Chinese beauty exported to the west becomes racialized, thereby acquiring scents of alterity under different systems of signification. Racial beauty in particular operates as a minor mode, a confrontation, a stammering within the major—and it is for all such promising criminal aspirations that we should interrogate it.

Still, despite clarifications around beauty's affect and force, or what I refer to as beauty's flavor/weidao, beauty can still feel like an empty signifier suggesting abstract Venusian qualities of love and vague sensations of pleasure—or what Sigmund Freud referred to as beauty's "peculiar, mildly intoxicating quality."⁹⁸ As weidao becomes the governing principle to address beauty as feeling in form, the book is accordingly organized around the five flavors of Chinese medicine as modalities of vulgar beauty: bitter, salty, pungent, sweet, and sour. Just as different flavors are used to address various health concerns in TCM, so do aesthetic flavors function as cultural medicine, attempts both to diagnose and to treat

psychic ills and dis-eases within collective, public atmospheres. However, as Steven Shaviro points out, “any theory of beauty is always inadequate to its examples.”⁹⁹ As such, I begin each chapter with a personal encounter that introduces my selection of global stars and texts, objects of intimate negotiation through which I theorize vulgar Chinese femininity from the purview of a diasporic Chinese/Asian/American woman spectator. As feminist and queer scholars demonstrate, the narration of one’s experiences becomes a vital and ethical means of theorizing and historicizing formations of subjectivity.¹⁰⁰ After Ann Cvetkovich, curating my “archive of feelings” involves gleaning popular culture images in order to sensually cull an intimately strange directory of bodies, gestures, and acts from the global sensorium.¹⁰¹

Chapter 1 begins with the first post-Mao international film star, Gong Li, and the medicinal volatilities of embittered beauty. During the late 1980s through the 1990s, Gong’s bitter performances in Chinese cinema envisioned a new, feeling China and the birth of an era of wounded, bleeding nationalism. Gong sensualized Chinese pain for worldwide consumption, demonstrating the transnational mobility of indigestible flavors and the lure of wounded Chinese femininity. Cosmological rereadings of Nietzschean and Deleuzian theories of passion, bad conscience, guilt, and ressentiment anchor close readings of Gong’s films *Red Sorghum* and *Hannibal Rising* (Peter Webber, 2007), as the chapter traces a shift from the porosity of leaky, postsocialist Chinese bodies to western envisionings of erotic suffering through the tasty, but indigestible, Chinese body.

Chapter 2 pursues saltiness as a postbitter disavowal (“a grain of salt”) that exalts existing flavor. Following from salt’s “immigrant” materiality, as it must be imported into the body, the chapter focuses on transnational Chinese/American stars Maggie Cheung and Joan Chen, who play enigmatic-exotic love interests for white, western men during the 1990s era of liberal tolerance. While narratively demonstrating the desirous mechanics of sexual assimilation, the actors also perform minor acts of deflection, drawing out salt’s cooling properties as a racial technique that enacts self-preservation as the object of salty (envy-laden) desire. Jungian alchemical-psychological accounts of salt explaining how matter matters, together with considerations of proper dosage, illuminate the tempered racial ambivalences in *Irma Vep* and *Twin Peaks*, cultural texts focused on aesthetic reconsolidations of national identity through multiculturalism.

Chapter 3 further elaborates upon the affective-aesthetics of tolerance, whereby the hot, intense flavor of pungency transgresses subjective

boundaries and forces communalities. Constituting an undesirable atmosphere, the pungent body becomes a vexing fulcrum in dramas of Derridean “hostpitality,” whereby the act of welcoming a stranger into one’s home is tempered by hostility. Yet being unwelcome does not preclude a sexual invitation extended to Chinese/American women to participate in cinematic fantasies of racial cosmopolitanisms and imperial collaboration. In *The Crow and Lust, Caution* (Ang Lee, 2007), the reluctant birth of tolerance arrives at the expense of the Chinese femme’s spectacular death. The pungent aesthetic emerges as a mode through which to manage anxiety and risk, and environments of discipline are constructed to contain the pungent body’s atmospheres. However, unwelcome guests Bai Ling and Tang Wei, once in the door, reveal the limits of tolerance by enabling glimpses into the anxious death drive that undergirds liberal and colonial atmospheres.

Chapter 4 interrogates the soft power of sweetness, specifically the national politics of the People’s Republic’s One China policy as imagined through heteronormative romance. China is fantasized as the male partner and Taiwan as the female love interest in epic historical melodrama *The Knot* (Yin Li, 2006) and the romantic comedy *If You Are the One* (Feng Xiaogang, 2008). However, star performances by Taiwanese actors Vivian Hsu and Shu Qi reveal the soft-sweet possibilities of the artificially saccharine, the overripe, and the cute as solvent of China’s hard-line politics. This chapter returns to sajiao, the technique of unleashing tenderness, as a vulgar and recalcitrant form of feminine beauty that plays, disruptively, with neocolonialist desire.

Finally, chapter 5 explores the racioaesthetics of sourness, proposing laughter as a radically open, biting condition of possibility for tasting Asian American bodies in acidic, caustic, and awkward ways. Ali Wong’s star-making stand-up specials, *Baby Cobra* (Netflix, 2016) and *Hard Knock Wife* (Netflix, 2018), together with Charlyne Yi’s minor stardom in mocumentary *Paper Heart* (Nicholas Jasenovec, 2009) demonstrate the racial sour as a comedic performer who disrupts hegemonic conceptualizations of gender, time, and work through effervescent hostility and astringent quirk. Where Wong’s acts perform vulgar, abject materialisms through a carnivalesque body of sensual and excremental delight, Yi’s offbeat improvisational quirkiness and genderqueer gawkiness introduce aesthetic arrhythmias and disorder, aligning with what Fred Moten refers to as anacrusis and Nietzschean chaos, in order to jam and to disrupt master narratives about Asian American gender, sexuality, and love.

In regarding beauty, we circle coterminous phenomena like charm, charisma, sexuality, desire, love, the gaze, and fantasy. *Vulgar Beauty* argues that an affective-aesthetic attunement to feminine beauty is an issue of survival, livelihood, and politics as much as it concerns our charismatic seductions. The question of beauty is also intimately entangled with the cinephile's delight and dilemma, engaging with fraught pleasures and bad conscience over our submission to the spectacular moving image. However, the problem is not with beauty, as biopolitical approaches may suggest. Rather, the issue is that we are sometimes unable to recognize it, let alone apprehend its unseen, phenomenal impact. Simultaneously deep and superficial, cryptic and transparent, disarming and provocative, beauty is the affective difference that captures and captivates, moving in and through us. We are undone and remade by our contact with beauty; we willingly become its passive guest, but within the wonder we hold for the beautiful, we become with and feel beautiful. If the Levinasian face-to-face concerns the ethics of otherness through a simultaneous meeting of eyes, a coincidence of seeing one another in reciprocity, then beauty stargazing is about the pleasure in never being able to see eye to eye. Indeed, to regard beauty in such a way is also to set aside the plight of voyeurism and the plague of the masterful gaze. In other words, it is about the misrecognitions and misalignments that can only arise from a spectacular and mediated confrontation with gargantuan appetites and desires. The cosmology of beauty therefore limns a world to which we fantasize an unbelonging belonging, one where we are always chasing after the object of desire's impossible gaze.

Beauty seeks our radical passivity. An appeal to pure reason in attuning to beauty via domination neglects this crucial duplicity and desirous deception. Nevertheless, if love is the mutual acceptance of one another's fantasies, the love of star beauty dreams about the impossible returning gaze from screen faces. Such longing for the impossible gaze and the mutuality of eye contact calls attention to the margins of the screen, a blind field or spot that lies just beyond it, and which accumulates and accretes the possibilities of a kind of love worlding. In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes explains love's ecstatic fragments, conflating love at first sight with ravishment: "What fascinates, what ravishes me is the image of a body in situation. What excites me is an outline in action, which pays no attention to me."¹⁰² Cinema teaches us how to love at first sight, becoming engulfed and ravished by beauty's basal shocks. Loving to love a movie star grants affection without a return on investment, and as such it models a kind of

loving of the Other that remains in the situational margins of possibility, without expectation. Of course, I hesitate to say it is unconditional, for we know that what we receive are the seductions and desires of being bathed in beauty's radiance, even if in ecliptic form. The contested and suspect object that is beauty enables and sustains this type of love, and it is here—at the point where we embrace the risk of becoming inordinately sentimental and optimistic—that we can begin speaking about vulgar beauty's feeling and doing.



notes

Introduction

- 1 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “vulgar,” <https://www.oed.com>.
- 2 Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 158.
- 3 For more on Zhang’s pungent reception in mainland China, see Zuo, “Sensing ‘Performance Anxiety.’”
- 4 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 17.
- 5 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 19.
- 6 Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 36.
- 7 Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 36, emphasis in original. In other words, the autonomic affect that Massumi describes precedes the formation of social emotion and emotion as a cultural politics, as explored by other scholars. See for example Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*; Berlant, *The Female Complaint*; Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*.
- 8 Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion*, 7.
- 9 Pham, *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet*.
- 10 See “creative contagion” in Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 19.
- 11 Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race*, 3.
- 12 With this observation, Feng counters the remark made in *The Joy Luck Club* (Wayne Wang, 1993) that *The World of Suzie Wong* is a “film that Asian Americans love to hate.” Feng, “Recuperating Suzie Wong,” 40.
- 13 Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*.
- 14 Duggan and McHugh, “A Fem(me)inist Manifesto,” 153–54, emphasis in original.
- 15 Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 85.

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16 Baudrillard evokes Paul Virilio's concept of an "aesthetics of disappearance." Virilio uses the condition of "picnolepsy," wherein a person briefly loses consciousness, as a metaphor to comment on the powers and realities of the unseen, the invisible and of disappearance. Virilio's inquiries into the picnoleptic experience urge us to consider the disappearance of time in its various permutations as meaningful, albeit misunderstood, experiences. The "aesthetics of disappearance" are themselves productions of meaning. Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*.

17 Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 2.

18 Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 117.

19 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

20 Garland-Thomson, *Staring*.

21 Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 34.

22 See Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*; Cheng, *Ornamentalism*; Khoo, *The Chinese Exotic*.

23 For example, demonstrating the etymological resonance of *detail* ("to cut in pieces"), Chow gives the example of breasts in Mao Dun's *Hong (The Rainbow*, 1930) in which the "narrative gaze returns obsessively" to the cerebral protagonist's bodiliness, with the effect of producing sensuous, erotic gaps in language, analysis, and political intent. Through the superfluous recurrence of Mei's breasts, Mao Dun demonstrates the limits of cerebral, revolutionary thought. Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, 114.

24 Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 23–24.

25 See for example Ang, "The Differential Politics of Chineseness"; Chun, "Fuck Chineseness"; Ang, "Can One Say No to Chineseness?"; Chow, "Introduction."

26 Chow, *Primitive Passions*, 9.

27 Chow, *Primitive Passions*, 145.

28 Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, xi.

29 Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 70.

30 Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 208.

31 Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*.

32 Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 100.

33 del Río, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance*, 21, 6.

34 Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions"; Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment."

35 Sobchack, "Cutting to the Quick," 340.

36 For a similar argument, see Barthes, "The Face of Garbo," 84.

37 Farquhar, *Appetites*, 75.

38 Farquhar, *Appetites*.

39 Farquhar, *Appetites*, 67.

40 Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, 42.

41 Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, 52.

42 Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, 81.

43 Xue, “Cotton Candy,” 111.

44 Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, 62.

45 Jullien, *This Strange Idea of the Beautiful*, 214.

46 See for example Shah, *Contagious Divides*.

47 Sohn, “Introduction.”

48 Although it is beyond the purview of this book to revisit such histories, I nonetheless join scholars like Shimizu and Karen Shimakawa to embrace “abjection” and “perversity” as a way to critically wrestle with the racial circumscriptions that produce the Chinese body politically, socially, and aesthetically. See Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race*; Shimakawa, *National Abjection*.

49 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 150.

50 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 138.

51 Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 141.

52 Quoted in Zhang, *Shengti Zhengzi*, 228.

53 See Classen, Howes, and Synnott, *Aroma*; Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*.

54 Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*, 11.

55 Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 1.

56 Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 7.

57 A “snout-to-belly-to-bowel” route also appears in Indian Vedic aesthetic notions of *rasa* or “rasaesthetics,” a term coined by performance scholar Richard Schechner to refer to the ways in which live performance can vividly arouse one’s enteric nervous system. Drawing upon the *Natyashastra*, an ancient handbook written by Bharata-muni on Sanskrit theater and in which *rasa* appears, Schechner explains that *rasa* “is sensuous, proximate, experiential. *Rasa* is aromatic. *Rasa* fills space, joining the outside to the inside.... What was outside is transformed into what is inside.” Drawing correlations between flavor and performance, *rasa* is starkly contrasted with the western performance aesthetic, which is founded on the “‘theatron,’ the rationally ordered, analytically distanced panoptic.” Schechner, “Rasaesthetics,” 29.

58 Perullo, *Taste as Experience*, 8.

59 Perullo, *Taste as Experience*, 10.

60 Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, xv.

61 Jullien, *Living Off Landscape*.

62 Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, 42.

63 See Eng, Ruskola, and Shen, “Introduction,” 6; Yapp, “Chinese Lingering.”

64 Han, *Shanzhai*, 4.

65 Han, *Shanzhai*, 6.

66 Han, *Shanzhai*.

67 Christina A. León contends that in order to point to the constitutive losses which mediate racialized referentiality through a “grid of intelligibility that is profoundly racist,” one must pursue the risks of a catachrestic deconstruction, one that embraces the abuse and monstrosities of language, which “acknowledges violence, undoes mastery, shows need, and allows for uncanny hauntings,” even as those overdetermined claims are revealed in and by linguistic processes as false and/or insufficient. For example, León offers the improper use of metaphor in Raquel Salas Rivera’s poem *The Tertiary/Lo Terciario*, which names untranslatable and impossible objects like “pink plaintains” in order to underscore the various, unequivocal losses of Puerto Rican indebtedness. Moreover, as León suggests, to “read identitarian terms as catachrestic would mean to read the contexts within which such terms make claims born out of the tense relationship between a lack of a proper word and a need to make a claim.” León, “Raciality’s Referential Interruption.”

68 Foucault, “Two Lectures,” 94.

69 To evacuate chance and accident from the “co-incidence,” a suitable synonym for assemblage, and to regard it as isomorphic, cosmic homology is itself a radical hermeneutic gesture, particularly in light of the global domination of western sciences, which emphasize, among other principles, linear-temporal causality, analytical and reductionist methods, objectivity and quantitative results, and the denaturalized isolation and control of studied objects.

70 As recalled in Keathley, *Cinephilia and History*, 6.

71 See Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*; Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*; Marks, *Touch*; del Río, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance*; Barker, *The Tactile Eye*.

72 Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 64.

73 Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 44.

74 Contemporary critics of beauty are justified in many of their charges and concerns over the uncritical esteem and reverence of beauty, particularly from a biopolitical point of view. The injurious effects of beauty have been well documented in feminist accounts elaborating upon Simone de Beauvoir’s contention that women voluntarily perpetuate their own subjugation by engaging in beauty care as a “kind of work.” Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (1990) and like-minded studies demonstrate correlations between material gain and perceived attractiveness. Feminist scholars including Mimi Thi Nguyen, Rita Barnard, and Sianne Ngai launch compelling criticisms of Elaine Scarry’s universalizing account of beauty for glossing over the uneven distributions and normative constructions of beauty that exclude and provoke hatred and disgust toward bodies deemed unbeautiful and ugly, premised on racism, sexism, sizeism, classism, ableism, ageism, and other forms of biosocial-structural discrimination. Nguyen’s work in particular describes

the ways in which beauty biopolitically organizes worlds, how beauty as a Foucauldian form of governmentality “is war by other means” by becoming one of the stakes upon which liberal humanism is imperialistically enforced. It is difficult to contest the fact that beauty lubricates the wheels of capitalist-consumerist-imperialisms, greasing their wildly destructive, disciplinary capabilities. The cultivation of socially acceptable feminine beauty takes time, money, and labor, involving (neo)liberal ideological complicity and generic rites of cosmetic passage. As Kant’s own racist and rigid aesthetic criteria for beauty reflect, it is also indisputable that white-supremacist biosocial politics, which constitute dominant beauty ideals, govern much of the ways we in the west recognize and consume beauty, thereby causing many deleterious material effects. See Nguyen, “The Biopower of Beauty”; Barnard, “The Place of Beauty.” Sianne Ngai criticizes what she views as Scarry’s “fairly aggressive claims against feminist, queer, and postcolonial critiques of beauty (and, perhaps most aggressively, never identifies any of them by name),” in Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 316–17n25).

75 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 111.

76 Massumi, “Translator’s Foreword,” xiii.

77 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*.

78 Quoted in Lindholm, *Charisma*, 19.

79 Lindholm, *Charisma*, 20.

80 Lindholm, *Charisma*, 6.

81 Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 5.

82 See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Chen, *Animacies*; Jackson, “Animal”; Jackson, “Outer Worlds.”

83 Chen, *Animacies*, 5.

84 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 93.

85 Huang, “Inscrutably, Actually,” 198.

86 Cheng, *Ornamentalism*.

87 Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, 51.

88 In distinguishing charm from the transcendental essence of beauty as an impure distraction, Kant also found it to be basically stupid, aligning it with emotion and “barbarism.” Insofar as charm, charisma, and beauty are often means through which to obtain desired objects and ends, it would be erroneous to insist that such affective-aesthetics are unintelligent, particularly when we understand intelligence to mean an “exchange of knowledge, information, opinion” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “intelligence”). I further add that intelligence also involves an exchange of energy, affect, and intensity through which we make sense of and understand the world. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 69.

89 Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 101. One is also reminded of Ingmar Bergman’s proclamation that “the possibility of drawing near to the human face is the

primary originality and the distinctive quality of cinema.” Bergman quoted in Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 99.

90 Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 47.

91 Gottfried Semper quoted in Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 79–80.

92 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.

93 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 193.

94 Goffman, “On Face-Work.”

95 Goffman, “On Face-Work,” 8.

96 Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 7.

97 Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, 4–5.

98 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 62.

99 Shaviro, “Beauty Lies in the Eye,” 19.

100 See Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*; Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*; Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*; Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*.

101 Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*.

102 Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, 193, emphasis in original.

Chapter One: Bitter Medicine, Racial Flavor

1 Han, *Shanzhai*, 4.

2 Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 42–43.

3 Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 130.

4 Drawing upon metaphors of indigestion, Nietzsche writes, “On the road to angel-hood (not to use in this context a harder word) man has developed that dyspeptic stomach and coated tongue, which have made not only the joy and innocence of the animal repulsive to him, but also life itself.” Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 42–43.

5 Zhang, *Shengti Zhengzi*, 213.

6 Author’s translation. The Chinese quotation is: 她在外表上很纯, 不张扬、不夸张, 但内心和性格里却有一种泼辣可以表达出来, 这样在戏里出现会更好.

7 Zhang, *Shengti Zhengzi*, 214.

8 Chen, *Zhongguo Dianying Mingxing Yanjiu Bianji*, 412.

9 Classen, Howes, and Synnott, *Aroma*, 4.

10 Dyer, *Stars*, 3.

11 Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 27.

12 Original emphasis in Lu, “Zhang Ruifang,” 114.

13 Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 257.

14 Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*.

15 Ban Wang notes that “overcoming and sublimating the feminine” became an aesthetic concern which manifested in revolutionary politics and media through a libidinal identification with the motherland and a symbolic release of psychic energy to the sublime order of law, the father. See Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History*, 103.