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## Journal of Transnational American Studies

### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/25h3m6c0>

### Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 4(1)

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### Publication Date

2012

### DOI

10.5070/T841012823

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# Across a Different Table: Strange and Familiar Encounters in Asian American Cinema

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JU YON KIM

*Pretty to Think So*, a 2008 film directed by Francis Hsueh and Steven Hahn, opens with a quotation in both English and Chinese: “It’s always so. Each time you happen to me all over again.” After these lines fade, the film reveals the source, Edith Wharton. The reference to Wharton’s novel *The Age of Innocence* seems apt given the love triangle and questions of class and privilege at the center of the film. Yet the reason for presenting the quotation in these two languages is not so obvious. While one of the three primary characters is Chinese American, the other two are identified in the film as Indian American and Korean American. With an overtly pan-ethnic set of Asian American characters, *Pretty to Think So* does not dwell on the bicultural contact or exchange that it coyly suggests through its initial juxtaposition of Chinese and English. Instead, by presenting the quotation from Wharton in Chinese characters and withholding the source at the outset, the otherwise somber film begins with a wink at the audience. What were you expecting, it seems to ask, a Chinese proverb?

The lines that open *Pretty to Think So* and its curiously bilingual presentation capture the suggestive intersection of repetition and surprise—or uncanny repetitions—that drew my attention to the film and two others, *Never Forever* (Gina Kim, 2008) and *West 32<sup>nd</sup>* (Michael Kang, 2007), which were screened at the 2008 San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival. Viewed concurrently, these three narrative films reveal strikingly parallel interests. In addition to a shared New York setting, they all center on conflicts between characters who are distinguished by class and migration history, but connected by ethnic or racial identifications.<sup>1</sup> In other words, these films are not preoccupied with the intergenerational or racial antagonisms that have been commonly found in Asian American narratives across media, but with contradictory, horizontal relationships that highlight differences in class, national attachments, and language. The most remarkable similarity, however,

is the particular scrutiny that each film places on an affluent and seemingly successful Asian American—specifically Korean American—man: although this character is not necessarily the protagonist, his uneasy interactions with lovers and friends provide much of the narrative momentum. The tenuous and uneven exchanges between these three men and those who are like them in terms of age and racial or ethnic identifications and *unlike* them in terms of privilege, legal status, and cultural habituations highlight the films' interest in relationships within Asian America that are never innocent or merely conjunctural, but involve profound disparities and strained equivalences.

Focusing on these parallel figures of economic privilege and social status in the United States, and setting them against those with more uncertain national affiliations and financial resources, these films participate in ongoing deliberations about the borders of Asian America. I specifically analyze these three films, with a focus on *West 32<sup>nd</sup>*, in relation to debates about the “national” and the “transnational” in Asian American studies, which ask whether the United States should remain at the center of the field given the major social and geopolitical shifts that have occurred since its founding in the 1960s. These changes include the demographic transformations resulting from the 1965 US immigration reforms, the globalization of capital and the rise of major economic centers in Asia, and, more recently, the revolution in information technology. In discussions of how these shifts have influenced (or should influence) Asian American studies and, more broadly, notions of Asian American identity, different paradigms of Asian America as a minority, immigrant, or diasporic formation compete for significance.

I argue that what is particularly noteworthy about the three films, both individually and collectively, is their juxtaposition, or more precisely, their *organization* of seemingly divergent models of conceiving Asian America. In other words, the films invite less a shifting of borders than an inquiry into the relationships *between* the different, and at times competing, shapes assumed by the designation of “Asian American.” Debates about who or what the term names, encompasses, or excludes have been ongoing since it first came into common usage with the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Certain paradigms, such as cultural nationalism or diaspora, have been more influential at different historical moments, but the jostling of various models has led to the incongruent layering and collocation of their attendant narratives, theoretical approaches, and political positions. In the next section, I consider some of the debates on national and transnational paradigms in Asian American cultural criticism, and ask what it would mean to take seriously, and to take as a point of departure, the wariness evident in these controversies with linear conceptions of shifts within the field. The three films that I examine point to the limitations of privileging certain formations of Asia America over others by dramatizing, and embodying, their uneasy coincidence; specifically, they direct attention to the meaningful tensions between minority, immigrant, and diasporic positions not only through their plots, characterizations, and stylistic elements, but

also through the particularities of their production and distribution. The point, however, is not that Asian American cultural criticism should simply embrace all conceptual models; rather, the films reveal the necessity of attending to the difficult questions of ethnic identification and material inequity that emerge when the various narratives of affiliation and difference espoused by each model encounter one another.

### **Locating Asian American Studies**

*West 32<sup>nd</sup>*, *Never Forever*, and *Pretty to Think So* collectively plot shifting networks of desire, resentment, and obligation between recent immigrants, established American professionals, and diasporic figures who are either thriving on globalized capital or struggling to survive their multiple displacements. The precarious relationships among these characters speak to the tensions within Asian American studies about how to respond to the major global as well as national changes that are continuously reshaping the field.

Reviewing the major developments in Asian American studies and Asian American cultural criticism in particular, King-Kok Cheung summarizes,

Whereas identity politics—with its stress on cultural nationalism and American nativity—governed earlier theoretical and critical formations, the stress is now on heterogeneity and diaspora. The shift has been from seeking to ‘claim America’ to forging a connection between Asia and Asian America; from centering on race and on masculinity to revolving around the multiple axes of ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality; from being concerned primarily with social history and communal responsibility to being caught in the quandaries and possibilities of postmodernism and multiculturalism.<sup>2</sup>

Cheung traces a shift from (US ethnic) minority conceptions of Asian America, which center on pan-ethnic coalitions and community-based activism, to models of “heterogeneity and diaspora,” which respectively emphasize inequities and differences within Asian America, and transnational circulations that trouble national delineations. This shift has been actuated by feminist critiques of cultural nationalism (which I consider one strain of the minority paradigm); the 1965 immigration reforms, which greatly diversified the population that could be designated Asian American, particularly in terms of ethnicity and class; and contemporary forms of globalization, which have accelerated the movement of capital, peoples, and media across national boundaries.

Two influential alternatives to nation-based approaches respectively place immigration and diaspora at the center of their theoretical projects. For Lisa Lowe,

the figure of the post-1965 immigrant puts pressure on Asian American studies to “consider different Asian formations within the global or neocolonial framework of transnational capitalism” and to “supplement an Asian American studies notion of ‘racial formation’ within one nation-state with an understanding of the multiple contexts of colonialism and its various extensions within the uneven development of neocolonial capitalism.”<sup>3</sup> In this formulation, a transnational approach focused on the immigrant brings together considerations of racialization, capitalism, and colonialism. Other scholars have specifically alighted on diaspora as a more appropriate or productive model for conceiving Asian American identity and cultural formations. Drawing from literary imaginings of diaspora, Shirley G. Lim describes it as “a condition of being deprived of the affiliation of nation, not temporally situated on its way toward another totality, but fragmented, demonstrating provisionality and exigency as immediate, unmediated presences.”<sup>4</sup> While immigration might suggest a movement from one place to another, diaspora dwells on spatial and temporal ambiguities.

The move to transnationalize Asian American studies has also elicited more cautious responses from critics concerned that such a paradigm shift might obscure or neglect the experiences of those who do not identify as diasporic or immigrant subjects—namely those for whom minority conceptions of Asian American identity rooted in the United States might be more compelling or fruitful. For example, Cheung muses, “I am less certain how American-born Asians—the very people who spearheaded Asian American studies in defiance of their political and cultural invisibility—can avail themselves of a diasporic identity.” She argues, “I believe that we can both ‘claim America’—assert and manifest the historical and cultural presence of Asians in North America—and use our transnational consciousness to critique the polity, whether of an Asian country, Canada, the United States, or Asian America.”<sup>5</sup> Dorinne Kondo similarly cautions, “Indeed, specific histories may be in danger of elision—paradoxically—by these forms of transnationalism and postcolonial theory,”<sup>6</sup> and urges a “case-by-case specificity.”<sup>7</sup> In their exhortations to consider the possible limitations of relocating Asian American studies, these critics express their concern that the paradigms of transnationalism may not be as germane to those who situate themselves in the United States (which does not mean those who *uncritically* privilege the nation). By suggesting that nation-based paradigms might at times be more productive for political efficacy or for narrating identifications, Cheung and Kondo are not issuing reactionary calls to affirm national affiliations and ignore transnational considerations. Rather, they are reflecting on how the field might keep multiple conceptions of Asian America in play.

In these discussions, Sau-Ling Wong’s essay “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Crossroads” has elicited particularly strong responses for its argument that Asian American studies should continue to “claim America.” In her essay, Wong explains, “By ‘claiming America,’ I refer to establishing the Asian American presence in the context of the United States’ national cultural

legacy and contemporary cultural production.”<sup>8</sup> Like Cheung and Kondo, she argues, “[I]f claiming America becomes a minor task for Asian American cultural criticism and espousal of denationalization becomes wholesale, certain segments of the Asian American population may be left without a viable discursive space.”<sup>9</sup> Wong suggests that if one of the goals of Asian American studies and Asian American cultural criticism is to provide a “viable discursive space” to those who might identify as Asian American, the shift to what she calls “denationalization” may erect new boundaries, even as it expands into more transnational considerations. Wong moreover emphasizes that despite major historical transformations, the models of Asian American identity crafted during the 1960s and 1970s remain cogent responses to persistent pressures to identify nationally.

Wong’s argument provoked a particularly strong response from Susan Koshy in her essay “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” which argues that the founding paradigms of the field are no longer adequate given the increasing heterogeneity and transnationalism of the peoples and cultural works potentially encompassed by the term “Asian American.”<sup>10</sup> Yet Wong’s and Koshy’s shared wariness of viewing changes in the field in teleological terms suggests a useful point of convergence. Emphasizing that she is not rejecting diasporic paradigms in favor of US-centered ones, Wong reiterates, “Again, what I am challenging is developmentalism, which facilitates reabsorption into master narratives. It would be far more useful to conceive of modes rather than phases of Asian American subjectivity: an indigenizing mode can coexist and alternate with a diasporic or a transnational mode, but the latter is not to be lauded as a culmination of the former, a stage more advanced or more capacious.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Koshy recognizes that “older formations often nest inside newer identity formations, or are unevenly developed across and within generations or ethnic groups.”<sup>12</sup> Despite their divergent positions on Asian American cultural criticism’s relationship to transnationalism, Wong and Koshy nevertheless seem to agree that different modes or formations of Asian American identity can be companions, if not always completely compatible ones.

What, then, would it mean to conceive of the relationships between these paradigms in a more horizontal rather than linear fashion? In order to avoid uncritically adding to or expanding the field, a tendency against which Koshy particularly admonishes in her essay, we might investigate how the various narratives, social identifications, and ethical priorities attached to these models *interact*. Even if specific formations of Asian America seem more pertinent to different groups or individuals at different times and in different spaces, their attendant imaginary and ideological frameworks are certainly not discrete or static. Furthermore, to the extent that theoretical models are themselves performative, they do not simply *fit* certain experiences or histories better, but have specific effects (and value) when circulated, adopted, and set against one another. In terms of cultural criticism, the question of how different paradigms of Asian America interrelate also implicates multiple levels of analysis and identification, which may or

may not collectively align with one critical approach. For example, with respect to film, considerations such as financing, production, distribution, casting, directing, narration, and style may each reveal complex and not always congruent relationships to the national, diasporic, or global.

Of the films I examine here, two of them, namely *West 32<sup>nd</sup>* and *Never Forever*, make particularly compelling cases for the importance of considering transnational and US-centered models of Asian American cultural production and identity formation together, while *Pretty to Think So* situates itself more firmly in the United States in terms of its narrative, production, and distribution. Each film sets two Asian American men of different class positions against each other, but in *West 32<sup>nd</sup>* and *Never Forever*, the less privileged of the two men is also the less assimilated one—either a recent immigrant or a figure more ambiguously situated between the film’s conceptions of Korean and American culture. At the conclusion of all three films, it is an assertion of power on the part of the more affluent of the two men that brings about the denouement. The parallels between these films raise the question of why they are all so interested in structuring their stories around the relationship between the elite and the underclass of Asian America. In their ultimately cynical portrayals of the more privileged characters, the films participate in what Peter Feng describes as an “ambivalent critique” evident in Asian American cinema, which “contributes to a disidentification with Americanness: more specifically, a disidentification with narratives of bourgeois assimilation.”<sup>13</sup> In *West 32<sup>nd</sup>* and *Never Forever*, this critique specifically unfolds through the characters’ manipulation and betrayal of foils who have stronger transnational ties, but are distinctly less moneyed.

Yet while the United States is the locus of privilege within the narratives, the films themselves depended on financing and distribution *outside* the United States. The films therefore reveal contradictory on-screen and off-screen configurations of influence and capital across national lines. Remarking on the impact of globalization on Asian American identity and activism, Aihwa Ong argues, “Global flows of Asian corporations and labor have thus transformed the political ground of minority struggles, contributing to the splintering of dominant ethno-racial categories into many newly racialized class positions structured by transnational production systems.”<sup>14</sup> She asserts that as a consequence, “Economic and intellectual capital have come to define the status of Asian Americans, while the hidden servitude of other Asian migrants has fallen off the horizon of most Asian American advocates, whose struggle against racism is more focused on individual cases of hate crimes and racist discrimination.”<sup>15</sup> By receiving financial backing from South Korea, *West 32<sup>nd</sup>* and *Never Forever* exemplify an interesting phenomenon: the transnationally produced Asian American film. Somewhat paradoxically, the global flow of capital enabled the filmmakers, who had previously worked on smaller independent or experimental films, to produce more elaborate movies in which “the splintering of dominant ethno-racial categories into many newly racialized class positions” form the crucial tension of their stories.

Explicitly juxtaposing the “economic and intellectual capital” of some of its Asian American characters with the “hidden servitude” of others, these films highlight rather than obscure the uneven distributions of access and privilege within Asian America. While *Pretty to Think So* is less transnationally-inclined in its interests, it also conveys the profound economic gaps between Asian Americans. These films are decidedly not works of advocacy; yet, they pose and delve into difficult questions about ethnic and pan-ethnic affiliations in the context of sharp disparities in who has access to the rewards of both (authorized) national attachments and transnational mobility. Asian America in these films is populated by lawyers and criminals, rich and poor, undocumented workers and affluent businessmen. Importantly, the films do not simply present this diversity, but explore the fraught relationships between differently situated characters. Transnationalism, pan-ethnicity, diaspora, and US racial formation are all relevant to the worlds of these films, and they are put in dynamic relation with one another through a series of unexpected encounters.

### **West 32<sup>nd</sup>**

The title of *West 32<sup>nd</sup>* refers to the street at the center of New York City’s Koreatown. The district’s neon lights form the backdrop for the film’s suggestive opening credits. The names of the cast and crew appear in both English and Korean, with the latter in a ghostly, fading font behind the former. Those with both Korean and non-Korean names receive different credits only evident to those who know both languages, while non-Korean names are spelled out phonetically. Like the opening of *Pretty to Think So*, the film plays with the audience members’ linguistic abilities. The credits immediately suggest the eerie “haunting” of Anglicized names by those rendered in Korean. Yet if the style seems to privilege the former by setting the latter as a trace or shadow, the choice of presenting both languages also favors the bilingual audience member who would recognize the important differences suggested in the incongruent translation of names. For example, the Korean credit for John Cho reads “Jo Yo Han” (with the family name placed first, following Korean custom); Jun Kim’s credit reads Kim Jun Sung in Korean (revealing that in English, Kim goes by a truncated version of his Korean given name); and composer Nathan Larson’s name is simply converted phonetically into Korean, with the order of first and last names retained. Although the distinction between English and Korean is given a stylistic emphasis, the uneven matching of names evident to those familiar with both languages hints at an assorted array of relationships between names and languages.

These subtle variations in the bilingual credits mirror the diverse and often ambiguous identifications of the film’s characters as Korean, American, or Korean American; recent immigrant, authorized citizen, or self-proclaimed “go-between.” With its glossy style, outbursts of violence, and mix of gravity and humor, *West 32<sup>nd</sup>* takes inspiration from both Hollywood and South Korean gangster films. The film begins with the murder of Jin Ho Chung, the manager of a Koreatown “room salon”



or hostess club, an establishment that provides its clients with attractive women as drinking companions. We soon learn that Kevin, an adolescent from the Flushing neighborhood of New York, has been charged with the crime, but a young attorney from a prestigious law firm offers to take the case pro bono for the family. Although the lawyer, John Kim (John Cho), assures Kevin's older sister Lila (Grace Park) that he is taking the case because he is certain they can win, he stands to receive a career boost at his firm from the high-profile case and also develops a romantic interest in Lila. While making inquiries about the murder, John is led to Mike Juhn, the murdered manager's charismatic and hot-tempered replacement. As the two develop a precarious friendship, Mike reveals to John that the murder was linked to organized crime in the Korean immigrant community. Mike claims that he and the former manager are merely middlemen within a network that is more about business than violence—unless someone steals from the bosses.

John's friendship with Mike gives him access to the room salon and its employees, including a young woman, Suki, who was also the former manager's mistress. When Suki finally agrees to tell John what occurred that night (she was the only witness, having gone to the window to wave good-bye to her lover), John asks Lila to translate, as he barely understands any Korean and Suki barely understands any English. While Suki relays what happened that night and reveals that the boy who was arrested did shoot Jin Ho, Lila tells John that Mike committed the murder without any accomplices. Lila then calls Mike, with whom she grew up in Flushing, and presumably tells him about Suki's testimony. Mike brutally murders Suki and, with his clownish sidekicks, attacks John at his home. Mike only refrains from shooting John when the latter convinces him that the interview tapes he left at his office will quickly implicate Mike in the murder. Mike maliciously reveals to John that Lila's brother did in fact kill Jin Ho (at Mike's request) and that Lila betrayed John and Suki. John later offers to bury the evidence against Mike if he provides an eyewitness to testify that the killer was *not* Lila's brother. With this deal, John gets a promotion at his law firm, while Mike, who is fired from his new position as manager at one point, gets his job back through brute violence.

The film focuses primarily on the relationship between John and Mike. Along with Lila and Suki, who occupy more minor roles, the four characters embody distinct and recognizable Asian American types. John is the established American professional who seems alienated from other Korean Americans and recent Korean immigrants, while Lila is the second-generation success story, the child of immigrants with one foot in a close-knit ethnic community and the other in a world closer to John's. Mike is the (ethnic) gangster trying to make a place for himself in a seedy transnational operation moving capital and women. Among the business's most valuable commodities is Suki, a disempowered diasporic figure who has few prospects beyond serving as a companion to globetrotting businessmen, or as a mistress to her managers. In plotting the relationships between these characters, the film flattens the presumed temporality of assimilation and economic mobility. Rather

than trace a path from servitude to success, or from alien to American, it sets the various narratives attached to these characters against one another. In particular, John's and Mike's negotiations of their respective proximity or distance to notions of "Korean" and "American" lend the film much of its momentum.

Meanwhile, the prominent but less central characters of Lila and Suki are positioned at opposite ends in the spectrum of cultural and spatial mobility charted by the film. Lila, like Mike, moves between Korean and English with apparent ease and is at home in the predominantly immigrant neighborhood of Flushing, New York, where she and Mike both grew up. Yet like John, she was thriving *outside* this community until her brother's arrest. Although she remains a peripheral figure, Lila seems to be the character who moves most fluidly between worlds, while Suki, the other important woman in the film, is the least mobile. Suki is ostensibly the one who made the most recent move to the United States, but the conditions of her migration seem to have stripped her of any economic or physical agency. Suki's limited mobility is made explicit when Mike confronts her after her interview with John. Slipping into Suki's apartment while she is in the middle of packing, he asks, "Going somewhere?" Catching Suki just as she is preparing to escape, Mike affirms her inability to move without his permission by brutally beating and murdering her. Trapped by her dependence on the various men who act as her lovers and employers, Suki is an acutely powerless figure in the film. Yet as the principal character after John and Mike, she insinuates into the film a constant reminder of the transnational passages that only hold migrants more captive—a point reiterated by the stark contrast between Suki and her customers, who are primarily wealthy businessmen from Asia.

John's and Mike's respective passages between different circles are much less restrained than Suki's limited and regulated movements, but more ambiguous and contingent than Grace's seemingly easy shifts between communities. Upward mobility for both John and Mike is facilitated by horizontal exchanges across worlds that evince particular conceptions of what is properly "Korean" or "American." Although the film is set wholly within New York City, each space clearly has its own rules about what language one speaks, which customs one follows, and whether one belongs at all. For example, after the opening scene of Jin Ho's murder, we see John at Kevin's home, sitting on a couch while Lila and her mother whisper in Korean in the bedroom. Lila then comes out without her mother, shutting the door behind her and apologizing in Korean before switching to English, presumably because she realizes that John does not understand her. The film thus immediately raises the question of language and access: who gets to enter specific rooms, and what gives them entrance? While investigating the murder, John relies on Lila and, later, Mike to access worlds that his ethnic identity makes available, but only partially: his Korean background makes him simultaneously familiar to and different from the more recent immigrants and less privileged Korean Americans whom he tries to interview about the murder. When John subsequently returns to Lila's home, her mother welcomes him at the door and insists that he stay for dinner. Making polite small talk, she asks

John, in Korean, about his parents' hometown, and he tells her Boston and New York. While John is able to understand her question, he does not fully grasp that she is asking about their hometown, or *gohyang*, in Korea. This brief exchange captures John's precarious position as both an insider and an outsider. It not only emphasizes his *incomplete* comprehension of Korean, it also brings to mind a question—"Where are you from?"—that has been particularly aggravating to Asian Americans who consider the United States their home. Later in this scene, as Lila translates for her mother at the dinner table, her selective translations, which omit and change her mother's words, foreshadow her purposeful mistranslation of Suki's testimony about Jin Ho's murder.

While John crosses one threshold to gain the family's approval to take on the case, he soon finds that with his very limited understanding of Korean and the ethnic communities of Flushing and Koreatown, he needs Lila's and Mike's help to investigate the murder. John's uneasy acculturation into different yet interconnected Korean American communities in New York is played out during his visits to Lila's home, the hostess bar where Jin Ho worked, and other businesses frequented by Mike. While Mike and his sidekicks rambunctiously enter establishments, play drinking games, and get into fights, John's discomfort as well as his fascination with their antics places him at a distance and at a disadvantage. By the end of the film, John realizes that getting access to these spaces has meant relying on two people who had good reason to obstruct his inquiry.

When John reasserts his authority at the end of the film, he uses the marked spatial distribution of influence to his own advantage. For example, he specifically confronts Lila about her betrayal at his law firm and speaks to her as they both stand at opposite ends of a conference table. In contrast to Lila's apartment, which both welcomed and estranged him, this space reestablishes his position as an attorney for the family and limits the sense of familiarity cultivated at their home. Similarly, when he calls Mike to make a deal near the film's conclusion, he arranges for them to meet at an upscale establishment with mostly white patrons. Mike is clearly uneasy as he searches for John through the crowd, and responds with hostility when a server asks if he can help him. When John casually, but not so innocently, comments, "Wasn't sure if you could find this place," Mike responds with homophobic remarks. John coolly ignores his ranting and orders him a drink. Telling Mike to relax, he only draws further attention to his discomfort. As Mike squirms in the tight wooden booth, his uneasy comportment reflects his feelings of being trapped by John.

Although Mike is more at home in Koreatown and Flushing than sitting at John's table, he exemplifies both the rewards and the costs of being a perpetual "go-between," a designation suggested by John that he eagerly affirms: "Yeah . . . I like that . . . I go between everything." Although John is referring specifically to Mike's place within the underground organization for which he works, the title also fits Mike's acutely ambiguous identity, as he is simultaneously cast by other characters as too American and not American enough, and as too Korean and not Korean enough.

When Mike first presents himself to a patron as the room salon's new manager, the customer speaks to him deridingly, interspersing his insults, which are mostly in Korean, with a few English phrases. The significance of this choice becomes clear later when the bosses call Mike in to explain his demotion from manager, and one mutters that he is too American to be trusted. Mike's fluency in both English and Korean enables him some mobility within the organization, yet the very uncertainty of his position leaves him constantly reacting to his sense of powerlessness with outbursts of violence. The problem is not that he actually is too Korean or too American (especially since the criteria always shifts depending on where he is), but that either can become grounds for rejecting or degrading him. As Mike's former mentor tells John while kicking him out of the room salon, "It's not going to help you [to know Mike]. He [Mike] doesn't belong here either." Thus, when John brings Mike onto his "home turf" to make their deal, he exacerbates Mike's fears of being an interloper by making it clear that he does not belong *outside* the room salon either.

Despite Mike's exertions of physical violence to assert control, John's power play at the conclusion establishes the lawyer's authority and privilege. His insistence on making a deal that will allow him to win the case (and enable Mike to avoid arrest) confirms Mike's claim in an earlier scene that John views other Korean Americans with a paternalism that sets him above and apart. In this scene, as his sidekicks beat John, Mike snidely asks, "You thought you could save us poor kids from Flushing?" Facing the barrel of Mike's gun, John affirms the profound disjuncture between them by reminding Mike that he is a lawyer, and pleading, "You can't get rid of me, man. I'm not some undocumented immigrant you can get rid of and nobody's going to miss, man." John thus emphasizes that he is *not* like Suki, whose dubious legal status, national affiliation, and occupation ensure that her murder will receive little interest. After testing the possibilities of ethnic affiliation for advancing his career, for attracting Lila, and for connecting with other Korean Americans, John ultimately decides that what will save him is his radical difference from those he ostensibly thought he could save. Although John's involvement in the case does secure Kevin's release, Suki's death and the generally ambivalent outcome make plain that his legal services did not benefit everyone. The question that remains is what *should* be his relationship to Kevin, Lila, Mike, or Suki? In other words, what possibilities for mutually beneficial relationships are opened up or facilitated by ethnic affiliations across differences in class, language, and neighborhood?

Through these interactions between characters with varying relationships to nation, diaspora, and ethnicity, *West 32<sup>nd</sup>* dramatizes the struggle between the desire for affiliation, and the competing objectives that reflect the uneven distribution of power and privilege. This collision of worlds was productive for the film in a directly material way, as the filmmakers received the financial backing of CJ Entertainment, a major Korean company with previous investments in Dreamworks SKG. CJ Entertainment's reputation and funding enabled a cameo appearance by popular Korean actor Jeong Jun Ho as the murdered Jin Ho and the distribution of the film in

South Korea. Ironically, while what is narrated onscreen is (Asian) American privilege, the film needed to find funding outside the United States to tell this tale. The film was directed and co-written by Michael Kang, until then known for the quieter independent film *The Motel*. Kang notably describes himself as resembling the John Kim character. A second-generation Korean American, he had little contact with other Koreans or Korean Americans growing up and became fascinated with the ethnic community in New York. He and his co-writer Edmund Lee reveal that they saw the film as presenting John's estranged perspective of the Korean American community.<sup>16</sup> From this angle, the dynamic of distance and desire crucial to *West 32<sup>nd</sup>* reflects a kind of transnational longing that concedes its situatedness in the United States. Yet, while the film was largely confined to the film festival circuit in the United States, it played to general audiences in South Korea thanks to the support of CJ Entertainment.

### ***Never Forever and Pretty to Think So***

Although my examination of *Never Forever* and *Pretty to Think So* will be considerably briefer than my analysis of *West 32<sup>nd</sup>*, I juxtapose these three films to highlight their provocative similarities. *Never Forever*, like *West 32<sup>nd</sup>*, benefited from transnational funding and distribution as a joint production between Korea's Now Films and the United States's Vox3 Films. It was also a recipient of funding from the Korean Film Council. In addition, its two stars, Vera Farmiga and Jung-Woo Ha, are well-known actors in the United States and South Korea, respectively, and the film was released in both countries.<sup>17</sup> Centering on a love triangle between Sophie (Farmiga), her husband Andrew (David McGinnis), who is a successful Korean American businessman, and her lover Jihah (Ha), who is an undocumented worker from Korea, *Never Forever* is an intimate love story which differs markedly from Michael Kang's gangster film. Yet this difference also makes their parallel choices to set a wealthy, established Asian American man against a more ambiguously positioned counterpart even more striking.

*Never Forever* begins with Andrew's father's funeral and soon reveals that Andrew is severely depressed. Although the exact source of his suicidal tendencies remains unclear, Sophie seems to believe that bearing her husband a child will renew his will to live. While at a fertility clinic, she spies a man, Jihah Kim, and overhears the doctor tell him that he cannot donate sperm because he is undocumented. Sophie follows Jihah and offers to pay him to have sex with her, promising a much larger financial reward if she gets pregnant. Sophie does eventually become pregnant, but not before falling in love with Jihah. When Andrew discovers the affair, he reports Jihah as an illegal immigrant and tells Sophie that he will forgive her if she agrees to give up the child. Sophie refuses and returns to Jihah's apartment, where she speaks to him on the phone just before he is deported. The film then cuts to a suggestive last scene in which Sophie (pregnant again) plays with her son on a beach. Although

Jihah is not present, the beach resembles the one depicted in a poster in his room, which, he tells Sophie earlier in the film, reminds him of his hometown.

The film sets up a stark contrast between Sophie's and Andrew's privilege and Jihah's financial struggles, emphasizing a class divide deepened by their differential legal statuses in the United States. The camera dwells on their homes, comparing Sophie's and Andrew's pale, spacious residence with Jihah's dim, tiny apartment in Chinatown. While it is not clear what Andrew or Sophie do on a daily basis (Andrew seems to be a businessman and Sophie, a homemaker), Jihah is shown hustling from job to job. In addition to working at a laundromat, he takes night shifts at a meat factory and seeks other opportunities to make money, such as selling imported watches to retailers. Although the class difference between Sophie and Jihah heightens the romantic tension between them and helps explain why Jihah would agree to their deal, it also positions Jihah and Andrew at opposite sides of the American dream—a point that Jihah makes explicit after seeing Sophie and Andrew together. He tells Sophie resentfully, "I saw your husband. He looks a lot like me. . . . Perfect couple, perfect car, perfect clothes. Perfect little blond American wife. He really made it, huh? You are the American dream." For Jihah, the physical resemblance between Andrew and himself, and their shared background as first- and second-generation Korean immigrants, only brings their unequal social positions into greater relief. Andrew's "model minority" success casts a shadow on Jihah's struggle, making him visible to Sophie only because of his physical attributes, and making his efforts to work his way up seem futile.

Meanwhile, like John in *West 32<sup>nd</sup>*, Andrew attempts to contain the threat posed by Jihah by asserting his status as an affluent and legally authorized American, and subsequently reports Jihah as an illegal immigrant. As Jihah is taken away, Sophie protests, "You can't treat him like that," to which one of the officials responds, "We absolutely can. He's an illegal alien. This has nothing to do with you. Please step aside, ma'am." He thus emphasizes that Jihah has no rights as an undocumented worker and tells Sophie that his situation does not concern her. Yet, as the link between Jihah and Andrew, Sophie is profoundly entangled in the arrest and deportation. She is the center of a love triangle that connects the story of the model minority to the story of an undocumented worker wearied by his efforts to attain financial security. This initially arbitrary connection between the men prompts Andrew's attempt to sever all ties by recruiting the legal system to imprison and deport Jihah. Although the official's demand that Sophie step aside and turn away insists that these two stories have nothing to do with each other, *Never Forever*—like *West 32<sup>nd</sup>*—invites an inquiry into the relationship between ethnic affiliations and ethical obligations.

Like *Never Forever*, *Pretty to Think So* centers on a love triangle, and it shares many of the same concerns as both *Never Forever* and *West 32<sup>nd</sup>*. Set in New York City right after the Internet boom went bust, the film traces the turbulent relationships between Hanna, an Indian American banker who lost her job; her boyfriend Jiwon,

whose ethnicity and profession exactly match those of John in *West 32<sup>nd</sup>*; and Hanna's childhood friend, Alex, a Chinese American youth minister who was once a street hustler. Like *West 32<sup>nd</sup>* and *Never Forever*, the film underlines the class differences among the characters. Hanna serves as an intermediary figure of upward mobility between the wealthy Jiwon, whose background is not elaborated, and Alex, who chooses to live modestly but is also trapped by a rough past and a gambling addiction. Jiwon's jealousy and Alex's addiction propel the plot to a violent climax in which Jiwon beats Alex, only to be shot and killed by Alex in the midst of their struggle. The film ends with Hanna, presumably pregnant with Jiwon's child, leaving New York to return to her mother in California.

In contrast to *West 32<sup>nd</sup>* and *Never Forever*, *Pretty to Think So* is less explicitly concerned with transnational circulations of bodies and capital, although the flashbacks to Alex's and Hanna's childhoods emphasize their strained relationships with their troubled immigrant parents. Furthermore, while the other two films deal primarily with Korean American characters distinguished by their (imagined or actual) proximity to Korea, *Pretty to Think So* presents a pan-ethnic set of Asian American characters whose connections to China, Korea, and India seem quite oblique. The production and distribution history of *Pretty to Think So* also links the film to the United States much more unambiguously than either *West 32<sup>nd</sup>* or *Never Forever*. *Pretty to Think So* was produced in the United States and screened primarily at Asian American film festivals.

The film's less wide-ranging travels raise an interesting question: To what extent do its ties to a certain conception of Asian America affect its production and distribution possibilities? In other words, given the story told by *Pretty to Think So*, could it be the kind of movie that gets equal distribution in the United States, Korea, China, and India? I am not suggesting that the film's overt Asian American pan-ethnicity makes it more quintessentially American or Asian American than works with transnational investments. The question of what kinds of films pick up transnational funding and travel internationally beyond the festival circuit is nevertheless important to consider. *West 32<sup>nd</sup>* and *Never Forever* exemplify the material advantages of appealing to transnational audiences, but *Pretty to Think So* raises the possibility that certain types of Asian American narratives may continue to depend on the support of sponsors, audiences, and organizations that prioritize their identification as minority Americans.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, I viewed all three films at the 2008 San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival. The festival, which has been running since the 1980s, is organized by the Center for Asian American Media, formerly the National Asian American Telecommunications Association. NAATA has come under some criticism for advancing a limited vision of Asian American media. Jun Okada, for example, emphasizes that "NAATA was instrumental in the encouragement and growth of Asian American films that follow the ideological, social change mission that can be traced back to the first films made by the Visual

Communications collective in the early 1970s.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly evaluating NAATA’s influence, Margaret Hillenbrand describes Asian American cinema as predominantly concerned with political efficacy: “The agenda of Asian American cinema is up-front as it tells the stories of immigration, segregation, and ongoing exclusion. This focus on the telling of truths and the righting of stereotypical wrongs results in what we might call an ‘educative’ representational mode, and this mode in its turn leads to a critical reception that is more concerned with the politics of content than the aesthetics of style, generic convention, and specific signature.”<sup>19</sup> The SFIAAFF’s recent programs, however, suggest a much more expansive and diverse collection of works, and the festival has presented highly stylized narrative films from Taiwan and South Korea alongside topical documentaries. The three films considered here, for example, do not fit well into an educative or “social change” mold. That the films are, on the one hand, produced through globally accumulated capital and, on the other, distributed through festivals with ties to cultural nationalism and community-based activism affirms the necessity of exploring how ongoing projects of “claiming America” intersect in both contradictory and productive ways with the expanding pressures and opportunities of globalization.

These tensions, as I have argued, find expression in the three films, particularly through their remarkably similar characterizations of the affluent (and male) Asian American professional. Interestingly, John, Andrew, and Jiwon all seem to carry less *history* than their foils. Their prosperity appears less acquired than simply present. If their privilege is naturalized in these portrayals, however, it is also put into question by their respective relationships with Mike, Jihah, and Alex, as well as their encounters with other undocumented immigrants and struggling workers who become visible and significant through their interactions with these less prosperous counterparts. Although the films all conclude with the characters of privilege working to reestablish the boundaries of their world, they collectively suggest the potential for Asian American cinema to explore how various incongruent “Asian Americas” might meet—whether to spar or to connect.

In a final revealing similarity, all three films initiate their central plots by having characters draw equivalences based on racial and ethnic groupings. In *Never Forever*, Sophie sees Jihah and chooses him for his resemblance to her husband. In the first meeting between Hanna and Jiwon in *Pretty to Think So*, Hanna overhears Jiwon say the words that Alex memorably muttered on his birthday years ago, and she thinks, while Jiwon’s face is turned away from her, that it might be possible that she has found her childhood friend. In *West 32<sup>nd</sup>*, John’s participation in Kevin’s case and his family’s approval are implicitly linked to their common ethnicity. These initial moments of contact depend on perceived resemblances between the characters’ racial and ethnic identities. Yet, what the films ultimately explore are the tensions and incongruities that come into relief *after* equivalences are drawn. Class divisions, in particular, become intensified in the interactions between these various sectors of Asian America. What propels and sustains the films’ plots, moreover, is the continual



management of differences as they compete with the desire for affiliation. These films therefore explore the complexities of a “post-racialization” (as opposed to “post-race”) moment in which racial and ethnic identifications illuminate differences and contradictions, even as they continue to recall a shared history of racialization.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of clarity within this article, I consider ethnic categories such as Korean or Indian as subsets of broader racial groupings such as Asian.

<sup>2</sup> King-Kok Cheung, “Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies” in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Lowe, “Epistemological Shifts: National Ontology and the New Asian Immigrant,” in *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora*, eds. Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 273.

<sup>4</sup> Shirley Geok-Lin Kim, “Immigration and Diaspora,” in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 297.

<sup>5</sup> Cheung, “Re-viewing,” 9.

<sup>6</sup> Dorinne Kondo, “(Un)Disciplined Subjects: (De)Colonizing the Academy?” in *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora*, eds. Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 38.

<sup>7</sup> Kondo, “(Un)Disciplined,” 37.

<sup>8</sup> Sau-ling C. Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads,” in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, eds. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 137.

<sup>9</sup> Wong, “Denationalization,” 137.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Koshy, “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9 (1996): 315–346.

<sup>11</sup> Wong, “Denationalization,” 138.

<sup>12</sup> Koshy, “Fiction,” 323.

<sup>13</sup> Peter X. Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, The New America* (Berkeley, CA:

University of California Press, 2003), 272.

<sup>15</sup> Ong, *Buddha*, 272–273.

<sup>16</sup> “Getting Naked with Mike and Ed” (DVD interview), *West 32<sup>nd</sup>*, directed by Michael Kang (2007) (Venice, CA: Pathfinder Pictures, 2009), DVD.

<sup>17</sup> Director and writer Gina Kim, known for the more experimental *Gina Kim’s Video Diary*, was also educated in both Korea and the United States.

<sup>18</sup> Jun Okada, “‘Noble and Uplifting and Boring as Hell’: Asian American Film and Video, 1971–1982,” *Cinema Journal* 49.1 (Fall 2009): 22.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Hillenbrand, “Of Myths and Men: *Better Luck Tomorrow* and the Mainstreaming of Asian American Cinema,” *Cinema Journal* 47.4 (2008): 53–54.