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**Ways of Seeing China through Isaac Julien’s**

*Ten Thousand Waves*

Evocative Translocality, Fantastic Orientalism, Nameless Labor

**ABSTRACT** This article examines ways of seeing China in Isaac Julien’s nine-screen film installation *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), which represents a migratory aesthetic based on evocative translocality and mobile spectatorship. As Julien reconstructs the legend of compassionate Mazu (played by Maggie Cheung) and memories of Old and New Shanghai (both enacted by Zhao Tao), his screen images and sounds enter a constant circulation and form an intriguing multidirectional dialogue across a variety of media and genres: cinema, art photography, calligraphy, painting, poetry, and star performance. In addition to evaluating new concepts and new techniques at work in the cross-fertilization of cinema and other visual media in the new millennium, this article complicates Julien’s celebrated political poetics by highlighting his problematic reception by ethnic Chinese spectators and by reckoning with the specter of orientalism that refuses to go away despite his previously audacious repudiation of stereotypes and clichés and his professed engagement with cosmopolitanism and globalization.

**KEYWORDS** Isaac Julien, evocative translocality, mobile spectatorship, fantastic orientalism, nameless labor

**Viewing Positions: Isaac Julien and China**

This article explores “ways of seeing” China in *Ten Thousand Waves* 萬重浪 (Wan chong lang; 2010), a fifty-minute, nine-screen moving-image installation by Isaac Julien (1960–), which premiered at the seventeenth Sydney Biennale in May 2010 and subsequently traveled to numerous art festivals and museums around the world to abundant acclaim.1 Inspired by the title of an edited volume on early cinema,2 I examine two aspects of “viewing positions” vis-à-vis China. First, how do we interpret the multilayered, translocal viewing positions (i.e., frameworks of perception and conceptualization, such as evocative translocality and mobile spectatorship) Julien sets up for his audience to see China in *Ten Thousand Waves*? Second, how do we reevaluate the intentionally multivalent yet potentially contradictory positions (i.e., ideas, figures, even clichés, such as migrant labor and orientalism) embodied in Julien’s spectacular images of China? A critical examination of acts of viewing and positions enables us to rethink issues of aesthetics, authorship, and audience and reconsider the innovative ways in which
Julien reorients his intended viewers to appreciate his ostentatiously auteurist, visually attractive, yet cross-culturally problematic vision of China.

As the object of seeing, China has long been fixated in the West, at once idealized (e.g., chinoiserie in literature and art) and demonized (e.g., the yellow peril in films) in modern times.³ In her discussion of Bernardo Bertolucci’s Oscar-winning fiction film *The Last Emperor* (1987), Rey Chow raises the question of “seeing modern China” and observes a distinctive feature of contemporary Western critical discourses: “Metaphors and apparatuses of seeing become overwhelmingly important ways of talking, simply because ‘seeing’ carries with it the connotation of a demarcation of ontological boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other,’ whether racial, social, or sexual.”⁴ Like Bertolucci, Julien tackles the question of seeing modern China in a sympathetic, allegedly non-Western way,⁵ but Julien has complicated viewing positions in *Ten Thousand Waves* because, as an internationally celebrated black British gay border-crossing artist, he has deliberately situated himself in a liminal space, “de margin and de center,” in visual representation, not just across the Atlantic as in his previous works, but now across the Pacific.⁶

This article explores ways of seeing China in *Ten Thousand Waves* and takes a path less traveled in Julien’s critical reception by reevaluating his self-conscientious, sympathetic, but ambivalent engagement with China and Chineseness. I focus on a neglected set of contradictions between Julien’s acclaimed audacity and his refurbished stereotypes of China, between his global, translocal resonances of labor migration and his iconic, enigmatic representation of China’s history and legend, and between his professed political intention and its varied, sometimes troubling receptions. It is my contention that, apart from illustrating Julien’s signature “migratory aesthetic” that emphatically privileges evocative translocality and mobile spectatorship,⁷ *Ten Thousand Waves* urges us to recognize unresolved issues of cross-cultural representation and reception hidden behind his auteurist aura, an aura that has migrated largely intact from the large screen in a dark movie theater to multiple midsize screens in an interactive art gallery or museum setting.

Julien conceives of *Ten Thousand Waves* not merely as “a film about China” but also as “a film that starts with a transcultural incident and grows to encompass certain aspects of China.”⁸ He dates the origin of this project to a tragic incident in Morecambe Bay near Lancaster in northwest England, where twenty-three undocumented Chinese migrant workers drowned in a rushing high tide while cockle picking on February 25, 2004.⁹ Even though Julien has intended *Ten Thousand Waves* to be his “esthetic response to the ghastly political campaign against immigration that was waged recently in the UK’s general election” (and even more prominently nowadays with Brexit in process),¹⁰ it is undeniable that the film is more about China than about England. Indeed, because it “is primarily set in China, was filmed in Chinese locations, and draws on moments of China’s history and legend,” the prominent film theorist Laura Mulvey argues that “the boldness,
courage even, of *Ten Thousand Waves* lies in its sense that in order to reflect on politics today, art should engage with global phenomena without the traditional trepidation of ‘orientalism’."

There is no question that Julien has succeeded in tackling global issues in his politically motivated, artistically sophisticated, and geographically expansive works, but Mulvey’s swift dismissal of orientalism in cross-cultural representation is rather unexpected because she does not pursue the issue further in her otherwise nuanced explication of *Ten Thousand Waves*. Sure enough, Julien is aware of the potential danger of exotizing his subject matter as an outsider: “There’s a thin line between deriving pleasure from images of another culture and lapsing into patronization or worse.” Patronization is certainly an attribute of orientalism, which exotizes and essentializes the oriental other through persistent stereotypes. In a preemptive move, Julien is quick to cite his track record: “I wanted to return to the question of iconic stereotypical representations because so much of my work had been about repudiating stereotypes. . . . [But recently] I began to think that perhaps there is a way in which the whole debate around stereotypical representations has been quite wrong-headed, especially if you are into making images. Maybe through the stereotype you can try to articulate something else.”

Here, Julien hints at a new approach to repudiate stereotypes by articulating "something else" through intentionally stereotypical representations, but what exactly is this something else that reputedly has or might have saved him from the pitfalls of orientalism or patronization when he represents other cultures that have long been marginalized by the West, for instance, Asian, African, and the Caribbean?

This article attempts to locate this unspecified something else by reassessing Julien’s migratory aesthetic, which disregards fixed boundaries and indulges in suggestive ambivalences, or even contradictions, across artistic media (e.g., cinema, art photography, calligraphy, painting, poetry, and star performance) and which has received profuse praises from curators and scholars around the world since the late 1980s. Nonetheless, even though *Ten Thousand Waves* is intended to project translocality that highlights fluid boundaries and identities and to mobilize spectatorship that enables an interactive audience to switch from gazes to glances and to contemplate the looks of his film, I contend that, inasmuch as ethnic Chinese spectators are concerned, *Ten Thousand Waves* does not deliver the efficacy of Julien’s political poetics as his supporters have claimed for him. His aesthetically innovative ways of seeing China ultimately leave China as a series of mesmerizing images and haunting sounds, without anchoring the film and its viewers on a firm ground for historical understanding or contemporary intervention.

**Projecting Translocality: Fluid Boundaries, Identities, Textualities**

Few contemporary Western visual artists could rival Isaac Julien in achieving both international artistic prestige and academic acclaim so quickly and
Julien’s work has been eagerly commissioned and exhibited by art festivals and museums around the world, and he has garnered glowing admirations from eminent cultural theorists and film scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. To quote one enthusiastic endorsement: “Isaac Julien is impossible to pin down. Moving with ease between feature films, video installations, documentary and ‘blaxploitation’ cinema, he has always been an audacious and unpredictable artist. His taboo-breaking is as defiant as his determination to disregard, or even demolish, the barriers dividing one discipline from another.”

My extensive research on Julien’s critical reception yielded a consensus that his innovative style and method have cohered into a migratory aesthetic characterized by incessant flows, movements, resonances, intersections, disruptions, and reconnections across boundaries of all kinds.

Most noticeable of all is Julien’s strategy of evocative translocality that symbolically engages the massive global flows of human, financial, and technological resources across national and regional borders. An interview with him carrying the title “Not Global, Trans-local” is not meant to deny the global as a prevailing condition of contemporary life but, rather, to envision the translocal as an effective way of interrogating the global. In Ten Thousand Waves, Julien repeatedly evokes translocality by means of the dominant water motif and star performance, both of which further enhance displacement and vulnerability as two recurring themes in his recent oeuvre.

Ten Thousand Waves opens with the ominous pitch-dark scene of the merciless sea, where the sense of vulnerability is dramatized not only by the pounding waves (CGI manufactured) but also by the mechanical sounds of the rescue helicopter and the barely decipherable voices of an emergency call to the police dispatcher. Julien’s inclusion of the rescue footage intensifies a precarious sense of reality. And he is quick to point out the relevance of the incident to a global situation of labor migration: twenty-three migrant workers from China’s southeast coastal province of Fujian who came to England in search of a “better life” but perished in Morecambe Bay in 2004 belong to what Julien calls “displaced people: those pushed or pulled around the globe by the flow of global capital.”

The translocal connection between Morecambe Bay and Fujian is first established by Julien’s water motif, and its multiple signification is further expounded in the 2010 ShangART Gallery (香格納畫廊) brochure: “as the symbol of danger, trade, modernity, mystery, and economic forces” and as “a metaphor for migration, seafaring, relocation, commercial ventures, and economic uniformity,” the water motif is intended to encourage the viewer’s “contemplation of a global significance.” Once the themes of vulnerability and displacement are introduced through the images of turbulent waters and the rescue footage, Julien proceeds to pursue another translocal link from the Chinese victims’ hometown, Fujian, to the legend of Mazu (literally “Mother-Ancestor”).
Widely worshipped by coastal communities in southeast China on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, Mazu is a patron goddess who is believed to fly over the sea and rescue fishermen in danger. Mazu's flight thus brings the viewer from the dark, drab scene of Morecambe Bay to an idyllic landscape of rural south China in a segment titled “The Tale of Yishan Island.” Here, Mazu hovers above a group of male laborers as they walk through a colorful field and a rocky hillside and rest in a lush-green bamboo grove. These gorgeous scenes are followed by another one featuring a small boat sailing amidst misty fogs in a visual style reminiscent of traditional Chinese ink-wash painting (shuimo hua 水墨畫), and all these scenes drive home a sense of peace in nature, in complete opposite to the opening sequence of dangers.

As the camera repeatedly highlights the benevolent looks of Mazu, the viewer gradually comes to realize another translocal link established by the star performance of Maggie Cheung 張曼玉 (1964–) as Mazu. An award-winning, internationally recognized Hong Kong film star, Cheung has taken screen roles in Hong Kong and French cinemas that embody displacement, vulnerability, and multiple identities, for instance, in Song of the Exile 客途秋恨 (Ketu qiuhen; dir. Ann Hui 許鞍華 [1947–], 1990), Comrades: Almost a Love Story 甜蜜蜜 (Tianmimi; dir. Peter Chan 陳可辛 [1962–], 1996), and Irma Vep (dir. Olivier Assayas [1955–], 1996). In Julien’s opinion, Cheung “brings with her a whole cinematic, historical legacy that’s connected to her performance.”

Star performance generates a certain “trans-textural quality.” Julien thus describes Vanessa Myrie, who is cast in his works, such as Baltimore (19 minutes, three-screen installation, 2003) and Western Union: Small Boats (18 minutes, 16mm film, five-screen installation, 2007): “She is always a sort of witness... or she is a sort of Walter Benjamin-like character, an angel of history. ... Trespassing from one location or film into another, she represents the cosmopolitan subject transversing different locations like a nomad.” Again, Julien seeks to establish translocality by transversing across places and films, and he intends the star’s nomadic movement to be an act of trespassing, an unauthorized entry into an otherwise inaccessible or unpredictable location.

Interestingly, Julien likewise evokes Benjamin’s vision when he discusses Maggie Cheung’s role as Mazu: “I don’t want to say that the Mazu character is an Angel of History because I want to look at the Chinese mythology on its own terms, but perhaps one could see a correlation.” The correlation here is made possible by Julien’s strategy of evocative translocality, which links China to England, compares Mazu to an Angel of History, and stages the acts of transversing as characteristic of both the cosmopolitan subject and the legendary Mazu. Indeed, the cosmopolitan potential is realized translocally via the trope of flight in the Shanghai segment of Ten Thousand Waves, in which Mazu suddenly appears from nowhere outside the glass windows of Pudong Hyatt Hotel, gracefully glides...
over the high-rise buildings in this futuristic Shanghai financial district, and
silently bears witness to the enormous transformation in contemporary China. 
Does Mazu here represent an idyllic rural view incompatible with a cosmopolitan
urban vision? Or does Maggie Cheung suggest a Hong Kong perspective that has
been transplanted or even surpassed by a supramodern Shanghai? As is typical of
Julien, he leaves his viewers to formulate their own answers to any questions they
may pose in his consistently evocative and ambivalent images.

Julien’s casting of Zhao Tao (1977–) creates yet another translocal linkage. A recognizable muse in most of Jia Zhangke’s films, Zhao’s screen images evoke not so much cosmopolitanism—which is emblematic of Maggie Cheung’s Hong Kong identity—as localism in China’s hinterland towns in Shanxi Province. By casting Zhao as a prostitute reenacting a famous scene in Goddess 神女 (Shennü; dir. Wu Yonggang 吳永剛 [1907–82], 1934) played by Ruan Lingyu 阮玲玉 (1910–35), a tragic star in China’s silent movie era, Julien not only alludes to the translocal connections of Shanghai to other places but also intends to project fluidity onto such translocality. Just as the fluidity of identities is locatable in Maggie Cheung’s star performance both as Mazu in Ten Thousand Waves and as Ruan Lingyu in a Hong Kong biopic, Center Stage 阮玲玉 (Ruan Lingyu; dir. Stanley Kwan 關錦鵬 [1957–], 1991), the fluid identities of Zhao as a prostitute in 1930s Shanghai and contemporary Shanghai (where she meets a male lover played by Yang Fudong 杨福東 [1971–], a world-renowned Chinese video installation artist who has exhibited works alongside Julien’s) result in a layering of temporality and sexuality on top of spatiality and locality. In contrast to the plain white color Mazu/Maggie Cheung wears in Ten Thousand Waves, Zhao showcases both her colorful fashions and Julien’s meticulous mise-en-scène as she paces along a 1930s Shanghai alleyway, sits in a saloon with retro European-style furniture or a gaudy traditional Chinese-style teahouse, and waits in a luxury hotel room with high glass windows looking out to a futuristic Pudong cityscape, with the eighty-eight-story Jin Mao Tower (Jinmao dasha 金茂大厦) as a centerpiece.

Furthermore, Julien builds in another layer of fluidity by revealing a nameless actress as a studio stand-in for Maggie Cheung’s Mazu. Julien’s deliberate revelation of cinematic apparatuses (e.g., cables, wires, lights, the green screen) in shooting Mazu’s gracious flights in this otherwise unsavory studio scene specifically interrogates nostalgia as a self-indulgent structure of feeling in contemporary Shanghai and Hong Kong and encourages a self-reflexive postnostalgic mode of urban imagination that both satisfies the need for nostalgia and exposes such nostalgia to be staged and consumed. Commenting on nostalgia cinema in Hong Kong, Ackbar Abbas reminds us that nostalgia “is not the return of past memory: it is the return of memory to the past.” Similarly, Rey Chow clarifies that nostalgia is “most acutely felt not as an attempt to return to the past as such,
but as an effect of temporal dislocation—of something having been displaced in
time.” As Julien illustrates in the studio scene in *Ten Thousand Waves*, there is
no such a thing as “the past as such” or “past memory” per se for Old Shanghai;
instead, what we see is something displaced in time and space, the cinematic
attempt to direct our attention to the past, and the postnostalgic mode of revealing
how nostalgia, both as the object of desire and the process of desiring, works
via the tropes of displacement and reenactment.

The star performances of both Maggie Cheung and Zhao Tao further con-
firm Julien’s intention: “When I choose performers for my work I am interested
in the many layers, resonances, and associations they can bring to the project.”
In *Ten Thousand Waves*, Julien may have succeeded in producing what Mulvey
describes as a special type of dialectic that opens “the realities of history, geogra-
phy, politics, and economics into fiction, legend, and myth.” Julien’s projection
of evocative translocality has enabled him to play with the fluidity of conceptual
boundaries—realities, dreams, memories—as well as that of individual identities
and cultural resonances. However, a crucial question remains as to how Julien’s
audiences perceive and receive his projected realities, dreams, and memories. To
explore the complexities of such perception and reception in relation to Julien’s
work, I now turn to his innovative ways of mobilizing spectatorship.

**Mobilizing Spectatorship: Ambivalent Looks, Gazes, Glances**

Scholars have realized that spectators of Julien’s work in a gallery or museum
are radically different from the audience in a movie theater simply because the
former must move around and therefore deserve a new name. Chris Darke calls
them *ambulant spectators*, while Julien himself prefers the *mobile spectator* or
*mobile spectatorship*. Julien intends his nine-screen installation to create a “hap-
tic relationship” between spectator and image, and given the spectator’s “sculp-
tural relationship to space,” he or she must move around in the gallery and thus
becomes “the observer in motion,” whose movement marks an “indeterminate
trajectory that is at once scopic and physical.” The mobile spectator’s trajectory
is indeterminate because he or she can choose to walk, stand, sit, or even lie down
on the floor. As one critic observes, precisely because his “moving images phys-
ically and emotionally move people,” Julien “transforms the exhibitionary realm
into one of mobilized participation rather than stagnant reflection.” Nonetheless,
I believe that Julien might have been carried away when he commented on
the mobile spectatorship of *Ten Thousand Waves* as seen at ShangART: “That
physical integration creates its own mise-en-scène, an absorbing but somewhat
uncomfortable experience—like immigration itself.”

Julien’s fancy leap from mobile spectatorship to global migration is unpersua-
sive because it glosses over a wide spectrum of differences (especially economic
and legal), but we should acknowledge the physicality required of his spectators
and subsequent changes in their scopic field during the exhibition. With multiple double-sided screens positioned at different angles, heights, and distances, the spectator's act of looking “is made to move across, to scan laterally, to ricochet between images” — images that are projected on several screens at slightly varied intervals or at times jarringly out of sync. Mulvey characterizes Julien’s mobile spectatorship this way: “The spectator’s gaze has mutated into a series of glances, always prepared to be caught, to pause, and then restlessly move on. Attention is not so much distracted as divided, and simultaneity coexists with sequence.” Mulvey’s differentiation of the gaze as structured by cinema and glances as restructured by film installation is illuminating because glances can be directed to any direction and are therefore freed from the authorial control.

In Darke’s opinion, Julien’s installation work succeeds in mounting “an effective combination of direct, frontal looks-to-camera and glancing ‘unmatched’ looks, converging in the territory of the spectator.” The spectator now constitutes the locus of meanings. Rather than the typical shot/reverse shot sequence in cinema, the fragmentation of images and segmentation of stories in Julien’s installation result in a “kaleidoscopic confluence of looks and gazes,” so much so that “the ‘look’ becomes the index of desire, of conflict, of misidentification.” I would add that, in Ten Thousand Waves, Mazu/Maggie Cheung’s multivalent looks—at once anxious, sorrowful, compassionate, and benevolent—are precisely such an index of desire and conflict, and so are Zhao Tao’s looks of sadness, perplexity, eagerness, and complacency. Such looks specifically challenge the absent presence of the off-screen spectator and turns “the gaze back on the spectator” to the extent that he or she is “constantly made aware of looking and of being looked at, of desiring and of the object of desire.” In short, by mobilizing spectatorship, Julien has choreographed viewers, along with images, sounds, and spaces, as integral parts of his multiscreen installation in various exhibition venues.

Theoretically, Julien seems willing to grant agency to his viewers by mobilizing their spectatorship. Indeed, he recognizes that “spectators are quite greedy” due to their “scopophilic investment” and their desire to “see more and more,” so he feeds them more and more to see. Typically, Julien creates “a lush sensory experience” that is “simultaneously immersive and fragmented”—“immersive” so as to satisfy the viewers’ desire to see and indulge in images, but “fragmented” so as to frustrate their desire from time to time and thereby increase their desire to desire more. This is how Julien envisions it as working: “I’m very interested in seducing audiences into scenarios or tableau that they might not usually be drawn to or interested in. So I want to deploy beauty to perform as a quality of critique.”

Nevertheless, I contend that a gap still exists between beauty and critique, between pleasure and politics, and between intention and reception, even though most scholars have accepted Julien’s use of kaleidoscopic beauty and excess in his installation, as expressed by Darke: “In Julien’s work for the gallery a sensual

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concern with sound, color and movement lures the spectator into a critical engagement with the image and with the very terms of moving-image representation. Pleasure is at the heart of the politics of this work, *beauty a quality of critique.*54 The nearly verbatim repetition of “beauty . . . a quality of critique” by Darke and Julien, published respectively in 2001 and 2002, raises the question of proximity—if not complicity—between the artist and scholars. After all, most of the scholars who have published favorably on Julien do so either in the format of their interviews with the artist or in essays collected for Julien’s exhibition catalogs, and many of them share Julien’s commitment to crossing boundaries of various kinds. Such publication occasions and shared commitment may have placed scholars in a position of declared solidarity whereby they feel obliged to substantiate Julien’s artistic intentions and to illustrate what his installation means, or should mean, to general viewers, especially when a work like *Ten Thousand Waves* is replete with ambivalent looks, gazes, and glances. Precisely due to such consistent ambivalences in Julien’s work, I suggest that we should avoid the facile assumption that his intended critique works all the time; instead, we should go a step further and reevaluate how his critique works in actual reception, particularly in a cross-cultural context.

**Problematising Reception: The Ethnic Spectator’s Dilemma**

Complicated by its innovative mobile spectatorship, *Ten Thousand Waves* demonstrates that there is no secure viewing position for the spectator as an insulated subject, because the spectator is always already caught in the act of seeing and being seen by the self and the other, caught in the very moment of becoming, as Julien anticipates, a critical spectator in the age of globalization. As mentioned above, academic viewers have predominantly accepted—and even elaborated on—Julien’s viewing positions. But how do general viewers position themselves vis-à-vis Julien’s ways of seeing China in *Ten Thousand Waves*? To answer this question, I now turn to five cases of reception by ethnic Chinese viewers, respectively situated in East Asia, West Europe, and North America.55

The first case is a Chinese article posted on the popular Douban dianying (Douban Movies) website in China and based on the ShangART Gallery exhibit between May and June in 2010. Clearly, the author endorses Julien’s connection of China to globalization and agrees that *Ten Thousand Waves* captures changes in Shanghai as seen from Mazu’s perspective: “The rapid transformation of the city becomes the metaphor for the profound clashes of people, politics, histories, cultures, economies, and ideologies amidst the tides of ‘globalization,’ so ‘Mazu’ and ‘summoning of souls’ represent struggles, expectations, and redemptions at the cultural and spiritual levels in this inevitable process” of globalization.56 The second case is a Chinese article posted on China’s Sina.com blogs 新浪博客 (Xinlang boke) and based on New York’s Museum of Modern Art
exhibit from November 2013 to February 2014. Here, the author identifies with the theme of displacement—“as if you were right there to accompany Maggie Cheung’s entanglement with human miseries or Zhao Tao’s experience of lost souls”—and comments on nostalgia as articulated in Zhao Tao’s tram ride through the studio sets of Old Shanghai: “You can no longer afford to smile; rather, you feel sorrowful” because the sets are not authentic and the nostalgic desire for the authenticity of bygone days is thus misplaced.57 The intimacy expressed by the author further links the unspoken sorrow of Mazu’s benevolent look to the unspeakable sorrow of Zhao Tao’s two separate goddess roles in Old and New Shanghai.

Contrary to these two cases in line with Julien’s intention, the following three cases interrogate Julien’s viewing positions. Based on the Museum Brandhorst exhibit in Munich, Germany in 2012, a third Chinese article acknowledges Julien’s refreshing mise-en-scène but is concerned with different receptions between Eastern and Western cultures. Even though German art school classmates claimed that they generally understood Ten Thousand Waves,58 the author notices that certain images demanding more background knowledge are beyond their comprehension, such as contrasts between Old Shanghai and New Shanghai (the basis of nostalgia as discussed earlier) or the enigmatic figure of Mazu (associations of miseries and benevolence). In other words, Western viewers may understand formal innovation but have little knowledge of China’s cultural and historical specificities.59

The fourth case is an English review posted on Asian CineVision and based on the Museum of Modern Art exhibit. It challenges Julien’s claim to multiple narratives in the film and opines that “the screens tell a single narrative which can be incomplete if you miss crucial images”; moreover, Julien’s “fractured viewing does not make a better narrative” because “there are too many disparate images to absorb and synthesize.”60 As for Julien’s intended critique, the author sees little of it because “the impact of tragedy at Morecambe Bay is lost amongst all the pretensions of the presentation and the narrative.”61 The fourth case thus contradicts Julien’s prerogative on deploying beauty as a quality of critique.

The fifth case is most critical of Julien’s project. Based on the Boston Museum of Contemporary Art exhibit in March 2012, Wang Zhengxiang’s Chinese article exposes the remnants of orientalism in Julien’s assemblage project, his predictable way of “projecting Oriental images such as Shanghai women dressed in qipao, a flying female knight-errant, street scenes in contemporary China, and unavoidably calligraphy.”62 Wang’s criticism is directed at Julien’s recycled stereotypes: “When it becomes an academic cliche to use femininity versus masculinity or tradition versus modernity to discuss the East versus the West, . . . how could these apparent Oriental images really represent the East?”63 Wang surmises that the viewers of Ten Thousand Waves might be emotionally touched but would not enter a genuine reflection as Julien intends.
Wang’s criticism reminds us that, contrary to Mulvey’s dismissal mentioned earlier, Orientalism is alive and well in the age of globalization, even in the work of an artist internationally celebrated for his audacious confrontation with racial, sexual, and cultural stereotypes. Julien himself categorically rejects any connection to orientalism: “I don’t think my work has anything to do with the ‘specter of Orientalism.’”\(^{64}\) Consciously or not, however, he has chosen exactly those ambivalent figures of China that could be readily received as stereotypical or orientalist. Despite his sympathy for the Morecambe Bay victims, Chinese migrant workers may conjure up Chinese coolies and laundrymen in Hollywood movies. Despite his homage to Chinese silent movies, the enigmatic prostitute from Old Shanghai may hail back to similar Hollywood characters from Hui Fei (played by Anna May Wong 黃柳霜 [1905–61]) in *Shanghai Express* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1932) to Suzie Wong (played by Nancy Kwan 關南施 [1939–]) in *The World of Suzie Wong* (dir. Richard Quine, 1960).\(^ {65}\) What is even more problematic is Julien’s confession: “I’m completely aware of what people are going to think when I’m shooting in a landscape like Guangxi, which has this *Avatar* feel to it. I know it’s got this kind of familiar Orientalist landscape.”\(^ {66}\)

What should we make of Julien’s apparent contradiction in denying the “specter of Orientalism” while admitting his awareness of “Orientalist landscape” in the same interview? Julien’s intention may have been to invoke stereotypes so as to complicate any simple viewing position. Christopher Moore is rather diplomatic in observing that “*Ten Thousand Waves* plays on expectations, with some Chinese audiences complaining about Julien’s use of cultural clichés, not realising that they are deliberate (and sign-posted), and yet Western audiences have sometimes also naively accepted the ‘Orientalism’ as merely aesthetic, and thereby validating the perspective of the ‘orientalist’ other.”\(^ {67}\) Moore’s differentiation between Chinese and Western audiences highlights the presence of orientalism in Julien’s work that has resulted in two opposite receptions (i.e., complaining by some Chinese audiences vs. validation by some Western audiences), but a more critical engagement with Julien should go further to question the artist’s intention in his “deliberate” use of orientalist clichés and its consequences of validating these clichés, deliberately or not.

We may revisit two such signposted scenes of cultural clichés in *Ten Thousand Waves*. First, Zhao Tao is seen sitting in a modern-day teahouse, wearing permed hair, a fashionable qipao, and high-heeled shoes. Yang Fudong sits across a long narrow an 案 (table, a traditional type of furniture rarely used nowadays) and gazes at Zhao. The dubious identities of Zhao as a reincarnated prostitute and Yang as lover notwithstanding, Julien’s orientalist fantasy is unmistakably sign-posted by the chinoiserie of a wall-size decorative painting of a slim peacock goddess flanked by two mythic animals. In the nine-screen installation, at least five screens showing this scene are projected simultaneously, with other two screens
displaying a revolutionary parade from China’s socialist period, and the profusion of red colors—symbolizing passionate desires—on the wall painting in the teahouse scene thus resonates with the red flags and red balloons in the parade scene.68 By a juxtaposition of the spectacles of current consumerism and bygone socialism in these two scenes, Julien signposts Chinese history into a flattened orientalist visual display of aesthetic chinoiserie and political fanaticism.

Second, the problem with Julien’s preference for a picturesque scenery in Guilin 桂林, Guangxi 廣西, is not just its “familiar Orientalist landscape” but also its disregard of authenticity in location shooting. The Guangxi’s scenery is chosen because it looks Chinese (or orientalist) to Western eyes, but arguably no Western viewer—not even Julien as quoted above—would care about the difference between Fujian and Guangxi, two provinces thousands of miles apart. Here, as elsewhere in Ten Thousand Waves, Julien’s evocative translocality is achieved at the expense of glossing over the specific locality of the Mazu legend (i.e., the Pacific coasts along the Taiwan Strait), thereby transforming Mazu into yet another decorative signpost for orientalist viewing pleasure.

Obviously, Julien’s ways of seeing China assume his viewers primarily to be sophisticated Western museum- and moviegoers who are already entrenched in an orientalist viewing position but who are privy to new visual innovations. This assumed viewership creates a dilemma for what Rey Chow describes as the ethnic spectator, “who is caught, in a cross-cultural context, between the gaze that represents her and the image that is supposed to be her.”69 The ethnic spectator is supposed to be lured to see modern China through the eyes of Mazu, but Mazu is presented as an object to be looked at, and her legendary power is nullified as she is objectified as yet another fantastic image of China or Chineseness. To quote one actual ethnic spectator, Julien “confusingly portrays [Mazu] as an observer rather than as the guardian she is supposed to be,”70 thereby depriving Mazu of her power of salvation, which is still widely worshipped in coastal Fujian and Taiwan.

One may defend Julien on the ground that he is too eager to lure “greedy” viewers (his word) with stunning visual beauty and that he has presented robust images of Chinese men and women after all. Nonetheless, the fact remains that he has deliberately recycled stereotypes in Ten Thousand Waves, and a great deal may have been lost in his fragmentary transmission of ambivalent images of China: Why did he select the footage of a parade celebrating rural collectives (hezuoshe 合作社) in the early 1950s rather than a Red Guards parade during the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s?71 What significance is implied by Zhao Tao’s random appearances in places like the Shanghai Oriental Art Center? And what exactly is that elusive “something else” in Julien’s assertion, “Maybe through the stereotype you can try to articulate something else”?72 To say the least, Julien’s use of maybe leaves enough room for us step out of the spell of his migratory aesthetic and to question whether his intended goal of critique through beauty has ever been achieved.
Reevaluating Political Poetics: Of Celebrated Auteur and Nameless Labor

To be sure, Julien is an unusually articulate artist who is well versed in critical theory and contemporary art criticism. In “De Margin and De Center,” his co-authored article published in 1988, Julien recognizes the necessity “to recognize and reckon with the kinds of complexity inherent in the culturally constructed nature of ethnic identities, and the implications this has for the analysis of representational practices.” Working in the same spirit, we may further explore the implications of cross-cultural representation and reckon with the complexity of Julien's migratory aesthetic and mobile spectatorship as constructed in Ten Thousand Waves.

Mulvey uses the term political poetics to describe Julien's effort to deconstruct the trajectory of African slaves migrating across the Atlantic in Paradise Omeros. Rather than delivering a straightforward message, Julien's visual politics is of a different kind in that "his refusal to offer a single, climactic conclusion to the overall project make[s] the viewer an active participant in the way that meaning is constructed." Yet, given the cases of actual reception enumerated above, we should be cautious with a blanket statement like this one: "Foregrounding the importance of the viewer is both an aesthetic and political act on the part of the artist." What is problematic with a wishful yoking of aesthetic and political together in Julien's oeuvre is that the active viewership does not automatically result in his intended political acts. Instead, it is my contention that Julien mobilizes spectators in a distinctively auteurist fashion and seduces them into his multilayered ways of seeing China, which ultimately prove to be predominantly aesthetic and marginally political.

Julien does not hide his auteur-centered position: “My responsibility is to myself and also to what I want to aesthetically explore and experience.” The centrality of I as the auteur is unmistakable here, and so is his preference for the aesthetic over the political, at least in the visual realm. Julien's commitment to aesthetics is so flamboyant that scholars tend to indulge in his signature “phantasmagoric imagination” and “mesmeric effect” and forget to ask how such imagination or effect translates into his intended critique. If it is true that “Julien has consistently argued the mobility of identity, whether measured in terms of race, class, sexuality, or nationality,” then what would have prevented scholars from using the same categories to evaluate the reception of his migratory aesthetic and poetic politics?

Undoubtedly, Ten Thousand Waves demonstrates the potential of artistic intervention in the era of globalization, as well as the sheer beauty digital imaging and installation can produce across continents. I concur with Darke's assessment that, in “Julien's work, the institutionalized space of fine art—the gallery or the museum—becomes a theatre of desire, a repository of history, a resource of memory, as well as a space open to intervention.” Yet again, the unanswered
questions are precisely whose desire, whose history, and whose memory Julien’s aesthetic seeks to capture, reenact, disseminate, preserve, and problematize. As far as *Ten Thousand Waves* is concerned, multiplying viewing positions only complicates different ways of seeing China, and whether these ways prove satisfactory, illuminating, inconsequential, or even frustrating depends on the viewers’ positions variously informed by their identities measured in terms of race, class, sexuality, or nationality.

I have elaborated problems with race and ethnicity in reception above because they, along with sexuality and nationality, are key to Julien’s earlier works, so I now turn to the term *class*. Julien’s portrayal of Chinese laborers is sympathetic, but they remain nameless objects of his sympathy throughout *Ten Thousand Waves*, signposted as an essential image of China along with Mazu and goddesses. In contrast to the centrality of the singular auteur in Julien’s insistence that “my responsibility is to myself,” requiems written by Wang Ping 王屏 (1957–), which were first commissioned by Julien, seek to articulate the plural *we and they* in solidarity with countless migrant workers around the globe, dead or alive, Chinese or not. Here is Wang’s poem dedicated to “Lin Zhi Fang, Yu Hui” 呂芝芳，于慧:

> We know the tolls: 23—Rockaway, NY, 58—Dover, England, 18—Shenzhen, 25—South Korea, and many more
> We know the methods: walk, swim, fly, metal container, back of a lorry, ship’s hold
> We know how they died: starved, raped, dehydrated, drowned, suffocated, homesick, heartsick, worked to death, working to death
> We know we may end up in the same boat.\(^8^1\)

Compared with Julien’s visually enticing images of nameless, voiceless laborers in *Ten Thousand Waves*, Wang’s poem is an equally translocal and perhaps more powerful way of both seeing China in the context of global labor migration and reckoning with its recent human tolls. Albeit less ostentatious, the speaking voice *we* in Wang’s poem is more forthright than Julien’s phantasмагoric and mesmerizing images and sounds.

Julien once proclaimed, “That’s exactly what I’m interested in: making images that cannot be translated into words.”\(^8^2\) Mazu’s multivalent looks are a case in point, as they bespeak the unspeakable—anxiety, sorrow, compassion, and benevolence all at once—and make her resemble, in my view, Bodhisattva 觀音 (Guanyin) in Chinese folk religion more than an Angel of History in Benjamin’s theory. Yet offscreen, words still matter for *Ten Thousand Waves* because this multiyear project started in 2006 when Julien commissioned Wang Ping to write a group of requiems in commemoration of the Chinese victims of Morecambe Bay.\(^8^3\) Both in composition and in recitation, poetry is a reenactment of lost voices, a
summoning of lost souls wandering too far away from home, and a phantom
sonic presence in *Ten Thousand Waves* embodied in Mazu’s solitary flight. Within
Julien’s installation, the recitation of fragments of Wang’s requiems is done in a
muffled, disembodied, lingering voice in a mixture of Chinese and English so as
to generate a series of haunting echoes across the nine screens, thereby further
reducing Mazu to a mere ghostly presence, visually confirmed by her floating
long white gown:

\[
\begin{align*}
Hun hu gui lai! & \quad 魂兮歸來！ \\
Wu yuan you xi! & \quad 無遠遊兮！ \\
Come back, Soul & \quad 歸來吧，孤魂 \\
\ldots & \ldots \\
\text{Ten thousand waves call your name.} & \quad 讓萬頃波浪把你的姓名呼喚
\end{align*}
\]

Here, Wang’s line “call your name” further draws attention to the nameless
condition of much of Chinese migrant labor around the world. Like Chinese male
laborers, the Chinese female stand-in for Maggie Cheung appears on a green
screen and remains silent, gracefully balancing her wired body against a blowing
fan so that her white gown can float as if in midair. Unexpectedly, her nameless
on-screen presence reminds us of other Chinese artists who participated in Julien’s
production but whose names may not have appeared in the film’s credit. Name-
less and voiceless, over one hundred Chinese crew members Julien employed
in producing *Ten Thousand Waves* were forced to be complicit in validating the
remnants of orientalism as the most alluring part of Julien’s auteurist vision. They
were hired to perform behind-the-scene and “below-the-line” skilled craft labor
and to provide technical assistance—from cinematography to location scouting
and art design—in meeting the growing demand for cross-cultural productions
in the international market, including orientalist expectations in this case. As a
nameless labor force, they have contributed to Julien’s “transnational neo-avant-
gardism,” which is characterized by “an almost baroque filmic display of formal-
ist aesthetics and sumptuous, multi-layered cinematography.”

Returning to Julien’s assertion that “I want to deploy beauty to perform as a
quality of critique,” which I problematized earlier, we have seen an abundance of
beauty but little critique in *Ten Thousand Waves*. What exactly does Julien expect
his viewers to critique politically? Illegal migrant labor around the world? UK
politics against immigration? Chinese human traffickers? If so, it is regrettable
that such political potential has been displaced or overwhelmed by Julien’s relent-
less pursuit of visual beauty: “My use of a bricolage of sources and of filmic tex-
tures along with elements of fantasy essentially takes my work into the realm of
the hyperbolic, the realm of myth and legend.” Contrary to Wang Ping’s requiem
dedicated to giving voice to the voiceless and the nameless, Julien’s installation
articulates his auteurist vision and projects fantastic orientalism to the delight of Western spectators but to the dismay of ethnic Chinese viewers. After all, as British critic Mark Nash sees it, “Ten Thousand Waves became a metonym for China. It . . . referred to a series of different ‘Chinas.’ It became naturalized and at the same time distanced.” I would argue that Julien's Chinas may be “naturalized” in alignment with the orientalist way of seeing China, but many ethnic Chinese viewers have found them to be artificial, superficial, and not natural at all. Julien's Chinas are “distanced” for both Western and Chinese viewers as they eventually end up seeing very different Chinas. In a final analysis, what Julien constructs in Ten Thousand Waves is his “hyperbolic” fantasy or “phantasmagoric imagination” of a mythic China, which he spent years to produce with the assistance of a few named artists but a great deal of unacknowledged, nameless, below-the-line skilled craft labor in China.

A culturally sensitive artist, Julien is not entirely unaware of alternatives to his auteurist ways of seeing China: “The artist's intention is, of course, never the final reading. Somebody else might have another.” To conclude this article, I suggest another reading focused on a brief scene in which three male workers walk up from nowhere and wipe off the beautiful calligraphy of “Ten Thousand Waves” in Chinese. Earlier, in an overhead shot, Julien has captured the calligrapher Gong Fagen 鞏法根 (1949–), dressed in white, in his Taiji-like dance move of wielding a large broom-size brush and writing a giant character lang 浪 (waves) on the floor, leaving drops of ink along the way, and thus evoking another instance of the water motif, this time cultural rather than natural. Another shot of Gong writing Chinese title characters on a glass panel is captured from the reverse side. Just as the viewer is attracted to appreciate Gong's beautiful calligraphy projected on multiple screens, the workers come up to wipe it off completely. As Julien remembers, Maggie Cheung was shocked in a screening to see Gong Fagen's “fantastic” calligraphy being wiped off by studio workers. As typical of him, Julien is quick to elaborate on the scene's translocal resonance: “I do see a tabula rosa here in China. Things are being wiped away. But that scene also hacks back to the Chinese immigrants lost—wiped out—in Morecambe Bay.”

Different from Julien's habitual way of reconfirming his auteurist intention, I would draw attention to the nonchalant face of the worker in a closeup shot when he wipes off the calligraphy. In my alternative reading, the very act of the worker wiping off an art piece challenges the viewers, Chinese and Western alike, to contemplate the sheer disjuncture between the ephemeral beauty of art and the unrecognized labor of workers, between the celebrated artist's eloquent statements and their utter irrelevance to nameless laborers, and between the artist's professed desire to represent the other and the other's silent refusal to be represented. Nonchalance is key here because it signifies, however briefly, the indifference of the other in terms of class here. The male laborer does not return
the gaze to claim his agency, if any, for that would imply his willing participation in an artistic exchange; instead, he simply ignores the gaze, the desire of seeing and being seen. Here, he acts as an intruder who trespasses into the sacred space of artistic production and challenges the viewer to see his irrelevant and nameless status anew, as unknowingly relevant to the viewer’s reception of the artistic work and all its intended meanings. In this nonchalant look, Julien’s *Ten Thousand Waves* contains an alternative albeit unintended gesture of undoing its own mythmaking. With this gesture hidden in plain sight, we may imagine other visual and verbal alternatives of wiping off Julien’s and similar orientalist ways of seeing China as fantastic imageries of beauty (both calligraphy and Taiji moves signposted as new chinoiseries) and as mere objects of sympathy—alternatives, that is, of returning to the vision and voice of the other that ultimately lies beyond the reach of Julien’s otherwise mesmerizing and moving film installation.

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**Notes**

1. Venues that exhibited *Ten Thousand Waves* included the Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, Florida (2010); Hayward Gallery, London (2010); Kunsthalle Helsinki (2010); ShangART Gallery, H-Space, Shanghai (2010); Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2011); Brandhorst Museum, Munich (2011); Galerie Ron Mandos, Amsterdam (2012); Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, California (2012); Museum of Modern Art, New York (2013); and Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei (2018). See Frankel, *Isaac Julien*, 241; Livesey, “Waves after Waves,” 32; Molesworth, “Social Welfare and Social Power”; and Mudie, “Framing a New World Order.” Strictly speaking, the gallery film, “the format of multiple-projection installation, is not cinema,” although “cinema remains the horizon against which much installation work has pitted itself during the past decade” (Darke, “Territories,” 79). Since most scholars use both film and installation when referencing *Ten Thousand Waves*, I follow the practice in this article. After all, several of Julien’s works exist in two formats, as a single-screen, 16mm film and as a multiple-screen installation.

2. Williams, *Viewing Positions*.

3. See Johns, *China and the Church*; Witchard, *Thomas Burke’s Dark Chinoiserie*; and Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”.*


5. While filming *The Last Emperor*, Bertolucci made “the effort of seeing things through Chinese eyes” because, in his words, “every time we try to read a Chinese event with our mental structure, we are wrong.” Sklarew et al., *Bertolucci’s “The Last Emperor,”* 50, 45. Similarly, Julien proclaims that he “wanted to look at Chinese culture and an ongoing dialogue with the aesthetic practices of that culture” when he was making *Ten Thousand Waves*. Maerkle, “Not Global,” 101.
“De Margin and De Center” (1988) is an article Julien coauthored for *Screen*, a UK-based academic journal; the article was later collected in Baker, Diawara, and Lindeborg, *Black British*, 194–209. Born in England, Julien grew up in the East End of London with his parents, who had migrated in 1957 to Britain from Saint Lucia, a Caribbean island nation.

The term comes from Kudláček, “Isaac Julien,” 74.


Borysevicz, “China Imagined,” 60.


Julien cofounded Sankofa Film and Video in 1982 before graduating from Saint Martin’s School of Art in London in 1984. He joined the *Screen* editorial board in 1987 and taught at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1995, New York University in 1996, and Harvard University from 1998 to 2002, among others (Frankel, *Isaac Julien*, 232–35, 244). Julien’s celebrated documentary films include *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* (69 minutes, 35mm film, 1996) and *BaadAssss Cinema: A Bold Look at 70’s Blaxploitation Films* (56 minutes, Super 16mm and 35mm film, 2002). His documentary *Looking for Langston* (44 minutes, 16mm film, 1989) won the Teddy Award at the Berlin Film Festival in 1989, and his fiction film *Young Soul Rebels* (105 minutes, 35mm film, 1991) received the Semaine de le Critique Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1991. For Julien’s other honors and awards, see Frankel, *Isaac Julien*, 244; and Julien, “Artist Statement,” 33.

Cork, “Not Waving,” 43.


*Better Life*, an abridged, single-screen version of *Ten Thousand Waves* as well as a Q&A held at the 2011 World Leaders Forum presented by Julien, as a Mellon visiting artist, and Carol Becker, dean of the School of Arts, Columbia University, is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hk550YH-mY&feature=youtu.be&t=59m53s. Better Life was originally the working title for *Ten Thousand Waves*, but Julien changed it after learning it would be the official theme of the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, "Better City, Better Life" (Maerkle, “Not Global,” 100). The abridged version differs significantly from the nine-screen installation not only because it rearranges the nine screens into several split screens in a single large flat screen but also because it prominently features the recitation of Wang Ping’s requiems—in both English and Chinese—and foregrounds Zhao Tao’s goddess character as a witness traversing Shanghai of the 1930s through the socialist years of the 1950s to contemporary Shanghai. Albeit still haunting, the sound effects of both the police rescue and the poetry recitation are much clearer and focused than those in the nine-screen installation, in which sounds are either muffled or distracted by Julien’s characteristically mesmerizing images.

The transcript of the emergency call, with time stamps, is printed in a white font on black papers at the end of Julien, *Ten Thousand Waves*. 
Julien, “Artist Statement,” 933. Twenty-two victims’ pictures, identified by name, appeared in the Guardian (September 15, 2005) and were reproduced in Julien, Ten Thousand Waves, 93.


Julien, Ten Thousand Waves, 106.

“Yishan Island, Mist” is exhibited separately as a 180×240cm Endura Ultra photograph; see Julien, Ten Thousand Waves, 22–23.

Maggie Cheung won the best actress (Silver Bear) award for her role as Ruan Lingyu in Center Stage (阮玲玉; Ruan Lingyu; dir. Stanley Kwan, 關錦鵬 [1957–], 1991) at the Berlin Film Festival in 1992. Among others, she also won the best actress award at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival for Clean (dir. Olivier Assayas, 2004).


Kudláček, “Isaac Julien,” 73.

Ibid., 74.


Ruan Lingyu’s life was tragic because she committed suicide at the height of her career, at the age of twenty-five, in Shanghai in 1935.

For Julien and Yang, see Moore, “Architectural Cinema.”

Zhao Tao is identified as “Blue Goddess” in an Endura Ultra photograph diptych. Julien, Ten Thousand Waves, 15–16.

The saloon is identified as “Glass House” and exhibited separately as a 180×240cm Endura Ultra photograph; see ibid., 24–25, 30–31, 86–87. The Chinese-style teahouse is discussed later.

Conveniently titled “Green Screen Goddess,” it is exhibited separately as a 180×240cm Endura Ultra photograph. Ibid., 18–19, 88.

For Zhao Tao’s role in Jia Zhangke’s postnostalgic representation of Shanghai in I Wish I Knew (海上傳奇; Haishang chuanqi; 2010), see Chiu and Zhang, Chinese-Language Documentaries, 144–47. For the postnostalgic imagination in Hong Kong cinema, see Lee, Hong Kong.

Abbas, Hong Kong, 83. For nostalgia cinema in Hong Kong, see Zhang, Screening China, 263–80.

Chow, Ethics after Idealism, 147.

Frankel, Isaac Julien, 194.


Frankel, Isaac Julien, 184.


Borysevicz, “China Imagined,” 60.

Darke, “Territories,” 80.


Darke, “Territories,” 80.

Ibid., 80.

Bryce, “Rifing on Omeros,” 86.

For different spatial setups for installations of Ten Thousand Waves in Sydney, Shanghai, and Helsinki, see respective diagrams in Julien, Ten Thousand Waves, 45, 64, 74.

Rich, "Long Road," 64, emphasis added.
Darke, "Territories," 81, emphasis added.

For Chinese online sources, I have considered only substantial online reviews of Ten Thousand Waves and have excluded short comments that contain more disparaging words against Julien. As of May 27, 2018, Douban dianying registered 157 comments and rated Julien's film 7 out of 10. Many admit they did not finish the film or could not understand it. A few take the film to be a ghost story or a horror movie, while several describe it as abstract, contrived, biased, exoticizing, and superficial. See Douban dianying, “Wanchonglang.”

The art school in question is most likely Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe (State University of Design, Karlsruhe), where Julien began a professorship of media art in 2008. See ayuartist, “Dongxifang.”

My own experience of presenting earlier drafts of this article confirms such a sheer difference in ethnic receptions between the East and the West. When I presented it in Chinese at East China Normal University in Shanghai in June 2015, Julien's images provoked discomfort, doubt, and even anger. When I presented it in English at the University of California, San Diego in February 2017, his images were greatly appreciated. On both occasions, the audiences were well-educated university faculty and graduate students.

Shiuie, “Review,” n.p. Another Chinese review focused on issues of class found it ironic that, after trashing traditional narratives, Julien's must rely on the narrative of a real-life accident as the inspiration of this project; so, the author further discounts Julien's claim to originality (yoshimi, “Zhege shijie”).

Wang, “Tamen de shijie,” n.p. The female knight-errant here references martial arts movies as a typical Hong Kong film genre in which stars like Maggie Cheung often play action heroines.

Ibid.
Maerkle, “Not Global,” 103.

As one critic takes time to explain in a footnote: “Also, the Chinese word for goddess, 神女 (shénnu) is a euphemism for prostitute (nushén). Thus, Maggie Cheung's role as a goddess doubles as that of prostitute: the mother/goddess overseas [sic] the wellbeing of innocent boy in the film Goddess while Mazu oversees the fishermen in The Tale of Yishu [sic] Island.” Moore, “Architectural Cinema,” 251. The downgrading of Mazu from a widely worshipped patron goddess could not have been more extreme than this eager show of knowledge about China.

The teahouse scene is called “Red Chamber Dream” (Frankel, Isaac Julien, 195), intentionally referencing the classic Chinese novel Dream of the Red Chamber 紅樓夢 (Hong-loumeng) by Cai Xueqin 曹雪芹 (ca. 1715–63).
Chow, Woman and Chinese Modernity, 32.
Julien's reference to “the archival footage of the Cultural Revolution-era parade” (Maerkle, “Not Global,” 102), along with several reviewers' similar references to the Cultural Revolution, is therefore historically inaccurate.
Julien and Mercer, “De Margin and De Center,” 64.
Ibid., 55.
“Phantasmagoric imagination” comes from ibid., 28; “mesmeric effect,” from Bryce, “Riffing on Omeros,” 93.
Darke, “Territories,” 78.
Other than the featured stars, artists, and poet, only a dozen or so Chinese crew members enjoy the privilege of having their names printed in an exhibition catalog, among them Zhao Xiaoshi (director of photography), Tu Xinran (art director), Li Yuan (costume design), Li Hui (makeup design), and Xu Hong (sound recordist). See Julien, Ten Thousand Waves, end matter.
It is crucial to recognize the labor performed by “below-the-line” workers (see Christopherson and Storper, “Effects of Flexible Specialization,” 333), because “the role of labor in international film co-productions is often both misunderstood and underappreciated.” Kokas, Hollywood Made in China, 133.
Maerkle, “Not Global,” 103.
See individual short comments in Douban dianying, “Wanchonglang.”
A separately exhibited Endura Ultra photograph of the shot is titled “Waves.” Julien, Ten Thousand Waves, 17.
Borysevicz, “China Imagined,” 60.

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ayuartist. “Dongxifang zhijian women jiujing neng dudong duoshao” 東西方之間我們究竟能讀懂多少 [How Much We Could Actually Comprehend between the East and the
West]. Douban dianying 豆瓣電影 [Douban Movies], November 26, 2011. movie.douban .com/review/5186583.


yoshimi. “*Zhege shijie meiyou zhongzu, meiyou kouyin, zhiyou jieji*” 這個世界沒有種族，沒有口音，只有階級 [There Are No Races or Accents but Only Classes in This World]. Douban dianying 豆瓣電影 [Douban Movies], March 21, 2015. movie.douban.com /review/7419809.