Whether adapting fiction into film is an art or a science, Chinese directors are good at it.

Since 1995 all eight of Ang Lee’s films have been adaptations, and his results have been nothing short of spectacular: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and *Lust, Caution* (2007), to name just three. Zhang Yimou’s best movies are also adaptations: *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), and *To Live* (1994). In 2002, Dai Sijie took the art of Chinese self-adaptation to new heights when he remade his own award-winning novel *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* into a film. Chen Kaige, Ann Hui, Stanley Kwan, and Hou Xiaoxian (Hou Hsiao-hsien) are a few more brilliant lights in this area.

In spite of this record of achievement, however, there are few comparative studies of Chinese fiction and film. It is easy to find books that offer detailed, sensitive interpretations of film or literature as separate texts, but not ones that put the two together. Why are Chinese literature and cinema still routinely treated as parallel disciplines with distinct aesthetic boundaries?

Over the course of writing this book, I have come to appreciate two reasons why the scarcity of such comparative studies cannot all be attributed to a lack of scholarly interest or academic overspecialization. The first has to do with the inherent difficulty of studying cross-media adaptation of any kind. As theorists of translation and ekphrasis can attest, it is difficult for an observer to establish general principles, rules of thumb, or even minimal best practices for any inter-arts discipline. Besides having many different formal attributes, fiction and film have distinct methods of production (usually an individual writer vs. a collective filming crew), modes of distribution (usually a bookseller vs. a theater), and circumstances of reception (usually solitary
reading vs. public viewing.) The more scientific or universally valid a theory of adaptation seeks to be, the more individual cases it must account for across these fields, and the more it must seek a platonic solution to the question of the commensurability of media. This explains why from the 1940s on the Western canon of adaptation theorists—André Bazin (2000, 2005), George Bluestone (1957), Keith Cohen (1979), Dudley Andrew (1984, 1998), James Naremore (2000), Kamilla Elliot (2003), Robert Stam (2005), Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (2005), and Linda Hutcheon (2006)—drew so heavily on the theoretical resources of hermeneutics, semiotics, structuralism, translation, and narratology. They were eager to discover an analytical paradigm, a grammar, a nuanced yet neutral vocabulary that could describe the origin and transmission of both literary language and cinematic moving images. They were often frustrated, but their impressive insights on how film directors adapt literary phenomena such as narrative, character, style, and mood have left a lasting impression on me and on this book.

A second reason has less to do with medium per se than with the rich, allusive texture of Chinese cultural traditions. Even when understood to be rigorously distinct from each other, modern Chinese literature and cinema are self-evident examples of what Mikhail Bakhtin would call cannibalistic forms: each devours and remixes a wealth of antecedent culture (1992: 33–34). Or, in the structuralist terminology of Gérard Genette, each is transtextual because it always already exists in relationships with a vast horizon of other texts (1997:1). This presents adaptation studies with a serious problem, for if a work of fiction or a film is understood to be embedded in an inexhaustible “formal” tradition of its own—not to mention in other political, historical, artistic, or personal contexts—then it is an infinitely rich artifact of culture long before it reaches the transformative dialectics of being “adapted.” Thus, studies of Chinese adaptation will always run the perilous risk of mixing two infinities.

Given the fact that the cross-fertilization of Chinese film and fiction has radically transformed both fields, however, I believe this is a risk more critics should take. Indeed, an initial attempt or pragmatic primer of some kind, a defense and illustration of at least a few strategies for studying adaptation, is not only warranted but overdue. Here, then, in Table 1 are the examples on which this book is based.

These seven sites, moments, or events of adaptation could be organized and analyzed in many different ways, each with its own integrity and implied assumptions about how cultural materials influence one another or otherwise belong together. A table like this looks very different when it privileges region (China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, overseas), genre (melodrama, martial
arts, romance, autobiography), or chronology (according either to the year of book or film production or to the historical period represented). One can also very productively arrange studies of film adaptation according to reception history, literary or cinematic movement, prominent themes, narrative structures, or sociopolitical impact. There are many other good options.

In fact, since different combinations of factors can become decisive in almost every individual case of adaptation, I think it is a mistake to try to decide the matter in advance. I believe, a fortiori, that because one cannot fix criteria in a general hierarchy, no abstract science for the study of Chinese adaptation is ever likely to form, and so I have adopted in this book an approach that is responsive, descriptive, and ex post facto rather than predictive, prescriptive, or a priori. Instead of yielding to the temptation to impose default frameworks such as region or genre on the empirical messiness of adaptation—though I did try to represent diversity in these areas—I have contented myself with carefully studying seven films that I rank among the best, most influential, and most interesting examples in the modern history of Chinese adaptation. Blending historical contexts with close readings, I have tried to identify and examine some of the richest and most revealing hermeneutic points of contact and divergence between source texts and films. I use the phrase “cultural politics” as an organizing

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<tr>
<th>Fiction Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Writer</th>
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<th>Movie Title</th>
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<td><em>Wives and Concubines</em></td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Su Tong</td>
<td>China</td>
<td><em>Raise the Red Lantern</em></td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Zhang Yimou</td>
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<td><em>Red Rose and White Rose</em></td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Chang, Eileen</td>
<td>China</td>
<td><em>Red Rose / White Rose</em></td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Kwan, Stanley</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
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<td><em>Intersection</em></td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Liu Yichang</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td><em>In the Mood for Love</em></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Wong Kar-wai</td>
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<td><em>Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress</em></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Dai Sijie</td>
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<td><em>Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress</em></td>
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<td><em>A Time to Live, A Time to Kill</em></td>
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<td>Zhu Tianwen</td>
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<td><em>The Personals</em></td>
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<td><em>The Personals</em></td>
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device not because I think of it as a universal framework or “principle of principles,” but because I believe that, loose as it is, it captures much of what I have found to be important and exciting about my chosen examples.

My method is not designed to measure what is “gained” or “lost” in the process of adaptation according to a hypothesized neutral scale, nor does it emphasize platonic or semiotic questions about the commensurability of forms or media. The kinds of questions I ask about each instance of adaptation are different: What are the important factors at play in it? What contexts is it responding to? What is unique or compelling about its style, theme, genre, or narrative? More broadly: what does a given case of adaptation say about Chinese history, art, politics, or culture? To answer such questions it is sometimes crucial to consider form and medium—we will see that genre, in particular, is almost never irrelevant—but often it is just as important to consider representations of gender, race, and class in colonial or postcolonial conditions, psychoanalytic phenomena, auteurial preferences, aesthetic techniques, political history, or anything else that might contribute to the complex cultural politics of Chinese adaptation.

Empirically speaking, gender politics are a prominent feature of many Chinese film adaptations. The topic is on the minds of writers and directors, in their texts and on their screens. In actuality (and this helps explain its prominence), gender politics is almost never only about gender politics if this phrase is construed narrowly to mean the sociohistorical condition of women, the struggle for women’s rights and liberties, or the problem of political status or sexual exploitation. Instead, in the Chinese context the various problems that the May Fourth Movement synopsized as the “woman question” turn out to be frequent—and therefore often ready-made—allegorical loci for interrogating postures of the artist, constructions of nationhood, Confucian philosophy, class conflict, and too many other topics to list in an introduction. Moreover, just as many films make gender politics an unavoidable topic, others make it class or identity politics. From the class war in post-1949 China to the postmodern theorization of multiculturalism, writers and directors thoughtfully investigate paradoxes of bourgeois morality and tensions between regionalism and nationalism.

The seven chapters in this book represent key episodes in the modern history of Chinese film-literature interaction and, taken as a group, open up new possibilities for exploring cultural politics. To introduce the logic of this book in a bit more detail, I provide here some brief chapter descriptions.

Chapter 1, “Wang Dulu and Ang Lee: Artistic Creativity and Sexual Freedom in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,” treats stylistic and philosophi-
cal issues raised in and by one of the world’s best-known Chinese films. Lee’s transformation of Wang’s story sensitively reinterprets narrative situations and character psychology, thereby illustrating the idea shared by many adaptation scholars that narrative is the common ground beneath fiction and film. Bazin, Bluestone, Cohen, Andrew, and others agree that the goal of adaptation is “to simplify and condense a work from which it basically wishes to retain only the main characters and situations” (Bazin 2000: 25).

Yet Lee’s adaptation also does much more. It not only capitalizes on Jen (an irresistible heroine in fiction who becomes even more irresistible on screen) and on a supremely climactic narrative event (leaping off a bridge into the clouds), it also introduces a transcendental style that enables gender politics to figure artistic freedom.

This argument may surprise readers who tend to identify “gender politics” with issues related to the struggle for “gender equality,” an association that has become nearly an equation in much of American feminism. Yet with different stylistic commitments and varying degrees of emphasis, Wang and Lee construct, narrate, and vivify the teenaged martial arts warrior in such a way as to connect the sexual freedoms of women with the creative freedoms of artists. The physical and psychological obstacles Jen faces as she confronts the constraints placed on her—her sex, rank, ideological inheritance, filial piety, jealous enemies—translate the difficulties negotiated by artists in twentieth-century China. Jen’s powerful fighting skills, resourceful imagination, and almost Nietzschean psychological strength open up models for artists seeking new freedoms to interpret, imagine, and narrate.

Chapter 2, “Su Tong and Zhang Yimou: Women’s Places in Raise the Red Lantern,” compares the aesthetic and ideological connections between two mid-1980s movements: Experimental Modernist Fiction writers and Fifth Generation filmmakers. Just like Ang Lee, Zhang Yimou reconstructs Su Tong’s basic plots and characters and reinterprets, for allegorical purposes, the novelist’s attitudes toward Chinese gender politics. The story is set in 1920s China, precisely the decade when the May Fourth Movement pursued a critique of traditional Chinese sexual hierarchy, so the representations of women’s lives in both works participate in debates over national culture and the ongoing dominance of tradition.

Much more than Ang Lee and other “literary” filmmakers, however, Zhang aggressively reworks, one can even say rewrites, the narrative style, imageries, scenes, and symbolic resonances of the source text. The creative force of his critical realist techniques is apparent in the way he adds an entirely new layer of coherent and interpretable symbols—imprisoning
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courtyards, cyclical seasonal changes, lantern-raising rituals, among others—to engineer his critique of China’s traditional sexual oppression. To show the detailed philosophical and aesthetic differences between Zhang’s humanist realism and Su’s modernism, I analyze the reasons why Zhang replaces one of Su’s most developed patterns of imagery—a well in a back garden, symbolically linked to a vast feminine cosmology—with a very different pattern of his own: a dark room on the roof of a building connected to the phallocentric cultural architecture of male domination. Controversial as this may sound, Zhang’s film adaptation is much more culturally conservative than Su’s text.

Chapter 3, “Eileen Chang and Stanley Kwan: Politics and Love in Red Rose (and) White Rose,” adds race to the complications of gender politics. Writing in a lucid, satirical, yet profoundly humanistic style that one could call “postrealist,” Chang illustrates the sexual and ideological confusions of a Western-educated Chinese man, Tong Zhenbao, as he oscillates between two self-images: an exalted manly colonist and an emasculated colonized subject. Chang traces Zhenbao’s attempts to impose order and value on his encounters with four women—a French prostitute, a Eurasian student, an overseas Chinese, and a Shanghainese local—and this serial structure systematically lays bare his inherited traditional Chinese attitudes.

In his adaptation, Kwan—one of the most important directors of the Hong Kong New Wave—picks up on Chang’s fine-grained study of the power relationships involved in seeing and being seen. Both artists creatively manipulate visual metaphors such as lights, roses, mirrors, and architectural spaces to expose the cultural constructedness of physical and emotional experience. In both versions of the story, this stylistic commitment destabilizes the authority of Chinese male perspectives and offers, in their place, models of cultural hybridity. From a technical point of view, Kwan’s fidelity to the movements of Chang’s text is not surprising, for among modern Chinese writers Chang is one of the most adept in cinematic language, especially in matters like point of view, framing, dramatic structure, and mise-en-scène. Not only was she a movie aficionado, she also worked extensively as a film critic and screenwriter. By the same token, Kwan’s appetite for Chinese literature, especially popular fiction, made him one of the most “literary” directors of his generation.

And yet, while Kwan fully understands the feminist style and strength of Chang’s original story, he noticeably streamlines his adaptation by condensing what in Chang is a provocative exposure of racial issues. Political context helps explain these differences: for Chang, the raging wars in the 1940s brought a strong imperative to treat race and sex as equally urgent issues,
and her literary analysis of China’s “sinochauvinism” reveals a nation whose relations with others, and with its own diverse population, often falls into complex and paradoxical traps of antagonism and self-representation. In particular, her expositions of the crises of the Chinese male subject invite readers to rethink widespread, codified definitions of Chineseness. By contrast, Kwan’s overwhelming concern in 1994 was Hong Kong’s imminent return to China in 1997. He borrows from Chang the gendered allegory of interactions between a masculine “fatherland” and feminine “mistresses,” using the sexual hierarchy to present and critique—sometimes openly, sometimes not—key political issues between Hong Kong and China. Many of these issues, of course, are still being negotiated: democracy, individual freedom, cultural diversity, and social mobility. Taken together, Chang’s mixed-media fiction and Kwan’s literary adaptation propose a more diverse and symbiotic future for Chinese culture.

Chapter 4, “Liu Yichang and Wong Kar-wai: The Class Trap in In the Mood for Love,” examines the everyday life of middle-class couples in the thriving capitalist environment of 1960s and 1970s Hong Kong. A melodrama, In the Mood for Love illustrates an aborted romance between two working middle-class people entangled in the hypocritical demands of bourgeois morality. Liu’s story, a modernist piece of novella titled Intersection, records the interior monologues of two different characters—an elderly male Shanghainese immigrant and a young local Hong Kong girl—as they saunter through the maze of Hong Kong’s cityscape and survey the mercantile environment with their restless gaze.

Wong’s film bears little resemblance to the original story and his method of adaptation is the most abstract that I discuss here. He uses what some scholars call “intersecting adaptation,” a style that seeks to show, as Bazin puts it, that “the film is the novel as seen by cinema” (quoted in Andrew 1984: 99). Wong appears to literalize, or radically distill, Liu’s novel into nothing—at least nothing visible—other than three frames containing three separate quotes: the opening shot, an intertitle, and a concluding still. Because of the different plots in the story and the film, the seeming random nature of these quotes generates a kind of fusion of literary and cinematic languages: words as images. Sweeping away concerns about fidelity, mimesis, or other platonic models for adaptation, this technique metaphorically proposes, as Bluestone explains, “two intersecting lines,” where “novel and film meet at a point, then diverge” (1957: 63).

A key to understanding the kinship between Wong and Liu lies in their shared technique of showing how the minds and bodies of their characters are constructed by material goods that come to symbolize their
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constricting class status. Objects like men’s ties, women’s purses and dresses, rice cookers, Western steak, Chinese noodles, and so forth dramatize and historicize the intersection between Hong Kong’s capitalism and the minds of its citizens. It is ultimately no accident that this abstract technique of adaptation finds its home in one of the world’s greatest consumer markets, where bourgeois materialism, middle-class moral constraints, excess, illusion, and disillusionment all help weave the miscegenated social tapestry of Hong Kong.

Chapter 5, “Dai Sijie: Locating the Third Culture in Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress,” explores a paradigmatic East-West and city-country cultural encounter through the lens of a film director adapting his own best-selling novel. Set in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, both the novel and film describe the experience of two urban teenagers sent to the countryside to be re-educated by peasants. An inside-outsider with a unique perspective, Dai writes in French about his intimate but distant Chinese memories and constructs a dialogic picture of China that has a complex, evolving cultural and class makeup. While Dai’s novel highlights, often humorously, divisive and discursive cultural practices—official Communist discourse, antiofficial Western romanticism, and nonofficial local parody, among many others—his film imagines a native land that mitigates class conflicts and nostalgically personifies a magnanimous “China.”

Both Dai’s fiction and his film study the characters’ relationships with the surrounding landscape—a metaphor for China as “native soil”—but they create strikingly different representations. In the novel the first-person narrator internalizes class, cultural, ideological, and sexual conflicts in ways that implicate nature as an accomplice of an oppressive political system that perpetuates the characters’ sufferings. In the film, however, Dai’s objective camera creates a more measured and conciliatory distance between the characters and their environments: as director he specifically turns to long takes and long shots of natural scenery to highlight the tolerance and beauty of the fatherland.

Chapter 6, “Hou Xiaoxian and Zhu Tianwen: Politics and Poetics in A Time to Live, A Time to Die,” moves in the opposite direction from the other chapters, for it is about Zhu Tianwen’s adaptation into literature of a 1985 film by Hou Xiaoxian. A political allegory about Taiwan’s coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s, Hou uses the perspective of a teenage boy whose family emigrates from the mainland to Taiwan in 1948, right before the Communist Revolution in 1949. The comparison between Hou, one of the most influential Taiwanese/Chinese directors today, and Zhu, a preeminent Chinese/Taiwanese woman writer, highlights the “literary
cinematics” of both artists and reveals competing gender and nationalist politics in Taiwan’s multicultural society.

Zhu’s literary adaptation opens up difficult questions of intertextuality, identified by Genette as quotations, plagiarism, allusions, and other forms of “copresence” among two or more texts (1997: 1–2). The special complexity of cross-pollination in this particular adaptation is due to two circumstances: Hou and Zhu are longtime collaborators in both filmmaking and scriptwriting, and both are avid readers of fiction, sharing a taste for Shen Congwen, Eileen Chang, and others. Despite such commonalities, the two artists produce very different aesthetic experiences, as can be seen in the way they differ with regard to perspective, narrative structure, and temporal construction. Zhu’s story creates a form of literary montage that generates a cinematic effect of movement by essentializing a discontinuous temporal structure, while Hou uses an objective camera, long takes, and slow panning shots to approximate still photos and to suggest visual tropes.

Chapter 7, “Chen Yuhui and Chen Guofu: Envisioning Democracy in The Personals,” analyzes Chen Guofu’s popular adaptation of Chen Yuhui’s autobiographical novel The Personals (1992) into a film with the same title (1998). The story allegorizes a woman’s failed pursuit of love and marriage to illustrate Taiwan’s negotiations with its miscegenated postmodern identity as China’s “renegade province,” Japan’s postcolonial partner, and America’s Asian-Pacific protégé. These multiple identities reflect the island state’s ongoing “de-China-fication,” a gradual and almost self-casting process that began after the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was legalized in 1987 and accelerated when the DDP’s Chen Shui Bian was elected president in 2000. The story invites the reader/viewer to scrutinize the democratic cultural diversity of Taipei in the 1990s, but the two versions use very different techniques to do so. Chen Yuhui’s narrative combines fiction with a sociological investigation of human psychology and an anthropological field study, while Chen Guofu’s film blends the traditions of narrative cinema with quasi-documentary reportage.

Exploring a postmodern sensitivity to pastiche, multivalent utterances, and an unreliable narrator, Chen Guofu and Chen Yuhui construct speeches and dialogues as if they were self-deconstructive confessions. Chen Yuhui uses narrative vignettes to envision, on the one hand, a democratic picture of marginalized men responding to a marriage ad, and, on the other, a composite picture of a socially alienated woman who tries to understand herself through a series of interviews. In Chen Guofu’s adaptation, he responds to Chen Yuhui’s dialogues with anatomic close-ups, shot-reverse-shots, and mirrored reflections, all in order to transform the
prosaic interviews into a variety of narrative accounts, including soliloquies, conversations, and audio diaries.

Chinese directors have been borrowing and transforming literary texts for a long time. “You are still a thief today,” says Yu Jiaolong to Luo Xiaohu in Wang Dulu’s *Crouching Tiger*, “so how can I be together with you?” Yu tries to moralize, but banditry is irresistible.