

Queering Kafka in East Asia: Displacement and Différance

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【Abstract】

My presentation discusses how the multimedial representations of the works and person of Franz Kafka, the German-language canon author of modernism, in East Asia product new meanings and images, expressing particularly queer desires. Focusing on the Japanese film *Guilty of Romance*, the Chinese novel *Private Life*, the Japanese novel *Kafka on the shore* and the Hong Kong film *Amphetamine*, I examine the rewriting of Kafka as signifier in the (self-)construction of queer subjectivities and explain this as a special form of trans-cultural travel, characterized by the displacement and différance. Based on the case studies, I argue that the appropriation of the cultural Other marks a strategy to shape the sexual minorities by othering themselves.

I.

In the opening sequence of the Japanese film *Guilty of Romance* (恋の罪), directed by Sono Shion (園子温) and released in 2011, a crime site of murder is exposed to us with its grotesque feature as a love hotel in the district Shibuya in Tokyo. A media shot shows a sidelighted doll in the high school girl uniform before a dimmed wall with red color traces and a large-sized Kanji character. Then, changing into a close shot, the camera focuses on the character which proves to be 城 (しろ castle).



So obvious a typical clue of the crime film as it seems to be, this single word turns out to be directly taken from the Japanese title of Franz Kafka's novel *The Castle* (Das Schloss), which is explicitly presented later in the film. The forceful insertion of the German modern canon work into the flow of images in the film indicates undoubtedly a functionalization of this foreign source in the narration of the fictive happenings in the Japanese society.

The victim, Ozawa Mitsuko (尾沢美津子) is a female professor in Tokyo and prostitutes herself at night on the streets. Her seemingly perverse sexual behaviors show a causal link to

an incestuous desire to her deceased father who rejected her erotic longing in his lifetime. *The Castle* was a present he had given to her, obviously a signal of refusal. As Mitsuko herself explains, she is situated in the status of the protagonist K in the novel who is forbidden to get into the castle, the eagerly yearned goal.



So the reference to Kafka's novel highlights the same binary model of power between an authoritative center which constitutes and strengthens its hegemony by setting taboos and the margined and oppressed subordinates who are constantly expelled from the center. Displayed between the father and daughter, this rigorous hierarchical structure is sexualized and re-inscribed with meanings concerning gender rolls and sexual censorships in the patriarchal order.

Such a castle allegory can also be found in the family life of the parallel-figure Kikuchi Izumi (菊池いずみ), the wife of a bestseller writer Kikuchi Yukio (菊池由紀夫). Her role of housewife is connected with an ascetic style of sexual life, determined by the beloved husband who actually only has sex outside the family. Once again, the patriarchal center of power monopolizes the sexual supremacy by denying the female sexual desire and thus depriving the female partner of any subjectivity and activity in sex.

Yet Kafka's castle is more than a metaphor for the reproduced and perpetuated gender and sexual hierarchy. The verbal emergence of this name, I argue, marks also a turning point which can be seen as the queering moment in the story. By the encounter of Izumi, now a part-time porn actress and Mitsuko who as a prostitute just seeks her clients, the utterance of the shared knowledge about the novel as well as the author engenders promptly a bond between the two, based on their awareness of the common margined and exiled identity in the sexual domain. This alliance to be built partly as a sexual rebel against the heterosexual-patriarchal normativity is itself a reorganization of gender and sex which conceals a homoerotic disposition. The inviting gesture of Mitsuko in this close shot is demonstrated as a seducing one which expresses rather female desire for another woman.



Accompanying Mitsukos sexual practices, Izumi seems also to accept the assignment to be a desiring and desired. So we see here an erotic triangle which enables, as Sedgwick in her queer theory points out, a homoerotic link “as a sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning.”¹ Save that not a male empowerment but an opposite of it is manifested.



In this light, the citation of Kafka’s *Castle* lends the oppressed female a sign, a code, a cant with which they recognize, communicate and confirm their identity of sexual exiled. Accordingly, their indulgence in prostitution as shared sexual acts affronts the normative monogamous, heterosexual-patriarchal system which strives to eliminate the female desire and female subject of desire. By naming the *Castle*, Izumi and Mitsuko refer thus to an oppressive power which is at the same time productive in activating the queer desire and shaping its subjects.

II.

Kafka’s name and another prominent work of his also appear in Chen Ran’s (陈染) sensational novel *A Private Life* (私人生活) which plays a peculiar role in the renewed narration of female identity and subjectivity in contemporary China.

One afternoon, I was sitting on my sofa just about to open a book when I noticed a spider on the ceiling. [...] I remember the book was Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. It was a novel I had read before, about a man who turned into a huge cockroach. But for some reason the work had not struck the passionate chord in me that it did that day. I was wildly excited and agitated.

I read and read. I don’t know whether it was something in the book that had infected me or something else, but suddenly I felt something inside me tugging, or tearing, or flowing, or walking, or crawling, something I could neither place nor identify. I was highly agitated. Finally,

¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: *Between men. English literature and Male homosexual Desire*. New Yor: Columbia UP 1985. P. 27.

I thought that maybe it was masses of little black words scrambling back and forth in my veins like so many insects.

With that, I went to get a pen and some paper so I could copy down all those insectlike words crowding through my veins.

It was from that moment that my life of ceaseless writing began.²

Placed near the end of this Chinese “female bildungsroman”, the reading experience of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (Verwandlung) transforms itself into a self-perception and thus a self-representation of the female protagonist and narrator Ni Niuniu (倪拗拗) and this sheds a retrospective light onto the written life story. The outlined biographical development from her childhood till maturity goes across the great changing periods of China from the late 1970s to the early 1990s and denotes the rise of female subjectivity particularly in the sexual self-consciousness as part of the social liberation in the Post-Mao era. The detailed description of her erotic and sexual experiences which proves to be the central narration of the novel is featured by opening up to possibilities beyond the hetero-normative, monolithic sexuality. Thereby, the demarcation of hetero/homosexual identities is broken through, which is significantly expressed in the illustration of Ni’s masturbation in the last capital:

Then I did something to myself.

Something you only have to imagine and it’s done.

While I was doing this wondrous thing, the two dearest loves of my life flashed through my mind: beautiful but ill-fated Ho, and brilliant and immaculate Yin Nan.

This marvelous combination and sexual confusion operated on two planes.

When my fingers caressed my round, full breasts, in my mind they had already become Ho’s fingers, her exquisitely slender fingers, touching my skin, those two spheres soft as swan’s down ...

[...] Just as it [the hand] reached the deep place covered over with leaves, Yin Nan suddenly stood there rigid, and filled with the spirit of exploration [...]

The experience of beauty and the fulfillment of desire brought perfectly together.³

In this autoerotic scenery, Ni recalls her homo- and heterosexual affairs and merges them in her fantasy into one desired pleasure, projected onto and enjoyed through the body. The female subject with its polyvalent sexualities is literally embodied, that is, generated and performed as a fluid, flexible, unidentifiable and uncontrolled self-image of body.

In regard of this, Chen Ran’s literary reminiscent of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* suggests a usage of the classic alienation narration to serve the representation of an amorphous identity that is

² Chen Ran: *A Private Life*. Translated by Johan Howard-Gibbon. New York: Columbia UP. 2004. P. 187.

³ *Ibid.* P. 208.

queer. The insect-body-image which causes Gregor Samsa's isolation and abandonment from the human world is now transferred to the words coming out from the female body, the carrier of Chen Ran's *écriture féminine* which is aimed at the performative construction of the queer subjectivity. After all, the fatal othering process in Kafka's novella is rewritten for articulating the sexual and mental otherness, "a willful queer solitude that acts through a constellational body"⁴. So the description of the beginning point of the writing inspired by Kafka corresponds with the self-characterization in the opening capital of the novel, indicating an individual being that cannot be defined by gender or sexual norms.

Perhaps what I need is a lover, a man or a woman, young, old, maybe even just a dog. I no longer have any demands or limitations. [...] Because I know that the pursuit of purity is pure stupidity.

[...] Sexuality has never been a problem with me.

My problem is different. I am a fragment in a fragmented age.⁵

III.

The appropriation of Kafka's work in the Japanese film and the Chinese novel I present here denotes a particular fashion of cross-cultural transformation of words and signs. Due to the suggestiveness of theme, plot, figure, constellation of figures, the book title is directly cited as a telling narrative arrangement, an evocative signifier for the queer identities either in the mutual perception or in the self-manifestation. This is not so much an implicit adaption or a parodying simulation of the respective content as a *deplacement* and re-coding. The concerning images and imaginations shaped in the German original texts are detached from the existent assignment and associated with a significant network issuing sexual dissidents in the East Asia. But if we don't take the so-called origin possibilities of the significance as enclosed and unified, we may observe the travelling of Kafka's literary formulations across languages and cultures as part of the continuous process of meaning-production and proliferation. Especially regarding the additional, distinguish semiotic function of such signs marking the narration of queer desires, this transition can be described with Derrida's term of *différance*:

[...] we will designate as *différance* the movement according to which language, or any code, any system of referral in general is constituted "historically" as a weave of differences.⁶

Given the assumption of relativeness and openness of words, signs and literature, the question is not, how the East Asian authors and film directors deploy kind of original Kafka by

⁴ Alvin Ka Hin Wong. Queer Sinophone studies as anti-capitalist critique. Mapping queer kinship in the work of Chen Ran and Wong Bik-wan. In: Queer Sinophone Cultures. Ed. by Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich. New York: Routledge 2014. P. 115.

⁵ Chen Ran: A Private Life. P. 7.

⁶ Jacques Derrida. Margins of Philosophy. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: UP Chicago 1982. P. 11.

integrating his works in a new different context, but rather how the differing and deferring movement which determines every code system anyhow is reinforced in the transcultural rewriting of Kafka's stories as sign. Every such appearance of Kafka as name and code in foreign settings means in this aspect a belatedly assignment of meanings which operates repeatedly with evident differences and makes Kafka what he is or can be.

I will use my third example, actually third and fourth examples combined as one, to trace this signifying through differences. *Amphetamine* (安非他命) is a feature film directed by the Hong Kong director Scud (云翔) which is nominated by Teddy Award at the Berlin International Film Festival of 2010. As its English and Chinese titles imply, this film portrays the tragic life of a drug-taking young man with indefinite sexual orientation. His name: Kafka.

There's no doubt that such a meaningful given name, especially considering its foreignness and oddness in the Asian linguistic context, cannot be chosen arbitrarily and must conceal decisive connections with Kafka from external symbolic systems. The film itself gives clues for that in a striking way. In a conversation in the car trip through the city of Hong Kong, Daniel, who feels himself attracted by the protagonist and wants to know more about him, asks his name. On hearing the name Kafka, his immediate reaction is to link the name to a Japanese novel, *Kafka on the shore* (海辺のカフカ) by Murakami Haruki (村上春树). And then, before the Kafka in Hong Kong responds, he asks another question, whether the other has read Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. This question is highlighted by a simultaneous cut-away motion shot which focuses a poster on a high building: precisely Kafka's name and the title *Metamorphosis* are presented in both Chinese and English language there.



The verbal and visual references to Kafka, respectively as a German language author and as a fictive figure in a Japanese novel, conflate two lines of the intertextual connections into one strand. The highly symbolic term “Kafka” is exactly generated in such a weave of meanings to

be a signal for an ambiguous and alienated identity.

Naming oneself Kafka in order to mark one's own eccentricity *vis-à-vis* the sexual and moral norms counts as Murakami's narrative invention. The fifteen years old protagonist, encouraged by his imagined *alter ego* named Crow, another variation of Kafka-image, strives an outsider-being in his escape from the patriarchal order and experiences sexual contacts with a sisterlike Sakura and a middle-aged Saeki. Although almost opposite to the biographic Franz Kafka who never succeeded in escaping from the patriarchal oppressive power, the Japanese boy Kafka Tamura stresses in a dialog with the librarian Oshima his connection with the former in the same world view:

"Kafka Tamura?"

"That's my name."

"Kind of strange."

"Well, that's my name," I insist.

"I assume you've read some of Kafka's stories?"

I nod. "*The Castle*, and *The Trial*, 'The Metamorphosis,' plus that weird story about an execution device."

"'In the Penal Colony,'" Oshima says. "I love that story. Only Kafka could have written that."

"That's my favorite of his short stories."

[...]

"Why's that?"

[...] "I think what Kafka does is give a purely mechanical explanation of that complex machine in the story, as sort of a substitute for explaining the situation we're in. [...] that's his own device for explaining the kind of lives we lead. [...]"

"That makes sense," Oshima says and lays a hand on my shoulder, the gesture natural, and friendly. "I imagine Franz Kafka would agree with you."⁷

To see his own existence condition in Kafka's term of machine description, feeling the alienating power in the normative society, is what Tamura believes unites him and Kafka. Aside from this identifying, the name of Kafka also plays a role in building an emotional bond between Kafka Tamura and Oshima, the latter a self-proclaimed intersexual: "My body is physically female, but my mind's completely male, [...] My sexual preference is for men. In

⁷ Haruki Murakami. *Kafka on the Shore*. Translated by Philip Gabriel. New York: Vintage 2005. P. 61.

other words, I'm a female but I'm gay."⁸ The shared fascination for Kafka's fiction implies an at least latent desire for each other which is also hinted by the bodily contact. Moreover, the design of figure Oshima as a sexual outlaw corresponds to the creation of the male youth named Kafka who seeks for an identity outside the normative patriarchal male-dominated system.

However, this lengthy novel with its double plots as a whole is rather a retold Oedipus-story about the incestuous fantasy and violent impulse as extraordinary adolescent experiences. The title "Kafka on the shore" is also the name given to a song and thus a painting by Saeki who might be the mother of Tamura. So a multiply recoding and reconfiguration is at work in the narrative web of meanings under the same name. Nevertheless, it is the takeover of the name Kafka for self-assertion of an unconformable subject that makes a remarkable node in the chain of the *différance*.

Scud's queer film *Amphetamine* seems to continue this naming as a performative act for producing alternative subjectivity and identity. Yet the loose connection with the queer affections in *Kafka on the shore* is shifted into an emphatic representation of queer desires, which makes the difference. Characteristically, the film narration visualizes another textual resource from Franz Kafka to suggest a more distinct queer image: Grego Samsa's position between human and insect being, a non-identity which finds nowhere to locate itself and is being expelled and discriminated by the normativity. So Daniel's question about the name and his following decipherment of it by referring to Murakami and *Metamorphosis* effect an interpellation which constitutes Kafka's queer identity. At the same time, this conversation is also the starting point of the homosexual relationship between the two. However, Kafka's recognition and fulfilling of his own desire for this homosexual partner is distorted by his trauma memory of being raped and his onward heterosexual behaviors. Addicted to drugs like amphetamine, he seeks in intoxication, analog with Grego Samsa in the shape of monstrous insect, an escape where there's no one. Such a self-imagination mixed with self-othering, self-hatred, passion and longing is expressively modeled in the climate scene of the film showing the protagonist Kafka in his nude male body, silver-powdered, equipped with fake wings. Erected in the height, against a backdrop view of the metropolis Hong Kong, this body offers a spectacular Asian version of metamorphosis of signs and images under the name Kafka, iconic of the queer self, the destined outsider, the perpetuated escaper.



⁸ Ibid. P. 189-190.

Conclusion:

The preoccupation of Franz Kafka in east Asia is to be ascribed not only to the aura of the kafakesque writing about oppressive and alienating power of state, system, order etc., but also to diverse drives to articulate and represent one's own fears and desires. Making Kafka a signifier for queer desires and identities which can disturb, challenge and problematize the regulation machinery of the patriarchal heteronormativity, is of course only one of the possibilities of transcultural connection. But a definitely remarkable one. The explicit references to Kafka, as we have seen in the examples of the Chinese and Japanese films and fictions, is recreation of a significance chain with differences surrounding the name and sign Kafka. To speak out the name of Kafka and his works, to name a Japanese or Hong Kong boy Kafka, that is, to import the cultural Other into the narrative construction of images and identities, can be also understood as an intended rupture of the Chinese and Japanese systems of words, signs and codes. Consequently, the otherness of sexual dissidents and minorities is formulated and uttered in a striking and impressing way.

Rewriting Kafka in this fashion, therefore, is queering the East Asian society itself.