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China redux: The central frontiers of the modern nation in Chinese cinema

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Cover Page



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Introduction

Three Moments of Chinese Cinema

This study advances a new interpretation on the national formation of modern China through the lens of Chinese cinema. To illustrate my emphases in the study, this introduction will be punctuated by my reflections on three contemporary Chinese-language films, namely, *Shadow Magic* (2000), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), and *Hero* (2002). Weaving together my thoughts on these titles, I intend to highlight three key aspects of Chinese cinema—the historical, the national, and the geopolitical. In so doing, this introduction aims to unfold the historical development, national influence, and geopolitical implications of Chinese cinema in the process of China's nation-building. Toward a nuanced understanding of Chinese cinema, this project explores how cinema—a modern invention imported from the West—has shaped China's sociopolitical transition from a dynastic empire to a nation-state. It is argued that, the concurrence of motion picture's arrival and nation-state's advent in China at the turn of the twentieth century, is not to be considered as unrelated threads, but rather as a dialectical dynamism in which the imagined community of modern China has largely relied on cinema for its symbolic construction, and yet encountered constant resistance from cinematic representation.

The cinematic configuration of the Chinese nation-state, in particular after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, has rested upon a multifocal and intersectional vision of society, featuring characters such as children, women, ethnic minorities, and diaspora. Although portrayals of these groups have been integral to the symbolic construction of the Chinese nation-state on screen, in reality they have been relegated to the margins of China's culture, society, and territory. This study, so to speak, begins from the recognition of this paradox, in which this range of demographics is marginal in reality but central in imaginary. As such, it sets out to explore the contingencies and contradictions of the collective formation of modern China by delving into the ambiguous relationship between the national and the cinematic. This fraught relationship has been mediated through a series of politically charged social figures, which span a wide range of locations, periods, and dialects in the Sinophone world.

On the one hand, Chinese cinema provides a vantage point from which we can observe how China has ventured into modernity by way of continual negotiations among cultures, languages, and ideologies, drawn from both China and the West. On

the other hand, cinema functions as a contested site of discursive formulation. In cinema, schisms between tradition and modernity, the vernacular and the foreign, the political and the personal are articulated formally—in images, sounds, and narratives. If cinematic images, sounds, and narratives encapsulate the ways in which China has reimagined itself, then, I argue, Chinese cinema can be understood as a vibrant field of signifying practices. Together, these practices have redefined the meaning of China under the auspices of modern technology and institutions. In this sense, the emergence of Chinese cinema not only coincides with the birth of the Chinese nation, but also contributes to how China is conceptualized today.

While situating filmic texts in the context of cross-cultural dialogues between China and the West, this study takes issue with cinematic embodiment against the backdrop of China's nation-building and modernization project. For this purpose, my textual and contextual analyses of selected films foreground a distinct synergy between different forms of cinematic semiosis. Through this synergy, a unified national image emerges from multiple loci of representation. Often dismissed as a complicity between motion picture and the nation, I contend, such symbolization on an extensive scale is much less a coercive measure of state ideology apparatus to interpellate individuals into a political consciousness or a national identity, than an engaged arena where the collective and the individual confront one another. Focusing on this persistent tension between ideological indoctrination and individual expression, my approach endeavors to demonstrate how Chinese cinema has disseminated and propagated the idea of nation, an idea that brackets discrete groups of people while crisscrossing geographical, cultural, and lingual boundaries.

Although Chinese cinema has emerged in resonance with the Chinese nation on various occasions—especially during the socialist era—it is by no means consistent with the authorities' ideological agenda. In fact, on numerous occasions Chinese cinema has directly opposed the governing view of the imagined community, primarily by asserting ordinary people's quotidian experiences. This project, then, intends to unveil Chinese cinema's resilience and resistance in the face of nationalist sentiments. Each of them revolving around a central theme in the symbolic construction of a homogeneous modern nation-state, the following chapters are meant to pry open the veneer of uniformity and lay bare diverse voices and perspectives emerged in Chinese cinema. More importantly, by exposing subversive tendencies emanated from these integral parts, those private moments and intimate encounters will show how the very process of cinematic signification in the name of the nation can be turned against itself.

This study aims to pinpoint the intrinsic, structural fragility of the Chinese nation through the lens of cinema.

Last but not least, my interpretations of Chinese films also involve reflections on the discipline of Chinese cinema studies itself. Through these meditations, I undertake a broad consideration of how these films speak to ideological disparities among contemporary scholars aligned with different geopolitical entities and cultural values. For decades, the discipline has been plagued by ideological confusion and disputes, not least over the definition of Chinese cinema. Scholars remain divided on fundamental issues, such as where to draw the boundaries of Chinese cinema, what kind of film qualifies as a Chinese production, and ultimately what the word “Chinese” stands for. To be sure, the disarray of Chinese cinema studies is more than a competition among conceptual frameworks, but a consequence of realpolitik among Sinophone communities across the globe.¹ It is the power dynamics between China as a centripetal heartland, and other places including Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Tibet as centrifugal borderlands, that perpetuates and extends the dilemmas of the Chinese nation-state into the academic world.

Accordingly, my investigation of Chinese cinema will address current debates over methodology. There are two perspectives to my discussion. First, the quarrel over theoretical approaches to Chinese films results from divergent attitudes toward the notion of Chineseness. Many think that “Chinese” strictly pertains to a territorially bounded sovereign state under communist rule. To this mindset, all Chinese-language films ought to be subsumed under one rubric, Chinese cinema, regardless of their diverse places of origin, forms of speech, and political orientations. Others however view Chineseness as a floating signifier that is not essentially tethered to the geographical, linguistic, cultural, and ethnic borders of the Chinese state. This group adopts a pluralist approach to the study of Chinese films. Breaking up the monolith of Chinese cinema, they distinguish between distinct strands of filmmaking practices and discourses, such as Chinese cinema, Hong Kong cinema, and Taiwanese cinema. Together, these might be alternatively referred to as Chinese cinemas. The multiplicity of theoretical paradigms in the field of Chinese cinema can be partly attributed to these conflicting positions. Second, China’s economy still wields a formidable influence over international politics and global commerce, bending neighboring regions and even distant trading partners to its will. So much so that economic growth has reversed China’s historical geopolitical standing in that this once poverty-stricken nation now dominates developed economies such as Taiwan

and Hong Kong, China's film industry has turned into a trans-regional hub of creative talent and capital investment. It caters not only to China, but a disarray of Chinese-speaking territories at large.

In the wake of China's rise, it is no longer possible for scholars to ignore Chinese cinema's expansion in the wider Sinosphere, even if they concentrate exclusively on films produced either inside or outside China. Whatever ideological positions they endorse, scholars are, more likely, compelled to acknowledge the complexity of Chinese cinema, which operates at once on national and transnational levels. Chinese cinema might be rigidly construed as part of the national enterprise of the People's Republic of China. It is increasingly, however, connected with other Chinese-speaking communities and beyond. As such, Chinese cinema should be recognized as a transnational cinema. What we find in Chinese cinema studies, therefore, is a contention between an inclusive viewpoint, which acknowledges that China's national cinema has a global reach, and an exclusive viewpoint, for which Chinese cinema ends at China's national borders. These two positions are invariably at odds with each other. To indicate the ways in which historical, national, and geopolitical dynamics are implicated and intertwined in Chinese cinema, I now go on to analyze three contemporary Chinese-speaking films.

A Looking Glass into History

The 1905 film *Dingjun Mountain* is widely considered to be the first film ever made in China.² It was created by Ren Qingtai, the owner of a photographic studio who lived in the imperial capital Peking (now Beijing). Cinema arrived at the dawn of China's modern era, as the embattled Qing empire was crumbling in the face of foreign powers and domestic rebels. As a Western invention which had just begun to enjoy its transatlantic popularity, cinema did not immediately stir up questions over its status either as a novel art form or a mass commodity of mechanical reproduction upon its arrival in the withering kingdom. Rather, alongside other Western novelties shipped to Chinese shores, such as photography, radio, and the telephone, cinema amounted to a dialectical dynamism of Chinese modernity which changed how people experience the world, and how they perceive themselves.

Attending to the reception of Western visual instruments (such as moving pictures, X-ray slides, and the microscope) in China at the turn of the twentieth century, Laikwan Pang maintains that these devices "provided and fostered a set of cultural conditions in which the Chinese saw things anew." These "acts of seeing," she

adds, “in turn defined what modernity was” (2007, 1-2). In other words, new Western visual technologies brought about a transformation in China that was not limited to the field of visual perception. It permeated the physical, psychological, and social realms, ushering in “an alluring yet threatening sense of identity that was not available before” (2007, 2). The historical emergence of *Dingjun Mountain* exemplifies how cinema informed the Chinese of alternative realities with technical advances and sensorial thrills, and in the meantime, how cinema prompted people to reinvent their way of life.

Featuring a classic sequence performed by the renowned Peking Opera artist Tan Xinpei, *Dingjun Mountain* is both a silent film and a visual document of traditional Chinese opera.³ Despite being basic in form and content, *Dingjun Mountain* embalms a unique moment in the history of Chinese cinema. It shows that, even in its very beginning, Chinese cinema crisscrossed boundaries—above all boundaries between genres. For instance, David Der-wei Wang has argued that *Dingjun Mountain* is not just the first Chinese film, but also demonstrates how “cinema and Beijing Opera were two of the most popular performing arts in early modern China” (Wang 2015, 271). Tracing elements of traditional opera in Chinese cinema, Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar also present *Dingjun Mountain* as the earliest Chinese “opera film.” This film, they argue, inaugurated continuous attempts on the part of Chinese film practitioners to appropriate “traditional narratives” and thereby “sinicize foreign film technology, creating a syncretic Chinese modernity onscreen as part of the transition from empire to modern nation-state” (2006, 55).⁴

The birth of modern China was at least partly induced by Western imperialism. Against that background, Chinese cinema can be seen as a cultural arena in which the Chinese tried to cope with, and make sense of, the uneven relations involved in the process of China’s nation-building as well as drastic social upheavals. At one stage, films allowed people to envision a possible future in which social differences could be reconciled in much the same way as early Chinese cinema combined vernacular opera and foreign film technology. A relevant question today, however, concerns how cinema enables individuals to negotiate their sense of self in modern China, that is, how it allows them to come to terms with the changing circumstances of personal existence in the larger context of nation-building. In fact, the tension between selfhood and nationhood remains a potential flashpoint—a fraught interface along which political unrest and ideological clashes have often erupted as China has modernized. Cinema thus offers a prism through which to examine such episodes of crisis. Cinema is uniquely well poised to do so, I argue, for it has occupied an

intermediate position between the national and the individual ever since cinema emerged in China in the final years of the nineteenth century. As this study shows, Chinese cinema has both served as a propagandistic instrument through which ruling powers have sought to legitimize themselves *and* articulates the quotidian lives, subjective feelings, and desires of ordinary people.

Nearly a century after it appeared, Chinese-American filmmaker Ann Hu paid homage to *Dingjun Mountain* with her own directorial debut, *Shadow Magic* (2006). *Shadow Magic* is a fictional reconstruction of the origins of Chinese cinema based on historical figures and events. It is both a love letter to cinema, which has travelled the world to enchant innumerable peoples, and an ode to the unsung heroes who paved the way for the development of cinema in China.⁵ Contrary to expectations, Hu's film does not foreground Ren Qingtai, the much-celebrated owner of an early film studio. In an imaginative twist, she shifts the focus of the narrative onto Ren's lesser-known protégé, Liu Jinglun. A receptive and energetic young man, Liu is portrayed as already well-versed in the use of photographic equipment and always keen to expand his knowledge. He is on a self-assigned mission to bring motion pictures to Chinese audiences. Still, this is no isolated endeavor: Hu's depiction of Liu Jinglun emphasizes his interactions with other men. These include Master Ren, his mentor and employer; Old Liu, his father; Lord Tan, an iconic performer in Peking opera with whose daughter Liu falls in love; and Raymond Wallace, a British businessman who hopes to establish a lucrative trade in moving image projectors, which he imports to Peking from the UK.

While providing a vivid image of how Western ideas and practices—in particular filmmaking—spread through late imperial China, *Shadow Magic* presents early Chinese cinema as not merely a foreign import, but the result of cross-cultural transaction. Bound up with the broader transformations wrought by China's modernization, cinema emerged as a dynamic locus of transcultural exchange. In generating new ways of approaching reality, it stimulated people to cultivate correspondingly new forms of identity. In this regard, I would like to introduce Emilie Yeh's observations concerning early cinema's repercussions in Hong Kong and Taipei, both of which were subjected to colonial rule following the Qing government's military defeats at the hands of the British and Japanese empires:

A newly arrived cinema is a colonial tool and technology par excellence.
Motion pictures come from the West, from capitals like Paris, London, and

New York; they carry novelty, a marvel that combines virtues of photography and projected imagery, of which we can choose phantasmagoria or magic lantern slides as prime examples. It prompts amazement and wonder, due to accurately reproduced motion of the subjects captured, and multiplied by the reaction of many others sitting nearby in the hall. Cinema, with a sensitive operator, could be a powerful collective reinscription of the scenes for a new century. (Yeh 2018, 5)

Yeh's observation resonates with Hu's film, which emphasizes the significant role that cinema played in the city of Peking. Echoing Yeh's remark, the protagonist Liu Jinglun is presented as being acquainted with photography already. Furthermore, *Shadow Magic* shows how moving images were being exhibited to rapt audiences at the beginning of the twentieth century. In colonial Hong Kong and Taipei, cinema may have served as "a means of forging an imagined cosmopolitan identity for colonized subjects," which gradually shifted their sense of belonging so much so that they became citizens of foreign empires (Yeh 2018, 5). Cinema in the heartland of modern China, in contrast, prompted individuals to reimagine themselves. No longer feudal subjects in a Chinese empire, people saw their horizons expand and open up to a wider world. In *Shadow Magic*, Liu epitomizes cinema's transformative power. In enthusiastically embracing Western technologies such as photography and cinema, he struggles to navigate his relations with other male characters who hold a range of opinions on motion pictures. Given that they share the same faith in cinema, Liu secretly joins Raymond's venture as a projectionist. A champion of Peking opera, Lord Tan sees cinema as a threat. Although practically invested in photography, Master Ren rebuffs Liu's conviction that cinema heralds a bright future. Moreover, he rejects Liu's proposal that the photographic studio could benefit from branching out into motion pictures. Upon hearing that Liu's has fallen out with Master Ren, Old Liu compels his son to leave the household.

When most of these characters cross paths in the Forbidden City, the escalating tensions surrounding Liu Jinglun come to head. As part of the celebrations for her seventieth birthday, the Empress Dowager Cixi invites Liu, Raymond, Ren, and Tan all to present their specialties. Everything runs smoothly until the projector explodes during film screening, injuring Liu and leading to Raymond's deportation. With a wounded leg and a stranded hope, Liu's passion for motion pictures is only reinvigorated when he receives a letter from Raymond, who sends him raw footage

that they had once made together. Fortified by Raymond's encouragement, Liu restores the damaged projector and makes plans to screen films again. Meanwhile, Old Liu has a change of heart and decides to help his son renew the projector lens using his own eyeglasses. On the night of the first screening, the locals gaze in amazement at the faces and landscapes onscreen. At the same time, Tan Xiaoling, Lord Tan's daughter, arrives. In the projection room, Liu and Tan finally reveal their feelings for each other, and kiss. The film ends with captions telling us that later on, Liu and Ren will collaborate on the first Chinese film, *Dingjun Mountain*, in which Tan will perform.

Shadow Magic tells the story of early cinema in China through the lens of the protagonist's shifting personal fortunes. This film, in Laikwan Pang's words, delineates how "the Chinese people first responded to imported images like lithography, photography, cinema, or spectacular theatrical settings with awe, yet they also had their own ways of coming to terms with the overwhelming effects of these spectacles" (2007, 7). Set at a time when cinema was still a novelty, *Shadow Magic* creates an array of characters whose fields of interest range from traditional opera (Lord Tan), through photography (Master Ren), to cinema (Liu Jinglun). By reenacting a historical event (the making of the first Chinese film), the narrative dramatically plays these conflicting attitudes toward cinema off against each other. As Carlos Rojas had noted, the protagonist's position amid the other characters not only foregrounds differences between "representational forms and practices." Moreover, it allows Hu to indicate how the characters' different stances boil down to a dispute among "distinct modes of *seeing*" (2013, 10; original emphasis). Above all, Ann Hu's historical fiction focuses on the politics of visibility. The film is concerned less with "the powerful West seeing the powerless China so much as the Chinese people seeing their new but fragile selves emerge in the face of a drastically new modern commodified environment, newly imported ideologies, and transformed everyday life" (Pang 2007, 3).

Besides Raymond, his British friend, Liu is the only character who is determined to develop cinema in China. Accordingly, the rapprochement between these Chinese men signals cinema's vicissitude in modern China. The final realization of the first Chinese movie suggests that these characters have engaged with cinema in one way or another. Together, they have "mediated cinema as a new invention from abroad and facilitated its local practice, forecasting its eventual Chinese indigenization" (Yeh 2018, 10). Through their varying associations with cinema, Liu Jinglun and his cohort are not passive spectators but active participants who retain

their subjectivity in realigning their sense of self with the changing circumstances. The making of *Dingjun Mountain* reveals that “what the Chinese ultimately wished to see was not simply a new self or a new world, but a new self placed within this new world, which was a public and collective experience,” whether that be in fiction, reality, or both (Pang 2007, 5). Despite the differences among the characters, *Shadow Magic* depicts cinema as an opportunity to merge different interests into a composite art form. As the prototype of Chinese cinema, *Dingjun Mountain* sutures Western techniques with Chinese aesthetics. In this way, cinema became a bridge between cultures—“an imagined space” between images, ideas, and locales, as Rojas puts it (2013, 1). But more importantly, it allows people to assume a subject position with respect to a wider social order and formulate an identity in the realm of cultural imaginary. As I continue to discuss, though, cinema is more than an imagined space in which individuals are able to reimagine themselves. Beyond that, it is also the imagined ground on which a national community is both constructed and contested.

Spectacles of the Nation

As *Shadow Magic* demonstrates, Chinese cinema is a nodal point around which individual existence, interpersonal interaction, and collective experience revolve. In the transition from late imperial to twentieth-century China, I argue, Chinese cinema is defined by the fraught relationship between the individual and the collective. In fact, cinema has fluctuated between the personal and the political throughout the process of Chinese nation-building. This tension has to do with what I term China’s *central frontiers*. The tension between individuality and collectivity in Chinese cinema derived from the historical drive to create a unified nation-state so as to withstand both internal and foreign threats. As part of their nation-building efforts, social elites and intellectuals fostered the emergence of a national cinema. Tasked with inculcating a shared sense of belonging to the nation-state, a suite of new filmic texts were to embody the politics and morality of Chinese nationalism.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that the definition of Chinese nation (and thus also the purpose of national cinema) has varied radically due to a series of regime changes over the course of China’s modernization. The concept of Chinese national cinema, in other words, is historically variable, developing in relation to successive administrations’ shifting ideological agendas and cultural policies. In studying it, therefore, scholars attend closely to the particular social and political conditions in which it is received. The import of Chinese films bifurcates as they play

out in specific cultural contexts. At one level, Chinese cinema often amounts to a propaganda vehicle in that it attempts to cement forms of national identity and political allegiance. At another, though, it also galvanizes individuals into realizing their artistic and intellectual freedoms against collective consciousness. The double-sidedness of Chinese cinema is borne out if we compare it to Benedict Anderson's grasp of the nation as "an imagined political community" that is "both inherently limited and sovereign" (1983, 7). Chinese films often construct images of a cohesive sovereign nation out of disparate constellations of characters. At the same time, however, it represents the lived experience of ordinary individuals who attempt to defy narratives of imagined collectivity. In short, Chinese cinema attests to both the power and fragility of China's national self-image.

Across the range of periods, topics, and theoretical frameworks in contemporary film studies, the relationship between cinema and the nation is a common theme.⁶ That said, the question of how to comprehend the role and significance of the national in Chinese cinema in different times and places remains as-yet unanswered. Highlighting the formative years of Chinese cinema, during the crisis of imperialist encroachment, Jubin Hu asserts that "the concept of 'Chinese national cinema' refers not only to the way in which the nation was filmed and the national culture embodied, but more importantly, it also relates to a type of nationalism which reflects Chinese political struggles" (2003, 19). Attentive to the fact that the Republican Era was overshadowed by the escalating political, ideological, and military rivalry between the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT or Kuomintang) and Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Hu posits cinema as "both the reflection of Chinese nationalism and a medium for the reinforcement and reproduction of that nationalism." As such, it is "a site where different versions of nationalism were expressed and contested." In making this argument, Hu compares Chinese national cinema to its European counterparts. Whereas European national cinemas concentrated on cultural values in an attempt to counteract the influence of Hollywood, "what the Chinese cinema performed most efficiently as a national cinema was in fact a *political* function" (2003, 18; original emphasis). With this in mind, Hu aims to flesh out "mobilizations of 'the national' in pre-1949 Chinese cinema." The idea of nation, he concludes, served as "the thread that can be traced throughout and used to bind this history together" (2003, 5).

Even if the concept of national cinema holds the key to understanding how nationalism shaped the path of modern China (despite its many permutations over the

last century), it is important to note that Chinese national cinema should not be reduced to either political propaganda or a site of cultural production. In fact, adhering to strict dichotomy between politics and culture only obscures our view of Chinese cinema, which calls for a balanced analysis sensitive to reciprocal influences between text and context. Laikwan Pang's study of the left-wing film movement in China during the 1930s is instructive in this regard. She advocates broadening the scope of film criticism by calling reductive binaries into question:

The Chinese intellectuals always idealize a transcendental position of art from politics in order to protect the former from the control of the latter. Obviously, with such outright and prominent "political" concerns, these Chinese thinkers are prevented from fathoming the many possible ideas and nuances the two notions "politics" and "aesthetics" may bring along...It was the organic integration of form and content (i.e., art and politics) that could bring the cultural products to influence the popular mass and help them to understand the social deceptions the dominant class put into force. (Pang 2002, 7)

To be sure, Pang's argument here is not that Chinese cinema is an outright national enterprise, which would preclude any further consideration of individual subjectivity or creative agency (2002, 9). Rather, she cautions against a hierarchical division between politics and aesthetics within the discipline of Chinese cinema. Such a division would obfuscate the ways in which Chinese filmmakers have had to construct cinematic representations strategically so as to navigate political circumstances. This is why Pang, whilst evoking Fredric Jameson's famous assertion in *The Political Unconscious* that cultural artifacts are "socially symbolic acts" (1981, 5), insists that "text and context were mutually interwoven, and it is this weaving process that made these films unique" (Pang 2002, 9). Following Pang's methodological intervention here, this section unpacks Zhang Yimou's historical epic *Hero* (*Ying Xiong*, 2002) in demonstrating the prominence of the interplay between politics and aesthetics in Chinese cinema.

Set in the Warring States Period (475–221 BC) of ancient Chinese history, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* tells of how an assassin called Nameless attempts to kill the King of the Qin in his tightly warded palace. Just as Nameless prepares to strike a fatal blow, however, he decides to spare his target's life. In his hope that the King's vision for a

unitary empire might bring the conflicts and conquests to an end, Nameless does not go through with the assassination, despite the fact that this will result in his own punitive demise. The film progresses over the course of Nameless and the King's conversation, during which Nameless reveals how he eliminates looming threats for the King, a gesture to win the monarch's trust and so he can talk to the King from a closer distance. Overall, *Hero's* narrative is interspersed with multiple renditions of a journey during which Nameless defeated many other assassins. This narrative structure recalls Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's diegetic approach in *Rashomon* (1950). Envisioned on an epic scale in elaborate visual spectacles, each episode of Nameless's account is visibly differentiated by a dominant hue. The story, then, filtered through successive colors. Following in the footsteps of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (released worldwide in 2000), Zhang Yimou's *Hero* turned out to be even more ambitious, with its story dating back to the beginning of China's imperial era. Whereas Lee's film features a rebellious martial arts prodigy, who leaves her prestigious family behind to pursue personal freedom at any cost, Zhang's blockbuster centers on the imposing figure of Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor to unify the vast territory that we know as China today. Initially dismissed for slavishly aping Lee's achievement, *Hero* was nonetheless a sweeping success at the box office, and was widely lauded by critics in China and beyond.

Although already admired for his masterful visual storytelling, in *Hero* Zhang further refined his cinematographic vocabulary so as to breathe new life into the often whimsical concepts and nebular ambiance of the *wuxia* genre. Despite precedents in classical Chinese fiction, *wuxia* emerged as a modern literary genre only at the turn of the twentieth century. According to Stephen Teo, it was Chinese writers and students living in Japan who sought to rejuvenate a decaying China by introducing the Japanese concept of *Bukyo*—"a series of militaristic adventure stories to denote militaristic virtues of heroism and gallantry"—to modern Chinese literature (2009, 2). First manifest in novelistic form, the literary genre of *wuxia* brought forth a cosmos of vigilantes and villains whose fates are determined less by their physical prowess than their ethical deeds. It was not long before that this world extended into the silver screen. When cinema began to thrive in the 1920s (the early years of Republican China), for instance, *wuxia* films already played a pivotal role in the industrial development of Chinese cinema. At the same time, they functioned as a form of "spiritual and political resistance to Western powers on the part of Chinese filmmakers and audiences" (Hu 2003, 62).⁷ The coming of the *wuxia* genre to Chinese

literature, film, and culture at large, portended a continuing struggle between politics and aesthetics. Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* may have aroused a "kung fu fever" that has elevated Chinese-language films to global prominence since the new millennium; nevertheless, the tension between politics and aesthetics is crucial to the interpretation of these films.

Hero was so well received on account of the director's audacious reinvention of the *wuxia* genre, that reports and reviews in the US media focused mainly on the dazzling sequences and swashbuckling choreography, brushing aside controversial themes that lurked behind the spectacle. Many have been wary of the film's glorification of the King of Qin, who is presented as an ambitious ruler yearning to end violence and chaos by enforcing his own order. For these critics, *Hero* appears to shore up the hierarchy by which the individual must succumb and dedicate themselves to the nation, as though the new power structure would guarantee everyone's livelihood. Despite its aesthetic wonders, *Hero* is suspected of justifying authoritarian rule. Moreover, critics claim that it sings the nation's praises, writing off individual subjectivity. For many, this makes the film politically unpalatable.

According to Kenneth Chan, the uneven response to Zhang's film is symptomatic of the disproportionate attention that many critics have paid to "*Hero*'s ostentatious visuality, chromatic ingenuity, and technical virtuosity." This has often led them to privilege "aesthetic beauty over ideological content" (Chan 2009, 101). For Chan, the director's tenuous narrative construct—in which a pack of noble warriors forgo their shared ambition to eliminate the King and instead devote their lives to a monolithic empire born out of conquest and bloodshed—is steeped in "a politics of ambiguity." Chan claims that Zhang intentionally embedded this politics in the film. This is how he deciphers Zhang's diegetic strategy:

This notion of ambiguity permits, on the one hand, Chinese cultural centrists and the Chinese government to celebrate the film as a paean to self-sacrifice for the good of society and country; on the other hand, allowing liberal critics to embrace the film as an ironic critique of blind submission to institutional power, hence further offering a criticism of Chinese authoritarianism. (98)

The film was released in the US in 2004. Recalling the US political climate at that time, which was characterized by an upsurge of jingoism in the wake of the 9/11

terrorist attacks, Chan suggests why many US reviewers shied away from *Hero's* controversial connotations:

What I am suggesting here is that embracing the film's aesthetics (which is not a problem in itself), without taking on its politics, is a way for moderate and even political left critics (and possibly viewers) in America to enjoy the film ... And, finally, mainstream acceptance of *Hero* also reflects audience and critical identification with a film that grapples uneasily with the logic of a nationalist unity that advocates military intervention, while simultaneously promoting personal sacrifice and submission, all in the name of achieving a peace that seems perpetually out of reach. (101)

Admittedly giving rise to a global popularity of the *wuxia* genre, Zhang's *Hero* is found political, nationalist, and characteristically Chinese.⁸ Zhang's earlier works, by contrast, focus largely on the hardship suffered by ordinary Chinese people throughout much of the twentieth century. *Ju Dou* (1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), and *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) attend to the traditional patriarchy, which physically and psychologically confines women; *Red Sorghum* (1987), *To Live* (1994), and *Keep Cool* (1997) variously depict the uncertainties that people face in times of war, political turmoil, and social reform. This concern with social hardship, however, seems to have bent under the weight of national politics. This is not to question the fact that *Hero's* phenomenal success rests in large part upon the painterly universe that Zhang conjured up in this film, which has been appreciated around the world. What invites criticism, however, is the film's *denouement*, which suggests that "a united nation requires submission to a leader who symbolizes China" (Berry and Farquhar 2006, 164). In this instance, Stephen Teo suggests, "the *wuxia* film seems to have become an instrument of the state" in that it serves "to maintain the myth of a warrior tradition and its historicist concepts of chivalry and knight-errantry in order to justify the modern concept of the nation-state" (2009, 8).

The controversy surrounding *Hero*, which has been presented as both political subservient and aesthetically radical, revolves around a gap between text and context. This gap stems from a set of power-laden tensions between the individual and the collective, the national and the global, East and West. On the one hand, *Hero's wuxia* style is heavily invested in traditional Chinese culture. This not only reinforces myths

about China's historical longevity and cultural continuity, but also implicitly presents the West with an orientalist fantasy of ancient China in a self-exhibitionist fashion. On the other hand, bringing together capital and talent from China, Hong Kong, and the US, the film deliberately appeals to a transnational audience, presenting a politically acceptable version of China to both domestic and foreign viewers. According to Anthony Fung and Joseph M. Chan, *Hero's* commercial success and mixed reception foreground the contradictions of Chinese national cinema in a global age: "as a corporate-led production in Chinese communities," they contend, "*Hero* does not aim to be a national movie that every Chinese should be proud of. Rather, to make *Hero* notable in Chinese film history, it has to succeed in the Western market" (Fung and Chan 2010, 209).

In other words, it is precisely *Hero's* ambivalent position, which speaks to both nationalist ideology and ethnic culture, that allows it to function as either as state-sanctioned propaganda or a highly crafted commodified spectacle. On both counts, Zhang's film is gauged in terms of national politics. If we recall that early Chinese filmmakers in the Republican Era also had to negotiate a viable approach to cinema between Westernization and Sinicization, Zhang's cinematic politics of ambiguity no longer seems so peculiar (Hu 2003, 48). In the final analysis, the ambiguity at the heart of *Hero* derives from the dynamics inherent in Chinese cinema, which come down to the question of "how the imported discursive techniques of the cinema work with and are worked upon by existing local narrative patterns and tropes, creating cinematic traditions in which Chinese national identities are cited and recited" (Berry and Farquhar 2006, 9). Driven by a historical imperative to define a Chinese national identity, Chinese cinema has generated a wide range of characters who reify the zeitgeist of modern China. These characters, such as women and children, embody the range of ideological dogmas and moral positions characteristic of the national community. This cast of prototypical figures, however, does not capture the intricacy of personal lived experience, let alone all those intimate moments of romance and desire that the socialist regime in China has often repressed in the name of spiritual purity and revolutionary ethics. But how has a single narrative of the nation emerged from a constellation of different films? What are the permutations of this narrative? Focusing on the cinematic representation of a national identity in modern China, in the following chapters I will interrogate films that present particular people as indispensable parts of the collective. Although at one level these characters are

expected to embody or speak for the nation, at another they strive to find their own voice.

A Thousand Voices

In the previous sections I have visited the historical and national aspects of Chinese cinema, by which I propose cinema, first, as a prism through which to scrutinize the historical trajectory of modern China's nation building, and second, as a site where competing forces are engaged in power dynamics of the nation between the foreign versus the vernacular, the political versus the aesthetic, and the collective versus the individual. Since its inception, cinema has participated in the formation of the Chinese nation. It has been a boon to the nation-building project, presenting an ample repertoire of cultural practices that runs the gamut from grand narratives to personal stories. Looking beyond historical and national dimensions, I now turn to the geopolitical implications of Chinese cinema, for these too must factor into my study. I address the geopolitics of Chinese cinema from two perspectives.

First, the dissemination of global modernity saw the partial colonization of late-imperial China, denting its sovereignty and fragmenting its territory. After 1912, the newly founded Republic of China tried to challenge the dominance of the imperial powers. However, its attempts were soon thwarted by the Japanese invasion. Shortly after World War II, Chinese communists overthrew the Nationalist regime and established their own government. Though the founding of communist China marked a significant leap forward in terms of national independence and liberation, this succeeding regime has in effect implemented an authoritarian rule ever since. Throughout the Cold War the party state operated largely in isolation from both the West and even most members of the Eastern Bloc. The prolonged separation between China and the former colonies, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, have thus spawned a parallel of historical, economic, and cultural realities. Over the past century, the factual coexistence of several self-governing entities in the region, which are economically linked, geographically adjoined, culturally affiliated, but politically divided, is responsible for fraught relationships among these Chinese-speaking communities, such as perennial disputes over national sovereignty between China and Taiwan, and constant pro-democracy protests in the post-handover Hong Kong. Channeling both political sentiments and personal feelings, cinema plays a crucial role in the formation of local communities and identities across Sinophone territories.

Second, geopolitical concerns reverberate through critical paradigms of such cultural texts. This is why, the theoretical research of Chinese cinema—an academic discipline encompassing multiple locations where China-related films are produced—has long been tackling a fundamental dilemma, that is, what does “Chinese” mean in “Chinese cinema”? Is it specifically confined to ideological propaganda of the People’s Republic of China, or, in a broader sense, pertinent to people who immerse China’s cultural legacies into filmic texts all around the world? Is it a category principally characterized by the Chinese speech, a linguistic criterion that further begs the question—which language(s) should a Chinese film speak? If either Mandarin or Cantonese readily fits into this domain, then what about those ethnic minorities living in mainland China, such as Tibetans, Mongolians, and Uyghurs, whose mother tongues differ from the official lingua franca? And what about those who immigrate overseas—Chinese Americans, for example—who have to adopt a foreign language in their adopted countries? All things considered, to critically engage with Chinese cinema now has become an intersectional endeavor, the chief concern—and challenge—of which is to tease out multivalent transactions within the cumulative signifier of “Chinese”.

The various vectors of identity politics which overlay one another in the discursive field of Chineseness, such as nationality, ethnicity, and language, allow us to locate a film’s codified messages in the context of China’s modern transition, national formation, and global expansion. Thereby cinema serves as a thread that weaves together distinctive labels into an overarching identity, be it national, ethnic, or cultural. As such, it offers clues as to how a unified concept can be constructed out of discrete units. On the flip side, cinema also reveals the seams of national identity—possible scenarios and points of tension at which it might fall apart. While there might be little confusion over what “China” indicates nowadays, as it refers in common knowledge to a totalitarian state in East Asia with the largest population on earth, when it comes to “Chinese”, however, the word consists in a tangled web of temporal, spatial, and political formulations, which revolves around two distinctive but intersecting power structures, namely, Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism. To sketch out the interplay between Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism in the discursive construction of “China,” “Chinese,” and “Chineseness,” I now look at Ang Lee’s award-winning film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). Concentrating on the film’s transnational production process and international acclaim, I explore how cinematic representation implicates and engages with the geopolitical realities and cultural imaginaries of

Sinophone communities. Last but not least, this section surveys the different theoretical frameworks at stake in Chinese cinema studies. In this way, I reveal how Ang Lee's film has inspired scholars to theorize and even challenge the power relations that suffuse prevailing notions of Chineseness.

Prior to the unrivaled success of *Parasite* by South Korean director Bong Joon-ho—the first foreign-language film that has won the award for Best Picture at the Oscars—Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was a landmark in Hollywood history.⁹ Adapted by Chinese writer Wang Dulu (1909–1977) from a *wuxia* novel of the same name, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was the first Asian foreign-language film to receive significant attention in the Western world. Although I recognize the hierarchy between Western and non-Western cultures, and that Anglophone culture still dominates global cultural production, here I want to close in on this film's narrative strategy and production model. On the one hand, the film strategically showcases alluring local cultural landscapes as a means of attracting global audiences. It consciously broaches the cultural dynamics between East and West. On the other, the film's dialogue intentionally features often discordant variants of Mandarin. In this way, it frustrates the idea that China is a unified, monolingual whole. I will now briefly recapitulate the film's plot before proceeding to unpack the geopolitical message embedded in this narrative arc.

Set in the Qing dynasty, the story centers on Jen Yu, the daughter of the recently promoted Governor Yu, who has just moved from the peripheral region of Xinjiang to Peking in the heartland. Having received years of secret martial arts training from Jade Fox under the guise of private tutelage, Jen flees from an arranged marriage after her family relocates to Peking. Around the same time, Li Mu Bai, a master of the Wudang clan, decides to resign from his distinguished career after a spiritual retreat. He consigns “Green Destiny,” his sword, to Yu Shu Lien, a seasoned swordswoman living in the south. Widowed by Mu Bai's friend, Shu Lien is the true reason that prompted Mu Bai to retire. Heading a group of mercenaries, Shu Lien travels with Green Destiny on a commission to Peking, and delivers the sword to Sir Te, a mutual friend of both Shu Lien and Mu Bai. However, the sword is stolen in the middle of the night. In her pursuit of the suspect, Shu Lien discovers that it was Jen who, having visited Sir Te's compound just days before, snatched the treasure. Before long, Mu Bai arrives in Peking, resolves to reclaim his lost weapon. A cat-and-mouse game ensues, in which Mu Bai and Jen encounter love, loss, and redemption.

Speaking of genre, the film subverts gender stereotypes. Its protagonist, Jen, moves about against the grain of the masculinist *wuxia* tradition. Although there have been occasions on which a female character has taken the lead—in King Hu’s martial arts films *Come Drink with Me* (1966) and *A Touch of Zen* (1971), for instance—by and large the *wuxia* genre presents a man’s world, whether in literature or film. By contrast, half of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*’s cast are women. Moreover, the film’s female characters carry the same weight as their male counterparts. In the West, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was commended for its feminist posture. In fact, the narrative is driven by three female characters’ mutual grudges against one another—Jen, Shu Lien, and Jade Fox. On the run, Jen becomes not merely an independent person dashing through a violent world, but also a renegade, whom her kung fu master, Jade Fox, can no longer tame. While chasing the young and restless Jen, Shu Lien also seeks to bring Jade Fox to justice, for Jade Fox murdered Mu Bai’s own master years ago. An illiterate elder woman, Jade Fox is enraged when she realizes that Jen has surpassed her in martial arts. As they studied the Wudang scriptures over the years, it transpires, Jen had been concealing arcane martial knowledge from her all along.

Therefore, the story is thrust by these intricate conflicts between a juvenile outcast and combat veteran, an aged murderer and her victim’s avenger, a disgruntled schemer and a rogue follower. The prominence of female characters has led critics and scholars to underline the film’s feminist flavor, which integrates Western social values into a Chinese narrative genre. This might be seen as a tactical move to engage audiences to identify with the gender dynamics embedded in the film. As Huaiting Wu and Joseph Man Chan have noted, “Ang Lee took advantage of a feminist touch to attract Western audiences, particularly women. It should not be seen as a mere coincidence that he chose a *wuxia* novel that focuses on tough female characters and wove the ideas of feminism into the Chinese martial arts film” (2007, 209). In other words, the secret ingredient of Ang Lee’s *wuxia* recipe lies in a mixture of Chinese aesthetics and Western ideology. Grafting globalizing concepts onto a local culture, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* appealed to audiences around the world—so much so that it contributed to a broader feminist reinvention of China’s popular cultural tradition.¹⁰

Ang Lee’s approach to the *wuxia* genre cleared the way for other transnational Chinese blockbusters in the years to come. Still, many scholars alert to euphoric appraisals of the film’s epochal achievement. Designating *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as “a quintessential example of global cinema,” Sheldon Lu argues that Ang Lee

inadvertently reproduced “the non-existent imaginary old China,” which now circulates as “a dehistoricized, disembedded entity in the global commercial film market” (2005, 231). Meanwhile, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* has been accused of perpetuating several fallacies, one of which is the variety of Mandarin accents with which the different characters speak. Given that the stellar cast includes actors from Chinese communities all over Asia—for example, Chow Yun-fat (Hong Kong), Michelle Yeoh (Malaysia), Zhang Ziyi (China), and Chang Chen (Taiwan)—the film’s sync-sound dialogues appear somehow counterintuitive to native ears, as Lu observes:

A very funny, yet jarring, aspect of the film is the phenomenon of real accent in cinema...Their accents breach the rule of plausibility and verisimilitude and indeed elicited giggles from Chinese audiences watching the film...The usual question about successful Chinese-language films has been raised again in regard to Lee’s film this time: who is his target audience? Did he make a Chinese-language film for the Chinese or for the global market? Is he susceptible to the accusation of orientalist self-fantasy? (Lu 2005, 227)

In Lu’s view, the film not only harnessed an ambivalent stance poised between ethnic culture and global capitalism, intriguing Western audiences at the risk of orientalizing itself. Moreover, it shored up a transnational Chineseness.¹¹ Despite its failure to accommodate local audience’s expectations of cultural authenticity (this partly accounts for why *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* flopped at the box office in mainland China), the film offers a glimpse into the diverse landscape of Chinese language and culture. In stark contrast to most kung fu movies, which are typically dubbed in either Mandarin or Cantonese, Ang Lee opted for a bundle of different tongues and tones. Whereas this is considered the common practice in Hollywood, Ang Lee in fact unveiled the social reality of Chinese-speaking communities, in which multiple topolects are subsumed under the overarching rubric of “Chinese.” Moreover, disparate pidgin dialects still subsist alongside the standardized lingua franca. Dwelling on the linguistic plurality showcased in the film, Shu-mei Shih claims that Ang Lee’s presentation of language here has a subversive potential:

The linguistic dissonance of the film registers the heterogeneity of Sinitic languages as well as their speakers living in different locales. What it

engenders and validates, ultimately, is the heteroglossia of what I call the Sinophone: a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries. What the film makes audible, hence also visible, is confirmation of the continuous existence of the Sinophone communities as significant sites of cultural production in a complex set of relations with such constructs as “China,” “Chinese,” and “Chineseness.” (Shih 2007, 4)

Taking Ang Lee’s film as a springboard for theoretical intervention, Shih proposes the concept of Sinophone to inspire the periphery’s resistance to the center of Chinese language and culture. “Films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, even though they work largely through and within Hollywood commercialism and the political economy that underlies it,” Shih argues, “nonetheless allow for noncentrist and nonstandardized articulations of ‘Chineseness’ against China-centrism” (2007, 14). Put another way, the cacophony of accents in the film serves as a travesty of normative conceptions, namely, “monolingual *putonghua* (Beijing standard), monological Chineseness, or a monolithic China and Chinese culture” (2007, 5).¹² In essence, Shih uses the notion of the Sinophone to critique China’s historically constructed supremacy, be that in the sphere of politics, culture, or economics. Instead of submitting Chinese-speaking communities to a concentric geopolitical dispensation in which the center dominates the peripheries, Shih calls for radical change. The Chinese-speaking world can no longer be reduced to the uniformity of the Chinese nation-state. Rather, Shih enjoins us to recognize “a pan-Chinese world—a collective of diverse identities and positionalities that a single geopolitical, national entity is unable to contain” (Lu 2007).

The concept of the Sinophone allows critics to circumvent the question of the nation. More importantly, as Rey Chow has observed, it unleashes “the diverse and multifaceted experiences that are articulated under the study of Chineseness” (1998, 24).¹³ In this sense, the stories told by marginal and marginalized subjects are not necessarily bound by totalizing discourses of the nation. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, for example, is directed by an American Chinese filmmaker and features a rebellious swordswoman. Traversing an array of temporal and spatial distances, such films mediate between physical and psychical dimensions. Thus understood, the many

voices of Chinese cinema, as captured by the concept of the Sinophone, are neither reducible to one another nor obstacles hindering mutual comprehension. Taken together, Chinese films guide us through the everyday struggles that people face as they confront the geopolitical tension between China and the West, providing both realistic and imaginative solutions to the conundrums of everyday life in China.

Overview

Focusing on the historical, national, and geopolitical dimensions of Chinese films, this study foregrounds Chinese cinema's unique position with respect to interpretations of modern China. Viewing the formation of the Chinese nation-state from a cinematic perspective, my study posits Chinese cinema as a form of "cinematic modernity" that entails "the translocal, transregional and transnational circulation of images, speeches and dialects inside and outside China" (Lu 2012, 24). Furthermore, my theoretical contribution centers around the tensions and contradictions between marginal figures and central vantage points as represented in Chinese films. This set of paradoxes, I propose, points to the fundamental condition of China's modern transition, which is to reconfigure social relations amid political unrest and epistemic shifts induced by Western imperialism. In the wake of foreign intrusions, China became a modern nation-state through waves of mass mobilization involving people from all walks of life.

In the course of modernization, those who had long been repressed by the feudal order of imperial China were now assigned new and vital roles—chiefly to enact and embody structural reforms to the state system. Now that the nation has been installed, however, individuals are once again coerced into a new form of collective identification. As much as it is supposed to personify the unity of a homogeneous community, the individual is coming to signify a site of resistance to enforced ideologies. In approaching this unresolved dilemma, this study is dedicated to mapping out a dialectical relationship between China's internal conflicts and external tensions. Through an extensive investigation of cinematic embodiment, I hone in on four groups of characters that I term the "central frontiers" of modern China's cultural imaginary: children, women, ethnic minorities, and diaspora. Often situated at a distance from cultural, social, and geographical centers, these characters are charged with symbolic significance. As such, they are well-placed to embody a national ethos. At the same time, though, these figures are often shown expressing discontent. Although each chapter focuses on a particular type of protagonist, what I intend to

show overall is how these categories intersect with one another, so that a single character might be viewed as part of the larger the ideological state apparatus, whose operation turns out not as effective as expected.

In the first chapter I situate depictions of childhood in relation to cross-cultural and trans-medial exchanges. Comparing the initial Bildungsroman (a literary genre concerning a young protagonist's coming-of-age) that emerged in tandem with European bourgeois society with equivalents in Chinese film, I emphasize how the intrinsic values of the Chinese Bildungsroman differ from European examples. In Chinese cinema, coming-of-age stories are packed with political allegories and social satires of the communist state. An epitome of modern Chinese culture, the genre of the Chinese Bildungsroman embodies China's emergent national identity as it has negotiated external and internal discords. I focus particularly on two contemporary Chinese films (along with the novels on which they were respectively based): Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994) and Zhang Yuan's *Little Red Flowers* (2006).

The second chapter examines how representations of Chinese women have served to symbolize the Chinese nation. My analysis is premised on a distinction between Chinese and Western notions of "woman," which departs from universalizing gender discourses originating from the West. Moreover, against the backdrop of the social, political, and epistemological transformation of China, this chapter shows how narratives of femininity, in particular the idea of Chinese Woman, mediate between the individual and the nation, convention and conversion, China and the West. My discussion centers on two Chinese-speaking films, *Song of Youth* (1959) and *Lust, Caution* (2007). The first derives from the first decade of China's Socialist Era; the second from the period marked by the dramatic upsurge of economic globalization in the new millennium.

In the third chapter I interrogate the ways in which the tension between the Sinocentric nation-state and ethnic minority groups plays out in contemporary Chinese cinema. Analyzing the dialectical relations between the center and the periphery, I reflect briefly on how cinematic representation has been used to propagate a shared belief of the Chinese nation among minority communities. In tracing different permutations of representational approaches, this chapter shows how portrayals of ethnic minorities are often neither accurate nor diverse. To this end, I examine two films featuring Tibetan people in contemporary China: Pema Tsenden's *Tharlo* (2015) and Zhang Yang's *Paths of the Soul* (2015).

The fourth and last chapter attends to the Chinese diaspora, a community that is often seen as politically questionable on account of their geographical distance from the “homeland” and proficiency in the “mother tongue”. Continuing my critical discussion of the idea that the modern nation is articulated in Chinese languages, my analysis focuses largely on different definitions of the problematic concept of *guojia* in Chinese language and culture. Investigating forms of ideological interpellation at work in cinematic representations, I draw attention to the ways in which the political, national, and cultural identity of modern China is resisted and negotiated in different cultural contexts. In exploring these themes, I analyze three Chinese films: *The Herdsman* (1982), *Comrade: Almost a Love Story* (1996), and *Mountains May Depart* (2015).

In conclusion, in considering the historical, national, and geopolitical dimensions of Chinese cinema, this study claims neither that China’s central frontiers are restricted to one particular period of Chinese history, nor that the tension between marginal social figures and national narratives pertains to Chinese cinema alone. Rather, I seek to explore how drastic social and cultural changes translate into collective violence at a symbolic level. In a world that is increasingly divided among nations, races, and cultures, this study reminds us of how power is exerted ever so surreptitiously through images, sounds, and words. Looking back, the construction of nationhood played a central role in redeeming China from a series of crises in nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, it has been converted into regimes of governance that often resort to brute force. In this regard, I hope that the figures at the fore of this study might inspire readers and viewers. To borrow a phrase from Rey Chow, it is when such individuals are “productively put under erasure ... not in the sense of being written out of existence but in the sense of being unpacked” that the central frontiers of modern China begin to transcend the boundaries between East and West, imagination and reality (1998, 24).