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

Zhang, J.

Chapter 4

The Ideology of the Homeland: Nationhood, Kinship, and Individuality

In modern Chinese languages, or in Mandarin at least, the term *guojia* consists of two separate words: *guo* and *jia*. Whereas *guo* refers to a country, nation, or state, *jia* stands for home and family. Sometimes rephrased as *jiaguo*, this word reflects an isomorphism in Chinese political thinking, a deep-seated perception of congruity between the family and the state. This isomorphism essentializes what I call an "ideology of the homeland." Drawing on Confucianism and ancient Chinese political thought, this ideology advances the idea of the family-state (*jiaguo*), for which the state, family, and individual were each wholly consistent with one another. Furthermore, the ideology of the "homeland" has also played a pivotal role in China's nation-building. A string of military defeats at the hands of the industrialized powers of Europe, the United States, and Japan in the late nineteenth century galvanized imperial China, which undertook a project of rapid modernization. In the face of manifold geopolitical crises, China underwent drastic changes. As the feudal empire waned, a modern state awakened. At this moment China started to reimagine itself as a nation.

To construct a Chinese nation/race/ethnicity (*zhonghua minzu*), intellectuals waged a series of political and social campaigns that aimed to inscribe an imaginary of the nation-state into China's resurgence. At the core of these new narratives of nationhood was a perception of China's victimhood at the hands of colonialism and imperialism. The burgeoning historical consciousness, as Rey Chow has put it, derived from a "logic of the wound" (1998, 6). The myth of a collective suffering served to downplay or diminish the hierarchy between China's major and minor ethnicities (Matten 2012, 64). With the founding of the People's Republic, the ruling party strategically deployed rhetorics of a Chinese homeland to bridge widening social divisions—a strategy that not only appealed to those between ethnicities and classes, but also to those who dwell outside China, at a distance from their so-called ancestral land. In China as elsewhere, people have been pursued by such visions of utopian harmony, in which all social conflicts and political tensions are supposed to disappear into thin air.

Historically, the nation-state, family, and individual in China are not seen as being at odds with one another. In consequence, individuals are anchored in their

identification with "China"—an imagined collective that encompasses various physical and psychic boundaries. This in turn confers an overarching national, cultural, and political identity upon these subjects, who thus became "Chinese." The ideology of the homeland also defies the limits of the nation-state. The original European model of the nation-state, which was imagined as being coextensive with a single ethnicity, fails to address the multiplicity of China's ethnoscape. The ideology of the homeland mystifies the Chinese nation, as if political and social divisions among ethnicities or classes can be metaphysically reconciled as a bickering family might be brought together, under the reign of a patriarch (Shih 2007, 46).

In line with this logic, China's ideology of the homeland perpetuates a bond between nationhood, kinship, and the individual. Premised on a vertical, concentric social structure, which rests upon the pillars of nationhood and kinship, the ideology of the homeland shapes individuals according to a set of cultural conventions and political rationales drawn from Confucian ethics, Marxism-Leninism, and socialism. The ideological operations through which a sense of belonging is propagated, however, are inevitably interrupted and interfered with by the horizontal, multifarious economic and cultural flows of global capitalism (Appadurai 1996, 33). Whereas the ideology of the homeland presumes a centripetal dynamic, which upholds political allegiance and cultural loyalty to a central authority, globalism and cosmopolitanism unfold into a centrifugal force, which decouples the individual from local, national, and global attachments. This world of globalization ultimately boils down to the permeations of capital, not ideological agendas. In this age of globalization, in which the fluidity, flexibility, and mobility of human conditions and identities are increasingly valorized and facilitated, the essentialist ideology of the homeland presents a distinctly homogeneous concept. The differences between these two conceptions have resulted in a growing number of confrontations.

Against this backdrop, Shu-mei Shih calls for new analytic frameworks with which to investigate discrepancies between the ideology of the homeland and globalism in relation to China. Revolving around the diversity and complexity of Sinophone cultural productions, Shih proposes a multi- and interdisciplinary paradigm under the name of Sinophone studies (2013, 6). Following Stuart Hall's postcolonial criticism, Shih's concept of "the Sinophone" focuses on uneven forms of political and cultural violence inflicted on language, ethnicity, and nationality (2007, 44). By first and foremost unsettling the hierarchies among Sinitic languages, the concept of the Sinophone affords a critical vantage point from which to examine the

dissemination of ideologies of China and Chineseness. Among its major interventions, for instance, is to explore why being Chinese has come to mean that one speaks only one language and pledges allegiance to only one polity? This assumption mirrors a recent process of Sinification or Mainlandization of Chinese cultures and languages, about which many scholars have voiced similar concerns (Yeh 2002; Liew 2012; Szeto and Chen 2014). Moreover, queries have been raised regarding the formation of majorities and minorities as identity markers in the Sinophone world.

At the same time, Sinophone studies latches onto the increasing significance of visuality. Built on Mieke Bal's and W.J.T.Mitchell's theories of narratology and of image, Shih's approach to visuality attends to how subjectivity is produced via image, narrative, and mediacy (2007, 32). In Shih's view, visual practice taps into articulations of locale, language, and logic with regard to China. In this light, cinema has become a vital field of inquiry in Sinophone studies, in that film is a means of conveying ideology that relies on visuality and aurality. As an ideological apparatus, film effectuates by activating subjective identification in its spectators. Given cinema's capacity to mediate between visuality and identity, Shih underlines an imperative to take into account the numerous languages, cultures, nationalities registered in Sinophone films (2007, 21).

Adopting a critical perspective, this chapter both explores the complex conditions of cinematic identification in the Sinophone world, and reflects on the field of Sinophone studies. Accordingly, this chapter attends to some key filmic texts so as to scrutinize the ways in which the ideology of the homeland is manifested in a global era. In my analysis, film characters in the grip of this ideology do not necessarily reinforce notions of China and Chineseness. In short, formal manifestations of the ideology of the homeland do not always create the conditions for its reproduction. Further, I consider how Sinophone cinema can be put into conversation with other disciplines, such as comparative film studies and transnational film studies (Zhang 2004; Lu 2014; Chen 2015). In this way, I assess the critical efficacy of the Sinophone framework.

The Myth of *Guojia*

In Chinese language and culture, the family-state isomorphism is integral to a grand narrative of *guojia*, which ties individual, family, and nation together in a mythical bond. In instilling a sense of belonging in people and groups, assertions of this imagined connection risk neutralizing people's free will. Given that *guojia* is

indispensable to the governance of historical and modern China, one might wonder how the concept is defined and disseminated in cultural production. It is also important to explore how this ideology—which has been systemically ingrained in the population—can be unlearned and undone. In approaching these issues, I will look at three Sinophone films—*The Herdsman* (1982), *Comrade: Almost a Love Story* (1996), and *Mountains May Depart* (2015). Encompassing distinct periods and locations, these films demonstrate how the affective and emotive pull of *guojia* can be suspended due to people's physical and psychic displacements. In dissecting these filmic texts, therefore, I aim to contextualize conceptions of China as one's origin, home, and roots. In doing so, I hope to unpack possibilities for dismantling the fantasy of *guojia* as a cultural imaginary.

Based on writer Zhang Xianliang's 1980 novel *Body and Soul* (*Ling yu rou*), director Xie Jin's *The Herdsman* (*Mu ma ren*) narrates a reunion between father and son after their thirty-year separation. The protagonist, Xu Lingjun, was born as the CCP was prevailing over the KMT during the civil war. Xu's father, a bourgeois man who is wary of his social class and weary of his marriage, fled to America prior to the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Her heart broken, Xu's mother soon passed away in a hospital. Growing up as an orphan in the new political climate, Xu endured great misery. In the 1950s, during the Anti-Rightist Movement, Xu was branded as a rightist, and then sent down to the countryside. Only after the Cultural Revolution did Xu clear his name with an agreeable life. Now a schoolteacher based in the prairies of northwest China, Xu heads for the capital city of Beijing to meet his long-lost father. Since leaving the country, his father has become a billionaire entrepreneur who owns a chemical corporation in San Francisco. In their meeting, the father tries to persuade Xu to emigrate to the United States and take over the family business. However, Xu declines the offer. In the belief that China's future is bright (and thus that his family's future is secured), Xu returns to his humble home, where his wife and son await him.

Often cited as one of Xie Jin's most important works, *The Herdsman* is closely associated with his two other films made in the same period: *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (*Tian yun shan chuan qi*, 1980) and *Hibiscus Town* (*Fu rong zhen*, 1986). These three films enunciate a common set of attitudes toward the PRC's political campaigns, in particular the Cultural Revolution. That is why, the three films were later referred to as the "Reflection Trilogy." The trilogy resonates with social crises at a time when China was in urgent need of sobriety and reflection. According to Yingjin Zhang, Xie's trilogy was occasioned by both the loosening of political control and his own self-

conscious contemplation (2004, 224). Enjoying freedom of artistic expression, at least temporary, filmmakers such as Xie were given room to "break away from old ideological confinement, reconstruct their personal and artistic identity, and cultivate new subjectivity along with new aesthetics, film language and directorial styles" (Zhang 2004, 224). Produced in the context of this new critical awakening, *The Herdsman* takes account of the suffering inflicted on individuals during consecutive years of political upheaval. Its protagonist, Xu Lingjun, is emblematic of the generation of victims.

The film opens with a series of shots showing both the pasture and herds of the Chilechuan region, and, in contrast, Beijing's ancient monuments, cement roads, and concrete buildings. In opposition with one another, the landscape and cityscape pictured in this sequence conjure an array of dissonances: rural versus urban, marginal versus central, and subalterneity versus dominance. Observing a hierarchy between the different spaces represented here, Michael Berry suggests that the sequence also juxtaposes temporalities (2012, 559). For example, the rural farm alludes to the protagonist's banishment and torment in the past, while Beijing's street views evoke the nation's potential for modernization in the present. These interlaced images comprise a nonlinear narrative logic, insofar as neither the temporality nor spatiality of the depicted events has been configured chronologically. Rather, this logic disrupts common perceptions of time and space such as here and there, now and then. In fact, such a montage technique paves the way for how Xu Lingjun's personal trauma is illustrated in the film—that is, the use of flashbacks.

In the scenes in which father and son are reunited, the film often cuts to a flash of memory. These moments reveal the protagonist's agonized experience of the political purges. Shortly after the opening scene, for instance, the two meet at the lobby of a luxury hotel. Back in his room, Xu decides not to give his father the gift of a basket of boiled eggs, having been astonished by the expense of the lavish dinner they have just had. In his voiceover monologue, Xu figures that to a well-groomed billionaire, the free-range eggs would simply seem worthless and unsavory. During the voiceover, the film shows a carriage loaded with haystacks, with the same basket of eggs fixated at the center of the frame. In the carriage, Xu sits with his wife Li Xiuzhi and son Qingqing, as they make their way to a bus station in the local county. Similarly, another flashback is triggered during the father and the son's conversation in a hotel suite, telling us how Xu was labeled as a rightist on account of his family history. Due to his capitalist family background, Xu was expelled to labor reform (*laogai*). Once a

promising student, he was condemned to remain a herdsman. In a moment of extreme despair, Xu determined to hang himself with a bridle in the staple. Dramatically, his action was dissuaded by a horse nearby, which approached him just in time. Above all, each of these retrospective fragments indicates that Xu is haunted by the past. His everyday experience in the present involuntarily sends him back to traumatic memories that he would rather disown. During the conversation in the father's suite, Xu reveals his conviction in *guojia*:

> The father: I find that in China nowadays the intelligentsia is very much concerned about so-called state [*guojia*] affairs.
>
> The son: That is because for Chinese, the destinies of the nation [*guo*] and the family [*jia*] are tied to each other. They share the same ebb and flow.
>
> The father: The chemical corporation in San Francisco is my own kingdom. In the West, values are appreciated on a personal level. Individual endeavor is what they treasure the most.
>
> The son: That might be true, father. You are honored by what you have achieved. Maybe because I have spent so many years in a community, what I treasure the most is the honor of our *guojia*.

Guojia, at this point, can be understood first and foremost as a union between the nation-state and the family. In this originally Confucian isomorphism, the political entity of nation-state and the social unit of family constitute an imagined community, which is premised on a firm belief in shared destiny. This shared destiny mystifies the bond between the collective and the individual. Whereas the nation-state demands political allegiance, the family solicits an ethical commitment to consanguinity. In Nick Browne's words, Xie Jin's *The Herdsman* looks closely at "the two large systems of ethical/political thought, Confucianism and socialism, that operate in some composite form in contemporary Chinese society" (1994, 53). The concept of *guojia* manifested in the film thus implies a multifaceted discursive formation that declares multiple claims on subjects. These claims have become essentialized knowledges and practices, such

as morality and loyalty. Through filmic narrativization, the concept of *guojia* is disseminated as a hegemonic ideology, an ideology of the homeland, which perpetuates a coherent imaginary of nationhood, kinship, and the individual.

As much as he is a victim of political violence and survivor of state injustice, Xu Lingjun has also become captive to a sense of belonging. On the individual level, this is due to the loss of his family and intellectual career. This was later compensated by new forms of belonging, as Xu started his own family (albeit through an arranged marriage, like his parents') and was rehabilitated as a school teacher after twenty years in exile. On the communal level, his sense of belonging is built on his bond with the local community. His close ties with local residents shelter Xu from continuing class struggles, which would only aggravate his suffering. The local peasants and herders not only offer the protagonist sanctuary and care; they in fact contrive to protect Xu as one of their own. As Xu explains in one of his monologues, he sees the natives symbolically as mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers, despite without blood relations. On the national level, the local government's support of Xu's rectification heralds a new era of the PRC, which began with the government making amends for past political purges. From an indicted laborer to a reinstated citizen, Xu's physical and mental displacement into an agrarian community serves as a trope for how personal trauma can be redressed, for a utopian sanctuary where wounds can be healed.

Ultimately, Xu's ostracism fortifies his sense of belonging; with the help of his family and community, all of his adversities have been endured. At the close of the film, we see Xu eagerly walking across grassland toward Xiuzhi and Qingqing, with all three silhouetted against a sunlit sky. Not for the first time, Xu's voiceover utters: "This is the place where people helped me live through those days; this is the place where my sweat soaked the soil; this is the place where I am accompanied by my wife and son; this is the place where my life's roots lie." This concluding soliloquy reads like a manifesto, inasmuch as it accentuates his ethical validity while glossing over his political disenfranchisement. In stark contrast to his attitude toward the rural community, Xu's speech explicitly renounces his father for his moral aberrance and ideological heresy. In closely focusing on family values, the story of *The Herdsman* promotes the ideology of the homeland, which champions an individual's rootedness in one's own family, community, and country.

It is no surprise that Xie Jin's melodramas (of which *The Herdsman* is one) have been regarded as an official mouthpiece. As a matter of fact, Xie Jin has been accused of complicity with the postsocialist regime, which seeks to reconcile the fissures

between the Party leadership and the populace at large (Browne 1994, 2; Ma 1994, 34). In Ma Ning's words, *The Herdsman* exemplifies how postsocialist China has reestablished its legitimacy through "a reaffirmation of traditional Chinese family and cultural values" (1996, 32). Xie's films were castigated so vociferously that one critic, Zhu Dake, even called for an end of the "Xie Jin's Model"—a narrative pattern that he espied in Xie's melodramas (Zhu 1990 [1986], 145). Intervening on Zhu's barrage of criticism, Yingjin Zhang points out that Xie Jin's methodology was considered heavily reliant on moralization and polarizing characters and narratives, which "creates a myth of compromised solutions to social conflicts" (Zhang 2004, 230).

To be sure, the propagandistic aspect of *The Herdsman*'s narrative should be acknowledged. Its focalization of the victimized Xu Lingjun, who exhibits filiality, domesticity, and patriotism, is patently charged with ideological values. The film's climatic ending, which is structured according to the genre of melodrama, appears to bolster the ideology of the homeland. However, the film's critics have largely overlooked another, equally integral aspect of the film, namely personal memory. Given that both Xie Jin and the original novel's author Zhang Xianliang witnessed the political upheavals of modern China, *The Herdsman* can be seen as a personal testimony. Unlike propagandistic films, which proclaim the superiority of political leaders and revolutionary heroes, Xu Lingjun's story foregrounds the experience of individuals who subsist at the mercy of absolute state power. In the wake of radical partisanship in China, the retainment of one's memory points to a partial agency under conditions of state ideological control, so as to tread a path between socialist discipline and individual freedom (Zhang 2004, 224). Rather than adopt the univocal historical narrative sanctioned by socialist collectivism, *The Herdsman* dares to speak of individual memory.

The death of Mao marks a watershed moment in modern Chinese history. The nation was dumbfounded and dismayed by the end of the Cultural Revolution, which had wrought havoc on the entire country. Following the collapse of socialism's ideological hegemony, many of the literary and filmic texts in this era attempted to mediate the chaos and violence of the recent past. As Yomi Braester has noted, works such as *Body and Soul* and *The Herdsman* not only responded to the onset of privatization and the diversification of public discourse (2016, 435). As significantly, they also constructed historical accounts that stood as alternative memories, which could not be reduced to a single shared point of view. To resist a dominant historiography that inscribes a collective memory of the political traumas, Chinese

intellectuals and artists resolved to intervene in the writing of history by introducing multiple voices and perspectives. In China, there is a cacophony of cultural memories. On one side, memories of recent history have been narrated around the composite concept of *guojia*, so as to forge a new cultural and political imaginary of China and Chineseness. On another, the population also harbors diverse memories, many of which deviate from reigning accounts of the past. Memory itself has become dynamic and intersectional, exposing the tension between the collective and the individual. It is in the sphere of memory, I contend, that the ideology of the homeland is subverted.

The fragments of memory that feature in *The Herdsman*, however formulaic, are less invested in the necessity of forgetting than that of remembering. Literary and filmic texts that present traumas and memories from an individual point of view, notes Braester, participate in deconstructing the collective amnesia imposed by official historiography (2016, 434). In Xu's story, the ethical imperative to recollect the past seems to prevail, in that *The Herdsman* recalls rather than obliterates personal lived experience. In Maureen Turim's words, the film deviates from others' experiences and thus denies any collective formation of memory (2001, 210).

At this juncture, it might be said that *The Herdsman* does not necessarily shore up the ideology of the homeland, for it does not establish a collective identity based on shared memories. However, whereas experiences might seem like "direct, unmediated, subjectively lived accounts of reality" in a strictly individual sense, Ernst van Alphen argues that experiences are also dependent on the discourse "in which the event is expressed, thought, and conceptualized" (1999, 24). As Van Alphen points out, experiences such as memory and trauma are fundamentally discursive constructs and as such are bound up with society and culture (1999, 37). Once they have come into being, experiences are no long tethered to the individual, but shared within a cultural milieu. The individual memories visualized in *The Herdsman*, therefore, also speak to a collective. They rather orient toward a potential solidarity, for, as Turim maintains, "when one is a member of a traumatized collectivity, what has happened to others like one's self has the potential to multiply the wounds" (2001, 210). Paradoxically, Xu Lingjun's experiences also precipitate a "heterogenization of memory," by which polymorphous accounts of the past proliferate, without being collapsed into the singularity of an official history. As against the collective amnesia, aphasia, and apathy, this heterogenization ventures to establish an outpost of critical consciousness. In the contested landscape of "post-Maoist politics of memory," it departs from the univocal history framed by the ideology of the homeland (Braester 2016, 434).

The ambiguity of memory lies in its discursivity, considering that it is imbricated in rival ideological formations. Chinese films of the postrevolutionary era are telling examples in this regard. The bonds between the individual and the collective have proven precarious, so much so that the symbolic order, affective linkages, and language itself have been suspended by cinematic reflection (Wang 2004, 95). In this sense, processes of mystifying and demystifying the Chinese nation-state, as Esther Yau's puts it, take the form of competing memory claims (2010, 156). So long as collective identity is forged in the discursive field of collective memory, it will be subject to contingency and subversion through the articulation of other memories.

The Sojourner's Ballad

Although reflecting on the past is necessary if one would like to establish historical agency, lived experiences in the present are equally significant. Looking beyond memories of political unrest, the ideology of the homeland also looms large in the contemporary trajectories of nation-building in China. I approach the discursive prominence of the homeland by posing a series of questions. How does this discursive formation—a string of claims devised to bind the national community—affect the individual *now*? How is a life lived on margins—both realistic and symbolic—of China and Chineseness? Is it possible to live beyond the discourse of the homeland and still identify as a Chinese? In addressing these problematics, I now pivot to Hong Kong, a city that has long been a nodal point of contemporary cultural politics.

Some parallels can be drawn between the historical development of Hong Kong, which was once a crossroad of Western colonialism and Chinese modernity. The phased transfer of the city from the British Empire to China was considered a watershed moment attesting to the revival of the Chinese nation. Much of the population of Hong Kong, however, was anxious about the city's present and future. This anxiety stems from a combination of a colonial past with a nationalistic mindset (Yau 1999, 181-183). On the one hand, Hong Kong's hybrid constitution (which includes Western political institutions, social structures, and legal systems, with Chinese cultural conventions) have made this fringe port into a cosmopolitan hub of local, national, transnational, and global economic flows. On the other hand, this intricate balance might also become a burden, in that Hong Kong has invariably been susceptible to ideological and geopolitical conflicts. Recently there seems to have

been a backlash against Hong Kong's hybridity, for the cultural identification of the locals is always caught in a dilemma of taking sides.

Speaking of the cultural politics that persist between mainland China and Hong Kong, Esther Yau aptly describes how Hong Kong's cinema serves as a "textual site of contradiction and negotiation informed by the historical conjuncture" (1999, 183). Hong Kong cinema, she deliberates, encapsulates the political ambivalence and cultural syncretism that have shaped this hybrid society. Yau's construal is certainly useful in sketching out the path by which Hong Kong has navigated Western colonization and the dominant Chinese culture. As Rey Chow explains, this path that "cannot simply be collapsed into the latter [Chinese culture] even as resistance to the former [Western imperialism] remains foremost" (1998, 153). Conceiving the broader scope of these implications, my discussion of Hong Kong's fluctuant and flexible survival tactics will be guided by a Sinophone approach.

For Shu-mei Shih, the category of Sinophone studies primarily serves to engage the hegemony and supposed legitimacy of essentialist cultural discourses. She argues against "the eternal validity of being Chinese, the measurable quality and quantity of Chineseness, and the centrality of China as the homeland" (2007, 185). Dwelling on a deconstructive attitude, Shih rebuts the ideology of the homeland, which normalizes rhetorics of superiority, authenticity, and loyalty. Shih's polemic, so it seems, is less a critique of chauvinistic Sinocentrism than an invitation to speculate on the openness and porousness of the linguistic communities, geopolitical confrontations, and cultural interactions grounded in Sinitic languages and cultures. In what follows, I demonstrate how a similar perspective can be found in Peter Ho-sun Chan's *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (*Tian mi mi*, 1996).

The story of *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* does not obey the regular formula of the romance genre. As its title implies, it is bittersweet. More importantly, the story is enriched by displacements of language, place, and time in everyday experience. Two strangers from the mainland, Li Xiaojun (Leon Lai) and Li Qiao (Maggie Cheung), arrive in Hong Kong on the same train on March 1, 1986. The pair's paths cross again when Xiaojun enters a McDonald's restaurant for the first time. A man from Tianjin (formerly Tientsin, a coastal city near Beijing in northern China), Xiaojun lands a job at a small deli thanks to his aunt Rosie, his only relative in Hong Kong. Qiao, on the other hand, who works as a cashier, comes from Guangzhou (formerly Canton), which makes her a native speaker of Cantonese. Distinguished by their mother tongues (or,

more precisely, their preferred dialects), Xiaojun's first conversation with Qiao reveals the role of language in Hong Kong's identity politics.

Xiaojun, who barely speaks any Cantonese, is so inarticulate in attempting to order a meal, that his order would have not been possibly placed without Qiao's help. Qiao, who literally stands on the other side of the counter, faces no language barrier. The instant that Qiao realizes that Xiaojun is a mainlander, we can detect the reluctance and perhaps even shame from her countenance. It is as if someone reminds her of an inconvenient truth—namely, that she is too, a migrant from the mainland. Through an exchange of words, this episode amplifies how one's identity is attached to, and demarcated by, language. Social integration is predicated on the nativistic aspect of language. This is exposed shortly afterwards, when Xiaojun asks Qiao about the prospect of working at McDonald's. Their dialogue proceeds in an amusing manner:

> Qiao: (in Cantonese) Are you from the mainland?
>
> Xiaojun: (in Mandarin) Yes, but how can you tell?
>
> Qiao: From your Cantonese, of course! So terrible! It will be a huge problem if you can't speak English.
>
> Xiaojun: I know. I don't know what to do.
>
> Qiao: Do you know there are many schools in Hong Kong…[switches to Mandarin] Can you follow what I just said?
>
> Xiaojun: Yes, yes.
>
> Qiao: There are schools that especially teach mainlanders to speak English. It is not that hard actually.
>
> Xiaojun: Are you from the mainland too?
>
> Qiao: Of course not! Just listen to my Cantonese!
>
> Xiaojun: But your Mandarin is so fluent…

> Qiao: People who speak Mandarin might not be mainlanders, but people who can't speak Cantonese must be mainlanders! Do you want to learn English or not?
>
> Xiaojun: So can I work at McDonald's if I speak English?
>
> Qiao: You can work anywhere if you speak English.

Unbeknownst to the newcomer, Qiao urges Xiaojun to learn English only because the school will reward her with kickbacks for anyone she passes their way. (On a side note, this scene also broaches the Anglo-American centrism of globalization.) Her trickery aside, Qiao's posing as a Hong Kong native exposes a mechanism of social exclusion, whereby Xiaojun is discriminated against on the grounds that he does not belong to a local identity. As Hong Kong is a bilingual society, those who can speak either Cantonese or English will likely be recognized as natives. Those who cannot will unfortunately be singled out as mainlanders. Yet by "passing" with her proficient Cantonese, Qiao verbally disrupts the authenticity of Hong Kong identity (Leung 2015, 274). In a Butlerian sense, the social and cultural identity of Hong Kong is performative, in that it can be constructed through bodily practices that repeat and replicate naturalized categories such as Chineseness (Lo 2005, 4). By the same token, Qiao also challenges the authenticity of Chinese identity, for she successfully pretends not to be a mainlander.

For Pierre Bourdieu, to equate one's social identity with one's mother tongue is to impose the symbolic power of language on people so as to construct distinctive groups (1989, 22). Aligning identity with language in this way intensifies divisive identifications—in this case, the difference between mainland China and Hong Kong. Moreover, it overlooks the nuances of self-identification, which often forms in response to multilingual realities (Ansaldo 2010, 621). In *Ethics after Idealism* (1998), a treatise released one year after Hong Kong's return to China, Rey Chow poses astute questions about Hong Kong's cultural and historical agency in the post-handover era:

> What would it mean for Hong Kong to write itself in its *own* language? If that language is not English, it is not standard Chinese (Mandarin/Putonghua) either. It would be the 'vulgar' language in

> practical daily use—a combination of Cantonese, broken English, and written Chinese—a language that is often enunciated with jovial irony and cynicism. (1998, 153; my emphasis)

For Chow, the performances that Qiao conducts on a daily basis so as to pass as a "true" Hongkonger can be located in the "struggle between the dominant and subdominant within the 'native' culture itself" (1998, 153). For so long as everyday life either in mainland China or Hong Kong requires that inhabitants are "native" in a certain sense, people who migrate across geopolitical borders will have to navigate discrimination and enact forms of nativeness. Alert to the violent equivalence inherent to identity politics in the Chinese-speaking world, Shu-mei Shih emphatically states that, "to the extent that communities may be multilingual, linguistically determined communities necessarily trace porous and contingent boundaries" (2007, 186). In other words, Qiao's migration to postcolonial Hong Kong entails assuming a subject position that must straddle discriminative borders. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha attributes such a subject position to a "third space": a space that "represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious" (1994, 36). In this third space, which is embodied in the characters' translocal and multilingual experiences, their displaced and disjunctive self-identifications create new possibilities of existence.

In both cases, mainlanders and Hong Kongers are subsumed under the larger rubric of Sinophone cultures. No matter which Chinese dialect a film's characters speak, the rest of the world will still likely to identify them as "Chinese." The notion of Chineseness thus seems not only bound up with monolingualism and nationalism, but ethnocentrism and racism. It becomes all the more conspicuous as the plot of *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* unfolds, when cultural affiliations hinge on multiple markers. Following their acquaintance, Qiao and Xiaojun's relationship takes many twists and turns. The two help each other settle in, strive for better lives, fall in love, and part ways. The film ends in a very different place and time—New York City, May 8, 1995. Having both emigrated from Mainland China to Hong Kong, then from Hong Kong to New York, Qiao and Xiaojun run into each other on a street in Chinatown, by an appliance store. They are both drawn to a television inside the shop window, which is broadcasting news of the death of the pop singer Teresa Teng (Deng Lijun). Teng's

song "Tian mi mi" (from which the film's Chinese title is derived) plays, first within and then without the narrative. Side by side in front of the shop window, Qiao and Xiaojun come to realize that they are standing next to each other. Stunned and still, they smile.

An icon of popular culture in the Chinese-speaking world, Teresa Teng was born in Taiwan in 1953. By the time of her untimely death, Teng's was well known across not only Greater China, but Japan, Southeast Asia, and the Americas. A polyglot in her own right, Teng performed her songs in a variety of Sinitic and non-Sinitic languages, such as Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Japanese, and English. It could be said that Teng's popularity and legacy seem to benefit from, and contribute to, an imagined community built on cultural and lingual hybridity. *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* or rather *Tian mi mi*, is punctuated by Teng's well-known melodies, which the protagonists themselves sing at times. Although a decade has gone by since they separated, and they are living on another continent, both characters are still transfixed by Teng's music. The reason, suggests Sheldon Lu, is that "the popular, deterritorialized, pan-Chinese songs of a Taiwanese singer more than the national anthem unite ethnic Chinese and Hong Kongers into some sense of communal bonding" (2000, 278).

However, in "The Voice of the Sinophone," Song Hwee Lim takes issue with the concept of the Sinophone, pointing out that it overestimates the role of language in identity politics (2014, 63). Drawing attention to the voice in Chinese/Sinophone cinema, including (non)diegetic sounds, Lim challenges the predominance of the phonic, the verbal, and the aural in communal bonding. For him, there seems a privileging of the "phone" over the "Sino," of a lingua-centric conception that contradicts "the multilingual polyphony that contemporary subjects increasingly inhabit" (2011, 38; 2014, 68). In other words, the language one speaks does not necessarily designate one's affinity with a certain community, be it a nation or ethnicity, for communities are not exclusively determined by language. As a result, Teng's songs and their impact must not be seen as symbolizing a cultural imaginary or fulfilling the purpose of a single polity and ideology. Conversely, the lyrics and rhythms conveyed through Teng's vocal performances should be construed as an assemblage of visceral and psychic intensities, transferred through the libidinal economy of commodity fetishism.

Building on Jean Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society*, Rey Chow notes how the associative quality of Teng's songs is driven by consumerist desires and habits

(Baudrillard 1988, 24; Chow 2007, 112). Consumption is an active mode of production and relation, which ultimately regulates signs and assures group integration. Simply put, the reason that Xiaojun and Qiao are captured by the same song at a particular time and place, is that they are both susceptible to consumerist culture, which engineers their desire for certain commodities—in this instance, popular songs. This susceptibility to mass commodities, according to Chow, shores up interpersonal bonds. Communities, it follows, are formed not in response to individual needs, but through consumption (2007, 113). What Teng's music evokes between the two characters, in this case, is less a sense of belonging to a distant homeland, than a mutual reaction (albeit vacuous) to intersubjective affects. The film's last scene seems only to reaffirm this tendency. Reprising the opening sequence in black and white, it reveals that Xiaojun and Qiao were not only both on the same train. In fact, they were sitting back to back. In sharing the same train of desire that brought them into a world of commodities, consumption, and capitalism, they were already connected. The film shows how, having been filled with the same desires, they finally come together again.

Notably, *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* was produced in 1996, the penultimate year of British rule in Hong Kong. As such, it resonates with what Esther Yau calls "the 1997 consciousness," which haunted the city's psyche at the dawn of another historical turn (1999, 181). The romantic journey of Xiaojun and Qiao, it seems, charts an escape route as the clock to handover counts down. For them, to have a place to live in the world is to escape from the places where they used to live. It might seem ironic then, that when Qiao eventually acquires a green card by working as a tour guide in New York, the mainland tourists wonder why she still stays in the United States. Many Chinese immigrants have returned to mainland China, where prospects are looking up. But for Qiao, as for Xiaojun, the process of repeatedly arriving in and departing from a place is driven by their mutual desire to secure a better future. As such, this process precipitates continual displacements, a continual elusion of the local. In Kwai-Cheung Lo's view, "the notion of the local in Hong Kong cinema exists in the form of a desire to become what it is not, in the hope of losing as well as simultaneously reconstituting itself in the process of globalization" (2001, 275). That said, in migrating among communities, both characters have achieved, and hope to achieve again, variations on their local identities (mainland Chinese, Hong Konger, and American). In pursuing happiness, Xiaojun and Qiao are perpetually displaced from the local. Yet this same pattern of displacement leads them back to where they once were. What must be underscored, here, is not that returning home is an irresistible desire, but that the

concept of "home" itself has become fluid. Now notions of home and local identity are continually reimagined and reconstructed by subjects on the move. In this light, I will further examine how the ideology of the homeland has shaped cultural imaginations of home among diasporic Chinese subjects.

The Nostalgia of Future

In inaugurating the Sinophone as a critical paradigm, Shu-mei Shih asserts that the notion of Chineseness figures an "inescapable, ontological, a priori condition," which insists on "an ideology of origin that refuses to accept an end date to diaspora" (2007, 185). Shih seems to suggest that diasporic communities, who have left their ancestral homes, should be allowed and enabled to throw off the burden of nostalgia and melancholy of homelessness altogether. For Rey Chow, the essentialization of "home" threatens individuals with homesickness (2007, 29). Attentive to forms of displacement and dislocation in lived experience, scholars have explored how identities are affiliated with places. This accentuated rootedness of a physical location indicates that although someone might leave the places with which their identity is connected, they will be ineluctably drawn back to it. In applying the concept of the Sinophone, Shih's reflection on the Chinese diaspora points to a "linguistic present and future," in which Chinese people living overseas (often named *haiwai huaren* or *huaqiao*) will integrate into their host communities and eventually disappear (2011, 716). Others, however, have argued that the concept of the Sinophone itself is dubious, for cultural practices and products are not exclusively linguistic (Lim, 2014; Chen, 2015). Eliding logocentrism, my investigation now turns to the topography and chronopolitics of cultural belonging. The cultural dynamics at work in rhetorics of belonging, I intend to show, entail variety of affects and memories, which are not reducible to the linguistic. Focusing on the trajectories of the ideology of the homeland as it moves across spatial and temporal boundaries, I call for a rethinking of the tensions surrounding Chinese cultural identity in diasporic contexts.

The latest film from China's leading director Jia Zhangke, *Mountains May Depart* (*Shanhe guren*) is paradigmatic of the entanglement between nationhood, kinship, and individuality in Chinese culture. With an episodic structure, the narrative spans nearly three decades. It tells the story of Tao, a woman in the small town of Fenyang. At the end of the last century, Tao finds herself trapped in a love triangle with

two admirers, Liangzi and Jinsheng. Jinsheng, the wealthier suitor, uses the profits from a gas station he runs to purchase the coal mine where Liangzi works. In consequence, Liangzi is laid off. Having lost the competition, Liangzi leaves the town before Tao and Jinsheng's wedding. Fifteen years later, the couple has already divorced. Tao stays in Fenyang while Jinsheng lives in Shanghai with their son, Dollar (Daole). Another decade on, in the year of 2025, the little boy has grown into a man and an immigrant in Australia. After a squabble, Dollar walks out on his father. Across the Pacific on a snowy night, Tao dances peacefully, all alone.

Whereas Jia's previous film *A Touch of Sin* (*Tian zhu ding*, 2013) features murderous and revengeful characters, the prosaic and pensive undertone of *Mountains May Depart* marks a stylistic return to his early works. The protagonist Tao is an ordinary person, played by Jia's longtime collaborator and wife Zhao Tao. Her portrayal bears traces of figures in Jia's previous films, widely known as the "Hometown Trilogy": *Xiao Wu* (1997), *Platform* (*Zhan tai*, 2000), and *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiao yao*, 2002). What these figures have in common is that they never leave the same place, whatever the reason. Jia's recent films, however, break with this narrative pattern. Instead, he turned to those who are removed from their places of origin, such as rural migrants, inhabitants of cities, and fugitives. Although the films do not directly address the originality invested in place, I reckon, the absence of rooted placehood in Jia's later works only serves as a foil to the bond between people and place, which Tuan Yi-fu refers to as "topophilia" (1974, 4). In *Mountains May Depart*, Jia reveals how topophilic feelings are disseminated and contested through temporality. The awareness of that our affective ties with place might die away, is prompted not only by geographical distance, but also by a fear of time. The film draws on an obsession or fixation on the negation, decadence, and erasure of memories and feelings due to the inevitable progress of time. Pamela Lee terms this obsessive fear "chronophobia" (2004, 14). Through close reading, I argue that Jia's *Mountains May Depart* captures the ways in which the protagonist's lived experience is heightened by topophilic and chronophobic intensities.

According to Tuan, the neologism "topophilia" designates humans' relations to the environments they inhabit, including aesthetic appreciation, physical contact, and emotional response (1974, 93). Subtly deferred from survival and adaptation, the notion of topophilia refers to a structure of feeling that "one has towards a place because it is home, the locus of memories, and the means of gaining a livelihood" (Tuan 1974, 93). Accordingly, topophilia provides a vantage point from which to

interpret how cultural identities are shaped by, and anchored in, spaces and places. In *Mountains May Depart*, topophilic emotions are expressed primarily by the female protagonist Tao. Having once been a cheerful person, Tao is now fraught with grief owing to a series of misfortunes. Despite her failed marriage, losing custody over her son, and father's death, Tao does not run away from Fenyang, the town where these disappointments and crises unfolded. On the contrary, these experiences make her determined to stay. At intervals, there are scenes showing Tao, sometimes alone, against the backdrop of the surrounding landscape. Time and again, the image of Tao is superimposed onto a Buddhist pagoda, frozen river, or undulating mountains, producing a composite image in which the connections between person and place are made palpable.

In another instance, Liangzi once avowed that if he left town he would never return. However, in the second episode, which is set in 2014, Liangzi has nonetheless returned with his wife from a neighboring province. He has been diagnosed with pneumoconiosis, a terminal disease common among coal miners. Liangzi's homecoming resonates with the notion of nostalgia in Chinese culture. The character's actions can be associated with classical proverbs, such as "niao fei fan xiang, hu si shou qiu" (a bird adrift finally returns; a dying fox returns to its den), and "ye luo gui gen" (a leave nurtured by the soil comes back to the soil). For Tao and Liangzi, Fenyang is a safe harbor for their damaged lives. It is a shelter of last resort in which they can bear an erratic present and enigmatic future. Through framing and storytelling, Jia highlights a mythical relationship between individual and place. This relationship affords people an illusion of nostalgia, a sense of belonging, and a yearning for "home."

It is in the figure of Tao's son Dollar, however, that this perception of original placehood is distorted by time. Upon Tao's request, an eight-year-old Dollar arrives in Fenyang after his grandfather's death. Wearing an international school uniform and equipped with digital gadgets, Dollar seems well accustomed to a Western-tinged and middle-class way of life. When they meet at the airport, Dollar addresses Tao as "mommy," not "ma" in Chinese. Whereas Tao mostly uses the local dialect, Dollar speaks either Mandarin or Shanghainese. Showing up in an underdeveloped hinterland, Dollar seems to epitomize China's modernization and globalization, through which tradition has seemingly been abandoned and poverty largely eliminated. The very fact that the boy is named after a global currency, the dollar, underscores the irony that socialist China has embraced a capitalist dream. His

uncommon interactions with his mother, moreover, attest to intractable anxieties about the loss of roots. Dollar, it seems, has been cut off from the orthodoxies of his place of origin. This displacement has arrested his sense of nostalgia. Aware of that Dollar will soon move to Australia, Tao insists that she accompany him home to Shanghai by train, rather than by train. Asked why, she confides, "The slower it goes, the more time we have."

Given its divided structure, the film's major theme is time. To render the temporal disjunctures still more visible, Jia consciously adopted three different aspect ratios in the three segments. Explaining this cinematographic method in a commentary, Jia writes:

> I made a lot video footage back in 1999, some of which are used in the film. The first scene I saw in that footage is a dancing crowd in a disco ballroom. Replicating the scene and its ambience seems impossible, as does simply reenacting it dramatically. Since the footage was shot in a 4:3 frame, I decided to make the first part of the story in the same format. The second part follows this logic. It involves some footage I recorded later in the format of 16:9. For the last part I simply used a widescreen format, to distinguish all three periods with different frames. All in all, my purpose is to incorporate this footage into the film. (November 5, 2015)

As some scholars have noted, this way of incorporating audiovisual materials from the past into a contemporary film links back to the tradition of realism in postsocialist Chinese cinema. According to Xudong Zhang, the notion of postsocialism defines China's postmodern condition. Characterized by "a bewildering overlap of modes of production, social systems, and symbolic orders," postsocialism emerges in the tensions between China's ideological institutions and global capitalism (Zhang 2008, 10). Considering its circumstances, postsocialist Chinese cinema took a realistic approach to the country's drastic and swift socioeconomic transformation, which involves conflicts between past and present. Taking on temporality as a site of social critique, Jia's films consistently deploy documentary imagery. However, Jia has moved to break down the boundaries between verisimilitude and reality, for instance, by using documentary techniques (such as synchronous sound and imaging) rather than

narrative devices (such as voiceovers and flashbacks) in his fiction films. Even though animated and computer-generated elements also appear at times, Chris Berry argues, Jia's persistent recourse to documentary practice lends his films an "on-the-spot" aesthetic and "in-the-now" temporality (2009, 114).

As Rey Chow suggests, the immediacy delivered by documentary realism serves to present the past not as a bygone reality, but rather as a matter of found footage (2014, 27):

> The past is given to view as what has been cut into countless times already, by processes and apparatuses of (audial, visual and narrative) recording. The acute senses of ephemerality, loss and ultimately melancholy which characterise many a moment in Jia's films are the results of this deeply-felt sensation of hypermediality—indeed, of the composite material, tracks and symptoms left on human perceptions and interactions by media forms such as print, photography, film, newsreel images, historical reportage, popular songs, interviews and, most importantly, storytelling. (Chow 2014, 27)

Chow's mention of hypermediality sheds light on Jia's cinematic techniques. Hypermediality can be found throughout *Mountains May Depart*. For example, when Tao and Dollar are sitting on the train to Shanghai, the camera shows a video clip on Dollar's tablet. The same display is then taken over by out-of-focus televised images. These images eventually dissolve as the film transitions to the last episode, which is presented in widescreen. The video clip on Dollar's table is an advertisement for Australia's tourism, which is showing the natural landmark of the Twelve Apostles—great limestone stacks on the coastline. Due to continual erosion, the narrative informs us, the twelve stacks will soon become three. In addition, two songs that recur in the film—Pet Shop Boys' *Go West* (1993) and Hong Kong pop singer Sally Yeh's *Take Care* (*Zhen zhong*, 1990)—provoke nostalgia by thematizing ephemerality. The hypermediary of Jia's film, so it seems, resonates with Fredric Jameson's discussion of "nostalgia films", because such films convey a sense of "pastness" to the present by imaging alternative historical situations with new aesthetic methods such as pastiche and parody (1991, 17-19). As Esther Cheung's puts it, Jia hopes to challenge discourses of authenticity and historicity that dominate the present (2015, 58). But what seems

even more provocative, according to Chow, is that Jia's characteristic aesthetic allows for a new way of envisioning China, "not simply as a land, a nation or a people, but first and foremost as medial information" (2014, 27). What Jia's films offer, then, is an ahistorical fragmentation of "reality"—understood here as mediated lived experience, "characterized by loss of history and an in-the-now tense of distraction and sensation" (Berry 2009, 114). To resist the authority of national historicism, for Jia, is to displace a coherent and progressive temporality with disjunctive and differential temporalities. The temporal splits in *Mountains May Depart*, therefore, attest to his critical methodology.

The last segment of the film revolving around Dollar, envisions a dystopian future for notions of cultural heritage. After living in Australia for almost a decade, Dollar can no longer speak his mother tongue. His father Jinsheng, in contrast, can only speak Chinese. Their few conversations often carry out with belated responses, for they both must rely on translation software to understand each other. It is interesting to note that, in an Oedipal twist, Dollar falls in love with his Mandarin teacher, Mia (Sylvia Chang), who is about his mother's age. With Mia translating for them, the father and son's conversations are full of time lags. It is as if despite living in the same place, even the same room, the father and son live in disparate temporalities. Walking down to the beach, facing the sea, Dollar calls to mind the only word of his native language that he can remember: "Tao," his mother's name, which also means wave in Chinese. Oceans apart, an elderly Tao dances in the open to the extradiegetic *Go West*—the same song to which she used to dance. Whereas the son's name "Dollar" implicates an ambition for global capital and satirizes contemporary China's skin-deep socialism, his mother's name seems to become a bridge that connects people across geographical distances. As much as the sea divides people, it also unites them.

For Shu-mei Shih, to order an expiration date on the Chinese diaspora, at which migrants will be absorbed into their host cultures, would undo their topophilic allegiance to the homeland. This notion entails a mobile conception of "homeness" and "origin" (Shih 2007, 190). Unlike his father, Dollar barely recognizes a sense of homeness. Still, his romantic relationship with Mia suggests a longing for his mother, a hope that Mia's presence will fill that void left by Tao. If Tao embodies a topophilic affinity with home and locality, then Dollar and Mia's love translates into an affective bond between the diaspora and the place of origin.

In the film, this affective bond is accented by hypermedial elements that express Dollar's yearning for Tao. When the son looks out to the sea, we hear the waves.

This sound extends into the following scene, remaining audible in the background. As long as Tao dances to the music, the sound of waves continues. The overlapping sounds of the music and waves function as a two-way response. On the one hand, the sound of Tao (meaning waving and waves) addresses the person named Tao. On the other, Tao's presence responds to Dollar's calling. Symbolically, this scene spells out an immigrant's diasporic memory of his homeland. Furthermore, the two characters seem immersed in different temporalities—as Tao revels in the favorite song of her youth (the past), Dollar dwells on the residual memory of his mother (the present). By arranging times in this way, the film suggests an alternative temporal logic. Given that the past and present have both become sites of nostalgia, the implications for the ideology of the homeland, and how memory can be preserved and performed, are contingent on people's specific conditions.

A World without Chineseness?

In this chapter I introduced the idea of the ideology of the homeland, demonstrating how notions of China and Chineseness play out in the domains of culture, language, and geopolitics. The kernel of this ideology posits the congruity of the state and family, which together circumscribe the individual with political institutions and ethical imperatives. By cultivating a mythic belief in *guojia*—an imagined bond between nationhood and kinship—this symbolic order effects personal identification. In analyzing the film *The Herdsman*, I show how films use ideological interpellation to produce a Chinese national identity. Nevertheless, the collective formation of national identity can be hampered by personal testimonial and memories. Rather than totally subjugate subjects, the complex character of memory affords individuals a certain degree of critical autonomy.

Furthermore, this ideology of the homeland is sustained through an essentialization of language, as expressed in the notion of "mother tongue." The notion of the mother tongue, or native speech, is problematic in that it has othering effects discriminating against those who either do not speak the language or do so with accents and dialects. In the Chinese-speaking world particularly, habitual discourses, practices, and native languages have become integral parts of local culture, providing a basis for local identity. This is where the Sinophone framework makes it possible to critique nativistic claims on languages, for it recognizes the Chinese-speaking world's

heterogeneous languages, national discourses, and ethnicities. *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* grapples with language's exclusionary power, revealing the constructedness of notions such as "mother tongue" and "native speaker." Once their constructedness is acknowledged, cultural identities premised on an equivalence among language, nationality, and ethnicity are seen as flimsy presumptions.

Alongside language, emotional investment in places also contributes to people's sense of belonging. This can transform into a strong commitment to a local community, or nostalgia for an origin or roots. People's attachments to place constitute a form of topophilia, even among migrant and diasporic subjects, who have left their erstwhile places of origin. As much as topophilia is intensified by geographical dislocation or displacement, it can also be disrupted by experiences of time. Temporal duration may either augment or attenuate one's affiliation with his or her original place. In *Mountains May Depart*, Dollar ends up unable to speak Mandarin. An immigrant, he now speaks English. Although over time Dollar's topophilic affection for Fenyang, the town in which he was born, may have given way to foreign locations, he remains nostalgic for his mother, Tao, who stays in Fenyang. This nostalgia, ultimately, tempers his severance from China.

In this way, the paradigm of Sinophone studies foregrounds the malleability of identities and forms of self-recognition. At one level, this comes down to linguistic, political, and cultural conditions. At another, it points to the ambivalence and indeterminacy of changing identities. Shu-mei Shih imagines a future Chinese diaspora that would have forfeited its associations with China—conceived here as a geographical referent—and dissolve into new social and lingual environments. However, this seems to dismiss other anchors in cultural identification, such as affect and memory. In highlighting heterogeneity, the Sinophone approach contributes toward fracturing the ethnocentrism and monolingualism that characterize the Chinese-speaking world. Notwithstanding, this critical recognition of plural dialects as national languages, draws restrictive lines between Chinese and non-Chinese languages. This, I claim, reduces multiple, polymorphous conditions of existence to linguistic practices. After all, cultural formation is by no means confined to the linguistic domain; it is also located in other areas of lived experience, including the physical and psychic.

Even if a person of Chinese descent has adapted to a different language, culture, and society, the cultural and political presence of China, whether benevolent or threatening, cannot be denied. The presence of China is only heightened by the

accelerated forms of technological exchange and commodity consumption that define the global age. More importantly, diasporic communities are not static and isolated. It is crucial to keep in mind the dynamism and porosity of the Chinese diaspora, which is engaged in an indefinite process of differing and deterring—a *différance* of Chineseness. In this process, traits and traces of Chinese culture, politics, and discourse intermittently reappear in the diasporic experience.

Engaging with Shih's interventions, I contend that cultural identities of overseas Chinese are rarely dissociated fully from their places of origin. This is not to say that China, with its sheer cultural and economic clout, will inflict itself upon Chinese immigrants and their descendants for all eternity. I rather foreground the trans/formation and dis/accordance of Chinese cultural identity and its "derivative" others. In the words of Stuart Hall, cultural identity is neither "a fixed essence…lying unchanged outside history and culture," nor "a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return;" rather, it is "always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (1990, 226). In other words, diasporic identities—cultural identities in general—correspond to differential "positionalities" that intersect with nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism in different local contexts (Hall 1990, 237). Consequently, various scenarios of one's relation to China or Chineseness caution us against any finite conclusions about how one's identity is prescribed by a fixed position in the world (Chun, 1996; Chow, 1997; Ang, 1998). In this light, we should further explore how fluctuating positions, poised between worlds of difference, can open onto myriad ways of being.

Note on translation

The English translations of dialogues, idioms, and Jia Zhangke's commentary are mine. For Jia's original text in Chinese, see Jia Zhangke (2015).

Glossary in Chinese

Guojia 国家; *zhonghua minzu* 中华民族;

niao fei fan xiang, hu si shou qiu 鸟飞返乡，狐死首丘; *ye luo gui gen* 叶落归根