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### National Allegory and Postmodernism in Chinese Cinema

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TRINITY COLLEGE  
Hartford, Connecticut

Senior Thesis

*National Allegory and Postmodernism in Chinese Cinema*

submitted by

Kyra Saniewski, 2015

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

2015

Director: James Prakash Younger

Reader: David Rosen

Reader: Christopher Hager

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## INTRODCUTION

Thanks to Fredric Jameson's essay "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," the concept of the postmodern national allegory made its way into the collective consciousness of academia. In this piece, which was roundly criticized upon its publication in 1986, Jameson—a political theorist and literary critic—proposes a rather controversial model by which we might interpret so-called third world literature. He argues that "all third world texts are necessarily [...] allegorical" (13); but not allegorical in the sense that one object stands in for another in a "one-to-one table of equivalencies." Rather, Jameson describes allegory as a complex and discontinuous "signifying process" (73), within which an object may hold multiple, or perhaps even ambiguous meanings. Although Jameson did not invent the term, his particular usage succeeded in prompting an intense debate concerning the intersection of literature and global politics.

But we could—and should—ask, what makes third world literature different from "first world" literature? Jameson goes on to explain that in the capitalist West, there is a distinct separation between art (or literature) in the private sphere, and politics in the public sphere. He writes, "[We have a] deep cultural conviction that the lived experience of our private existences is somehow incommensurable with the abstractions of economic [and political] science [...]" (69). Due to the systematic oppression of the third world through centuries of Western imperialism and colonialism, the nations of the third world have no such luxury. For these people, personal and political narratives are "necessarily" linked. Understandably, many readers criticized Jameson's use of the term "third world," which first emerged during the Cold War to denote foreign powers unaligned

with either the West or the Soviet bloc. In recent years, however, it has been used to refer to poorer (often economically exploited) non-Western countries. Early in the essay, Jameson readily acknowledges the problematic nature of the term “third world,” but argues that despite the great cultural and socio-historical diversity in non-Western countries, “[there is no] comparable expression that articulates [...] the break between the capitalist first world [...] and a range of other countries which have suffered the experience of colonialism and imperialism” (67). In the West, Jameson explains, we have the ability to live our lives free of such a history of oppression. Our experiences throughout life—unlike those of third world nations—have not been shaped by the ways in which we have struggled to get out from under the influence of a foreign power.

Jameson writes,

“[Our] view from the top is epistemologically crippling, and reduces its subjects to the illusions of a host of fragmented subjectivities, to the poverty of the individual experience of isolated monads, to dying individual bodies without collective pasts or futures bereft of any possibility of grasping the social totality. This placeless individuality, this structural idealism which affords us the luxury of the Sartrean blink, offers a welcome escape from the “nightmare of history”, but at the same time it condemns our culture to psychologisms and the “projections” of fragmented subjectivity” (22).

All of this, he claims, is off limits to the third world, which must be “situational and materialist despite itself.” Needless to say, his admittedly sweeping claims made many people quite angry. Among Jameson’s detractors is Aijaz Ahmad, whose criticism of Jameson rests on the idea that he succeeded in exploring the West rather than the “Other,” and in doing so, engaged in “patronizing, theoretical orientalism” (Szeman 803). But Imre Szeman, in defense of Jameson, attempts to clarify the point: “[the broader aim of “Third World Literature in an Era of Multinational Capitalism” is to] develop a system

by which it might be possible to consider these texts within the global economic and political system that *produces the third world as the third world*” (807). Of course, I am not here to say whether or not Jameson should be the definitive voice in the discussion of third world literature. I think that there are aspects of his argument that require deeper conversation on the topic of national allegory, and unfortunately, this is not the place for that. Rather, I seek to use his paradigm of national allegory in order to discuss a particular national cinema—in this case, that of China.

I first became interested in the subject during my junior year, during a course on World (or non-Western) cinema. We studied Wong Kar-wai’s *Chungking Express* (1994), and I remember feeling as if a whole new landscape of film had been opened up to me. I think I realized then just how ethno and euro-centric my film education had been, up to that point. I know that I cannot possibly do the subject justice—not entirely. But I had to start somewhere, and Jameson seemed like as good a place as any. We share a similar goal: to elaborate on a system by which we can begin to understand certain aspects of non-Western literature—or in this case, film. I know that Chinese cinema is not one whole—the movements and stories it contains are as heterogeneous as the ethnic groups within China itself. In order to give myself a broader perspective of how the concept of national allegory applies to Chinese film, I have decided to separate my inquiry around films that were produced within three distinct political contexts: the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. While they all share a national identity, the ways in which this identity is expressed are very different. For example, due to various historical events throughout the past few centuries, the people of Hong

Kong may not have the same idea of what it means to be Chinese as do the people of Taiwan.

Here, it might be useful to point to the concept of the “imagined community”—a phrase coined by Benedict Anderson in 1983. He believed that nations are essentially communities that are held together by a psychological construction of camaraderie, rather than a concrete political power (Anderson 5-7). Szeman similarly proposes that the cultural specificities of the nation-state lie in the space between the “psychological and the political” (810). Anderson posits that in countries affected by colonialism, nationalism paves a path toward the reconstruction of an identity independent of the powers that be. Szeman describes the same re-shaping of any one culture as a “cultural revolution.” In particular, China’s search for a national identity would take the country through a series of sociopolitical upheavals (including the aptly named “Cultural Revolution”) throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. At the forefront of numerous conflicts were the Kuomintang (or KMT)—the nationalist party—and the Communist Party of China (CPC), which fought for control throughout the Japanese occupation (1931-1945). Eventually, however, after the fall of the Japanese empire, the CPC (under the management of Mao Zedong) managed to take control of most of the mainland. The defeated KMT fled to Taiwan, where the Japanese had surrendered to the nationalists. However, China would continue to face questionable leadership under Mao, and the people’s discontent with a brutal communist regime continued to boil under the surface until peaceful protesters were forcefully driven out of Tiananmen Square on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989. At that point, the People’s Republic came under great international scrutiny, although the sanctions placed upon the nation in the early 90’s were later lifted without

fanfare. The people of China, however, continued to come face to face with a changing global landscape. In 1991, military rule came to an end in Taiwan, and the KMT were officially ousted from office in 2000. In 1997, Hong Kong—which had previously been under British control—was returned to the PRC.

Of course, this is only a rough outline of a complex and fraught history of China's entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But I shall soon attempt to navigate events which have had a significant impact on Chinese filmmakers—events which, arguably, inform the narratives of their films. Directors like Jia Zhangke (of the PRC), Hou Hsiao-Hsien (Taiwan), and Wong Kar-wai (Hong Kong) have all utilized various stylistic methods of incorporating the political and social climate of China into their art. It will be my goal throughout the three chapters of this thesis to highlight the historical events which are being represented allegorically in each film (one for each director), how the narrative of the film reflects these events, and how each director's specific style supports the latter. In addition, I seek to develop a greater understanding of how these distinct political contexts (Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the PRC) create the narrative of China as a whole. Here, in chronological order, is a brief introduction to each of the films I will study:

Firstly, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *A City of Sadness* (1989) portrays one family's violent history during the White Terror in Taiwan—a period of martial law on the island that lasted for nearly 40 years. But the film deals mainly with the experience of people on the *periphery* of this larger historical event. For example, the unlucky Lin family feels the repercussions of Taiwan's political upheaval, even though they aren't anywhere near the epicenter of Taipei. In the film, gangsters from Shanghai begin to take control of business on the island, and violence and deceit start to creep into the family's



comfortable lifestyle. At the center of the narrative is the youngest of three brothers: Wen-ching, a deaf-mute photographer who catalogues the family's experiences through his camera lens. In many ways, his inability to communicate through traditional structures reflects the silence that fell upon Taiwan during the 1940's—a silence marked by a ban against the Taiwanese dialect, and the suppression of any perceived movement against the KMT's rule (Reynaud 31). Another central character—who also provides the voiceover narration for most of the movie—is a young woman named Hinomi. She is not only at the periphery of the larger events happening on the island, but she is also at the periphery of the family. While the men do business and discuss politics, the women are often confined to the kitchen, or told to keep their mouths shut. Wen-ching and Hinomi together make a couple that is on the fringes of both family and society.

In *Chungking Express* (1994), Wong Kar-wai presents us with characters who seem to have lost their way. His protagonists drift through the so-called “Chungking jungle” of Hong Kong, counting down the minutes, hours, and days until they find true love. Cop 223 buys cans of pineapple marked with a May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1994 expiration date (the one month anniversary of his lover's departure), and when his ex-girlfriend May refuses to get back together, he desperately attempts to reconnect with women from his past. Meanwhile, a young woman called Faye struggles to get the attention of her melancholic love interest—Cop 663. Despite there being no direct reference to the looming handover of Hong Kong, *Chungking Express* was released shortly before that date, and it is difficult to notice the ticking clocks and ominous expiration dates without recognizing the parallel. The characters in the film are desperate to make a connection with each other in a dizzyingly crowded world, and their own anxiety reflects the anxiety surrounding Hong

Kong's uncertain future. It seems as though the city itself is on display here—with all of its rich diversity and unique spirit. It's as if Wong wants us to see what might be lost in the coming months. Despite his love for the city, however, there is a distinct element of melancholy in the film—at night, the images of Hong Kong take on an uneasy, dreamlike quality. Wong consistently reminds us that time is passing, and that the people we love aren't sticking around.

Finally, in his movies about everyday working class people, Jia Zhangke consistently draws attention to the disconnect between a socialist past and a increasingly globalized, capitalist future. His characters often speak of their youth during Mao's Cultural Revolution with a strange sort of melancholic longing. In *A Touch of Sin* (Jia Zhangke, 2013), however, characters express more than a touch of discontent with China's current economic woes. In the first segment of the film, the disparity between the wealthiest socialites and the poorest workers becomes painfully apparent when one man called Dahai takes it upon himself to rid the world of corrupt village officials. The film, which is broken up into four distinct segments, is a bleak look at what China has become—for women, for the poor, and for the oppressed. Therefore, it retains little of the peaceful recollection of the past that defined Jia's *24 City* (2008). The world in *A Touch of Sin* is a world in limbo: disorientation and confusion often temper the anger in Jia's characters, so they wander across the country, lost and indecisive. In this manner, he highlights the struggles of ordinary people who are merely trying to adapt to a way of life that is very different from what they once knew. Jia himself admits that most of the stories in *A Touch of Sin*—such as the suicide of a young factory worker and the murder of one cruel brothel patron—are based on real events that took place in different parts of

the country (Adams). Throughout the film, Jia seems to ask us, where does this violence come from, and whose fault is it? The poor girl seeking honest work, or the rich men who beat and humiliate her?

Overall, I hope to explore how these events and moments in history have shaped the experiences of the Chinese people, and how different filmmakers have asked the question of what it means to be Chinese. As for Jameson, I do not seek to disprove nor to defend his position on third world literature. For example, one of the critiques of his work centers around the fact that he was merely “using the third world as a lens by which to examine the West” (Szeman 803). I think that criticism is valid, and I hope that I can go beyond Jameson’s model—not by indulging in my knowledge of Chinese culture (it is limited by my overwhelming Americanness), but by admitting that I do not know if Jameson’s claim holds true. I can only hope to elaborate upon the politics that have shaped the relationship between Western and non-Western cultures, and how they inform the art that we both make. And I do not mean for this disclaimer to be self-serving or patronizing in any way—but if I am presumptuous, I welcome criticism, and it is my greatest desire to break free of my inherent ethnocentricity.

CHAPTER I:  
*A City of Sadness*

It is difficult to begin a conversation of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's award-winning *A City of Sadness* (1989) without first acknowledging the climate of the times in which it came to be. According to Berenice Reynaud, Hou was working on editing the film during the summer of 1989, when the protests in Tiananmen Square were reaching a head (Reynaud 8). After the student protesters were forcibly driven out of the square on June 4<sup>th</sup>, Hou reportedly recognized the parallels between the situation in his film and the turmoil of China's modern sociopolitical landscape. He wondered, "why do such tragedies keep befalling the Chinese people?" (Reynaud 9), and hoped that *A City* would prompt his audience to feel a sense of anger at those responsible for such violence. In addition, *A City of Sadness*, which picked up a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1989, garnered international acclaim for the way in which it drew attention to Chinese filmmakers and the artistic merit of their work.

But in the wake of the Tiananmen Square protests, which focused on securing various freedoms (such as the end of censorship) and political reforms, the film also served to illuminate the open wounds of contemporary Chinese culture. When *A City* was released, it came only two years after the end of military rule in Taiwan, and prompted both "national pride" and the suspicion of Taiwanese officials (Reynaud 8). The events in the film—which outlines the history of the fictional Lin family during the White Terror—felt all too familiar, considering the climate of Mao's despotic rule of the PRC, as well as apprehension surrounding the future of the newly democratized government in Taiwan. Even though the immediate events of the film have long since come to a close, the political discourse that Hou presents within the narrative remains

entirely relevant today, as it did in 1989. But in order to understand the significance of the film's reception in Taiwan, one must first understand the significance of the historical events it portrays. In short, the movie portrays various events leading up to the White Terror. Specifically, it tells the stories of the Lin family's three brothers; each of which experience various hardships throughout the years. The oldest son, Wen-heung, as well as the third son (Wen-leung), become embroiled with gangsters from Shanghai after the Japanese flee the island. Eventually, however, Wen-leung's deal with the mainlanders goes bad, and the brothers are labeled as Japanese sympathizers—a death sentence (Reynaud 25). In the meantime, the youngest son (Wen-ching) attempts to escape the turmoil by running to the mountains with his radical socialist friends. The film also follows a young woman named Hinomi, who falls in love with Wen-ching as she attempts to adapt to this rapid succession of changes. Eventually, however, all but Hinomi and the Lin patriarch fall victim to the violence between the Taiwanese and the mainlanders. Overall, the smaller events of the narrative help to illuminate the larger events taking place throughout China; in this case, the Lin's personal hardships were shared by countless people across Taiwan. This is how *A City* works as an allegory: actions on the small scale stand in for shared, national experiences which have previously been suppressed by government of Taiwan. In order to understand the allegory, we must read through this coded, fictional story.

While the incidents in the film often occur out of order or in a series of flashbacks, *A City's* opening minutes portray a critical cultural and political shift. The movie starts with the Japanese emperor Hirohito's speech announcing his surrender to the Allied forces. It plays over the credits until the first sequence of the film begins: the

eldest brother of the Lin family, Wen-heung, is tinkering with the lights as his wife prepares to give birth in the background. It is a scene that is both grimy and realistic in its depiction of motherhood, as well as highly symbolic. Over her plaintive cries, we can hear Hirohito's speech—now fuzzy through the static of the radio. As the woman screams, however, Hirohito's voice is drowned out by the noise of the birth. Finally, when the baby is born, the speech—which is delivered in a traditional Japanese dialect—fades out entirely, and is replaced by a sweeping, non-diegetic musical score (Reynaud 10-11). Here, the birth of the Taiwanese child ushers in a new chapter of history, and his pathetic wailing eclipses the speech of the once-mythical emperor. With the end of the war, Japan's influence over the island was effectively lost, and a struggle between the PCP and the KMT would soon fill the resulting vacuum.

The departure of the Japanese forces is also represented through the character of Shizuko, with whom Hinomi is close friends. Shizuko, upon the eve of her leaving Taiwan, gives Hinomi a sword (which she is to pass on to Shizuko's lover, Hinomi's brother Hinoe) and a kimono. With that, she is gone, so Hinomi begins to spend more and more time with Hinoe and his radical intellectual friends (also, keep in mind that the Tiananmen Square protests were essentially run by students and intellectuals as well). But throughout the film, we also learn that the Japanese influence in the culture of Taiwan is not entirely lost—it is, in turn, a part of the Taiwanese people's complex national identity. Later, Taiwanese men who are condemned to death by the mainland Nationalists will sing in Japanese—expressing a facet of their identity that the KMT had desperately hoped to suppress.

In this manner, throughout the film, the events taking place on the island are indicative of a cultural shift from rule under the Japanese to rule under the escaped mainland Nationalists. A rich part of Taiwanese culture—with all of its Japanese and native influence—would be suppressed by the KMT, who sought to use Taiwan as an outpost in their fight to win back the mainland from Mao's forces. Unfortunately, the takeover would prove to pose a very serious risk to the freedom of Taiwanese families. For example, when gangsters from Shanghai develop a sour working relationship with Wen-leung, he and his brothers are denounced as Japanese sympathizers and arrested. The balance of power in Taiwan has been disrupted, and the hapless Lin family are left out in the cold. While they are eventually able to strike a deal with the mainlanders, it is too late for Wen-leung, who has been tortured into a shell of his former self. For the members of the Lin family, imprisonment, torture, and execution are very real threats. On the eve of the 2-28 Incident, which saw countless civilians murdered for challenging the KMT government, Wen-ching (who is deaf and mute) is arrested for fraternizing with Hinoe (essentially a member of the Taiwanese resistance) and company. In jail, Wen-ching can only make sense of what is going on around him through the body language of the other inmates (Reynaud 34). His silence—and his inability to communicate with the men who have captured him—only reflects the inability of the Taiwanese to resist—and even to communicate—with the KMT (Reynaud). In reality, Tony Leung (Wen-ching) simply couldn't speak the Taiwanese dialect, so Hou had to make up a way to keep him in the film. But Hou also utilizes Wen-ching and his penchant for photography as a witness of sorts—"capable of extracting emotions, narrative, and spirituality from lighting and framing his subjects" (Reynaud 34).

The character of Wen-ching is therefore indicative of one of the film's overall goals—to *finally* tell the story of what happened to Taiwan during the years of the takeover. For decades, the subject was considered entirely taboo, and to speak of events like the 2-28 Incident (a day of unprecedented violence) was essentially forbidden. But with the repeal of martial law in 1987, things began to change, and following the release of *A City of Sadness* in 1989, people found that they could revisit the traumas of the past without fearing for their safety. Here, in a *movie*, were characters speaking in native Taiwanese dialect (which had previously been banned in official settings). The “family drama” genre was familiar to audiences at the time, but this certainly wasn't your run-of-the-mill melodrama. The ramifications of *A City* were great—it broke records at the box office, and finally the Taiwanese people felt that they could speak more openly about what had happened to them and their families. According to Jean Ma in *Melancholy Drift*, “*A City of Sadness* made an enormous impact on Taiwan's cultural scene as the first major film to revisit the historical trauma of the immediate aftermath of World War II [...]” (20). In fact, the marketing of the film relied on the tagline, “a story you could not hear, and could not discuss...before today” (Ma 21).

However, much of the action of the film takes place on the periphery of these larger historical events. What is important to Hou is not necessarily the individual caught up in the traumatic moment, but rather how the collective trauma bleeds through the fabric of family life and society as a whole. Hou tends to focus on the *context* of the action—how characters interact with other characters, and how the state of the family takes precedence over that of the individual. But how exactly does Hou set out to accomplish this delicate re-telling of history within the confines of a 3-hour film? In



other words, how does he utilize the *medium* of film in order to connect with his intended audience? *A City of Sadness*—with its political and social nuance, as well as artistic merit—is considered a masterpiece by many scholars of Chinese cinema. And the film *is* breathtaking—it’s long, but it’s beautiful. In *Staging Memories* by Abe Mark Nornes and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, the authors propose that Hou uses some distinct filmmaking techniques which are key in understanding the effect of the film altogether. Amongst them are minimal camera movement, long takes and long shots, repetition, and the “gradual revelation and construction of spatial relationships” (Nornes & Yueh-yu Yeh). Similarly, Berenice Reynaud describes Hou’s style thusly: “Through his minimalist imagery, complex framing, elliptic rendering of interpersonal relationships, and [...] disruptions created by his storytelling technique [...], Hou involves the spectator emotionally, while leaving [them] intellectually responsible for constructing the multiple layers of the plot” (9).

The three authors mentioned above have proposed similar models of Hou’s distinct film style, which I will attempt to explicate and condense within the next few pages. First of all, Hou’s narrative is distinctly nonlinear, and we are often left to infer the passing of time. According to Jean Ma, there are numerous flashbacks in Hou’s films that actually “[undermine] the stability of the present tense as a narrative anchor [...] and displace the present as the narrative’s main locus of enunciation [...]” (30). The example that Ma employs is the scene in which Shizuko gives her gifts to Hinomi. There is a flashback which apparently belongs to Shizuko, in which she sings for a class of children, and then one in which she is wearing the kimono she gives to Hinomi. But the next sequence (which takes place after the initial gift-giving) is no longer hinged on Shizuko’s

point of view. She is nowhere in the scene; rather, Hou shows us Hinomi pouring over papers with Wen-ching and Hinoe. Ma wonders, “whose recollections motivate the flashbacks here?” (39). Despite Shizuko singing a song which links her memory to the present moment in the narrative, she essentially disappears from our view, and her song is resumed by a different, non-diegetic source. Here, Hou reveals his penchant for playing with the “parameters [...] of subjectivity” (40) and collective memory. In other words, it is not Shizuko, Hinoe, or Hinomi who prompt the flashbacks, but rather, the significance of their relationships to each other. Here, Hou highlights the importance of the collective experience over that of the individual. Overall, in *A City*, the family unit is what suffers the most.

Along the same lines, Hou also enjoys inserting ellipses into the action of the plot: for example, cutting away from a knife fight in a corridor, showing us instead a peaceful village square, and then having the fight spill out into the street a minute later. Hou admits, “When I cut between scenes, I try to allow the unfinished atmosphere of the last shot to continue into the next” (Nornes & Yueh-yu Yeh). According to *Staging Memories*, this lends to the experience of the film as an “amorphous” whole, rather than a fragmented series of images. The knife fight especially highlights how violence and turmoil ripple outward, breaking the peace and cutting through the entire fabric of the diegetic world. These stylistic choices keep us on our toes: they require an active attention to detail, and a willingness on our part to engage with the events onscreen.

This need for active viewership also applies to what Reynaud labels “visual motifs” (66), or repeated images. Upon first viewing, many of Hou’s shots look the same, and actions appear to repeat themselves (such as the numerous dinner scenes at the

Lin's dining room table). But Hou often shoots along what Nornes and Yueh-yu Yeh dub an "axis"—a line from which certain repeating shots are taken. For example, the entrance to the Miner's hospital represents one such "axis". There are eight separate shots of that entrance, and all of them are slightly different—in angle, lighting, or framing. They pop up in various parts of the film—sometimes filled with chatting nurses, or the awful cries of the wounded. The repetition of this "motif" helps to develop an aptly-dubbed "emotional residue" with which we can further contextualize the meaning and purpose of these individual shots (Nornes & Yueh-yu Yeh). Throughout the film, there are numerous axes to which Hou returns time and time again, including the dining room, the hospital entrance, and the altar room (which is repeated twenty times throughout the film, according to the authors).

Hou also makes wonderful use of space in *A City of Sadness*. Whereas many directors will use establishing shots to set up the scene for the viewer, Hou's filmmaking is surprisingly devoid of such accommodating images. Instead, Hou will often cut to interiors, which are fragmented by walls, windows, and the respectful distance of the camera from the action. He will, however, carefully build upon our knowledge of the place—sometimes showing us more or less of the room. We are like an observer slowly learning our way around the Lins' home. According to Reynaud, this also leads to the sense that the human presence in Hou's films is "transitory" and "accidental." She writes, "[people] are floating over the composition of the shots like unnecessary ghosts" (64). Hou's characters often retreat off-screen, although we can still hear their movements and their chatter outside of the gaze of the camera. In other words, the setting takes on a life of its own, and we get the feeling that we are looking at real places,

and real events. Hou's clever breaking down of space allows the characters in *A City of Sadness* to exist outside of the diegetic world, which lends a sense of realism to the film. In their freedom from observation, they take on a life of their own, and even "resist" the desire of the spectator to be a part of their interior lives.

Additionally, Hou also refuses to follow some of the principal rules of classical continuity editing; he hardly ever uses the "shot reverse shot" formula, which makes it easier to see the action from the main character's point of view. For example, instead of supplying context for a conversation between Wen-ching and Hinomi (by cutting to a shot of Wen-ching from over Hinomi's shoulder), Hou might simply position the camera somewhere at the back of the room, and let the scene play out as if we were watching a theatre performance (Nornes & Yueh-yu Yeh). I find that there is a distinct lack of pointed close-ups to impress upon us the importance of the people who inhabit these shots. Men and women drift in and out of Hou's frames at leisure, and only Hinomi—an unassuming young nurse—has the privilege of narrating her story and providing a retrospective account of events.

This brings me to one of the most important aspects of Hou's filmmaking: the use of sound, especially within the context of voiceover narration. Overall, however, there is something eerily quiet about Hou's filmmaking. He doesn't often make use of non-diegetic sound, and when he does, the lines are often blurred between what the characters can hear and what they cannot. Sometimes, there is music playing over a long shot of a hazy mountain range. Sometimes, there is nothing but the bustling of nurses and clanging of metal instruments at the hospital. In this movie, the lines between realistic representation and poetry are blurred. When Hinomi discusses classical literature and

opera with Wen-Ching, black intertitles—on which we can read Wen-ching’s written replies—are edited into the film. Sometimes, the words turn into poems—free of meaningful context; up for interpretation. Many times, the only thread that ties the narrative actions together is Hinomi’s narration, which is unconventional considering that she is a woman (and therefore, not privy to the same knowledge of politics as the men). Earlier, I pointed to the example of Hirohito’s speech over the radio, and I really do believe that this is a prime example of how Hou regulates male narration to “official” speeches and broadcasts, whereas a woman carries the Lin family’s personal narrative (Reynaud 65). She is the voice—that subjective voice—that we must listen to and believe. In *Staging Memories*, Nornes and Yueh-yu Yeh point to a text called the “Acoustic Mirror” by Kaja Silverman. They summarize:

“[The] male voice enjoys a privileged position in the text and is structured as the site of enunciation. Female voice-over, on the other hand, is temporally and spatially dislocated from the image track and associated with interior perspective [...].”

This means that female voiceover is largely used within the narrative to promote the individual, subjective, and feminine point of view, rather than the objective truth. I would argue that Hinomi’s position as the only woman who narrates the story of the Lin family says something about the way in which Hou wanted to represent the traumatic events of the White Terror. Not only are we ushered into the private sphere—a place which Hinomi, as a woman, inhabits—but this interior, subjective space provides our only access to the narrative at all. On the other hand, what Nornes and Yueh-yu Yeh label as “official history” resists the experience of the individual, and undermines the validity of the people’s suffering. It is, I think, unfortunately true that the “winners” of a

conflict will write (or re-write) its history, and that the voices of the people who “lost” will sink back into the stream of oblivion.

Historically, many of these marginalized voices have been women—even in the United States, the rhetoric of women’s struggle for equal rights under the law has been twisted, suppressed, and turned against them. By embracing the point of view of the oppressed (in the Taiwanese, the disabled, the female), Hou effectively returns the power that has been taken from them by these “official narratives” of history. One such scene that really drives home the dichotomy between the masculine, “enunciating” voice and the subjective female’s is when Hinomi is writing in her diary at the hospital (Nornes & Yueh-yu Yeh). As she is jotting down her thoughts, however, we can hear an older man teaching a group of hospital staff how to speak Mandarin in order to accommodate the people fleeing from the mainland. Amongst the group of people who are learning the new language is a small girl around ten or eleven years old. Perhaps Hou is attempting to make a point about the ways in which culture is passed from one generation to the next, and how this may lead to some narratives being forgotten, while others continue to be perpetuated. It would appear that Hinomi’s voice—which, in this case, is silently confined to her diary—is in danger of being drowned out by the voice of the mainlanders and the KMT. However, overall, her voice is the only one that survives the test of time and the violence enacted upon her people.

Besides Hinomi, the other central character who actively observes and records history is Wen-ching. He is largely unable to communicate without his notebook, and often gets into trouble for his inability to hear and follow orders, but his camera lens serves to capture and present moments in time that would otherwise be forgotten. In

many ways, *A City of Sadness* is a film that bypasses a traditional, masculine retelling of history. Instead, Hou embraces imperfect human subjectivity, and challenges his audience to see things from the periphery, like Wen-ching and Hinomi. Throughout the film, we are not in the middle of the conflict between the Japanese and the Taiwanese, or the communists and the KMT—nor are we even privy to much of the fighting between the Lin brothers and the gangsters from Shanghai. Instead, the story of the White Terror is told through anxious glances between women, uneasy business dinners, and wounded disillusioned soldiers returning home.

Overall, I believe that the particular aspects of the *mise-en-scène* laid out by Reynaud, Ma, Nornes, and Yueh-yu Yeh require the most careful discussion. I also believe it to be worth reiterating that a film is not merely a story slapped together in an editing room. No shot, camera movement, nor line of dialogue is an accident. Rather, every aspect of the film remains in the finished product through a series of choices—whether they are the director's or the cinematographer's. Hou's decisions to repeat certain images, or to present his sets as series of fragmented spaces all have important ramifications. In this case, Hou's stylistic choices lend to what Jean Ma labels as a sense of melancholic longing, or as the title of her book suggests—a “melancholy drift”. There is definitely a sadness that pervades throughout the entirety of the film; in the empty rooms, as well as the vacant gazes of the men who have been condemned by the KMT. Hou's style is so unobtrusive, and yet the scenes are carefully rendered so that they echo previous sequences and make us conscious of the “emotional residue” of the images. This certainly leaves us something to discuss concerning how Hou portrays the plight of the Taiwanese—and even the Japanese and the mainlanders. Throughout the

film, I kept wondering, what are these people fighting for, exactly? Why do the KMT want to re-take the mainland, and what exactly does this film say about the national identity that they seem desperate to construct?

It is definitely not a simple question to tackle: in *A City*, identity is a complicated affair; it's not merely language or politics that determine who we are. But perhaps it is a lack of conscious identification that best speaks to Hou's purpose. Merely claiming that you are loyal to the cause of the KMT clearly means very little—just as refusing to comply with their wishes simply results in death. But I do not want to imply that Taiwanese identity is defined by oppression by other groups, especially since the island has been, and remains a home to people of many different ethnic backgrounds. But the question of identity has been at the forefront of the cultural consciousness of Taiwan since the repeal of martial law in 1987, and I think that its situation does serve as a prime example of just how complex the concept of a national identity can be. Is it based on language, or one's lineage? Politics? Traditions? Or is it simply what one "feels"? When the mainlanders arrived in the 1940s, many surely felt that the Taiwanese were too far removed from the motherland and too "Japanese." Understandably, many islanders did not feel very "Chinese" either, and considered themselves *Taiwanese* above all else (Chang Yen-Tsai 13-14). Regardless of how they identified, however, those who lived through the White Terror shared a nearly-unspeakable trauma. It is difficult to forget or to ignore the effects of such events, and I think that this is a facet of identity that interests Hou a great deal. He does not seem overly concerned with an identity based on ethnicity, or cultural background. Rather, he explores how a shared experience can shape



identity, and how a people's memory of that experience informs the realities of their present.

One important scene that Jean Ma describes in *Melancholy Drift* is when Wen-ching acts as a messenger and delivers the last words of a cellmate who had been executed. He doesn't write them down, but he remembers. “[His] memory serves as a channel between the dead and the living, and by extension as a reservoir of a secret history [...]” (63). In this sense, history is preserved because it lives on and “persists” in the memory of those who have experienced it. When those people are gone, the private history that they espouse will go with them. I think that Hou's closing shot of the empty dining room is so effective because it represents our inability to remain and propagate our stories. Perhaps this is why Hou made Wen-ching a photographer: he captures images that have since ceased to exist—not unlike Hou as a filmmaker. But while we can rely upon photographs and film to retain the image, they still require an interpreter—in the case of *A City of Sadness*, perhaps this is Hinomi's role. Now, the story she tells is a counter-narrative of the “official” history of the island; it is based on memory, and the subjective act of remembering.

It has become more and more apparent to me that *A City of Sadness* operates within an incredibly complex model of history. But it is one that Hou tackles with a sort of grace that rises from a deep respect of his subjects. I often wonder how we can do justice to such traumatic events, especially if we have not actually lived through them. How can we even begin to understand a culture of violence and oppression that we—especially the most privileged among us—have never experienced? Hou, I think, begins to answer this question, whether he had thought of it or not. By placing his camera along

the periphery of a larger event; by choosing to inhabit the realm of subjective experience, he bypasses the quandary of attempting to represent a set of events that are essentially unrepresentable *because* of how varied people's experiences really are. By doing justice to one (fictional) family, however, Hou positions us so that we can enter into the private back room of a nearly-inaccessible national memory.

## CHAPTER II: *Chungking Express*

The history of Hong Kong is just as complex—and its future just as unclear—as that of Taiwan. Although it has been settled in some capacity since ~960 CE, Ackbar Abbas, in “Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance,” argues that the city’s history—as it is relevant today—lies in its more recent colonial past (2). After the First Opium War, during which the Chinese and the British clashed over trade imbalances, the Chinese were compelled to relinquish control of Hong Kong in 1842. There were some territorial disputes between the Hong Kong people and their new colonizers, but eventually, the British helped the island to transition into a new era of industry, as well as worldwide commercial and financial influence. However, the numerous changes enacted by the British would only deepen the cultural divide between Hong Kong and a struggling mainland China. In addition, after World War II, the Cultural Revolution caused a large wave of emigration to Hong Kong. Since the British decided to retain control of Hong Kong after the war, the culture of the island—influenced by refugees, the British, as well as immigrants and expats—continued to grow separately from that of the People’s Republic. “It is not true, as some might wish to believe, that if you scratch the surface of a Hong Kong person, you will find a Chinese identity waiting to be reborn [...],” says Abbas (2).

However, by the time Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher visited the PRC in the early 1980’s, talks between Deng Xiaoping (Mao’s successor) and Hong Kong officials concerning the future of the city had already taken place. Unsurprisingly, the Chinese were interested in reclaiming the territory that they felt they had lost in “unequal” treaties following the Opium Wars. Eventually, after a few years of tense negotiation,

the British government agreed to officially return Hong Kong to the PRC in June of 1997. Hong Kong would then be labeled as a “Special Administrative Region”, and under the “One Country, Two Systems” principle enacted by Deng Xiaoping, it would be allowed to keep its capitalist economic system (as well as certain individual personal freedoms) for fifty years hence (Abbas 23).

Hong Kong, Abbas argues, is in a rare position. Its colonial history has effectively transformed it into a globalized, diverse cultural space that is—in many areas such as infrastructure and commerce—more secure than its motherland. In this manner, before the handover in 1997, Hong Kong was nestled somewhere between a system of colonialism and decolonization. In other words, it exercised a unique sort of power in global commerce. Abbas uses the term “postcolonial”—and gestures to the fact that the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank recently took over the British Midlands Bank, and “not vice versa” (6). However, the city’s conflicted history has also lead to a strange cultural identity—one marked by its own imminent disappearance in the face of the handover in 1997. While the majority of the population has a background that is ethnically Chinese, Abbas proposes that the primary characteristic of this “culture of disappearance” is the dichotomy between this shared ethnic background and a very different cultural identity (2). This Hong Kong identity, he argues, has largely been defined by its distinct “lack of culture.” After all, it is a port city: a “place of transition” (4); historically, there has been a lot of coming and going. Abbas writes, “Everything floats—currencies, values, [and] human relations” (4). Because of this intersection of immigrants and mainland Chinese and British expatriates, the people of Hong Kong largely failed to recognize that they did, in fact, have a unique culture of their own. However, it was not *seen* as the culture of

Hong Kong. It merely *was*, and it existed without due recognition. This is what Abbas refers to as “reverse hallucination”: the refusal to see something that is, in fact, there (7). Hence, the concept of a “culture of disappearance” is not so much an ethnic tradition as a shared psychosis.

Beginning in the eighties, only a few years before the handover, Hong Kong found itself on a precipice of sorts. Despite all of the uncertainty surrounding their imminent integration with the PRC, the people of Hong Kong realized that their way of life—their *culture*—might indeed come to an un-ceremonial end. But this raised the question, “what culture are we talking about?” What exactly *is* the culture of Hong Kong that we are going to lose? How does one go about retaining a cultural identity that did not exist in the first place? This is the culture of disappearance: a sort of identity based on its imminent loss. However, Abbas goes on to quote Fredric Jameson’s seminal essay on postmodernism: “[The] dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture is rather to be imagined in terms of an explosion [...], an expansion of culture throughout the social realm [...].” (7). That is, in this era of “late capitalism” and globalism, culture no longer merely refers to ethnicity, or one’s inherited traditions; instead, it permeates every aspect of our social and political lives. In many ways, Hong Kong was at the forefront of Jameson’s concept of postmodern globalization: as a conglomeration of various cultural, social, and economic traditions, the city itself can serve as an allegory for the emergence of a new postmodern era. In some ways, we can understand Hong Kong’s return to the insular PRC as a regression of sorts—an attempt to return to the way things were. This regression, I would argue, is also an aspect of the culture of disappearance.

Later in his introduction, however, Abbas discusses how emerging Hong Kong filmmakers have developed a new lens through which to peer at their city—as it is now, with all of its idiosyncrasies; free from traditional (East-West, Capitalist-Communist, Traditional-Modern) “binarisms.” These, Abbas argues, pose a great threat to our seeing Hong Kong as it truly is; in other words, these binarisms promote cultural disappearance (25). But first, I believe it is necessary to briefly examine how Hong Kong’s cinema—often labeled by Chinese and Western critics alike as kitschy and commercialized—came to reflect on the anxious sociopolitical climate of the 1980’s. Interestingly, the films coming out of Hong Kong only began to be taken seriously in the 1990’s, with filmmakers like Wong kar-wai and Stanley Kwan garnering a new sort of international acclaim. Before that, the “campy” kung fu movies of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan had been Hong Kong’s principal cinematic export. The “new” Hong Kong cinema is different, Abbas argues, because it turns inward and chooses Hong Kong itself as a subject (23). Before the handover was announced, it was as if “stories about Hong Kong always turned into stories about somewhere else” (25). However, Abbas warns that our use of the aforementioned binarisms also threaten to make Hong Kong disappear—or worse, be overlooked in favor of a simpler, but already vanishing set of clichéd images. In this sense, “[the main task of the new Hong Kong cinema] is to find means of outflanking, or simply keeping pace with, a subject always on the point of disappearance” (26). We should not, then, be interested in the Hong Kong that lies between the traditional and the modern, or the East and the West. That Hong Kong is already gone—“*deja disparu*.” So, these new filmmakers seem to be engaged in what is effectively a high-speed chase: an attempt to pin down what makes Hong Kong special. And in an era

defined by progression and transformation, they choose to distort both space and time—allowing us to experience a cultural moment free from the confines of the traditional (and thus, misleading) filmic image.

And if we look at Wong kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994), the city and the people of Hong Kong certainly take on a life of their own. We are acquainted with the city in a dazzling flash of immediacy, as if Wong is saying, "Look! Before it's too late!" Of course, one might argue that the events of the late twentieth century would inevitably find their way into the popular art of the city. But here, perhaps, is where we might go back to Fredric Jameson's concept of "third world literature" and the national allegory. It is not that Hong Kong cinema, which is—according to Abbas—necessarily commercialized (unlike Chinese films in the 80's, which were funded by the state), explicitly sought to represent the cultural mindset of Hong Kong during the 1980's and 90's (21). But how could it not? As good, critical viewers, we must examine these films within the framework of the culture that produced them. When *Chungking Express* makes excessive use of the motif of expiration dates, Wong is more than aware of the implications of doing so. However, popular cinema in Hong Kong is rarely overtly political: for example, not once in *Chungking Express* is the handover mentioned. It is, however, a ubiquitous presence.

But before I elaborate further, let me offer a brief overview of the narrative: firstly, *Chungking Express* tracks two distinct yet concurrent plotlines. The first follows Cop 223 (Takeshi Kaneshiro), or He Qi Wu, as he attempts to flirt with a mysterious woman (Brigitte Lin) donning a blond wig. We are also privy to her point of view as she attempts to organize a group of Indian immigrants to transport cocaine. Later, as she

struggles to track them down through the crowded alleys of the Chungking Jungle in Tsim Sha Tsui, He Qi Wu attempts to get over his girlfriend May by jogging and gorging himself on tins of pineapple and chef's salad. He also frequents the Midnight Express food stall in the Central district, which is where another girl, also named May, is currently employed. But by the time 223 decides that he wants to ask May out, she leaves for good, and Faye (Faye Wong)—our heroine of the second half—is hired instead. During the second act, Cop 663 (played with great sensitivity by Tony Leung) also languishes and hangs around the Midnight Express after his stewardess girlfriend leaves him. He meets Faye, who is immediately interested in him, but 663 is entirely oblivious—even after she breaks into his apartment numerous times to clean and organize. She even begins to replace his belongings, which should arguably raise a red flag. But he writes it off as his emotional state “influencing” his perception of his environment. When he finally catches her in the act, however, he begins to change his mind about her; decides to give her a chance. But she has flown off to California—the subject of her favorite song, *California Dreamin'*. By the time she comes back, Cop 663 has gotten back into the groove of things, and is finally ready to commit.

The film, in many ways, relies on preconceived notions of genre, and it seems to fit into the schema of the romantic comedy (LaFrance): the plot can tend toward the convoluted, and the characters seem so caught up in their own misery that they fail to recognize when love is knocking at their door. Of course, *Chungking Express* isn't a traditional “Rom-Com”—there are moments which are morbid, disgusting, and even violent in nature. The first half, I think, is more of a crime flick than a comedy. But Wong isn't interested in coloring within the lines of any particular genre. In a way, his



subversion of genre expectations is similar to the desire of the new school of Hong Kong filmmakers to subvert common clichés of Hong Kong culture. But Wong doesn't necessarily do away with them entirely, as one might expect (Teo 49). After all, they draw in an audience. Rather, he turns them on their head and forces the viewer to really grapple with the image onscreen, instead of allowing us to indulge in our habit of refusing to see (or to understand) what is really there. He also does this through the film's stylistic flair for spatial and temporal distortion, as well as his use of uncanny narrative parallels and repetitions.

The very beginning of the film, which is a decidedly dreamy chase sequence, sets the tone for the remainder. Immediately, Hong Kong appears to us as both a setting and a subject—an overpopulated, bustling series of twists and turns. The faces of the people are blurred through a technique called “smudge-motion,” which involves shooting at double-speed and then slowing down the finished product. As we follow Brigitte Lin's Blonde Woman past the neon shop windows and overcrowded alleys of the Chungking Mansions, Cop 223's voiceover proclaims that,

“Every day, we brush past so many other people. People we may never meet, or people who may become close friends. [...] This was the closest [she and I] ever got—just 0.01 of a centimeter between us.”

The last sentence refers to when Lin knocks into him without stopping to turn back. Obviously, Cop 223's monologue isn't entirely true. The two do more than “brush elbows”—they eventually meet in a cheap bar and then go to a hotel room together, even if all she does is sleep. But they do speak; they do get to know a little bit about each other's lives. Perhaps they don't get much closer in the “getting-to-know-one-another” sense, but she also rests her head on his shoulder. So what does he mean, “the closest we

ever got”? Perhaps it was the potential in their meeting that drew 223’s attention; the possibility that they might someday become close friends, or lovers. Anything is possible in the Jungle. The area contains many different types of people—a motley population of immigrants, foreign travelers, and natives. Wong admits,

“[It] is a mix of different cultures...it is a legendary place where the relations between the people are very complicated. It has always fascinated and intrigued me. It is also a permanent hotspot for the cops in HK because of the illegal traffic that takes place there. That mass-populated and hyperactive place is a great metaphor for the town herself” (Lafrance).

I found Wong’s personification of the city to be particularly telling: to him, the city is more than a city—it is a subject; a character. And the mix of people to which Wong refers is present from the get-go: some of the first characters we meet are the ill-fated Indian drug mules who cross Blonde Woman by disappearing with her product. We are also introduced to a white American man who forces one of his preferred sex workers (I am making a leap by presuming she is) to wear a blonde wig à la Lin’s character. And then, when 223 goes up to her in the bar, he says hello in multiple languages—including English—in order to elicit a response. It is easy to see how the people of Hong Kong might not consider their own culture as its own distinct entity; worthy of study apart from the traditions and cultural practices of “elsewhere.” The characters eat American food—fries, burgers, and chef’s salads. We see the bright red and white colors of the Coca Cola logo at the Midnight Express, and hear foreign music throughout the film—especially California Dreamin’ and What a Difference a Day Makes, by Dinah Washington. At the bar that the American frequents, Things in Life—written by the Reggae artist Dennis Brown, always seems to play in the background. There is also a Punjabi track called Piplan di Chhan that plays during the drug trafficking scene of the

first half. Overall, it's an impressive assortment that clearly identifies Hong Kong as representative of Jameson's notion of globalization.

Clearly, *Chungking Express* takes place in an era of global transmission—an era of postmodernity in which we are all acutely aware of the cultural and political goings-on across the globe. And Hong Kong—with all of its cultures clashing and borrowing from one another—is a prime example of this. In *Chungking Express*, Wong seems fearful for the future of this multicultural mecca. It is, for all intents and purposes, a capitalist city that exists in what Fredric Jameson calls an “era of multinational capitalism.” As Abbas reminds us, the disconnect between the economic and political realities of Hong Kong and its uncertain future with the PRC threatened the city with imminent disappearance. Perhaps this is why 223 is obsessed with finding cans of pineapple with the May 1<sup>st</sup> expiration date, and why Wong lingers on the image of cat food marked with the same numbers, even as the white American lies dead in the periphery of the shot.

However, the songs I mentioned earlier do more than merely provide an example of how Hong Kong is a global city. They also allow us to identify certain characters—linking them to specific locations and events in the narrative (Teo 54). For example, when *Things in Life* begins to play on the jukebox, we know where we are. We know that this particular song only plays in relation to Blonde Woman and the American man. And when Faye swings her hips to *California Dreamin'*, we recall other instances of her creeping around 663's apartment, or perhaps their first meeting at the *Midnight Express*. Music is only one mechanism by which Wong prompts us to regain a sense of direction in the narrative—it connects us to certain characters, and the characters to their local haunts. The music also seems to exist, to an extent, outside of the framework of space-

time. Sometimes, it is diegetic—sometimes not. Occasionally, it is a mixture of both. But it always brings us back to the same, familiar space in which we first heard it. The songs are arguably anachronistic—they belong to a different time, and hearing the first new notes of California Dreamin’ can be disorienting. But soon enough, it becomes Faye’s song; specific to her, and specific to her love for 663. In Stephen Teo’s “Space-Time Tango,” Teo argues that time and space in *Chungking Express* only exist within the framework of human memory and experience—a phenomenon that he calls “durée,” or “lived time.” He writes,

“Space itself can only attain its wholeness by being lived in. Chungking Mansions is a virtual dimension of memory. Its space is a vivid time-filled (hence human and psychological) entity” (53).

Essentially, space and time in *Chungking Express* are inherently united with human experience. When Wong represents the passing of time after 663 and Faye’s first meeting, he slips an unobtrusive cut into the scene, featuring Faye wearing a different shirt than before. It’s easy to miss it: the situation is almost exactly the same. Faye is dancing around her work station, much to the chagrin of her boss. But whatever happened between the two events is not important: what matters is Faye falling in love, as implied by this visual distortion of time.

But Abbas certainly doesn’t let us forget that Hong Kong has always been perceived as a place of transience and change. Everything moves quickly; as Wong himself said, it is “hyperactive.” One aspect of disappearance, he argues, is the sense that things are moving too quickly, and that we are unable to grasp an image before it is “swept out from under us.” Signs of time passing are everywhere in *Chungking Express*—so much so that it is nearly impossible to forget about it. Analog clocks are

always ticking down, songs play on repeat, and 223's obsession with expiration dates is perhaps the most telling sign of all. He laments, "I wonder if there's anything in the world that won't expire." The characters also discuss time as if they know exactly what is going to happen in the future—blending the line between fantasy and reality. "In 57 hours," says Cop 223, "[Faye] will fall in love with another man [663]." There is no question about it: like the imminent handover, "unknowable" future events loom in the back of our minds. But Wong—with cinematographers Christopher Doyle and Andrew Lau—is also quite skilled at representing his preoccupation with spatial-temporal boundaries in the film's visual style. Michael Korsky of "Reverse Shot" discusses how Doyle follows Faye around 663's (in reality, it was Doyle's) cramped apartment. The camera trails her through tight spaces with a striking "fluidity," like the miniature airplane Faye flies around the fish tank. As California Dreamin' plays sensually in the background, Faye's half-dance, half-exploration of this forbidden space seems both painfully extended (we can't help but think, what if the cop comes back? What if he catches you?) and compressed, like a montage. Her cleaning, which appears to take most of the day, takes only a few minutes of screen time.

Stephen Teo also outlines how Wong expands and compresses space, as well as time—making it seem as if we are really looking at a plane landing on a giant woman's back, or making us believe that two distinct districts in Hong Kong are only a stone's throw away from each other (59). In the former, there is a scene during the second half in which 663 flies a little model plane around his girlfriend, making it chase her; land on her spine as if it were tarmac. Needless to say, Doyle is adept at capturing this sequence as if the airplane were really an airplane. It looks as if 663's apartment has suddenly

transformed to include great open valleys, and the slope of the woman's body lends to her becoming a landing strip for an international flight. This magnification and breaking down of the space in the apartment truly lends to what Teo calls "durée"—that sense that the human presence here makes the space *more* than an apartment (53). It is lived in; it holds memories—so much so that they transform the space into something entirely different from what it was before. This same effect is highlighted later when Faye plays with the airplane in the same manner; flying it into the fish tank instead.

But the clever use of space that I found most striking is Wong's ability to make the Chungking Mansions (in Tsim Sha Tsui, in the district of Yau Tsim Mong) and the Central district (where the restaurant and Cop 663's apartment are located) look like the same place. Teo writes that in the Hong Kong release of the film, Cop 223 takes a ferry across the harbor in order to highlight how the story is moving from one part of Hong Kong to another. But in the international version, there is no such scene. Instead, the two places blur into each other—Hong Kong takes on the appearance of one big maze, with people inhabiting little alcoves and alleyways of the same twisting, turning place (Teo 54). This is, of course, not how Hong Kong natives might see it. But for the foreign audience—for us—it works. Now, all of Hong Kong fits together like a living jigsaw puzzle of culture and commerce. The two halves of the film seem to take place in order, but in reality, they are happening concurrently at different ends of the city—only two of the countless, complex human narratives occurring simultaneously across the globe. But *Chungking Express* is more than a Chinese film that plays with familiar styles slapped onto a new city. Of course, now, we might ask ourselves how all of this fits into Abbas' concept of the culture of disappearance. I believe that he would argue that Wong's

distortions of time and space “problematize” the visual (48)—freeing it of any clichés or binarisms; forcing us to really search for meaning in a film that might appear to be little more than a clever study of film genre.

Essentially, Abbas argues that direct questions about the nature of Hong Kong identity, such as in Evan Chan’s *To Liv(e)*, are not effective in really capturing the magnitude of Hong Kong’s cultural malaise. So, instead, directors like Wong and Stanley Kwan present a new take on Hong Kong through the “provocation of fantasy” in their film style (49). However, he notes that these auteurs have also been criticized for being decidedly “apolitical”. In response to this criticism, Abbas quotes Gilles Deleuze: in terms of narrative, representing the “mutations” in national identity and culture actually allows for a more nuanced political awareness (49). In a film like *Chungking Express*, questions related to the disappearance of identity may not necessarily be obvious or easy to grasp—especially for those of us who do not experience the day-to-day existence of Hong Kong. But, if we know the history of the place, these questions become pointed; they subvert our desire to be satisfied with a superficial exploration of a complex identity. Of course, as per his usual style, Wong leaves the film without a firm sense of resolution—similar to how Hong Kong is left without any real idea of what the future might hold. When 663 and Faye smile at each other over the counter of the newly renovated Midnight Express, we cannot help but think that maybe, things will be all right. But if the current political unrest in Hong Kong is any indication of the city’s future relationship with the PRC, then I cannot help but fear that perhaps Hong Kong is farther from China than ever.

CHAPTER III:  
*A Touch of Sin*

In the past two chapters, I have spent a good deal of time discussing people who exist on the margins of the influence of the People's Republic. Now, I face the task of peering into the psyche of the mainland itself. It seems to act, in a way, as an epicenter of sociopolitical conflict—the ripples of which are felt by those on the periphery of China's narrative of history. At the same time, it would be criminal to neglect the stories of the people who reside within the PRC—after all, throughout the twentieth century, they bore witness to an alarming string of changes in nearly every facet of life. Within the space of forty years, China had seen the Qing dynasty fall, a national government (the KMT) rise, the formation of the Communist Party (and then conflict with the KMT), the Japanese invasion, the eviction of the Japanese, and finally the victory of the communists over the nationalists. During many of these years, the general population had to make do with little food and even less security—whether in their livelihoods, their future, or in their personal safety. Few families were unscathed by these events. If they hadn't been mistreated by the Japanese in Manchuria, they were suspected of being sympathizers, or condemned and blacklisted by the communists for having nationalist ties. But before the nationalists lost control in any given countryside town, many families who refused to give the soldiers special treatment were denounced for being communists. There was no winning.

But as the communists “liberated” various portions of China from the KMT, things appeared to be going quite well for the average Chinese. The communist soldiers seemed honorable, and they reportedly treated KMT prisoners with respect. The CPC government also sent food to poorer, rural regions which had previously struggled



through the Japanese and KMT occupation. As Jung Chang writes in *Wild Swans*, “The Communists proved extremely efficient at restoring order and getting the economy going again” (113). But within the Party itself, Chang insists, the manner in which new recruits were treated seemed lacking. Chang’s mother, the wife of a prominent Party member, had to prove her worth through physical hardship. But even as Chang’s mother gained the trust of the Party, she realized that it would not live up to her expectations. Many of the cultural and social traditions (such as living close to family and showing affection to one’s children) with which she had been raised were deemed “bourgeois” (162) and selfish. The revolution, she discovered, would largely take place in the mind. “Mao wanted not only external discipline, but the total subjugation of all thoughts, large or small” (164). Meetings in which party members “self-criticized” and atoned for their privilege took up much of their time and effectively “eliminated the private sphere” of Party life (165). Of course, despite some members’ best efforts, corruption and greed festered. Higher-ups could essentially determine the worth of any subordinate member based on personal preferences. At the same time, many innocent people who weren’t in the Party were accused of being capitalists or rightists, and were ostracized from their communities.

But perhaps it was Mao’s economic policies during the “Great Leap Forward” that would be truly detrimental to China’s wellbeing. Mao had organized the country into working communes, which would supposedly feed themselves with a “surplus” of food. At one point, Chang writes, “[telling] fantasies to oneself as well as others, and believing them, was practiced to an incredible degree” (224). Farmers and local officials lied about levels of production, since many would be beaten until they admitted to

massive (and entirely falsified) increases in output. However, because of Mao's interest in steel production, in reality, agriculture was largely neglected. Predictably, food shortages—and eventually famine—followed. But of course, Party officials were treated to better rations, and many enjoyed their health throughout the shortages. But even after the fiasco of the Great Leap Forward, the so-called “Cult of Mao” seemed to grow stronger—especially as the economy steadied.

However, Mao continued to grow paranoid about the image of his regime, and even turned against the arts. He eventually banned a genre of theater Chang calls “ghost dramas,” which contained stories of spirits seeking vengeance on those who had harmed them. Chang reasons that because the Chinese often express their discontent through “allusions” to the past, Mao felt that these plays might subvert his favorable standing in the public eye. She quips that the ghosts might have resembled the spirits of those he had labeled as “class enemies” (273). Mao eventually turned against many of his own Party members, whom he decried as “capitalist-roaders.” Even when he was forced to relinquish some control in Party politics, he was determined to work outside of their regulations in order to “destroy” this dissension in the ranks (276). This movement helped to usher in what is known as the Cultural Revolution—a series of events which have arguably defined Mao's legacy in present-day China. Chang writes, “to achieve [absolute loyalty] he needed terror—an intense terror that would block all other considerations [...]” (283). The goal of this “revolution” of thought was to demolish “the four olds”: culture, ideas, customs, and habits. People with nationalist connections, landowners, and other “capitalists” had always been Mao's enemy. But now, even “writers, artists, scholars, and most other top professionals, who had been privileged

under the Communist regime” (284), were considered the enemy as well. No one seems to know for sure how many people were persecuted, tortured, blacklisted, or killed under the haphazard actions of Mao’s Red Guards, although the number is surely in the millions.

Eventually, after the country had come to a nearly complete standstill—economically, politically, and socially—Mao, who still enjoyed a great deal of support amongst the people, declared in 1969 that the Revolution was over. However, it wasn’t until after his death a decade later that Deng Xiaoping and other reform leaders began to rectify many of Mao’s lingering policies. Now, for the sake of brevity, I must brush over a few years: from the “end” of the Cultural Revolution to Mao’s death. It is not that what happened in those years is not important; but for the sake of my argument, a rudimentary knowledge of what happened after the “Cult of Mao” fizzled out is absolutely necessary. After Mao’s death in 1979, change seemed inevitable, especially due to the nation’s lingering economic struggles. According to Ronald Coase and Wing Nang, authors of “How China Became Capitalist”, the process of China’s economic reform was inherently divided: there was government intervention, and then there were grassroots movements. For example, reformers in the Party sought to “decentralize foreign trade and [give] more fiscal autonomy to provincial governments”, in addition to “incentivizing state enterprises.” But at the same time, slowly and without fanfare, people in the countryside moved away from the communes and returned to private farming. In addition, small private businesses—which were mostly run by displaced young people who could not find jobs through the state—started to spring up in urban areas (Coase & Wang). Industry also boomed in smaller towns, and the black market

was integral in supplying “village enterprises” with the materials necessary to manufacture goods. Coase and Wang claim that these new “business firms” quickly began to displace the state’s.

However, while China’s economy has grown considerably since the 70’s and 80’s, its government has largely remained firm in its dedication to upholding the old communist ideology. Criticism of the state, for example, is not taken lightly. When students and intellectuals protested in Tiananmen Square in the summer of 1989, they petitioned the government for free speech and free press, a crackdown on corruption, and for workers to retain control over industry (Atshan & Tedla). Despite their ideals being similar to what the Communist Party had originally wanted, their demonstrations were renounced as “counter-revolutionary,” and armed troops were sent into the square to clear them out. *This* is what Jia Zhangke is eager to explore in *A Touch of Sin*. It is this disparity between reality and ideology that he represents allegorically through the movie’s various narrative threads. In short, this disparity feeds a system in which the rich can get richer, but the poor are stagnated at the bottom; unable to claim that they have been treated unfairly, due to corruption within the government itself. This type of oppression, Jia argues, breeds violence (Adams). In order to show us the scope of the suffering of everyday China, Jia breaks the film into four distinct episodes. While the threads of these episodes do intermittently tie together, they are—for the most part—distinct. The first tells the story of a worker called Dahai who takes the law into his own hands when corrupt village officials take advantage of the townspeople. The second features a vicious young man who visits his tight-knit family in the countryside, and the third follows a woman who finally decides to exact revenge on the rich men who treat

her like dirt. Finally, the fourth segment introduces us to a man who would rather kill himself than continue living a colorless, paycheck-to-paycheck lifestyle. But Jia didn't simply make these people up; rather, all of the events represented have a historical precedent of some kind. Perhaps the most famous reference, however, is to the Foxconn suicide epidemic, which has claimed the lives of over 20 factory workers since 2010. But violence against the self is still violence. Jia himself admits,

“These four characters all came from news reports from China; they're all people who have endured severe acts of violence, and who have since transformed from victims to being perpetrators of violence themselves” (Adams).

According to Sam Adams of the film magazine *The Dissolve*, Jia heard about most of these stories through a social media site called Weibo (he calls it the Chinese answer to Twitter). According to Jia, the question of violence—whether it be metaphorical or physical—is key to understanding the events of *A Touch of Sin*. Violence, he claims, is not the natural response of human beings to injustice. But when these injustices of society continue to build up, and the people's voices are continually silenced, then there is no other way to express anger, or disappointment (Adams). He finishes, “Violence becomes a mode of expression for those who do not have the language to express themselves in these moments.” But there is an implicit question here, although Jia does not directly address it in this interview with *Dissolve*. Through Jia's depiction of these characters' lives, we can see how they perceive injustice; how they roll with the blows, or fight back. But he wants us to ask, what caused their suffering? Where did this injustice come from, if China is truly a communist society?

Unfortunately, injustice seems to permeate every strata of Chinese life. Not one character is untouched by the social, political, and economic malaise that has burdened

the PRC over the past few decades. This is why it is of the utmost importance to have a firm grasp on the nation's history. Regardless of what has happened to propel China into the global economy, it would seem that one foot remains in its recent past—trapped by a cultural paradigm of silence, suffering, and violence that emerged during the time of Mao. Now, while Mao's economic policies may have been lifted, they have been replaced by a system which allows for the rich to take advantage of the poor, and for local governments to discretely turn their heads, all the while preaching that every person receives their due share. These events have precedence as well: Party higher-ups were never subject to the same level of scrutiny as the everyday men and women. They didn't starve during the Great Leap Forward; they weren't repeatedly driven by slander and shame to commit suicide. Even Mao burst outside of Party regulations to weed out the capitalist "demons" and monsters within its administration (Chang). China is no stranger to corruption, profiteering, and state-sanctioned violence, and in each of the episodes, the dichotomy between the old and the new China (which still embraces the old ideology) becomes apparent.

That being said, I would like to take a bit of time to discuss Jia's film style before diving into the narrative. As I noted earlier, this is largely a film about violence, and about the people in the margins of Chinese society. Therefore, Jia is first and foremost invested in a sense of realism: he never shies away from showing blood and gore, and his use of sound is impeccable: the stretches of pained silence feel all too real, as do the shotgun blasts, the drone of machinery, and whinnies of a horse in distress. But there is something otherworldly in Jia's painterly landscapes of China. All of the colors seem to pop—the lush greenery, the bluish haze of the mountains. Everything seems wide and

open—the characters are surrounded by space; so much so that it feels alienating. These are desperate people who have nowhere else to turn. Sometimes, all they have for company is a minimal non-diegetic score—peppered with traditional Chinese instrumentals and gentle, humming bass notes. But it never stands in for Jia’s visuals—as in, it never displaces what’s happening on screen by drawing our attention away from what we see. His camera work is similarly unobtrusive—it is nearly always steady, and so the film lacks the jerky grittiness of one shot with a handheld. However, for *A Touch of Sin*, style doesn’t quite unlock the allegorical aspects of the film—at least, not to the same extent as in *Chungking Express* or *A City of Sadness*. Instead, the impact of Jia’s film largely comes from the plight of the characters themselves.

The first segment of *A Touch of Sin* takes place in the Shanxi Province, and follows a man called Dahai. He lives in a small, unnamed village that shelters a neglected statue of Mao Zedong near the town center. Its state of disrepair immediately gives us an indication as to the importance of Mao’s ideals in the town proceedings. But if that weren’t enough to clue us in, Dahai continually rants and raves against the corruption of local officials who have pocketed money from selling off collectively owned property. But nobody else wants to listen. His friends brush him off and make fun of him for his noisy insistence. Eventually, when he publicly confronts his former boss (who became rich from keeping money intended for the village) he is beaten and then bribed to stay silent. But perhaps the real tragedy here is that Dahai *attempted* to lodge a complaint to Beijing through the official channels, when confronting the man face-to-face had failed. But when his request to make a complaint is ignored, Dahai reaches his breaking point. He dons his olive green, Communist-style coat, wraps his

hunting rifle in a cloth adorned with a tiger, struts down Main Street past the statue of Mao, and then murders the men he had previously confronted—including his former boss. Dahai then takes the time to shoot a man who mercilessly beats his horse, and we cannot help but see the parallels between Dahai and the poor animal. Jia's presentation of Dahai; tall and proud, with a tiger-clad rifle propped over his shoulder, provokes an association with Wu Song the "tiger killer": a famous outlaw in Chinese literature (Rayns). But these murders do not feel legendary; we get the feeling that Dahai will not pass into folklore. It's simply duty to him—what needs to be done. As Jia might argue, violence is Dahai's last resort, since nothing else seems to achieve justice. In this segment especially, Jia puts the system of "new" China, which allows local governments to sell off collective property to turn a profit, on trial. The disconnect between the lifestyle of Dahai's boss—who travels in a private airplane and receives a traditional ceremonial welcome—and that of the villagers is staggering. They struggle to make ends meet while entrepreneurs get rich on their misfortune. It seems like a slap in the face to communist ideology, and yet, that is what the Chinese government continues to espouse.

I will return to the second segment, but for now, the parallels between the first and the third stories are too immediate to ignore. Zheng Xiaoyu, a thirty-something woman, makes ends meet by working various jobs, including one as a receptionist in a sauna. This particular sauna, however, doubles as a brothel. Regardless, Xiaoyu upholds that she is merely the receptionist: she is unwilling to put herself in the position of a "masseuse," even when she is offered a good amount of money to do so. "I am not a prostitute," she insists to two belligerent customers. Upon her refusal to indulge the men who ask for her, they become indignant and angry. One of them, whom we have



previously seen extort an illegal toll from poor construction workers, asks, “You think you’re better than me?” He begins to beat her around the head with a wad of cash, and continues to scream, “I have fucking money!” as he slaps her. It is eerily reminiscent of the scene in the first segment in which the villager beats his horse. But here, in one fluid motion, Xiaoyu pulls out a knife, slices open his chest, and then plunges the blade into his stomach when he lunges for her. She pulls back, and without so much as a flinch, cuts his throat. We see the second man run for his life before she makes her way outside, down the road, and into the gathering dark. Like Dahai, she respects the law, and dials emergency services to turn herself in. Stylistically (and thematically), this segment resembles Jia’s beloved *wuxia* films, which feature tales of vengeance and heroes skilled in martial arts (Adams). Only now, Jia repurposes a predominantly historically-based genre to fit modern times, similar to how Chang’s “ghost dramas” allude to contemporary issues.

The fourth segment of *A Touch of Sin* is equally pessimistic about the relationship between China’s bleak past and bleaker future. Perhaps this is why the protagonist of this piece is in his early twenties: more so than Xiaoyu or Dahai, Xiaohui embodies a sort of fresh-faced innocence which makes his eventual suicide all the more shocking. Throughout his screen time, his naiveté—concerning relationships, money, and hard work—slowly ebbs away, only to be replaced by a chilling sense of disappointment. First, he turns away from his old job when he is forced to pay for a friend’s injury leave. Of course, he cannot afford it, so he runs away to work at a “nightclub” called The Golden Age, where young women dress in revealing uniforms inspired by the old Red Guards. In addition, the club is fitted with special rooms designed to look like train cars

that would carry Party officials across the countryside. As Xiaohui watches the woman he fancies, Lianrong, cater to one of their “distinguished guests” in a train car, he hears her ask, “Where are we going?” The man sighs exaggeratedly, and as Lianrong kisses his chest, laments, “Young people nowadays have no sense of direction.” While that much certainly isn’t true, it may be the case that the young women at the nightclub have simply become numb to the suffering of the world—a case of what Fredric Jameson might call postmodern apathy.

Throughout the scenes at the Golden Age, we watch bored women playing with their smartphones, trying to ignore the impassive gazes of the men who would buy their company. Then, when Xiaohui and Lianrong sit in an empty room browsing the web, she tells him about two stories: one, a female executive was found in possession of nearly 130 Luis Vuitton handbags worth over 2 million Yuan. The second: a deadly mine explosion that killed “dozens” of people—in the same province where Dahai lives. Xiaohui and Lianrong post the same comment on both stories: “WTF.” Not “what the fuck,” just a flippant WTF. Although we see Xiaohui becoming more and more despondent, especially when Lianrong refuses his advances, his death still comes as a surprise. When he throws himself from the balcony of an apartment block called the “Oasis of Prosperity,” he does so without any great commotion; without seeking help or saying goodbye. His face is expressionless, and his descent is silent, save for the noise of his body hitting the pavement. In that moment, Jia makes us all think “WTF?” Is that it? But this suicide stands in for the most notable events that Jia borrows from China’s modern history: a string of suicides at factories owned by Foxconn, which has

manufactured devices for Apple, HP, Dell, Sony, and Microsoft...amongst others (Pogue).

I wouldn't argue that Xiaohui is apathetic, necessarily, but his startling lack of affect during his suicide recalls our protagonist from the second portion of the film: Zhou San. The second segment shows Zhou coming home to the countryside in order to attend his mother's birthday celebration. There, it becomes clear that the other members of the community—and even his family—don't trust him. We know why: Zhou first appears at the beginning of Dahai's segment to coolly kill four would-be motorcycle thieves. Later in the second part, he treats his family relatively well, but then returns to the city and promptly murders a wealthy-looking couple for their money. But unlike the other characters' resorting to violence, Zhou's use of violence feels decidedly impersonal—he kills in cold blood, and he simply does not care about the consequences. He kills because he's bored, and “shooting guns isn't boring.” This part of the film stands out to me; it seems out of place in the midst of these stories of vengeance and retribution. Zhou San is a man who kills people who are, as far as we know, innocent: he shoots a woman whose only crime seems to be that she dresses nicely. In this way, Zhou might represent a broader, cultural malaise which stands apart from the confusion and the anger of Dahai, Xiaoyu, and Xiaohui. Zhou seems to have no greater purpose—he merely exists, and his lack of affect and emotional depth is truly unnerving. He is Jameson's concept of apathy taken to its logical extreme—a grim portrait of a generation of working class people who have nothing to gain, and nothing to lose. In that way, he reminds me of Xiaohui—except Xiaohui resorts to violence against the self, rather than violence directed outward.

Finally, toward the end of the movie, we see Xiaoyu return from her ordeal. She now sports a short haircut, and wears a pleasant, placid smile on her face. We quickly learn that she is applying for a job in a factory similar to where Xiaohui worked, except this factory is owned by the company that lost their CEO to Dahai. During her interview, when she is prompted to explain why she has moved so far from home, Xiaoyu insists that her past is far behind her. However, as she walks back toward some unknown destination, she comes across a public performance of a traditional Chinese opera, *Yu Tang Chun*. It tells the story of a woman who is accused of a murder that she did not commit. As an actress tearfully explains to the audience that she has failed to defend her honor, the judge demands of her, “Do you understand your sin?” Here, Jia cuts to the audience—a sea of tanned, wrinkled, expressionless faces. In this shot, Xiaoyu is nowhere to be seen. Rather, just for a moment, Jia forces us to face the men and women who suffer for sins that they did not commit, and do not fully understand. Part of the reason this scene is so striking, however, is that it features people gazing directly into the camera—“breaking the fourth wall,” as it were, and putting us on the spot.

From the perspective of a privileged spectator, suddenly, all of these people are looking at us, and we know—deep down—that we are, in part, responsible for their suffering. *We* buy Foxconn-manufactured products without knowing anything about the company, and without concern for their unhappy workers. After all, how many of us really take the time to consider that many of the products we use every day (our smartphones, laptops, etc.) are built by Chinese laborers who are routinely take advantage of? Unwittingly, we have also benefitted from the hardships of China’s working class. Unsurprisingly, *A Touch of Sin* was not popular with the government in Beijing, and

although the Film Bureau had pre-approved the script, it has since been banned in mainland China. So I wonder, how many Chinese have seen *A Touch of Sin*, and been asked the question, “Do you understand your sin?” How many have identified with the protagonist of that opera and thought, I don’t deserve this?

Regardless, Jia’s film clearly gestures to a startlingly large rift between China’s policy and ideology, which results in the social ills that Jia represents in *A Touch of Sin*. As I mentioned earlier, however, we should be careful not to forget that the concept of “allegory” is not a simple one-to-one exchange. Jia’s is more of a framework—a model through which to explain the finer points of the modern Chinese experience. And it is an experience marred by dissatisfaction and dissent, which is the very polar opposite of what a socialist state should hope to achieve. Still, throughout the film, there are clear references to the tumultuous history of China—the communist-era costumes, the statue of Mao—which beg the question, what composes Jia’s concept of Chinese identity? What separates the average Chinese from the average Taiwanese? Or resident of Hong Kong? It seems to me that Jia espouses a similar perception of national identity to Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s.

Throughout *A Touch of Sin*, there are references which, arguably, all Chinese would understand. There is a shared past here—one defined by collective trauma and memory. When the women in the Golden Age march by dressed in uniforms meant to resemble the communist army’s, Jia is representing an aspect of China’s history that he knows people will recognize, and even remember. He knows that people will recognize references to the *wuxia* genre, and that we will know Mao’s likeness when we see it. In this manner, despite its style being perhaps the most visually appealing of these three

films, I think that there is something about *A Touch of Sin* that makes it difficult for Westerners to fully appreciate. If we cannot grasp at least a few of complexities of Chinese history and culture, it becomes challenging to contextualize the events in the film. It is the ultimate irony, then, that *A Touch of Sin* has been banned in the one nation that will truly understand it.

## CONCLUSION

When I told an acquaintance of mine that I was writing my thesis on Chinese cinema, he looked at me and asked something along the lines of, “Aren’t there better Asian cinemas to write about? Like Japanese?” I said that he might be surprised. Later, an old friend from elementary school asked, “They make movies in China?” I said yes, they do. I remember being more than a little taken back when I realized just how little consideration we give to the art coming out of these “third world” nations. I admit, it may be in part because their distributors do not focus on foreign markets like Hollywood does. But I can’t help but think that it also has something to do with the way in which we perceive the value of non-Western art. It cannot merely be the language barrier—we have a rich market here for European independent and art house films. Even Japanese auteurs like Akira Kurosawa—and in recent years, Hayao Miyazaki—have made a decent name for themselves in the United States. But I’d argue that you have to dig a little deeper to find people who know the names of Hou Hsiao-Hsien or Jia Zhangke. But there’s no reason why those names shouldn’t be more familiar to the average, self-proclaimed cinephile.

Contemporary cinema, in my mind, is one of the most accessible forms of art. From vendors selling pirated DVDs on the street to legal online streaming, we enjoy unprecedented access to films made across the world—including the parts of the world that are unfamiliar to us. I don’t know if even Fredric Jameson could have predicted the sheer amount of information that we share with our global neighbors. So why don’t we know about these films? Perhaps one might argue that we watch movies for entertainment, and what’s better for entertainment than the stuff I can watch on Netflix?

But of course, those Hollywood blockbusters that we see for fun don't exist in an apolitical, cultureless vacuum. Rather, they tap into our Americanness by reflecting a unique cultural context that separates us from the rest of the world. In other words, we speak the film's language—both literally and metaphorically. In this manner, film *is* a medium for communication, and therefore it represents an opportunity for learning. When we watch a movie by Wong Kar-wai, it is difficult not to bring along all of our ideological baggage and misconceived notions about China and Hong Kong. We might immediately bring to mind the effects of colonialism, or the protests that swept across the city within the past year. Jameson, in his discussion of national allegory, has a fair point here. He knows that no matter what we tell ourselves, we will be watching these films with tinted glasses. It would be difficult, if not altogether impossible, to wipe the slate entirely clean when it comes to how we perceive the world around us. Regardless, as I've said, there is something to be learned here. I, for one, have learned that Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China are different. Of course, that seems obvious. But over the past few months I have come to understand how shared history and collective trauma can forge national identity, and how the people of China have fought to express what it means to *be* Chinese. But there are no easy answers here, I'm afraid. I cannot say exactly what defines national identity in China, as it seems to change drastically depending on who you ask. But isn't that worth knowing in itself?



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