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ABSTRACT

The paper is a brief study of cultural identity as trans-nationalized in seven narrative films from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Chinese diaspora cinemas. It is an exercise of making the critical distinction between culture and civilization. As is evident in these films, (national) culture is a set of metaphysical qualities used to distinguish a people whereas civilization is set of shared experiences in which people participate globally. The former is aristocratic by nature and the latter democratic. Within this framework, the films are critical elaborations of a national culture rooted in language and traditions. The lives of these characters are defined, more than anything else, by their ambivalence towards both cultural tradition and global civilization. In these sinophone films of recent decades, cultural identity is being negotiated but not necessarily at the expense of or to the exclusion of other cultural traditions. The stories suggest, among other things, that the Chinese are outgrowing their cultural self-definitions that are often aristocratic and ethnocentric. This study helps document the subtle changes in Chinese humanity that happen at the frontiers of a global civilization. The films thus constitute a democracy of perception, subjecting Chinese culture to different interpretations.

KEYWORDS

Taiwan cinema, Hong Kong cinema, Chinese diaspora, cultural negotiation, sinophone film

"Even though there were periods of so-called conquest dynasties or foreign rule, the cultures of foreign nationalities were continuously coming into and overlapping with China, just as the culture based largely on the Han ethnicity continuously melded with other cultures and underwent changes. The cultural tradition based on Han culture, however, extended across time in this region, forming into a clear and distinct cultural identity and [the] mainstream."

– Ge Zhaoguang (p. 19)

> "The nation, too, is not only a social but also a metaphysical being; the nation, not 'the human race' as the sum of the individuals, is the bearer of the general, of the human quality; and the value of the intellectual-artistic-religious product that one calls national culture, that cannot be grasped by scientific methods, that develops out of the organic depth of national life – the value, dignity and charm of all national culture, therefore, definitely lies in what distinguishes it from all others, for only this distinctive element is culture, in contrast to what all nations have in common, which is only civilization. Here we have the difference between individual and personal, civilization and culture, social and metaphysical life. The individualistic mass is democratic, the nation aristocratic."
>
> – Thomas Mann (p. 179)

Perhaps nowhere is this idea of "national culture" more palpable and problematic than in the films analyzed below, made in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Chinese diaspora communities. As attempts at transcultural negotiations, they show just how cultural identity gets reconstructed to include the idea of social democracy. In other words, these stories underscore what Thomas Mann refers to as the distinction between culture and civilization. The fictional characters represent, among other things, very complex emotions, torn between a cultural identity rooted in traditions and a global civilization predicated on the notion of freedom for those able to endure the unbearable lightness of being. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein sheds light on this ambivalence with his idea of civilization as a form of hyperreality, "a condition common in technologically advanced cultures where virtual reality has made possible the endless reproductions of fundamentally empty appearances." (Botz-Bornstein, p. 1) To the extent this claim is true, it is not hard to understand those living in developed Chinese cultural spheres. For them, the idea of "*zhong guo*" (中國) is bound to be very different from what it used to mean centuries ago within Chinese culture. "That which is situated in the center of the two (Heaven and Earth) is known as 'the middle kingdom.' Those who dwell on the edges of heaven and earth are known as 'the four outlanders.' The four outlanders are on the outside. The 'central kingdom' is on the inside." That metaphysical, aristocratic, and ethnocentric idea of "China" is obsolete in the eyes of many Han Chinese who "dwell on the edges" or in territories that Song literati member Shi Jie (1005–1045) would have considered as being occupied by "the four barbarians" (四夷). For many in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas, "China was not necessarily the center of the world, and the four barbarians came from civilized countries. In fact, in the eyes of these so-called barbarians, China may be one of the 'Four Barbarians.'" (Ge Zhaoguang, p. 48)

I chose these films because they all have parts where English is spoken and therefore are not exactly Sinophone films ("Singlish" or Chinese-Anglo cinema). They represent a variety of "China" that is a home, country, or culture, in contrast to the homes, countries, or cultures that are the host societies for many overseas Chinese. In other words, the films seem driven by a deep anxiety over one's cultural identity to one degree or another – something that has preoccupied the Chinese for centuries. That sense of apprehension about being bereft of one's identity was already tangible in the ominous remark by Qing minister Guo Songtao (郭嵩燾, 1818–1891), made upon his return from touring Europe, that "The way they [the Westerners] view China is the same as how China used to view 'the barbarians.' It is sad that there have not been literati in China who understand this."[1] In light of the changes in geopolitics that have shaped Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese communities, it is imperative to take seriously what Mann refers to as the "difference between individual and personality, civilization and culture, social and metaphysical life." It is to this difference that the selected films speak directly – in English, Mandarin, and various local dialects – while expanding the "metaphysical being" that is Chinese culture.

Contemporary scholars such as Wang Hui (汪暉), Zhang Longxi (張隆溪) and Lydia Liu (劉禾) have all aptly pointed out that Asia, for the most part, is an ideological construct created by the Europeans more than anything else. This gives us some historical context for transcultural negotiations in film or elsewhere in which Asia is implicated. This is because "Modernity for the Orient is primarily its subjugation to the West's political, military, and economic control. The modern Orient was born only when it was invaded, defeated, and exploited by the West. This is to say that only when the Orient became an object for the West did it enter modern times." (Yoshimi Takeuchi, pp. 147–8) This view is echoed by Edward Said who argued that the "Orient" is the product of European imagination and cultural biases. "Asia," including China, thus emerges from what Henry Rosemont refers to as "the conceptual framework of rights, within which human beings are seen as free, rationally choosing autonomous individuals." (Nadeus, p. 111) This same cultural discourse also "subsumes human differences under the totalizing category of national identity . . . in legitimizing Western imperialist expansion and domination of the world." (Liu, p. 48) What this means is that in the past two centuries in which the West has subjugated Asia through war and trade, "China" often exists as a problem. Fukuzawa Yukichi (福沢諭吉), for example, seriously entertained the possibility of "leaving Asia" (*Datsu-A Ron*, 1885, 脱亞入歐). To him, cultural identity boils down to a matter of choosing friends. "Those who cherish bad friends cannot escape the fate of being branded as a bad person. My heart and determination lie in the refusal of bad friends." The "bad friends" is a reference to China (Shina) and Korea (Chosen) with which Fukuzawa wanted Japan to sever cultural ties. "Unless we [Japan] want to prevent the coming of this Western civilization with a firm resolve, it is best that we cast our lot with them. If one observes carefully what is happening in the present world, one should realize the futility of preventing the onslaught of Western civilization. Why shall we not float with them (the West) in the same ocean of civilization, sail the same waves, and enjoy the fruits and endeavors of civilization?" (Fukuzawa, p. 15) Nowhere is this rhetorical question more relevant than in the social problem films in which the viewer realizes his or her cultural identity in the self-awareness of the fictional characters as Chinese or Asian.

To differing degrees, the theme of identity crisis is present in all the films that transvalue Han Chinese traditions in the context of European civilization. As such, they are but variations of recent events such as independence or de-sinicization (去中國化) movements in Hong Kong and Taiwan. They can also be seen as continuations of the May Fourth radicalism to abolish Chinese writing in order to save the country (漢字不死中國必亡), mediated by a "new rhetoric [that] is deceptively simple: since China's backwardness had deep roots in Chinese polity, society, and culture, the total transformation of Chinese-ness is a precondition for China's modernization." (Tu p. 5) The films stage that transformation of identity in a series of "hyper-realities" in which "it is impossible to distinguish reality from fantasy." (Botz-Bornstein, p. 3) Most Chinese today are used to thinking of themselves as related by abstract affinities such as universal human rights rather than kinship and friendship. The films invite them to exercise their right to choose a civilization or redefine their own and ultimately they represent the dynamism of the Hegelian dialectic, reacting critically to an old symbolic order (thesis), waking up to a new cultural myth or higher truth of reality (antithesis), and reconciling themselves with a mode of existence to be defined as becoming (synthesis). These critical steps of the "creative self-negations and destructions"[2] (Zhang, p. 73) taken by those during the May Fourth movement, Communist Revolution, Cultural Revolution, and Deng's reform also go on in the hearts and minds of those, Chinese citizens or not, living beyond China's borders that used to circumscribe their identity.

British Hong Kong was one of the areas where the Chinese could become "modernized" and even "civilized." In an article titled 'Barbarism – Civilization', published in one of China's first English language newspaper the *Canton Register*, the global progress of the Anglo-world is invoked as evidence that British civilization is far more superior to Chinese despotism:

> By what right are the aborigines of North America and New Holland driven from their indisputable homes by the governments of the United States and Great Britain? By no other than that barbarism must vanish before civilization, ignorance succumb to knowledge: such appears to be a law of nature, or rather, the will of God! (Stan Neal, p. 62)

One such record of "barbarism vanishing before civilization" or "total transformation of Chinese-ness" is *The Unwritten Law*, (1985) directed by See Yuen Ng, a.k.a. Wu Siyuan (吳思遠). In this courtroom drama, social justice prevails under Christian precepts and triumphs over the barbarity of the colonized. Trial by jury was designed to settle criminal matters where the fate of the individual on trial is in the hands of his or her peers and not those who happen to be in power. The female lead Liu Hui-lan is a prostitute, charged for killing a sadistic playboy Zeng Yonglin who gets sexual pleasure from torturing women. The characters who exemplify the Christian virtues of hope, charity, and love are the male lead Liu Zhipeng, his mother the prostitute, and Mother Maria at the orphanage where he is brought up. The story ends with Liu Hui-lan exonerated and free.

The film is a window into the minds of Hong Kongers living under Western subjugation. It begins in England when Liu Zhipeng, in cap and gown, graduates from the London School of Law, with Latin honors of summa cum laude. He grows up in a Christian orphanage in Hong Kong, under the loving care of Mother Maria. His job as a solicitor in Hong Kong puts him in the position to defend Huilan, whom he does not know is his biological mother who abandoned him. By winning the case for his mother, he not only glorifies the works of Mother Maria but also celebrates the ethos of Christianity. When Mother Maria is ordered to testify under oath whether Zhipeng is the son of Huilan, a legal maneuver on the part of the prosecutor to disqualify Zhipeng as the lawful representative for Huilan, Maria's adamant denial "No" helps secure the acquittal for Huilan. This untruth is not a lie because, in Christian theology, all people are God's children and it is through His divine grace that Christians achieve salvation and redemption. The concept of equality before God triumphs in a repressive and corrupt society in which people are treated according to their social status. An Asian messianic figure of the Enlightenment, Zhipeng understands not only the letter but also the spirit of the law to achieve justice and bring mercy to the poor. This tribute to European civilization is in perfect accord with the view of Robert Morrison (1782–1834), Anglo-Scottish Protestant missionary in Macau and Guangdong, father of Anglo-Chinese literature, "The general principles of our religion give a tone of elevation and dignity to the human mind which is not felt here . . .. They the Chinese do not associate something approaching equality for the worship of their gods. The multitudes of people in this country are truly, in a moral and religious view, as 'sheep without a shepherd. (Gao Hao p. 580) To Director Ng, Europe represents the highest stage of world civilization and Hong Kong a benighted place where sheep need a shepherd to lead them out of darkness. Some Chinese settlers and colonists, however, had a view much less sanguine on the encounters between Asian peoples and European powers. One Cheoke Hong Cheong protested loudly what he saw as racial discrimination by the British Australians:

> Is it possible the Parliament of Victoria and the other colonies can enact that even a British subject, if of the Chinese race, and just because he differs from the European in the colour of his skin, is therefore to be treated as a felon? Then, again, is it possible that common human rights accorded to other civilized people are to be denied to us? That it is to be a crime, punishable by hard labor, if man or woman of the Chinese race travel over the line separating any of the colonies without a permit, which might not be obtainable? If such is to be then we protest in the sight of heaven that this is a crime, not as committed against us only, but against the great Creator of all "who made of one blood all nations of men." (Marilyn Lake, p. 387)

In Ng's commendatory version of British colonization, justice, and racial equality prevail over evil. As a sinner and Chinese, Huilan is saved by the grace of God, a footnote to the civilizing mission of the white man to bring light to those kept in the darkness of ignorance and barbarity.

As a British colony and a huge metropolis that was once only a fishing village, Hong Kong is a typical migrant city with a diverse population. To many residents, Hong Kong is a gateway to freedom and endless opportunities. Shot in 1996 when the colonial rule was coming to an end, *Comrades, Almost A Love Story* by Peter Chen (陳可辛, 1962–) is a nostalgia film. "On the surface," says critic Gan Tian (p. 26), "the film is about a process in which two Mainlanders try to achieve HK identity but there is no reason why it is not also a process of finding one's history and identity on the part of the local residents. . . . The crazy spirit of Li Qiao struggling to change her life no matter what epitomizes the spirit of Hong Kong immigrants, old and new, who would not take it lying down. This is why the film triggers nostalgia among Kong Kongers hoping to establish and revise their history." The twists and turns of the romance between Li Qiao and Li Xiaojun take the viewer on a tour oscillating between the heaviness and lightness of being a Chinese in British Hong Kong. The products of this historical moment, the two youth cannot erase their past in the Mainland even when convinced, as Li Qiao is, that "This is Hong Kong; everything is possible here!" Their struggles as Chinese emigrants delineate the itinerary of a round trip from disclaiming to reclaiming their cultural identity. "If I wanted to marry a Chinese," Li Qiao says to Li Xiaojun, "I wouldn't have come to Hong Kong." For her, Xiaojun is her alter ego that is attached to her like the shirt of Nessus. He triggers in her the kind of negative narcissism in people like Bo Yang and Lu Xun who felt as though culturally implicated by Chinese traditions but powerless to resist the white mythologies of race. The true nature of their romance is nothing other than their shared desire to destroy their past and be different, which pushes them apart but also draws them together. They cannot be together until the two can accept each other and themselves, which they do at the end of their self-discovery odyssey from China's borders to the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor.

The film transnationalizes Chinese identity and offers an encyclopedic treatment of overseas Chinese experiences as migrants. The two main characters testify to the fact that "the mobility of laborers makes these people culturally lost, socially uprooted, and politically impotent in the public life of their destination societies. . . . While the problem of identity arises everywhere with globalization; international immigrants are doubtless among those who meet the most serious challenges in this regard, as they have to abandon their own language, culture, and religion in settling into new destinations." (Wu, pp. 188–9) The romance of the two immigrants expands the Chinese imagination and extends the Chinese vision from the Mainland where the two lovers begin their odyssey all the way to the New York Harbor where they are nothing like who they were years ago except for their passion for Teresa Deng's songs. The two protagonists disseminate a changing version of Chinese identity, recording the moments when a Chinese person steps onto foreign soil, learns the language of the host-country, deals with immigration matters, and feels overwhelmed by homesickness and love. The voyage taking Xiaojun and Li Qiao from China to America allows new experiences to happen, but only as variations of what they have experienced in the past, as if in déjà vu.

Hong Kong as a conglomerate of different cultures is never Chinese enough for China or Western enough for Europe. It is a composite of both but like neither. Wayne Wang's *Chinese Box* is characterized by a playfulness about Hong Kong's identity. Comprising both English and Chinese, the film is an interesting exercise of deconstruction through which it rejects the essentialist notion of culture in favor of a global civilization. As the title suggests, identity is really like a set of boxes with graduated sizes, which the viewer sees open one after another at the very beginning, with no substance inside. The story reveals a set of interlocking relationships that change with the dynamics of geopolitics. As the white colonizer, John Spencer perfectly exemplifies the British rule in Hong Kong before 1997, genuinely concerned with the interests of the natives such as Jean and Vivian. He does not realize that his presence as a white colonizer biases his investigation as a reporter. Despite his compassion for the conquered races, John feels he is losing his grip on reality. As the colonized, both

Jean and Vivian learn the art of mimicry in all its forms to accommodate the racial stereotypes and prejudices of the West against them.

In the film, what matters is not the truth of reality but the apparatuses of perception. The story is about an unstable hyperreality that will soon be subverted when Hong Kong reverts to China. John is often frustrated with the information he gets from the natives because he does not know what to believe. When viewing a video clip of Jean talking about herself, John's friend Rick positions the projector in such a way that her face gets shown over John's to create a hybrid cultural identity. The uncanny image of two faces overlapping, one Chinese and one white, reveals the violent history of colonial subjugation and cultural domination. The violence of European colonialism that John represents also created new forms of inequality. The politics of self-representation were not any less complex with the end of British rule, as there are now going to be issues about how pure Hong Kong residents are as Chinese rather than as British subjects. While some in Hong Kong perceive the Mainland as a politically less evolved and culturally inferior place, some Mainlanders such as Mr. Zhang also feel a sense of superiority over the Hong Kong residents whose Chinese-ness has been compromised during the colonial occupation. Mr. Zhang feels embarrassed to be seen in public with Vivian and would introduce this former prostitute only as his secretary to his business associates.

The film could not have been made at a more opportune moment to observe the dynamic and complexity of cultural politics. In 1997 when the British colonial rule of Hong Kong was coming to an end, not only was the history and law of Hong Kong going to be rewritten, individual Hong Kongers also needed to rethink their lives in relation to the changes to come. Hong Kong's history is subject to different interpretations, either as a satellite state of European civilization wherein the Chinese natives enjoy self-autonomy or even independence, or as lost Chinese territory that the motherland is now reclaiming from the colonizing foreign powers. The battle over the right to interpret history is dramatized when Jean gives an oral account of her past, in which she was madly in love with her boyfriend William. But when John brings this white man to confront his past, William has no recollection of ever being in love with an Asian woman and does not remember Jean. All these individual boxes of personal memory or identity are being put into larger boxes of national and international history.

The geographic distance between Hong Kong and the Mainland is infinitesimal but the distinction between culture and civilization is significant. Take for example *Happy Together* (春光乍洩, 1997) by Wong Kar-wai. The definition of national culture as Thomas Mann understood it is relevant in the story where three homosexual young people travel to South America to escape their identities as defined within Chinese culture. Their problematic relationships are characteristic of the tension (hostility) between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China. The change of venue in Buenos Aires is a quest for freedom denied at home. For Lai Yiu-fai (黎耀辉), Ho Po-wing (何寶榮) and Xiao Chang (小張), the sojourn in Argentina is a way to revolutionize how they normally experience Hong Kong or Taiwan, to stage an antithesis of the original thesis. They would rather cope with the unbearable lightness of being nothing (and free) than carry the burden of a national culture as their identity.

To an extent, the story is about self-exile or escapism, but it is also about the homecoming that happens at the end. The film begins with Lai's and Ho's passports being stamped which, according to Carlos Rojas, "[A passport] is a symbol both of one's identity and of the contingencies that underlie that identity. … The passports, in other words, symbolize Hong Kong and China's own attempt to figuratively "start over." (Rojas, p. 516) As British subjects, Cantonese speakers, and male homosexuals, their relationships are contentious or even poisonous, characteristic of the complex relationships between Great Britain, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China as different temporalities converge. They are at the mercy of larger historical forces and cultural trajectories over which they have no control. Regardless of where or how far they travel, they are inextricably connected to the local culture that continues to shape their growth, like the saying "you can take the man out of the ghetto, but you cannot take the ghetto out of the man." Like Hong Kong in 1997 being pulled apart by the divergence of Great Britain and China as two world powers, the gay relationship is so volatile and precarious that Lai, at

one point, refuses to give Ho's passport (freedom) back to him so that he cannot run away. Their relationship is analogous to that between China, England, Hong Kong, and Taiwan: it is contentious and interdependent.

What is expressed here is the notion of civilization that is individualistic and democratic rather than aristocratic and metaphysical. The incompatibilities between Ho (who is volatile or tempestuous) and Lai (who tends to be calm, collected, and self-disciplined) are such that one critic goes so far as to compare the two with the Nietzschean dichotomy of Dionysius and Apollo. (Wang, p. 72) Their emotionally taxing love relationship in which Ho often returns to Lai only to leave again allegorizes the uncertain situation of Hong Kong's homecoming to China. Before going back to Hong Kong, Lai watches television in a motel room when the news of Deng Xiaoping's death is broadcast. His homecoming coincides with the death of China's paramount leader, an allegorical figure of patriarchal authority. Lai's apprehension about his return to reconcile with his father who may or may not forgive him for stealing money is an analogy to Hong Kong's anxiety as the crown colony of Great Britain is about to become an authoritarian-run Chinese Hong Kong. Their escapism is a temporary suspension from being in time and culture, Chinese or otherwise. The narrative shifts back and forth from black-and-white to colorful, documenting the difficulties and struggles of overseas Chinese to find and hold onto meaning in each fleeting moment. The film ends with Lai's train coming to a halt at the terminal in Hong Kong where another cycle of self-exploration awaits.

Chinese identity as defined within Confucian humanism is challenged the most, it would seem, within the discourse of human rights. For this reason, Ang Lee's *Wedding Banquet* (喜宴, 1993) is a very important film to study the art of "reproducing hegemonic national subjects" despite the liberalism that disrupts the traditional family as a Confucian construct. According to Sarah Olutola, Ang Lee displays queer liberation in such a way as to fulfill the regulatory functions of the patriarch. (Olutola, p. 94) It is Wei-tong's father, the retired army general, who conducts what Homi Bhabha refers to as "the process of transcultural negotiation." (Bhabha, p. 312) As one of the most populous world cities, New York City epitomizes global civilization where one is expected to experience cultural and ethnic diversity. Ang Lee's view of transcultural negotiation is presented through the figure of Father Gao when confronted with same-sex relations cross racial lines. He is a newer version of the philosopher-king, changing the famous remarks by Julius Caesar from "I came; I saw; I conquered" to "I came; I saw; I *learned*." William Leung is quite apt to point out that "In fact, it is the bedrock of Chinese culture – the father's paramount esteem for familial unity and continuity – that finally becomes the agent for healing the potential disruption and enables a kind of new family to emerge." (Leung, p. 31)

For Ang Lee, as some have argued, Chinese traditions contribute to world civilization and become trans-nationalized through globalization. "As contemporary Chinese and Taiwanese negotiate an increasing trans-national self and nation, the 'soy sauce jar' has begun to crack. Filmmakers like Ang Lee may use 'soy sauce' to flavor their dishes, but they juxtapose it with unexpected ingredients. There may be a danger, as bell hooks argues, that "within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is the mainstream white culture. . . . Ang Lee re-envisions Chinese civilization in a much more sympathetic light, as something that is highly versatile and adaptive. The 'soy sauce jar' that both represents and contains Chinese and Taiwanese national and trans-national identities, is figuratively broken to reveal a new sensibility while the fluid of the 'jar' is not discarded. Recognizing the unfinished nature of intercultural processes endows the individuals with a sense of agency and consequence." (Dariotis and Fung, p. 189) The film thus challenges the conventional philosophical paradigm that treats civilizations as if by nature separate, static, and distinctive. Mr. Gao's ethnicity and morals as a Confucian contribute greatly to a global civilization in which cultures are interdependent. His skills in dealing with the challenges of cultural and racial diversity in NYC are reminiscent of the traditional cultural ideals of "bringing the four barbarians into China (納四夷入中國) . . . to bring the many ethnic groups on its periphery into a single 'Chinese nation.'" (Ge Zhaoguang, p. 65)

As is with space, cultural differences can also be experienced *as* time. As Mann pointed out, "national culture" is by nature metaphysical, aristocratic, and intellectual, not subject to change. This is the reason why Rey Chow views Zhang

Yimou's representation as that of a "timeless China of the past … signified mythically." (Chow, p. 145) *What Time Is It There* (2001, 你那邊幾點) is "an allegory of the political situation in the post-generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek era" that defines Tsai Mingliang as a Taiwanese filmmaker. (Liao, p. 63) The death of Xiao Kang's father seems to rob everybody of their identity. This film, with its nostalgia for the bygone Chiang Kai-shek era, seems to be a tale of two cities (Taipei and Paris) except the vast distance between Asia and Europe reveals nothing meaningful in this post-Chiang age. Like identities, time zones are also man-made realities and cultural constructs that are arbitrary and artificial; they are only as true or meaningless as people make them. The point of the film is that cultures are as different from one another or as true as the time zones or people's inner spiritualities. Xiao Kang is lonely after his father dies and does not have a real life anymore other than as a street vendor of wristwatches. A pious Buddhist, his mother also becomes emotionally withdrawn and weary of waiting for her husband's spirit to visit her. Living under the same roof, the mother and son might as well be living in two different spiritual realms. Relationships may appear nonexistent for people related by blood but, at the same time, seem quite real for strangers. After a young woman – Chen Xiangqi – buys the wristwatch that he was wearing, Xiao Kang becomes attracted to her. She is going to Paris the next day, and Xiao Kang becomes fascinated with the seven-hour time difference between Taipei and Paris. He resets all his timepieces to Paris time so he can live in her time, which suggests that reality is being hollowed out through globalization. Plagued by nothingness, Xiao Kang only seems preoccupied with a place where he is not.

The crosscuts back and forth between the two cities connect things and people that have no inherent meanings to one another. Paris-Taipei romance is as nonexistent as the spirit of Xiao Kang's dead father. The young woman Chen Xiangqi has absolutely nothing to do in Paris because her life as a Taiwanese woman has no real meaning other than being seven hours away from Taipei, which is perhaps why she insists on buying a watch that can tell the times of two different places. Similarly, Taipei as a place or time zone that is no more home to Xiao Kang than Paris is to Xiangqi. After Xiangqi leaves Taipei, Xiao Kang tries to telepathically move himself to Paris by watching *The 400 Blows* (1959) in which his meaningless existence is reflected in Antoine Doinel's problematic childhood. In this distant land that Xiao Kang cannot afford to visit except through some cultural artifact like videotapes, Xiangqi lives a life not any different from Xiao Kang's life that is seven hours ahead of Taipei. On the surface, French culture and society cannot be more different from Taiwan, yet the homogeneity of modern civilization seems to render life everywhere so flat and empty that no one can achieve intimacy regardless of how close they are geographical to one another.

As global cities, Taipei and Paris offer nothing meaningful other than the unbearable lightness of being. People everywhere live in different "time zones" and personal bubbles. Xiao Kang's parents dwell in different spiritual realms even as his mother masturbates in the dark for fear that her dead husband will be frightened away by bright light. Meanwhile, in Paris, Xiangqi meets Cecilia Yip, a young woman from Hong Kong, only to realize that they do not make a good lesbian couple. Back in Taipei, Xiao Kang is seen having sex with a prostitute, but the intense physical act never brings the two any closer than Taipei is to Paris, with the prostitute stealing all his watches while he is asleep dreaming of Xiangqi in France. The story helps register different international time zones in which a person feels alienated from other individuals by his gender, sexual orientation, language, or religious creed. We realize the artificiality of civilization as opposed to the authenticity of culture (the old days of Chiang Kai-shek) when Xiao Kang's father oddly reappears at the end as if to undermine the reality of the characters in different localities in space and time. The montage sabotages time zones and sequences. With temporal linearity removed, the sequence and causality of events are gone, and individual identity evaporates. There is no "here," "there," "now" or "then." There is also no identity for the characters. The story is thus an exercise in deconstruction to expose the superficiality of modern life in which fantasies are mistaken for reality.

The lines separating one person from another seem hard to draw in America for obvious reasons. But even in this multiracial society or "universal nation," Chinese Americans still often feel as though they are being "… defined by our European heritage and institutions."[3] (Huntington, p. 9) This dominant definition of America's national identity becomes

the nightmare for a Chinese immigrant family in *The Gua Sha Treatment* (2001). The controversy surrounding *Gua Sha Treatment* shows the relevance and validity of cultural institutions that do not necessarily originate in the West. A Chinese expat living in the US. Zheng Xiaolong (鄭曉龍) is interested in how ideals of democracy and liberty impact the life of overseas Chinese (-Americans). His story revolves around a case of child abuse when the accused do no more than *gua sha*, a traditional medicine treatment not recognized by the US legal system.

Based on a real event, the story demonstrates how "European heritage and institutions" can benefit as well as discriminate against people of Chinese descent in America. It is not just Chinese medicine that is called into question and put on trial, but the hierarchical Confucian values as well, such as loyalty, filial piety, obedience, and self-sacrifice. The hierarchy of these home values is rendered problematic and negotiated through the character of Datong (大同) whose name signifies universal harmony. To a degree, the drama is a sequel to earlier historical chapters of racial discrimination such as the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882–1943) in which the Chinese are described as "Asiatic barbarians." In the courtroom, Datong is called "barbaric" by a white nurse present at his son's birth when he tells her to save his wife if mother and son cannot both survive. He is caught committing perjury when standing in as the culprit for his father's questionable medical practice, an act exemplary of Confucian ethics.[4] In short, the film raises the self-awareness of Asian Americans whose cultural legacy is not well accepted or is badly misunderstood in the US. The legal battles that the Xu family goes through underline the problems of American national identity as Huntington understands them. If America is a Western nation defined by European heritage and institutions, do the Xus have to renounce part of their ethnicity, religion, and tradition to be respected? The film lends itself to a much larger conversation that began long ago on racial and civilizational differences.

The *gua sha* controversy is only a catalyst for debating the conscious values subscribed by many overseas Chinese such as Datong. The trial draws into the courtroom the literati tradition that is not well recognized in the dominant Eurocentric narrative of human rights. In his *The Essence of Chinese Civilization*, scholar Liang Shuming (1893–1988) defines Confucianism from a comparative perspective. Some of his critical observations provide a cultural prototype of which Xu Datong is one instance in America. In this philosophical treatise, Liang identifies what may appear a lack of civic spirit on the part of the Chinese, well elaborated in the film plot:

> Chapter IV: Chinese lack public life. Westerner's strength and our people's shortcoming. As it turns out every Chinese is a docile subject but, at the same time, every one of them is an emperor. Behind shut doors, he is an emperor to his wife and children. But once out the door, his propensity to be peaceful and accommodating comes out like second nature, a docile and pleasant man with his philosophy of taking losses as natural blows of life. But he has not cultivated the social skills to interact and negotiate with others in public settings, being neither haughty nor humble. Mr. Hu Shiqing is said to have been to every corner of the world, especially in the Americas and the South Pacific areas where there are pockets of overseas Chinese. He enjoyed talking about the overseas Chinese he had met, and came to this conclusion: that the overseas Chinese tend to outdo the expats of other nations as well as the natives. In nearly all walks of life, they outperform the rest, even in robbery or panhandling. However, these are personal skills and not the achievements of an organized group. Because of this inferiority in organizing themselves into a society and inability to receive legal protection from the state, they are doing worse than the overseas Japanese, and are bullied by the natives. This is the perfect example of the reason why in today's competitive world the Chinese are inferior and weak as a whole. . . . In addition, in his *The Travels in the New World*, Liang Qichao further elucidates the point that China has clans whereas the West has citizens; the Chinese have self-rule by clan or village but do not have a bourgeois society. From the very beginning, the West preferred governance by citizens whereas the Chinese favored tribal and communal governance. (pp. 66–7)

Nothing elucidates Confucian humanism better than Datong as a (Chinese) character. His problems underscore the fact that "China has clans whereas the West has citizens." What Datong does not understand and ignores at his peril is the spirit of democratic people for whom, in the words of Tocqueville (p. 409), "common opinion remains the sole guide" and whose similarity "gives them an almost unlimited trust in the judgment of the public." Datong's self-righteousness as a Confucian gentleman (*jun zi*, 君子) is aristocratic by nature, as he "aims at harmony, and not at uniformity" (君子和而不同小人同而不和). He expects that his beliefs and conducts are private matters not subject to social conformity so long as they do not challenge social harmony.

The court is not only where Datong has to prove that *gua sha* is a bona fide medical treatment. It is also where authoritarianism, despotism, or totalitarianism is on trial, which the Americans have fought against in favor of law and constitutional democracy. Born and raised in a different tradition, Datong is utterly unfamiliar with the cultural institutions of the country in which he now resides. He acts like a patriarch (father and monarch) at home and a docile subject outside. Contrarily, Americans belong to "Western self-ruled bourgeois society" (西洋之'市民'市制之自治) and abide by the law and public opinion when they interact. What is brought to light through this case of "child abuse" is how civil society and democracy operate in the pursuit of truth and justice. In the Confucian context, society is conceived of through the concept of the family. A family man, Datong expects himself to do no wrong in society if he conducts himself like a good son, father, and husband. His over-reactions throughout the legal proceedings dramatize Chinese cultural ineptitude while in such "democratic nations" where the order is maintained when elected officials legislate and enforce laws to settle disputes and protect public interests. To Zheng's credit as the director, the story comes to an intriguing ending when Judge Horowitz rescinds his earlier ruling against Datong. The end confirms the utopian vision of reform-minded political thinker Kang Youwei (康有為, 1858–1927), the author of *The Book of Great Unity / Universal Harmony* (大同書) which happens to be Datong's name. The drama reintroduces the idea of universal harmony and it reminds the viewer of the words of Chinese philosopher Fei Xiaotong (費孝通): "Each (culture) is beautiful by its own aesthetics; each also finds beauty through the aesthetics of the other; when different aesthetics coexist, there is great harmony." So, beneath this brief clash of civilizations that ends in temporary peace and harmony, the viewer sees also the recurring theme of a Confucian utopia, coexisting with the ideal of social democracy in America as a "universal nation." *Gua Sha* is one of the Sinophone films showing the dangers as well as rewards of transcultural negotiation in the contexts of colonialism, diaspora, emigration, exile overseas, global travel, and tourism.

The value of these Anglo-Chinese films lies in the fact that the directors transvalue the idea of *Zhongguo* (中國) through imaginaries, and allow cultures to coalesce. China in these stories is not a monolith or noun but a process or verb that people are learning to conjugate. This China resonates with the viewer when being translated back and forth between Chinese and English. In these hyperrealities, East-West "cultural differences" are presented to delineate the contours of a global civilization sutured together out of the fabrics of Confucianism, Christianity as well as the democratic values of individual freedom and equality. "China" is no longer just a metaphysical construct but also a sociological process, thanks to the film aesthetics of Ang Lee, Wong Kar-wai, Peter Chen, Zheng Xiaolong, Tsai Mingliang, Wayne Wang, and Wu Siyuan. To these filmmakers, the viewers owe their changing identity, as much as "later modern human beings are still being shaped by Shakespeare, not as Englishmen, or American women, but in modes increasingly postnational and postgender." This is the sense in which critic Harold Bloom regards Shakespeare as "the first universal author" and "an international possession, transcending nations, languages, and professions." To Bloom, the Shakespearean plays amount to "the invention of the human"[5] (Bloom, pp. xviii, 1, 2, 7, 10) with highly sophisticated individual characters, men and women capable of change who are no longer just hegemonic national subjects. Likewise, these Sinophone films reinvent the Chinese through memorable characters who speak Chinese and English as the languages of social change. As is true for Shakespeare, the filmmakers create new mythologies or modes of being that the Chinese have not thought of before.

The gap between Renaissance humanism in the West and this ever-changing identity among Chinese in the diaspora is getting smaller. That gap used to boggle the mind. For Yan Fu (1854–1921), the scholar and translator of Darwin's *Natural Selection*, the Chinese are a different species compared to Westerners, since their cultures are so diametrically opposed.

> China values the Three Bonds more highly, while the Westerners give precedence to equality. China cherishes relatives, while the Westerners esteem the worthy. China governs the realm through filial piety, while Westerners govern the realm with impartiality [*gong*]. China values the sovereign, while Westerners esteem the people. China prizes the one Way, while Westerners prefer diversity. . . . In learning, Chinese praise breadth of wisdom while westerners respect new knowledge. In respect to disasters, the Chinese trust fate, while Westerners rely on human strength. (Yan Fu, pp. 49–50)

Yet, this aristocratic idea of China as a "national culture," which idealizes what distinguishes one people from another, is constantly being renegotiated in the films to underscore what people all over the world have in common. The fictional Chinese characters seem to desire nothing better than what the Westerners want as they break with traditions to achieve equality and individual freedom. Time is on the side of change as people spread civilization to transcend their respective cultures. There have been plenty of films in Chinese cinema in which people fight for justice through Marxism and communism, building a republic modeled on the Western nation-state and joining the march of history dictated by global capitals and free markets.

Amazing things happen in these films in which Chinese traditions are being redefined in the context of European cultural institutions. It almost seems that the characters are created to debunk the notion that the Chinese are *culturally* predisposed to act differently from Westerners. This body of films reaffirm the point made by Liu Qing against cultural nationalism in favor of a cosmopolitanism.

> There has been a long history of homegrown theories of China as a unique culture. Since the late Qing period, there have been several revivals of the argument that have developed into a conclusion that can be summed up as the "unsuitable" logic: namely, because China is so special and unique, any non-native concepts, values, systems and praxis are unsuited to Chinese situations. There has been no shortage of this logic or lack of eloquence for it. For example, Western medicine is not suitable for China, because Chinese physiological constitution is different from that of the Westerner; free love is not suitable for China, because since antiquity the Chinese have advocated the ideal of extended family, marriage has never been between men and women as individuals but the merging of two families arranged by the parents and the matchmaker; "coed education is not suitable for China because the traditions would not consider appropriate for men and women to touch hands; "Marxism is not suitable for China because the generality drawn by the Jewish person about European traditions and social praxis cannot be valid for Chinese situations; "individual rights" are not suitable for China because the Chinese identity always stems from the collective and never been an atomized self; "market economy is not suitable for China because Chinese culture has always been community based, especially after the temperament of socialist experience that renders impossible the pursuit of money and profit as personal values. It is said that prior to fast-food giant McDonald's made an entry to China, the company consulted experts on its business prospect and the assessment was that it would be undoubtedly a total failure because the Chinese have their special and rich culinary tradition for flour-based food and would not eat hamburgers. As a result, McDonald's did not make the move well after KFC stepped into the fast-food market. To date, not only do we see Western medicine, McDonald's, coed

> education and free love, Marxism and marketplace introduced into China, but also the taking roots and coming to fruition of these Western institutions. (Liu Qing, pp. 12–3)

In the narrative film above, we see a vast array of characters who achieve identity through "these Western institutions" when the traditional close-knit organic community (有機共同體) is all but extinct. They are ordinary citizens of civil society (公民社會), proprietors (業主), legal representatives (法人), tax-payers (納稅人), homosexuals (同性恋者) or celibate (獨身主義者).

The films record not only metamorphoses of the individual outgrowing their aristocratic and ethnocentric self-definitions but also a collective psyche in all – Chinese citizens or naturalized in their respective host societies – who find a sense of themselves as a people. The films have addressed the issues that the Chinese have experienced in the diaspora:

The untold suffering of the Chinese people – caused by Western imperialism, the Taiping Rebellion, the collapse of the Manchu dynasty, the internecine struggle of the warlords, Japanese aggression, the conflict between the Nationalists and the Communists, and the misguided policies of the People's Republic of China – contextualized the meaning of Chinese-ness in a new symbolic structure. Marginality, rootlessness, amnesia, anger, frustration, alienation, and helplessness have gained much salience in characterizing the collective psyche of the modern Chinese. (Tu, 1994, vii)

The filmmakers document important changes in Han Chinese self-awareness as they explore the frontiers of a global civilization, similar to what happened to American identity deeply rooted in Europe when "the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines."[6] (Turner, p. 201) Thanks to these filmed cultural events, "Chinese nowadays are a new species. Therefore, we need to emphasize, that the Chinese who have been through the experience of the Twentieth-Century are *not* the ancient Chinese, overseas Chinese, those who identify themselves as part of cultural China, or people referred to as citizens of the world." (Zhang, p. 77) It would be equally correct to argue to the contrary, that contemporary Chinese *are* all these things. These films thus constitute a democracy of perception, subjecting Chinese culture to different interpretations.

As these film texts recede into the distance by the day, we gain new horizons in what it means to be Chinese. Chris Berry is quite right that "it is not so much China that makes movies, but movies that help to make China." (Berry, p. 3). That China is not only real but also justified as Nietzsche understands the human world, namely, "it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified" (… *nur als ästhetisches Phänomen ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig gerechtfertigt*). As philosophy and history meet in these films, there emerges a community of mind where the Chinese come to embrace new values and develop new conscious attitudes. If history is, to quote Hegel, "… the progressing self-determination of the Idea, the progressing self-development of Spirit" (Hegel, p. vii), then the directors should be credited as poets and seers who have helped redefine Chinese identity, frame by frame. The idea of China has gone through more changes in these Chinese/English language films over the past century than has been recorded in the historical records and scholarly works written in the past two millennia in both China and the West. Thanks to these films, the Chinese have awoken to their self-development in the world. It is only right that movie lovers and fans of Anglo-Chinese films pay homage to these filmmakers by saying, in the words of Hermann Hesse, "If I know what love is, it is because of you"

ENDNOTES

[1] "In recent years, when the king of Persia toured London, the British King awarded him medals of honors. *Times* newspaper reported rather disparagingly: "Why should the half-civilized deserve medals of honors?" To the Westerners, European countries that govern with the rule of law are civilized. Others like China, Turkey and Persia are half-civilized. The word "half" means half civilized. Countries in Africa are referred

to as "barbarian," just like the word "Yi Di" in Chinese, which is what the Westerners meant by uncivilized. During the time of Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, China alone was viewed as a place where there existed such rituals as dress code for mourning the dead, all those places far away from China were disparaged as "the barbarians." Since the Han dynasty, the culture of change through education has been steadily on the decline towards extinction, while the culture of law in Europe has been on the rise to prominence. The way they view China is the same as how China used to view the barbarians during the time of the Three Sage Kings. It is sad that there have not been literati in China who understand this.

[2] "What I mean by the so-called affirmation of the whole is affirming their negation. . . . There is not necessarily logic in things linked together sequentially. Was not the history of over 2000 years overthrown overnight during the May Fourth movement? This is because there is a new logic. "New" here is not an adjective but a noun, the new as a subject by and of itself. With its own history, the history of the new is a whole thing that affirms a new set of contradictions. The history of the new continuesly subverts, breaks through, revolts and self-destroys.

[3] "We Americans" face a substantive problem of national identity epitomized by the subject of this sentence. Are we a "we," one people or several? If we are a "we," what distinguishes us from the "thems" who are not us? Race, religion, ethnicity, values, culture, wealth, politics, or what? Is the United States, as some have argued, a "universal nation," based on values common to all humanity and in principle embracing all peoples? Or are we a Western nation with our identity defined by our European heritage and institutions?"

[4] *Analects*, Book VIII, chapter XVIII; "The Duke of She informed Confucius saying 'Among us here are those who may be styled upright in their conduct. If their fathers have stolen a sheep, they will bear witness to the fact.' Confucius said 'Among us, in our part of the country, those who are upright are different from this. The father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this.'" 叶公语孔子曰、吾党有直躬者、其父攘羊而子证正之。孔子曰、吾党之直者异于是、父为子隐子为父隐、直在其中矣。

[5] "Shakespeare will go on explaining us, in part because he invented us. . . . Shakespeare's originality in the representation of character will be demonstrated throughout, as will the extent to which we all of us were, to a shocking degree, pragmatically reinvented by Shakespeare. Our ideas as to what makes the self authentically human owe more to Shakespeare than ought to be possible."

[6] "At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American. As successive terminal moraines result from successive glaciations, so each frontier leaves its traces behind it, and when it becomes a settled area the region still partakes of the frontier characteristics. Thus, the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines."

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