Independent Filmmaking across Borders in Contemporary Asia

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Introduction

Beyond the Homeland and Diaspora

Abstract
Departing from the omnibus film project ‘Homeland and Diaspora’ (Yuanxiang yu lisan), this introduction outlines important questions to be explored throughout the book regarding what I have proposed as ‘independent border-crossing filmmaking’. I focus on a specific strand of auteurist independent cinema (and of image-making) emerging mainly since the late 1990s and early 2000s that project and articulate the experience of being mobile and displaced, being minority and diasporic, and/or journeying within and across various Southeast Asian and East Asian places. Detailed chapter summaries are also proffered.

Keywords: contemporary Asia, border-crossing filmmaking, independent cinema, film auteur

In 2013, Hong Kong-based Phoenix Television (Fenghuang weishi), in collaboration with Kuala Lumpur-based independent film collective DaHuang Pictures (Dahuang dianying, est. 2005),¹ invited six Asian filmmakers based in Malaysia (Tan Chuimui), Thailand (Aditya Assarat), Taiwan (Tsai Ming-liang, Midi Z/Zhao Deyin), and Singapore (Sun Koh, Royston Tan) to participate in an omnibus film (microfilm) project with the theme ‘Homeland and Diaspora’ (Yuanxiang yu lisan). The accomplished works that came out of this project – all shot in digital format – were broadcast on the satellite TV channel and streamed online on Phoenix TV’s official

¹ Since 2004, Tan Chuimui and other Malaysian (Chinese) filmmakers such as James Lee, Liew Seng-tat and Amir Muhammad, who were based in Kuala Lumpur at that time, leveraged the entity of DaHuang Pictures to carve out an independent space for like-minded independent filmmakers, regardless of their ethnicities, to work together on digital film projects in a collaborative manner. Also refer to Hee Wei-Siam’s chapter (in Chinese) on DaHuang Pictures (see Hee 2018: 211-237; also see ‘DaHuang Pictures’).

Whereas in Royston Tan’s *Popiah* (*Baobing*), the transgenerational bonds between members of a big ethnic Chinese family are repaired through food and the practice of tradition, Sun Koh has taken a more parodical take in *Singapore Panda* (*Xinxin xiongmao*) to re-examine the history of Chinese Singaporean immigrants, also addressing the flow of capital from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) into the city-state and the potential anxiety triggered by China’s threatening economic power worldwide. With *Walking on Water* (*Xingzai shuishang*), Tsai Ming-liang films his long-term collaborator Lee Kang-sheng’s slow walks through the city of Kuching, where Tsai spent his childhood, in order to explore a disparate sense of time. In *A Night in Malacca* (*Maliujia yehua*), Tan Chuimui reenacts an uncanny encounter in the historic city of Malacca between ‘herself’ (impersonated by an actress) and a mysterious friend, evoking the impressionist writing of diasporic Chinese novelist Yu Dafu (1896-1945) about the ‘South Seas’/*Nanyang* during the time of Malaya’s occupation by the Japanese.  

Even though not every filmmaker in the omnibus project has thematized her/his short film with the actual geopolitical border zones or transborder movement, the anthology has nonetheless leveraged the narrative tropes of mobility and identity, in tandem with multilingualism, in making visible the interrelations between people and places across East Asia and particularly Southeast Asia. Places such as the city-state of Singapore (Royston Tan, Sun Koh); Kuching (Tsai Ming-liang) and Malacca (Tan Chuimui) in Malaysia; Bangkok (Aditya Assarat) in Thailand; and Lashio (Midi Z/Zhao Deyin) in Myanmar are foregrounded as liminal sites for the filmmakers and their characters to reflect upon and negotiate with the localized, fragmented experiences of modernity and social transformations as well as the multiple possibilities of belonging. Although ‘Homeland and Diaspora’ was originally launched by Phoenix TV under the leitmotif of celebrating the commonalities and cultural bonds that have been passed down and shared by generations of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia across the Southern Seas/*Nanyang* (hence the ‘South’ in the title *Letters from the South*), I would contend that

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2 Unlike its television and online versions, when exhibited on the festival circuit, ‘Letters from the South’ adopted the style of ‘epistolarity’ or ‘letter-film’, so that every short film comprised a letter addressed to someone (including the audience), each closing with a message from the filmmaker (also see C.-T. Chen 2014).

3 Generally speaking, *Nanyang* in Mandarin Chinese is used by Chinese émigrés and their descendants to refer to the region of Southeast Asia. For more works on Nanyang literature and cultural productions, read Bernards (2012, 2016) and Groppe (2013).
these shorts have actually engaged the performativity of ‘Chineseness’ to canvass the interlacing yet uneven transnational movement of persons, commodities, cultures, and ideas as well as the sensibilities and feelings across Southeast Asian societies and communities. To put it differently, the omnibus is not simply one that narrowly concerns the Sinophone diaspora in Asia, if we can for the moment understand the Sinophone in terms of what was originally outlined by Shu-mei Shih as ‘Sinitic-language communities and their expressions (cultural, political, social, etc.) on the margins of nations and nationalness in the internal colonies and other minority communities in China as well as outside it’ (Shih 2011: 716; also see Chapter Four in this volume). As Aihwa Ong forcibly illustrates, ‘the contemporary practices and values of diasporan Chinese are characteristic of larger questions of displacement, travel, capital accumulation, and other transnational processes that affect large numbers of late-twentieth-century subjects (who are geographically “in place” and displaced)’ (Ong 1999: 86; emphasis in original).

Moreover, as much as ‘Homeland and Diaspora’ was advertised as a showcase of transnational collaboration among the diasporic Chinese filmmakers (as well as among film professionals such as actors and actresses from diverse backgrounds and locales), it has indeed highlighted the existing transnational nexus and creative momentum intersecting East Asian and Southeast Asian independent film movements and film auteurs since the early 2000s in the new waves of digital filmmaking. Having based their filmmaking in urban centres in this region, filmmakers who participated in the omnibus are at the same time closely connected with the global visual regime through variously scaled networks of film production, circulation, and exhibition, such as those of the international film festivals.

The anthology of ‘Homeland and Diaspora’ spotlights a group of filmmakers and a body of film works that will be mapped out in *Independent Filmmaking across Borders in Contemporary Asia*. This book focuses on a specific strand of auteurist independent cinema (and image-making) that has emerged mainly since the late 1990s and early 2000s that projects and articulates the experience of being mobile and displaced, being minority and diasporic, and/or journeying within and across various Southeast Asian and East Asian places, which correlate with the filmmaker’s negotiation with her/his layered identities and/or the trajectories of travelling and migrating across Asian locales. Whereas I place my survey within the geopolitical space of Southeast Asia and East Asia, I also pay specific attention to inter-Asia culture and media flows in the post-Cold War period and particularly in the era of globalization, into the new millennium.
Importantly, I borrow the concept of dissensus from philosopher Jacques Rancière to consider how this study – which features a specific breed of border-crossing auteurs and image-makers together with their independently produced border-crossing projects – can be enframed within, and thus contribute to, a new understanding of the aesthetics and politics of contemporary cinema. In particular, as far as the ‘independent border-crossing cinema’ is concerned, I argue that for the independent filmmakers and image-makers canvassed here, their practices are political not simply because they have transgressed identities and/or borders of various scales (not unlike their characters in the diegetic world). The politics also concerns how the cinema works contribute to envisioning ‘Asia’ as a cultural text/imaginary of disjuncture, multiplicities, and unevenness wherein the connectivity between the previously marginalized and peripheral subjects, places, and feelings can be realigned, reconnected, and made perceptible.

Independent border-crossing cinema, which here includes both fiction film and documentary, is closely analyzed in the first chapter, and I have specifically situated it at the conjuncture of inter-Asian culture and media productions and the new waves of independent film movements across Asia since the late 1980s and early 1990s. Leveraging the concept of translocality/translocalism, I suggest that this border-crossing filmmaking comprises political acts in promoting and visualizing a new way of envisioning and reconfiguring the interconnections between (Asian) places, the (im)mobile subjects, and their layered identities. To better understand the dissensual potentiality of this border-crossing cinema, I zoom in on the issue of film authorship, which is understood in this project as the ‘ways of doing and making’ around which independent filmmakers and artists coordinate their authorial positionings and aesthetic preferences. Inspired by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih’s framing of ‘minor transnationalism’ (Lionnet & Shih 2005) while also discussing ethnic, diasporic, and postcolonial filmmaking in critical parameters such as ‘accented cinema’ (Naficy 2001), ‘intercultural cinema’ (Marks 2000), and a ‘cinema of transvergence’ (Higbee 2007), I demonstrate how a ‘minor’ authorship connects with the dissensual in modifying the ‘policed’ articulations and representations of the minority and marginalized identities and groups. Also, the dissensuality of such an authorship concerns how it is institutionally situated and performed within the space of the international film festival network.

The five chapters that follow Chapter One I have envisioned as an inter-Asia translocal trip that goes from North to South. The second chapter, ‘A Landscape Over There – Positioning Zhang Lu’s Border-Crossing Cinema’, examines three border-crossing films by the Korean-Chinese filmmaker
Zhang Lu, namely Desert Dreams (2008), Doorman River (2010), and Scenery (2013). Using the conceptual framework of translocality, this study first explores how Zhang, as a translocal auteur, leveraged his multi-layered identities to engage the global film festival network. The cinematic trope of border crossing is emphasized: not only has Zhang reinvented the border as a new scale to scrutinize the translocal movement of deterritorialized subjects and diasporic peoples, he also sheds light on the significance of place in identity formation and further interrogates the power geometry of globalization. As such, Zhang's translocal filmmaking intersects and challenges us to rethink both Chinese independent cinema and Korean diasporic films.

Titled ‘Fading Hometown and Lost Paradise – Kuzoku’s Politics of (Dis)location’, the third chapter sets out to examine Kuzoku, a Japan-based independent film collective of multiple members founded in 2004 by self-trained filmmakers Tomita Katsuya and Aizawa Toranosuke. Set in the generic ‘regional city’ of Kofu in post-economic crisis Japan, Kuzoku’s feature film Saudade (2011) looks at a group of marginalized labourers, part-timers, and rappers who find their lives and desires inextricably intersecting with the foreign immigrants in town. In Bangkok Nites (2016), Ozawa, an ex-soldier of the Self-Defense Force, travels to Isan (northeastern Thailand) and feels trapped in between his home country and the Southeast Asian ‘paradise’ of sex and escape. This chapter first examines Kuzoku’s location shooting by reconceptualizing fūkeiron (theory of landscape), which was famously explicated by Japanese leftist critic Matsuda Masao in the 1970s. Importantly, I look at how both Saudade and Bangkok Nites, in tandem with other media projects by Kuzoku, have reconfigured the mode of appearance in making visible previously marginalized subjectivities and locales and have interrelated with disparate temporalities and modes of affect as a gesture of resistance.

In Chapter Four, ‘Li Ying’s Films of Displacement: Toward an Im/Possible Chinese-in-Japan Cinema’, I turn to a long-term Chinese resident in Japan, Li Ying, who has been mostly known for his controversial feature film Yasukuni (2007) which reflects upon the socio-political significance of Yasukuni Shrine, where Japan’s war dead are commemorated. This study nevertheless frames two of Li’s earlier documentaries – 2H (1999) and Dream Cuisine (Aji, 2003) – as ‘films of displacement’. I situate Li Ying’s independent filmmaking at the conjuncture of diasporic filmmaking and Sinophone

4 Throughout this book of mine, I use ‘Kuzoku’ instead of ‘Kūzoku’ to refer to the collective members and their works, given that the former spelling is preferred by the film collective.
cinema and consider how these documentaries have not only interlinked Li's becoming 'Chinese-in-Japan' subjectivity with other displaced subjects who have difficulty articulating any singular sense of national or cultural belonging. Also, these documentaries examine and archive transhistorical and transnational affective connections traversing various Sinophone and diasporic communities within Japan and beyond. We could, therefore, envision a Chinese-in-Japan cinema which, loosely assembling contemporary film and media works by Chinese-in-Japan filmmakers who have arrived in Japan since the mid-1980s, challenges us to question its unwritten historiography and to rethink Sino/PRC-Japanese transnational cinema.

Chapter Five, entitled ‘Okinawan Dream Show: Approaching Okinawa in Moving Image Works into the New Millennium’, deals with the oeuvre of Okinawan filmmaker Takamine Gō and video artist Yamashiro Chikako, with an emphasis on the former's fiction feature film Queer Fish Lane (Hengyoro, 2016). Taking as a point of departure Gilles Deleuze’s framework of time-image, which underpins his explication of modern political cinema, this chapter examines how Takamine has experimented with textual strategies and forms of expression in configuring the 'stratigraphic image' apropos of Okinawa, wherein the boundaries between the actual and the virtual as well as the real and the imagined are blurred. The teleological narrative of any essentialized national identity is thus disturbed. Accordingly, spectators are challenged to read the film texts in their heterogeneous layers. Meanwhile, I also turn to Yamashiro Chikako’s recent narrative-oriented video works that have been intricately connected to the legacies of the Battle of Okinawa and current waves of protests against the US military bases on the islands. I argue that from a stance not too dissimilar from Takamine’s, Yamashiro grasps the political image of Okinawa less in terms of a truthful representation ‘in’ or ‘as’ reality but relates the work of memory, or remembering, to a series of operation on images.

Our meandering journey comes to an end with Chapter Six, ‘Homecoming Myanmar: Midi Z’s Migration Machine and a Cinema of Precarity’, where I look at Taipei-based, Chinese-Burmese filmmaker Midi Z, whose ‘homecoming’ oeuvre includes three fictional films (also known as the ‘Homecoming Trilogy’) and two documentaries shot at Myanmar’s most (in)famous high-quality jade deposit, Hpakant in northern Myanmar. Reframing precarity from its theoretical framings in sociology and biopolitical theories, I first argue that Midi has explored how, when ensnared within the precarious, impossible conditions of mere biological existence, the disenfranchised diasporic Chinese subjects – both female and male – still gamble on gaining access to other possibilities in life. My focus then shifts to City of Jade (Feicui
zhicheng, 2016), one of his Hpakant documentaries. Leveraging the notion of ‘risk-taking’ at both the textual and inter-textual levels, with an emphasis on the gendered perspective, I examine how Midi has leveraged a personal, subjective point of view to interweave the struggles of the Zhao family (particularly his brother’s) with those of the male labourers on location.


The journey has just begun.

Works Cited


