

Intermingled Fascinations

Intermingled Fascinations:
Migration, Displacement, and Translation
in World Cinema

Edited by

Flannery Wilson and Jane Ramey Correia

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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Migration, Displacement, and Translation in World Cinema,
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—*Flannery Wilson*

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—*Jane Ramey Correia*

INTRODUCTION

FLANNERY WILSON
AND JANE RAMEY CORREIA

Shih Shu-mei's book *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* is a monumental achievement. Throughout the course of the book, Shih succeeds not only in defining the term "Sinophone"—she creates an entirely new concept that she deems the "Sinophone". Of course, she does not (nor could she be expected to) resist providing a careful definition of the term, as a means of introducing her readers to the notion of the Sinophone so that we will be able follow her later arguments. She broadly defines the Sinophone, therefore, as: "a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries" (2007, 4). For Shih, the term denotes heteroglossia; Sinitic languages are by their very nature heterogeneous and resist easy classification. One might also compare the Sinophone to other similar concepts such as the Francophone, the Anglophone, or the Hispanophone in that it denotes a certain precarious and potentially problematic connection to the "mother-country," yet at the same time, the term is inextricably linked to the "mother-country" by its very nature.

The most interesting aspect of Shih's conception of Sinophone studies is that she is clearly opposed to (what she views as) the essentializing and constrictive practice of linking these studies to "Chinese culture". Because Sinophone visual practices (films, artwork, etc.) must be situated both locally and globally, Shih argues that the distribution and reception of these visual art forms are carried out in a global capitalist context. This global capitalist context consists, in turn, of a multitude of different identity-types, which Shih lists.¹ She sketches out these various types of identities so that the ones that she deems useful to her study of Sinophone visual practices can be analyzed. Again, what Shih does *not* find useful to her study, are any analyses of these visual practices that would seek to definitively link Chinese culture to the Chinese diaspora. To label

someone as “Chinese,” argues Shih, means to define that person based on how closely he or she fits into the mould of Han identity, which would be utterly restrictive.

Shih does not, however, argue for some sort of unrealistically relativistic definition of the Sinophone. The Sinophone, she says, should be thought of residually; this notion should be centered on certain immigrant communities throughout the world, as well as on other locations outside Mainland China such as Taiwan, Singapore, and British-ruled Hong Kong. Because the field of Sinophone studies transforms according to immigrant living conditions, and is associated with certain places, Shih calls for a spatially and temporally specific *modus operandi*. As a “collective” of responsible scholars in the midst of a developing field, she asks that we utilize Sinophone studies as a means to shatter the myth of Chineseness as a symbolic totality.

And yet we remain slightly resistant to and uncomfortable with the term “Sinophone” as coined by Shu-mei Shih. If we take the Sinophone to be defined as: “a network of places of cultural production *outside* China and on the *margins* of China and Chineseness...” (2007, 4, my emphasis), then Shih is correct in her assertion that the Sinophone is always an inexact copy of “Chineseness” as defined and predetermined by those on the Chinese Mainland (i.e. of Han decent, Mandarin-speaking, etc.). Yet by willfully excluding Mainland China in her definition of the Sinophone², Shih reaffirms the dichotomy of dominance/minority resistance from which she seeks to break free. By painting China as the dominant empire that must be destabilized by the outlying Chinese diaspora, she manages not only to separate outlying communities further from the mainland, but also, paradoxically, to reinforce their connection to it. If we are to assume that the world is now “borderless” (2007, 6), why create a needless border between China proper and the marginalized diasporic communities?

The idea for this book came about when we (the co-editors) realized that we needed a new way to discuss Sinophone cinema. We would be willing to use the term “Sinophone,” but only if it were to include cinema from the mainland. While we agree with the majority of Shih’s central arguments, (i.e. the idea that diaspora is temporally-marked, that linguistic communities are open and constantly changing), we wanted to create a book with a more inclusive focus. As a result, we have chosen to perform close analyses of a few carefully selected films. The boundaries of our discussion do not encompass all types of visual art—paintings, photographs, or television programs—only films. We cannot be accused of centering our focus too narrowly, since it would suffice to read the titles of our four chapters alone to see that this is far from the case. Our book was created

with a goal in mind: to be less dominated by political discourse, and more heavily dominated by in-depth analyses of narrative and character development.

While Shih constructs a solid thesis about the displacement of the Chinese diaspora and how this relates to and enriches Sinophone visuality, the essays that make up this book seek to advance Shih's definition of the Sinophone. This collection of essays, written on various examples of transnational cinema, demonstrate that Mainland Chinese cinema must be included in any definition of the Sinophone, and that in-depth cinematic analysis is key to understanding filmic representations of diasporic and displaced communities.

“The Sinophone” Through Character Development

Using Shih's notion of the Sinophone, therefore, we devote the next few pages to a careful analysis of the displacement of *character* within the narrative of three select films: Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994), Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Le voyage du ballon rouge* (2007), and Nobohiro Suwa's *H Story* (2001). In each of these films, the notion of the Sinophone functions through the development of character. The protagonists themselves are metonyms for Shih's concept of Chinese diaspora, but in contrasting ways. In *Chungking*, Cop 663 and Faye are displaced within their own surroundings—namely pre-handover Hong Kong—yet they remain in their “native” environment. In *Voyage*, Song is displaced from her hometown of Beijing, and thrown into the midst of French culture. *H Story* is the exact inverse: a French actress is plucked from France and placed in the new and estranging environment of Hiroshima.³

In her introduction, Shih argues that one of the Sinophone's favorite modes is intertextuality, and that this sort of intertextuality is meant to construct new identities and cultures. Thus by Shih's definition, Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* is an eloquent ode to both intertextuality and heteroglossia. The film consists of at least three audibly distinct languages: Cantonese, Mandarin, and English (although there are a number of others, including Hindi and Japanese). The film was shot in two very distinct areas of Hong Kong: inside and around the Chungking Mansions, and in another well-known area called Central. The Chungking Mansions location was hand-picked by Wong because it is filled with a diverse crowd of people from around the globe on a day to day basis; this is one of its most distinguishing factors. The Mansions are located on the island of Kowloon, which itself is filled with cheap residential accommodations, all types of ethnic restaurants, and exotic shops. The

film's soundtrack is also incredibly diverse and scales an enormous range of time-periods: Indian music, synthesizers, "California Dreamin" by the Mama's and the Papa's, "What a Difference a Day Makes," by Dinah Washington, and Faye Wong's own Cantonese cover version of "Dreams" by the Cranberries.

The narrative is divided into two stories: the first story centers on the Taiwanese-born cop He Qiwu, who is struggling to get over the fact that his girlfriend, May, recently broke up with him. He Qiwu is lonely, alienated, and essentially trapped by time (he is obsessed with expiration dates, and decides to wait until May first to "formally" get over his girlfriend). The second story, however, makes up the bulk of the film. This section of the narrative centers on the relationship, or lack thereof, between a snack bar server named Faye (Faye Wong) and another cop (#663) who remains unnamed, played by Tony Leung. Like He Qiwu, Faye and Cop 663 are trapped in their own respective temporal and spatial realities, which occasionally overlap. In one noteworthy scene, Faye and Leung stand alone in the snack bar; Faye rests her hand on her face behind the counter and remains still while Leung stands a few feet away sipping his coffee. As if to symbolize their alienation within their environment, Leung and Faye remain trapped in slow motion as the anonymous figures of Hong Kong pass through the frame in a blur.

Faye is in love with Leung's character, but is too shy to tell him. Instead, she dances in his apartment while he is out. One of central visual themes of the second half of the film are airplanes; real airplanes, model airplanes, paper airplanes, and stewardesses (Cop 663's first girlfriend is a stewardess). Faye longs to leave her isolating job as server, fly away to California and become a stewardess herself, which she does at the end of the film. She escapes. Leung's character, however, remains trapped in Hong Kong. He waits for hours and hours for Faye to meet him at a restaurant, but she is already gone. This scene is similarly marked by the slow motion/fast motion technique that Wong uses throughout the film: Leung's character remains fixed while the rest of the world whizzes by.

Shih talks at length about the idea of Hong Kong culture as a culture of "dis-appearance," a culture that was viewed nostalgically around the time of the 1997 turnover by the British. Noting that many Hong Kong cultural theorists at the end of the 20th Century wondered what would come next after this final parting glance of nostalgia, she comments: "Fetishism of the present, whereby the most mundane of everyday practices becomes immediately imbued with historical and symbolic meaning, would have to be replaced with a different temporal logic as the present will no longer be a site of nostalgia" (Shih 2007, 141). This observation perfectly describes

much of *Chungking's* general aesthetics and themes—fetishism of the present moment, and apprehensive worry about the future. These characters are looking for a means of escape, and the plane symbolizes the possibility of departure. As Shih maintains, the political situation of Hong Kong immediately prior to 1997 (this film was made in 1994) is clearly entangled with the artistic concerns of filmmakers, Wong Kar-wai in particular. Although Wong does not specifically address the British turnover in this film, his characters are, arguably, metonymic representations of larger socio-political issues.

There are two socio-political points that Shih makes in her introduction that can be related to character development and narrative themes in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Le voyage du ballon rouge*. The first point concerns (self) Orientalism and the second concerns the problem of translation. Beginning with the first point, Shih mentions the phenomenon of Sinophone filmmakers being criticized for attempting to cater to Western tastes in order to garner a bigger box office success (directors like Zhang Yimou for instance). Such directors have been specifically criticized for creating films that condemn the Chinese government while simultaneously exoticizing Chinese cultural symbols. It is interesting to connect the problematic of (self) Orientalism to *Voyage*, since one might reasonably wonder whether or not Hou (either consciously or subconsciously) engages in it.

The film consists of two main women protagonists: Suzanne, the eccentric French woman who performs in puppet-shows, and Song, a Taiwanese film student, hired by Suzanne to baby-sit her son Simon. As Suzanne and Song are driving together in the car together, presumably after meeting for the first time, we initially do not see either of the two characters, only the road in front of them. The entire sequence is shot from their perspective. We hear the voice of Suzanne, who says: "*Vous ne semblez pas timide*" (you don't seem timid). Song meekly answers: "*Oui je suis timide*," (yes, I am timid) and Suzanne replies "*Vous devez être à l'aise*" (you should feel at ease). Clearly Suzanne is trying her best to make Song feel comfortable, yet her blatant comments about her new baby-sitter's personality still have a note of judgment in them, and are perhaps presumptuous-sounding to someone who is not used to being personally critiqued. This initial conversation characterizes the rest of the interactions that occur throughout the film between Song and Suzanne; and, in fact, the two of them never seem to truly "connect" on a deeper level. Hou is making a harsh comment about cultural differences—because Song and Suzanne come from two very different cultures, they are never truly capable of connecting on a human level. At the same time, Hou does

not appear to intentionally orientalize Song; and even if he does, he certainly does not paint Suzanne under a more flattering light. Although she is passive and timid, Song is also intelligent, talented, and interesting. By the same token, although Suzanne is overbearing, crass, and often angry, she is also depicted as warm-hearted. Overall, however, it is Song's perspective that Hou privileges.

Shih also makes an important point about translation, which relates to Hou's film nicely. She argues that the Sinophone is an imperfect copy of "Chinese culture," and that it is therefore a form of translation. She remarks: "translation is not an act of one-to-one equivalence, but an event that happens among multiple agents, among multiple local and hegemonic cultures, registering an uncertainty and a complexity that require historically specific decodings" (2007, 5). In *Voyage*, the "translation scene" (which is actually two scenes pasted together) functions as a cinematic representation of how Shih uses "the Sinophone" in this remark. The sequence starts with the camera focused on a puppet, a Chinese man dressed in traditional garb. We hear the sound of Mandarin being spoken theatrically in the background; only later does the camera pan around to show us the puppeteers' face. After the puppeteer has recited his poem, the camera pans over to Suzanne, who proceeds to translate and explain the cultural context of the Chinese poem to the French audience (and also to the non-Mandarin speaking film spectator, since there are no subtitles).

The sequence then fades into the inverse mode of translation: the puppeteer and Suzanne are sitting on a train; Song has now joined them, and is functioning as the new translator. Suzanne gives the puppeteer a postcard, one that supposedly represents something "profoundly Chinese" for Suzanne, even though she purchased it in a British museum. Song translates Suzanne's rather inane comments for the puppeteer, who responds politely with "*merci beaucoup*." As Song continues to translate and carry on a conversation in Mandarin with the puppeteer, Suzanne smiles pleasantly but blankly and gazes out the window. Now Suzanne, not Song, is the "displaced" character, so to speak. However, this is the only scene in the entire film in which Song is placed in the position of mastery over Suzanne. Hou's film functions, therefore, as a negotiation between French and Chinese, as an imperfect correspondence between cultures that cannot be reduced to a single notion of either the Sinophone or the Francophone. In this sense, *Voyage* fits nicely into Shih's paradigm of non-Chinese-centrism.

Suwa's *H Story* contains an inverted form of the character displacement that is apparent in *Voyage*. In Suwa's film, the French woman is no longer the so-called master of her surroundings. On the contrary, the French

actress is utterly and woefully lost within the context of her surroundings, both literally and figuratively. In the opening scene of the film, the actress (who remains unnamed) must recreate the hotel bedroom scene from Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour*, but she does not understand any of the directions that Suwa gives her. She must therefore have a translator on set with her at every moment to translate from Japanese into French. Also unlike Song, this actress has almost no desire to integrate herself into Japanese society. She is the only French person on set, yet everyone speaks French to her and she to them. When her Japanese co-star asks her if she has seen anything in Hiroshima so far, she answers that she does not like to go out while she is working, and for that reason has only been to the museum. The actress is disturbed not only by the historical events that took place in Hiroshima some sixty years ago; she is disturbed by Duras' "pretty-sounding" lines. She thinks that the language of the script essentializes and therefore fails to communicate the gravity of the horrific events. "To me, it's not the way it should be said," she explains. This is one of the main reasons that the actress feels she cannot sufficiently play her role, and as a result, the director eventually shuts down the shoot.

Suwa's film is multi-layered and self-reflexive. It evades predetermined categories by refusing to fit into a perfectly translatable mould. In this sense, the film manages to fit (although much more loosely) into a discussion of Shih's notion of the Sinophone. The French actress is culturally displaced on many different levels: within the overall film, within the film within a film, and within her broader cultural environment, both as an actress playing an actress and as the actress in the film within a film. Suwa seems to have Shih's notion of the global capitalist context in the back recesses of his mind. His film caters to both a French audience/identity and to a Japanese audience/identity, and to anyone who has ever seen *Hiroshima mon amour*. Although the French actress is displaced within her cultural environment, she is able to find companionship by befriending the Japanese scriptwriter. But the final scene of the film ends in ruins, and we are led to wonder whether the state of their relationship is doomed to fail. The hand that blocks the lens, however, reminds us that this is only a film we are watching. Thus, not only are the characters themselves displaced; so is the film apparatus itself.

Intermingled Fascinations in Transnational Cinemas

Using a comparative approach, this collection of essays seeks to build upon and advance the study of Sinophone, Franco-Japanese, Sinofrench, and Sino-Italian transnational cinemas. Though each of the four chapters

in the volume is written by a separate woman author, all of the essays are connected thematically. Each author has chosen to discuss one or two contemporary transnational films that, for her, exemplify *displacement*. As a larger unit, this anthology seeks to demonstrate: 1) that in-depth cinematic analysis is key to understanding filmic representations of diasporic and displaced communities in modern Mainland China and Japan, and 2) that because new genres of Sinophone cinema are constantly emerging, the study of transnationalism needs constant re-envisioning and re-inventing.

Chapter 1, by Flannery Wilson, is entitled: “Opening the Door to Sino-Italian Cinema Studies: Gianfranco Giagni’s *Un cinese a Roma* and the Representation of Chinese Migrants in Contemporary Italian Cinema.” This essay seeks to answer the question: in what form does Sino-Italian cinema (cinematic exchange between Italy and China) currently exist? What will this type of “hybrid” cinema look like in the future? The chapter focuses primarily on *Un cinese a Roma* (2004) by Gianfranco Giagni, a film that documents the day-to-day life of a first-generation Chinese-Italian forced to live on the peripheries of Rome. Wilson concludes that this film demonstrates the problematic nature of Sino-Italian cinema: though the protagonist of the film, Li Xiangyang, is provided with “cinematic space” in which he is free to express his feelings of alienation, ultimately Giagni’s directorial hand remains apparent throughout. Through her close analysis of this film and others, Wilson argues that the possibility for Sino-Italian cinema in the near future will be more likely when non-native Italian filmmakers living in Italy are encouraged and funded.

Chapter 2, by Fontaine Lien, is entitled: “Contemporary Migration and Unstable Translations: Dai Sijie and Amélie Nothomb.” In this chapter, Lien argues that Dai Sijie’s *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise* and Amélie Nothomb’s *Stupeur et tremblements* are both semi-autobiographical experiences of 20th century interhemispherical migrants, written in the mode of “double-exile.”⁴ The former is written by a Chinese man living in France recalling his time spent under compulsory re-education in China, dispatched into the countryside and away from his childhood home; the latter is written by a Belgian woman in Francophone Europe recalling her unsuccessful attempt to become reintegrated into her country of birth, Japan, as an adult. The original texts themselves provide multiple examples of translation—as performance, affectation, and role-inhabitation—as a means of (re-) education, persuasion, and ingratiation.

Contrary to the translators’ intentions, however, Lien argues that the actual effects are mitigated and destabilized after they are received by the intended audience. When these works are, in turn, translated into other

languages and into cinematic form, additional layers of cross-cultural and cross-lingual trajectories and refractions are created. In particular, Lien notes that Dai Sijie's ternary role comprising writer, director, and ultimately, "translator" warrants attentive examination. Ultimately, Lien's essay is a nuanced consideration of these translations, and translations of translations, alongside translator-audience relationships both within and beyond the texts.

Chapter 3, by Regina Yung Lee, is entitled "No Place Like Home: Minor Transnationalisms in Jia Zhangke's *The World*." Lee's chapter takes Shu-mei Shih's idea of Sinophone film and investigates the theory through the lens of a Mainland Chinese filmmaker, Jia Zhangke. Lee also specifically confronts Shih's rather controversial claim that "the Sinophone" is only applicable to "minor transnational" locales. As a director, argues Lee, Jia is intimately concerned with language and its positioning within China, as well as the ways in which China is becoming alien to itself.

The chapter deals specifically with Jia's film *The World* (2004). As Lee observes, *The World* deals with issues of language and linguistic capability and distancing. She argues that, as a film, *The World* uses the ability of affect and music to move freely across a boundary not strictly policed by linguistic capability. This relationship between affect, music, and linguistic border crossings is concretized between two of the protagonists, Zhao Tao (a Chinese woman) and Anna (a Russian woman).

Chapter 4, by Jane Ramey Correia, is entitled: "Broken Lives, Fractured Cinema: The Cinematic Representation of Homelessness in French and Japanese Films." In this chapter, Correia examines homelessness as depicted in transnational cinema. She argues that homelessness, one significant instance of urban failure, is driven by an existence in liminal space, outside of defined architectural structures, and yet still governed by social norms. She notes that urban failure begins at forgotten, purposefully over-looked places in the city: in subway stairwells, beneath freeway overpasses, at the periphery of clearly defined neighborhoods. Correia furthermore observes that as the worldwide homeless population increases, especially in the wake of the recent global economic crisis, as well as from revitalization and gentrification movements of cities, the long observed tendency for the public to blame the individual failings of the victim continues.

Correia lists Akira Kurosawa and Abdellatif Kechiche as examples of transnational filmmakers who confront this taboo topic in their texts by bringing the problem of urban failure to the public's consciousness. In particular, she looks at Eric Rohmer's 1959 film *Le Signe du Lion*, which

depicts the protagonist's agonizing downward fall into poverty, isolation, and homelessness. In the style of Naficy's "exile cinema," she argues that Rohmer's film directs attention to issues of alienation and loss.

Correia further argues that, rather than mental illness, addiction, poverty, or ill-fated fortunes, the central problem of homelessness rests with an individual's alienation from his or her community or in-group. The failure of the community to support or to even recognize the individual allows the victimized homeless population to grow exponentially and forces society to become increasingly fragmented and disjointed. Yet the impoverished, the disadvantaged, and the displaced remain a central part of the world, even when living in the liminal peripheries and crevices of modern cities. Homelessness, urban living, and marginal spaces are not particular to any one city. Correia innovatively moves beyond East-West dualism and area studies to explore global concepts of space, the effects of rapid urbanization (in the past and in the present day) and the problem of homelessness.

This anthology celebrates a diverse set of authors who perform close readings of film narratives and characters yet who do not shy away from sociopolitical analyses or post-colonial theory. The project stems from our shared belief that the future of film studies, particularly transnational film studies, rests in the hands of Comparative Literature scholars. Without the ability to interpret translations or subtitles, film scholars would be constricted by their own linguistic boundaries. Rather than argue that it is *possible* for a film scholar to perform a detailed analysis of a film that is in a "foreign" language, we argue that for the Comparative Literature scholar, doing so is a necessary rite of passage.

Each of the four authors comes from a slightly different cultural background, which provides for interesting differences in perspective. Fontaine Lien, for example, divides her time between Los Angeles and Taipei, and speaks both Mandarin and French. Regina Yung Lee is Taiwanese Canadian, and also speaks French and Mandarin. We both speak French, though Flannery also speaks Italian and some Mandarin, and Jane speaks some Japanese. We have specifically chosen to exhibit the work of our colleagues (Lien and Lee) because we know their work on East Asian cinema to be innovative and exciting.

This volume seeks to supplement existing academic texts⁵ such as Olivia Khoo and Sean Metzger's *Futures of Chinese Cinema: Technologies and Temporalities in Chinese Screen Cultures* (2009), Zhen Zhang's *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (2007), and Hamid Naficy's *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001). Khoo and Metzger's volume contains

an astonishing variety of approaches to film studies. In other words, while the introduction is heavily laden with post-structuralist terminology, later chapters such as the one by Chris Berry tend to downplay the importance of such approaches. Zhang's book, meanwhile, is entirely focused on China and Chinese cinemas, but does not include investigations of East/West cross-cultural phenomena in cinema. Naficy's book, finally, is (by no fault of its own) now a decade old, and although the volume addresses themes of displacement and exile in cinema, it does not relate them to East Asian cinema exclusively. As co-editors of the current volume, we believe that—like the aforementioned texts—this collection of selected essays will appeal to film scholars who are interested in issues of migration, translation, cross-cultural fusion, as well as East Asian cinema more generally. We also believe that it will appeal to university students and graduate students in the U.S., East Asia, and internationally, and to scholars of Media, Comparative Literature, Film, and Area Studies.

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Notes

¹ She lists six main kinds of global capitalist identities in fact: fundamentalist, commercialized, legitimizing, epistemic, resistant, and transformative identities.

² It is not even entirely clear by its very definition that the “Francophone” does not include France, as Shih suggests. “The Anglophone,” for instance, seems to obviously include the U.S. and England.

³ Clearly, our discussion will go beyond even the notion of the Sinophone, since obviously Japanese, not Mandarin, is the central language of *H Story*. Our hope, however, is not to perfectly parallel Shih's notion of the Sinophone, but to show how character displacement functions to emphasize estrangement in a temporally and spatially specific setting.

⁴ Both of these works are novels *and* films.

⁵ This is an abbreviated list.

CHAPTER ONE

OPENING THE DOOR TO SINO-ITALIAN CINEMA STUDIES: GIANFRANCO GIAGNI'S *UN CINESE A ROMA* AND THE REPRESENTATION OF CHINESE MIGRANTS IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN CINEMA

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The Sino-Italian

On August 6th of 2008, Italy's Ministry of Cultural Activities (*Il Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali*) passed a law that creates a tax incentive for companies to reinvest their profits in Italian film production and distribution.¹ The law was passed for apparently benevolent reasons, one of the more important being, to attempt to overcome the direct intervention of the Italian government in the filmmaking process, which had previously held the power to decide which projects would receive funding or not. The true benefits of this law remain to be seen, since it is unclear how much actual control of media content the Italian State has relinquished.² Even if this new law can be interpreted under the most flattering light, the list of stipulations regarding "what constitutes a fundable Italian film" remains large and exclusionary. In order to receive a tax credit from the Ministry, the film must be directed by a "native" Italian, have at least one Italian author, and contain mostly Italian actors speaking the Italian language. While perhaps there is nothing inherently unseemly about such stipulations, I would argue that insofar as the definition of an "Italian film" becomes increasingly laden with self-imposed limitations, the possibility for non-native Italian filmmakers to receive funding to produce films in Italy remains low.³

The concept “Sino-Italian” is inspired partially by Shu-mei Shih’s work on Sinophone cinema, and also by Michelle Bloom’s term “Sinofrench,” which she defines in terms of cross-cultural connections. My definition of Sino-Italian cinema also stems from the general notion of “hybridity”⁴ as it relates to contemporary transnational filmmaking. Michelle Bloom, in her article “Contemporary Franco-Chinese Cinema, Translation, Citation, and Imitation in Dai Sijie’s *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* and Tsai Ming-Liang’s *What Time is it There?*” has coined the term “Sinofrench” in order to describe the cultural fusions and conversations that continue to occur in prolific numbers between China and France. Similarly, Sino-Italian cinema describes films in which cross-cultural connections between China and Italy are highlighted. Like the Sinofrench, therefore, my definition of Sino-Italian cinema is relatively broad, and can include films that are either marginal or mainstream, made and directed either in “greater China” or in Italy, or both.

There are several issues that I hope to raise, many of them problems that arise when one investigates Sino-Italian cinema by way of example. In the process of researching and studying examples of the Sino-Italian—cinema that I perceive functions in similar ways to the Sinofrench—I have come to wonder: what makes a film “hybrid” in the first place? Aren’t both the Sinofrench and the Sino-Italian too conceptually vague as they currently stand? Films that appear transnational upon first glance often carry nationalist agendas, and vice versa. It would seem that we need more—not less—precise ways to define transnational, hybrid, and diaspora cinemas. As this research continues, therefore, the concept of “the Sino-Italian” will require further retooling and specification.

Sino-Italian cinema is, in a very literal sense, a more “problematic” category than Sinofrench cinema. First of all, there are simply less examples of it. But if there truly is a dearth of artistic exchange, follow-up questions remain: does this lack of exchange stem from political issues, post-colonialist issues, or something else entirely? Is contemporary Italian cinema still centered on current national interests above all else, which, in turn, creates an imbalance in the exchange? My hope is that, by outlining and analyzing various examples of Sino-Italian cinema, these issues—and the reasons why they are difficult—will become clearer, even if the problems that I see as inherent to the concept of the “Sino-Italian” are not resolved.

As we will see, even well intentioned attempts at cross-cultural understanding can fall short. But rather than point a finger at filmmakers who attempt (and often do not succeed) at bridging cultural gaps, I would urge us to seek out what is lacking in these attempts. Often the missing

link, so to speak, can be read as a fundamental inability to shift perspectives. Walter Benjamin's famous observations about translators also apply to filmmakers. Filmmakers are translators in the sense that they must place images syntactically in order to create a narrative. Benjamin notes: "A real translation is transparent, it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully" (2000, 260).⁵ The willingness to surrender one's own (original) mode of interpretation in an uncomfortable setting—or to resist interpretation entirely—is hardly a simple task.

Throughout the course of this chapter, I will look first at an example of Sino-Italian cinema that was shot by an Italian director while traveling through China. I will then move to examples of Italian-made films, shot in Italy, and in which the notion of "Chineseness" arises as a thematic constant.⁶

Antonioni's *Chung Kuo* and the Awkward Cinematic Gaze

Two of the most prominent examples of Sino-Italian cinema are Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1986) and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Chung Kuo* (1972), which I will discuss at length in a moment. The story behind the making of *The Last Emperor* is well known because the film ended up winning an Oscar: Bertolucci was granted special access by the Chinese government to shoot his film in the Forbidden City in Beijing. He remains, in fact, the only Western director to have been given permission to film a historical movie in the Forbidden City since the early 1940s. It is difficult to say with absolute certainty why Bertolucci was granted access to the site, but it is likely that the Chinese government under Deng Xiaoping approved of the Italian director's communist leanings. Even though Bertolucci's representation of the Qing Dynasty is hardly one-hundred percent accurate, *The Last Emperor* exemplifies bi-lateral cinematic exchange between Italy and China, especially in terms of production and distribution. Bertolucci once stated that he wanted to make a film about China: "Because it's not Italy...the Italian present doesn't need—or doesn't want—to be represented onscreen at the moment, at least not by me" (Marcus 2002, 62).

The same sentiment might just as well have been expressed by director Gianni Amelio, whose 2006 film *La stella che non c'è* (*The Missing Star*) was released in international film festivals to mixed reviews. The film stars Sergio Castellitto as Vincenzo Buonavolontà (the surname means "goodwill"), a factory technician who travels to China to find and repair a

dangerous broken machine that was sold to China after it became obsolete in Italy. He travels the countryside (through Wuhan and up the Yangtze River) with his reluctant companion and translator Liu Hua (Ling Tai) who shows Vincenzo the harsh “realities” of modern life in rural China and—perhaps unsurprisingly—ends up falling in love with him. On the poster for the film, Vincenzo hugs Liu to his chest as if protecting or shielding her from an unkind world. One relatively positive review of the film notes: “Along the way, the usual trappings of such travelogue styled movies comes into play, such as the learning of culture, ideals, food, and basically, the understanding that the world is without strangers, if only one makes an effort to try and connect.”⁷ The reviewer notes that even though *La stella*’s storyline is clichéd, the underlying message is well-meaning.

In fact, Amelio’s film was based on a 2002 novel by Ermanno Rea entitled *La dismissione* (*The Dismissal*) which is similar in all ways but one: the protagonist, Vincenzo Buonocore (“good heart”) never travels to China. Instead, the former technician, who has been laid off from his job at L’Ilva (a steel factory in Naples) meets and falls in love with an Italian woman named Marcella. Italian reviewer Renato Persòli comments that the novel is, in essence, a metaphor for the death of a certain phase of Italian modernity, a time in Italian history in which hard work and social solidarity were encouraged and prized. Rationalizing the nostalgic tone of the novel, Persòli adds: “*Muiono con la fabbrica un pezzo di Napoli e l’intero Novecento*” (when the factory dies, a piece of Naples—and the entire 19th century—dies with it) (2008). There is a hint, within all of this nostalgia, that Vincenzo longs for a by-gone period in Italy in which the bulk of the industrial labor was done by legal (i.e. native) Italians. Even if this was not Rea’s intent, the story’s nostalgia rings, however faintly, of an anti-immigration sentiment.

Amelio’s film, on the other hand, takes Italy out of the past and into the present (Persòli 2008). The Vincenzo of Amelio’s film, though slightly reminiscent of Marco Polo, improves significantly on Rea’s Vincenzo. In many ways, the film signifies a step in the right direction; it was, in fact, the first Italian-Singapore co-production in recent cinematic history (2008). As a filmmaker, moreover, Amelio takes the opportunity to escape from the confines of Rea’s novel as he offers his viewership an “inside” look of the complexities of modern China—from the vast country’s unparalleled beauty to its abject poverty. Audiences do not even have to leave their seats.

But herein lies the unfortunate aspect of Amelio’s film. This is the problem that, as we will see, also plagues Antonioni’s *Chung Kuo*. Certainly, there is something noble (or at least mildly endearing) about the

act of “reaching out to strangers.” But the more fundamental issue that critics of Amelio’s film seem to ignore is: why is it presupposed that the state of the world is a world “full of strangers?” Furthermore, why should it be the duty of filmmakers to “reach out” to strangers while the viewer sits passively in his seat? The act of photographing an entire country that is presupposed as “Other” is an act that is ever-so-finely balanced between magnanimous intent on the one hand and vague imperialism on the other. Although such films often require viewers to reflect on their own position *vis a vis* the “strangers” on screen, when the film ends, viewers have been filled with a false sense of accomplishment and are sent on their merry way.

Although Antonioni was originally invited by Zhou Enlai to film in China, when *Chung Kuo* was screened by Mao’s inner circle, the film was condemned and subsequently banned. When the Italian filmmaker heard the news, he was heartbroken (Hilton 1999). In retrospect, it seems that the entire debacle stems from a fundamental misunderstanding. While the Chinese government was under the impression that Antonioni’s film would represent China’s people, places, and customs in an uncritical and “straightforward” way, the film contained commentary and “odd” photographic angles. At one point, for example, Antonioni films the Nanjing Bridge from underneath. Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, was so insulted by this shot that she denounced the director as anti-Chinese. In the shot that Antonioni uses, a washing line can be seen, which according to Qing, makes the bridge appear unstable, as if it is on the verge of collapse (1999).



Fig. 1-1: The Nanjing Bridge as shot by Antonioni’s camera.

One contemporary Chinese critic explains the misunderstanding between the Italian director and Mao's inner circle as follows: "Of course, the camera has a mystic aspect to it, the lens has its own will. Antonioni was aware that, with his camera eye, he captured very real and profound things—things that were not arranged naturally within the frame" ("My Life" 2007).⁸ The problem lies in differing opinions about photography as an art form, the purposes of it, and how one should go about achieving that purpose. Watching the film, it is evident that Antonioni was genuinely intrigued by the medicine, industry, food, religion, and everyday life in China during the Cultural Revolution. Unfortunately, those aspects of society that Antonioni chose to expose—especially the ways in which he chose to expose them—were taken, altogether, as a one big insult.

Susan Sontag, commenting on the film, notes: "While for us photography is intimately connected with discontinuous ways of seeing ...in China it is connected only with continuity" (2001, 170). Continuing her already-contentious claim, Sontag explains that, from a Chinese perspective, photography is not meant to capture incomplete or fractured images. Rather, a photograph should exist in order to "reproduce the real" (Sontag 2001, 174). In Mao's eyes, Sontag concludes, Antonioni was viewed as a thief who stole people's images and then used them for his own selfish purposes.

Sontag simplifies the issue and occasionally approaches a patronizing tone, at one point noting: "The only use the Chinese are allowed to make of their history is didactic: their interest in history is narrow, moralistic, deforming, uncurious. Hence, photography in our sense has no place in their society" (2001, 174). Perhaps when we consider that Sontag wrote this essay in 1976, during Mao's rule, such generalizations can be overlooked slightly. Nevertheless, she seems to conflate the ruling philosophy of the Chinese government with the mores and beliefs of individuals, suggesting that *our* notion of photography is opposite to *theirs*, and that "our" notion is far more sophisticated and subtle. While Sontag is certainly justified in her critique of Mao's regime, she jumps to some misguided conclusions.

Regardless of Sontag's commentary, or Antonioni's own desire for political correctness, *Chung Kuo* is a remarkably ambitious and interesting film. The first scene of the film is shot in Beijing, in Tiananmen Square. Although Antonioni's camera reveals the large murals of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin that preside over the square, Antonioni is far more interested in the everyday lives of the Beijing citizens. The director's own voice-over sets the scene:

*Piazza Tienanmen. A Pechino. In un giorno di maggio. Abbiamo cominciato il nostro breve viaggio nella Cina d'oggi puntando qui le nostre macchine da prese...per i cinesi, questo grande spazio silenzioso è il centro del mondo. La Porta della Pace Celeste è il cuore di Pechino. E Pechino è il centro economico e rivoluzionario della Cina. È la Cina è il Chung Kuo. Il paese di centro. Il nocciolo antico della civiltà del mondo...sono loro, i cinesi, protagonisti di questi nostri appunti filmati. Non pretendiamo di spiegare la Cina. Vogliamo solo cominciare a osservare questo grande reparatorio di volte, di gesti, di abitudini.*⁹

Antonioni clarifies that he is not interested in explaining an entire country through cinema; rather, he is interested in filming the bits and pieces that form something larger yet inexplicable. This is typical Antonioni. As one of the most avant-garde directors of his time, Antonioni was known for his interest in the bits and pieces rather than the “bigger picture” in his cinema. In the final scene of Antonioni’s *L’Eclisse* (1962), for example, Antonioni’s camera seems to “forget” about the protagonists entirely and focuses instead on empty intersections and forgotten meeting places. In his earlier film *L’Avventura* (1960), the central mystery of the narrative—the disappearance of Anna (Lea Massari)—is left unresolved intentionally. In the final scene of *Zabriskie Point* (1970), the icons of mid-century consumerist society—a television, a refrigerator, Wonder Bread, patio furniture—fly through the air in a graceful explosion.

In the same vein, in this scene from *Chung Kuo*, Antonioni explains that he is interested in documenting the gestures, expressions, and faces that he and his film crew encounter while traveling through China. By filming the bits and pieces that make up the whole, the director is true to his cinematic style. In an attempt at modesty, he states that he does not seek to “explain” China—only to explore it. Clearly, he does not intend to offend anyone—not Mao’s government—and certainly not the subjects of his film.

If anything, in fact, *Chung Kuo* portrays Mao’s communism far too apologetically and naively. The voice-over notes that despite strict food rationing, everyone seems to have enough: “*Gli abitanti di Pechino sembrano poveri ma non miserabili. Senza lusso, senza fame. Quello che ci colpisce è la qualità della loro vita, così lontana della nostra*” (The inhabitants of Beijing seem poor but not miserable. Without luxury, without hunger. What strikes us is the quality of their lives, so far from our own).

The phrase: “*così lontana della nostra*” carries a slightly more ambiguous meaning in Italian than it might if translated directly into English. The word *lontana* literally means “far” but in this case it can also

mean “different.” Antonioni is therefore expressing his feelings of foreignness in a country that is “far” in both a literal and a less tangible sense. Furthermore, though the possessive construction *la nostra*—“our”—appears unproblematic at first, the exact meaning becomes more difficult to pinpoint upon deeper reflection. It is unclear to whom exactly the “*la nostra*” refers. Presumably, Antonioni is referring to his fellow Italians, but he might also mean “Westerners” more broadly. Indeed, this starts to get tricky, because if we take him to mean “the lives of Italians,” how do non-Italians fit within the schema?

Regardless of minor semantic issues, Antonioni missteps in far more serious—and seemingly opposite—directions. On the one hand, Antonioni’s film minimizes the ugliness of the Cultural Revolution, almost to a fault. This being said, considering the fact that the Chinese government only allowed him to film in certain areas, Antonioni cannot be blamed for this misrepresentation entirely. On the other hand, *Chung Kuo*, as a final product, was so insulting to Mao that the film was banned and Antonioni was charged as an anti-Chinese conspirator.

How can such opposing problems possibly coincide? I can only explain it by saying that, in my estimation, although *Chung Kuo* does showcase Antonioni’s unique talent for capturing small bits of life with his camera, the film feels strained at times. This strained quality most likely stems from the fact that he and his crew were being constantly surveyed and were provided with such limited access. If Sontag is correct in her contention that Mao did not approve of the “oddity” of Antonioni’s photographic angles, then it is easy to see how such an unconventionally shot film might have worried the communist leader.

Although *Chung Kuo* is more aesthetically interesting than Amelio’s *La stella che non c’è*, both films make similar blunders. As an audience member, there is no need for me to budge from my seat. If I am disinclined to travel outside of my comfort zone in the first place, I can simply tell myself that I have already seen what there is to see of China, at least for now. This is the problem with most travelogue-style films.

Strangely, however, unlike other travelogue films, the many forms of Mandarin that can be heard throughout Antonioni’s film are left untranslated. There is a benevolent and a not so benevolent way of interpreting this lack of translation: in the benevolent interpretation, we might think that Antonioni does not translate the Mandarin because he wants to allow his protagonists an unmediated voice. Rather than endow their words with meaning, he allows them to stand alone—to speak for themselves. In a less benevolent interpretation, it might appear that Antonioni was too lazy to translate the Mandarin. Or perhaps he assumes