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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

The Art of Duration: Echoes of Untimeliness in Chinese Cinematic Experiments

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Comparative Literature

by

Wujun Ke

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Ackbar Abbas, Chair
Professor Jane O. Newman
Distinguished Professor Gabriele M. Schwab
Chancellor's Professor Jeffrey Wasserstrom

2022

DEDICATION

To

my grandparents,

with love

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Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature and Film, Film and Media Studies, Chinese Cultural Studies, Critical Theory

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Art of Duration: Echoes of Untimeliness in Chinese Cinematic Experiments

by

Wujun Ke

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Irvine, 2022

Professor Ackbar Abbas, Chair

This dissertation examines a range of durational cinematic experiments in post-1980s China and Taiwan, arguing that the contemporary period in reform-era China and post-martial law era Taiwan is better explained through the framework of durational temporality than chronological time. Challenging linear, progressive temporalities that dispense with the past too quickly in favor of idealized futures, durational temporality allows for contradictions such as the coexistence of socialism and neoliberalism, the co-presence of nostalgia and amnesia, and the reinvention of tradition alongside modernity. Through attention to the interruptions of untimeliness in cinematic and literary texts, this dissertation demonstrates that the search for a distinctly Chinese identity in the contemporary era resurrects the signs of tradition, rurality, and spirituality not to essentialize an ahistorical Chinese identity, but rather point out the historical erasures and disjunctures constitutive of the modern Chinese identity. My case studies include durational films by Jia Zhangke, Wang Bing, Wu Wenguang, Tsai Ming-Liang, Edward Yang, and Zhang Mengqi as well as the long-term oral history projects conducted by Liang Hong and the Folk Memory Project.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary China is an emerging global power that challenges the West's presumed political supremacy and provokes anxieties about political difference. In a time of rising ultra-nationalism and global neoliberalism, when dominant narratives about contemporary China frame the free market reforms of 1976 as a rupture after which China embraced free market values and rejected older socialist forms of life, my dissertation argues that culture during the reform era, which has been described in terms of collective amnesia, is complicated by the resurgence of neo-traditional imaginaries. At the CCP's 19th Party Congress, held in October 2017, president Xi Jinping inaugurated a new period - "the new era for socialism with Chinese characteristics"- and spoke of promoting "traditional Chinese culture" for the greater goal of "national rejuvenation" (Xinhua 2017). While the state is invested in consolidating a continuous, stable Chinese identity that endures from past to present, writers and artists have long invoked traditional concepts in their work by highlighting the untimely: Harkening to anachronistic figures, images, and ways of life that are out of joint with secular, neoliberal modes of being, these films reveal how Chinese modernity is constituted by history's layered inheritances through the lens of spirituality, tradition, and rurality.

In a time of widespread precarity, systems of stability have drifted out of reach for an increasing number of people. Rather than reflexively reaching for new forms of stability, whether that be the nation-state, the free market, or the enticing alternative of collectivist politics, we could accept what disillusionment entails: pre-structured chaos, randomness and contingency. Interrogating teleology in favor of more messy understandings of reality requires departing from the myth of linear, chronological time, and I situate my work on independent Chinese cinema in the contingent, fluid, entangled, and divergent ways that scholars, filmmakers,

and writers have conceptualized historical time. Departing from both the progress narrative of the nation-state and the instantaneous time of economic exchange, I want to emphasize that lived time is never entirely colonized by hegemonic systems. Instead, time - as glimpsed in artistic forms - is also suffused with philosophical, ethical, and spiritual resilience to colonization. Such untamed temporality – what we might call the “untimely” – always exceeds the disciplinary regime of historicism.

In my dissertation, I address the invocations of traditional Chinese culture in contemporary China as complicating the temporal frameworks of modernization, secularization and socialism with Chinese characteristics. Challenging these linear, progressive temporalities that dispense with the past too quickly in service of more desirable futures, I advocate for durational ways of thinking that stay with the past, and examine how the past and present are continually co-constituted. I analyze texts across various genres and locations – mostly independent Chinese cinema, but also literary non-fiction, YouTube videos, oral histories, and Daoist classics – in order to document China’s contemporary cultural moment as a space of contradictions and layered temporalities. Such departures from linear temporality include the co-existence of capitalist and socialist dynamics, the co-presence of historical amnesia and nostalgia, the reinvention of tradition alongside modernity, and simultaneity of hyperreal media ecologies and the desire for documentarians to access “authentic” reality.

I focus on cultural production that indexes the resurgence of traditional Chinese culture during the reform era, and how these traditional concepts are reinvented in contemporary Chinese film and visual culture. The quest to formulate a Chinese identity is a driving question for contemporary filmmakers and writers, and this search for authentic Chinese culture attempts to recognize historical ruptures and erasures, including those of Western colonization,

modernization, socialism, and the free market. Still, nationalist narratives are used to spread a unitary, essentialist idea of Chinese culture by resurrecting “ancient” spiritual imaginaries as part of a consolidation of continuity in the Chinese cultural identity. While the nation-state instrumentalizes Chinese tradition as a buffer against globalization and Western political values, writers and filmmakers appropriate aspects of Chinese tradition in order to reflect and comment on the complexity of the contemporary Chinese cultural landscape. Because the sign of tradition was rejected by Mao-era socialism and resurrected in China only in the post-Mao era, many of the primary sources invoke tradition not for consolidating nationalist narratives, but precisely to point out disjunctures in history, and distance between the modern Chinese subject and what we think of as tradition.

The rise of observational documentary and oral history of ordinary people in China is tied to the sociopolitical conditions of the reform era that have allowed for the rise of subjectivity and individualism under globalization. Rather one official notion of truth, there is now a proliferation of individualized and decentralized truths. Therefore, writers and filmmakers often use documentation as a strategy of thinking through the archive of the present, and all of the primary sources in this dissertation are either explicitly non-fiction and documentary, or fictional texts that incorporate elements of documentary and exhibit a strong “documentary impulse” (Braester 2007, 22). Critical to the documentation process is dispensing with strong political and ideological commitments from the outset and being committed to strategically non-judgmental, open, and spontaneous observation. The cinematic and textual archive I draw upon are durational in their approach; they include long-take films, time-lapse videos, and oral history projects that span many years, if not decades. And while durational projects do often feature long takes and

are slow-paced, they can be defined on a more conceptual level as experiments with non-chronological time.

A few notes on methodology: My primary texts are films often grouped under the banner of “independent Chinese cinema,” a label that often reduces films into chess pieces for competing geopolitical interests, and a term I unpack in a later section of this introduction. My primary sources were produced from 1986 to 2021, belonging to a capacious sense of “Chinese.” My use of “Chinese” refers to a body of linguistic and cultural traditions that originated in China pre-1949, including Daoism, and the dissertation thus includes references to the cultural production of Chineseness, which takes different forms but form part of the same problematic in Chinese, Taiwanese as well as Hong Kong cinema. Lastly, the structure of this dissertation is informed by Deleuze’s rhizome and not so much organized in an arborescent structure as a paradigm for knowledge. It moves from standard academic analysis and a more detached scholarly tone to a participant-observer who is progressively more engaged in the documentary process.

The Post- in Postsocialism

One of the primary ways that scholars have grappled with reform-era cultural politics is through the analytic of postsocialism. While virtually all scholars acknowledge Chinese culture’s increasing commercialization under the global force of capitalist modernity, many also emphasize continuity between the socialist and postsocialist periods. For instance, Shu-mei Shih (2012) marks the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989 as the beginning of postsocialism, a global condition that she identifies as hastening the neoliberalization of the world. Shih proposes taking the prefix of the “post” as not only a succession, but also a continuation, of previous cultural logics. Connecting postsocialism to Lyotard’s use of postmodernism, Berry also argues that the

forms and structures of socialism persists “long after faith in the grand narrative that authorizes it has been lost” (2007, 116).

While these usages of “postsocialist” are nuanced ways to describe contemporary China, it is not a term that is used in an official capacity within China, where the state describes its current governmental strategy as “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Because it also assumes a chronological understanding of history, I will refrain from using the term postsocialism for describing the cultural logics of the reform era. Rather, I advance a durational understanding of this time period - a space of Bergsonian multiplicity in which overlapping logics coexist and resist being understood as either the dying out of socialism or triumphant capitalism in all but name. The desire for Chinese state to change direction with its Reform and Opening Up policies is tied to a desire to maintain a Chinese identity as distinct from the West, an identity that is tied up with socialism as a crucial part of its state-led modernization process.

Amnesia and Nostalgia during the Reform Era

Because of the history of China’s transformation from an ancient empire to the target of Western and Japanese imperialism in the past hundred years, Chinese culture has internalized a sense of civilizational inferiority as the “sick man of Asia” (Riebold 2020, 1). This drastic shock in the early 20th century was then layered with a secondary shock of rapid political transformation, during which Deng Xiaoping adopted free market policies in 1978, radically reorganized social relations, and transformed the global narrative of China as a nation that suffered a “century of humiliation” (mid-19th to 20th centuries) to an emerging world power. These policies are translated as “Reform and Opening Up” (改革开放), and the period thereafter is called the reform era (1978-present). For peasants and workers who are unable to refashion themselves as entrepreneurs and cosmopolitan subjects, the turbulent 20th century and rapid shift

to a consumer economy have produced economic precarity as well as multiple layers of trauma that remain buried or repressed.

Anxieties of Chinese selfhood emerge from Chinese modernity's dual motifs of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism. According to Dai Jinhua (2018), the dual political imperatives to reject Chinese traditions as backwards and to reject Western influences as imperialistic leaves Chinese subjects unmoored, envious of the undivided human rooted in the West. The discourse of the human is a utopian, aspirational horizon for China that reveals the extent to which the modern Chinese subject internalizes a sense of inferiority and self-negation. As an example of the unmoored nature of Chinese identity, Dai Jinhua writes that Lu Chuang's *City of Life and Death* (南京! 南京!, 2009), which narrates the Nanjing Massacre from the perspective of a repentant Japanese officer, joins "a global trend of post-Cold War amnesia, employing the mechanism of forgetting to erase traces of historical trauma" to the Chinese people (2018, 41). The film, according to Dai, eviscerates the atrocities committed by the Japanese army and erases the history of trauma suffered by Chinese victims under the ideological construct of cosmopolitanism. Later, she elaborates on amnesia as a strategy for nation-building, pointing out that "At the beginning of the twenty-first century, forgetting has become the main theme of memory construction. It is this imperative to forget the sufferings and revolutions of the twentieth century that gives rise to the middle-class revolution and their subject position" (ibid, 46).

However humanistic the filmmaker's intentions, the film was widely panned in China for portraying Japanese soldiers in a positive light and erasing the suffering of Chinese civilians. Since the Nanjing Massacre is still widely remembered as a national wound, the concept of post-Cold War amnesia applies more perhaps to violence inflicted by the Chinese state than by

foreign aggression. While Nanjing has often been turned into anti-Japanese fodder for the CCP, what remains more firmly lodged in the collective unconscious are unresolved traumas that the Communist Party is responsible for, such as the Cultural Revolution, the Great Starvation, and widespread suffering experienced by “left-behind” populations – migrant workers, the working class, the rural poor – during the reform era. Such traumas are blind spots in a collective psyche that aims to valorize the emerging middle-class as emblematic of China’s global ascent.

Dai Jinhua theorizes that traumas in collective memory have been critical to defining the modern Chinese identity, which tends toward a paranoid position that dissociates good from bad absolutely. For the CCP, the bad is retrojected into China’s feudalist past and projected onto the West, while the good is attributable to the Party as the architect of the modern Chinese state. In much of the English-language scholarship and journalism on modern China, on the contrary, the CCP is an authoritarian regime that violates basic human rights while the US champions and defends democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech. The mutual paranoia and suspicion that constitutes much of the US-China relationship is reflected in English-language writings on Chinese film, which tends to evaluate independent Chinese films by how subversive they are to the Chinese state.

Besides amnesia, the affective orientation to the past that emerges most prominently from the reform era is nostalgia. They can be considered two sides of the same coin: While amnesia involves forgetting the difficulties of the past for an idealized present, nostalgia usually involves the forgetting of the difficulties in the present for an idealized past. While soothing, escapist forms of nostalgia involves selectively forgetting trauma, many of the cinematic texts I analyze in this dissertation also engage with nostalgia as the not-yet-understood return of unassimilated elements from the past. What appears as nostalgia can be distinguished as two separate

movements: one involves the desire to return to a more comprehensible moment in the past, while the other involves the uncomfortable, sometimes undesirable return of repressed aspects of the past. Both types of nostalgia coexist in contemporary China and Taiwan, but most of the cinematic texts in this dissertation tracks the second example of nostalgia – a return of the past that is not always accompanied by fond feelings, but instead by discomfort, non-understanding, and a sense of historical disruption and erasure. Each chapter tracks a different example of nostalgia, such as nostalgia for the real (chapter 1), nostalgia for Daoist spirituality (chapter 2), nostalgia for *jianghu* - a mythical world of knight-errants (chapter 3), and nostalgia for the rural (chapter 4 and 5).

The Problem of Independent Chinese Cinema

Independent Chinese cinema as an archive is often politicized as either anti-authoritarian or not political enough by Western observers; moreover, these films are not often discussed in terms of their own artistic merits, but rather in terms of their independent production methods and as proof of China's authoritarian media ecology. Whereas independent cinema means outside of mainstream commercial industries in the West, in China, it means not submitting films to the censors and thus remaining outside of state control. From the beginning, independent Chinese cinema was based on low-budget, low-technology production methods. It became more accessible in the late 1990's with the availability of digital video, but did not have much wider impact until the 2000s, when video-sharing and downloading technologies allowed the films to reach a wider audience. With the forceful shut-down of the Beijing Independent Film Festival in 2014 and the passing of the PRC Film Industry Promotion Law in 2016, scholars wondered if the death of independent Chinese cinema was imminent (Berry 2017). The law regulates the content to "serve the people and socialism," banning content that endangers national security, "harms

national dignity” and “undermines social stability” (Evans 2016). The law also stipulates that films must gain official clearance before being submitted for overseas film festivals, which has made independent filmmaking and screening an act subject to prosecution. This has had a chilling impact on the independent filmmaking scene and driven filmmakers towards lower-profile venues, such as contemporary art exhibitions and video-hosting sites such as *Bilibili*. Because of their cosmopolitan funding sources – often Western academic and film institutions, independent Chinese cinema is independent from both the standpoint of the Chinese market as well as the censorship mechanisms of the Chinese state, yet remain dependent on institutions outside of China.

Cultural theorist Dai Jinhua (2002) has argued that independent Chinese films have been appropriated to affirm a Western, Orientalist desire for oppressed Chinese subjects and indulge Western consumers hungry for subversive art coming from an authoritarian country, and that focusing on production methods rather than formal analysis risks lumping all sorts of different films together in a simplistic manner. Given that these films are screened mostly at international film festivals and not for domestic audiences, film scholar Ying Qian wonders, “Perhaps independent documentaries simply offer victimized images of China to the world?” (2012, 119). On the other hand, scholars have argued that independent Chinese cinema elides larger sociopolitical critique in favor of non-interventionist observation (Pickowicz 2006). Because many independent films take observational rather than critical and investigative approaches, they are criticized as lacking a strong political standpoint, of being apolitical (Lu 2010). However, these films also must be historically situated as responding to the strong ideological control of the Mao era by privileging naturalistic shooting styles and observation of everyday life. Rather

than allowing ideologies to lead the camera, they allow the camera to bear witness to social suffering in the search for truth.

In a regime with a highly controlled media apparatus, independent filmmaking must be creative and walk a fine line between taking a critical stance and running afoul of the authorities. The relationship between the Chinese state and critical journalism is one of “guarded improvisation,” which political scientist Maria Repnikova defines as “a fluid, state-dominated partnership characterized by continuous improvisation” (2017, 10). The ambiguity of what is allowable by censors is a mechanism of control as well as an opening for limited forms of activism in an authoritarian regime. In a political context that does not allow for free speech, journalists must respond creatively by veiling their criticism of the state in human-interest stories. Similarly, this dissertation explores how the contested, improvisational space of independent filmmaking sheds light on the possibilities and limits of sociopolitical critique in contemporary China. While Western academics sometimes fetishize independently-produced Chinese cinema, this reading often reduce Chinese filmmakers into purely oppositional subjects rather than subjects whose work might actually be spurred into greater creative complexity, rather than merely stifled and repressed, by the regulatory apparatus of the state.

The CCP’s highly controlled media ecology incentivizes filmmakers to avoid making direct critiques, hence the evaluation of independent Chinese films must go beyond binary evaluations of them as either subversive or apolitical. The political potential of “independent Chinese cinema” lies not (or not only) in its production methods, but more so in its creation of apolitical images that at first glance, appear devoid of political content. By necessity, these films cannot take the side of resistance or complicity to the ruling regime. Instead, they carve out the space for observation, meditation, and mediation on what is not-fully-known or understood. I am

interested in examining the films that have been judged as apolitical, or whose politics are not evident on the surface, in order to examine the cultural politics of memory. I attempt to read the independent Chinese cinema archive according to a practice of non-duality and to highlight the poetics of ordinary life, as ordinary life is still full of unknowns that we have no language for.

China's media ecology, where government oversight and censorship are normalized, challenges artists to engage in creative efforts to critique, remold, or evade the system from within. I read the selected archive of independent Chinese films as documenting a complex period of rapid change within the confines of what is permissible, producing temporal disorientations that seek to interrupt repetitive, predictable historical patterns in favor of cracking opening spaces of contemplation and transformation. Complicating Dai Jinhua's concept of "post-Cold War amnesia" (2018, 41) during the reform era with alternative orientations towards the past, I draw attention to how independent Chinese filmmakers find creative ways of bearing witness to the transgenerational suffering of marginalized and disposable populations. While film scholars have linked directors' propensity to dwell in duration to the numbness and delayed structure of the traumatized consciousness, I argue that the long take simultaneously serves as an opening for differently inhabiting temporality, as a spiritual attitude of attentiveness to temporality's divergent and manifold paths.

In two of my chapters (chapters 2 and 3), I track concepts from Daoist thought in contemporary Chinese cinema to complicate the secular myth of homogeneous time with more spiritually-infused notions of temporality. A philosophical and religious tradition and that serves as a reference point for many Chinese folk beliefs, sayings, and assumptions, Daoism is a foundational aspect of traditional Chinese culture which often goes underexplored in English-language criticism on independent Chinese films. In the last two chapters (chapters 4 and 5), I

explore the temporality of returning to the rural, another mode of recovering meaning and history amidst the national impulse to focus on China's cosmopolitan future and leave behind its provincial past.

Resurrecting Chinese Spiritual Traditions

Chinese culture during the reform era sees a resurgence of religious belief and a renewed interest in religion as a social, cultural, and political force. While the twentieth century ushered in secular modernity through the systematic destruction of religious institutions and texts, China is experiencing the emergence of the post-secular during the reform era, when state repression and control on spiritual life began to lift. In an era that valorizes materialism, an increasing number of Chinese citizens look towards religion to provide meaning in the aftermath of the spiritual vacuum left by Mao Zedong's death. In the post-Mao era, religion has become a new locus of interest as an alternative ideology and source of meaning.

According to writer Ian Johnson (2017), "A 2005 survey by East China Normal University in Shanghai found that 31 percent of the country's population, or about 300 million people, are religious: two-thirds were worshippers of Buddhism, Daoism, or folk practices, in addition to 40 million Christians, with the rest divided among other faiths." The number of places of worship have doubled in 2014 since the 1990s. Johnson interprets the resurgence of interest in religion as filling an ideological vacuum left by Mao's death:

Traditional values and practices are encouraged as a source of stability and morality. But faith is also feared as an uncontrollable force—an alternative ideology to the government's vision of how society should be run. In the past, state and religion were united, forming a spiritual center of gravity for China. That old system is now gone, but nothing new has taken its place. (Johnson 2017, 32).

After the Chinese economic reform of the latter half of the 20th century, folk religion - as with other long repressed spiritual traditions such as Confucianism and Buddhism - experienced

a cultural renaissance in mainland China. As part of a renewed search for identity, the government began promoting an agenda of National Learning (guo xue 國學) - the study of classical texts of Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist, and Legalist traditions, after almost a century of repressing them. Like other spiritual traditions, Daoism and folk Daoism had been persecuted by both the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party as ignorant, unscientific, superstitious, and generally “backwards”, based on the assumption that traditional Chinese culture was responsible for China's political and economic weaknesses relative to the West.

Imperial China was a religio-political state, where the emperor who was said to be the Son of God derived his authority from the mandate of Heaven. Starting in the late Qing period and under threat of being colonized by Western powers, Chinese reformers made a concerted effort to modernize. This meant rejecting their native religious traditions and modeling the concept of religion after the institutionalized qualities of Protestant Christianity. During the New Culture Movement, reformers regarded Chinese folk religion as the ignorance of the peasant masses, categorizing these folk practices as superstitions rather than religion. Later during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1968), the CCP started a movement to “smash the four olds,” which included systematic destruction of traditional religiosities in order to institute utopian communist futures. The Communist Chinese state replaced the multiplicity of religious thought with the cult of Mao and linear teleology of Leninist-Maoist thought. Anthropologist Mayfair Yang (2020) argues that these changes constituted Chinese modernity’s “purification” process, which filtered out cosmology, divine deities, and ritual procedures from social, political, economic practices, replacing gods and ancestors with a secular identification with the nation-state (5).

This purification process began in the 1890s, when leading intellectuals called for the confiscation of temples in order to build the infrastructure for a modern Chinese nation-state.

This movement to “build schools with temple property” (Miaochan xingxue 廟產興學) was part of a larger movement to modernize and Westernize China as it was being besieged by Western imperialist powers. The movement involved seizing property, destroying statues, expelling Buddhists, Taoists, and spirit mediums, and remaking temples into public schools. One of these reformers was social reformer (and neo-Confucian) Kang Youwei, whose proposal to destroy all temples, save for a few that performed state sacrifices, was turned into an edict on July 10, 1898. Large-scale confiscations began in 1901, which sometimes resulted in armed conflict between local political and religious leaders.

These reforms followed a broader effort to remodel Chinese religion after Christianity and dismiss other beliefs as superstition. In fact, the very categories of “religion” (zongjiao 宗教) and “superstition” (mixin 迷信) were imported to China, through Japan, from the West. All of the local temple cults and many practices of Chinese folk religion were dismissed as “superstitions” resulting from the ignorance of the peasant masses. These “superstitions” included practices such as geomancy, belief in gods and immortals, spirit mediums, and temple festivals.

The New Culture Movement (1915-1923), sometimes referred to as the May Fourth Movement, took its models of a new culture from the West by embracing science and democracy. At the same time, it sought to systematically destroy China’s religious organization of local temple cults in order to create a hierarchically-integrated society, where the state is in direct control of the village without the mediation of local religious leaders. Even Confucianism fell under the ax of modernization. While Confucianism had enjoyed a special status in the late imperial era, sacrifices to Confucius in school were newly banned during this period in the name of the separation of church and state.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which was born in 1921 and came into power in 1949, continued many of the Republican government (KMT) regime's policies on religion, but it also recognized that folk religion could not be forcefully rooted out from the structure of social life in rural China. It continued the KMT policies by secularizing and nationalizing elements of traditional culture, such as Chinese medicine and martial arts, while ruthlessly exterminating Confucianism and redemptive societies such as Yiguandao. The CCP's attitude towards folk religion was influenced by Marxist teleologies about historical change that assumed that all gods, Buddhas, and immortals are false idols and would disappear with the advancement of technology. During the Cultural Revolution, all forms of religious life were exterminated. The state's institutions of dealing with religion were eliminated and all forms of religious activity were banned. But rather than a process of secularization, religious feeling was diverted towards the state in the cult of Mao.

By the 1970s and through to the early twenty-first century – during the reform era – communal religion experienced a revitalization as temples were rebuilt and expanded, starting in Taiwan and overseas and eventually reaching back to the hinterlands of mainland China. According to Goossaert and Palmer (2011), this revival was due to three interconnected factors: one, the lessening of state intervention on communal religions, two, the rise of globalization which undermined nation-building projects, and three, the growing economic prosperity of the Chinese world. Overall, the market economy was more favorable to the growth of Chinese folk religions, even as it imposed new material constraints.

Chapter Outlines

In my first chapter, “Representing the Reform Era on The Digital Image,” I explore the emergence of the digital image in reform-era China: both the ways that digital technology has

impacted the cost and accessibility of film production as well as how it paves the way for extremely long takes and digital manipulation. The representation of reality in the Reform period is defined by the pervasiveness of digital media technologies and the ways they mediate the image. On the one hand, the ability for digital video to record for many hours at a time is tied to the rise of slow cinema and extremely long takes. Reading Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing* (流浪北京, 1990) and Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks* (铁西区, 2002), I argue that the use of the long take adapts the Deleuzian time-image to the historical and cultural context of China during the reform era. On the other end of possibilities of the digital image are Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (三峡好人, 2006) and *Mountains May Depart* (山河故人, 2015). While these films also make extensive use of the long take, they also feature digital manipulations that reflect the hypermediated, temporally-layered, and aesthetically-bricolaged nature of contemporary Chinese society.

In my second chapter, "Resurrecting Daoist Temporalities in the Taiwanese New Wave," I track Daoist references in Taiwanese New Wave cinema to discuss several long take films and their affinities with Daoist and Bergsonian notions of time. I demonstrate how Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* (一一, 2000) and Tsai Ming Liang's *Stray Dogs* (郊遊, 2013) each comment on the temporality of Daoist thought as interventions into the homogenous, empty time of late capitalist modernity, but in different ways. While *Yi Yi* highlights the cyclical, nourishing time of everyday life, *Stray Dogs* frames time as impartial and bringing inevitable loss. References to Daoism in these films serve as a tool for temporal dilation as well as ethical reflection on contemporary social problems, as well as a vantage point from which to critique dominant temporalities.

In my third chapter, “Jianghu in the Age of Disposability,” I trace the multiple, evolving meanings of *jianghu* (江湖, “rivers and lakes”) from its roots in Daoist philosophy to its connections to the criminal underground, martial arts societies, and codes of chivalric brotherhood. Reading Jia Zhangke’s *Unknown Pleasures* (任逍遥, 2002), *Still Life* (三峡好人, 2006), *A Touch of Sin* (天注定, 2013), and *Ash is the Purest White* (江湖儿女, 2018), I argue that the director recreates a contemporary *jianghu* where market values of the reform era threaten to displace longstanding loyalties to one’s family and sworn brothers. The director’s frequent allusions to the mythical world of *jianghu* challenge the future-oriented ethos of the reform era and recuperate the value of chivalric ethics for the neoliberal age.

In my fourth chapter, “Appropriating Rural Nostalgia for the 21 Century,” I examine the emergence of popular oral histories and viral videos produced by rural influencers about present-day rural China. I compare nostalgic representations of rurality in the YouTube videos of Li Ziqi (李子柒), a well-known Chinese rural influencer, with more critical representations of rural life in Liang Hong’s *China in One Village* (中国在梁庄, 2021) and Jia Zhangke’s *Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue* (一直游到海水变蓝, 2021). These oral history-based projects constitute critical representations as well as critical self-representations of the rural countryside, emerging from a documentary impulse which deconstructs singular national narratives and recover local, decentralized memories of collective historical experience.

In my fifth chapter, “Rural Futurity and the Folk Memory Project,” I experiment with a hybrid form of scholarship that includes journalistic reporting as well as film analysis. I interviewed several people involved with The Folk Memory Project (民间记忆计划), which collects oral histories and creates documentaries about rural life during the Great Starvation and Cultural Revolution, and was a participant observer for the group’s online film-editing

workshops in 2020. I explore the process of independent film production from the perspectives of the participants and the space of the workshop in order to document their long-term commitment to the home village and their reimagining of the rural space as a space of rural futurity.

CHAPTER 1

Representing the Reform Era on The Digital Image

In the era of digital video, the image can stretch to extreme lengths and express pixelated realities rather than document transparent “reality” as unquestioned phenomena located out-there. The digital image does not fix time, but instead tracks the uncertainty and flow of historical movement by bringing renewed capacities to the image and give us new ways to think about time itself. In this chapter, I treat representing “reality” in independent Chinese cinema as a problematic and a series of open questions: How does the “real” transform itself as the boundary between documentary and fiction becomes increasingly blurred? How does the event of digital media challenge theoretical assumptions about the celluloid image that emerged from older social and political contexts? And lastly, how does nostalgia for socialism, as well as for older aesthetic imaginaries, inform contemporary Chinese realities?

Using extremely long takes, slow pacing, and static camerawork, the films I examine in this chapter avoid the melodramatic movements that characterize Hollywood’s classical narrative paradigms and stretch the Deleuzian time-image in new directions, producing time as distended, mundane, suspended, and unbearably uneventful. Internationally recognized under the genres of slow cinema, cinemas of duration, Sixth Generation filmmakers, and New Documentary movement, these films explore the contradictory sociopolitical space of the reform era by documenting the proliferating cultural, environmental, and social ruins produced as unpredictable consequences of unilateral capitalist development. In many of these films, contemporary Chinese life is visualized as depopulated, impoverished, itinerant, and post-industrial. The barrenness of the social and physical landscapes, situated in a global context of rising wealth inequality, makes visible the co-constitutive nature of development and decay.

While the long take has been masterfully deployed by a number of East Asian filmmakers beginning with Yasujiro Ozu, contemporary Chinese filmmakers have adapted this post-war technique by combining the long take with digital video and documentary aesthetics. The remixing and overlaying of multiple mediated forms (TV, pop music, DV, special effects) renders old forms of reality as a point of crisis on digitally-remixed film. Instead of being clearly distinguishable from mediated fictions, reality becomes a shifting ground territorialized by global capitalism and its hyperreal byproducts. Through reading this selection of films and reflections on digital media, I hope to generate a framework for understanding the temporality and spatiality of the reform era, not as a historical periodization but rather as an insufficiently elaborated space, one that is produced by but remains illegible to the logic of development.

Film scholar Chris Berry identifies an imperative to “get real” in the New Documentary and Sixth Generation Chinese filmmakers in two senses: the drive to represent the real via stylistic innovation, on one hand, and the drive to chart the limits of social transformation in China’s 1990’s sociopolitical context on the other (2007, 115). In an evocative declaration, Berry writes, “‘getting real’ is the condition of contemporary postsocialist cinema in China” (2007, 116). The condition to which he refers involves institutional changes and shifts in the ideological purpose of Chinese cinema. Notably, the genre of documentary witnessed a tidal change with the decline of socialist modes of production: While the socialist system favored pre-scripted illustrated lecture documentaries, independently produced documentaries featured spontaneous, unscripted, on-the-spot recordings. In the realm of feature films, Sixth Generation filmmakers abandoned the national allegories of Fifth Generation films in favor of depicting the quotidian rhythms of urban life. Rejecting both the restrictive schematic of socialist realism and the grand

modernist parables of the Fifth Generation, filmmakers of this new generation mobilized a looser, more improvisational style in order to capture the spirit of contemporary urban realities.

While ideological and institutional changes of the reform era have contributed to the stylistic relaxation of the documentary-form, the relation between documentary realism and what it supposedly documents, “the real,” must be interrogated in the milieu of the reform era.

Contrary to conventional assumptions that documentaries record fixed historical truths, Sixth Generation Chinese filmmakers often feature aberrant movements, twisted temporalities, and strange affects within their filmic explorations of the quotidian. While older modes of filmmaking – both socialist realism and Fifth Generation – drew upon national allegories to focalize their understandings of historical progress, contemporary Chinese cinema suggests that China’s reform era is neither transparent nor knowable through a chronological understanding of time.

This opaque historical situation is residual, heterogeneous, and uneven, characterized by its experiential excess from either the collective memory of socialism or the individual’s alienation under consumer capitalism. Against state narratives of development and upward mobility, independent Chinese filmmakers focus on reality as a state of drifting bodies, permanent displacement, and aberrant motion. Rejecting a sensory-motor conception of the real, these films depart from the legibility and ideological authority of the documentary realist genre to define the reform era as a space of endurance amid rapid change. Opting instead for a documentary praxis, these films seek to observe and track the contemporary moment as a shifting ground of significations. If we understand “documentary” as a mode of engagement with the real, then even seemingly unrealistic scenes, whether CGI-generated, temporally-distended,

also function as critical examinations of how subjectivity engages with uncertain and newly de-territorialized realities.

Production, Distribution, and Reception

One way that Western consumers tend to fix the real is through a privileging of films whose modes of production and content are considered subversive to the Chinese state. Undergirded by geopolitical tensions between the United States and China, this method of evaluating independent Chinese cinema is tied to an anti-ideological impulse that forgets how it is itself implicated by ideology. If independent Chinese films are valued only for their subversive cachet, then their claim to investigating the heterogeneous space of the reform era becomes reduced to fetishistic advocacy for “Western” values. Nevertheless, many scholars have focused on the production methods of these films at the expense of examining their form or content.

The moniker of Sixth Generation refers to filmmakers who are excluded from the official state-sanctioned filmmaking system and then made recourse to independent modes of production. Given the disintegration of the socialist film industry and growing role of market forces in the 1990’s, 1989 graduates of the Beijing Film Academy, the directors who were first named as belonging to the Sixth Generation, were faced with limited opportunities to direct their own films within the apparatus of state-controlled studios. Turning away from state patronage, they began to self-finance to produce ultra-low budget films. Partly because of budgetary constraints, Sixth Generation filmmakers developed an “amateur” style with the use of digital video, non-professional actors, and on-locating shooting.

Because of their exclusion from distribution through the domestic market, Chinese independent filmmakers entered their works into international film competitions in the 1990’s to gain exposure, prestige, and financial support. Skeptical of their positive reception by Western

critics, Dai Jinhua (2002) argues that the act of naming a Sixth Generation fulfills Western hunger for signifiers of native resistance to the authoritarian state. Wary of Western intellectuals and critics who focus on the politically subversive rather than artistic, individual significance of these films, Dai Jinhua suggests that they engage in a neo-imperialist interpretive praxis by praising the production methods of Sixth Generation films with little attention to their content. For aspiring Chinese filmmakers, she writes, “independent filmmaking now became a shortcut to the power base in Western cinema” (91). Like Dai, Chris Berry (2009) is also suspicious of the reception of these films by western audiences, worrying that they may be consumed “as staging displays of curiosities, exotica, and freaks for the consumption of the urban elite” (122).

These arguments are based on a suspicion of Orientalism and self-fashioning to fulfill Orientalist desire. They also assume that the typical viewer for independent Chinese cinema is white, Western, and privileged enough to attend international film festivals. While Chinese urbanites who visit local art galleries, film clubs, and internet cafes might also be able to view them, their lack of exhibition in popular movie theaters ensures that most of the Chinese population have little knowledge or access to these films. While some of these movies have been uploaded to illegal streaming sites as well as Youtube.com (censored in China, but accessible via VPN), the prominent film critic Dai Jinhua (2002) writes that she was only informed about the existence of critically-beloved Sixth Generation by a friend living overseas.

The interdependent relationship between independent Chinese cinema and cosmopolitan overseas audiences raises not only questions of access, funding, and state censorship, but also fears of national betrayal. For example, the reception of Jia Zhangke’s *Xiao Wu* (1997) differed drastically across foreign and Chinese audiences. While it won the top prize at the 1997 Berlin film festival and picked up distributors across Europe, Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong, it

was criticized by faculty at Peking University for portraying China in an unflattering light, and hence, pandering to Orientalist desire for the third-world Other (Zhang 2006, 38). While the specter of betrayal seems to hang over these filmmakers for relying on Western funding and audiences, state resources and international sources of funding are not always mutually exclusive.

Independent Chinese films generally do not reference the Tiananmen Square incident or take obviously oppositional stances (due to, perhaps, the recognition of swift potential crackdown). And while they are technically illegal, the state has not made a concerted effort to prevent independent filmmakers from continuing to make films. According to Pickowitz (2006), the reason for this permissiveness lies in the existence of cultural liberals in the bureaucracy who believe underground filmmaking serves as a “useful pressure release mechanism” as long as they refrain from directly criticizing the party-state or mobilizing in opposition (7). Filmmakers therefore maintain a permeable relationship with state resources, and the ones that the state recruits (such as Jiang Wen, and now Jia Zhangke) can move freely across the aboveground and underground divide.

While the Western desire for Chinese resistance to the authoritarian state can be found in English-language scholarship, the most prominent Chinese filmmakers frustrate desire for clear political messages. The conflicting aims of Chinese filmmakers and Western critics engender situations of frustration, confusion, and generalization. For instance, Pickowitz (2006) criticizes independent Chinese films for being excessively individualist and self-centered, going as far as to say “the people who appear on screen seem quite shallow and unattractive - and remarkably humorless...their lives are not embedded in any social context, and we learn little or nothing at the society in which they live” (2006, 16). The spaces in these films are also largely private and

residential, which he registers as claustrophobic and unable to account for greater underlying social problems. He writes, “Underground films, to their credit, are long on ethnographic descriptions, but frustratingly short on analysis” (2006, 15).

Chris Berry (2009) agrees that the Sixth Generation’s use of on-the-spot realism thwarts the extraction of larger historical meaning: “It is unclear if they are representative of anything other than the very specific events and people shown; no cause-and-effect logic is presented to account for what we see; and no judgment is encouraged either through narration or fictional characters guiding us (like the ubiquitous Party secretaries of socialist realism)” (121). Berry expresses frustration that due to the party-state’s control over the cultural realm, filmmakers are not allowed to formulate explicitly oppositional critiques. The ambiguity derives from the observational nature of many of these films, which Berry construes as a strategic move to avoid disciplinary action by the State: “The rhetoric of pure observation allows filmmakers to record phenomena while leaving their perspective on it unclear” (ibid, 121). Berry concludes that the anti-interpretive and political ambiguity “is itself part of the postsocialist condition” (ibid, 121).

These criticisms - that independent Chinese cinema is ahistorical, privatized, and offers little substance in the form of explicit social critique – have been leveraged to critique the seemingly apolitical mode of slow cinema worldwide. Dovetailing on this line of critique, Moira Weigel (2016) critiques the disembedded formalism of the slow cinema movement, speculating that these films are attractive to international audiences precisely because they offer visual access to foreign realities and do not require deep historical knowledge. For foreign audiences, the value of slow cinema may lie in their ease-of-access and their privileging of phenomenology over history. Arguing that these films primarily attract with their formalistic rigor, Weigel writes, “The

intense mode of attentiveness it demands can move you, even if you know very little about the particular place you are looking at.”

If the realism of independent Chinese cinema is expected to furnish a more truthful political and historical education than the state-controlled media, then a closer look at the aesthetics of this film archive breaks down any transparent notions of truth. The stripped-down, observational realism of many of these films is far too partial and aporetic to offer the pleasure of totalizing critique. Contrary to fears of Chinese intellectuals about the cooptation of these films by Western agendas, very few explicitly criticize the party-state or historicize contemporary China within political and policy decisions that brought the current state of affairs into being. Against the desire for more historically-specific or clearly oppositional films, these films – either due to self-censorship or aesthetic choices - fail to position themselves against the Chinese state. Instead, they outline in subtle detail moods, movements, tensions, and atmosphere – paying great attention to subjective and absurd moments of contemporary life while refraining from delivering the pleasures of explicitly oppositional politics. One could also argue that these films are political precisely because they visualize everyday life rather than exceptional scenes of historical trauma, party politics, or political activism. Rather than seeing the two as separate, we could acknowledge that everyday life encompasses political life, whereas political life detaches from everyday life and focuses only on its most privileged moments (Lefebvre 1991).

I argue that one of the most valuable aspects of independent Chinese cinema is its refusal to promote either the “quixotically anti-state sensibility” of Western critics or the agenda of the Chinese party-state (Johnson 2006, 57). Instead, Johnson (2006) suggests that what defines films with a “documentary mood” is their refusal to depict meaningful solutions to irreconcilable tensions between lived reality and aspirational state rhetoric (55). If their value lies in refusing

cooptation by state logics on either side, then they cannot be understood as self-Orientalizing documentaries that seek to tell hidden truths about the poorly-understood Other. Unlike the beloved films of the Fifth Generation, they do not subscribe to embalming fictions of cultural authenticity. When rapid de-industrialization and globalization has swept away all fixed personal identities in terms of jobs, residences, and sometimes moral compasses for the subjects in front of the camera, the documentary does not serve as a tool of preserving historical truths as much as an inscription-machine for collectively de-territorialized flows, affects, desires, and moods.

Johnson (2006)'s observation about the prevalence of irreconcilable tensions between lived experience and aspirational rhetoric in the reform era is registered in film as anomic aimlessness and what Jean Ma (2010) calls "melancholy drift" (11). These affects also can be considered through Deleuze's notion of "any-space-whatever," where spaces are no longer determined and homogeneous, but instead consist of infinite probable linkages and loss of once-dominant conceptual coordinates (2001b, 5). While Deleuze observes the rise of "any-space-whatever" in relation to the crisis of World War II, Chinese filmmakers visualize "any-space-whatever" in relation to the crisis of identity in the reform era. Both involve the enervation of sensory-motor motivations and the rise of "a state of strolling, of sauntering or of rambling" (Deleuze 2001b, 120). This drifting, aberrant movement, embodied by both characters as well as the camera, illuminates looming economic as well as epistemological uncertainty.

The "documentary impulse" of independent Chinese cinema is crucial for registering this state of drifting uncertainty (Braester 2007). Because documentary praxis does not come with formulaic or ideological assumptions about historical truth, it is a position of radical openness that destabilizes comfortable readings and opens the parameters of representation to moments of excess or illegibility. *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (流浪北京, 1990) is often

regarded as first film of the New Documentary Movement. In this DV film, Wu Wenguang crosscuts interviews with a group of five young artists crosscut with observational scenes of their everyday lives in Beijing. The documentary, like many independent productions, is subtitled in English and made specifically for international consumption. The subjects of the film are independent artists much like the director, who have traded in economic security for artistic freedom. Despite not knowing where their next meal will come from, these artists are anchored by their sense of purpose and hope. In a reversal of conventional wisdom that wills life towards greater stability, one of the photographers claims that “everyone should have a drifter spirit.”

Yet the documentary also admits a painful vulnerability to being a drifter. As migrants to Beijing, they lack residency permits and must frequently rely on friends for food and housing. As the documentary progresses, we see a painter suffer from a mental breakdown that is captured on camera. In a section titled “The Madness of Zhang Xiaping,” we see the female artist lose her composure following a solo exhibition. Shot as a single uninterrupted long take, the uncomfortable scene tracks Zhang lying on the ground crying, laughing, and orating incoherently about God and gender, finally asking without response, “who the fuck am I?”. While some have interpreted this breakdown as an internalized aftershock of the Tiananmen crackdown, others read it as “othering the self, of radically repositioning the self as the other in a prolonged existential crisis” (Chiu and Zhang 2015, 82). Given the spontaneity of Zhang Xiaping’s breakdown and subsequent vulnerability, this moment indicts the director and viewer as complicit with the violence of visual representation. Her breakdown interrupts, momentarily, our compulsion to fix identities in place. The camera’s long take stays with her unraveling, refraining from judgment or intervention.

If we follow Zhang Xiaping's breakdown through schizoanalysis, we might find a fissure in the social body from which escape is possible. For Deleuze (1983), the revolutionary and the schizophrenic are identical because they scramble all codes, words, concepts, identities, and egos. They experience desire as pure becoming and misappropriate the code in order to dissolve it. Affirming rather than attempting to make sense of the of the schizoid's language, schizoanalysis involves deterritorialization toward "an active point of escape" (1983, 322). However, Deleuze warns that schizoanalysis must be a collective project, or else schizoid ways of being will become re-territorialized as pathology. Indeed, one can detect this reterritorialization in the re-containing impulses of academic scholarship, as any gesture that diagnoses this moment as representative of wider social illnesses interprets her breakdown as pathology and reconsolidates the totality of the social order. Departing from the documentarian's desire for the real as well as the academic's desire for coherence, Zhang Xiaping pushes the documentary form to its limits with her madness. She is excessive, incoherent, incommunicable, divine – uncontrollable and uncontainable by any interpretive grids.

Cutting from the scene of the breakdown, the next scene features an interview with a theater director recounting the aftermath. After describing the scene of her hospitalization and subsequent medical treatment, he says that they are essentially the same in spirit. The difference is that she is mad and he is not yet. Rather than lamenting Zhang Xiaping's mental illness, the theater director affirms the age-old idea that craziness is allied with creativity: "The best art might be crazy art. After deranging your senses, you're more likely to find a state of pure creativity." We learn from the concluding title-cards that Zhang Xiaping married an Austrian man in August of 1990 and now lives in Vienna. While drifting can open up new arrangements

of perceptibility and creativity, the danger of drifting away from the protections of social order comes at a price of economic precarity as well as radical unintelligibility.

Slow Cinema

From the outset, reform-era Chinese art cinema and documentary have engaged with a globalized cultural terrain through their international circulation, art-film inspired style and engagement with themes of globalized postmodernity. They have also become taken up in recent discussions about an international film current known as “slow cinema”, which emerged partly as a result of digital technology’s capacity for increased storage space (for completed films) and recording lengths (for longer takes). According to Matthew Flanagan (2012), slow films are often branded as festival films because they are generally considered too austere even for arthouse distribution and exhibition. He identifies the qualities that constitute slow cinema as tropes of the long take, undramatic or non-narrative structure, realist or hyperrealist representation, and a “pronounced stillness of composition and visual content” (2). In his overview of the slow cinema movement, he lists mainland Chinese directors such as Jia Zhangke, Wang Bing, and Liu Jiayin as well as Taiwanese directors Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang to be representative of the aesthetic at hand.

Flanagan (2012) identifies the historical origins from which slowness emerges as the trauma of the Second World War, a periodization that follows Gilles Deleuze’s distinction between the movement-image and the time-image in *Cinema 2*. Responding to the emergence of fast-paced commercial cinema and mass advertising, slowness became a way for art filmmakers to depart from the dominant strategies of Hollywood contextualization and to define themselves against classical narrative models. Beyond opposing dominant film temporalities, however, slow cinema can also be a means to reflect on the accelerationism of global capitalism and critique

widespread mental habits of instantaneous gratification fostered by contemporary media technologies.

As implied by its name, one of the main characteristics of slow cinema is the “hyperbolic application of the long take” (de Luca 2011,12). This formal property produces a mode of realism that requires observational study rather than immediacy of action and reaction. While Flanagan identifies a global stylistic that draws directors of various nationalities and traditions together, Jean Ma (2010) and Chris Berry (2007) place the time-image specifically in conversation with Chinese films. Berry (2007) invokes Deleuze’s distinction between classic and modern cinema to understand the appearance of Chinese documentaries and art films in the 1990’s. In this new wave, he finds similarities with Deleuze’s characterization of modern cinema: rather than following a predictable editing structure, these films feature unusually long takes and unpredictable linkages from one shot to the next. Rejecting the narrative logic of the movement image, these films deploy a breakdown of the sensory-motor schema to extract a direct image of time, or what Deleuze calls the “time-image” (2001b, 1).

In China, the historical periodization for slow cinema is not post-WWII, but rather post-Reform and Opening Up. Jean Ma (2011) argues that we should acknowledge Chinese cinema’s debt to post-war auteurs, but cautions against including Chinese art films under the rubric of international art cinema without also acknowledging that their inclusion must necessarily “demand a reassessment of earlier understandings of art cinema” (74). In other words, she argues for a destabilized theoretical conception of art cinema - one that is not predicated on an implicitly Western model, against which Chinese cinemas are defined as stylistically similar but culturally different. Rather than viewing Chinese art films as local manifestations of the international art

cinema aesthetic, Ma emphasizes their eclectic sampling of various influences and the concrete postcolonial, post-martial law, and post-Reform situations to which they respond.

History and Duration in *West of the Tracks*

A film that exemplifies the slow cinema aesthetic is the nine-hour long documentary *West of the Tracks* (铁西区). In 1999, a young art school graduate named Wang Bing wandered around Tiexi District in Shenyang with a rented handheld camera, bearing witness to the slow decline of the copper and lead furnaces that had formerly powered socialist industrialization in Northeast China. Wang Bing cut two years of filming (300 hours of footage) down to a 9-hour film divided into three sections: Rust, Remnants, and Rails. While he had studied photography at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, this was Wang's first attempt at film. After premiering at Berlin International Film Festival in 2002, it proceeded to sweep film festival awards in Europe and earned a place on the British Film Institute's list of the best films of all time. Studded with international accolades, *West of the Tracks* (2003) was praised by Lu Xinyu as "without question the greatest work to have come out of the Chinese documentary movement" (2010, 58).

Lu Xinyu (2005) reads the film first through the lens of history: as a monument to the dying out of socialist-era industrialization and the industrial working class. Because there is no narrative voiceover, title-cards at the beginning of each section of the documentary summarizes the film's historical background. The first title-card informs us that Tiexi, a district of Shenyang, was China's oldest and largest industrial base. It was established in the 1930s when Japan constructed factories to produce weaponry for its imperial army. After 1949, the USSR helped to invest additional industrial equipment to encourage Soviet-style planning and modernization. In 1980, a million workers were still employed in Tiexi plants, but by the 1990s, the factories in the north began to decline and close down. All the plants he filmed - the Shenyang Foundry, the

Electric Cable Factory, and the Shenyang Steel Rolling Mill - were conducting massive layoffs, and by the time he finished shooting, all of them had been closed.

If one views documentaries as faithful records of historical reality, one would understand *West of the Tracks* as a visual tribute to the end of socialist-era industrialization and the beginnings of privatization. Drawing an equivalence between Tiexi's deindustrialization in the 1990s and the rise of the rustbelt in the American Midwest, Lu (2005) asserts that "the same historical rationality appears to unfold remorselessly across space and time, and no one can escape its compulsion" (60). Although capitalism constructs a historical world-system which at least, appears inescapable, Lu also asserts the significance of art (including documentary) as a messianic force capable of undermining history: "Under history's iron logic, art strives to find a place for humanity's survival and feelings. This is how art establishes its relation to time and society and becomes a force questioning the logic of history, a force that can redeem humanity" (74). I argue that two coextensive interpretations seem to arise from Lu's reading: the historical and the aesthetic. Because documentary's function is double, and we must move between the two registers, it is insufficient to regard documentaries of reform-era deindustrialization merely as further evidence of capitalist consolidation destroying differences across cultures and time. If documentaries are simultaneously aesthetic forms that question the homogenizing logic of history, then we must also attend to ways that they depart from visualizing historical truths.

The critical consensus that these films "document" reality assumes a straightforward and transparent relationship between reality and representation. Marxist scholar Xudong Zhang (2010) writes, "The New Documentary Movement was not something pursued professionally as a genre or format, but was fervently guarded as the last ground for truth, thought and critique" (80). Zhang's approach again seems to fix the purpose of documentary: to document historical

truth. Yet the purpose of many New Documentary films is not to guard any unchanging grounds for truth, but to accompany the shifting grounds of truth as it evolves in time. I would argue that their primary subject is not truth – a view that would fall into the trap of timeless authenticity - but instead a changing conception of Reform-era reality, one filled with aberrant movements, strange affects, and non-chronological time.

Director Jia Zhangke has said that a “surrealistic atmosphere prevails in China today because the entire society faces an enormous pressure to speed up. As a result, many strange and unimaginable things have occurred in reality...Sadly, because many people do not believe they have a future, they splurge on excessive enjoyment, as if life might end tomorrow” (Lu Tonglin 2006, 126). Because reality has lost its moorings due to the rapidity of change, a strict distinction between surrealism and realism is no longer tenable. Reflectivist readings therefore ignore defiantly non-realistic modes that exist within seemingly realist films and elide the contradictions raised by their presence. For instance, while Jia is both a documentary and feature filmmaker, he often mixes elements of both in a single film. Combining CGI, shaky-cam footage, stage performances, and non-diegetic music, he denatures the assumption that documentary realism is the site of privileged access to truth. His use of computer-generated imagery to enact “irrational cuts” constitutes one avenue of departure from the rational continuities previously organized by socialist realism. His characters are drifters who move but go nowhere. Regarding Jia Zhangke, Chris Berry writes, “His is the temporality of flux, of contingency, maybe even of chaos. The result is an account of postsocialist marketization that is ambivalent at best and quite possibly a vision of Benjaminian ruination” (2009, 115).

While *West of the Tracks* does not use digital photoshop, it still breaks with rational continuities by its uncomfortable length and attention to drifting uncertainty that pervades

contemporary Chinese life. Manuel Ramos-Martinez (2015) approaches *West of the Tracks* from a reading that is attentive to the form. He asks, what does it mean to witness or observe “reality”, and finds that *West of the Tracks* thwarts reflectivist readings of observational cinema (as mourning the tragic end of socialism) by making visible new epistemologies of approach, sight, and understanding. Rather than seeking mastery over the image, the filmmaker is a mere witness to the factories’ closures. The camera’s exhaustive, impossible efforts to document everything signify a failure of omniscience and full representation. Following Pasolini, he finds that the expansiveness of the long take resists constructing any singular meanings, such as a definitive attitude of mourning or nostalgia.

In discussing *West of the Tracks*, scholars often draw parallels between Wang Bing’s project of documenting the ruins to Walter Benjamin’s theories of history and allegory. According to Benjamin, allegory – like modernity – is a palimpsest. It holds tightly to the debris of history and acknowledges that ruination and redemption are inseparable processes. Far from documenting idealized versions of reality, allegory preserves the world as imperfect and incomplete fragments rather than as a unified totality. Because objects lose their commodity fetish after being abandoned, their essence is revealed only when they linger on the edge of extinction. If history is contained in the ruins of the present, then the present is also destined for ruin: “In the convulsions of the commodity economy we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled” (1999, 162).

If the factories in Tiexi represented the idealistic site of socialist industrialization, then the film uses a non-narrative, fragmentary editing style to reveal “the ruins of that ideal” and how people cope in the aftermath (Lu 2005, 61). Jie Li (2008) expands the discussion of ruins to the entire body of the New Documentary Movement, drawing a comparison between the

movement's filmmakers and the Benjaminian figure who is powerless to make whole what has been broken: "These films come into existence as their subjects—places, communities, and ways of life—disappear, so that the films already have the quality of relic as they are first released...the filmmakers' impossible effort at preservation is thus reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History" (3).

Wang Bing takes up the call to film the soon-to-be ruins of factory life, injecting the project with a non-dramatic style characteristic of cinemas of time. Here, slowness is a key a part of his filming process as well as the unconventionally long result. The opening scene is composed of several extremely long takes from a camera anchored to the front of a train. We identify with the train's mechanical perspective as it moves past the alleyways and streets of a run-down part of town. The snow flurries toward the camera lens as the train moves gently forward. While cuts occur, the subsequent images do not differ much from previous images, and it is unclear how much time has passed or whether we are still on the same train. In the language of Bergson, there is no meaningful extension of perception into action. This scene highlights the difference between the camera-consciousness and perception-images experienced by characters, in which the camera has become seemingly independent of the characters' perceptions.

Sharing with the Sixth Generation a "chilling, savagely poetic camera-eye style," *West of the Tracks* makes use of the static long take for an impersonal gaze at the remnants of socialist industrialization (Dai 2002, 95). Eschewing narrative voiceover, extra-diegetic music, and emplotment, the first four hours ("Rust") are characterized by long tracking shots, static long takes, and a fluid, semi-anonymous ensemble of characters. Interested more in the dying factory ecosystem more than individual workers' narratives, Wang Bing allows the first chapter of his film to wander freely from one group of workers to another, all the while foregrounding the

physical elements of light, steam, dust, machinery, and raw materials that populate the factory's interior. Wang's attention to materiality manifests in the repetition of biological (the naked bodies of bathing factory workers), technological (the unknowable complexity of factory machines), and the economic (frequently discussed anxieties of compensation) motifs.

Jie Li (2008) points out that while Soviet Socialist realism depicted workers as heroic and strong, "Rust" frames the workers as "dwarfed and emasculated by the giant machines they supposedly control. More slaves than masters, they have to use all their life force and energy to lift a small fraction of a machine's effortless load" (2). The structure of feeling in this film, as well as independent Chinese documentaries at large, has very little to do with glorifying workers as the builders of a strong socialist society. Instead, they are appendages to a machine that no longer requires them to function. Their labors, prolonged by long takes of tedious repetition, are exhausting to watch and invite the viewer into a sympathetic relation with the workers.

While it has become reflexive for film critics to discuss the costs of reform-era progress as the focal point of "humanist" Chinese documentaries, *West of the Tracks* is not devoted to Enlightenment or Socialist humanism as much as its failures, remnants and remainders. Ideologies of linear progress have become radically disconnected from workers' everyday lives, and faith in man's ability to forge better futures appears only in the optimism of state-controlled television and the lyrics of outdated revolutionary jingles that workers still sing at karaoke restaurants. By contrast, lived reality consists of material scarcity as well as spiritual poverty. Taking note of the same, director Jia Zhangke has used television in the background of his feature films for a similar effect. The juxtaposition of news, pop songs, and stage performances with depressing realities emphasizes a deep loss of faith in socialist humanism, which is resurrected only as an object of entertainment or nostalgia.

This condition finds its most poignant expression in the last chapter of documentary, “Rails,” where the father who the camera has been following is making small talk at his friend’s house. He says, “I saw a plane the other day. It was trying to take off, but couldn’t get up off the ground,” says Du Yang’s father. This moment of technological failure finds echoes everywhere in independent Chinese cinema: a character’s motorbike stymied by an incline. The same motorbike breaking down in the middle of a road. A plane crashing into the ground. A coal truck getting stuck in a ditch. Everywhere, there is a re-evaluation of the sensory-motor schema, humanist ideals, and Enlightenment progress as evidence of their powerlessness becomes increasingly apparent. The reform era can be considered a global condition of impasse that demands a rethinking of time and futurity.

Digital Interruptions in *Still Life*

In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze introduces the time-image by discussing the still life of a vase in Yasujiro Ozu’s *Late Spring* (1949). He writes:

The still life is time, for everything that changes is in time, but time does not itself change, it could itself change only in another time, indefinitely. At the point where the cinematographic image most directly confronts the photo, it also becomes most radically distinct from it. Ozu’s still life endures, have a duration, over ten seconds of the vase: this duration of the vase is precisely the representation of that which endures, through the succession of changing states (Deleuze 2012, 17).

Ozu’s long take introduces a gap between perception and reaction, a breakage with rational continuities, in order to extract a direct image of time from the clichés of the sensory-motor schema. According to Deleuze, time is no longer subordinated to movement, but rather, time subordinates movement to itself in post-war cinema. Because Ozu’s vase is not caught up in the sensory-motor schema, it is impossible to decide whether the object is a hallucination, a recollection, or an actual object occupying the same spatial and temporal plane as the characters.

In the preceding shot, Noriko is seen in a close-up looking upwards, seemingly lost in thought. The only other character in the scene is her father, who has fallen asleep. The cutaway from the human characters to the vase is therefore an irrational cut, following no predetermined logics of causality or continuity. Shot at a low-angle rather than the level of the human eye, the image of the vase is not tied to human consciousness or any particular character's point of view, but to what Walter Benjamin in "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" calls the *unconscious optics* of the camera. The image does not coincide with the human eye; instead, it addresses itself to the post-human or non-human eye. It is as if the shot forms an internal circuit between the actual and virtual, banal and extreme, subjective and objective, real and imaginary, which chase after each other, constantly exchanging roles around a point of indiscernibility. Ozu's irrational cuts, his long takes and mundane concerns give his film a sense of unbearable duration. Yet it is through unbearable duration and irrational discontinuities that a time-image is constituted.

If the vase scene stages a confrontation between the photographic and the cinematic image, then what emerges from the confrontation between cinematic and digital images of the 21st century? In this section, I will discuss one of the inheritors of Ozu's long-take aesthetic, Chinese director Jia Zhangke, in order to speculate about the cinematic image in the wake of digital technology, global neoliberalism, and postmodernity, as exemplified in his 2006 film *Still Life* (三峡好人). Since the economic reforms of the 1980's, the turbulence of socioeconomic change in China has profoundly undermined the power of continuity editing and chronological time to convey a believable sense of reality. Invoking films by Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang, and Wong Kar Wai, Jean Ma (2010) argues that recent Chinese art films inherit modern cinema's preoccupation with disjointed time, spectrality, nostalgia, melancholy, doubling,

confused temporal planes, and long takes. Ma refers to Jia Zhangke in her conclusion as an emerging auteur who grapples with similar problematics of temporality and historicity through his observational long take aesthetics.

Still Life deploys images from very different aesthetic regimes to assemble an aesthetic bricolage, as if engaged in an endless and impossible search for a realism that can capture Chinese culture in the reform era. While he has made a variety of documentaries throughout the years, including *In Public* (2001), *Dong* (2006), *24 City* (2009), and *I Wish I Knew* (2011), Jia Zhangke's impulse to attain realistic depth never fixates on the documentary as a privileged form. Rather, his films blur fiction and nonfiction, all the while appropriating heterogeneous forms of media, moving between the interstices of different mediations, as well as between the past and future. Carefully weaving together cinéma vérité, computer-generated imagery, TV footage, tablet surfaces, cell phone ring tones, popular music, and stage performance, he assembles heterogeneous media not only as a record of China's hyper-mediated contemporary culture, but also to comment on the layered nature of time.

This form of the film draws attention to how new ways of representation is necessary for this not-yet-understood space, and how the medium of digital video draws attention to China's contemporary history as a history of discontinuity. The blending of digital image with long take realism, as well as narrative with documentary elements, embodies the famously eclectic style of a filmmaker who refuses to be limited by one particular genre or "tradition" in the traditional sense. The importance of surrealist liberties in this film suggests a conception of history that suspends, like Benjamin's now-time, the sense of progressive continuity in conceptions of historical change. Critical interruptions in time are illustrated in the digitally-mediated, surreal scenes that seem out of place within the genre of documentary realism.

First, it is important to note that Zhangke is well-known for his observational realism and his use of the long take. The stillness in *Still Life* can be located in the lethargic gaze of the camera and the film's male protagonist. Both grace their objects with "slow, steady, almost motionless lingering attention" that registers "unknown depth (of time, of experience, of life)" (Tadiar, 32). Similar to how Deleuze writes about Yasujiro Ozu, Tadiar sees the stillness of Jia Zhangke's camera as one way for cinema to access time itself. Contrasting the duration of everyday life with the anticipatory and speculative time of financial capital, Tadiar undergirds her reading of *Still Life* with a critique of neoliberalism, whose unrepresented human costs become visible through the film's focus on migrant laborers. Jia's long takes are also often associated with "on-the-spot" (*jishizhuyi*) documentary realism, an aesthetic borrowed from the New Documentary Movement. Even though *Still Life* is a fictional film, Xudong Zhang implicates it in a "documentary of rescue," (2010, 63) which arrests the demolition of old norms by arranging "its dispersing fragments into a sequence of enduring visual evidence" (ibid, 87). Also commenting on the filmmaker's approach to realism, Jean Ma writes that against the background of the instantaneous, networked digital age, Jia's films "insist upon a prolonged gaze at enigmatic ruins of the socialist-industrial past that mingle with signs of the new" (2010, 149). Whether it is through a focus on marginalized subjects, a documentary of rescue or a meditation of the past in ruins, Jia Zhangke's aesthetics are overwhelmingly associated with documentary realism and a skeptical attitude toward the sanctioned state narrative of economic progress.

Benjamin's affirmation of critical standstills for interrupting the continuum of progressive time parallels director Jia Zhangke's use of temporally and spatially displaced shots (which we might call anachronisms) to interrupt the social realist aesthetic of his films. In *Still Life* (2005), Jia eclectically combines signifiers from multiple temporal and aesthetic regimes to

produce perplexing but evocative visuals. Amidst a plot involving two people searching for their former partner in Fengjie, the camera pans to images of UFO's flying above the Yangtze River, building-shaped rockets leaving construction site, tightrope walkers between buildings, Beijing Opera performers playing cell phone games, an anonymous boy singing on a barge, and a ballroom dance among the ruins. While these scenes are all set within the filmic diegesis, none of them are introduced or remarked on, and none of them link up logically with the preceding or subsequent shots. These images perform a critical interruption of causal logics in the film through the wandering attentiveness of the camera's gaze.

These scenes raise difficult questions: Are they hallucinations, recollections, or dreams, and to whom do they belong? Falling outside of cause-and-effect linkages, it is impossible to determine the origins and meanings of these images by mapping them onto the film's narrative arc. The shots that the camera pans to may therefore be understood as irrational cuts which follow no predetermined logics of causality or continuity. In Deleuze's concept of the time-image, the irrational cut creates discontinuities on purpose. Rather than being subject to relinkage by earlier and subsequent images, relinkages become subject to the cut.

Besides critiquing the sociopolitical conditions of Reform-era China by visualizing the suffering of the underclass, Jia Zhangke's films also bring to Chinese art cinema a new type of image: the digital image. While these images bear some relation to the time-image, the interstice or gap necessary for the existence of the time-image is increasingly threatened by the instantaneity of electronic media. Commenting briefly on the electronic image in the conclusion of *Cinema 2*, Deleuze observes that "the life or the afterlife of cinema depends on its internal struggle with informatics" (2001b, 270). Just as information becomes a substitution for nature, "the sign of the time-image" may come to take the place of the time-image itself (2001b, 270).

Far from reconciling harmoniously, the struggle between cinema and digital media becomes heightened in Jia Zhangke's deployment. In a single film, he juxtaposes and sometimes superimposes the amateur aesthetics of digital video with science-fiction-inspired special effects, blurring the boundary between documentary realism and blockbuster aesthetics. Hence, while *Still Life* is shot in the visual vernacular of HD digital video, it avoids the documentary's claim to raw, spontaneous footage taken straight out of the camera. Exposing the deception of his documentary impulse, Jia does not hesitate to disturb the realistic surface of his films with surreal digital manipulations. In what begins as a long-take of the female lead hanging laundry to dry in front of a building, a rocket bursts into the scene and interrupts the viewer's contemplation of what could have been a direct image of time. In contrast with the stillness of the camera, the building in the background is digitally-manipulated to blast off like a rocket into the sky, substituting kitschy distraction in place of contemplation or boredom. This scene begs the question whether the building itself, a hollowed-out shell of concrete, is a "real" object captured by the camera or added later through video-editing software. This scene also works to undo the viewer's assumptions about the visual cohesiveness and the realism of Jia's aesthetics. A far cry from Ozu's vase, the camera's optical unconscious is hijacked by the computer's ability to add and eliminate layers, adjust colors, and manipulate lighting in the post-production editing process. Rather than staging a direct image of time, the shot of the building/rocket reveals the total manipulability of every pixel. This pixilated representation threatens to destroy time as layered or stratigraphic and replace it with a digital image of time, an endlessly malleable surface capable of heterogeneous combinations and transformations in hyperspace. In other words, the digital image threatens to collapse the circuit between actual and virtual into the hyperreal. Just

as time subordinates movement in modern cinema, so temporal reality becomes increasingly subordinated to hyperreality in postmodern cinema.

A similar scene occurs earlier in *Still Life*, when the camera's slow, attentive long take seems to make visible the startling image of a UFO shooting across the sky. The movement of the UFO is tracked through a continuity cut that connects the two protagonists, two strangers who never cross paths but gaze upon the same mystifying object as it flies rapidly over the Yangtze River. The special effects used to create the UFO is a simple disc of white light, but its presence in a documentary realist film feels extremely out of place. Reviewers of *Still Life* have described the rocket and UFO scenes as "surreal" (Bradshaw 2008), "whimsical" (Croce 2008), and "mischievous, seemingly inexplicable" (Zhang 2010). Others attempt to rationalize why inexplicable science fiction elements are grafted onto a realistic film focused on the environmental and human costs of the reform era. Film reviewer Andrew Chan (2008) writes, "The surrealist in Jia is full of both hope and pessimism, and seems to be arguing: If thousands of years of tradition can be degraded in the span of a few decades, then the invasion of UFOs might be a credible occurrence as well." In his eloquent review, Chan subordinates the digital image to a metaphor in order to explain its inclusion in the film. While he grounds his explanation in the appearance of the UFO as symbolizing absurdity of such fast-paced, world-altering change, I will refer to Deleuze's discussion on the irrational cut as a productive, generative technique that moves our understanding of the digital image beyond the frame of figurative interpretation.

In Deleuze's time-image, the irrational cut creates discontinuities on purpose. Rather than being subject to relinkage by earlier and subsequent images, relinkages become subject to the cut. In *Still Life*, the irrational cut is located in the unlikely superimposition of computer-

generated objects onto recorded backgrounds, a sight that transforms characters into seers dispossessed of action. Since *Still Life* deploys the long take, the irrational cut, and the any-space-whatever, many of the aesthetics of the time-image are still operational. Yet out of Jia Zhangke's long take something new also emerges. The digital image is a new manifestation of the irrational cut (much like Orson Welles' depth of field, following Deleuze's example).

The use of digital video in *Still Life* derives and departs from a lineage of independent Chinese documentary filmmaking. Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (1990) is widely acknowledged as the first independent documentary to be made in China. Typical of projects considered part of the New Documentary Movement, Wu used handheld digital cameras, a low production budget, and spontaneous on-the-spot shooting to capture the plights of marginalized subjects. These techniques were widely influential and have since become a staple of TV news, internet videos, and Sixth Generation filmmaking. When the mini Digital Video (DV) camera was introduced to China in 1997, expanded access for most middle-class people and the possibility of one-person filmmaking resulted in an upsurge of independent and amateur productions (Berry, 2010). Emphasizing the movement's preoccupation with and belief in the truth of reality, Xudong Zhang (2010) asserts that Jia Zhangke "shares with the independent documentarists a fervour for rediscovering reality at its most concrete and profane" (80). While this comparison is valid, it is also incomplete. Jia's films certainly draw from the techniques and concerns of the New Documentary movement, but his films betray an eye for the simulated, fantastical, and absurd; these images seem to suspend the idea of reality rather than guard it as an island of truth threatened by the ravages of the market economy.

The temptation to idealize digital video and other forms of new media is reminiscent of optimistic assessments of the utopian potential of the internet. While DV does allow for more

democratized access to the tools of video production, the multiplication of perspectives that such a technology brings into play does not necessarily guarantee that “a cognitive victory might be snatched for a sleepwalk-like *dérive* through the land of indifference and reification” (Zhang 2010, 83). While the originators of the New Documentary movement hope to “open up new public spaces of discussion of social problems” through documenting on-the-ground realities, their medium of choice (or perhaps, by necessity) is also radically amenable to retouching and manipulation (Berry and Rofel 2010, 10). In the *Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich (2001) writes that DV introduces the ability to manipulate the image at the level of the pixel, the basic unit of the digital image whose density determines its resolution. He identifies several properties of digital images, including a common representational code making it possible for different media to be combined into a single digital file, and numerical programming allowing infinite copies to be made without any loss of data (in principle)¹. Because pixel-based images are encoded by numerical data, they are radically programmable. Hence, the liberating potential of DV lies not only its accessibility and popular format, but also in its ability to depart from the organic realm of the real while masking fact that the real no longer exists.

Mountains May Depart

I now turn to another Jia Zhangke film as another case study of how the digital image undermines chronological time with its unexpected insertions of nostalgic imagery and bygone pop songs. In the feature film *Mountains May Depart* (山河故人, 2015), the presentation of time is at first glance straightforwardly chronological. It is organized into three sections introduced by the years 1999, 2014, 2025, and it tracks the youth, middle age, and old age of three protagonists

¹ Manovich emphasizes that in practice, digital images undergo “lossy compression,” a process by which files are made smaller by commonly-used software that allow for easy file storage and transmission (2001, 70).

who share the same hometown but go on very different life trajectories, carried aloft or pushed under by the unbridled currents of neoliberal transformation. Despite an overall linear chronology, a closer look at specific moments in the film reveals the disruptive influence of musical repetition and the incommensurable relations within the digital image.

In the first act, the female lead Shen Tao is en route to paying her friend and unsuccessful suitor Liangzi a visit, when a plane unexpectedly dives and crashes right in front of her. Tao slows down and stops on her motorbike when she sees a plane heading rapidly towards her. Her horrified reaction is cross-cut with the plane as it crashes and disintegrates into a cloud of black smoke nearby. The camera slowly swivels and pans left from a close-up of her reaction to the remains of the airplane, and then cuts to a long shot of Tao standing alone by the side of the road. A coal truck, as if oblivious to the disaster that has just occurred, continues moving behind her and exits from the right side of the frame.

This terrifying event suspends Tao's attention but does not otherwise affect the film's narrative arc; this scene therefore lies outside of the sensory-motor schema. While a conventional Hollywood film might deploy explosive special effects in order to emphasize imminent danger and the necessity of a heroic response, this film deploys the violence of a plane crash as a random, unpredictable event that intrudes into the quotidian reality of people's lives. Similar to the UFO and flying building of *Still Life*, the jet plane in *Mountains May Depart* is a computer-generated digital image that bursts into a scene of everyday life. It temporarily arrests time and hints at the hyperreality and violence of the future to come.

Later, Tao overhears a TV broadcast announce that a government-sponsored project to reseed forests in the area has sent planes carrying seeds to Fenyang, which explains and contextualizes the earlier plane crash. Ironically, the government's attempt to rectify address

environmental externalities of coal mining produces unanticipated effects of its own. Perhaps the plane crash signifies that the fallout of neoliberal progress cannot be made ameliorated through retroactive efforts, just as the planes carrying seeds cannot remake a landscape that has been irreversibly degraded by coal mining.

Though the coal truck sputters forward in the earlier scene, a later segment shot in a lower quality camcorder witnesses the coal truck becoming stuck in a ditch, unable to move forward or back. As lumps of coal fall onto the ground, some of the villagers use this opportunity to take some for themselves. Shot in the observational style of *cinéma vérité*, this scene presents a more nostalgic use of digital imagery. Taken together however, the juxtaposition of the digital image's handheld, amateur aesthetics with slick, professionally-done special effects reveal its radical malleability and ability to mimic aesthetics from different layers of time.

Like many of Jia Zhangke's films, *Mountains May Depart* uses popular music to comment on the sedimentations of time. Deleuze advocates for reading across the gap or the interstice between the audio and visual, which constitute two different layers of the image. In this film, the repetition of two songs in particular denature chronological time to reveal the present as passing and the past as preserved in the present: "Take Care" (珍重) by canto-pop singer Sally Yeh, and "Go West" by British pop group Pet Shop Boys. Here, I will focus on "Go West," a song that opens and closes the film. In the opening scene, a group of young people led by a young Shen Tao performs a choreographed routine to the pop tune, seemingly for themselves, eventually cheering and forming a conga line as they prepare to welcome the new millennium. The music mixes with bright sounds of laughter and its call to "go west" is infused with youthful

energy and idealism.² At the end of the film, an elderly Tao goes to an empty field and the notes of “Go West” crescendo into audibility, as if the memory drifted into her consciousness. This replay of the song evokes complex emotional and bodily resonances; as she is no longer young and looks back from the vantage point of old age. Smiling to herself, Tao begins to reprise the same choreography as 25 years ago, during the turning of the millennium, in an extremely long take that lasts for almost a minute. The camera stages a medium shot of her dancing in the snow with eyes closed, flanked by 21st century telephone towers and a high-rise to her left. If the present changes so quickly, the past is preserved in her bodily memories and in the repetition of this song under new circumstances.

The scene then cuts to a reverse angle shot of her still dancing, and we see that Tao is facing ancient Chinese courtyards and towers, landmarks that have been sporadically visible in the background of the first act. The perfectly preserved, seemingly pristine architecture of ancient China now becomes the focal point of the *mise-en-scène*. I turn to Baudrillard’s concept of simulation to discuss the background. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard observes a new relationship forming between map and territory in postmodern culture. He writes, “The

² The song has a layered history. The phrase “Go west” originates from American politician Horace Greeley’s call in 1865 for continued colonization and western expansionism. It was adapted into the title of the song “Go West” by the American disco group Village People in 1979, which was interpreted as a call for gay men to go to what was at-the-time the LGBT mecca of the US, San Francisco. In 1992, the song was covered by British pop group Pet Shop Boys. Their music video in 1993 featured kitschy Soviet symbolism and brief segments filmed in Moscow’s Red Square, which appropriated “go west” as a phrase to tout the superiority of liberal Western democracies over the Eastern communist bloc. Then in 2015, Jia Zhangke shared in an interview with *Indie Wire* that the Pet Shop Boys version of “Go West” was very popular in Chinese nightclubs in 1999. He continues, “The DJ usually wouldn’t play that song until midnight, as a sort of signal that it was a new day, and then everyone, whether or not they were complete strangers, would be holding hands or other people’s shoulders and do this kind of line dancing thing.”

territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory" (1994, 1). In other words, signs of the real become substituted for the real, such that we can no longer distinguish between reality and artifice. Rather than reality preceding representation, simulacra precede and come to determine the real.

The ending of *Mountains May Depart* offers a poignant illustration of the precession of simulacra. The background occupied by dynastic architecture visualizes a hyperreal space of the cultural site, where historical preservation of authentic Chinese culture also functions as a zone of global tourism. The obsession with preserving markers of Chinese history hides the symptom that such a history no longer exists, that history is replaced by a simulacrum of history. The tower we see, Wenfeng Tower (文峰塔), is part of Wenhui Cultural Park, touted by Fenyang's government website as one of the city's many prestigious cultural relics. The website advertises the tower as "the world's first ancient brick tower," a description that makes no distinction between the original from which it was modeled, which has long since disappeared, and the more recently built replicas of the original.

Rather than being an enduring structure that has weathered the tumult of centuries of social change, therefore, Wenfeng Tower corresponds to the hyperreality of the computer-generated image, an image that no longer refers to the real. If cultural relics are produced from the overtaking of the real by the hyperreal, then might the empty field on which Tao dances point to a desert of the real? Closing her eyes and not paying any attention to the dynastic architecture in front of her, Tao is able to access the depth of time and reality through remembrance. Though the architecture may be hyperreal, Jia's static camera and extremely long take in this last scene

(about 25 seconds of Tao dancing) points to the continued relevance of the time-image in the digital age.

CHAPTER 2

Resurrecting Daoist Temporalities in the Taiwanese New Wave

Contemporary Sinophone directors such as Jia Zhangke, Wang Bing, and Liu Jiayin as well as Taiwanese directors Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang are often grouped together as contemporary Asian exemplars of “slow cinema,” an international film style characteristic of arthouse and festival films. While slow cinema is frequently discussed in relation to critical theories of duration, such as Deleuze’s time-image and Bergson’s durational time, this chapter aims to de-secularize discussions on cinematic temporality and use a Daoist lens to excavate the significance of the Daoist references they employ. By centering spiritual traditions within films that dilate time, I follow Walter Benjamin’s call to interrupt notions of secular, homogenous time. In addition, I situate the wider significance of my argument in discussions about the “postsecular” in support of the idea that religion does not disappear with the onset of secular modernity, but instead remains an influential part of public life (Habermas 2008).

It is crucial to trace how spiritual traditions intervene on contemporary social and economic temporalities in order to define alternatives to the temporality of secular modernity. Secular modernity, since the advent of nation-states, has been dominated by time that is secular, homogeneous, chronological, and measured by the clock. Produced alongside capitalism, it is used to regiment life for the increasingly brutal extraction of labor. In concrete terms, modern time is divided into measurable quantities: days, weeks, months, and years before and after the year zero. This quantitative, chronological system grew into an official means of marking time, spreading globally in tandem with European colonial ventures and Hegelian notions of teleological history.

By contrast, Daoist notions of time embrace relativity and multiplicity, positing that the world exists in continual transformation. Rather than regimenting time into compartmentalized units of clock-time or of a historicist timeline of past, present, and future, Daoists subscribe to a notion of time as unfolding in the interconnected context of the natural world, rather than the limited confines of the human world. The temporality of Daoism advocates for a return to multiplicity and contingency prior to the Dao's (the Way) distortion by the social conventions of the human world. According to Steve Coutinho (2013), the Dao according to Daoism is the holistic and immanent source of things, perpetually unfolding, discursive, and indeterminate.

In this chapter, I situate my post-secular approach in the context of Taiwan's post-martial law period, a time of rapid neoliberal transformation documented by Taiwanese New Wave filmmakers. I discuss Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* —— (*A One and a Two*, 2000) and Tsai Ming-Liang's *Stray Dogs* (郊遊 *Jiao You*, 2013), two of the masterpieces of the Taiwanese New Wave, in order to meditate on how they invoke Daoist attitudes towards time, process and transformation. Each exemplifies the New Wave style in its observational realism and focus on ordinary life. I select these two films as exemplary of two possible directions that Daoist images of time might take. While *Yi Yi* is attuned to the cyclical, nourishing, self-renewing rhythms of everyday life, *Stray Dogs* emphasizes the impartiality of nature and inevitability of loss. Both films resurrect Daoist temporalities as interventions on the homogenous, empty time of late capitalist modernity.

Daoism: An introduction

Daoist thought interprets the Way (or Dao) as embedded in an expansive, non-anthropocentric awareness of the cosmos. It is a philosophy of immanence, characterized by refusal to glorify transcendence and practical guidance on how to live a flourishing life in the

face of uncertainty and death. While Confucianism and Mohism also take Way as their central problematic and advise people how to conduct themselves in society, Daoists conceive the Way to be cosmic, expansive, and rooted in the natural world. Skeptical of language and explicit argumentation, and rejecting rational and empirical approaches in favor of a philosophy of unfolding, Daoist thinkers use aphorisms and anecdotes to convey their messages. Though the Way is essential indeterminate, it is maternal, self-generating, and the source of all things. Against gradual cultivation advocated by the Confucians, Daoists believe that the Way is distorted by social convention, hence people must return to a state of virtuality and pluripotency in order to flourish.

Dating back to the Warring States period, Daoism is a religious and philosophical tradition that emphasizes process and the interconnectedness of all things. Anthropologist Mei Zhan (2011) has proposed using Daoism as a mode of analysis, rather than simply an object of analysis, in light of its congruities with Martin Heidegger's ontology of oneness. In centering oneness, Daoism does not exclude but rather embraces relationality, multiplicity, contingency, and creativity. It is "deeply mundane and down to earth," suspicious of hierarchy and knowledge, and rhizomatic in structure and influence (2011, 111). Unlike Confucianism, which has historically been used to justify state paternalism and administration, Daoism frequently occupies sites of oppositionality, and its anti-authoritarian spirit has inspired countless artists, thinkers, and writers from antiquity to today. While some of its canonical texts were originally conceived as a guide to statecraft, 20th century reformers during the Cultural Revolution systemically destroyed Daoist texts, statues, and monasteries in mainland China in order to transform its population into legible citizens of socialist modernity. Since the 1980s, the state's reorientation towards the free market and integration into networks global capitalism has resulted

in cultural amnesia and the relegation of Daoism into China's "backwards" past, though there have been recent attempts at its cultural revival as a marker of authentic national identity. Rather than analyzing Daoism as an exotic tradition from a secure standpoint in modernity, however, I aim to illuminate how Daoist practices and attitudes are coeval with the contemporary and opens up a way to live with the precariousness of the present.

As a philosophical and religious tradition originating from China, Daoism does not easily map onto Western understandings of philosophy or religion. The philosophical side of Daoism is more pragmatic and avoids abstract metaphysics, containing kernels of environmentalism, relativism, pluralism, skepticism, and anarchism. The religious side of Daoism is polytheistic, syncretic, and sometimes difficult to distinguish from Chinese folk religion. Daoism comes from the Chinese word 道 (dào) , which is most often translated as the Way. It also means path, method, style, or technique. It consists of the radical (an important component of the character indicating meaning or sound) for "walk" on the lefthand side, 辵, and the character for "head" on the right, 首.³ Coutinho (2013) describes the Dao according to Daoism as the holistic and immanent source of things, perpetually unfolding, discursive, and indeterminate. In Daoism, the cosmos is conceived as the interdependence of opposites to form "a self-generating organic whole" (Coutinho 2013, 84), in which existence and non-existence mutually emerge from one another.

It is traditionally understood that there are two strains of Daoism – one more religious, the other more philosophical. The religious tradition (道教 *daojiao*) originates in the Huang-Lao school of thought during the early Han dynasty in 2nd century BCE. It is highly syncretic,

³ Dao is also translated as Tao or Taoism in the Wade-Giles romanization system.

meaning that it merges and assimilates different religious and philosophical beliefs and practices. It draws upon the teachings of the ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi, worship of the legendary Chinese deity, the Yellow Emperor, the practices of Chinese popular or folk religion, and Buddhism, with an emphasis on the quest for longevity and immortality. It is distinct from philosophical Daoism (道家 *daojia*), also known as the Lao-Zhuang philosophy, which is based on the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi. The two thinkers never considered themselves Daoists at the time they were active; only later were they grouped together as belonging to the Daoist school of thought by Han dynasty historians. Modern scholars have challenged this distinction between philosophical and religious Daoism because Daoist texts themselves make no such distinction, and *daojiao* (道教) directly translates to “Daoist teachings” rather than Daoist religion, while *daojia* (道家) translates to “Daoist family” or “lineage” rather than Daoist philosophy. Both are used to refer to the same entity by Daoists themselves and the separation between the two is only useful insofar as it translates the Daoist tradition, however imperfectly, into the more familiar Western framework of philosophy and religion.

As Angus Graham (1989) noted, the meaning of the Dao was central to debates among all schools of thought in ancient China. But unlike other schools of thought, like the Confucians, Mohists, and Legalists, Daoists conceptualized the Dao as extending beyond human contexts and inseparable from the world as a whole. Rather than being limited by our human perspective, Daoists advocate for transforming our thoughts and actions to be in harmony with nature. Daoist thinkers shared a common skepticism towards moralistic arguments about the way humans ought to behave in society, as well as a common style of using satire, parable, and paradox rather than direct advocacy or argumentation. It fostered a spirit of opposition to authority and dominant codes of social behavior, protesting against rigid social hierarchies and fixed social roles. Many

stories in the Daoist tradition poke fun at the Confucian regime of sincerity, in which one must commit with heart and mind to one's social roles, by pointing out its hypocrisies and limitations.

I refer to two foundational texts of Daoism in this dissertation, *The Laozi (or Daode Jing)* and *The Zhuangzi*, both named after their putative authors. There is evidence that Zhuangzi (莊子) or Zhuang Zhou (莊周) was a historical figure, while Laozi (老子), or Master Lao, is a legendary character who may or may not have been based on a real person. Although *The Daode Jing* is traditionally attributed to Laozi, most scholars now believe that it is a collection of aphorisms, or brief sayings, composed by multiple authors during the Warring States period, an era of warfare and military consolidation from 475 BC to 221 BC. Since the Han dynasty, Laozi became venerated as a God and seen as a personification of the Way.

The Daode Jing is composed of 81 verses and some 5,000 words. It is a famously dense and difficult to understand political and philosophical treatise that juxtaposes ideas in often paradoxical ways. *The Daode Jing* advocates for elevating the undervalued (nothingness, water, the feminine, the lower position) and rejecting what was conventionally valued in feudal China (benevolence, morality, social engagement, the wisdom of sages). Water serves as a favorite image-metaphor for the Dao, and it is highlighted in Chapter 8 (上善似水) as the highest good.

The other prominent Daoist philosopher, Zhuangzi, lived between 369 and 298 BCE (during the Warring States period) and is said to have shunned offers of political employment and lived his life as an impoverished hermit. While he cannot have written the entire book which bears his name, he is credited with at least seven of its thirty-three chapters. *The Zhuangzi* does not put forward a single Dao that everyone must follow. Instead, it is a collection of colorful

stories and often funny anecdotes that embrace human and non-human voices, including those of animals, trees, cripples, and thieves.

One of Daoism's defining characteristics is its adaptable and relatively non-exclusionary attitude towards other spiritual traditions. During the Han Dynasty, the Neo-Daoists facilitated the introduction of Chan Buddhism to China. Buddhism then served as a model for the establishment of a more systematic Daoism with a more clearly defined set of teachings and model of monastic organization. At the same time, Daoists have historically had contradictory attitudes towards Chinese folk religion, both incorporating certain practices and gods into its pantheon, while also at times prohibiting cults to minor deities and attempting to educate the masses into venerating deities that personify the Dao. Besides temple worship, Daoists also includes practice techniques of self-cultivation, including practices of Nourishing Life (養生, yǎngshēng), meditation, and alchemy. These practices of self-cultivation are said to prolong one's longevity and aid in attaining immortality.

These practices and cosmologies are often not exclusive to Daoism, but rather shared with and mutually influenced by Chinese folk religion. Chinese folk religion is a form of popular religion practiced by the masses regardless of their affiliation, or lack thereof, with the three major traditions (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism). These beliefs have no set doctrines, can vary by region, and absorb and influence elements of other Chinese religions. It is important to stress that Chinese folk religion is an invented, modern term - these beliefs and practices were simply part of everyday life in China. In traditional Chinese cosmology, everything is interconnected and there is no clear distinction between the sacred and profane, heaven and earth, gods and humans. This emphasis on harmony and integration of dualities undergirds the principle that Heaven and Earth are one (tiāndì hé yī, 天地合一) and composed of the same vital

energy (qi 氣). While popular beliefs must be interpreted in their local contexts, there are certain structural elements unifying Chinese folk religion - for instance, the existence of Heaven and the Underworld, ancestor veneration, shamanism, and divination. Chinese folk religion is particularly intertwined with folk Daoism, and the two are sometimes used interchangeably. Because these traditions fit into a larger cosmic totality, people can participate in multiple modes of devotion without contradiction. In contrast with monotheistic traditions, Chinese religions did not require total commitment or exclusive adherence to one particular tradition. Prasenjit Duara, historian of China (2014), has argued that Abrahamic faiths of “radical transcendence” are less tolerant of other divinities and religions than traditional Asian religions of “dialogical transcendence,” which are more open to relative truths, multiple modes of devotion, and mutual encompassment (5-6).

Situating the Taiwanese New Wave

Laden with a multiplicity of sometimes contradictory signifiers – as a repository of traditional Chinese culture, an outpost for global techno-capitalism, a former Japanese colony, home to at least sixteen aboriginal groups, and an island under increasing pressure from China to relinquish its political sovereignty – Taiwan can be thought of a site of crisis, invisibility, and liminality. Located off the coast of China between the East and South China seas, Taiwan has been subjected to multiple waves of colonization, including by the Spanish, the Dutch, Ming loyalists, and the Japanese Empire. Because of these intersecting political erasures, Huang (2020) argues that Taiwan embodies a structure of “negative presence,” referring to the “historical condition of subjection to multiple systems of inclusive exclusions” (189).

Taiwan’s modern-day governance began when the Kuomintang (KMT) was exiled from mainland China in 1947 and planned to take temporary refuge in Taiwan before returning to

reconquer the mainland. This “temporary refuge” eventually became the permanent status quo as it became increasingly clear that the mainland would not be recaptured from the CCP. During the post-war period, the KMT was extremely repressive toward political dissidents, jailing and killing thousands of suspected communists in what became known as the February 28 incident, launching the “White Terror” and four decades of martial law. As a result of anticommunist sentiments during the Cold War, Taiwan (also known as the Republic of China), rather than the People’s Republic of China, had a seat in the United Nations and was recognized by the United States as the legitimate government of China from 1950 to 1971. In 1971, The UN expelled the Republic of China and transferred legitimacy to the People’s Republic of China. In 1979, President Carter followed suit and cut off relations with Taipei, marginalizing Taiwan on a global stage. Domestically, massive protests in the 1980s led to the lifting of martial law and the beginnings of democratization. During the 1970s and 1980s, Taiwan’s adoption of an export-driven economy led to an intensive period of industrialization and the growth of an urban middle class.

After martial law was lifted, Taiwanese New Wave filmmakers took advantage of increased political openness and committed themselves to a realist mode that portrays the impact of whirlwind political, economic and social developments on Taiwan’s psychic life. Taiwanese New Wave directors also benefited from the cosmopolitan offerings of a KMT regime that sought global legitimacy, such as the low-budget filmmaking of the Italian neo-realists as well as rebellious rock music from the United States (Yang 2001). Because political ideals were not allowed open expression in the authoritarian social environment; however, Yang has described the psychic life of his generation as characterized by “inner rage and the outward conformity”

(2001, 130). This sense of tension between inner turmoil and external placidity plagues the protagonists in one of his landmark films, *Terrorizers* (恐怖份子 *Kongbu Fenzi*, 1986).

Popularized by literary theorist Frederic Jameson (1995) as a touchstone of postmodern cinema, Edward Yang's *Terrorizers* remains one of the most recognizable films of the Taiwanese New Wave. The film is organized around at least two unrelated storylines that intersect in unpredictable ways: a wealthy young photographer's voyeuristic obsessions leads him to the scene of a crime, where he takes pictures of a Eurasian girl ("White Chick") in the middle of a hasty escape. Meanwhile, Li Li-Chun, a medical professional in line for a promotion, navigates a strained relationship with his wife, a novelist battling writer's block and domestic malaise. Each of the characters is listless, bored with their lives and starved for novelty and excitement. Their storylines intersect when the Eurasian girl makes a prank phone call, a seemingly minor event with devastating consequences.

Terrorizers features a double ending, juxtaposing a fantasy sequence with a disappointing, and much less satisfactory "reality" sequence of Li Li-Chun's suicide. The fantasy kicks off with Li Li Chun telling his friend that he's finally gotten the promotion for which he's waited for a long time. Then, he shoots his wife's new lover execution-style and threatens his wife with the gun. He picks up the White Chick from the train station and takes her to a hotel room that the police are alerted to raid. When a policeman shoots into the door of the room, a sound bridge of bullet blasting into its target is created between the fantasy sequence and the reality, where Li Li Chun lies bleeding into a public bath, having shot himself in the head. Subsequently, the sound of the bullet also bridges an unknown distance and appears to startle his estranged wife, who is in bed with her new lover. She leans over the bed and vomits, an indication of morning sickness and the fulfillment of her long-hoped-for pregnancy. This last

scene emphasizes how unnecessary Li Li Chun's role as a husband was, for it is only after his death, and with a new lover, that she can finally start over with a new child. Throughout the film, Li Li Chun is also hinted to be literally impotent and unable to give her a child.

Frederic Jameson's reading of *Terrorizers* defined the film as a Third World national allegory situated within the postmodern world system (1995). He argues that *Terrorizers* appropriates a modernist storytelling technique, Synchronic Monadic Simultaneity, to link storylines that have no apparent relationship to one another. Jameson interprets this tendency as evidence for the globalization of postmodern subjectivities, which are no longer tied to moral categories of good and evil, but instead produced by capitalist processes of commodification and reification. Jameson notes that, unlike earlier films in the Taiwanese New Wave, there is an absence of worries about the nature of Taiwanese identity in *Terrorizers*. Rather, Jameson sees the main character in *Terrorizers*, Li Li-Chung, as a "quintessential loser" and an allegory for a post-third world country that can never really join the first world; an embodiment for "fantasies about the limits to Taiwanese development in a world system" (1995, 146).

This comparison is a bit of an insulting one, as one might disagree with history developing in a deterministic or linear fashion, and Li Li-Chun's inability to live up to the patriarchal ideal expected of him might be read as a condemnation of patriarchal expectations rather than his essential identity of being a "loser." In a more sympathetic reading, Liu (2017) points out that rather than serving as allegories for Taiwan, many of Edward Yang's male characters are out of step with the country's rapid pace of modernization and economic development (116).

Other scholars have taken Jameson's reading of *Terrorizers* to task for failing to account for the specificity of Taiwan's history as well as New Wave directors' desires to write stories

grounded in local perspectives. Wu (2020) points out that Jameson's focus on globalization in *Terrorizers* minimizes the longer historical context in which Taiwanese New Wave directors in the 1980s were dedicated to rewriting Taiwan's history from an indigenous perspective (56). After the 1990s, indigenization is entangled with globalization and they could not be separated into distinct historical periods. Instead, he argues that the film is situated in a complex, overlapping context with loneliness as a consistent psychological pattern for Taipei throughout different historical periods. Instead of attributing the characters' psychic alienation to the spread of postmodernism, Wu cites Wu Zhuoliu's *Orphan of Asia* as a reference point for Taiwan's psychic loneliness that stretches back at least as far as the Japanese colonial era. I also seek to complicate linear conceptions of history by suggesting that traditional modes of thought, such as Daoism, continue to exist well into modernity and post-modernity. Next, I will discuss Edward Yang's final film, *Yi Yi* (2000), as illustrative of my post-secular argument.

Yi Yi

Unlike the self-centered, aimless protagonists of *Terrorizers*, the protagonists of Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* (2000) are deeply sympathetic. By indulging in long takes and leisurely pacing, the film gives its characters and its viewers the time to think and reflect, offering an experience of lived time that is deeply mundane yet magical in its simplicity. Translated into English as "A One and Two," the title conjures the image of a conductor waving his baton before launching into a performance. The film is an orchestral masterpiece that weaves together many melodies of the Jian family's life in 21st century Taipei. It follows three members of the family: the soft-spoken patriarch N.J., growing teenager Ting Ting, and budding artist Yang Yang. They live in a small apartment with their mother and maternal grandmother, who has an accident and falls into a coma in the beginning of the film. The family's apartment—cozy, lived-in—becomes a

gathering ground for family members and the holding space for the comatose grandmother. It is inside, outside, and from the third-floor window of the building's balcony that the characters' lives play out.

The film portrays Taipei at the turn of the millennium—in the midst of socioeconomic change, struggling to compete in the global economy while negotiating with traditional values informed by Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought. This negotiation is personified in N.J.'s struggles to be honest with his clients at work under the increasing sway of the profit motive. His struggle to preserve his integrity in dealings with a Japanese client, Mr. Oto, is threatened by his coworkers' desire to maximize profit by using cheaper software produced by a copycat company in Taiwan. This filmic sub-plot writes an alternative story of what has been called Taiwan's "economic miracle"—a boom period resulting from its transition in the mid-1980s from state-led industrialization to an export-driven, globalized economy. During this time of rapid change, this slice-of-life film momentarily suspends larger historical trends and zooms into the joys and frustrations of one Taiwanese family.

While the film traces familiar New Wave motifs of urban alienation and loneliness, it also seeks answers to existential questions—the meaning of life and death, the passage of time, and how spiritual traditions morph and adapt to an increasingly materialistic society. The film makes abundant use of the long take to highlight the understated moments of everyday life. Because the camera lingers on the urban landscape as moments of pause, it makes the viewer feel like blank, unremarkable moments in life are equally important as the twists and turns of action. While the film is not short of drama—including a murder, a suicide attempt, a hasty marriage, infidelity, and a funeral—events are subordinated to quieter moments meant to illustrate the durational flow of time. Scenes move gracefully and music sometimes spill over the frames. Life is constantly

happening in the margins of narrative and in still moments in between plot motion, inviting the viewer to travel into a meditative plane by way of the mundane.

It is difficult to put into words the reasons why this film is so moving. As A.O. Scott of *The New York Times* reflects, “I struggled to identify the overpowering feeling that was making me tear up. Was it grief? Joy? Mirth? Yes, I decided, it was all of these. But mostly, it was gratitude” (2000). *Yi Yi*’s beauty seems to lie in its ability to capture something ineffable, making the film a challenge for critics and scholars to decipher. According to Gilles Deleuze (1986), these strong yet unnamable feelings can be described as affect, a kind of movement away from preconceived emotions—a kind of emotional deterritorialization—and thus difficult to describe in language. Just as film uses visual language, narrative, and editing to articulate what cannot be fully captured in words, I posit that Daoist philosophy is uniquely positioned to articulate the ineffable quality of this film, as it is also characteristically skeptical of language. It also embraces a more intuitive form of knowledge tied to a temporality that emphasizes the process of unfolding.

Time is suspended in many ways in the film, but most significantly, in the unanchored temporality of the comatose grandmother. In the beginning, Ting Ting, the teenage daughter, forgets to take out the trash. This mistake leads to the grandmother taking out the trash, tripping on the stairs, and falling into a coma for the rest of the film. A doctor advises the family to speak to the grandmother every day to help her recover, and her family members then take turns speaking in front of her bed without receiving a response. Ting Ting feels guilty over her forgetfulness having led to her grandmother’s coma and begins to suffer from insomnia.

Near the end of the film, Ting Ting finally dozes off and enters into a lucid dream in which her grandma gives her an origami butterfly. This scene implicitly references Zhuangzi’s

famous butterfly dream, which imparts the wisdom that dreaming and waking, life and death, are merely transformations from one state to another:

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know if he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the transformation of things. (Zhuangzi 2013, 99)

One is not necessary more real or more significant than the other, and Daoist philosophy would posit that one should strive to approximate the inclusive impartiality of the cosmos and embracing transformation as it occurs. This story illustrates the Daoist principle of *qi wu lun* 齊物論 (the equality of things) – a sense of equilibrium and willingness to let go of attachments to temporary states of being. The reference to the *Zhuangzi* serves to open up a more cosmological space that allows Ting Ting to accept the passing of her grandmother as simply part of the natural and inevitable transformations of life and death, just as waking transforms to dreaming and vice versa. She mysteriously finds an origami butterfly in her palm upon waking, a reminder of her dream of forgiveness and release from her guilt.

The Zhuangzian butterfly in *Yi Yi* stems Ting Ting's feelings of guilt by warping linear temporality and opening up a space for rest and contemplation. It also creates a thread of messianic connection between the past and present, as well as the spiritual and secular realms. In Ting Ting's dream as in her waking life, the butterfly is a messianic figure that redeems her from her mistakes and her guilt over those mistakes. It interrupts ordinary life and opens up a temporality of fulfilled hope, what we might borrow from Walter Benjamin and call messianic time.

Rejecting the Hegelian idea that history obeys inexorable laws allowing for the attainment of ever-higher collective consciousness, he highlights in "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

that the past is contingent and fleeting, that history's continuity is that of the oppressor's, while history of the oppressed is fragmented and discontinuous. For Benjamin, it is the historian's task interrupt progressive time by blasting moments out of the continuum of history and forcing time to a critical stand-still. This allows us to recognize moments of immediacy, what he calls "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*), which fulfills and momentarily suspends the progression of history as an ongoing catastrophe (1969, 261). "Now-time" serves as an alternative to linear, historicist temporality. It is often produced by moments of interruption, unexpectedness, and waywardness, and in *Yi Yi*, this waywardness is personified by the youngest character, Yang Yang. Yang Yang is a misfit, constantly teased by the older girls around him and getting into trouble at school. When his father gifts him a camera, he begins to experiment with photography and through this practice, develops a deeper and more philosophical understanding of life.

To the bafflement of those around him, he likes to take photos of the backs of people's heads. He explains to his father, "You can see what I can't see, and I can see what you can't see, so how do I know what you can see? . . . Aren't we only able to see half of something?" The photos he takes freeze a moment in time, as if literalizing Benjamin's imperative to bring history to a critical stand-still. Despite his young age, Yang Yang also seems to serve as a messianic figure in the film, seizing through his camera the essence of "a memory that flashes up at a moment of danger" (1969, 255). While his practice is grounded in aesthetics rather than politics, he aspires to show people that the social totality is composed of a combination of partial perspectives. Using an ordinary example of the impossibility of seeing the back of our heads, Yang Yang raises the question of how we can say for sure that any of our singular perspective or values are true. This movie hints that only through skepticism and openness to unconventional framings can we open our eyes to this expansive and multidimensional world.

Domestic Time

In a conversation with her estranged husband, the housewife in *Terrorizers* complains about the tedious repetitions of everyday life. She is perpetually engaged in effort to escape the tedium of everyday life and start anew. She goes about trying to escape from her sense of entrapment by quitting her job to write a novel, trying to conceive a child, berating and then cheating on her husband, and finally leaving her husband for her lover. Each time, she does not seem to gain a sense of emotional satisfaction in following through with her decisions. Despite her attempts to leave unfulfilling situations; the viewer is left primarily with a sense of her restlessness and disconnection, unconvinced that her sense of entrapment will disappear as a result of changing circumstances.

The housewife in *Yi Yi*, Sherry, is also spatially and temporally confined to the world of domestic repetition. After becoming aware of the tediousness of her everyday life after her mother becomes comatose, she goes on a spiritual pilgrimage to a Buddhist temple in the mountains. When she returns, she has a more accepting disposition towards these quotidian repetitions. It is not the circumstances that have changed, but rather her attitude of tranquil acceptance. Her husband independently comes to the same conclusion. While meeting up with his first love in Japan on a business trip, the father NJ reminisces over the regrets and longings of his youth in his middle-age. He does not, however, stray into an escapist cliché of cheating on his wife. Despite being offered a fresh start with an ex-lover, someone he claims is the only woman he's ever loved, NJ rejects her advances and returns home to his wife and family. He confesses to his wife about meeting his first love on the business trip, reflecting: "It's just that I suddenly realized, if I were to start over...there's really no need." NJ's acceptance of what he has experienced and lost, with no desire to start over, is an example of following the Way.

Confronted with their impending death, NJ and Sherry draw a striking contrast to the characters in *Terrorizers* who would love nothing more than to start over again and again, each time without finding what they are looking for.

Modes of Duration

Malaysian-born Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming-Liang's *Stray Dogs* (2013) is most obviously notable for its excruciating, nearly 12-minute long take near the end of the film. It is considered one of the quintessential examples of slow cinema, a group often labeled as “festival films” because they are generally considered too austere even for arthouse distribution and exhibition. *Stray Dogs* illustrates key characteristics of slow cinema, including the frequent use of the long take, undramatic or non-narrative structure, realist or hyperrealist representation, and a marked stillness of the camera as well as its content (Flanagan 2012 and Lim 2014).

Because deferrals of understanding are built into the structure of the film for both the onscreen characters and the audience, the long take could be considered a specific manifestation of what Deleuze calls the “irrational cut.” What characterizes a long take is not merely the time elapsed between cuts, but rather the deferral of rational continuities. In the archive of films that Deleuze defines as “images of time”, these films reject a predictable editing structure in favor of unusually long takes and unpredictable linkages from one shot to the next. Rejecting the narrative logic of classical cinema's privileging of movement over time, these films seek to extract a direct image of time. According to Deleuze, “It is no longer time that depends on movement; it is aberrant movement that depends on time” (2001b, 41).

Deleuze's account of the time-image draws from Bergson's account of time as qualitative experience. In contrast to standardized clock-time, which is homogeneous for every place on Earth, Bergson's durational time theorizes heterogeneity as the ground of lived experience.

Change and continuity coexist in a vibrational universe composed of force relations. Embracing a philosophy of intuition, Bergson affirms that temporal multiplicity is lived, not thought. Bergsonian duration is an open, relational whole, and never given or determined ahead of time. Rather than supporting historical closure through projections about the future, it affirms the fact that nothing is exactly what we thought it was, and nothing is what we think it will be.

Contemporary scholars have been reawakened to Henri Bergson's ideas through Deleuze's primer *Bergsonism* (1990, orig. 1966) and his two volumes on cinema. In *Bergsonism*, he called for a return to Bergson – not only to return to the philosopher's ideas, but also to extend his project in relation to the contemporary transformations of science and society. Deleuze turned to Bergson to escape the Hegelianism that was prevalent in the French academy. In contrast to the abstraction of the Hegelian dialectic, Bergson's philosophy of lived experience affirms internal difference, novelty, indetermination, and unforeseeability.

In *Time and Free Will* (2018, orig. 1889), Henri Bergson theorizes real duration on the phenomenological level—it is defined as the inner experience of time in its immediacy, which is independent of space and inaccessible to cognitive consciousness. The ground of experience is qualitative richness of sensations or qualitative multiplicity, in which states of mind “overlap, merge with one another, and add together dynamically, forming a qualitative, or ‘confused,’ multiplicity” (Guerlac 2006, 96). Thinking interiority and subjective experience means that in the process of becoming, we never feel the same thing twice.

Duration goes beyond the phenomenological, as Bergson also establishes a permeability between the realm of inner experience and the nature of external reality. In *Introduction à la métaphysique* (2011, orig. 1903), he theorizes reality as not a series of discrete states but a process of constant change and ever-fluid movement. Reality can only be seized through

intuition, or entering into the object, rather than intellectual analysis, which can never go beyond mental shortcuts of homogenization and quantification.

In *Matter and Memory* (1991, orig. 1896), he further clarifies that the mental utilitarianism of human consciousness performs processes of abstraction, solidification, and division on the “moving continuity of the real in order to obtain a fulcrum for our action” (280-82). While useful for calculative tasks, these mental shortcuts—homogenization, quantification, abstraction—spatialize time into a falsely linear chronology. Similarly, language can never quite capture the kaleidoscopic, moving continuity of duration in which “everything changes and yet remains” (1991, 260). For Bergson, there is no dissociation between permanent bodies and homogenous movements in space, for they are part of the same kaleidoscopic whole. Rather than thinking about individual bodies with determinate boundaries that move in empty space, he speaks of change as forces, “modifications, perturbations, changes in tension or energy”—metaphors drawn from fluid dynamics that Deleuze and Foucault would later take up in their philosophical thought (1991, 226).

While sensory-motor perception reduces reality to representations that serve our interests and needs, Bergson defines attention (or attentive recognition) as:

A turning back of the mind which gives up pursuing any useful end of the present perception: there will be first an inhibition of movement, a pause. But rapidly, other, more subtle movements will graft themselves onto this attitude...whose role it is to go over the contours of the perceived object. With these movements the positive work of attention begins, and not just the negative work. It is continued by memories (1991, 110).

Attention is anti-utilitarian, and it also appeals to memory. An increase of attention means widening scope of memory images, allowing the image at hand to become embedded in a constellation of past images. It increases our ability to contextualize the perceived image within deeper layers of memory images, allowing us to resolve objects with greater detail and

specificity than utilitarian, action-oriented perception. Illustrating his ideas using the diagram of a cone of memory whose point intersects with the plane of perception, the present moment (represented by the point of intersection) is the moment of useful action. The cone represents pure memory. The more we move towards the more expanded intervals of cone and the expanded plane of perception, the more distended our attention and less focused we are on action. *L'esprit* (the mind) is in constant motion across these levels or intervals, while the body anchors our attention to the preservation of life.

The experience of attentive recognition requires drifting away from the pragmatism of the sensory-motor schema, whose focus on the utilitarian present necessarily fashions the chaos of time into a sensible plot. Hence, I argue that slow cinema involves the technical application of extreme long-takes and static framing to construct an experience of attentive recognition, an experience in which the virtual – pure memory and pure perception—is emphasized over the actual. Only when narrative framings are abandoned does durational present emerge, and this visualization of duration makes viewers aware of the expansiveness of a reality without any tangible reference points. Undoing established epistemologies as well as ways of seeing, it forces viewers to become familiar with the freedom that exists prior to language and the vulnerability that such freedom entails.

The static long take forces us to endure through our impatience, to experience the discomfort of real novelty, to not know in advance what is going to happen next on screen, to become completely open to anything tiny shifts of movement, brightness, mood, in the diegesis. We are forced to release our conventional ways of thinking and living without immediately mapping novelty onto pre-ordained coordinates, rationalizations, or explanations. Laura Kissel describes the long take as “a process of discovery, enabled by the duration of the frame” (2008,

351). She compares the long take to an investigation, and experiment, “a moment to linger on a question rather than pursue a particular answer” (2008, 351). Because slow cinema largely dispenses with narrative organization, we cannot fall back on the ordinary formulas of making order out of chaos. If we are bored, it is because we are overwhelmed and unused to being in a completely open, expansive field with no guide posts for where to look next.

Stray Dogs

I take the notion of long take as a capacious one—beyond describing only the length of a single shot, it can also encompass a filmmaker’s obsession with time and its representation on the screen. For instance, Tsai Ming-Liang returns to the same actors repeatedly in his films, as if documenting the to track the passage of time engraved into the lines of their faces and bodies through his feature films.

Starting in 2012, Tsai developed a slow walking performance with his lifelong collaborator, Lee Kang-sheng, into a series of short films set in different cities, including *No Form* (2012), *Walker* (2012), *Sleepwalk* (2012), *Diamond Sutra* (2012) and *Journey to the West* (2014). This series of “walking meditations” features Lee Kang-sheng dressed in a monk’s scarlet robe walking at a snail’s pace in the bustling streets of Taipei, Hong Kong, Kuching (in East Malaysia), Marseille, and Tokyo. Scholars have made the connection between these walking mediations and Buddhist notions of temporality, suggesting that the protagonist is actualizing the pilgrimage of the character of the monk Xuanzang, who made the journey from China to India to bring back Buddhist manuscripts in the seventh century (Lim 2017). Tsai Ming Liang identifies as a Buddhist and claims that his artistic work “possesses a spiritual component” (Vagenas 2013). While scholars have pointed out the Buddhist references in his work, fewer have discussed the Daoist influences in his films. I build on the discussion of spirituality in his

work by investigating the Daoist temporal frameworks in his self-declared last feature film, *Stray Dogs* (2013), which took home the Grand Jury Prize at Venice Film Festival in 2013.

The film paints a psychological and sensorial portrait of Hsiao Kang, a single father attempting to raise his children on the margins of Taipei. We see the man and his two children eating amidst weeds and on public benches, washing up in public bathrooms, relieving themselves in tall grass and by abandoned buildings. The father has a job holding a sign advertising luxury real estate while he and his children live in a one-bedroom shack by the side of a busy road. After the father suffers a mental breakdown, a woman who regularly feeds stray dogs nearby takes the children into her care.

What happens next is uncertain: the sequence might belong to a memory, fantasy, or dream. We are inside of an apartment and it is the man's birthday, and his wife and children sing for him. Despite the baroque lighting and dirt-streaked concrete walls, it looks like a happy and intact family. They have a recliner, tables, chairs, and seem to live a comfortable middle-class existence. The signs of trouble are subtle, almost undetectable—perhaps they lie in his hidden flask of alcohol, or the way that she flinches when she sees him. These subtle details gesture towards something sinister lurking under the surface; perhaps alcoholism, perhaps domestic violence.

In the last scene of *Stray Dogs*, the camera holds a static shot of a man standing behind a woman for twelve minutes in front of a landscape mural. Silence. Nothing happens for one minute, then two, then ten. Finally, twelve minutes pass by and finally, the man drinks from a flask while a single tear rolls down the woman's cheek. He approaches and rests his head on her shoulder, while she stares ahead, seemingly unmoved. Eventually, she leaves. After a few

minutes alone, he too exits the frame. This shot is merely the longest in a film composed almost entirely of static long takes and sparse dialogue.

Perhaps this scene signals the end of their marriage, but we are not told the two characters' personal history with one another, nor are we entirely certain about the time frame when this scene occurs. If conventional ideas about marriage and kids point to faith in a future, then the film skips forward to the point after durable intimacy unravels along with the clarity of chronological and causal linkages.

Disposability

In the film, three actresses play the part of a woman, but it never becomes clear if they play the same woman or different women. She is psychologically inaccessible and always in the midst of leaving. Abandoned like the stray dogs that inhabit the wilderness alongside them, the man and his children live moment to moment, too precarious to make any plans for the future. While the film may seem to take a humanistic view of the stray dogs and humans, evoking compassion for those society views as disposable, Tsai himself gestures to a different conception of disposability—one that is tied not to the capitalist economic system that generates people as disposable, but rather the cosmic impartiality of nature that sees all things as disposable. In an interview with Charles Tesson, artistic director of the Critic's Week in Cannes, Tsai reflects:

When shooting this film, I often thought of one expression from Laozi, "Heaven and Earth do not act out of benevolence; they treat all things as sacrificial straw dogs" [*Daode Jing* 5]. Those poor people and their children seem to have been abandoned by the world, but they still have to live. On the other hand, those who have power and influence seem to me to have forgotten about this world. They work incessantly on never-ending construction, but they do not know when destruction will arrive. (Tsai 2015, 5)

The line he cites from the *Daode Jing* is usually interpreted to mean that heaven and earth follow non-human rules, that they do not subscribe to the Confucian virtue of benevolence (*ren*

仁). They treat all things as “straw dogs” (*zougou* 芻狗), ceremonial objects used in ancient sacrificial rites. According to Ames and Hall (2003), “These sacrificial objects are artifacts that are treated with great reverence during the sacrifice itself, and then after the ceremony, discarded to be trodden underfoot” (206). While this vision of disposability might strike modern readers as inhumane, cruel, or unkind, it also points to a vision of the Dao as being completely impartial in its treatment of all things. Because nature is indifferent to humans and human notions of morality, it treats us with the same degree of care or carelessness as it would non-human beings. Chapter five of *Daode Jing* then goes on to discuss how the sage also treats all people with impartiality, without giving preference based on artificial codes of morality.

By invoking the ancient Daoist text, Tsai Ming-Liang avoids a critique of disposability based on human conceptions of social justice. As Huang (2020) writes, the film’s dispensing of narrative storytelling reminds us of “the unassimilability of precarious lives in a conventional humanizing framework” (194). Rather, Laozi advocates for an encompassing vision that takes the position of existential humility, being willing to accept one’s powerlessness and surrendering to change: “In the natural cycle, all things have their moment, and when that moment passes, they must pass with it. There is nothing in nature, high or low, that is revered in perpetuity.” (Ames and Hall 2003, 149). The understanding is based on the premise that everything and everyone is disposable from the perspective of nature, even though humans create arbitrary hierarchies of disposability based on wealth, power, status, or prestige. Tsai gestures to how the poor are more vulnerable and closer to this fundamental truth of our inherent disposability, while the wealthy engage in “never-ending construction” to shield themselves, not only from the lives of the poor, but also their own inherent fragility (5).

Using the impersonal lens of the *Daode jing* produces a reading of Tsai's long take not as a humanizing shot that seeks to bestow the dignity on oppressed people, but rather, as a spiritualized image of time. The twelve-minute take at the end of the film lends itself to reflections on the span of the couple's relationship as well as the relationship between humans and the cosmos, inviting viewers into the Bergsonian experience of attentive recognition. The two characters gazing at the mural, mesmerized, are no longer looking at the mural itself but at the memories and fantasies generated by the mural, taking in the demise of their relationship simultaneously with the beauty of the artwork and the idealized landscape it portrays. Absorbed by their thoughts, memories, and reflections over the mountains and rivers depicted in the mural, the estranged couple stand upon a post-apocalyptic landscape of a building in ruins. As Tsai reflects:

On one whole wall of a crumbling house the familiar landscape in Taiwan is portrayed in charcoal pencil. It is like standing in front of a mirror, looking at the farther shore in the mirror. It is both real and surreal. It is both close at hand and far away on the horizon. If everyone has an ideal world in their heart, a perfect farther shore, a place deep in their soul: isn't it right there?" (Tesson 2015)

Through close analysis of *Yi Yi* and *Stray Dogs* as films inspired by and speaking to Daoist worldviews, I contribute to the post-secular project of recovering religiosities embedded in a film tradition usually analyzed in secular terms: on the one hand, postmodernism and globalization, and on the other, indigenization and localization. Rather than subscribe to the binary notion of one or the other, I bring attention to the role of the Taiwanese New Wave directors Edward Yang and Tsai Ming-liang in resurrecting Daoist thought in moments of narrative stillness. References to Daoism in these films serve as a tool for temporal dilation as well as ethical reflection on contemporary social problems, as well as a vantage point from which to critique dominant temporalities and frame lived time as much more fluid, entangled,

and plural than we previously imagined. They share the insight that lived time is never entirely colonized by hegemonic systems, and instead, suffused with spiritual resilience and attuned to the cyclical rhythms of more cosmological ways of thinking.

CHAPTER 3

Jianghu in the Age of Disposability

The Changsha-based rap group C-BLOCK and GAI, winner of *The Rap of China* season 2, opened their hit 2017 single “Jiang Hu Flow” (江湖流) with images of a ragtag brotherhood of honorable men. The ten or so members are standing on a rusted cargo boat on the Yangtze River, wearing sweatshirts and jeans, spitting verse, and drinking baijiu (fermented sorghum). The chorus goes: “The entire Jiang-Hu exists for me to break through/my life is like a song/ nothing can be taken away/ karma comes and goes in the flow of Taoism” (SUP Music, 2:45).

The song’s spirited lyrics exemplify a resurgence of traditional Chinese elements (China style 中国风) in Chinese music and culture since the 2000s, in a genre known as *jianghu* style (江湖风). As China begins its meteoric rise into a regional and global political power in the 21st century, writers, artists, intellectuals and everyday people began to draw upon, invoke, reinvent and re-appropriate traditional Chinese culture. The song invokes both *jianghu*, here referring to a Daoist vision of life as continual unpredictable change, as well as karma, a Buddhist notion of spiritual debt, grounding the song in longstanding modes of Eastern tradition. Having been suppressed during the Mao era, pre-modern discourses such as Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism have returned to prominence in reform-era China, filling a spiritual void left by disillusionment with both leftist and neoliberal ideologies (Zhou 2016, Johnson 2017). The search for cultural alternatives to state-sponsored socialism, on the one hand, and market-driven consumerism, on the other, has led to a revival of ancient Chinese culture to provide a new sense of collective identity and meaning. No longer excoriated as “relics of feudalism,” images of traditional culture have become ubiquitous and highly visible in popular culture: From Hanfu retailers to *gufeng* (archaic style) music to *wuxia* (martial arts) flicks and palace dramas, neo-

traditionalist revival often occurs at the nexus of popular and traditional culture, knitting together ancient Eastern traditions with globalized forms of new media and commercial distribution.

In this chapter, I argue that the resurgent visibility of traditional Chinese culture is a symptom of the loss of stable political identities in the reform era and the desire for a stable cultural identity amidst the emergence of globalized forms of existence. While the state appropriates elements of traditional culture – in particular, Confucianism – towards consolidating Chinese nationalism, I examine a genealogy of discourse on *jianghu* to draw attention to the utopian and messianic potential of the Daoist tradition. I argue that the discourse of *jianghu* signals a desire for an alternative form of Chinese identity: one that is based on forming communities of mutual care and egalitarian fraternity in solidarity with the oppressed. While *jianghu* literally means “rivers and lakes” and signals a life-world beyond the bounds of the law, invocations of the term also serve to connect disparate time periods and social groups by creating a romanticized lineage with which outsiders identify: groups as diverse as martial artists, gangsters, migrant workers, rappers, and independent filmmakers. Following Benjamin, I use the analytic of *jianghu* to highlight that redemptive moments of the past are contingent and fleeting; that the history of continuity is that of the oppressor’s, while history of the oppressed is discontinuous, fragmented, and without any guarantees.

To examine the reinvention of *jianghu* discourse during the reform era (1976-present), I turn to three films by Sixth-generation director Jia Zhangke: *Unknown Pleasures* (任逍遥, 2002), *Still Life* (三峡好人, 2006), *A Touch of Sin* (天注定, 2013), and *Ash is the Purest White* (江湖儿女, 2018). Each of these films incorporate *jianghu* discourse in relation to a population “left behind” by the market economy: Chinese migrant workers during the reform era, who have participated in the largest wave of rural-to-urban migration in human history. While the

sociological exclusion of migrant workers is well documented, particularly, the ways in which they are denied household registrations (*hukou*) in the cities where they work and thus unable to access public services, less has been written about the communities to which they see themselves as belonging. In reading these films, I focus on the ways in which migrant worker characters conjure identification with mythical communities that draw on the discourse of *jianghu*, thereby providing an alternative genealogy of Chinese identity that centers the struggles of the downtrodden. By associating migrant workers with the age-honored archetype of martial arts heroes and heroines, the director points to how these characters are not simply defined by their class positioning as exploited workers, but also by their association with a fantastical, nostalgic space of the *jianghu* and its redemptive collectivities.

At the same time, fugitive communities that identify with the *jianghu* are eroded by the neoliberal forces during the reform era, as the encroaching pressures of market values threaten to atomize social relationships within these underground communities and uproot existing natural, social, and built environments. While both *jianghu* and neoliberal space are fluid, unregulated, and full of dangers and pitfalls, what sets the *jianghu* figure apart from the entrepreneur is a commitment to maintaining bonds of interpersonal loyalty. And while the entrepreneur pursues profit and individualism at the expense of their personal relationships, the figure of *jianghu* is animated by commitment to and sacrifice for their chosen family, forming contingent communities of reciprocity, indebtedness, and mutual interdependence.

Reinventing Tradition

In the reform era, nostalgia for tradition has been symptomatic of China's search for localized cultural identities in response to globalized forms of existence. Cultural theorist Dai Jinhua has argued that nostalgia furnishes comforting, if imaginary historical linkages between

past and present (1997). She points out that the visibility of traditional Chinese culture does not gesture back to the past as it was, but rather reinvents tradition and cultural memory according to the needs of the present. It is necessary to note that for the contemporary Chinese context, “tradition” does not mean a continuous stream of cultural knowledge passed from past to present, but rather a signifier that was banished, rejected, and expelled for the majority of the 20th century, and then resurrected in the reform era. The impulse to consolidate the Chinese ethnic and cultural identity through invoking tradition can be considered a *hysterical symptom* of the loss of self-understanding during the reform era, a search for ghostly roots that were amputated during the violence and chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Because memories of socialism are not yet forgotten and capitalism is not completely in place, tradition serves as a stabilizing mechanism protecting the imagined continuity of the Chinese people during the reform era.

The anachronistic nature of this cultural revival is not, however, a threat to the Chinese state, since nostalgia is often used to justify and consolidate ethno-nationalism by using the Han Chinese identity as a synecdoche for Chinese national identity. One might cite the Confucius Institutes as an institutionalization and exportation of traditional Chinese ideology for the CCP to wield soft power over language learners abroad, or the wearing of Hanfu clothing (the traditional clothing of the Han people), as an expression of love for traditional Chinese culture. This neo-traditionalist revival tends towards what David Wang (2013) calls “post-loyalism” to the singular “ethnic Chinese” identity rooted in antiquity (97).

Chinese antiquity offers a multiplicity of traditions to draw upon, and while some justify Han-centric allegiance to the state, other schools of thought inspire more individualist tendencies. I will focus on the cinematic invocations of Zhuangzi, who is commonly grouped with Laozi as Daoist thinkers, to offer an example of how tradition can serve as a starting point

and tool for analyzing contemporary developments. Unlike Confucius, who often serves as a source of legitimacy for Chinese ethno-nationalism, Zhuangzi has historically had an ambivalent relationship with centralized power. Zhuangzi is notable for his philosophical style – in the form of quirky, humorous parables – as well as his mythologized elevation of private life over public service. According to the Sima Qian's *Shiji* 史記 (*Historical Records*), Zhuangzi hails from a lower aristocratic background in the state of Meng. He became a minor official in the state of Song (in modern-day Henan), and declined when offered a higher post as prime minister in the state of Chu, insisting instead on retreating into private life and pursuing his own enjoyment (Kohn 2014).

Zhuangzi's emphasis on individual freedom has often placed him at odds with the aims of Chinese social reformers and modernizers. In *Zhuangzi and Modern Chinese Literature* (2016), Liu Jianmei traces the ambivalent reception of Zhuangzi by key 20th century Chinese thinkers, many of whom rejected his ideas as being overly individualistic at the expense of the collective. May Fourth intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu attacked Laozi and Zhuangzi as nihilist individualists who negatively affected social and cultural development. Lu Xun, often hailed as the father of modern Chinese literature, was an adamant critic of Zhuangzi for being too hermitic and reclusive to meet the needs of revolutionary social change. After the founding of the CCP in 1949, Daoist thinkers were perceived as reactionary idealists, enemies of the working class, and Daoist temples were systematically demolished by the CCP as reactionary relics of feudalism. Zhuangzi then experienced a resurgence of popularity in the 1980s, after the Cultural Revolution ended and the call for “an independent, autonomous, subjective individual” resurfaced (Liu 2016, 2).

Zhou (2016) traces the beginning of what he calls China's "neo-traditional revival" in *xungen* 尋根 (root-seeking) literature of the 1980s. Writer Han Shaogong, who wrote the manifesto for the root-seeking movement, calls for a return to ancient Chinese wisdom despite its deterioration into "paltry spiritual opium" in the modern age (Han 2001, 107). While Han seems to cautiously advocate for recovering the healthy roots of Chinese tradition, Zhou concludes, in line with Lu Xun, that Zhuangzi fails to demonstrate a commitment to social reform, instead advocating for an anti-social position of uselessness to and withdrawal from society. Indeed, this charge of Daoist thought as antithetical to social life extends back all the way to Mencius (a disciple of Confucius), who saw Laozi's concept of "effortless action" as "small scale hedonism that serves the self alone and avoids extending oneself to serve others" (Laozi 2001, 137).

While Zhuangzi has been criticized for being overly individualistic and political apathetic, a deeper reading of his philosophy calls into the question the binary between individualism and collectivism, political versus apolitical, as well as usefulness and uselessness to society. Furthermore, Zhuangzi's individualism must be distinguished from the liberal and neoliberal concepts of individualism that one finds in the West. For Zhuangzi, rejecting public service is necessary to protect and preserve oneself from exploitation and corruption, but this does not mean that he discards all commitment to collectivities. Rather, Zhuangzi recognizes that what is most useful to society is often misrecognized as useless, and thus the distinction and the ideological foundations of "usefulness" – prioritizing what is immediate, actionable, and utilitarian – must be unpacked. Despite Zhuangzi's problematic relationship with political reformers, his thought has been enormously influential in popular culture and offers important conceptual tools for understanding the reform era.

Tracking the ways that Zhuangzi's spirit illuminates contemporary life, I turn to Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke's invocations of Zhuangzi in *Unknown Pleasures*, *Still Life*, *A Touch of Sin*, and *Ash is the Purest White*, to elucidate his linkages between the floating worlds of migrant workers and forms of roaming consciousness as embodied by the Zhuangzian concepts *jianghu* (江湖) and *xiaoyao* (逍遥). Zhuangzi's influence enters Jia Zhangke's films through the mediation of popular culture, endowing them with a literary and intertextual lineage beyond the documentary realism for which he is well-known. I argue that Jia's three films implicit and explicitly reference Zhuangzi through new media, transmitting his ideas in unlikely places such as migrant workers and gangster brotherhoods. These marginal characters reimagine themselves into an alternative, self-fashioned space where they are cast as modern knights-errant, rather than as objectified victims of China's neoliberal transformation. Framing themselves as belonging to the age-honored archetype of martial arts heroes and heroines, these characters are not merely defined by their class positioning as exploited workers, but moreover by their association with a fantastical, nostalgic space of the *jianghu* and its alternative collectivities.

Despite the optimism that associations with *jianghu* afford the drifter characters for reclaiming their agency and a sense of community, however, their reprieve is often painfully short-lived, and their longing for heroism are inextricable from their entrapment in environments that are inhospitable to their thriving. This mythical framing, however idealistic, often obfuscates and prevents those inside from seeing how the social world of *jianghu* is slowly disappearing, displaced and infiltrated by new market values that threaten to atomize social relationships and uproot existing communities.

On the Concept of *Jianghu*

Jia Zhangke has been regarded as a cosmopolitan filmmaker with influences ranging from King Hu's *Touch of Zen* (1971) to Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), American gangster films, Orson Welles' *A Touch of Evil* (1958), Bella Tarr's *Turin Horse* (2011), Fellini's *La Strada* (1954), and Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953). However, he never loses sight of the local and strives to translate ancient Chinese folklore into the modern context as "recitable or adaptable classics" (Xiao 2015, 34). In his filmography, Jia references many classics of Chinese literature that are still influential on popular culture, such as *Monkey King* (in *Unknown Pleasures*) and *Tale of the Water Margin* (in *A Touch of Sin*), as well as classical genres such as Peking opera (in *Still Life*) and wuxia (武侠) novels and films (in *Ash is the Purest White*). In this chapter, I will focus on his references to Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi, in order to argue that his directorial style channels the philosopher's playful irreverence and roaming consciousness.

While many of Jia's films refer to the world of *jianghu*, *Ash is the Purest White* (2018) is literally titled "sons and daughters of the *jianghu*" (江湖儿女) in Chinese, and the poly-spatial and polysemic meanings of the term becomes integral to understanding the film as well as the layered temporalities of reform-era China. *Jianghu* 江湖 is colloquially understood as a metaphor for the underworld, a term whose origins can be traced back to the Warring States period in the works of Zhuangzi. It has since become taken up to describe the life-worlds of martial artists, gangsters, artists, and other underground figures, including independent Chinese filmmakers, who must work around or beyond the law.

To understand how the term has evolved over time, I turn to *The Zhuangzi*, which was written circa the third century BCE and contains one of the first written instances of the term.

The word *jianghu* is a composite composed of 江 (rivers) and 湖 (lakes), and in this text, it literally describes the open waters where fish might search for freedom from inhospitable environments:

泉涸，鱼相与处于陆，相响以湿，相濡以沫，不如相忘于江湖

When the springs dry up and the fish are left stranded on the ground, they spew one another with moisture and wet one another down with spit—but it would be much better if they could forget one another in the rivers and lakes (Zhuangzi 2003, 131).

Since fish in rivers and lakes are freer to express their natural characteristics than in a drying puddle, Zhuangzi advocates for abdicating to the rivers and lakes as an allegory for following the Way⁴. This evocative line appears in the chapter “The Venerable Master,” which uses a variety of stories to describe the mysterious and sometimes inexplicable ways of the ancient sage. Many of the stories illustrate non-attachment to life and non-aversion to death, advocating for acceptance of death as a natural transformation rather than something that ought to invoke sorrow and mourning. In a story about three friends, one of whom (Zisanghu) has died. Confucius dispatches one of his disciples, Zigong, to assist with funerary rites. Zigong is taken aback when he witnesses the two surviving friends playing the zither and singing to the corpse, celebrating that Zisanghu has “returned to his true form” (而已反其真). When Zigong asks the friends whether singing in the presence of a corpse was flouting the rules of ritual propriety (li,

⁴Ironically, the first part of this phrase, 相濡以沫 (“wetting one another down with spit”), has been appropriated in modern colloquial language to valorize nurturing and being nurtured by one’s significant other in a romantic relationship, while the second part of the phrase (“better to forget one another in rivers and lakes”) is usually ignored or forgotten. In the original context, however, the phrase attends to the way of nature as “water,” contending that even codependence in romantic relationships cannot rescue people from unfree environments.

禮) for dealing with a death, the friends laughed and dismissed his understanding of propriety.

When Zigong reported back to Confucius about what he had seen, Confucius admits that he is limited by the ritual norms of the human realm, and they are not. Confucius explains: “Fish thrive in water, man thrives in the Way. For those that thrive in water, dig a pond and they will find nourishment enough...So it is said, the fish forget each other in the rivers and lakes, and men forget each other in the arts of the Way” (Zhuangzi 2003, 142).

This story – in which the fictionalized figure of Confucius places himself in a position of non-wisdom in relation to Zisanghu’s friends – partially serves as an explication for the previous line. Ultimately, *jianghu* is an image-metaphor for the Dao, or “the way,” which is embedded in an expansive, non-anthropocentric awareness of the cosmos. This story evokes a skepticism towards codified human rituals as necessary for marking the passing of a friend, advocating instead for letting people process their grief in their own ways and celebrating their friend’s transformation based on their shared philosophical understanding of life and death.

Against the gradual self-cultivation and adherence to propriety advocated by the Confucians, Daoists believe that the Way is distorted by social convention. For Daoists, social convention consists not only of conventional values (what is morally right or wrong, desirable or not), but also concepts of “time, space, reality, and causation” (Zhuangzi 2003, 22). In the story, the three friends have seemingly attained a kind of enlightenment beyond even what Confucius can grasp. As Watson (2003) puts it, “In Zhuangzi’s view, the man who has freed himself from conventional standards of judgment can no longer be made to suffer, for he refuses to recognize poverty as any less desirable than affluence, to recognize death as any less desirable than life...He remains within society but refrains from acting out of the motives that lead ordinary men to struggle for wealth, fame, success, or safety” (23). The Daoist sage, who sheds conventional attachments of

wealth, success, ritual propriety, and even life itself, is one with nature and flourishes in his freedom. This enlightened figure then served as a model for the figure of the *jianghu*. While *jianghu* was initially associated with exiled scholars and recluses, it evolved to refer to knight-errants and other outsiders who brave considerable danger to fight against social injustice.⁵ These honorable outsiders became the basis for the *wuxia* archetype, a vigilante figure who follows his or her own moral codes over “state monopolies of justice and supervision” (Altenburger 2009, 364).

I open with the lyrics to “Jianghu Flow” in order to unpack the theoretical significance of *jianghu* as both an “untranslatable concept” (Wu 2012, 62) and “flexible cultural frame” (Sullivan and Zhou 2019, 2). It alludes struggle, solidarity, and honor, the underground, and functions as an “allegorical template for expressing resistance to structures and circumstances that can’t be addressed directly due to political circumscriptions” (Sullivan and Zhou 2019, 15). Because *jianghu* has taken on layered meanings through iterative adaptations, the term is difficult to pin down: Like “an organic entity” that evolves via adaptation, *jianghu* bridges the literary and the everyday and is ceaselessly generative (Wu 2012, 60). Signifying ease within rootlessness and exile, it poses a challenge to nationalism and other centralized frameworks by taking a fugitive relationship to power.

Sullivan and Zhou (2019) argue that *jianghu* is a Chinese cultural template that situates marginalized outsiders within an imagined space outside of the nation-state, in an unofficial lineage of outlaw heroes. The term *jianghu* gestures to a subjugated history of underground

⁵ Han-dynasty historian Sima Qian’s *Biographies of Knights Errant* (遊俠列傳) and Song Dynasty classic *Tales of the Water Margin* (水滸傳), were essential for defining the modern understanding of *jianghu*.

communities that abide by “the spirit of justice” (義氣) and “the spirit of brotherhood” (兄弟) rather than laws imposed by the state (Chen 2016, 181–82). Regardless of the specific time period or location in the Sinosphere, denizens of the *jianghu* are resourceful and deceptive, take shifting and strategic positionalities, evade the law when necessary, cross borders repeatedly and shed societal attachments of family and state in order to honor their interpretations of truth, justice, and kinship.

The irony of using *jianghu* as a template for resistance is that many of its qualities are now embodied by the neoliberal establishment. When finance capital itself is shifting, agile, resourceful, and boundary-crossing, denizens of *jianghu* can no longer take an oppositional position to power, but rather mirror its fluid, adaptive qualities. While the new space of *jianghu* is indeterminate, sometimes deceptive, and ever-changing, what sets the *jianghu* figure apart from the entrepreneur, the ideal subject of neoliberalism, is a commitment to maintaining bonds of interpersonal loyalty and care, often in friendships. And while the entrepreneur pursues profit and individualism at the expense of their personal relationships, the figure of *jianghu* is animated by commitment to and sacrifice for their chosen brotherhoods, forming communities of care and mutual interdependence.

Geographic Margins and Popular Culture

In Chinese popular culture, *jianghu* is closely associated with the world of Hong Kong gangsters and martial artists from a bygone era. Jia Zhangke’s transposition of *jianghu* into mainland China during its neoliberal transformation elevates perspectives of those on the margins as not victims, but subjects who inherit and transmit cultural values of the underworld. In an interview about *Ash is the Purest White*, the director has said that he wanted to explore how “values and philosophy of the underworld evolved and changed and eroded” between 2001 and

2018 (Jia 2019). He cited Hong Kong Triad films of the 1980s and '90s, in particular, directors John Woo and Johnnie To, as important influences to his work. Hong Kong maintains a special relationship with *jianghu*, as it is literally a peripheral space to the centralized authority of mainland China. Hong Kong is home to the wuxia novel, kung fu films, and Triad 三合會 films about organized crime syndicates, all of which invoke *jianghu* as the mise-en-scène in which action takes place. While the Kuomintang banned wuxia fictions during the Republican era and the Communist Party considered them feudal relics, Hong Kong became a refuge for *wuxia* fictions. Hong Kong was home to the golden age of the wuxia novel in 1950s, as well as the widely celebrated *wuxia* novelist Jin Yong (金庸). Berenice Reynaud (2015) proposes that given its complex relationship to Chinese traditions and western modernity, the city of Hong Kong can be thought of as a figure of *jianghu*: “The jiang hu proposed a model through which a situation of colonialism, exile, and alienation could be thought, expressed, subsumed, and mythologized” in the terms of an imaginary space of martial art heroes and heroines (86).

As Mayfair Yang (2002) and Shenzhen Cai (2016) have argued, the dissemination of popular characters from Hong Kong and Taiwan have allowed mainland Chinese audiences to internalize marginal types that are less affiliated with statist imagery, allowing for *jianghu* figures to emerge into the cultural landscape of mainland China. References to Hong Kong and Taiwanese popular culture abound in Jia Zhangke’s films, and mainland Chinese characters are often inspired to adopt the language of *jianghu* through their exposure to Hong Kong media. These characters are often shown watching and learning from Hong Kong characters onscreen, mimicking their dress, their mannerisms, and their patterns of speech. For instance, a solemn scene in *Ash is the Purest White* witnesses this process of cultural diffusion: Bin and his band of gangsters wear suits to

watch a screening of a Hong Kong action-crime film *Tragic Hero* (1987), with the ritual reverence of attending a religious service, absorbing the gestures, slang, and dress codes of their counterparts in Hong Kong.

In *Still Life*, the identification of gangsters in the mainland with bygone gangsters from Hong Kong becomes even more apparent. The protagonist Han Sanming, a migrant worker searching for his wife in Fengjie, strikes up an unlikely friendship with a young gang member named Little Ma (小馬). When they first meet, Little Ma lights up the cigarette that Sanming offers him with a scrap of newspaper, mimicking the mafia boss on the Hong Kong TV drama he was watching. Later, Sanming helps to free him from body bag, where his supposed friends left him as a prank. When Sanming asked if the others are giving him a hard time, Little Ma replies with a famous phrase from Taiwanese martial arts writer Gu Long: “人在江湖，身不由己” (“it is every man for himself in the *jianghu* underworld.”) Then Han Sanming offers Little Ma another cigarette, from brand that was popular sixteen years ago, and he recites another famous line, this time from the tragic hero from John Woo’s *A Better Tomorrow* (1986): “You know what? Present-day society doesn’t suit us because we’re too nostalgic.” Finding kindred spirits in one another, they exchange numbers and agree to look after one another as sworn brothers. And continuing to parallel the fate of the gangster hero in *A Better Tomorrow*, Little Ma becomes a martyr in the film as part of a gang war.

This conversation serves as a mouthpiece for the filmmaker, whose nostalgia for the past refers to a world of personal loyalty and chosen kinships. Though the *jianghu* – a marginal space away from centralized authority - is dangerous and untrustworthy, it is also where bonds of loyalty and mutual protection are forged. This form of collaborative survival is depicted in stark

contrast to the ruthlessly self-serving mentalities of the entrepreneurs and conmen in the film, for whom personal loyalties are merely liabilities, who emerge as the ideal subjects of neoliberalism.

A Touch of Sin: Resurrecting Archetypes

Discourse on *jianghu* is most frequently associated with the fantastical setting of the *wuxia* (武俠) or Chinese martial arts genre, where alternate communities at the margins of proper society are central to the storyline. While Jia Zhangke's world is primarily realist, he uses the visual language of *wuxia* fiction as a tool for framing modern-day violence in his 2013 film, *A Touch of Sin* (天注定). As the most representationally violent of his films, it delves into the context and fermenting pressures that erupt in acts of violence perpetrated by marginalized populations. Loosely based on four real-life incidents that went viral on Weibo, a Chinese microblogging platform that often reports stories in real-time, the four episodes of the film correspond with Hu Wenhai, a peasant vigilante who killed fourteen villagers in 2001 in Shanxi; Zhou Kehua, an ex-mercenary who carried out a series of murders and armed robberies across Jiangsu, Hunan, and Chongqing from 2004 to 2012; Deng Yujiao, a pedicure worker who stabbed a customer and local government official to death in response to sexual harassment in Hubei in 2009; and fourteen Foxconn employees who jumped off buildings to their deaths in 2010. While the film was officially approved by the Chinese Film Bureau in 2013, it has been shelved and unofficially banned in China for fears it will provoke social unrest. Jiwei Xiao (2015) writes that this film depicts Chinese society unraveling as a result of modernization, urbanization, and extreme wealth inequality, speculating that its portrayal of a "state of emergency" is prophetic in nature (24).

In this situation of necropolitical inevitability, acts of violent protest from the margins are framed as a tool of the last resort. Jia Zhangke's visual language around violence – as righteous

and justified in certain situations - is self-consciously borrowed from the wuxia tradition. As far back as the early Han dynasty, Sima Qian has defended the use of violence in the wuxia tradition, arguing that when the society is in a state of lawlessness, people should be allowed to resort to violence to vindicate themselves. Along similar lines, the director does not justify or seek to glorify violence, but rather seeks to understand the social forces that shape and propel these tragedies.

In his interview with The Asia Society, Jia says he was inspired by King Hu's *wuxia* films, which were primarily set in the Ming dynasty, as well as *Tales of the Water Margin*, a classic novel set in the Song dynasty (Jia 2013). He emphasizes that because the historical context was full of social unrest and inequality, people are tragically forced to resort to violence to solve their problems. One of the stories referenced in the film is Lin Chong's Nocturnal Escape (林冲夜奔) – a tale originally from *Water Margin* which was adapted into a Shanxi opera and shown to an audience of villagers in the first vignette. Lin Chong, also known as Panther Head, is framed, exiled and almost killed by an important civil servant, eventually becoming an outlaw of the marsh. Here, Jia draws an implicit parallel between the corruption from these dynastic eras with that of modern-day China, drawing attention to the political corruption of the present.

In the classical imagination, the *wuxia* warrior is chivalrous, righteous, heroic, passionate, and willing to risk their life to protect the weak and oppressed. As models of loyalty, bravery, and integrity, they are committed to serving justice by using their preternatural fighting skills for helping the less privileged. The director compares the modern troublemakers to ill-fated “xias on the decline” (沒落的俠) or “leftover warriors” (殘留的俠) who often have psychic and bodily impairments (Jia 2013, 1:00:07). These modern characters are not archetypal heroes, have no

supernatural fighting powers, and can barely protect themselves, much less help anyone else. Wang (2015) argues that Jia's refashioning of peasants and migrant workers into knight-errants "[restores] their humanity with a glimpse of their rich emotional world that official media representations tend to repress" (161). Their violence is both a symptom of helplessness and "a deep-seated desire for justice, freedom and dignity" (Wang 2015, 166). Unable to use violence to protect others, these impaired warriors wield violence as a refusal to be dehumanized. In the context of modern China, it is difficult to imagine there being any mythological knights coming to the rescue of the poor and oppressed. The oppressed must learn to fend for themselves, transforming from being situated as victims to becoming their own avengers.

Jia Zhangke excels at portraying the less obvious effects of class inequality in China – not only its material deprivations, but perhaps more maddeningly, the psychological effects of being ignored, worn-down, and humiliated by a capitalist system dominated by money and power. At the same time, China's authoritarian collectivism allows for little civic feedback and dissent, forcing people to go to extremes for their voices to be heard. Updating of the *wuxia* genre for China's modern neoliberal period, Jia says, "the characters at the end, for a very brief moment, reclaim their self-respect. They are ordinary people who, when faced with crises, are forced to become chivalrous warriors" (Jia 2013, 1:01:25).

The film weaves together four incidents that might seem sporadic into a tapestry of loosely connected episodes. The first episode features Hu Dahai, a rebellious peasant cut in the cloth of a traditional *wuxia* hero – warm-blooded, honest, direct, rough around the edges and unafraid to speak truth to power. He is diabetic, single, and seemingly unemployed. In multiple scenes, we see Dahai juxtaposed with a tiger, an animal associated with the hero Wu Song (武松) from *Tales of the Water Margin*. Dahai is angry that the local official sold the state-owned mine

to Boss Jiao, a former classmate and local entrepreneur who initially promised 40% of the profit to the village, but has since appropriated the money for himself. Dahai wants to write a petition to the Discipline Commission in Beijing, but does not know the address. In a remarkable scene at the airport, Boss Jiao bribes villagers to come greet him by promising them one sack of flour each. This preposterous and staged “homecoming” is accompanied by a welcoming committee of drummers and orchestrated cheers from the villagers. When Dahai gets Jiao’s attention and confronts him about his betrayal of the village, the man’s well-dressed goons begin beating him on the head with a shovel. In the hospital, Boss Jiao’s henchmen bribe him to keep his mouth shut, but Dahai refuses to accept the bribe. Instead, he picks up his rifle and wraps it in a cloth emblazoned with Wu Song’s tiger, resorting to violence, the only means through which he is able to express the voice of the powerless.

Many of the characters in this film recall different archetypes one might find in a *wuxia* story. For instance, Boss Jiao, the coal mine owner, corresponds to a false façade of the scholar-gentry (junzi 君子) archetype – one who appears humble, benevolent, and tolerant, telling Dahai “whatever you need, just ask,” but who behind the scenes hires others to do the dirty work of violently putting troublemakers in their place. The Confucian gentleman is known for his benevolence (ren 仁), yet this film questions if the Confucian ideal is itself a disavowal of strict hierarchical structures under the veneer of civility and generosity. Meanwhile, Zhou San recalls the archetype similar but different from the *wuxia*, the deadly assassin (*cike* 刺客), cold-hearted and seemingly unattached to either the suffering he engenders or to playing the role of a good husband and father. Xiao Yu recalls a modern-day female knight-errant (*nuxia* 女俠), with a high ponytail, white work shirt, carrying a cloth bag. She visually parallels the mysterious and fiercely independent lead in King Hu’s *A Touch of Zen* (俠女, 1971), and the editing during the

scene of her defending herself during a sexual assault corresponds to the switchblade editing one would see in a *wuxia* film.

The only character who lacks correspondence with a mythological archetype is the last character to which we are introduced, Xiao Hui, a young migrant worker who commits suicide after working a series of temporary jobs. He appears to be too innocent and hapless to respond to structural violence with violence of his own. He is instead associated with Buddhist imagery, choosing the path of non-confrontation and non-violence, only to internalize structural violence and turn it upon himself. In one scene, he helps his romantic interest Lianrong to buy and release goldfish into a lake as part of a Buddhist practice of *fangsheng* (放生) (setting animals free). As the most ordinary and least “heroic” of all the protagonists, he floats from one job to another, unanchored by loyalty to any particular community, buffeted by economic forces, representing the plight of millions of young migrant workers drifting around China today. According to the director, Chinese people today are caught up in the cruel optimism of “eternal migration,” the idea that wandering and roaming around will surely result in a better life for themselves and their families (Jia 2013). Similarly, that *A Touch of Sin* is “filled with people trying to escape,” and the word he uses for escape, “闖江湖” (*chuang jianghu*) brings us back to the concept of *jianghu* (ibid, 21:45). In a literal sense, 闖 (*chuang*) means to rush, charge, or break through. When placed together with *jianghu*, “闖江湖” (*chuang jianghu*) means to pioneer one’s own path while being tempered by difficulties and dangers along the way. Each of the characters in *A Touch of Sin* leaves home to seek a better life, advancing the idea that perpetual migration will lead somewhere unexpected, maybe better, and in any case offers a greater range of outcomes, both positive and negative, than staying in one place.

Unfortunately for Xiao Hui and so many others, these peregrinations do not always result in the desired outcomes. The optimism attached to moving around and starting anew eventually runs out as his debts and disappointments pile up and avenues of escape close down. While working at a Taiwanese-owned factory that produces iPhones, Xiao Hui commits suicide by jumping from the balcony of his worker dorm. While his suicide is certainly a result of the exploitation he faced at the Foxconn-like factory, it is also the result of the depleted hope and deferred dreams, a loss of attachment to the promise of eternal migration. The optimism attached to the idea of starting over is in the end, revealed to be extremely tenuous if not downright deceptive. *Chuang jianghu* is a risky path to take, and serves as a dark foil to the ideal of Zhuangzi's "free and easy wandering." Both are idealized versions of escape – whether from restrictive social hierarchies or economically stagnant situations. Migrant workers like Xiao Hui are caught in a double bind: leaving one job for another, or one city for another, does not radically improve their economic prospects, but instead traps them in the same contingent predicament. The idea of escape is shown to be illusory, as their circulatory movement is merely like treading water, which keeps them afloat rather than advancing their livelihoods or escaping from the oppressiveness of global capitalism.

As we've seen, Jia Zhangke makes prolific references to *wuxia* fiction as well as other touchstones of the Chinese cultural tradition, both ancient and modern. His wide range of references span ancient folk tales, Beijing and Shanxi operas, zodiac symbolism, Hong Kong action films, and 90's pop music, and this thick intertextuality serves as an effort towards cultural remembering in times of collective amnesia. In the process of paying homage to tradition, he revitalizes its power while becoming a part of its future. By centering the voices of marginal drifters and migrant workers within a stream of references that might be grouped under

the category of “Chinese tradition,” he elevates their ordinary stories into the realm of canonicity, affording them the same respect and admiration as given to the archetypal characters of *wuxia* stories. This blending of the realistic and the mythological gives ephemeral stories that might otherwise be lost to history a cultural continuity and permanence, a place high alongside the “great” touchstones of the Chinese tradition.

Free and Easy Wandering

Zhuangzi 莊子, also known as Zhuang Zhou 莊周 and Master Zhuang, lived from 369-286 BCE. Though it is usually attributed to him, the influential text called *Zhuangzi* is most likely a composite of his writings and those of his followers. He lived during the Classical period of China (5th-3rd century BCE) and like Confucians and Mohists, sought to understand the *dào* 道 - the path that humans should follow in order to thrive. His prose is organized into a series of short and often humorous parables, filled with eccentric characters including animals, trees, tricksters, failed masters, and ordinary craftsmen with superhuman skills. Zhuangzi has been described as skeptical, relativist, and naturalistic, and is considered one of the fathers of Daoism, along with Laozi 老子 and Liezi 列子. While few details of his biography can be verified, he was a contemporary of Mencius 孟子, Huizi 惠子, and the poet Qu Yuan 屈原. Huizi 惠子 appears frequently in the text as one of his friends and interlocutors, representative of a position of linguistic relativism, most famously in their debate about the happiness of fish.

Zhuangzi lived during the Warring States period, when retreating into hermitage was seen as an appealing alternative to participating in the corruption and instability of public life. In ancient China, hermits were aristocrats who refused official positions and served as an ideal of personal

integrity. They favored privacy, retreating to their estates or the mountainous wilderness, and aimed to protect their moral purity from the corrupting demands of the external world. They are associated with longevity, alignment with natural cycles, and ultimate personal freedom. In this state of withdrawal, hermits live in a state of inner freedom that Zhuangzi valorizes in his essay “free and easy wandering” 逍遙遊. The essay discusses the philosophical importance of journeying beyond the familiar, and has been translated as “free and easy wandering” (Zhuangzi 2003, 50), “rambling without a destination” (Ames and Nakajima 2015, 248) or “enjoyment in untroubled ease” (Sturgeon 2019). Yet this idyllic state of being should not be romanticized, and commentators have pointed out that this wandering is necessitated by and the result of sociopolitical strife and corruption. As Deng Lianhe (2010) points out, “The happy excursion is a forced decision by individuals in a dark age, but not the way of existence and the ideal of life in a normal society” (322).

The first story of Zhuangzi, “Free and Easy Wandering,” discusses the philosophical importance of journeying beyond the familiar. This anecdote tells the story of Kun, a mythical fish, who transforms into Peng, a mythical bird, who then seeks to migrate a great distance to the South. Its efforts are mocked by the smaller cicada and dove, who find it laughable that it sets its aims on such a seemingly impossible journey. Yet the story describes the naysayers as “small” and “short-lived,” praising the migratory bird for being able to feel at home within an expansive realm and for setting its sights on an unfathomably far-off destination (Zhuangzi 2003, 52).

“Where does he think he’s going?” The quail asks, unable to conceptualize of or accept the flight paths of long-distance migratory birds (Zhuangzi 2003, 53). The mockery and disbelief of the smaller animals towards the larger bird highlights difference between “petty” and “vast” ways of thinking, whereby petty understanding find the aims of the vast impractical or downright

ridiculous. According to Coutinho (2013), this story urges people to leave familiarity behind in order to loosen preconceptions fashioned by social roles, expectations, and ideologies. This involves journeying not only in the horizontal sense, but also vertically, to a higher perspective where formerly important distinctions become smaller and lose their significance. Coutinho distinguishes wandering from tourism and empathy, both of which involve merely shifting positions, by emphasizing how wandering occurs on a higher-order level so as to expand and transform one's worldview.

Unknown Pleasures

Jia Zhangke not only portrays itinerant characters reinventing themselves in order to adapt to a society in rapid transformation, but also embodies the kind of migratory consciousness that he injects into his films. A celebrated auteur, he frequently wins top prizes at international film festivals for his films and has found recognition both domestically and abroad. Before he became a household name, however, he was a migrant worker from Fenyang who began in the underground by submitting films to festivals without going through the government censors (Pickowicz & Zhang 2006). Even as his horizons expand, he continually returns to his hometown in his filmography. Like admits, "I think only if one has a feeling of connection would they be willing to be a fatigued migratory bird." (Jia 2020).

More than two thousand years after Zhuangzi, this desire for freedom, symbolized by the excursion elsewhere, finds widespread expression in the roaming inhabitants of the post-Mao era. While it is rarely described as a dark age, the reform era registers a collective loss of faith in the progress narrative, socialist values, and state institutions, and a reorientation of values under the terms of the free market. In the transition to the reform era, workers are stripped of a guaranteed role in socioeconomic life. The loss of security during the reform era has cast

thousands of people adrift, and like the mythical bird, they are leaving a familiar world behind with only the most nebulous idea of where they might land. Socialism's rules and loyalties erode as the free market becomes the dominant mode of organizing social relations.

In this modern context, Zhuangzian roaming is double-sided: it results from institutional abandonment, but also gives rise to a newfound, precarious freedom to change and evolve rather than adhering to fixed social roles and prescriptive doctrines. Feelings of drifting, floating, non-belonging, and being left-behind have been widely used to critique the ambiguous residence status and exploitation of Chinese migrant workers; however, this ambiguity also gives rise to a wandering consciousness, a kind of higher vantage point gained from perpetual movement and non-belonging. In this way, characters occupy positions provisionally, ramble without destination, live with radical contingency, and assert no essential or eternal modes of being.

Jia Zhangke makes explicit reference to Zhuangzi's notion of free and easy wandering in his early film *Unknown Pleasures* (2003) by juxtaposing the desire for spiritual guidance with more tangible desires for the consumerist pleasures of the free market. The Chinese-language title for the film, *ren xiaoyao* (任逍遥), references a popular Richie Ren song from 1998, a track that haunts the opening and closing scenes of the film. While the song's uplifting lyrics resonated with people's strivings in the burgeoning market economy of the 1990s, it also gestures to how the ancient Daoist concept of free and easy wandering has acquired a consumerist meaning totally detached from its spiritual roots during the reform era. Upward mobility seems out of reach for jobless youth in Datong, much less the kind of inner freedom propounded by Zhuangzi. For Binbin, who hangs out at the train station, in karaoke bars, and on the streets where he sells pirated DVDs, freedom means breaking free from the economic paralysis of his life in Datong. For Qiao Qiao, the female lead, freedom is more intangible, but it involves both a sense of

internal freedom and geographical mobility. In the ending scene, Binbin and his friend Xiao Ji unsuccessfully attempt to rob a bank, and are held captive in a police station. The police officer demands that he sing a song for his entertainment, so Binbin is humiliated, forced to sing the Richie Ren song that Qiao Qiao performs to in the opening of the film.

If the Chinese title *ren xiaoyao* does not already evoke Zhuangzi's story of Free and Easy Wandering (*xiaoyao you*), more explicit references can be found in the visual motifs that gesture to his famous story about the butterfly dream. In the film, Qiao wears two colorful outfits with butterfly embroidery, one in the opening of the film, and another as she is visiting her elderly father in the hospital. In a scene at a hotel room, she draws a butterfly on the mirror while speaking to her teenage lover, Xiao Ji, in dialect.

“老子孔子你知不知道?” (Do you know about Laozi and Kongzi?)

“不知道” (No.)

“莊子呢?” (How about Zhuangzi?)

“知道” (I know him.)

“逍遙遊知不知道?” (Do you know “Free and Easy Wandering?”)

“不知道” (No.)

“逍遙遊是莊子寫的。他意思就是說，你想幹什麼就幹什麼” (It's written by Zhuangzi. It means we should do whatever feels good.)

This exchange illustrates the enormous distance between Zhuangzi and ordinary Chinese people's understanding of Zhuangzi today. Xiao Ji's knowledge of Zhuangzi stops at the level of name recognition, while Qiao Qiao repeats the hedonistic interpretation her boyfriend had suggested to her, that *xiaoyao you* means “you should do whatever feels good.” Qiao Qiao and Xiaoji are both high school dropouts from a “third-tier” Chinese city; they have likely never been exposed to Zhuangzi in primary school, or if they had, only in the most superficial ways. Yet at the same time, this conversation signifies a larger collective desire in modern China for spiritual

guidance under the conditions of ruthless competition for material gain. It is this feeling of economic entrapment and spiritual depletion that leads these characters to desire transcendence, whether in class and geographic mobility, sleeping with one another, or in the kind of inner freedom that Zhuangzi advocates. After this conversation, Qiao Qiao reveals she has a tattoo of a butterfly on her collarbone. While she may not understand Zhuangzi in a scholarly sense, she gravitates towards his thought for the feeling of possibility that it affords her, an escape valve from her disappointing relationship with a controlling boyfriend and a dancing career that serves to promote a beer company.

The skewed interpretation of Zhuangzi in this scene speaks to the emptying out of faith in spirituality in modern China, the replacement of spiritual desires with hysterical symptoms. While in his original text, Zhuangzi conceives of “free and easy wandering” as a journey towards transcendence and self-transformation, the contemporary reception of his work, in these two characters, is anything but transformative. The overwhelming mood of the film is paralysis, and the citation of Zhuangzi merely serves to emphasize how impossible the current conditions are for purposeful self-transformation and elevating one’s consciousness.

Ash Is the Purest White

In *Ash is the Purest White* (2019), Chinese director Jia Zhangke reprises the settings and characters of his previous films: as in *Unknown Pleasures*, young lovers named Bin and Qiao lead lives of crime in Datong, and as in *Still Life*, Zhao Tao’s character searches for her absent lover in Fengjie. Like *Mountains May Depart*, the film is organized in a tripartite structure beginning in 2001, jumping to 2006 and concluding in 2018. Bin and Qiao, the head mobster and his lady, are at the head of a crime ring and respected and feared by their subordinates. When young rivals outside of their circle threaten to de-throne the boss and threaten his life, Qiao uses

Bin's gun to fire two warning shots into the sky. She is apprehended for carrying a gun and takes the fall for Bin. She spends five years in jail for Bin, but he disappears and does not visit her in prison nor does he await her release. This story follows the consequences of his unpaid debts and her self-sacrifice for their relationship - but rather than seeking retribution, the film's heroine embodies strength and continued loyalty upon finding out about his betrayals. While she is initially skeptical of the *jianghu* code, dismissing it as fictional, wanting to stay out of his underworld dealings, she grows deeper in her adherence to the *jianghu*'s code of honor and loyalty even as her boyfriend, who initially claims to be a part of the *jianghu*, leaves his gangster associates behind.

By tracking the different uses of *jianghu* in the film's dialogue, I argue that this concept creates an ahistorical mythical frame on which the characters can project their values and allegiances. One of the early scenes in the film is set against the picturesque backdrop of a dormant volcano. Bin tells Qiao that they are people of the *jianghu* underground, but Qiao disagrees, saying she is not part of the *jianghu*. Instead, she tells him "You've watched too many gangster movies. There is no more *jianghu*. It's not like the old days anymore." Bin replies with a famous quote from Jet Li's *Swordsman* (1992), "Where there's people, there's *jianghu*" [有人的地方就有江湖]. While Qiao realizes that the old *jianghu* of the Hong Kong gangster movies is irrevocably disappearing, Bin imagines that *jianghu* is eternal, mythical, and ahistorical, making an idealist claim that fails to consider the shifting historical conditions that affect him and his compatriots.

In *Ash is the Purest White*, the female lead Qiao (played by Jia's muse, Zhao Tao) reincarnates an older, wiser version of the Qiao Qiao character from *Unknown Pleasures*. Like

the female lead in *Still Life*, she is look for her missing partner in an extended sequence of wandering around the river towns of the Yangtze River. While the young Qiao Qiao only dreams about leaving her hometown and forging a new life, the more experienced Qiao begins to embodies an autonomous, shapeshifting subjectivity that resurrects modes of free and easy wandering 逍遥游 in *Zhuangzi*.

After five years in prison, Qiao is released into a world where she has no money, connections, or clout. Her five years in jail serves a metaphor for the sudden transition to the reform era. In the blink of an eye (or literally, in the space of several long shots), she is released into a new world with unfamiliar rules and social arrangements. No longer the head mobster's girlfriend, Qiao is also bereft of a social role that arises logically out of the past. She must therefore constantly reinvent herself in keeping with the changing circumstances.

Qiao responds to Bin's betrayal by immersing herself in an itinerant *jianghu* lifestyle. After being released from jail and then robbed, she is bereft of money and connections. To survive, she becomes a small-time con artist, successfully swindling a string of people by quickly adopting and discarding different identities. On a passenger boat going to Fengjie, her purse is stolen by a bunkmate who pretends to be Catholic. With no money to her name, she procures a free meal by professing to be the classmate of the bride at an outdoor wedding feast and blending in with the other celebrants. At a restaurant festooned with white tablecloth, she scams middle-aged men for money with the lines, "I'm her elder sister. She's had a miscarriage." Qiao's perceptiveness into the private world of middle-class with mistresses is rebuffed a few times, then finally rewarded by a hefty stack of cash.

Qiao's shapeshifting, performative selfhood in this sequence follows the ethos of what Hansgeorg Moeller and Paul D'ambrosio (2017) call "genuine pretending," a means of engaging with

the world that overturns expectations and asserts no authentic essence or specific identity (1). Many of the characters in *The Zhuangzi* embody this shapeshifting mode of existence. It is asserted in response to the Confucian regime of sincerity, which commands that one must sincerely commit to one's prescribed roles and relationships not only in actions, but also in one's thoughts and feelings. For the Daoists, Confucian hierarchies, divisions, and ranks are artificial constructs that can never fully account for the natural versatility of the self; furthermore, their impossible stipulations lead only to contrivance, hypocrisy, and unhappiness. Yet Zhuangzi's self is not an individual, isolated self nor a return to authenticity. Instead, it is a performative self that plays many roles without identifying with any of them: "Genuine pretending allows one to operate smoothly in a social environment full of hypocrisies, and at times, perils" (Moeller and D'ambrosio 2017, 181). Because shape-shifting allows you to assume any appearance, it is a fluid position that prevents identification with one's name or status. Along the same lines, Levinovitz (2012) argues that wandering 游 functions like an epistemological wild card, "completely open, versatile, and ready to become whatever the hand you are dealt with requires" (495). This reading valorizes an existential playfulness and spontaneous attitude, where commitment to expansiveness and transformation prevails over social roles into which people are disciplined.

In the film, Qiao eventually finds Bin despite his best efforts to avoid her. She meets him by a dock and learns that he is dating someone new, the sister of an entrepreneur. He tells her that he is no longer the same Guo Bin and no longer part of the *jianghu*, while she says that she's been living as a *jianghu* (跑江湖) – by which she means, engaging in a series of petty-thefts and scamming strangers - just to find him. Notably, he says he doesn't remember much of anything

about his previous existence, his amnesia serving as a way to protect himself from the loss he has experienced. Their previous roles are now reversed: while Bin becomes a shadow of his former self, withering away, Qiao begins to embody the underworld qualities that she previously repudiated as myth. In the end, Qiao becomes the proprietor at the Mahjong parlor, surrounded by old associates. When Bin comes back, crippled and in a wheelchair, she takes him in with no questions asked. She tells him, “in the *jianghu*, we talk about righteousness...you’re no longer part of the *jianghu*, so you wouldn’t understand.” Qiao’s transformation is now complete - she abides by the *jianghu* code of honor even as so many others dismiss it as bygone, mythical, or irrelevant to social conduct in modern China. She thus serves as an inheritor of the spirit of *jianghu*, identifying as a heroic figure of fugitivity and strength in an outlaw community she had previously repudiated.

In this chapter, I tracked the genealogy of *jianghu* discourse in Jia Zhangke’s films as an example of the resurgence of traditional Chinese images in modern Chinese visual culture. While this neo-traditionalist revival is often appropriated to consolidate the legitimacy of the state rooted in an ethnic Chinese identity, filmmaker Jia Zhangke makes references to the *jianghu* not as a stable marker of Chinese traditional culture, but in order to point out the ruptures, mutations, and mediations that tradition undergoes in contemporary China. While his small-town characters can only access Zhuangzian philosophy through martial arts films and folk sayings, I argue that they channel its rebellious and resourceful spirit, rearticulating *jianghu* in terms of the morally corrupt and precarious world of neoliberalism by evading the law while obeying underground codes of loyalty and righteousness.

CHAPTER 4

Appropriating Rural Nostalgia for the 21st Century

While the spiritual, the traditional, and the rural have been left behind according to modernity's logic, they constitute key types of resurgent nostalgias in contemporary China. In the next two chapters, I will discuss documentary representations of the home village, which is an important spatial location of Chinese tradition, and which is often tied to the feeling of rural nostalgia. While nostalgia for tradition might be comforting, even therapeutic for the individual, it can also spawn nationalistic ideologies that draw on the idea of the ancestral homeland and its associated traditions as the cultural foundations of the nation-state. Dominant social and political discourse harnesses nostalgia for authentic Chinese culture, which draw on neo-Confucian ideologies as well as cultural legacies of Maoist socialism, in order to consolidate nationalistic sentiments. However, the countryside also serves as a not-fully-known or fully-documented site of historical traumas, which are still repressed or sidelined in official narratives.

In this chapter, I will read the emergence of rural nostalgia as a symptom of the complex, problematic space of post-Mao China, and a site of competing ideologies of neoliberalism and critical recoveries of historical memory. I draw out some similarities and contrasts between three texts that produce nostalgia for rural life: One, the YouTube videos of rural influencer Li Ziqi (李子柒), which portray her everyday life in rural Sichuan as representative of the aesthetic ideals of classical Chinese culture, thus connecting the rural with the traditional, and two, Liang Hong's *China in One Village* (中国在梁庄, 2010), which highlights the social upheavals that her home village experienced from the 1950s to today, and three, Jia Zhangke's *Swimming Out Till the Sea*

Turns Blue (一直游到海水变蓝, 2020), which features well-known writers discussing their relationship with their home villages.

All three authors were born in villages or small towns before moving to big cities, and they have each found success on the national and global stages in the era of Chinese globalization. They appeal to different demographics: while Li Ziqi's practice of picturing rural idyll targets a global public that desires soothing, therapeutic images to help them escape from the stressors of their busy urban lives, her comforting images exotify a silent and idyllic Chinese countryside, largely devoid of people. Liang Hong and Jia Zhangke's oral history projects, by contrast, features oral narratives that refute the idea that of the rural as an idealized, ahistorical site of safety and belonging, and highlights that the rural space is deeply entwined with changing political and economic circumstances. At the vanguard of the revolution during the Mao era, and now "left behind" by the socialist market economy, rural China is not a neutral space of the Chinese homeland, but rather a rich archive of historical consciousness, political struggles, and complex emotional attachments.

Rejecting both the aims of the nation to frame the rural as vanguard or left-behind, as well as market aims to frame the rural as timeless and ahistorical, I argue that the two oral history projects constitute critical representations, as well as critical self-representations of the rural countryside within the contingent, historically-situated space of the present. Rather than using the rural as allegory for the grand narratives of the nation, these oral history projects attempt to situate the rural as locally distinct and historically specific. These projects, which occupy the intersection between documentary and oral history, attempt to deconstructs singular narratives and foster local, decentralized perspectives on collective historical experiences, has focused on reimagining rural China as coeval with the present and as a generative space of

alternative futures. Each of these projects present oral histories as not only important pieces of historical testimony, but as negotiations of the documentary form as ethically and socially-engaged art practice in rural China.

Rather than conceptualizing of their oral history projects as ways to access and represent the rural Other, the writer and documentarians I profile here return to hometowns to which they have personal connections, following a recent trend of urban intellectuals as well as migrant workers returning to the countryside (*fanxiang*). Beyond showcasing oral histories with key interlocutors, they also use formal techniques to complicate the self-other binary. Liang Hong represents herself as a former member of the village and employs self-reflexivity in her narration, while Jia Zhangke frames his film not only in terms of historical testimony but also as a self-reflexive project that plays with the documentary form. The village is reconfigured as a site of artistic innovation, engaging in community-based projects that also sometimes feature in their films. These projects challenge developmentalist narratives of China's rise and offer alternative ways of apprehending history based on personal and collective memories, changing the countryside from "backward" to a space replete with multivalent possibilities.

Historicizing rural nostalgia

The term "nostalgia" was first coined by Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer in 1688, while he was writing a dissertation on Swiss mercenary soldiers afflicted with an intense form of homesickness that could, if left untreated, lead to death (Abdelfatah 2021). Its symptoms included seeing ghosts, sadness, disturbed sleep, weakness, hunger, thirst, heart palpitations, and frequent sighs. Named by combining the Latin terms "nostos" (homecoming) and "algia" (ache), nostalgia was believed to be a physiological disease, spawning theories that a "nostalgia bone" existed somewhere in the body (ibid). In the scientific community, there was an increasing belief

that nostalgia was a modern psychological condition that was itself a reaction to modernity and its perpetual displacements. In the first half of the 20th century, nostalgia was considered a pathological emotion that was linked to aberrant and criminal behaviors, but by the mid 1950's, it was normalized as a regular human emotion and could be harnessed by commercial interests.

The type of nostalgia I will discuss in this chapter is rural nostalgia, or *xiangchou* (乡愁) – a feeling of wistfulness and painful longing for one's home village. In China, the village and rural life is central to feelings of nostalgia. For people who live in the city, *laojia* (老家) or old home, colloquially refers to one's ancestral village, and in a time of rapid urbanization when more Chinese people live in cities than villages, the village becomes a natural cathexis for nostalgia. Nostalgia for one's hometown is often evoked in moments of volatility and uncertainty, and displacement from the home creates longing and desire to return. Rural nostalgia is thus at once a longing for an idyllic, pre-industrial past, and an effect of the alienation and fragmentation of urban life. According to David Der-wei Wang (1993), this nostalgia towards the Chinese countryside is also an imaginary nostalgia in which modern authors romanticized and fetishized what has never existed or what has already disappeared.

Rural life has been romanticized throughout the Chinese history. Imperial China saw the rural as associated with literati returning to their countryside estates, whether mediate between the state and local society or to embrace a reclusive lifestyle. This harmonious “urban-rural continuum” was disrupted by the threat of imperialism in the late 19th and early 20th century, and the collapse of the China's imperial system in 1911 (Zhang 2020, 5). Starting in the twentieth century and under the influence of rapid modernization and urbanization, the rural began to become politicized and negatively associated with “backwardness.” May Fourth discourses categorized residents of rural areas as peasants who were seen as feudal, innocent, and

ignorant in contrast to enlightened urbanites. Then in the mid-1930s, the discourse about the countryside shifted again as the Chinese revolution relocated its base of operations to the remote rural town of Yan'an. In the revolutionary Mao era, peasants were portrayed as a unified collective revolutionary force, a source of strength and collectivist values, and model subjects that urbanites should emulate.

The rural has been central to twentieth century cultural movements such as native-earth literature, socialist romanticism, revolutionary realism, scar literature, and Fifth Generation cinema. While imperial China viewed the rural as idyllic, aesthetic retreat into nature, modern China viewed the rural in overtly politicized terms – whether as politically backwards during the New Culture Movement or at the forefront of the revolution during the Mao era. In the twenty first century, the “rural” has taken on new layers of meaning as a commodified space of aesthetic retreat. Micro-bloggers are producing new images of “rural idyll” (Li 2020, 3771) that depoliticize and sanitize the rural space, dislocating the rural from being subordinated to the paradigm of nation-building and re-subjecting it to the delocalized flows of the market economy.

Rural nostalgia in the contemporary China is inextricable from commercial flows that depoliticize and de-emphasize the relationship between present and the recent past. According to Linda Qian (2017), the period of 1980s to 2000s saw a resurgence of cultural production that evoke rural nostalgia, and I will extend her argument into the present decade of the 2020s using the case study of the rural microblogger Li Ziqi. This nostalgic idea of the countryside may serve the interests of commercial flows, but also mystifies the political and social problems afflicting rural China today. It frames the rural as an idealized Other, exotifying the landscape as soothing, abundant, and timeless in a time of aggressive modernization and urbanization. In this way, nostalgia both expresses a yearning to escape the commodified urban world and functions as a

commodity itself. In cultural production as well as the experiential commodity of rural tourism, the countryside is viewed through a romanticized, idealized lens and is permanently associated with the pre-modern past.

The Commodified Rural

Since at least the turn of the 21st century, Chinese studies that focus on the contemporary culture has been dominated by the study of urban culture. Scholars who work on post-Mao Chinese culture have frequently explored the representation of subjectivity in urban spaces (Zhen 2007, Braester 2010, Huang 2020), the figure of migrant worker in those spaces (Sun 2014, Lee 2014), and the innovations of Sixth Generation filmmakers (Berry 2006). However, this “urban turn” must be contextualized as departing from a longer scholarly trend of “rural preoccupation” which dominated modern Chinese studies in the West before the 1980s (Zhang 2020, 1). Because rural problematic straddles both popular culture and elite culture in contemporary China, this chapter examines a diverse assortment of mediums (documentary film, non-fiction literature, and social media), to investigate the rural as a discursive space in which the pressures of modernization, urbanization, and commercialization play out alongside the desires for cultural preservation and historical memory.

In much of post-Mao Chinese discourse, the rural is seen as underdeveloped, backwards, and stuck in the past while cities are exalted as harbingers of the future. While we know that urban and rural communities inhabit the same time, evolutionary conceptions of time push villagers into the backwards past and propels the urban bourgeois into modernity’s future. This modern ideology of linear, progressive time accounts for common characterizations of the rural as left-behind. The largest rural-to-urban migration flow, which occurred in China in the aftermath of Deng Xiaoping’s 1978 reforms, led to an array of challenges like empty villages,

left-behind elderly and fractured families. But a host of problems such as the marginalization of migrant workers by the *hukou* system, feeling of rootlessness and isolation in the city led many of them to return to the countryside. This emerging trend of urban-to-rural reverse migration is accompanied by visual representations of rural China catering to an idealized version of the countryside as a soothing respite from the city, attracting rural tourism and fostering a sense of rural nostalgia (Qian 2017).

This emerging trend of reverse urban-to-rural back migration, along with the state's pivot to rural revitalization since the announcement of Xi Jinping's "New Type" Urbanization Plan in 2013, has created a competing alternative vision of temporality and renewed interest in rural tourism. As idealized visions of the countryside promoted by rural microbloggers, rural tourism both benefits from and contributes to the resurgence of discourses of rural nostalgia (Li 2020). While rural nostalgia has been indexed by Chinese poets and writers for centuries, its newest instantiation in microblogging platforms is defined by its relationship to the market economy, entrenched rural-urban inequalities, and environmental exploitation. In a time that has been characterized by a headlong dive into materialism amidst a spiritual and moral vacuum, rural nostalgia is enmeshed with other nostalgias that seek to recover an authentic Chinese identity in a context of rapid change.

This is most emblematic in the short videos of rural microblogger Li Ziqi, who has been touted by the Chinese Communist Party as an ambassador for traditional Chinese culture worldwide. She has created a lucrative empire around promoting an idyllic rural lifestyle, and the images in her videos seem plucked straight out of an ancient Chinese fairytale. In her videos, she is often surrounded puppies and baby farm animals, making traditional Chinese dishes such as Luosifen from ingredients that are sometimes foraged, and sometimes grown from seeds she

planted, and cooked on rudimentary stovetops with wood-burning fireplaces. Her food is artfully plated on glazed earthenware dishes. In one video, she is making lipstick made of rose petals. In another, she builds furniture sets from bamboo stalks she forages from a nearby forest on horseback. This charming world is quiet and idyllic, accentuated by the patient, well-composed pillow shots of the moon and trees. She appears to live in a traditional-style house with a verdant garden framed by mystical mountains. In the videos, she often wears *hanfu*, a style of traditional Chinese clothing of the Han ethnic group currently experiencing a popular resurgence.

Commentators have observed that her videos portray a “peach blossom spring” (桃花源) a reference to the short story about a utopian rural community written by the poet Tao Yuanming during the Six Dynasties period (220–589), while others comment that they are inspired by her beauty, work ethic, and self-reliance.

Skeptics have questioned the authenticity of her videos, asking for behind-the-scenes explanations of the filming process, but Li Ziqi only gives the vaguest contours of an answer. “I’m just filming my life,” she says in an interview with *Goldthread*. “Or rather,” she clarifies, “I’m just filming the life that I want” (Wu 2019, 6:22). Li emphasizes that she wishes for her videos to be therapeutic and alleviate the stresses of city life, with the full awareness that they do not necessarily document the reality of life in the countryside. The website distributing her wares for international consumers, Li Ziqi Shop, brands her as “An Oriental Lifestyle Foodie: The representative of the beauty of Chinese classical culture” (Li Ziqi Shop 2021). It also briefly outlines her biography: she was born and raised in Pingwu, a small town in the Sichuan countryside. Her story is tragic and heartwarming – because her father died at six, and her grandfather died soon after, she was forced to work from a young age to support herself and her grandmother. Like many other rural microbloggers, she worked various odd jobs in the city

before returning to the village where she was raised. As a former migrant worker, her access to both urban tastes and mastery of traditional cooking and handicrafts make her well-poised to become a rural influencer. At the moment, Li Ziqi is perhaps the most successful of the well-known rural influencers. She has a following of 16.5 million international subscribers on YouTube (as of January 2021), making her the most popular Chinese-language YouTube channel, in addition to her nearly 100 million domestic fans across Chinese social media platforms (Weibo, Bilibili, Douyin, and more). Viewers are impressed by her self-sufficiency and commitment to a self-reliant, sustainable lifestyle, and even a *New York Times* food critic has written about how soothing and escapist it was to watch Li Ziqi videos in quarantine during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, when globally-interconnected industrial supply chains have been exposed as deeply fragile (Rao 2020).

The world that Li Ziqi inhabits is beautiful, timeless and fertile. It is a world of natural abundance untouched by the political and environmental effects of contemporary capitalism, and Li herself embodies both beauty and talent: not only is she pale-skinned, doe-eyed, and slim, but she is also deft in executing both agricultural and domestic work, as practiced in harvesting corn as making dresses from scratch. The camera quality and calligraphy script in these videos suggests a skilled production team, contributing to an overall effect of timeless and effortless refinement. Her camera is patient, recording time-lapses for months and even years to illustrate the life cycles of seeds growing and vegetables ripening. The soundscape is silent, with the exception of occasional chatter between her and her grandmother in Sichuan dialect, overlaid with a soundtrack of calming zither music. Notably, her world is limited to the private and domestic realm, with no people shown outside of her, her grandmother, and occasional production assistants and friends.

The emergence and success of rural microbloggers such as Li Ziqi depends on an ecosystem of supportive political, social, technological, and economic factors. As a result of the slowing down of the Chinese economy as well as the continuing exclusion migrant workers face due to the household registration system, many are returning to their villages to forge new opportunities. The widespread use of smartphones, 4G and 5G networks, and social media incentives for rural areas creates the technological infrastructure that makes rural celebrities possible, while challenges such as increased wealth inequality in urban centers make such escapist consumption desirable. While the consumption of these videos of rural life might be said to bridge the urban-rural gap, the popularity of rural microcelebrities reveals the discrepancy between the two by offering urbanites an aestheticized, commodified experience of rural life (Li 2020).

Li Ziqi also translates the urban-rural binary into a modern-traditional binary, fashioning herself as a global ambassador for traditional Chinese culture. In one video titled “The Scholar’s Four Jewels of China,” she is filmed spending two years making calligraphy brushes, inkstick, paper, and inkstone from scratch, and finally presenting them to a royal Malaysian family (Li 2019). In 2018, the Communist party named her a “good young netizen” and role model for Chinese youth (Matei 2020). In September 2019, the *People’s Daily*, a CCP mouthpiece, gave Li their “People’s Choice” award for her video on calligraphy, and praised Li for helping to promote traditional culture globally, while the Communist Youth League named her an ambassador of a program promoting the economic empowerment of rural youth. In December 2019, *People’s Daily* wrote on Weibo that the key to her success was that she expressed “the beauty of [a certain] Chinese lifestyle which is pleasing to the audience and attracts people to come [together]” (Inkstone 2019).

While this type of rural nostalgia casts the countryside as desirable as a scenic escape from the city, it jettisons historical memory of the turbulent 20th century as well as poverty other sociopolitical obstacles that rural residents face. Rural nostalgia refashions the countryside as an amusement park of pastoral delights, a home to which one might temporarily return as a respite; however, this consumptive mode of engagement does not alert the urban consumer to any of the social and environmental issues facing rural residents. As cultural critic Dai Jinhua (1997) has pointed out, nostalgia replaces the historical consciousness of political struggle with an individualized re-writing of history. She explains its function is to neutralize discontent: "The mesmerizing allure of this picture is that it rebuilds a kind of imagined link between the individual and society, between history and the present reality, in order to provide a rationale for our contemporary struggle and to impart to us some sense of comfort and stability" (Dai 1997, 160). Representations of rurality in Li Ziqi's videos are therefore spectacles that cater to fantasies of rural life as a touristic backdrop. They impart a sense of comfort and stability, offering a seductive reframing of the countryside as apolitical, abundant, relaxing, and therapeutic rather than impoverished and fraught with unresolved political traumas. Unlike rural influencer' projections of timelessness onto the rural landscape, the oral history projects I will discuss aim to recover the historicity of rural life by turning to people's painful, sometimes repressed and incomplete memories.

Oral History Projects in Contemporary China

The use of oral history in China as sources for historical analysis is not new – one can find records of conversations with local residents in Sima Qian's *Shiji* (Historical Records), which was compiled during the Western Han dynasty (202 BC-25 AD). In more recent historical memory, one can point to projects such as Zhou Enlai's project to collect oral histories of the

Boxer Rebellion as well as Mao Zedong's "field investigation" (田野调查) of the Cultural Revolution which were not very critical of communist party policies. It was not until the early 1980s that a formalized oral history methodology began to be practiced in China, which both celebrated the achievements of the revolution and recovered some of the marginalized voices of the ordinary people (Li Na 2020). In the 21st century, oral history has experienced steadily rising popularity, both inside and outside the academy.

The most well-funded oral history projects are those that celebrate significant historical events since 1949 and follow the well-worn grooves of official CCP history. One such project, The Oral History of the Open-Door Policy, created a triumphant narrative of how the Open-Door Policy came to be implemented. Other national-level oral history projects have focused on topics such as the War of Resistance against Japan (1931-1945), intangible cultural histories (on Beijing opera, the cultures and histories of ethnic minorities, and folk musicians), and traumatic historical events that have occurred due to foreign aggression (ie. Nanjing Massacre, bombing of Chongqing in 1938-43, and the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake). Politically sensitive oral histories of the Cultural Revolution and Great Famine are classified, often inaccessible to researchers and the wider public. In a survey of oral histories in contemporary China, Li Na (2020) acknowledges that few scholarly works of oral history ignite public interest in the way that public oral histories do. Although she does not identify any specific works of popular oral history, I will turn to a book that is widely agreed to have launched oral history and the closely related genre of "literary nonfiction" (*feixugou xiezu*) into the mainstream, catalyzing a national discussion about the costs of modernization for rural China.

Only 20 when she left her home in Liang Village to pursue educational opportunities in Beijing, Liang Hong, a professor of modern Chinese literature at Remin University, is best

known for her oral interviews and commentary in the three-volume Liang Village Series. The series is composed of *China in One Village* 中国在梁庄 (2010), a 5-month investigation into the lives of rural villagers, *Leaving Liang Village* 出梁庄记 (2013), which focuses on migrant laborers who left the village, and *Liang Village Ten Years On* 梁庄十年 (2020), which follows up with key characters in her previous volumes. Together, these oral histories serve to treat ordinary people, primarily her family members and fellow villagers, as archives of embodied knowledge whose lives are physically and mentally shaped by larger sociohistorical forces.

The Liang Village Series has been frequently discussed in terms of its generic innovations. It is said to draw from sociological “field investigations” and ethnographies, and *China in One Village* has become required reading in many sociology and anthropology classes across China. Her work has been widely discussed as ushering in a new generation of non-fiction writing (*feixugou xiezu*), which Chambers argues has subsumed and replaced the genre of reportage literature (*baogao wenxue*) in the 21st century. Chambers (2019) situates her work in relation and in contrast to reportage literature, which developed from internationalist, leftist critique of bourgeois journalism by the League of Left-Wing Writers in the early 1930s (Laughlin 2002). While reportage assumes an authoritative and objective writerly stance, a top-down vantage point that Liang Hong calls “hongguan” (macrocosmic), Liang Hong’s investigative approach is distinguished from reportage by its sense of self-reflexivity and openness to uncertainty, in which the investigator cracks open the process of her investigation (Xu 2014, 19). Building on the insights of literary deconstruction, Liang Hong states that she aims to “seek out the village’s existence” rather than describe its fixed existence (ibid,19). Rather than embodying authorial objectivity, Liang Hong admits her limited perspective with honesty and humility: “Maybe I am completely perplexed, maybe I myself have lots of doubts,

hesitations, and I cannot be clear. I only try to present this kind of complexity, right down to its ambiguity, multiplicity, and incertitude.” (ibid, 19).

Chambers (2019) identifies in the Liang Village Series the social logic of China’s recent rural transformations as being “post-socialist” – following Arif Dirlik, which he defines as the contradictions between socialist theory and practice (250). He wishes to locate her work in relation to China’s leftist tradition of politically-committed reportage literature, commenting that the collapse of reportage is part of a broader “farewell to revolution” and restructuring of the social world by the market economy (250). He recognizes that unlike the Maoist orientations of reportage, Liang Hong’s political orientation remains ambiguous. Yet at the same time, her work enacts critique by portraying the contemporaneous lived experiences of rural people vis-a-vis the market economy. Drawing from Brian Massumi’s theorization of affect (2002), Chambers uses the term “feeling” (quoting Liang Hong) to understand the transformations of the reform era, defining it as “the stage on which a social logic of fragmentation is both enacted and obscured” (267).

Liang herself insists that regardless of how people perceive and categorize her work, it remains “literature, first and foremost” because “it relies on emotion, rather than using the language or logic and reason to produce an account of social norms and community attributes” (Liang 2021, ix). I will follow the literary and affective threads of her work in my analysis, paying attention to questions of intimacy, memory, how she situates herself in relation to her informants, and her relationship with academic and journalistic norms of objectivity.

Liang Hong’s work is as much an ethnography as an auto-ethnography as her topic is the village where she was born and where she grew up. Her interview subjects are family members, distant relatives, friends, long-time acquaintances, local characters, or acquaintances of

acquaintances. This lends the book a sense of embeddedness, and the text does not read as academic knowledge from above, but rather a personal quest to represent her changing relationship with her hometown and the people in it. Liang is a hybrid of academic language and rural roots, and in her writing, she represents herself as a former member of the community, never disavowing her roots or objectifying herself as solely a native informant. Much of Liang Hong's book is composed of direct transcripts from her interviews, with seemingly little editorialization. Her commentary is sparse and concise, and often with an eye towards humanizing those who are excluded from social ecosystem of the village.

The Decay of the Rural

According to Chambers (2019), the primary feeling threaded through Liang Hong's *China in One Village* is "The loss of the rural", a feeling of losing one's home shared by peasants and migrant workers alike (271). This feeling is not easy perceptible, however, because the decay of rural society only becomes starkly apparent when viewed through an outsider's eyes. For Liang Hong, an outsider who was once an insider, and who is still emotionally connected to the village through her father and other rural family members, the "loss of the rural" signifies a feeling of "psychological homelessness" (Liang 2021, viii). It is engendered by the fragmentation of familial relationships, environmental degradation, disinvestment in education, and the abandonment of the clan-based social organization that once knitted the community together.

Spatial changes in the natural and built environment register a sense of loss and decay, observations that Liang Hong contrasts with memories and images of rural abundance. While the book contains are moments of rural nostalgia, it is projected into the distant past or into the subjective domain of memory. The rural that emerges from this return trip is shockingly different

from her earlier memories of abundance. For instance, the waters of Tuan River, which Liang remembers being clear in her childhood, has become black and shiny like gasoline, and in many places, dried up. The village center and roads are organized around commercial areas, rather than by kinship as in the past. Even more absurdly, Liang Hong's former elementary school has become repurposed as a pig pen for a neighboring village after it was defunded and gutted by village administrators.

The decay of the rural is also when Liang Hong describes the family separations resulting from the trend of migrant workers leaving the countryside without their children. In a chapter that begins with a chilling news story about the rape and murder of an 82-year old woman by a high school boy from her village, Liang Hong uses the case to discuss the prevalence of juvenile delinquents (*liushou* 留守, literally “rear guard”) in rural areas and the social factors that produce delinquency. Because so many adults leave the village to become migrant workers, leaving their children behind under the care of overworked grandparents, the children grow up without adequate attention and supervision. Migrant worker parents are also frequently separated – they often work in different cities, or if they live in the same city, sleep in different worker dorms.

While she (and her educated, city-dwelling readers) may find the trend of prolonged parent-child separation tragic and unfathomable, it is an everyday state of affairs for migrant parents to put their children under the care of their grandparents for years on end. Putting herself in the shoes of her informants, she channels both their frustration and their lack of ability to change anything about the situation: “The tragedy and suffering is a feeling only we “tourists” or “visitors” have. Faced with separation as an everyday occurrence, what can they do? Spend each day crying bitterly, being unhappy? You can’t live like that” (Liang 2021, 79). While mainstream media and academia represent migrant workers as a sociological group, Liang

Hong's focus on how long-term migration impacts private and intimate life, family bonds, and psychological wellbeing humanizes migrant workers as complex emotional beings.

In her commentary on the juvenile delinquent murder case, Liang Hong uses anthropological language to describe the undercurrent of a "primitive moral order" and divine retribution that allows people to make sense of the tragedies happening around them (2021, 71). For villagers, the idea of karmic or divine justice is central to explaining the suffering that Liang Hong attributes to bad policies, government corruption, lack of corporate regulation, and free market economics. Though her positionality and interpretive frame are very different from that of her informants, she is able to relate to and represent their moral interpretation of the world without dismissing or patronizing them. While Liang Hong and her audience might seek to understand and forgive the Wang boy for his crime, for many of the villagers, "death was the only fitting punishment for this brutal act." (ibid, 71).

The Urban Intellectual Returns to the Countryside

Liang Hong pays homage to revered modern writer Lu Xun, who is known for his exploration of Chinese village life during the early 20th century. Chapter three of *China in One Village* is titled "Save the Children," a reference to his short story "Diary of a Madman," and Chapter five in Liang Hong's book is titled "Runtu Grows Up," which references to an important character in Lu Xun's 1921 autobiographical short story, "My Old Home" (故鄉). In order to contextualize this reference, one must go back almost a century ago to 1921 when the story was published. The chapter title gestures to widening chasms between urban and rural life as well as the disparities between the idealized past and the harsh realities of the present. The story is representative of native-land literature (*xiangtu wenxue* 鄉土文學), a genre Lu Xun first coined in 1935. For Lu Xun, exile is the condition of possibility for utopian longings about the

hometown, and according to Xiaobing Tang (2000), these narratives are motivated by the desire for “seeking, in childhood memories, of an imaginary compensation for present dissatisfaction” (86).

In “My Old Home,” the narrator (a proxy for Lu Xun) has already been away from his hometown village, Shaoxing, for over twenty years, working as a civil servant in Beijing. When he sees his village come into view, he is in shock at how desolate it appears, commenting that “This is not the village I remembered at all, my hometown village is so much better.” The protagonist is planning to sell his family’s old house and bring his mother, wife, and younger brother to Beijing. In his hometown, he is visited by one of his childhood playmates as well as the son of a hired hand, Runtu (闰土). Lu Xun remembers him being a happy and carefree child who told colorful stories about trapping birds, protecting watermelon from wily predators, and collecting colorful sea shells. When he encounters Runtu as an adult, he sees a completely different person.

The older Runtu has clearly lived a life of suffering and privation:

Although I recognized him right off, he was not at all the Runtu who lived in my memory. He seemed twice as tall now. The round and ruddy face of yesteryear had already turned pale and grey, and it was etched with deep wrinkles. The rims of his eyes were swollen and red just like his father’s. I knew that most farmers who worked close to the sea got that way because of the wind. He was wearing a battered old felt hat, and his cotton clothes were so thin that he was shivering. His hands held a paper package along with his pipe. They were not the smooth and nimble hands that I remembered. Now they were rough, clumsy, and as cracked as pine bark.” (Lyell 1976, 96).

The naturalistic description of Runtu also functions as the portrait of a trope: the inarticulate Chinese peasant who suffers at the hand of fate, reduced to his social role as a peasant and powerless to change his plight. When they reunite, Runtu’s address of Lu Xun as “Master” simultaneously breaks the silence as well as creates a wall between them – drawing attention to the hierarchies between the two and master-servant relationship that characterize

their social positioning. While Lu Xun attempts to equalize their positions using the endearment Brother Runtu (闰土哥) to address his old friend, he can no longer view Runtu only through a rose-tinted, nostalgic lens. They engage in reciprocal gift giving: When Runtu gifts Lu Xun a package of dried beans, Lu Xun offers Runtu to take whatever he won't need from his old house, and Runtu picks out two tables, four chairs, an incense burner, a balance, and candlesticks. Later, a fellow villager tattles that Runtu may have also stolen some of the narrator's dinnerware.

Tang Xiaobing (2000) draws forth an allegorical dimension of the short story in which the homeland is always "abstract and unrepresentable," an idealized vision of a rural, pastoral landscape at odds with the harsh realities of rural China (79). The character Runtu reminds Lu Xun of a more innocent time in his past, as well as a vision of youth and lost innocence. In the conclusion of the story, the narrator comments on the friendship between his nephew and Runtu's son as not only an echo of his past, but the utopian vision of a more hopeful future. As in the "Diary of a Madman," Lu Xun projects hope onto the next generation in the conclusion, envisioning that the friendship between an urban and rural child will not disappear with time, and that they live a utopian life of fulfilled friendship, psychological rootedness, and economic security. Tang comments that this story is a kind of "therapeutic writing" that accesses alternative visions of social life, a vision that moves forward from individualized nostalgia towards collective transformation: "The relivable native land lies not in the past, but in the future, and it is to be reached collectively; it signifies nostalgia overcome. Such is the narrator's belief when he reminds us how a new path may be created on the surface of the earth." (ibid, 96) At the end, the narrator embraces a more future-oriented vision of homeland, one that projects utopian longings into the future rather than one that romanticizes the past.

Liang Hong's "Runtu Grows Up" chapter profiles four eccentric male characters who occupy the margins of village life, including Qingli, a man who suffered a mental breakdown after a dispute and now carries a knife with him at all times. Kunsheng, a poor man from a different village who lives with his family in the Liang Village graveyard, Lumpy Ginger, a drifter who bums dinner and liquor off of his fellow villagers, and Qingdao, a former village secretary who tells humorous stories and skewer officials with wise-cracking rhymes, but who maintains a strained relationship with his children. This chapter brings a layer of specificity to village men, tracking sparks of wittiness, humor, intelligence, and wisdom that denature the trope of the silently-suffering, stoic Chinese peasant, pointing to the ways in which an adult Runtu might live a fuller life than a city-dweller would imagine. The tone that Liang Hong takes is not one of pity, but wry observation and dark humor.

In many ways, Liang Hong is positioned very similarly to Lu Xun in the story. She returns to the home village as an urban intellectual, and her relationship to her hometown changes as a result of confronting the imperfections that memory has distorted or smoothed over. When asked by an interviewer whether Liang Hong saw a different hometown in Jia Zhangke's documentary, she responded, much like Lu Xun, with a moment of disidentification: "Looking at my hometown through someone else's eyes suddenly made me see how broken down our house is, how the river is not as big as I thought it was, how there was less water than I thought...I also felt quite embarrassed, like bringing a guest home and suddenly finding that the table is dirty" (Liang, *Lens*). Despite anticipating that she would feel less connected and return less often to the village than before embarking on her research, Liang Hong has vowed in the Afterword of her first English translation to continue tracking the life of the village and write one book on her hometown every ten years (2021, 297). This kind of deep, long-term commitment to the village

distinguishes her from tourists, and her commitment to writing non-fiction literature about her village is a durational project that pushes back against simplistic understandings of rural China.

Provincializing China

What distinguishes the documentarians I discuss in this chapter and the next is their focus on China not as a nation-state or a people, but their desire to seek out a sense of “home” within the “homelessness” of contemporary capitalism. Whereas the previous generation of filmmakers – the Fifth Generation – tended to identify China with Han-centric national narratives, the newer generation is focused on the local and the provincial within the nation, creating a more granular image of regional difference and specificity within China.

For instance, one might trace the narrative arc of Jia Zhangke’s filmography as recursive—each of his orbit around his hometown, and how characters search for, long for, and make a home in a time when everything is changing. Jia’s so-called Hometown Trilogy – *Xiao Wu* (1997), *Platform* (2000) and *Unknown Pleasures* (2003) – are all set in Jia’s home province of Shanxi, and according to Michael Berry, all explore a ceaseless and ongoing search for home.⁶ His latest feature (*Ash is the Purest White*, 2019) ends with the main character returning to her hometown and managing a mahjong parlor, the setting for the film’s opening shot. Similar to the protagonist of this film, Jia Zhangke has also moved back to his hometown of Fenyang, where has been active in multiple efforts in rural revitalization, including launching the Pingyao International Film Festival, building the Jia Zhangke Art Center, organizing the Luliang Literature Festival, and investing in a restaurant named after the Chinese-language title of his 2015 feature, *Mountains May Depart* (山河故人). These efforts are all situated in or near

⁶ Those working on the filmmaker’s features might want to refer to Michael Berry’s *Jia Zhangke on Jia Zhangke* (2022), but it was published too recently for me to bring into the dissertation.

Fenyang, a county-level city within Luliang prefecture, a “fourth-tier” city located about 600 kilometers to the southwest of Beijing.

Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue (2020), subtitled “the literature of a village,” continues Jia Zhangke’s commitment to highlighting the village as a politically important and culturally relevant space in the contemporary Chinese cultural landscape. It features oral history interviews with acclaimed writers Yu Hua, Jia Pingwa, and Liang Hong, as well as with ordinary villagers of the Jia Family Village about the posthumous Shanxi writer Ma Feng. They each came of age in a different time period –revolutionary socialism, the Cultural Revolution, Reform and Opening Up, and the consolidation of the market economy, and they each reminisce on the Mao era and the turbulent transition to the reform era, reflecting on the place of rural China in their early lives and the changes to which they have borne witness in the large-scale transitions through different periods in Chinese society. These oral histories situate writers as expert witnesses to history, their stories weaving a tapestry of emotional and spiritual connections between the present and the past.

Jia Zhangke embarked on filming *Swimming* at the launch of the Lu Liang Literary Festival, for which he invited writers to gather and give talks on the relationship between rural experience and modern China. Like *24 City* (2008) – which was partly funded by the real estate developer, China Resources Land Limited, and *I Wish I Knew* (2010), the official documentary of the Shanghai Expo, *Swimming* serves the dual function of boosting publicity for the festival as well as a documentary mediating on time and historical change.

The film opens with the sounds of telegram taps, whistles and marching to a 1-2-1 chant, Beijing opera, then more whistles and chanting, as the opening credits play on a black screen. We see close-up footage of the faces and bodies of statues commemorating physical strength of

socialist workers, farmers, and youths who have helped to build the nation. The image then cuts to close-ups of the faces of elderly masses at a public cafeteria, as if in an instant, these once-revolutionary youths have grown old. Elderly men and women stand around waiting their turn for canteen food, their faces etched with wrinkles and the emotional complexity and pain wrought by China's tumultuous 20th century. The mess hall recalls the memory of socialism and its communal spaces. A somber Western classical soundtrack turns this ordinary space into something more evocative, even symbolic of the disappearance of one kind of mess hall, and the appearance in its place of something that looks identical, but now embedded within a new and dislocated context.

A close-up shot of a man slowly pushing a walker follows. We learn from a title card that this was Song Shuxun, a resident of Jia Family Village, and the first oral history interview in the film. Through the oral history interviews, Jia Family Village is described as an impoverished place. Villagers talk about the reputation of the village as a place of many beggars, unmarried men, children sold, infertile soil. But it is also a village where the acclaimed writer Ma Feng stayed and wrote many of his rural works. He is interviewed and shot sitting on a bench in what appears to be a retirement home. In this oral history, Ma Feng is described as a socialist leader who solved the problem of overly-alkaline soil in the village by forming mutual aid groups among the farmers, and even contributing a million kilos of grain to the state. The collectivist ethos of Ma Feng is echoed by subsequent interviews. His artistic talent was noticed from an early age and he was assigned to the theater troupe which went on tour to Yan'an, at the time the cradle of the revolution. He was an avid reader, and then went to work as a journalist in Beijing. But it was only when he returned to his home village in Taiyuan, the provincial capital of

Shanxi, and began writing on rural topics that his stories were picked up and eventually canonized by educational textbooks.

In Jia Zhangke's signature documentary style, this film features patient ambient shots of anonymous crowds and ordinary activities, focusing on the ways in which certain gestures can encode and encapsulate the spirit of an era. And when he points his camera at people on the street, he creates a visual archaeology of different eras. While the younger generation are absorbed by swiping and watching videos on their smartphones while sitting on the bus, the elderly sit in public parks, looking with curiosity and wariness at the camera. These vérité-style shots focus on the surface of life: gestures, ways of walking, ambient street sounds, and are overlaid to a soundtrack of somber classical music. He also enlists the help of some of these ordinary people – often farmers and workers - to choose one of their favorite lines from a famous writer and recite them in front of the camera, paired with the sound of Western classical music. Unlike the oral history interview segments which are conducted in native dialects, the recitations are always done in standard Mandarin – the language of China's educational system, the *lingua franca* of China. All of the villagers speak Putonghua inflected by local dialects.

Jia Zhangke's documentary style is famously eclectic, but these fragments of life - oral histories, poetic recitations, observational shots, and extra-diegetic sounds – are used to convey a sense of historicity and epochal change. Just as he uses documentary footage in his fictional films, he also uses excerpts from his feature films as documentary footage. Blurring the bounds of reality is not new in Jia Zhangke's work - he used the opening of Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (2000) as documentary of the river in 1999 in *I Wish I Knew*, juxtaposing it with a take of the same river shot ten years in the future in 2009. In *Swimming*, Jia Zhangke also incorporates footage from a fictional film as documentary footage - a shot of the village mural that he used in

Platform (1999). In *Swimming*, the mural of the village plan for the Jia Family Village is marked as shot in 1979. In this shot, the mural is titled “Blueprint of the New Village Design Plan” with housing and village centers designed as part of a grid-style organization. Villagers in the foreground ignore the mural, laughing and chatting cheerfully with a man in the center.

It is followed by the title card “The old and the new,” prefiguring the next shot of the new village plan filmed in 2019, exactly thirty years later. The new mural is painted in the style of a more naturalistic, traditional Chinese ink painting with socialist elements: mountains and streams painted in a classical style in the background, houses nestled in the mid-ground, while the slogan “Becoming wealthy together” (共同富裕) and the flag of the Chinese Communist Party features prominently in the foreground, bright red in contrast to the muted greens. A tour guide informs people that the village plan “shows the village as it is now and the plans for its future” while the visitors ignore one another, intent on taking snapshots in front of the mural. An audio excerpt of a policeman apprehending some youths from *Xiao Wu* (1997) is presented used without comment, as if voiced of the past literally returned to haunt the present. (“What are you doing, sir? Nothing. We’re just chatting. Chatting? Show me what’s in your bag! Open it!”)

Jia Zhangke’s documentary work uses a method of archiving and reflecting on national change from the vantage point of the local. The past, in Jia Zhangke’s work, is recursive and localized, it continues to return and haunt the present. As much as one might argue that his participation in international film festivals speaks to a desire to exhibit China for the world, it is also a desire to produce film-collages that attempt to hold onto fragments, images, and sounds, that are continually slipping away. If progress relies on amnesia, Jia Zhangke reminds us that the past, and in particular, the rural, provincial, unglamorous past, which has never completely disappeared, is indispensable for understanding China in the present.

In an interview with *MUBI*, the author references up a quote from the writer Yu Hua that “remembering the past or one’s hometown is a way of reaching for reassurance in the midst of chaos,” and Jia responds, “Yes, many of the authors talked about this idea of seeking their roots or returning home to their native birth place. I think it's because right now there's an overwhelming sense of people just feeling lost” (Huges 2020). Jia’s response diagnoses a key issue in modern China, and his films – as repositories of micro-histories that connect the present to the past – serve to partially heal the sense of psychological homelessness that Liang Hong articulates in her book.

Jia Zhangke has described his newest film as “not only a journey in contemporary Chinese literature, but also a journey into the spiritual history of the Chinese people” (Liu 2021). This journey is recursive: it often takes us from villages to cities and then back to villages, where the film is primarily shot. There is footage from the Lu Liang Literary Festival where writers highlight their memories of and nostalgia for the countryside, and this sets up the narrative arc of the in-depth oral history interviews: In three out of the four case studies, a writer leaves their hometown, studies or works in a major city, and then returns to their home villages to create literature inspired by the people and the landscape around them. Their journeys are ones of homecoming, involving going out of and back into the village, the process of which transforms their perception of the village from an impoverished place to escape to a place of abundance and creative inspiration for their literary work.

Each of the authors are interviewed about their lives prior to becoming famous writers, and their interviews reveal the biographical details of their lives as intertwined with the Chinese history and distinct storytelling styles. They are interviewed almost as if they were “ordinary people,” their literary talents portrayed as an outcome of their circumstances rather than innate

talent or ability. The second author profiled in this film is Jia Pingwa, the author of *Ruined City* (1993), which stirred much controversy and a 17-year ban for its frank descriptions of sexual acts, and *Qin Opera* (2005), which won the Mao Dun Literature Award in 2009. But in the documentary, he is introduced first as a family man, as an establishing shot shows him conversing with his family over dinner and advising his daughter to privilege her familial responsibilities over her poetry. In the more formal interviews shot in his study as well as a theater house, he speaks in depth about his family life. He discovered *Dream of the Red Chamber* at his aunt's house in primary school and identified with its descriptions of navigating interpersonal politics in a large family. He shares his experience of the Cultural Revolution through its impact on his family: Because his father, a college graduate and teacher, was accused of being a KMT secret agent and counter-revolutionary, he was forced to work in the production brigade instead of attending high school. He made very little money, and tried to find other jobs but was rejected from the militia, geological work, and road maintenance work due to his family background. When political conditions allowed him to be classified as a reformable child, he went to college in Xi'an. He decided to be a writer in Xi'an, but he only began writing prolifically after returning to his home village in Shangluo. He highlights his local pride, stating that "Standing from Shangluo, from the perspective of the hometown I live in, I observe China and the world" (0:56:18).

The writer Yu Hua is introduced by an establishing shot of the author sitting in a dumpling shop by the side of the street, watching a basketball game on his smartphone, clearly at home in the globalized, digitized world. He was born in Hangzhou but grew up in the coastal town of Haiyang. He comes across as entertaining, upbeat, unflappably cheerful, taking the interview as an opportunity to tell funny, irreverent stories about his childhood and growing up

during the Cultural Revolution. He describes how books were passed in secret during the Cultural Revolution so they wouldn't be burned or confiscated, passing through so many hands that the beginning and end pages of the binding would come loose. Because he wasn't able to read the endings, he would make them up in his head. He also wanted to see more of China and the world, and the desire to experience the world outside of his small town influenced his desire to become a serious writer.

Liang Hong's section is more focused on the affective and relational dimension of her experience of becoming a writer. She is introduced by a scene of her son and his friend on a moving train, discussing Socrates' distinction between physics and metaphysics. She joins the conversation and rests her head on her son's shoulder. Liang Hong narrates her own biographical details – she was born in a small village in Henan province, but moved to Beijing for college and graduate school. Her upward trajectory was smooth, and she obtained a job as a professor and had a child. As she tells the story, "Life was getting better and better...but the word 'betrayal' lingered in my mind." In 2007, she returned to her hometown to conduct the interviews that would eventually form the groundwork for *China in One Village*. The interview of the author is filled with emotional silences when she is overwhelmed by painful memories of being raised by her mother and elder sister, who took on the motherly role for the rest of the kids when her mother became bedridden and near-vegetative after suffering a stroke.

Liang Hong herself is a mother, and in a moving scene, she tries to remediate generational amnesia by passing down her local dialect to her son. In this scene, the director invites writer Liang Hong's 14-year-old son to introduce himself on camera, and the boy introduces himself in standard Mandarin (Putonghua): "My name is Wang Yiliang. I was born in Henan, raised in Beijing. My mom is Liang Hong, my dad is Wang Hengtao. I'm 14 years old, I

study at Renda Middle School. I like physics. In my spare time, I like to watch TV and play video games.” Speaks about not having had much contact with his grandfather, and he wasn’t able to see his grandfather at the end of his life. He would have liked to ask him “When he was young, did he have enough to eat?” “Did he ever want to see the world?”

When the director asks him to introduce himself in Henan dialect, the idiom of his mother, he responds that he’s pretty much forgotten how to speak Henan dialect, looking to his mom for support. His mother comes to the rescue, telling him to repeat after her, one sentence at a time. When he introduces himself in Henan dialect, for the third time, it is with increasing confidence, as if he is recalling not just what his mom had just said on camera, but reaching farther back into an unconscious repository of linguistic knowledge that had never truly been forgotten. The linguistic specificity calls to its Chinese audience, not Western viewers, and perhaps even more familiarly, to viewers from Henan, as well as all of those who are on the cusp of forgetting their native dialects.

CHAPTER 5

Rural Futurity and the Folk Memory Project

In this chapter, I discuss how the Folk Memory Project (FMP) reimagines rural China a living archive of historical memories and as a generative space of alternative futures. I argue that the FMP not only functions as an archive for marginalized knowledges, but also opens up experimental spaces for amateur filmmakers to question dominant ideologies. It is both a model for teaching independent filmmaking as a form of humanistic and ethical inquiry in an authoritarian state, as well as an idealistic experiment in imagining rural China as a generative space of art, filmmaking, teaching, and critical thinking. The long-term commitment that the collective requires of its filmmakers enables the reimagining of life trajectories, the possibilities of working in the Chinese countryside, and the possibilities of collaborative art with populations from the countryside.

The Folk Memory Project is a collective of mostly young, amateur and student filmmakers who interview elderly villagers about their memories of the Great Starvation (1959-61) and other periods of social upheaval in the People's Republic of China. Because the Great Starvation resulted from Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward policies, the famine is not discussed in great detail by official histories and in schools. The Folk Memory Project is driven by the urgency of highlighting and preserving historical testimonies before the remaining survivors pass away. Co-founded and led by Wu Wenguang, who I discussed in the first chapter, FMP encompasses an experimental, cross-disciplinary body of work on memory in contemporary China, including oral histories, documentary films, and modern dance and documentary theater performances. Their physical and online workspace is called the Caochangdi Workstation (CCD), which documents their online meetings and advertises their film screenings, and most of

the oral history interviews and documentary films are housed in an online archive hosted by Duke University.

The collective trains young and amateur filmmakers as a “non-institution” or “non-organization” with no formal barriers to entry (Zito 2015, 21). If the collective’s goals are, as its founder Wu Wenguang claims, for “combining their understanding of society with self-transformation...the creator himself or herself was also a work in a constant state of self-training and self-moulding,” (Wu 2014, 38) then it can also be conceptualized as not merely a film collective but also a collective that seeks to promote self-cultivation and moral education within a biopolitical regime of surveillance, censorship and self-censorship. How might this collective foster critical thinking, resistance to state ideologies, and moral subjectivation through teaching and learning independent filmmaking? In what ways might this pedagogical space engender sustainable ways of creating documentaries with and about marginalized populations?

Fighting against the dominant view of the rural villagers as left-behind by modernity, FMP invests in long-term relationships and collaborations with villagers, often engaging their informants in participatory filmmaking. They have mobilized villagers to create memorial tablets for victims of the great starvation, collected mutual aid and social welfare funds, organized trash-cleanups, taught village children how to make documentaries, and most recently built a village community center. The filmmaker’s agency extends beyond documentation to actively shaping the future of the village through grassroots collaborations, and thus transforming pejorative significations of the rural from underdeveloped wasteland to vibrant repository of cultural possibility.

In this chapter, I use a hybrid methodology that combines film analysis with participant observation and interviews with people affiliated with the collective. By incorporating

journalistic methods, I track the project through multiple online spaces and archives, including the space of the workshop, the online oral interview archive at Duke University, the Caochangdi Workstation Facebook and Wechat groups, online screenings of documentary films and performances, as well as the personal memories of longtime participants. While the group usually comes together at a physical space in Beijing to edit their footage, the Covid-19 pandemic forced their editing workshops to be virtual in 2020. I received permission to join the weekly editing workshops and the daily email group as a researcher. From August 4th to September 15th, I participated in four of the online footage-reading workshops, one online reading group meeting, and one virtual performance on video-hosting website Bilibili. Outside of participating in their meetings and taking notes, I conducted interviews with Odette, the only American, and Luo Zhou, the archivist at Duke affiliated with the group.

First, some disclaimers on the practice of oral histories. In her seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak points to the dangers behind the presumption of Western academics to speak for the subaltern regarding the Hindu practice of sati. She notes that the desire for knowledge about the subaltern is never innocent, and always invested with the political and economic interests of the researcher. She critiques subaltern studies for lumping together heterogeneous positionalities and interests (divided across gender, class, caste, region, and so on) into a collective “subaltern” identity, as well as for inadvertently reproducing hegemonic structures and projecting either imperialist or nationalist knowledge onto the subaltern subject, whose voice would be inaccessible to those frameworks, and famously concludes that “the Subaltern cannot speak” (Spivak 2010, 128). She poses a question that resonates in the context of oral history projects: To what extent are intellectuals projecting their own politics onto the subaltern, in projects that presume to listen to the subaltern?

This question is particularly pertinent when thinking about oral histories and participatory art practices, which should not be overly celebrated for “humanizing” the subaltern through a liberal Western gaze, but which I argue also should not be rejected out of hand for not being critical enough in their orientation. While oral history projects are not necessarily as politically liberating as they claim, and come with a host of possible issues (for instance, creating a myth of authenticity around the speaking subject), the impulse to archive, document, and produce knowledge on rural memories of Chinese history is extremely important for preserving and transmitting a sense of cultural continuity by repairing connections between the past, present, and future, as well as generating evidence for scholars to write narratives outside of the imperialist and nationalist frameworks. Additionally, what distinguishes the Folk Memory Project is that it takes on a durational mode of engagement; framing the practice of oral history collection and documentary filmmaking as iterative, continuous, and long-term engagement. This durational quality is what drew me to the project, and it is a model for deep engagement with documentary practices that not only reflect the past and present, but envision unexpected possible futures for the Chinese village.

Wu Wenguang and Independent Chinese Cinema

It is widely accepted that the first independent Chinese documentary, *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (1990), was made by FMP’s co-founder, Wu Wenguang. But in the past decade, Wu Wenguang has turned away from the life of being a documentary auteur and has instead been working as the head organizer of the Caochangdi Workstation, a virtual and in-person work station that hosts workshops and archives the documentary projects and creative process of its participants, mostly young and amateur filmmakers. Filmmakers associated with

the collective are often seen wearing black T-shirts with the Caochangdi Workstation slogan, “100% Life 0% Art.”

Wu Wenguang studied literature in college and then worked as a news journalist for Kunming’s local TV station. In 1989, he left the TV station and became an independent documentary filmmaker. In 2000, he decided to stop making conventional documentaries altogether. He has said “I didn’t want to be one of the many people who depended on documentaries for food or fame,” and stopped making documentaries for public screening (Tong 2021). However, he never stopped shooting and continued to make “film diaries” in private, forging a style of documentary he calls “writing with footage” (ibid). He says that he films as a daily habit, akin to brushing one’s teeth. In the shift from producing films for audiences to making films as a way of life, Wu Wenguang has largely stopped screening his films to the public. But he nonetheless continues to be highly active organizing Caochangdi Workstation’s activities, as a mentor for FMP filmmakers, and shooting footage to make one autobiographical film each year.

One of Wu Wenguang’s early projects in rural China was a collaboration with his friend Jian Yi, a documentary project called The China Village Documentary Project (村名影像計畫), which was funded by the EU-China Training program on Village Governance and conducted in 2005. Taking inspiration from socially-engaged and participatory art practices, Wu and Jian recruited a group of 10 rural villagers to produce a 10-minute documentary on experiments with local self-governance. The villagers were given cameras, basic training, and editing facilities, and the documentaries were then distributed and promoted at international film festivals including the prestigious International Documentary Filmfestival Amsterdam (IDFA).

This project as received a popular and positive reception in Western academia, however, Paola Voci (2010) raises critical questions about how the projects also objectify the filmmakers as subaltern: for instance, each film is preceded by a still image of the filmmaker and a description of the person's name, age, gender, and place of residence. As a result, "the villagers cannot free themselves from their social belonging and are therefore defined not simply as makers of their documentaries but, first and foremost, as subaltern men and women, who thus need to explain and justify their incursion into film-making" (Voci 2010, 157). Furthermore, the China Village Documentary Project is perceived as part of Wu Wenguang's artistic vision, rather than that of its participants. And he (and sometimes Jian Yi) are invited for talks with the assumption that he is "a more effective and articulate spokesperson than the subaltern" (ibid, 155). Paola Voci (2010) cautions against overly celebratory and self-congratulatory attitudes towards projects that claim to empowering the subaltern; after all, the material benefits and prestige of these projects are primarily conferred to the organizers and not the participants. While Voci may be right to criticize the self-congratulatory presumptions behind this project's positive reception in Western academia, she indirectly points to an important fact about the political cachet of independent Chinese cinema in the West.

At the same time, Wu Wengguang explains that ethos for the group is to focus on long-term investment in a community to which one has personal ties, making the FMP a durational project rather than a fact-finding one. Rather than filming villagers in a "material gathering safari" or "helicopter-style field investigation" that ends in "withdrawal upon achieving the objective" (2014, 37), he hopes that participants will also transform themselves and others in the process.

Planting Seeds: The Footage-Reading Workshop

Examining the discussion-based approaches used in the FMP's weekly workshops, I construe the collective's work as a kind of humanistic inquiry that operates outside of formal educational institutions. I analyze the workshop as a collaborative, creative, and pedagogical space that nurtures critical inquiry and creative investigations into forgotten historical memories. At the same time, the workshop reveals the suffering and sacrifice that entails working as an independent filmmaker in China.

Despite conjuring the image of a solitary filmmaker, "independent" filmmaking relies on the work of teams and networks, hence I analyze the space of the workshop as a collaborative methodology for independent filmmaking. I explore the behind-the-scenes world of the production process and take the space of the workshop as a site and object of study to uncover the material and discursive conditions under which filmmakers engage in independent media practices. Besides understanding how the state constrains independent film production and distribution from a top-down policy perspective, I explore how "independent" film production occurs within a community of filmmakers who must live in ongoing conditions of uncertainty and precarity.

Because it is a durational project spanning one or many years, FMP requires a lifestyle commitment for the filmmaker. It involves living in their ancestral village for the majority of the year without a steady job or steady stream of income, all the while collecting footage for a documentary that will reap few financial returns. One of the recurring questions that come up in the workshop is the question of sustainability. Is the lifestyle of the collective a sustainable way for a young Chinese person to live and work in the world? Wu acknowledges that participants come and go, and the longest participant stayed four or five years. In an interview with *Literature Today*, Wu Wenguang is quoted saying, "The environment of the independent image

is too harsh, almost equivalent to planting grass in the desert, the survival rate is extremely low, and if one or two survive, it will soon not grow, and it is impossible to spread" (Tong 2021). Central to FMP is Wu Wenguang's effort to foster the workshop as a creative community, a nurturing environment for the independent image to grow. This is perhaps why the workshop space is called "Caochangdi" – 草場地, which literally translates to "grassland," a ground on which he hopes to nurture independent thought. It is a small group – with no more than five or six core members that make it through the entire process of shooting footage to the final cut, along with others who float in and out of the group.

Zhang Mengqi, one of the core filmmakers of the group, organizes much of the discussion facilitation. With a rosy face and cheerful demeanor, she is a welcoming presence for those who are new to the group. The creative space of the workshop was a discovery for her when she first encountered CCD Workstation in Beijing. In a personal essay published in 2020, she details her memories of the first documentary workshop she attended, which assembled around 80 people from professions, including students, farmers, reporters, designers, Beijing floaters, teachers, and uncles⁷ on resident committees:

The workshop was a marathon. We worked from sunrise to sunset and then to sunrise again, during which we talked, cried, laughed, with dark circles under our eyes...ate the affordable, filling, and delicious canteen (which since 2005 has never change its price of 10 yuan for everything you can eat), loudly discussing the world within the silver screen, where one reality is replaced by another more dream-like than fiction" (Zhang 2020, my translation).

The workshop was, as she quotes Tian Gebing, an independent theater director, "The country's largest art battlefield hospital" – a space for repairing the wounds of history through art. In her retelling, it was in the space of the workshop that the idea of the Folk Memory Project

⁷ Not biological uncles. By "uncles" she colloquially refers to neighborhood acquaintances who are middle-aged men.

came into being, after a post-film discussion about memories of hunger. Participants talked about “historical hunger,” the hunger to know what really happened twenty, fifty years ago, the hunger to know their grandparents’ proper names and experiences, experiences which have been distorted and erased by official accounts. In 2010, Mengqi returned to her grandfather’s village, Diaoyutai Village in Hubei Province, to collect footage of oral histories. Caochangdi held workshops on virtually every aspect of the production process, conducting workshops from interviewing, the first cut, script editing, to footage analysis.

During the 2020-present Covid-19 pandemic, the Caochangdi Workstation moved online. Much of their time and focus was spent on collective workshopping through daily group emails and weekly video-meetings to discuss one another’s footage. Every Sunday, they practiced yoga together and then discussed philosophical, anthropological, and literary texts from across the world in an online book club. Occasionally, their completed films were screened online on their Bilibili account (Station B) in live broadcasts, followed by post-screening discussions open to the public. Teacher Wu welcomes new participants of any background, but requires his students to be intensely dedicated to the process. This means writing regular notes on the filmmaking process, to be emailed to the group each week, as well as participating in weekly meetings, a total time commitment of at least six hours each week. The weekly book club operates like a graduate seminar, but without the professionalizing dimension. It is entirely voluntary and open to anyone who is interested.

I attended a handful of the workshop’s meetings. Every time I logged on, it felt like I was entering an intimate space of creative kinship. I was aware that I was an outsider and it was a privilege to be allowed in. In each footage-reading meeting, each person’s footage is treated with great care and attention in the 10 minutes that they were allotted. Frequently the footage

contained elderly people speaking in dialect, which the filmmakers translated in real time. At the end of everyone's time, Wu Wenguang and Zhang Mengqi lead a free-flowing discussion on what they noticed about the films – “reading” the footage, voicing their curiosities, advocating for patience, and suggesting ways to develop certain ideas and images further.

One of the book club meetings clearly illustrated the reality of the filmmakers' precarious lifestyles. It was Saturday, 8pm on the West coast; Sunday, 10am in China, and Sunday, 11am in Tokyo. The light filtered differently in each Zoom frame, but everyone dutifully gathered together for the weekly book club as if it were a weekly worship service. The book club drew a diverse group of people. There was Wu Wenguang, famed independent documentary filmmaker who everyone calls Teacher Wu. He wore round glasses with plastic black frames, skimming our faces with eagle-eyed curiosity. There was Mengqi, a trained contemporary dancer who has dedicated almost ten years to the work of the project. The rest of the group was composed of an anthropology major and graduate student auditing from Tokyo, was joining the collective as a participant observer, a middle-aged woman who is a caretaker for her father and making a film about her father's memories of the Great Starvation, a filmmaker who was born and raised in the village he is documenting, and an elderly village woman of sixty who participated in The China Village Documentary Project and has continued with this project since its inception.

On that day we were pondering the terrifying nature of freedom and the precarity of doing independent filmmaking. One filmmaker was presenting on philosopher Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*, which explores how freedom breeds anxiety, and that being unfree is sometimes more alluring than the terrifying responsibility of freedom. He distinguishes between two kinds of freedom: passive – which involved following social expectations, and active – which is a much more difficult path to take. He connected this book to his own feelings of

anxiety about choosing to be a filmmaker in the village while other people his age are moving out of the village to start more stable careers and families. He feels like an invisible force is pushing him to leave the village, and sometimes he doesn't want other people in the village to see him. But he chooses to walk around and shoot footage until he feels like he can find the confidence and motivation to continue. To gently encourage him, Teacher Wu reminisced on his own journey of working as a middle-school literature teacher, then as a producer for a TV station, but in his words, he became "too comfortable." Because he wanted to be a writer, he quit a conventional career to become an independent documentarian and freelancer, musing, "when you're in a state of confusion, you feel the world slowly opening up. You no longer have the same kind of boring, gossiping days."

During another workshop session, Teacher Wu voices his skepticism of all extractive processes, whether in filmmaking, academia, or journalism. He mentioned that academics and journalists often report on the Memory Project by invoking topics like overseas distribution and the fact that the films are being produced outside of the state system, but that their articles fail to grasp what's most crucial about the project: the active working through of ideas during the workshop, the difficult process of searching (寻找) and passing through (渡过) the coronavirus pandemic, as well as the intimacy and conflicts between the collective's participants. During one meeting, he said he hoped that the graduate students of the group would be able to capture in writing the nuances of the collective from inside of their workspace.

The internal politics of the collective, as in any collective, was sometimes complicated. In the six weeks that I joined their meetings, I was privy to many conversations that foregrounded the struggles of maintaining cohesiveness and commitment to the film collective, as well as feelings of betrayal when one of their members left. Once, the discussion turned to a former

participant who had left without a proper goodbye, after having participated in the workshop for several months, and Teacher Wu became visibly angry. He reflected that it is not the first time it's happened that participants became mere visitors, but the way that this person left violated the threshold of basic decency. Given the amount of time everyone invests in reading one another's reflections and giving feedback on their footage, I could see that his anger came from feeling disappointed and betrayed.

In all of the sessions I attended, Teacher Wu self-consciously restrained himself from speaking all the way until the very end of the footage screenings, and after everyone else had their say. Later during a phone interview, I learned from Odette, the only other American who joins for the footage-analysis session, that the collective used to be focalized around Wu Wenguang, and his acolytes waited with bated breath for his every word. He been actively tried to decenter himself in the collective and encourage others to speak in a more discussion-based format. Wu was the charismatic leader but he did not want to be seen as the such. He wanted the collective to come up with its own ideas, to step down and install each of its participants as a leader. Odette mused, channeling Wu, "how do you not be so charismatic that you replace their ideas with your own?"

Odette Scott

Odette is an American woman in her thirties with thick brown hair, who describes herself as a "videomaker, camerawoman, editor, occasional film consultant and teacher" on LinkedIn. She is a longtime friend of the film collective, having moved to Beijing shortly after graduating from college. Odette lived near and worked in Caochangdi for four years from 2006 to 2010, doing translations and odd jobs for Wu Wenguang and Wen Hui, a contemporary dancer and choreographer, who were a couple at the time, while recording her personal experiences in video

and writing. She lived in a hostel nearby and later a female dormitory with other young filmmakers affiliated with the project. Despite the language barrier, the bonds they forged were strong and she remains in touch with her friends from that time more than a decade later. They held intensive footage-sharing and feedback sessions that continued even after Caochangdi, the physical studio, was closed in September 2014. Because of the skyrocketing cost of rent, their patron had decided to not renew the lease and their studio was bought by perhaps the most celebrated Chinese artist in the West, Ai Weiwei. “He could afford it,” Odette remarked wryly.

Odette believed that Wu’s documentary about a failed filmmaker, *Fuck Cinema* (2005), had created an existential quandary for him: if all the rewards and accolades were given to the director as a single auteur, and a documentary’s subjects rarely saw any share of profits, how does one make documentary film that is not exploitative of its participants? This launched Wu’s ventures into collaborative filmmaking, starting with The China Village Self-Governance Film Project and then moving onto the Folk Memory Project.

Odette acknowledges that in the beginning, “the films were bad...just barren landscapes of wintery villages.” She said the filmmakers’ first few films felt contrived, because they had no real connection to the village. But upon returning year after year, the relationships began to deepen and grow. The films became better over time, winning international acclaim and scholarly attention. Although Odette has not yet made work for the Folk Memory Project, she has been involved from the beginning, forging a relationship with the Caochangdi film collective that has spanned 14 years to date. She speaks of Wu Wenguang and Wen Hui fondly, as old friends. And she speaks of the friends fondly, keeping in touch with nearly everyone she became close to there: “I have a whole family.” She remembers nostalgically the days that everyone would eat together and then watch films on a projector in the courtyard.

This year, Odette has begun to make a film about the Sycamore tree in front of her family's house, which has grown and evolved with the feedback workshops every week. The reason that she still attends the group's workshops is because of their co-creative, collaborative process. It is a supportive and non-competitive space, something quite rare in the world at large. In an email to me from June 30, 2020, she wrote:

The balance between individual filmmakers and the group is what is special about this project. It's where [its] true power lies. The films themselves are just a product of a process that is more important than the films themselves, although the films have become increasingly powerful over the last 10 years. It's taken a long time to learn how the group should work best, how to help each filmmaker find their unique voice and way.

Odette brought up Wu Wenguang's obsession with what she calls "over-documentation." Wu Wenguang had begun to compile hundreds of people's biodatas onto a spreadsheet, and at first Odette was not sure why. While archiving every interview with an elderly villager about their life seemed like "over-documentation" at the time, this impulse to record, in retrospect, was an insightful and prescient move. Soon, Wu Wengguang partnered with Luo Zhou, an archivist at Duke University, to create a video archive of oral histories that were not suited for the documentary format. Beyond a commitment to rigorously documenting the data of elders and their memories, the collective is also committed to maintaining a well-documented online archive of the collective's activities. In addition to making a Zoom recording (which is not posted), the collective's participants take turns taking notes and screenshots, and uploading a transcript of the three hours of conversation onto Weixin, a Chinese social media super-app, and Caochangdi's Facebook group.

When I looked through the immense archive of online meetings, I am tempted to agree with Odette that the collective engages in exhaustive over-documentation. Documentation of the process takes many hours, and not all of the information seems immediately useful. Yet it also

occurred to me that the archive is made for a future that is desired but not yet possible - a promise, a hope, a missive connecting future to past, a fleeting moment always subject to overwriting and erasure. It is not clear what is and it not useful at the moment, and thus the overdocumentation uses digital technology's capacity to store enormous amounts of information for future use. On a practical level, the rigorous documentation ensured that the project would be legible to outsiders, including potential participants and supporters for the project. Soon after the Memory Project began, it drew attention from film festival circuits in Europe and American academia, including institutions like New York University, Harvard, Duke, and UCLA. They would invite Wu Wenguang to speak and screen his films, and he would always take a few of the younger people along with and advocate for their films to be shown alongside his own. The documentation of the collective's activities, its public-facing nature, is a way of creating an audience and a secondary community of support outside the core community of filmmakers. This is especially important because the collective is not supported by any one institution, nor by the state.

The film collective benefits from Wu Wenguang's talent for being a filmmaking mentor, teacher, and community-organizer. It also, at times, struck me as an educational collective, one that seeks to produce critical thinking rather than only tangible products. After attending their meetings for a few weeks, I asked Odette: "Do you feel like this is kind of like film school? Or, I don't know what film school is like. But to me, it seemed like a, almost like a graduate seminar when I attended. And we were doing these close readings of the footage." Odette responds by drawing a distinction between how the collective functioned a decade ago, when she was in China, and how it functions now that it has become virtual:

We used to joke, that sometimes we were really in college. There was like a dormitory and there [were] festivals, and we had to make things and share things. And we even had

like some assignments sometimes like, that we would then share in the festival, like we did some things like everyone had to sell something to share. But now it's really like more like graduate school or PhD, you know, dissertation stuff. Because you're not, we're not all together and you're expected to do a lot by yourself.

The community that the film collective creates is a very self-aware, process-oriented community. Odette said she has not been able to find this kind of filmmaking community after returning to the United States, and even when she tries to model the Caochangdi collective's process-driven methods and camaraderie, it just hasn't worked. Odette said, "I thank people in my credits and stuff, because they helped make the film better, but Wenguang is all about making you better...and filmmaking is just a product."

While Mengqi traces the origins of the Memory Project back to the space of the workshop, Odette has a different memory of how it might have begun. She noted that Wen Hui, a choreographer and Wenguang's partner at the time, might have started the Memory Project. She recalls preparing for a road trip that she, Wen Hui, and Wenguang were taking from Kunming to Luang Prabang in northern Laos, and how Wen Hui came to realize her body's memory of scarcity:

When Wen Hui was packing up the car, she brought so much fruit, and she packed that car...and you know what, there's so much food along the way. And for her that was a realization that she had things in her body that were planted there during the Cultural Revolution that she didn't know, such as scarcity, and so she started this long investigation about memory stored in the body. She made this theater piece about memory – that was about her body through movement, and she danced some of those revolutionary dances she learned in school that she still remembered.

Luo Zhou

In December of 2019, I spoke with Luo Zhou, the Chinese Studies librarian at Duke University, about how she began to archive the Folk Memory Project's oral histories. I had volunteered to do some Chinese to English translation for the project, and had been speaking

with her over email. Luo Zhou is a petite woman who is very down-to-earth. When we met in person, she gave me a warm hug and welcomed me to her office, where we sat down to chat.

After she met Wu Wenguang at Duke University in 2012, she instantly recognized the value of the project for its focus on rural villagers and its public appeal: “Go back one or two generations, and we’re all from rural China.” She asked Wu Wenguang where all the interviews were stored, and his plans for archiving them, and he soon agreed to donate the footage of the oral history interviews to Duke University for archiving. In addition, Duke University purchases the films that they make each year as a way of providing financial support. The process of archiving and organizing the footage has taken a few years, and is ongoing still. It took time for Luo Zhou to get approval from Duke University’s Special Collections, transporting the footage from China to the US, and troubleshooting tech issues. Once the hard drives of footage arrived at Duke, she realized that there would be more challenges to overcome. The footage was not subtitled, and the interviewees were speaking in dialect, which can be very different in grammar and pronunciation from standard Mandarin. Luo added, “These were not only very local dialects, but also because these were elders. When elders talk, sometimes it’s not that clear, so you have to get used to this [way of] talking even if you do understand the dialogue.”

In 2015, she applied to and received a grant from the Mellon Foundation to hire 5-7 Master’s students at Duke to help with organizing, transcribing, and translating the interviews. There was initially no standardized format, so Luo had to decide on what kind of textual tags to add to the videos, including the name and age of the interviewee, the filmmaker, the village, and a brief summary of the video. They also translated local dialects and colloquialisms into an English-language transcript. The filmmakers wrote blog posts with their reflections on each

interview, which were compiled with each video. Each year, a new batch of videos (around 200-300) is published on the website.

When I asked Luo about the significance of archiving the interviews, she spoke about their importance as primary sources on the first 30 years of the PRC and the connections forged between younger and older generations in the village. The scholarly importance of this archive is that Duke has few primary sources on the first 30 years of PRC history, especially the experiences of rural villagers, whose experiences are either neglected or over-generalized. While the Great Famine is documented as a historical event in Chinese textbooks, it is often glossed over without much detail. Luo asks, “We knew a lot of people died, but we how did these people die?” She noted that having examined the archive, there were clear variations between the experiences of different regions and villages during the Great Famine, as well as between rural masses and urban elites: “We knew about how these famous professors suffered during the Cultural Revolution, did we know anything about the peasants? Did we hear from the peasants? No, we haven’t. So for that reason they are valuable primary sources. These people seldom have their voices recorded. They may not have a high level of literacy, so we probably cannot count on them to write down their own stories; we can only hear their stories.”

The second reason Luo found the interviews compelling is that they are not conducted by academics, who might be tempted to ask questions to evoke specific answers. Rather, the interviewers are filmmakers, mostly in their 20s and born in cities, who have had little to no connections with their ancestral home villages before embarking on this project. Because they are conducting interviews not necessarily as an end in themselves, but to build relationships with the elders and collect footage for their feature films, the interviews tend to be very open-ended, meandering, and sometimes surprising. The interviewees sometimes turn the question on the

interviewers: “Very often, the interviewees will ask...”so you are the grandchild of so and so” - why do you want to interview me?”

Finally, I asked Luo Zhou about whether these stories could be archived in China or if they could only find an archival home in the United States, and she told a story about how the Memory Project’s Sina Weibo blog was unexpectedly taken down in 2017. She suspects it was related the fact that Yang Jisheng won an award at Harvard University in 2016 for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism for his investigative book on the famine, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine*, but was prevented from flying to the US to accept the award. Luo believes that the CCP’s sensitivity towards the book was directly responsible for fact that the FMP blog was shut down. Because websites can suddenly be taken down in China under changing political circumstances, she believed that it was safer for the archive to be located in the US.

Zhang Mengqi

I had first met Zhang Mengqi at a film screening at UCLA in November 8th, 2019. I was sitting on the steps near the sculpture garden when a thin, balding man dressed in black wearing circular spectacles, followed by an entourage of three students, walked by. I later realized that it was Wu Wenguang, the filmmaker I had read about as the father of independent Chinese cinema. When I told him that I had written about his seminal work *Bumming in Beijing* for my qualifying exams, he replied that scholars should stop writing about him and instead focus on younger filmmakers whose works were also being screened at this event. I kept his advice in mind and watched carefully the two films that were screened alongside his.

Out of all three films, the one that stood out to me the most was Zhang Mengqi’s film, *Self-Portrait: Window in 47 KM*, which was the 8th film in the documentary series on her home village, 47KM. 47 KM was the name for a village so small that the only way to arrive is to

inform the bus driver to stop 47 kilometers after the nearest city. It is her father's home village and where she has been filming documentaries for eight years now. The film was poetic and understated, featuring an 85-year old man reminiscing on surviving three years of starvation and the deaths of his family members during the Mao era. This deep dive into memory was interspersed with a little girl, Fang Hong, walking through the village, going door to door, drawing colorful portraits of the elders on a spiral notebook. The camera is open and mobile, checking in on these characters, but also patiently taking time to shoot scenes of village life: children playing, responding to mini-interviews, landscape shots, and the recurring motif of long shot of chickens lining up, flying one by one onto a tree branch. The film was not only observational and contemplative, but it also incorporated performance art and oral history interviews.

The next time I encountered Menqi was after the Covid-19 lockdown in California, during her online performance on May 30, 2020, "Share Your Screen with Zhang Mengqi," an event hosted by Zeughauskino Berlinin, a movie theater located in the German Historical Museum in Berlin. Responding to the global lockdowns following the pandemic, the curator asked artists to share a personal archive via their computer screens, and Mengqi would be helming the inaugural event. Mengqi kicked off the event by sharing some documentary footage. She appears with a red hat and a puffy navy coat, rapidly taking off the hat, coat, gloves, mask. Then the camera cuts to Mengqi as she introduces herself in real time. She shares that she is currently living in Suizhou City, away from her village 47KM, where she is building a blue house that will also function as a cultural center.

She narrates: In 2010, she joined Folk Memory Project along with other students, artists, and filmmakers. She had not heard of the Three Years Famine (also known as the Great Famine)

before because this historical disaster was not recorded in official Chinese history books. She had to search for the historical knowledge on foreign websites. While her dream was to become a dancer and travel all over the world, the Memory Project has changed her life trajectory, causing her to return and build relationships in the village where her father was born. Because all the young people in her village left for the city, the kids – toddlers and older – became her friends. They helped her build a library and conduct interviews with the elders. “The kids are the only chance to invent a new future for the village” – they became co-directors, working behind the camera to interview the elders of the village. She met one of the kids, Fang Hong, when she was only 5 years old. Now she is 15 years old. She has made a short film “My Room,” and she was the subject of the latest film. She finally talks about the house she is building in the village – the Blue House, which was built from 2019 to 2020, with prize money from DMZ International Documentary Film Festival in 2018. It is a vibrant color in a sleek modern design, with many big windows, a space intended to foster dance, yoga, performance, art-making with the village kids.

The Oral History Archive

During The Great Famine (1958-1961), officially known in China as the “Three Years of Natural Disasters” or “The Difficult Three-Year Period,” scholars estimate that between 20 and 43 million people died of starvation in rural China. This was a result of the disastrous experiment of the Great Leap Forward, which was envisioned by Mao Zedong as a project to industrialize the countryside so that production could outpace Great Britain in steel production. The plan involved creating backyard factories that would melt down cooking pots to make high-grade steel. Because farmers smelted steel instead of growing crops, and at the same time, too much of the grain was exported, villagers did not have enough food to eat. Grain was requisitioned by the state at below-market prices to be sold at market prices for profit in order to finance heavy

industry. In practice, local cadres overreported the amount of grain harvested in order to fulfill unrealistic targets and protect their place in the party hierarchy, resulting in one of the most devastating famines in human history.

In the nation's official and popular memory, the blame for the Great Famine was placed onto local cadres (anti-Five Winds campaign), floods and drought (and there is evidence that this may have exacerbated the problem), as well as the Soviets who were rumored to have called in Chinese debts. Peasants also blamed the Nationalist Party or their local village leaders but rarely Chairman Mao or the Communist party (Brown 2012). The details of the famine, including the death toll, have been largely blocked and removed from public discourse, and there have been no state-led efforts to collectively grieve or atone for the disaster. The Folk Memory Project seeks to fill this gap in public discourse by documenting the Great Famine across rural China. The digital project has attracted an impressive number of participants, including more than 150 filmmakers, who have visited 246 villages in 20 provinces and interviewed more than 1,100 elderly villagers. Duke University's archival webpage for the project reads: "The notes and blogs written by the filmmakers and the interview footage preserve the fading memories of people who lived through the Great Famine, ensuring that their stories are not forgotten."

As of April 2022, the collection includes 657 interviews, and I examined 10 oral history transcripts in depth: three interviews by Zou Xueping, four interviews by Zhang Mengqi, and three interviews by Wu Wenguang. Many layers of mediation have made this research possible. The villagers speak in their local village and regional dialects, which the filmmakers transcribe into Mandarin text, which is then translated by research assistants at Duke University into English. Harrowing stories of the Great Starvation are rarely shared in official contexts; they are emotionally difficult to listen to, to read, and to process. In the oral histories I listened to and

read, there are many harrowing stories of villagers stealing crops from the fields, which were requisitioned by the state, as well as foraging for whatever was available, including seeds, chaff, wild herbs, clovers, sweet potato and elm leaves, and tree bark. Many of the interviewees talked about how the communal canteens did not supply enough grain for people to eat, and so people would resort to eating inedible things like leather or soil, which destroyed their digestive tracts and sometimes resulted in premature deaths. The historical record even records instances of cannibalism (Brown 2012). Interviewees talk about the trauma of their family members dying candidly, matter-of-factly, the starvation and resulting deaths of their mothers, fathers, sisters, grandmothers, nieces.

The oral history archive was especially fascinating in the moments at which communication breaks down between the young interviewers and village elders. Because the interview subjects are elderly folks, interviewing them involves extending great patience, sometimes allowing silence for interview subjects to experience the weight of their memories of hardship, or repeating questions louder, more directly into the elders' ears. A curious refrain echoed through the oral histories: an insistence that remembering difficult times was just not useful. Sometimes, this meant a refusal to speak. I wonder if the resistance to bringing these memories to light is a form of self-censorship due to fear of retaliation by the state, internalized and embodied so fully that there is always a felt experience of danger when telling the truth about this historical disaster. Moreover, the idea that speaking about such topics is "useless" speaks to a form of pragmatism that people have taken on in the reform era, the determination to move forward by suppressing or forgetting the memory of traumatic events, and being grateful for having enough food to eat in the present.

In Zou Xueping's interview with Lu Junrong on February 24, 2010, she asks Lu to talk about the conditions here during the three years of natural disaster, when people starved. It is clear that Lu is nervous to speak on these topics, and she responds at first by deflecting: 'I can't remember much. How is this useful?' (咱记不住吧，你记住啥，记还记不住嘛！咱说这个当着啥用啊). She talks about how there was little to eat in the communal cafeterias, then again she interjects, "Ping, don't ask me anymore, what is this for? It is useless to talk about this for someone young like you. It was really difficult, but we've lived through it all already" (平啊，你叫俺说这个干啥啊，俺说这个没有用，俺这不说嘛！俺说给你这年轻的有啥用啊，真困难，真啥，咱也过来了，也就是这么的挤过来了). Despite her hesitancy, she continues describing that time period without prompting: how her mother's household had it slightly better than the others, and that they normally had enough to eat, but no household received enough food portions. The interview continues when Xueping asks what she ate when she was starving the most, and she responds that they ate "herb balls" (菜团) made of sweet potato leaves, and ground-up cottonseed, when starvation was at its most severe. Lu continues:

Society now is good, with nothing like that and everyone is very satisfied. But at that time, I took care of everyone and all the work at home since I was fifteen or sixteen...I just don't think there is a need to talk about it, because since I was small - not like other people who just followed their elders and were given something to eat - I couldn't do that. Since I was 15, 16, I raised the whole group, and there was nowhere to even go begging. Ping, this is real. What can I say, starting from that time we had nowhere to go begging. Many beggars had nowhere to go then, because we were not allowed to go out (2).

现在社会是好，啥也经不着是老么满足，但那个时候呢，俺拉着这几个，一个人一个样，啥也不管了是另一个说法，平啊，没有这些姊妹.....俺觉得没啥说，俺从一小，就经着这些，像别人的话，就跟着老人家受罪，老人家给他口吃就行，咱这可不行了。我从十五、六，个人带着这一帮，那个时候去要饭都没处要的，小平啊，这是真事，俺说啥，俺就是从那时候说起啊，要饭都没处要的，那时候老多要饭的都没处要的，出不去。

The filmmakers must make a concerted effort to coax their elders to speak on difficult topics, sometimes reassuring them that these stories are useful, not useless, and that it's important to record them in video and in writing. Sometimes it works, and sometimes, it leads the subject to shut down and the interview to end. The Cultural Revolution is another sensitive topic that draws similarly withdrawn responses. In Zhang Mengqi's Interview with Gong Jinkuan on January 14, 2012, the interviewee is willing to discuss the Great Famine and responds that even though people starved, no one died of starvation in his village. However, when questioned about the Cultural Revolution, he resists and brings up the uselessness of talking about it: "What's the use of talking about the Cultural Revolution?" (8). Zhang's uncle, who also served as Mengqi's translator, tries to jog his memory by bringing up the Red Guards and the infighting between the different sects. Gong repeatedly says it's no use to talk about these things. When asked about being part of the Red Guard, Gong responds: "They also gave us armbands. We all belonged to the Red Guard. It's of no use. It was in the past." (9). When asked about the big-character posters used to denounce alleged counter-revolutionaries, he says: "It was those things. It was of no use" (10). When asked about the souvenir badges of Chairman Mao that Red Guards wore and distributed, he says, "We had so many badges but they are all lost now. What was the use of it?" (10).

Rural Futurity

Zhang Mengqi's most recent film, *Self-Portrait: Fairy Tale in 47KM* (自画像：47 公里 童话), was made during the pandemic in 2020 and has made the rounds at multiple international film festivals, including Visible Evidence 2021, Busan International Film Festival 2021, Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival 2021, Doclisboa International Film Festival 2021, winning best director and youth prize for best film at the Punto de Vista International

Documentary Film Festival of Navarra 2022. Her film, as well as each of the filmmakers of the collective, has also screened on the streaming site Bilibili to a public audience for free.

Having attended the footage-editing workshop while Mengqi was editing this film, I wondered if its title was inspired by a workshop where we had discussed the meaning of fairy tales. Wu Wenguang had mentioned 童話 (tonghua) as a guiding idea in the discussion. He asked the group what this translates to in English. I told the group that in English, “fairy tale” literally translates to “a story about fairies (仙子 xian). Wu noted the Chinese is much more practical, as 童話 (tonghua) literally translates to “a story told to children.” He continued, “Fairy tales are byproducts of creativity, not realizable yet not completely fantasy.” Wu Wenguang said growing up, he was told revolutionary stories, not fairy tales. He closed, saying “fairies will never descend into our world, but we can nevertheless create these new possibilities for ourselves.”

The film almost feels like a response to the question Wu Wenguang posed, answering by presenting the village as a space of renewed possibilities at every moment. It basically departs from the original aims of the project to catalogue memories of starvation from the eyes of village elders, and instead, turns the camera’s gaze to the children of the village, filtering reality through their offbeat and unlimited imaginations. The film is at once contemplative and playful, documenting the conception and construction of a Blue House in the village, interspersing narrated footage about the construction of the house with performance art, spontaneous choreography, and Mengqi’s everyday interactions with the kids. Mengqi tells the children that she envisions The Blue House as a public space, with a reading room, a dancing room, and a room to watch movies and learn computer skills. She invites the children to draw the yard of their dreams, empowering them to be co-creators of the house, and by extension, the future of the

village. These village children, known as “rear guard youths,” are left in villages to be raised by their grandparents and other elderly relatives while their parents work as migrant workers in faraway cities. Despite considered “left-behind” in mainstream discourses, in front of the camera, the children are full of energy, brash, uninhibited, bringing new life and possibility to the village, a joy to watch and behold.

The importance of generational transmission is a clear motif in this film. Mengqi as a character in her documentary is a model teacher to the children – teaching them how to use a camcorder, how to do yoga, how to dance. She includes them as decision-makers in designing the house and yard, asking them to draw and describe what they want the house to look like before it has been planned or built. She also teaches one of the older children, Fang Hong, to teach the younger children to use a camcorder, to film. And in the final cut, she uses footage filmed by two of the children as well as her own. A memorable scene shows the three of them filming one another, creating a kaleidoscope of returned and telescoping gazes. The children are pointing a camera at Mengqi’s camera, but also pointing the camera at each other. We later see someone’s footage played on a TV screen, with Mengqi’s narration: “I film Ding Qixuan, Ding Qixuan films Fang Hong, Fang Hong films me.” (Zhang 2021, 32:05).

Mengqi teaches the children that the camera is an instrument of observation through which life is apprehended, as a means of noticing things that are otherwise difficult to see. One scene features footage of a footprint on the snow, while the child filmmaker notices and describes the shapes of hearts and butterfly bows inside of the footprint. But unlike other contemplative films, the long take also functions as an opportunity for play and performance, in which the camera’s gaze treats life as art, as a fairy tale, as a game of noticing more and more.

When the long take finds children as subjects, imagination becomes then lens through which the world is filtered, and the camera becomes an instrument of play.

This film points to the possibilities of a rural futurity that does not reproduce the historicist logics of the past, in which the rural has been inscribed by national narratives as either modeling a utopian communist future or “left-behind” by capitalist modernity. In this film, the rural becomes a site of art, experimentation, and play, a space of optimism informed by but not trapped by the traumas of the past. By conceptualizing of documentary as a method of social engagement and generational transmission, rather than merely a form of extractive capture, the Folk Memory Project also models a project of using documentary as a method of critical thinking and pedagogy. Hence, they produce independent films not only as an aesthetic project of creating films, but also a social, economic, and political project of creating spaces for independent images to grow.

CONCLUSION

Dwelling in Duration

One of the guide rails of my thinking throughout college and graduate school is to follow, parse, and interrogate the promise of liberation and what James C. Scott calls “high modernist” solutions for more egalitarian and rational forms of social life (5). My admiration for ideologies that claim emancipatory potential, whether leftist ideologies of Marxism and feminism, or liberal touchstones like science and democracy, is tied up with the awareness of their unintended, unanticipated, sometimes violent consequences. The history of modern China is filled with lessons on the dangers of the promise of liberation, and the state still harbors ambitious visions of progress even as its harmful effects are not sufficiently accounted for in the contemporary era.

As an alternative to the promise of liberation, I am inspired by Laozi’s concept of *wuwei* (無為), which is often translated as “non-action” or “effortless action.” It involves refraining from taking action that interferes with the natural expression of different things and their potentialities in accordance with the Way. Rather, action should be free of ingrained habits, natural, and spontaneous. They should be the result of “deferential responses” (Ames and Hall 2003, 93) where one yields to and mirrors the complex interdependencies of the world to achieve a state of harmony and tranquility. *Wuwei* promotes an attitude of stillness and non-interventionism, but not complete passivity. The philosopher Francois Jullien (2004) describes *wuwei* as “to know how to allow the effect to occur...rather than worrying the world with one’s desire and impatience...One sets in train a process which leads there of itself - and such is the art of not acting” (40-41). This spontaneous way of acting guards against overly assertive modes of behavior that may lead to unanticipated outcomes, violence, and aggression.

While the concept of *wuwei* has been criticized as overly passive and quiescent, and a sort of capitulation to the non-interventionism of the free market, its mechanism of “effortless

action” is also embodied by the practice of durational films and oral history projects discussed in this dissertation. They face the same kinds of critiques as Daoist thought has historically faced – for being too quiescent, individualistic, and apolitical. And just as Daoism seeks not to emancipate, to resist, or to dispense with this world to start over with a blank slate, durational projects also tend to stay with the messiness and imperfections of this one, highlighting the mundane rhythms of daily life, times of waiting and stillness, time in-between events, times of rest, times of play, times of reflection, memory, and dreams.

While there is a temptation to frame critique as emancipatory in and of itself, it is only a starting point, and I do not imagine that durational temporalities can offer any conclusive solutions to the many anxieties of the contemporary era. Instead, it brings our attention to the process and what can be learned by practicing attentiveness. This process-oriented approach, which we see in modern philosophers of immanence ranging from Gilles Deleuze, Henri Bergson, and François Jullien, as well as ancient philosophical schools such as Stoicism and Daoism, is conveyed with intensity in durational cinema. Watching and engaging in these films require attentiveness to the present and constitute a kind of ascetic practice in the age of digital distractions.

Hermeneutics of the Subject, Michel Foucault discusses the Stoic and Epicurean models of care of self as a lifelong undertaking involving ascetic practices such as meditation, listening, and writing. These practices of the self involve “conversions of looking” and “modifications of existence” that allows the subject to reconfigure the field of power relations in which they are enmeshed and constitute themselves as moral agents (2016, xxiii). This process of subjectivation, or cultivation of the relationship with the self, ultimately leads to truth-telling as a way of being. As Arnold Davidson has pointed out in the preface, this range of practices that constitute the care

of the self is intimately linked to political resistance. Care of the self and self-transformation is key to reconfiguring a field of power relations in which one is enmeshed, but this is only a first step.

In the contemporary world, market pressures around time and short attention spans conditioned by mass media make watching and appreciating durational cinema out of reach for a vast number of people, and this is reflected in how it is distributed through the elite cosmopolitan spaces of film festivals and the academic humanities. However, durational cinema is only one way of accessing lived time. In fact, Henri Bergson (1954) only associated lived time with duration, and argued that cinema actually produces faux time, a fiction of spatialized, linear, chronological time, which is obsessed with space and suppresses durational time. For Bergson (1954), this faux time is associated with false epistemology, unsustainable economic practices and political injustice. Bringing Bergson's critiques into the contemporary moment in which lived time seems to be saturated by the temporality of digital media, we primarily experience time as an effect of technology, which renders it commodified, disposable, instantly gratifying, and distracted. Ironically, certain kinds of durational cinema can now give direct access to durational time, while life becomes spatialized by the digital temporality of late capitalism.

Since the time of Bergson's writing, there has been a reversal where the faux time of cinema has encroached into life while durational time has retreated into art. The reason art cinema is considered difficult, boring, or unbearable is because it is out-of-sync with the continuous present of lived time under late capitalism. Anachronistic, it observes time rather than subjugate time to movement. While observation requires and produces duration, capitalism requires the suppression of duration. By contrast, lived time (life) is duration for Bergson. Duration, for Bergson, is when the past is preserved in the present, when time thickens into

sheets rather than tapers into peaks of ever-renewing presents, and when the past “gnaws into the future” (Bergson 1984, 4).

In this dissertation, I have sought to show how long-take cinema and durational projects like long-term oral histories might draw attention to what is neglected by progress narratives, in particular, how nostalgia for tradition, spirituality, and rurality remain central components of contemporary Chinese culture. The films and texts I analyze respond to the exhaustion of the progress narrative with deep dives into the durational present. Their extensive use of the long take signals an inward turn, in which all extraneous action and movement are forsaken in favor of self-reflection. As Hua Hsu quoting Lauren Berlant writes, “in the absence of real stability – the state of affairs that we must come to terms with – there is still the possibility of true solidarity, the experience of ‘having adventures and being in the impasse together, waiting for the other shoe to drop, and also, allowing for some healing and resting, waiting for it not to drop.’” Waiting in the impasse describes a perspective that rejects future utopias and the faith in collective social revolution. Instead, this perspective foregrounds endurance and survival. The pause is not only a holding space for something better, but is itself a place to rest, recover, gather strength.

Disillusionment with current systems and ways of life results in becoming speculative: Reaching towards the unknown and becoming otherwise. This means relinquishing progressivist notions of reform and futurity, as well as the restoration of linkages between the past and the present. I am interested in illuminating how the past bears a messianic claim on the present, thereby rescuing spirituality from the sterility of philosophy that has detached itself from its affective and affectable conditions of possibility. In discussing how Chinese cinema might counteract oppressive visual regimes, I draw on the Chinese intellectual tradition to bear on

contemporary Chinese cinema to literalize Walter Benjamin's exhortation to seize "a memory as it flashes past in a moment of danger." In the era of continually unfolding global crises and pessimistic discourses, we might look to what has been discarded as outdated to reclaim an alternative vision of futurity. Attention to the preservation of gaps and silences of cultural memory cuts apart the timeline of modernity, uncovering a messianic temporality attentive to discontinuities, exclusions, and marginalizations. Glimpsing the messianic in temporal disjunctures, anachronisms, and playful renderings of time, this dissertation aims to shake loose the defensive reactivity of nationalisms as well as secular understandings of linear time.

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APPENDIX

Filmography

- Hu, Jinquan 胡金銓, dir. *A Touch of Zen* 俠女. Jakarta: Union Film Production, 1971. 180 minutes. DVD.
- Jia, Zhangke 贾樟柯, dir. *Xiao Wu* 小武. 1997. Hong Kong: Hu Tong Communications, 1998. 111 minutes. DVD.
- Jia, Zhangke 贾樟柯, dir. *Unknown Pleasures* 任逍遥. New York: New Yorker Films, 2002. 113 minutes. DVD.
- Jia, Zhangke 贾樟柯, dir. *Still Life* 三峡好人. Beijing: Xstream Pictures, 2006. 108 minutes. DVD.
- Jia, Zhangke 贾樟柯, dir. *A Touch of Sin* 天注定. Shanghai: Shanghai Film Group, 2013. 130 minutes. DVD.
- Jia, Zhangke 贾樟柯, dir. *Mountains May Depart* 山河故人. Shanghai: Shanghai Film Group, 2015. 131 minutes. DVD.
- Jia, Zhangke 贾樟柯, *Ash is the Purest White* 江湖儿女. Shanghai: Shanghai Film Group, 2018. 136 minutes. DVD.
- Jia, Zhangke 贾樟柯. *Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue* 一直游到海水变蓝. New York: The Cinema Guild, 2021. 112 minutes. <https://mubi.com/films/swimming-out-till-the-sea-turns-blue>.
- Ozu, Yasujiro, *Late Spring*. Tokyo: Shochiku Company Limited, 1949. 108 minutes. DVD.
- Tsai, Ming-Liang. *Stray Dogs* 郊遊. New York: The Cinema Guild, 2013. 138 minutes. DVD.
- Wang, Bing 王冰, dir. *West of the Tracks* 铁西区. Self-produced, 2002. 551 minutes. <https://www.kanopy.com/product/96020?frontend=kui>.
- Wong, Taylor, dir. *Tragic Hero* 英雄好漢. Hong Kong: Johnny Mak Production, 1987. 97 minutes. DVD.
- Woo, John 吳宇森, dir. *A Better Tomorrow* 英雄本色. Hong Kong: Cinema City Company Limited, 1986. 95 minutes. DVD.
- Wu, Wenguang 吴文光, dir. *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* 流浪北京. Self-produced, 1990. 70 minutes. <https://www.chinaindiefilm.org/films/bumming-in-beijing-the-last-dreamers/>.
- Yang, Edward 楊德昌, dir. *Yi Yi* 一一. New York: Kuzui Enterprises, 2000. 173 minutes. DVD.

Yang, Edward 楊德昌, dir. *Terrorizers* 恐怖份子 *Kongbu Fenzi*. Taipei: Central Motion Pictures, 1986. 110 minutes. DVD.

Zhang, Mengqi 章夢奇, dir. *Self Portrait: Fairy Tale at 47KM* 自画像：47 公里童话. Self-produced, 2021. 109 minutes. <https://mubi.com/films/self-portrait-fairy-tale-in-47-km>.

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