

Locality in Chinese-Language Avant-Garde Cinema

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## **Introduction**

### **Abstract**

As the heir to an ancient civilization that has lasted for over fifty centuries, the Chinese-speaking world continues to show an instinctive concern for its own culture, especially in the realm of art, even in its current stage of significant development. As such, the art from Chinese-speaking cultures conveys a strong sense of locality. Even though local filmmakers create avant-garde works that we would generally consider a dynamic contradiction to tradition, the continuity, reality relevance, and power of Chinese culture is always prominently present in such works. In other words, through the abstract, exaggerated, and even divorced avant-garde elements of Chinese-language avant-garde cinema, audiences can observe the traditional, widely humanistic side of Chinese civilization. To a certain extent, this has differentiated the avant-garde films created in the East from those created in the West (also known as the land and sea civilizations, respectively), making the former unique in avant-garde cinema. Simultaneously, through the integration and innovation of Western avant-garde filmmaking paradigms, Chinese-language avant-garde filmmakers have contributed to a reinterpretation of conventional ideas about Chinese culture, which is in line with the aesthetics and values of the modern era. Furthermore, these filmmakers have resolved the obscurity and incomprehensibility of Chinese elements in the impressions of foreigners, enabling the latter to understand Chinese culture more intuitively through the works of local people through avant-garde forms, one of the most common forms of art across the globe.

This project notes the unique cultural locality reflected in this seemingly antinomic phenomenon. On the basis of the historical context and the motifs in the selected films, the project presents this locality in two respective threads: classical and modernistic. The “classical” chapter draws on conventionally endemic aspects such as ecological spacing and neoclassic interpretations

of history. It demonstrates how Chinese-language avant-garde filmmakers reconstruct intimate yet isolated Chinese collective memories and develop them into a dynamic self-reflection on Chinese culture in the contemporary era and describes the unexpected feasibility of using foreign avant-garde strategies to adapt and rejuvenate local content (images, narrative, philosophy, etc.). On the other hand, the “modernistic” chapter draws on social and psychoanalytical aspects such as homeland complexity, urban anxiety, and socialist nostalgia. It summarizes these syndromes as the performance of a shared trauma facing continuous upheaval, globalization, and modernization in the Chinese-speaking world over the past century. In a slightly different way than audiences see in most Western avant-garde cinema, Chinese-speaking filmmakers show a very realistic humanization of those suffering from the *Chinese disease* (a play on the so-called *British disease*)<sup>1</sup> using avant-garde esthetics. The project then connects the two threads to conclude that Chinese-language avant-garde cinema is considered a subtle yet honest display of Chinese culture and social status quo. With a global audience, it uncovers the cultural landscape, historical vicissitude, and the dilemma of modernity in Chinese civilizations from an avant-garde perspective.

The locality of Chinese-language avant-garde cinema is conveyed through three significant aspects. In terms of content, locality is evident in the genres of Chinese-language films (e.g., classical romance, martial arts, Republic adventure, homeland). From classical values to those of modern society, Chinese-language avant-garde cinema has touched upon the Chinese-speaking world’s collective memories. Struggles between kings and nobles, the sacrificing of the small for the greater good, arranged marriages, agricultural production, life on the margins of urban areas, and many other local topics are all depicted in avant-garde cinematic storytelling. In terms of essence, Chinese-language avant-garde cinema is closely related to traditional Chinese culture and

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<sup>1</sup> “Causes of the British Disease,” *Nature* 311, (October 1984): 691–692. <https://doi.org/10.1038/311691a0>

the social status quo; indeed, the two interact dynamically. By deconstructing, abstracting, and reinterpreting local culture, Chinese-language avant-garde cinema attempts to artistically present the ups and downs of Chinese civilization and the dilemma of modernity in today's world. Similar to the avant-garde literature popularized after the reform and opening-up (改革开放, *gaige kaifang*), Chinese-language avant-garde films are often ironic, critical, and realistic at their core, as shown by the filmmakers' depictions. In terms of form, while Western avant-garde cinema uses unique filmmaking methodologies and techniques (e.g., surrealism, expressionism, stream of consciousness, high-speed montages) to present physical or psychological heterization, Chinese avant-garde cinema uses similar strategies to focus on Chinese elements (e.g., shots of Chinese landscapes, elements of "red", depictions of folk customs) in images, scenarios and characters. Thus, the intense attention given to the individual mentality in Western avant-garde cinema is naturally shifted to a focus on locality in Chinese-language avant-garde cinema.

This project on locality in Chinese-language avant-garde films has dual value. Research specifically on locality in Chinese-language avant-garde films is still in the beginning stages, but the subject undoubtedly has twofold significance. First, for local creators, this representation of locality reflects a new understanding of Chinese culture and self-identification. Avant-garde cinematography is an art not only of the West but also of modernity. As one of the filmmaking strategies most recently imported into the Chinese-speaking world Chinese avant-garde cinema is coincidentally taking shape at a critical moment when the Chinese-speaking world is going global. In looking at Chinese film history, as the most important avant-garde art medium after literature and fine arts, the locality in Chinese-language avant-garde film reveals how the Chinese-speaking world has been examining and reinterpreting local culture at the turn of the century by absorbing Western avant-garde esthetics since the 1980s. Additionally, the market positioning of and

audience feedback on such films are worth noting, as they reflect the acceptance of this new local cultural industry.

Second, from the perspective of global avant-garde cinema, Chinese-language avant-garde cinema offers an opportunity to observe the paradigm of Chinese cultural expression. Compared to Western avant-garde cinema, which has been developing for a century and focuses on constructing sensory alienation, fragmentation, and mystification, Chinese avant-garde cinema has intense and concrete localism that appears unique. In the era of globalization, the abstraction and dramatization of the concept of reality in avant-garde films occasionally make the differences between civilizations more obvious. This comparative study helps us see the differences between modern Eastern and Western civilizations in terms of individual, collective, social, emotional, logical, and moral propositions. Overall, this project aims to bring more Chinese cultural concepts and their manifestations in society to the attention of the world through this dual effect.

## **Literature Review**

Avant-garde cinema, or experimental cinema, is a specific genre of cinematic art or a strategy that upends conventional concepts in the making and viewing of films. From the perspective of sensory perception, the avant-garde esthetic often includes surreal images, nonlinear cinematography, and uncanny sound effects; from the standpoint of content, such cinema usually moves beyond the conventional narrative mode by emphasizing obscurity and featuring nonnarrative plots and lines. The modern French term “avant-garde,” essentially equates to “vanguard” in English. The phrase was initially used to indicate the movement of “charging

forward” in a military confrontation. Most literary research has held that Renato Poggioli was the first Western scholar to apply this concept to European cultural studies.<sup>2</sup>

The origins of Western avant-garde cinema can be traced back to a series of upheavals during the capitalization and modernization process in the Western world beginning in the 1890s. During this period, due to large-scale industrial movements and political reforms, various emerging crises completely disintegrated classical ideologies and traditional concepts that have been central in Western culture for centuries. Modernistic methods of thinking, including those of the Dadaists and Surrealists, were popularized in the art world by virtue of the old rules encountering new conflicts. This has been widely regarded as the origin of avant-garde art in the fields of painting, literature, drama, and dance. Possessing interart value and benefitting from the inherent publicity of being on the big screen, cinema showed its dual superiority over other types of art in terms of innovation and popularization, making it one of the most appealing mediums of avant-garde movement.

In the coming 50 years after World War II, Western avant-garde cinema experienced a golden period of development. Enriched by filmmakers from the United States, France, Germany, and the Soviet Union, avant-garde films gradually diversified in both form and content, giving rise to their uniqueness. Generally, the avant-garde film genre can be divided into two main categories from the perspective of motivation. One is esthetic-centric cinema, or so-called “pure cinema,” which stresses self-expression, artistic camera manifestation, and poetic narratives. In *The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo*, Alexandre Astruc claims that representative auteur directors such as Maya Dren, François Truffaut, and Jean-Luc Godard are the leading examples of such

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<sup>2</sup> See Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981).

filmmakers.<sup>3</sup> The other category is ideological-centrist cinema, which aims to provoke reform by criticizing and satirizing current social situations. The popularity of these films is believed to be closely related to traumatic memories of World War I and to the lack of confidence in postwar social reconstruction. These films were usually created based on the intellectual proposition that was introduced to critical circles, such as American New Left and German expressionism, beforehand and claimed that avant-garde cinema should be the medium used to stimulate a cultural revolution. Nevertheless, regardless of which of these categories Western avant-garde cinema belongs to, the prevailing spirit of such films emphasizes absolute independence, antitradition, and artistry. It is also worth noting that, benefiting from the continuous repressive government censorship of Western films, most of the underground cinematic authors who had become wholly financially independent became gradually incorporated into the mainstream film market. All these efforts have allowed avant-garde cinema to develop into a common genre on par with other cinematic genres. Additionally, distinct from the commercial cinema occupying the mainstream market, avant-garde cinema has made the significant contribution, by making use of its intensively literary, artistic, and experimental nature, of upgrading the status of cinema to “the seventh art.”

Unlike with avant-garde films in the Western world, the trajectory of Chinese-language avant-garde cinema has seen more ups and downs. Moreover, affected by various complex factors such as policies and censorship, the emergence and development of Mainland avant-garde cinema seems extremely disparate from the diaspora of other Chinese-speaking areas. In Mainland China, due to the intensive intervention and comprehensive surveillance of the Communist Party of China, until the 1980s, Mainland filmmakers produced almost no cinematic works with avant-garde elements. After the turbulent period of hyperinstitutionalization starting in the 1980s, waves of

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<sup>3</sup> Scott MacKenzie, *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 850-855.

national New Literature movements played a decisive role in stimulating inchoate avant-garde cinema in the Mainland. According to Lin Xiaoping's work on postsocialist Chinese culture, the first group of Chinese avant-garde cinema makers, which Lin believes mostly overlaps with sixth-generation directors, started their experimental practices at the beginning of the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> The root-seeking literature first produced by Mo Yan, Han Shaogong, and other similar writers aimed to provide a retrospective on the motherland. Many fifth-generation film directors, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, were deeply inspired by these literary works. In their most renowned films, for instance, *Yellow Earth* (黄土地, *Huang Tudi*, 1984) and *Red Sorghum* (红高粱, *Hong Gaoliang*, 1987), the themes of land, ecology, and the life of indigenous people were emphasized in a simple yet modernistic way.

Approximately a decade later, sixth-generation directors, including Jia Zhangke, Zhang Yuan, Lou Ye, Jiang Wen, Lu Chuan, and Wang Xiaoshuai, integrated an increasing number of auteur features and Chinese traditions into their creation of avant-garde films. With the accumulated work of two generations of filmmakers, Mainland avant-garde cinema has entered an unprecedented golden period of development since the beginning of the 21st century. Avant-garde films such as *Still Life* (三峡好人, *Sanxia Haoren*, 2006), *The Missing Gun* (寻枪, *Xun Qiang*, 2002), *Devils on the Door Step* (鬼子来了, *Guizi Lai Le*, 2000) and *Suzhou River* (苏州河, *Suzhou He*, 2000) represented Chinese new cinema within the global film market and won international awards.

However, after this ephemeral refulgence, the production and quality of Mainland avant-garde cinema began to shrink by the middle of the 2000s. The renewed and tightened censorship

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<sup>4</sup> See Xiaoping Lin, *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola: Chinese Avant-Garde Art and Independent Cinema* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010).

by the Chinese film bureau and the considerable decrease in the demand for avant-garde films cause the avant-garde cinema industry in Mainland China to stall around 2005. Considering both the rise in production costs and the popularity of webisodes, many avant-garde filmmakers have decided to move the distribution of their films to online or underground channels. Many sixth-generation directors who were previously keen on avant-garde exploration, such as Jiang Wen and Lu Chuan, joined the commercial film industry to enjoy better career prospects. To break the stagnation of avant-garde cinema in the Mainland, some of these filmmakers and their works, for instance, Jiang Wen and his *Beiyang Trilogy* (北洋三部曲, *Beiyang Sanbuqu*), have endeavored to find a balance between commercial and avant-garde elements in their films. Unfortunately, this kind of effort has usually resulted in dissatisfaction either in the market or among critics. Other directors, such as Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye, faced another dilemma under the strong pressure of censorship. Many of the experimental elements reflected in their films, which inherited the spirit of Western avant-garde cinema, seem to provoke the sensitivities of the film bureau in China (political criticism, social imperfection exposure, adult content, etc.). Thus, these directors seemed to have no choice but to screen and distribute their work primarily through overseas channels. This situation also reflects a strange phenomenon worth further consideration: Many Mainland avant-garde films praised by foreign film critics and even given awards have been banned from being shown to local audiences in China.

Fortunately, since 2005, Mainland avant-garde cinema has shown signs of rejuvenation through the efforts of young local directors. In the past ten years, we have witnessed the emergence of an increasing number of avant-garde elements in the works of Ning Hao, Bi Gan, Xu Haofeng, and other directors from the new generation. They have engaged in the mainstream film market, producing repeated experiments that blend avant-garde art with popular culture. Furthermore, their

films, such as *Crazy Stone* (疯狂的石头, *Fengkuang De Shitou*, 2006), *Kaili Blues* (路边野餐, *Lubian Yecan*, 2015) and *Arrow Arbitration* (箭士柳白猿, *Jianshi Liubaiyuan*, 2012), are widely recognized and highly praised. Since the emergence of these directors, the concept of avant-garde has once again garnered public interest.

In contrast, in other areas touched by the Chinese diaspora (mainly Hong Kong and Taiwan), the emergence of avant-garde cinema took place approximately 20 years earlier than it did in the Mainland. Due to the rapid development of the admiration and imitation of Western avant-garde cinema in the early stages of Chinese-language avant-garde cinematic development, since the 1960s, Hong Kong and Taiwan have organized various experimental film exhibitions, screenings, and competitions. The Hong Kong Film Association (卫影会), established in 1971, and the Firebird Film Association (火鸟电影会), established in 1973, prompted the wave of independent short film production with the introductions of the 8 mm filmstrip. Taking advantage of this opportunity, some influential directors, such as John Woo and Cheung Kwok Ming, distributed their works and began defining their own filmmaking style. From the early 1980s to the late 1990s, Hong Kong avant-garde cinema reached a climax through the New Wave Movement. Representative films from this era include *Too Many Ways To Be No. 1* (一个字头的诞生, *Yige Zitou De Dansheng*, 1997) and *The Mission* (枪火, *Qianghuo*, 1999) produced by Milkyway Image LTD (银河映像); these illustrate the possibilities for integrating Hong Kong gangster cinema and avant-garde elements in film. Simultaneously, a considerable number of auteur directors, including Wong Kar-wai, Stanley Kwan, and Ann Hui, produced internationally influential melodramas with experimental shooting techniques and narratives, such as *Rouge* (胭脂扣, *Yanzhi Kou*, 1987) and *In the Mood for Love* (花样年华, *Huayang Nianhua*, 2000). The varying content and form these films greatly enriched the themes, shooting techniques, and ideological connotations of Hong

Kong films. Nonetheless, after experiencing a period of glory just before the 21st century, the volume Hong Kong avant-garde cinema has unfortunately inevitably declined following an overall reduction in the size of the entire Hong Kong film industry. In the last ten years, almost no influential films or filmmakers have appeared in this foregone empire of cinema.

The development of Taiwanese avant-garde cinema shows similarities with the Hong Kong model but has had an entirely different result. In 1966, an experimental movie conference organized by the magazine *Theater* brought the concept of avant-garde from the West to Taiwan. Under the influence of self-reflective localizing movements and positive reforms of cultural policies during the 1970s, Taiwanese avant-garde cinema experienced several dynamic and long-lasting New Wave Cinema movements like that in Hong Kong. Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Edward Yang, and other prominent directors gradually became the main face of Chinese-language avant-garde cinema production during that period. Their works even affected subsequent mainstream filmmaking styles and manifestos in Taiwanese cinema and thus received increasing attention across the global film industry. While the Hong Kong film industry has been inevitably shrinking, Taiwanese cinema, including the genre of avant-garde cinema, has profited from this crucial generation of filmmakers and their development of unique shooting techniques and film textures, thus maintaining the industry's in recent decades. In the last five years, the rise of neogenerational directors in Taiwan has brought further creativity to this field. The triumph of *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* (血观音, *Xue Guanyin*, 2017), as well as *The Great Buddha+* (大佛普拉斯, *Dafo Pu La Si*, 2017) in the 54th Golden Horse Awards, can be regarded as sound evidence of this auspicious situation. Overall, the successful development of avant-garde cinema in Taiwan is worth reflecting on; it has indeed determined the development of the entire Taiwanese film industry and has secured a place for itself in the history of Chinese film.

In the past, studies on the locality of Chinese-language cinema often referred to the subtle differences between Mainland and diaspora productions, and this also applies to Chinese-language avant-garde films. Influenced by ideological upheaval, colonialism, geographical divisions, and other factors that have lasted for over a century, the avant-garde filmmaking practices in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have gradually diverged into different value orientations and filmmaking paradigms. Locality scholar Hongliang Qin argues in his essay on Chinese-language new cinema that “Hong Kong (cinema) presents itself as having a pluralistic locality and external Chineseness; Taiwan (cinema) presents itself as having a realistic locality and ‘resentful’ Chineseness; Mainland (cinema) presents itself as having a retrospective locality and a sublate Chineseness.”<sup>5</sup> In response to Qin’s work, this paper argues that in the context of Chinese-language avant-garde cinema, Hong Kong avant-garde cinema, due to the long period in which it was enveloped by Western colonialism, presents characteristics of an East–West fusion (e.g., oriental-style urban street shots, conflicts between bourgeois patterns and nostalgic complexes); Taiwanese avant-garde cinema, due to its long period of isolation and Japanese postcolonial influence, presents an evident focus on natural ecology and solicitude; and Mainland avant-garde cinema, with its ambivalence towards traditional culture, which underwent many drastic changes in terms of social structure, seeks to fictionalize a more primitive and straightforward collective relationship in order to search for the roots of Chinese civilization, thus showing a tendency towards self-reflection and traceability. It is precisely because of the complicated geopolitical structure and historical background of the Chinese-speaking world that locality in Chinese-language avant-garde films generates rich connotations that are hard to describe succinctly.

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<sup>5</sup> Hongliang Qin, “Locality, Chineseness, Modernity: On Identity Politics in New Films from the Mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong”, *Literatures in Chinese*, (June 2015): 62.

## Chapter 1

### **Classical Locality: Ecology, Neo-Historicism, Heterotopia**

In contrast to the narrow impression given by the word classical in the title of this chapter, in terms of space, the application of “classical” locality in Chinese-language avant-garde cinema is found not only in films focusing on preindustrial or rural areas but also in a great number of films depicting modern and contemporary urban life. Both ancient narratives and a large number of premodern and modern narratives are found in Chinese-language avant-garde cinema. To fully reflect local characteristics in different storytelling genres, directors’ basic logic usually involves exaggerating the visual, aural, and narrative units of the story inherent to the local culture through avant-garde strategies, adding symbolically typical Chinese details to every aspect of the film. This high degree of integration between local content and avant-garde techniques allows such films to achieve a paradoxical unity from both esthetic and narrative perspectives. While the local elements and avant-garde forms may constantly collide and contradict each other, the unique viewing experience brought about by poetics and the modernistic esthetics brought about by the avant-garde strategies (such as symbolism, dissimulation, psychoanalysis narratives, and time-space malpositioning) is reproduced in a soothing way for audiences by adapting the local character of the content they depict. Thus, avant-garde filmmaking strategies have been effectively integrated into the Chinese cultural narrative, producing films that are, on the whole, harmonious.

#### **Ecology**

Whether in terms of nature or culture, the focus on Chinese ecology has been an important development since the 1980s, when the film market in the Chinese-speaking world gradually turned global. As stated in the introduction, the Chinese filmmakers’ gaze and construction of

ecology originated from the root-seeking movement in literature that gradually emerged in Mainland China after the Cultural Revolution. After nearly a century of nationwide cultural upheaval, along with the growth of intellectual practices as part of the reform and opening-up movement, Mainland writers were the first group of Chinese people introduced to the concept of “root-seeking” in the early 1980s, as they had absorbed some similar foreign ideologies (modernism, Western mysticism, Latin magical realism, etc.) and reflected on how to revitalize their local culture. As a famous poet in search of his Chinese roots, Yang Lian has systematically pointed out that “taking the cultural tradition to which the poet belongs as the vertical axis and the human civilization (philosophy, literature, art, religion, etc.) of the poet’s era as the horizontal axis, the poet tends to constantly retrospect the tradition of his civilization from the perspective given by the latest achievements of his country, and thus see many things that were not seen in the past due to the limitation of knowledge. We named this process ‘rediscovery.’”<sup>6</sup> In line with Yang’s agenda, the root-seeking literature, in the spirit of self-enlightenment and the tradition of modernism, tries to trace idea back to simple concepts closely related to the origins of Chinese civilization, such as the landscape where nature and civilization meet, primitive productive labor, and tribal-style group life. Ultimately, Chinese writers tend to link these contents intrinsically to broader world civilization through acquired modernist techniques. Simultaneously, fifth-generation Mainland directors were also profoundly influenced by this creative environment and its inner spirit of root seeking, trying to construct or examine a primitive space and rhythm of life with Chinese characteristics in an avant-garde context.

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<sup>6</sup> Weifang Cao, “On the Composition and Occurrence of Artistic Communication,” *Zhejiang Social Science*, (November 2006): 137.

What left the most decisive impressions on the audience were several rural avant-garde films that underlined the close connection between nature and people as an essential narrative background and artistic feature. Bi Gan became one of the most active Mainland neogenerational directors in the 2010s and is known for his dreamlike narratives and intimate romanticism. In the storytelling of his protagonists' illusory pursuit of love and affection in hazy mental conditions, there are numerous empty photolike shots of natural scenery, distant fixed shots of recreational activities in rural areas, a deliberate amplification of ambient natural sounds, and an obsession among characters with a specific region; all of these aspects are integrated into the natural scenes of a story in a small town in southwest China that has a localized yet transcendent atmosphere. A comparative viewing of his two artistic films, *Kaili Blues* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (地球最后的夜晚, *Diqiu Zuihou De Yewan*, 2018) shows that using the same narrative and artistic filmmaking strategies, Bi is attempting to twin romantic stories that are largely interconnected through their spirituality. Through the motif of the countryside, he constructs a complex esthetic of the homeland formed around China's southwestern border villages. Interestingly, through neither renouncing nor satisfying the pursuit of his/her lover's ubiety, Bi's protagonists strongly imply an even more metaphysical and untouchable Chinese utopia through the images in the film.



Image 1.1.1 *Kaili Blues*:  
Foggy winding highway in Kaili.



Image 1.1.2 *Kaili Blues*:  
Protagonist's lover reciting the tour guide script of  
Kaili on a boat.



Image 1.1.3 *Long Day's Journey Into Night*: Protagonist facing the view of Kaili downtown on a cable car.

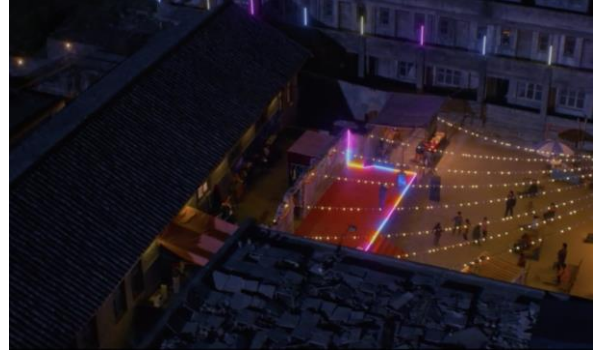


Image 1.1.4 *Long Day's Journey Into Night*: The paranoma of nighttime entertainment on downtown square.

Lu Chuan's experimental film, *The Missing Gun*, is also set in a remote village located in southwest China. Lu's work differs from that of Bi Gan in that Lu tells a suspenseful story of a police detective searching for a gun, which is a common premise in Chinese commercial cinema, and combines this with the silence, mystery, and the ecology of the mountain village to create a unique setting, further deepening the atmosphere of suspense and loneliness. The panicked and anxious thoughts of the protagonist, Ma Shan, often echo the environment, such as the intricate stone streets; the scenes of Ma riding a motorcycle on a country road also indicate the inner journey taking place while searching for the gun thief.



Image 1.1.5 *The Missing Gun*: Ma Shan chasing the imaginary gun thief by bicycle on a countryside road.



Image 1.1.6 *The Missing Gun*: Ma Shan looking for a male who was suddenly missing on intricate stone streets.

It is worth noting that, in addition to the abovementioned visual strategies, local dialects also play a significant role in the collision of ecology and the avant-garde. With eight entire departments and numerous branches and subdivisions, Chinese dialects initially function as a signal of characters' geographical affiliation, endowing the characters with traditional cultural identities—a common Chinese film strategy. In contrast to scripts, often comprising obscure and stream-of-consciousness language, dialects provide a surprising intermingled sensation of earthliness and vanguardism, in other words, locality and abstraction. While this type of film fulfills its main narrative tasks, it also impresses the audience with the film's Chinese characteristics by artfully emphasizing the presence of Chinese ecology.

As mentioned above, the highlighting of ecological features is not limited only to areas that are near pristine natural environments. Indeed, this practice is also often found in many avant-garde urban films that explore essential Chinese cultural elements (e.g., water, nature, air, soil). In fact, as film scholar Sheldon Lu argues, a large number of references to Chinese cultural ecology are concentrated in films that focus on metropolitan issues, such as city planning and the living conditions of urban people as narrative themes.<sup>7</sup> For instance, most of Wong Kar-wai's Hong Kong urban films leave deep impressions about the construction of Hong Kong urban ecology in the middle of the 20th century. From *Days of Being Wild* (阿飞正传, *Ah Fei Zhengzhuan*, 1990) and *Chungking Express* (重庆森林, *Chongqing Senlin*, 1994) to *In the Mood for Love*, the depiction of old Hong Kong presented in Wong's films tends to blend together many disparate cultural elements, including postcolonial bourgeois sentiment, the depressed collective memories of local citizens during the curfew period starting in the 1960s, and cyberpunk-like landscapes full of neon

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<sup>7</sup> Sheldon Lu, "Gorgeous Three Gorges at Last Sight: Cinematic Remembrance and the Dialectic of Modernization," in *Chinese Ecocinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge*, ed. Sheldon Lu and Jiayan Mi (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 39–55.

lights, humid nights, and decadent people. This unique mixture, well known by its vraiseemblance (the structure of Hong Kong has a similar complexity) and psychedelization (owing to the illusory visual elements and stream-of-consciousness language), has become a paradigm often borrowed by subsequent films around the world reflecting Chinese cities with colonial or postcolonial overtones.



Image 1.1.7 *Days of Being Wild*:  
Protagonist's place.



Image 1.1.8 *Chungking Express*:  
An official poster of the film.



Image 1.1.9 *In the Mood for Love*:  
Protagonists dating in a shabby outdoor restaurant.

The exaggerated reproduction of traditional customs also frequently appears in the ecological images in of Chinese-language avant-garde cinema. Taking Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*, *Raise The Red Lantern* (大红灯笼高高挂, *Dahong Denglong Gaogao Gua*, 1991) and *Yellow Earth* as

examples, some Chinese avant-garde filmmakers are willing to devote considerable effort to depict productions and cultural events in local settlements. Overflowing with the color red (a specific color showing the vitality and cohesion of the Chinese), esthetically arranged scenarios and exaggerated rituals, such as harvest festivals and weddings, not only reveal the primitive relationships and subtle disagreements between individuals and groups but also implant them as metaphors to reinforce the plot.



Image 1.1.10 *Red Sorghum*:  
Peasants lifting marriage litter in a Sorghum field.



Image 1.1.11 *Raise The Red Lantern*:  
Heroine's room full of red lanterns.

## Neo-Historicism

Despite its consistent use of the Chinese language, neo-historicist cinema, like ecological avant-garde cinema, has a history of cultural transmutation in the modern era that stems from an earlier nationwide movement of literary innovation. The democratic system drastically contradicts Confucian morality and beliefs, and the tenet of “history is always written by the winners”—a proverb that has been rooted in the Chinese mind for thousands of years. Following the footsteps of the Western Enlightenment, Chinese writers, critics, and historians began to re-explain the history of ancient times until the Republican period. This eventually led to the critical historical

revisionist movement (历史翻案运动, *Lishi Fan'an Yundong*), which is still ongoing<sup>8</sup>. On the basis of materialism and democracy, citizens are taught to critically reflect on prestigious figures in history while considering negative figures' desirability with a dialectical approach. In the case of significant historical events, citizens are asked to judge rights and wrongs in terms of macrohistorical developments, the maximization of productiveness, and other materialistic but not moral principles. This has led to a complete reversal of many previously stable historical discourses, providing Chinese society with an entirely new perspective on its past. Influenced by the reconstruction movement of classics and its noted practitioners (politicians such as Mao Zedong and Chen Duxiu, critics such as Lu Xun and Liang Qichao, writers such as Guo Moruo and Cao Yu, and historians such as Lv Simian and Tian Yuqing), a large number of stage plays have reinterpreted historical figures and events in Mainland China around the time of the democratic revolution (the 1910s to the 1940s) and the reform and opening-up (after the 1980s); such plays include *Qu Yuan* (屈原, 1942) and *Wang Zhaojun* (王昭君, 1978).

Fifth-generation filmmakers and some older sixth-generation filmmakers who grew up during this particular period were deeply influenced by this wave of neo-historicism and began to explore historical themes in addition to making ecologically avant-garde films. Coincidentally, this antihistorical spirit, which criticizes traditional Chinese morality and emphasizes the complexity of characters and the irony of events, coincides with the inherently fractured spirit of the avant-garde, providing an efficient narrative framework for directors and screenwriters. Nevertheless, while stage plays have a singular emphasis on characters and events, Chinese film directors do not forget the fact that cinema carries the responsibility of building a visual spectacle. Therefore, in the process of cinematizing such narratives, their historical films are filled with honest depictions

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<sup>8</sup> For more information about historical revisionist practices in the fields of theatre and cinema, see Kehui Liu, "The Problem of 'Revision' in the Study of Historical Figures," *Historiography Bimonthly*, (March 2009): 141-147.

of historical landscapes to meet audience demands and the creators' rosy image of ancient Chinese civilization. As a result, neohistoricist avant-garde cinema emerged and developed in the Mainland and has become a distinctive branch of Chinese-language avant-garde cinema.

Take Qin (秦朝, *Qin Chao*, the first united feudal dynasty of China) and its founder, Ying Zheng, as an example. In recent years, the continuous excavation of Qin dynasty relics and the increasing popularity of Qin culture have led film creators in this field to reconstruct the elaborate administrative structure, historical anecdotes, architectural and costume styles, and unique customs of the dynasty, which show the power of the feudal dynasty. However, due to this reconsideration of historical figures, the portrayal of Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇, namely Ying Zheng, translated as the first emperor of Qin) himself appears increasingly rebellious in light of classical narratives. Due to the specificity of his historical identity (arguably a monument to the spirit behind the grand unification of China by force) and the strict control over the narratives of historical figures in the Chinese feudal era, this well-known monarch is often evaluated as either a great emperor or a ruthless tyrant regardless of whether official or folk records are consulted, reflecting the blatant functional and moral indoctrination of those learning about Chinese history. Nor, until the end of the 19th century, did Ying possess the vivid multidimensional character that legendary leaders of the nation in Europe and elsewhere have in literature (such as Shakespeare's depiction of Roman emperors). However, in *The Emperor and the Assassin* (荆轲刺秦王, *Jingke Ci Qinwang*, 1998) and *The Emperor's Shadow* (秦颂, *Qin Song*, 1996), the directors decide to overtly adopt Shakespearean romanticism and use modernist strategy to design a completely base (even occasionally psychopathic) emperor and an exaggeratedly mundane storytelling mode for Ying. The result is that he appears to the audience to be an emotional, even unpleasant person whose outstanding achievements have been taken away. This makes the audience question the

historical image of Ying and the importance of the Qin dynasty in the film, thus reflecting the skeptical stance of neohistoricist cinema towards the epic narratives of Chinese classical literature.

Zhou Xiaowen's *The Emperor's Shadow* is extravagant in its restoration of the landscape of the Qin dynasty, showing many glorious Qin palace complexes and vast ritual scenes accompanied by magnificent musical effects. However, the depiction of Ying disturbs the epic narrative and undermines his image as a great emperor. Even when focusing only on the shaping of Ying's character, many surprising scenarios reveal his personal peculiarities, such as bisexual algolagnia. Ying's relationships and interactions with other characters are also explicitly damaging to his dignity as a well-known historical figure. Ying's best friend, the renowned musician Gao Jianli, mocked him seriously by fornicating with his daughter, Princess Yueyang. This scandalous relationship is incontrovertibly confirmed in a sex scene that took place in the Ying ancestral hall, resulting in the embarrassment of the Ying family. Moreover, in Ying's enthronement ceremony, which was the grandest scene of the film, he was severely beaten by Gao (who was dying at the time) as he swore to heaven that his dictatorship was valid. These scenes led to the thorough disenchantment of a wise and powerful leader.



Image 1.2.1. *The Emperor's Shadow*:  
The wide shot of Qin palace.



Image 1.2.2 *The Emperor's Shadow*:  
The wide shot of Qin sacrifice.



Image 1.2.3 *The Emperor's Shadow*:  
Ying Zheng igniting the ritual tripod.



Image 1.2.4 *The Emperor's Shadow*: Ying Zheng molesting Xu Fu (a respectful warlock).

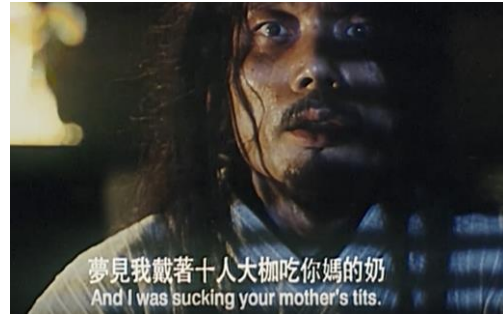


Image 1.2.5 *The Emperor's Shadow*: Gao Jianli insulting Ying Zheng.



Image 1.2.6 *The Emperor's Shadow*: Gao Jianli having sex with Princess Yueyang in Ying ancestral hall.



Image 1.2.7 *The Emperor's Shadow*: Gao Jianli attacking Ying Zheng on his enthrone ceremony.

Chen Kaige similarly uses psychological anomalist strategies in *The Emperor and the Assassin* to shape the creative but controversial figure of Ying Zheng, who is only partially consistent with the great Qin Shi Huang in the Chinese history. Dressed in luxurious clothes and surrounded by hundreds of people, this character realizes the Qin emperor's dream of unifying all Chinese. Nevertheless, the subsequent plot shows that he not only is politically and militarily hostile towards his royal mission and his henchmen but also has lost his personal happiness by disappointing his lover in the process of fulfilling the emperor's wishes. In addition, an ironic scene occurs when Jingke starts his assassination attempt: Not only is Ying unable to make any dignified counterattack, despite his status as a great national leader, but he is also chased out by Jing as if he were a deserter, creating the first-ever embarrassing and ugly depiction of Qin Shi Huang in Chinese-language film history. At this point, those magnificent scenes and props

functioning as tools for restoring history suddenly become a source of silent satire of Ying's obscene image. It is worth noting that, in addition to the portrayal of Ying, the other main characters are also absurdly shaped to create the sense of an overwhelmingly eccentric atmosphere during the Qin dynasty. For instance, there are several unexplained feminizations of male characters in the film, including Jingke and Lao Ai (a gigolo who had a sexual relationship with Ying's mother and eventually planned a failed munity), which further demonstrates Chen's commitment to reflecting absurdity within this historical moment.



Image 1.2.8 *The Emperor and the Assassin*: Ying Zheng clustered by hundreds of servants.

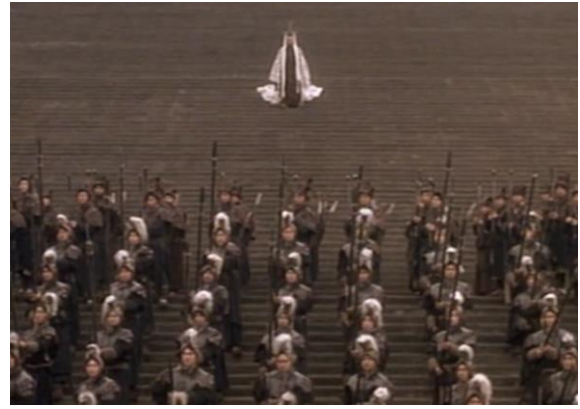


Image 1.2.9 *The Emperor and the Assassin*: Ying Zheng commanding his army to quell Lao Ai's munity.



Image 1.2.10 *The Emperor and the Assassin*: Ying Zheng chased by Jingke.



Image 1.2.11 *The Emperor and the Assassin*: Ying Zheng beaten badly by his mother Consort Dowager Zhao.



Image 1.2.12 *The Emperor and the Assassin*:  
Lao Ai wearing women's dress.



Image 1.2.13 *The Emperor and the Assassin*:  
Jingke wearing women's dress (the right one).

Liu Bang, another great emperor who seized power from the Qin and beat the destructive Chu (楚) before founding the great Han dynasty (汉朝, *Hanchao*), is another popular subject in neo-historicist narratives. In Lu Chuan's *The Last Supper* (王的盛宴, *Wang de Shenyang*, 2012), Liu's imperial standing is set aside altogether. Instead, he is an extremely frail figure who has spent half his life immersed in self-doubt. On the one hand, Liu considers himself a villain who is held under the bewitching spell of the glorious Qin dynasty and has lost his conscience on the quest for power. On the other hand, he describes himself as an inferior and weak-minded person when confronting the lofty, ingenious image of Xiang Yu, the great Chu king and both his most critical benefactor and his enemy. Lu uses multiple first-person angles, a voyeuristic lens, and unconscious time-space displacement to show Liu's anxious inner world in between Qin palace and Xiang's army, thus achieving the overall disenchantment of the great emperor.



Image 1.2.14 *The Last Supper*:  
Liu Bang astonished by the census register system of Qin dynasty.



Image 1.2.15 *The Last Supper*:  
Liu Bang sadly predicting the tragedy of his family with his dying breath.

Another group of historical avant-garde films that are similarly eclectic include Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (英雄, *Yingxiong*, 2002) and *Shadow* (影, *Ying*, 2018). Such films prefer to take a poetic narrative style and filmic esthetic design to create an abstract atmosphere of sensations in order to briefly probe into the ancient Chinese wisdom of "The Way" (道, *dao*), which was carried out by familiar philosophical schools, such as Confucianism and Taoism. Compared to the radical attempts to reconstruct historical narratives in other avant-garde films, *Hero*, which was hailed as the first blockbuster born in China, helping the country step into the 21st century, makes limited use of visual avant-garde strategies due to commercial considerations. While the exact masses of solid color and formalistic spatial constructions of *Red Sorghum* were present in the film, Zhang cleverly used historical stories from the pre-Qin period, which were primarily about naturalistic philosophies, as narrative themes to accommodate these avant-garde expressions. Since the abstract and metaphysical features in the avant-garde and ancient Chinese philosophy have subtle resonance, the format and content of *Hero* is ultimately harmonious. Zhang also experimented with a more minimalist visual presentation years later in *Shadow*, using ink-and-wash (水墨, *Shuimo*) elements in the costumes, architecture, and overall scenery to make give an overarching impression of unique Chinese chromatics. He created a highly conceptual space composed of black and white landscapes as an artistic stage upon which to tell historical stories in a simple way.



Image 1.2.16 *Shadow*:  
The ink-and-wash style outdoor scene.



Image 1.2.17 *Shadow*:  
The ink-and-wash style indoor scene.



Image 1.2.18 *Hero*:  
The library covered by blue color.



Image 1.2.19 *Hero*:  
The Qin palace covered by green color.

An interesting phenomenon within this aspect of classical locality is that another branch of Chinese-language avant-garde historical films, instead of representing official history, has engaged in tacit collaboration with classical martial arts that has been prevalent since the premodern era. For example, when viewing Wong Kar-Wai's *The Grandmaster* (一代宗师, *Yidai Zongshi*, 2013), it is obvious that the grand tone of the esthetics and values are an unexpected blend of subtly balanced elements of classicism, marginal portions of society (江湖, *Jianghu*), and modernistic solicitude. This blend originates from martial arts, and avant-gardism focuses on many overlapping topics, such as the lives of those living at the margins of society, individualism, and surrealism. This allows the martial arts to possess a natural validity and harmony in avant-garde narratives. For instance, the chivalrous values espoused in those films, for instance, the values righteousness and patriotism (especially in the face of Japanese invasions), has developed distinctive vitality in various avant-garde formats. Like Zhang Yimou's attempts at neo-historicist cinema, Wong's avant-garde aesthetics in *The Grandmaster* essentially showcase a romanticism that echoes the patriotism in traditional national cinema through all deliberate high-speed photography and partial close-ups of the action. Ultimately, the marginalized characters in martial arts films defend the

nation's dignity with their ancient but unique kung fu values, fully internalizing this responsibility in their career and even throughout their whole lives.



Image 1.2.20 *The Grandmaster*:  
Ip Man (protagonist, the right one) challenging the kung fu senior in front of the altar.

Contrary to Wong's work, but mimicking the demystification mentioned above regarding epic narratives, Jiang Wen's *Hidden Man* (邪不压正, *Xie Bu Ya Zheng*, 2018) shows an attempt to appropriately dismantle the more severe parts of the traditional nationalist narrative by using spatial fragmentation and marginal characteristics of martial arts strategies (which are commonly recognized as strategies of avant-garde art as well). By allowing the male protagonist, Li Tianran, to construct the double space of the rooftops-as-ground while flying over the eaves of houses, Wen divides the private, romantic neighborhood on the outskirts of the city to be contrasted with the distressing social background of invasion during war. By taking anti-Japanese actions as his everyday self, Li liberates his chivalrous nature and forms a parallel, noninterfering state for his transcended ideas, creating an alternative model of the Sino-Japanese war hero.



Image 1.2.21 *Hidden Man*:  
Li Tianran riding a bicycle on the roof.



Image 1.2.22 *Hidden Man*:  
Li Tianran overlooking the Beijing city with his lover.



Image 1.2.23 *Hidden Man*:  
Li Tianran dashing on the roof with his bottom uncovered.

## Heterotopia

The coexistence of realistic elements and avant-garde strategies in avant-garde cinema can be described through the heterotopia model. In his essay *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, Michel Foucault defines heterotopia as a special metaphysical space full of ambiguous connections and distinctions from real time and space<sup>9</sup>. One of its essential functions is to enable creators to reconstruct an independent space for looking at or reflecting on the basis

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<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, no. 5 (October 1976): 22-27.

of existing culture. Chinese scholar Fan Xiang also gives a functional definition of heterotopia in his article *Foucault's Heterotopia Theory and Its Enlightenment to Narratology* (2019):

The deconstruction strategy of alternative space is used in the domain of literature to shed important light on the innovation of traditional novel narratives...to eliminate the theory of 'space containers' to emphasize the reproduction of the meaning of space elements, the specific space. The specific space field creates and broadens new the meaning of the text.<sup>10</sup>

The unique atmosphere constructed in classical Chinese-language avant-garde cinema looks very different from the atmosphere in general avant-garde cinema and other Chinese-language cinema genres. Indeed, this aligns with Foucault's assumption of the cultural meaning of heterotopia in several ways. First, taking ecological and neo-historicist films as examples, either by using avant-garde shots and performances to give local or historical landscapes a sense of distance and absurdity or by deliberately focusing on a marginal issue that is far from modern reality, Chinese-language avant-garde cinema has always tried to isolate the subject of narratives from familiar Chinese culture to a certain extent. However, at the same time, these distant spaces are still inextricably linked to authentic Chinese cultural scenes due to many local elements that are visible in the films. At the right moment, directors will consciously exaggerate either familiar or unfamiliar parts of their heterotopias through avant-garde strategies to express their ultimate purpose in making those films, such as fetishizing the naturalist purity of South China, satirizing Chinese civilization in a specific historical era, or philosophizing on the cultural complexities of the homeland.

Based on the presupposition of classical locality in Chinese-language avant-garde cinema as an embodiment of heterotopia, in addition to developing explanations in light of spatial theories, we can say, from the perspective of modern structuralist linguistics, that filmmakers in the Chinese

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<sup>10</sup> Xiang Fan, "Foucault's Heterotopia Theory and Its Enlightenment to Narratology," *Journal of Mianyang Teachers' College*, (June 2019): 69.

world have encoded a variety of local elements based on modernist semiotics into such films to provide them with a large cultural corpus with prominent Chinese characteristics. In turn, this allows filmmakers to create classical contexts or explore classical propositions in avant-garde contexts. In his monograph, *Language and Cinema*, Christian Metz brings the significant concepts of structuralist linguistics, such as signifiers, codes, and discourse, to film studies, producing a new theory that is more compatible with this complex new art. His argument about the interplay of the four categories of film codes aptly illustrates how local content fits into the seemingly incompatible form of avant-garde art.<sup>11</sup> As a “special signifying practice” in heterotopian spaces, Chinese-language avant-garde film presents “a complex ensemble of codes” that Metz divides into several groups based on their components. Cinematic codes usually represent dynamic symbols that appear only in filmmaking in the genre of avant-garde cinema. High-speed photography, stream-of-consciousness narratives, montages, and abnormal camera angles are the most familiar coding strategies. Noncinematic codes refer to common cultural concepts that are not specific to filmmaking; these include elements of Chinese localities cited above. Shared codes are symbols shared by films and other forms of art, such as chromatolysis (fine art), spatial arrangement (architecture), and action design (theatre and dancing). Subcodes are a more flexible concept and may refer to specific filmmaking skills with special ideographic effects that are often expressed in Chinese-language avant-garde films through slow-moving distance shots, amplified natural sounds from the environment, slow-motion shots and partial close-ups of ancient characters in motion. From the perspective of performance, this subgenre of Chinese cinema is characterized by ritualization, poeticization, recitation, and other features closely related to Chinese artistic perception.

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<sup>11</sup> See Christian Metz, “Plurality of Cinematic Codes,” in *Language and Cinema*, ed. Christian Metz and Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok (Berlin: De Gruyter, Inc., 1974), 61-69.

Directors may accomplish a localized avant-garde presentation by exchanging different kinds of codes and softening the conflict between foreign avant-garde art and the native local culture by allowing the localizing process to infiltrate into the avant-garde film production paradigm, perhaps even forming a unique regional avant-garde film production paradigm. For this reason, the ecological avant-garde cinema and neo-historicist films discussed share many characteristics in terms of how local elements are displayed and avant-garde artistic techniques are employed. As a result, the classical localization of Chinese-language avant-garde cinema has achieved innovation in local content presentation and gradually formed an independent avant-garde atmosphere with prominent national characteristics within Chinese-language filmmaking circles through the continuous penetration of localization. Through avant-garde intervention in the form of the juxtaposition of familiarization and estrangement, traditional cinematic motifs take on a paradoxical status. In such ambiguous, isolated spaces, ideal paradigms, social constructions, and ideologies that filmmakers attempt to actualize but have not practiced sufficiently in reality have room to take root. Avant-garde filmmakers from Chinese-speaking areas, probably due to the profound influence of traditional culture and values, prefer to present transcending ideas based on ecological/historical landscape reconstruction and to maintain a limited level of heterotopian vagueness. Doing so helps develop the characters with the naturalistic poetics, intimacy, and historical traceability of such avant-garde films and attempts to reconstruct an intimate yet isolated space for Chinese characterization.

## Chapter 2

### The Modernistic Locality: Fracture, Modernity, Red Nostalgia

#### Fracture

In interpreting modernistic localized content, most Chinese-language avant-garde cinema shares an initial awareness of the gradually deepening fracture between the lives of individual Chinese and the Chinese collective consciousness caused by modernization and globalization during the past century. As Chinese film researcher Rao Shuoguang summarizes in *Note on the Evolution of Film Trends in the Post-New-Age Decade*:

Facing the sudden emergence of modern urban civilization and its way of life, the filmmakers present a strong mentality of ‘spiritual wanderers.’ On the one hand, they cannot refuse to accept the urban civilization, but on the other hand, they are eager to keep the emotion, warmth, integrity, and eternity of the ‘homeland’ (乡土, *xiangtu*) society in their hearts. This kind of confusion, fracture, and anxiety results from the collision of the inherent homeland complex of Chinese intellectuals with the newborn urban civilization.<sup>12</sup>

These films are adept at introducing the Western avant-garde cinematic paradigm to analyze contemporary Chinese social dilemmas with sharper dramatic tension or exaggerated artistic expression. They document and even interrogate the reality of the contemporary era. They usually use multiple camera angles to establish the connection between individuals and the urban environment after establishing their ideological core. Special shots and scenes acquired from the universal avant-garde tradition are frequently used to expose the dark side of contemporary urban life. Simultaneously, the characters’ private emotions, shown through the first-person perspective, are set against chaotic scenes, allowing the morbid psychology of the characters formed by their low quality of life to form a nonnegligible relationship with their living circumstances. It shows a synchronicity between the plight and anxiety of people and the environment rather than the

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<sup>12</sup> Shuoguang Rao, “Note on the Evolution of Film Trend in the Post-New-Age Decade,” *Contemporary Cinema*, (June 1999): 64.

uncanniness or horror that results from being affected by odd surroundings, as emphasized in Western avant-garde films such as *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) and *Eraser Head*.

*Suzhou River* and *Spring Fever* (春风沉醉的夜晚, *Chunfeng Chenzui de Yewan*, 2009), two urban-focused films directed by Lou Ye, tell similar stories of polygamy in two Chinese metropolises (Shanghai and Wuhan) at the beginning of the 21st century. In addition to their romantic, yet nihilistic, main plots, both films attempt to direct their focus to the underclass's existential landscape in turn-of-the-century urban areas. In *Suzhou River*, a series of close-ups of middle-aged boatmen at work and frequent scenes of pedestrian traffic on the Suzhou Bridge emphasize this fundamental concern. Showing the untidy, crowded environment around the Suzhou River, the poor quality of life of the underclass laborers, and their numbness to this poor situation are effectively implied. On the other hand, in *Spring Fever*, the first-person perspective, voyeuristic view, and intense motion shots recreate the feeling of being "caught in bed" (捉奸, *zhuojian*) using many Chinese esthetic characteristics. The collaboration between realistic narratives and avant-garde filming skills amplifies the sense of wretchedness that pervades such a situation, exposing the embarrassment and pain of banality that each person involved in the polyamorous relationship experiences. The problematicness of Chinese marriages originates from traditional Chinese patriarchal control and its fate since the rise of feminism, the transformation of family structures, and even the growing awareness of nonhetero sexualities. Lou's insight incorporates these common yet intimate issues that have become quite prevalent in China. Through the artistic presentation of the avant-garde, he hopes to provoke thoughts on contemporary Chinese spousal relationships, marriage problems, and other fundamental issues.



Image 2.1.1 *Suzhou River*:  
The filthy Suzhou River.



Image 2.1.2 *Spring Fever*:  
Wang Ping finding his wife investigating his  
homosexual affair.

Lou also consistently pays attention to the widespread confusion of urban youth in the 2000s. More or less influenced by their European and American predecessors in the Beat Generation, these young people at the bottom of the social hierarchy were subjected to many pressures just to survive and thus took a decadent attitude towards worldly life but also possessed more enthusiasm for spiritual satisfaction. Following the growing migration of rural populations in China in search of part-time jobs, young people who have chosen to embrace metropolitan culture have gradually crafted a blueprint for “pursuing life success and true love” that includes both romanticism and enthusiasm for survival. Nevertheless, they are also prone to lose their direction in life once subjected to the high level of pressure involved in urban life. In Lou’s films, the director excels in expressing this violent collision of free will and reality. The esthetics of the places where young people entertain themselves, which he emphasizes several times, are a mixture of cyberpunk and the unique “village in the city” (城中村) structure of 2000s China. Characters change and take on more staged and flamboyant attire as they lose themselves in the environment, highlighting the vast emptiness and loneliness in their minds. In *Suzhou River*, Meimei, the heroine, works in a nightclub and occasionally dresses up as a blonde mermaid to dive in the workplace pool. When she adopts her mermaid persona, she also willingly takes the place of a man’s lost love when he

brings her an impressive love story. Addicted to role playing, she exhibits the same bewitching aura as the environment she finds herself in. Similarly, in *Spring Fever*, the homosexual protagonist, Jiang Cheng, often masturbates in a nightclub dressed as a woman due to his inner anxiety and emptiness. However, when these characters return to their daily lives, they are completely lost when they are confronted with a series of mundane aspects of their reality, such as poverty, damaged reputations, and complex interpersonal relationships, which might overshadow their ideal lives.



Image 2.1.3 *Suzhou River*:  
“Century Happy House” (Meimei’s workplace).



Image 2.1.4 *Spring Fever*:  
The nightclub Jiang Cheng always visits.



Image 2.1.5 *Suzhou River*:  
Meimei dressing like a mermaid.



Image 2.1.6 *Spring Fever*:  
Jiang Cheng made up as a lady boy by the dancers.

Faced with marginal behaviors or scenarios commonly found in foreign avant-garde films, such as felony, candid eroticism, violence, and death (which could have irreparable consequences),

Chinese-language avant-garde filmmakers have smartly localized these elements, either because of censorship considerations or due to the Chinese characteristics they value. This has led to the development of a specific subgenre: Chinese-language avant-garde crime cinema. This genre occupies a special place in the expression of modernistic Chinese locality. The development of this genre in avant-garde culture also hints at the irreconcilable contradictions that frequently arise in Chinese culture between the pressures of contemporary life and adherence to social morality. Chinese people, who have long revered traditional public morality and group harmony, still show instinctive resistance to most kinds of socially marginal behaviors, as they represent a breakdown of the order of daily life and the destruction of humanity. This subgenre, therefore, comes with a natural warning and carries edifying significance in Chinese-speaking areas. Therefore, when the Western avant-garde film paradigm emerged into China, local directors tended to underline the distortion of human nature caused by social factors behind those extreme behaviors. Dehumanizing under a macroview, which occurs during periods of ideological revolution and social reconstruction, is always a concern among avant-garde filmmakers when composing this kind of story. They always strive to link this phenomenon with the vicissitude of Chineseness and the inevitability of modernization.

Diao Yinan's *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (白日焰火, *Bairi Yanhuo*, 2014) and Cao Baoping's *The Dead End* (烈日灼心, *Lieri Zhuoxin*, 2015) are two representative films of the Chinese-language avant-garde crime genre. Both films focus on criminals' inner struggles, and unexpected consequences of murder cases that have remained unsolved for years. In the course of the narratives in these films, many realistic social dilemmas that criminals face or witness such as sexual harassment, homophobia, and racism, are also suggestively pointed out. The two films also share else something unique: In addition to arranging a narrative line from the point of view of the

person who solves the case, they also pay a great deal of attention to the subjective perspective of the perpetrators, allowing the audience to feel the heaviness of crime, as well as the pain it brings to the perpetrators as reflected in their actions, experiences, and thoughts.

In *The Dead End*, a trio of criminals sexually assault an innocent girl and slaughter her entire family. Surprisingly, they try to make amends afterward, but they still cannot escape the intense trauma and negative consequences caused by the crime. Xiaofeng, one of the criminals, frequently feels the impulse to self-harm with cigarette butts, burning off his fingerprints. His coconspirator, Ah Dao, is at one point seriously injured but chooses instead to tend to his own wounds by excruciating means rather than go to the hospital and be caught by the police. Lao Chen, another coconspirator, does not hesitate to pretend to be mentally retarded for years to avoid arrest. The men adopt a terminally ill orphan to atone for their crime. However, they inadvertently reveal themselves in the process of borrowing money to pay medical bills. Along with graphic shots of crime scenes and a devastating close-up of a lethal injection (part of a capital punishment sentence), the depiction of the criminals' hard lives gives the film a desperate and fatalistic atmosphere. Cao seems to be trying to show the inevitability of retribution and the criminals' slow fulfillment of their fate, that is, of being punished by law through a process of "crime commitment→atonement→exposure→confession." This is considered a natural flow of social morality tales in Chinese culture and literature.



Image 2.1.7 *The Dead End*:  
Xin Xiaofeng self-harming unconsciously.



Image 2.1.8 *The Dead End*:  
The lethal injection.

In *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, Diao is intended to convey the subtly synchronous desperation and survival instincts of the case solver and the perpetrators by portraying how the characters' mental conditions are affected by the case. Zhang Zili, a police officer, and Wu Zhizhen, a murderer, are forced by circumstances to use and betray each other, but they also live under a significant amount of pressure and guilt. Zhang, who represents justice and fairness in the police office, succumbs to Wu's seduction because of his unhappiness over his sexual desires. However, he later betrays Wu under the psychological pressure presented by his eagerness to secure a promotion. Wu, who is initially in the vulnerable position of being threatened to provide sexual services from time to time, betrays her husband (who is willing to kill people to protect her). The detailed narratives of crime causality reflect both sides' desperation in the act of betrayal. In terms of avant-garde aspects of the film, Diao uses multiple artistic strategies to focus on the two protagonists' painful reactions to a crime. Wu, like a typical PTSD patient, acts like nothing is wrong but is unusually silent. Her facial expressions are frozen in looks of indifference and sadness at all times; Zhang's dissatisfaction with sex and guilt for betraying Wu is finally expressed in a scene of wild dancing at the end of the film. The obscure but realistic desire for life is mercilessly magnified in their bodies through such extreme acts as committing crimes, forcing these ordinary Chinese people, who just wanted to live an ordinary life, to make tough choices.



Image 2.1.9 *Black Coal, Thin Ice*:  
Zhang Zili attempting to assault on his ex-wife.



Image 2.1.10 *Black Coal, Thin Ice*:  
Wu Zhizhen assaulted by her boss.



Image 2.1.11 *Black Coal, Thin Ice*:  
Wu Zhizhen showing an indifferent face when  
seducing Zhang Zili.



Image 2.1.12 *Black Coal, Thin Ice*:  
Zhang Zili's insane solo dance.

### Disease of Modernity

Turning from the past to the present, Chinese-language avant-garde cinema that focuses on mental disorders in modern Chinese-speaking regions also conveys Chineseness since it exposes long-term historic dilemmas through stimulating, trenchant avant-garde strategies. Such films' moral value has transformed from oriental collectivism (nationalization, ethnocentrism, familiarization, etc.) to personal crises. Unlike the congeneric avant-garde cinema in the West, these films emphasize the modernistic social background of the story in which characters develop the pessimistic feelings of having “nothing to rely on,” a “lack of survival goals,” and a “loss of self-worth.” The analogous phenomenon that took place in Europe and the United States decades earlier is called the “disease of modernity”<sup>13</sup> (时代病, *Shidai Bing*) in social psychology.

The obsession with this typical Chinese disease of modernity has been explored by various local directors in their avant-garde films from different periods and regions and has thus been artfully expressed and psychoanalyzed in a way that reflects the cultural dilemmas China faced at the turn of the century. Except for the aforementioned large-scale domestic migration that has

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<sup>13</sup> For more information about the disease of modernity, see Brandon H.Hidaka, “Depression as a Disease of Modernity: Explanations for Increasing Prevalence,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 140, no. 3 (November 2012): 205-214.

prompted a climax in affection for the homeland, the typical symptoms of the Chinese version of the disease of modernity are also widespread in the clash of Chinese and foreign cultural interactions gradually fostered by the process of globalization. Additionally, the collective unwellness resulting from the capitalist components of the social reconstruction that began with the reform and opening-up aggravates the situation. Amid the intense clash of cultures at different stages, in different countries, and with different ideologies, Chinese filmmakers find a great deal of drama and absurdity. Taking this theme as a gateway, they use avant-garde cinematography to share their unique interpretation of the symptoms and causes of the modernistic disease with a sharper and more distinctive angle.

The concept of “home” is an exceptionally long-lasting and profound anchoring point for those whose families have lived in Chinese-speaking regions for more than 5,000 years. In addition to the “native” conversion or *xiangtu* mentioned in the introduction, the concept of “home” also acknowledges the importance of Chinese people’s attachment to territory, blood ties, and family. In 20th century China and its diaspora communities, traditional family characteristics, such as “stability,” “solidarity,” and “mutuality,” were in serious conflict with the increasingly rapid social upheavals (dominated by national modernizing movements such as the reformation of the household registration system, domestic relocation, and urbanization). This presented a great challenge to the long-lasting culture inherited by the modern Chinese, which always prioritizes the protection of the family and collective wellness.<sup>14</sup> The Chinese people who were caught in this situation began to feel confused by the new rhythms of life. At the same time, Chinese filmmakers captured the dramatic potential in this period of social change. Many fifth- and sixth-generation directors tried to use the strategies they acquired from Western avant-garde cinema, such as

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<sup>14</sup> See Kwok-Bun Chan, “Ethnic Space, Displacement and Forced Relocation,” in *Migration, Ethnic Relations and Chinese Business*, ed. Kwok-bun Chan (Abingdon-on-Thames: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 124–139.

symbolic metaphors, disordered narratives, and avant-garde art designs, to show the profound relationship of Chinese people with their hometowns and families, as well as to reveal the hindrances to self-identification and the spiritual anxiety arising from such feelings.

Jia Zhangke is a sixth-generation director who mainly portrays the vicissitude of the lives of China's underclass through artistic cinematography. Since his early work, Jia has focused his narrative on the intersection of the two core goals of ordinary Chinese people: searching for their homeland and reconnecting with their loved ones. In his masterpiece, *Still Life*, and most of his other full-length films, the common plot of the protagonist returning to his or her hometown and finding his or her family is evident. Jia has been interested in the dramatically changing landscape of Mainland China since the 1980s, often focusing on fluid space and time. His stories thus follow the individual's attachment to his or her homeland and family responsibilities during Chinese domestic migration. The most representative story concerns the great displacement caused by the establishment of the Three Gorges Dam (三峡大坝, *sanxia daba*). Exploring the dark side to this great national project, *Still Life* is punctuated by the introduction of unexpected and avant-garde elements. For instance, several surrealist images unexpectedly appear in realistic scenes: A UFO enters the heroine's view, and the Three Gorges Project Monument takes off from the ground like a rocket. These elements emphasize the absurdity of the project that drove millions of people to abandon their ancestral homeland and migrate to an unfamiliar place. (To some extent, because the film bluntly depicts the negative consequences of the project, it has been unwelcome in the Mainland film market, since the government propagandized the project as a significant positive milestone in the process of improving national infrastructure). Similarly, the tiny figure walking on a tightrope behind the protagonist at the end of the film suggests the loneliness and anxiety of those who carry the painful burden of leaving their home following the "flood" of the new era.



Image 2.2.1 *Still Life*:  
Shen Hong witnessing a UFO.



Image 2.2.2 *Still Life*:  
Three Gorges Project Monument taking off  
from the ground.



Image 2.2.3 *Still Life*:  
A man walking on a tightrope.

In addition to Mainland filmmakers, Taiwanese director Sylvia Chang also presents traumatic, complex and retroactive stories triggered by the shattering of family in her avant-garde film *Murmur of the Hearts* (念念, *Niannian*, 2015). Leaving behind an unhappy childhood on a remote island called Lik-tó (绿岛), the female protagonist, Yumei, is taken away by her independent mother. The male protagonist, Yunan, stays with his father for years. After her mother's death, Yumei, failing to understand her mother's decision to leave her hometown, becomes a neurotic modern artist and immersed in frequent acts of self-repression. Her painting style is full of confusion, pain, and even bloodshed, as she works out her resentment towards her mother and her discomfort with urban life. On the other hand, Yunan becomes a local tour guide and keeps trying

to find his mother and sister. He finally seems to let go of his bitterness after he has a time-traveling dream in which he reconciles with his young mother. Chang meticulously portrays the trauma of being away from home and witnessing a family's fragmentation, presenting a nest of thoughts mixed with a robust tradition Chinese mode of thinking. The fact that the two siblings finally recognize each other at the end of the film can also be considered a positive intention of the part of Chang to digest and dissolve this typical modernistic Chinese disease.



Image 2.2.4 *Murmur of the Hearts*:  
Yumei painting painfully.



Image 2.2.5 *Murmur of the Hearts*:  
Yunan reconciling with his mother in a dream.



Image 2.2.6 *Murmur of the Hearts*:  
Yumei and Yunan's final reunion.

## Nostalgia on the Red

Considering the current status quo of Chinese society, which is characterized by widespread marketization and money worship, both traditional culture and symbols of socialist culture, which only gained a foothold in Mainland China 70 years ago, have become objects of nostalgia for a large number of Mainland Chinese. The reason for this nostalgia, according to Hong Kong sociologist Ruth Y.Y. Hung's argument in *Red Nostalgia: Commemorating Mao in Our Time* seems to be the conflicting expectations in the early socialist era and those in neo-socialist era (社会主义新阶段, *shehui zhuyi xin jieduan*):

On the one hand, twenty-first century chinoiserie accepts revolutionary China as a figure of unlimited possibilities...On the other hand, the new chinoiserie continues to instruct and inform China from within the hegemonic framework of transnational capitalism precisely in its attempt at liberating and depoliticizing Red China.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, the fetishist portrayal of things with a specific socialist association is a variation of the lovesickness described above. An increasing number of Chinese people are trying to conceive of a Chinese cultural atmosphere undisturbed by external factors by immersing themselves in classical, nostalgic, or early socialist stereotypes. Jiang Wen is good at expressing his love for “red.” His film *In the Heat of the Sun* (阳光灿烂的日子, *Yangguang Canlan de Rizi*, 1994) follows the reminiscences of Ma Xiaojun about the socialist life he experienced in his youth. The film includes typical socialist images, such as the military quadrangle (兵家大院, *bingjia dayuan*), Maoist propaganda posters, and national film screenings. Ma's innocence, which he proclaims in a circle of young people living in a military quadrangle, exists in pure harmony with the red atmosphere in his realistic yet illusory memory and contrasts sharply with the monochromatic scenes focusing on the adult Ma at the end of the film.

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<sup>15</sup> Ruth Y.Y. Hung, “Red Nostalgia: Commemorating Mao in Our Time,” *Literature Compass*, (December 2015): 373.



Image 2.3.1 *In the Heat of the Sun*:  
Ma Xiaojun imitating a general by wearing his  
father's medals.



Image 2.3.2 *In the Heat of the Sun*:  
The monochromatic filter representing the present.



Image 2.3.3 *In the Heat of the Sun*:  
A young hoodlum thrown up in front of a Maoist propaganda poster.

*The Sun Also Rises* (太阳照常升起, *Taiyang Zhaochang Shengqi*, 2007), directed by Jiang, is considered a complex fetishization of red. From a visual perspective, Jiang perpetuates and significantly enhances the fetishistic portrayal of socialist symbols. The McGuffin-like character, Alyosha, as well as the collective labor in the factory, the Soviet characters and objects, and the characters' "hooliganism" (流氓罪, *liumang zui*, which actually means the crime of adultery) all indicate Jiang's ambition to reconstruct his illusion of the "Red China" in the 1970s. To maximize the presence of socialist fetishism in the film, Jiang even abstracts the narrative, inserting several very obscure and time-disrupted love stories throughout the film. The inscrutable plot, combined with the omnipresent atmosphere of "red," reveals a uniquely disturbing but passionate tendency

to memorialize or even attempt to revive early socialist China.



Image 2.3.4 *The Sun Also Rises*:  
The collective labor.



Image 2.3.5 *The Sun Also Rises*:  
Lao Tang involved in a hooliganism arrest.



Image 2.3.6 *The Sun Also Rises*:  
Alyosha's revolutionary legacies.

These aspects are considered to be part of a dramatized performance of the aftermath of continuous upheaval in Chinese-speaking areas. On the one hand, the traditions the modern Chinese have inherited have led to significant contradictions in the face of the rapid development of modernization (and the new rules for survival that such development brings); on the other hand, the robust protection of Chineseness, along with the passive acceptance of foreign culture forced by the situation, has also helped form solid psychological resistance. The result seemingly reveals the analogic sensation of insanity, fear, and despair that we often find in western avant-garde cinema. Nevertheless, Chinese filmmakers emphasize and draw on the realistic roots of these

symptoms. Meanwhile, Western avant-garde cinema that focuses on the distortion of individuals by modernity usually uses the syndrome's abnormality to shape the film as a work of sheer irony, absurdity, or horror. In a slightly different way, avant-garde filmmakers in Chinese-speaking areas show considerable sympathy or concern for the characters' mental disorder and ask for humanistic sympathy and relief for those suffering in reality. The latter have experienced social upheaval, forced cultural inheritance, and humanitarian crises in reality. Additionally, they raise incisive yet realistic questions that explore social dilemmas in an avant-garde medium.

The root of this phenomenon is the deep-seated anxiety brought about by fractures in history, particularly the drastic changes since the end of premodern China (the 1910s). During that turbulent era, traditional culture faced continual displacement as industrialized forces invaded and Chinese and global civilizations were incompletely integrated. Additionally, the core ideology of Chinese-speaking society transformed from feudalism to socialism in approximately only one century. In recent years, China experienced two drastic, decisive ideological revolutions (the capitalist Xinhai Revolution in 1919 and the communist War of Liberation in 1949). As a result, the Chinese-language cultures have expanded Western scholars' postclassical, postcolonial, and postsocialist work. In addition to contributing several modern Oriental esthetic paradigms and social research values to the global body of research, this thread of Chinese-language avant-garde cinema, with its modernistic local flavor, has also provided foreign audiences with a nonorientalist perspective on contemporary China and its diasporic communities.

Additionally, these findings reflect some critical issues in Chinese avant-garde films' locality, such as the historical fracturing and nationwide anxiety at the turn of the century, that allow films further mirror reality. This also virtualizes such traditional avant-garde interactions in the context of the self-innovation of Chinese-language cultures. In conclusion, this thesis argues that Chinese-

language avant-garde cinema should not be considered the product of an incomplete “eastward spread of Western civilization” (西学东渐, *Xixue Dongjian*) movement. On the contrary, thanks to the omnipresence of this aspect of locality, the integration of local complex (territorial complexity) and avant-garde formats (universal intelligibility) presented in Chinese-language avant-garde films seems very valuable for foreign audiences in reinterpreting Chinese-speaking areas in the era of cultural globalization.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Chinese-language avant-garde cinema is influenced by ideological and stylistic features frequently applied in the West. Nevertheless, such cinema also possesses Chinese characteristics. As for Mainland cinema, in his dissertation titled *Avant-Garde and its Context: A Study of Contemporary Avant-Garde Literary Trends in China*, Cheng Bo notes that the uniqueness of such fictions also lies in their “exploration strategies” that constitute the avant-garde artistry and effectively avoid censorship or prohibition. From Cheng’s point of view, these strategies can be summarized as three threads: marginalization, poverty focalization, and comprehensive autobiography. Coincidentally, though these strategies may seem entirely dissimilar from those used in the West, Chinese-language avant-garde films have unique opportunities to deliberately and vividly depict the living status and social background of those living in Chinese-speaking areas.<sup>16</sup> Incorporating artistic representations of Chinese landscapes and customs, these films reveal a strong or even exaggerated sense of locality. This phenomenon is not limited to Mainland films, as Hong Kong and Taiwanese avant-garde cinema possess similar characteristics. Such films portion of the expatriate Chinese kaleidoscope (including their dialects, architecture, costumes, and diet), emphasis on the concept of *xiangtu*, and dedication to traditional interpersonal relationships (attachment to collectivity, nationality, family) are all integrated through the artistic techniques of avant-garde film. It is precisely this locality that allows Chinese-language avant-garde cinema to be simultaneously detached from realism and deeply regressed in order to identify cultural Chineseness—in short, these form a single unit of opposites. Additionally, this content is considered mostly contrary to the spirit of Western avant-garde cinema, which is determined to break with tradition.

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<sup>16</sup> Bo Cheng, “Avant-Garde and its Context: A Study of Contemporary Avant-Garde Literary Trend in China,” (Ph.D. diss., Fudan University, 2002), 39.

Owing to the pioneering artistry and perplexity of this genre of film, monographic studies focusing on avant-garde cinema have consequently emerged. As for the West, since scholars have constructed and configured a full-scale literary theoretical system involving literature, philosophy, sociology, esthetics, and other disciplines, based on the pioneering propositions developed within this system, Western avant-garde cinema was able to produce monographic studies shortly after its rise in popularity; this is exemplified by the establishment of postwar American avant-garde cinema theory by Stanley Brakhage and Amos Vogel. It must simultaneously be realized that most important Western avant-garde directors, including Sergei M. Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov from the Soviet Union, have also been active film theorists involved in the construction of avant-garde cinema theory systems. They have introduced many practical methodologies, such as the typical Soviet montage, which became very influential and helpful for subsequent research on such films.

Nonetheless, within Chinese film studies circles, the status of local avant-garde cinema research has stagnated around a few particular dilemmas. Possibly influenced by the belated emergence and popularity of Chinese-language avant-garde cinema, most of the monographic studies on such cinema seem to have limited independence. Moreover, regardless of whether the context is Mainland or diaspora Chinese culture, local scholars always show a lack of experience and ability to construct modern literary theories that are compatible with Western theories. This situation has caused the overall penetration of postcolonial ideology and methodology into local studies of Chinese-language avant-garde cinema. Some scholars have even identified and described the negative consequences of such infiltration. For example, in his dissertation titled *The Drifting Youth of Chinese: Note on the Waves of Contemporary Chinese Avant-Garde Cinema*, Han Chen pessimistically claims that postcolonialism largely deprives these films of their locality (described as “the[ir] most profound significance”) and finally devalues Chinese-language avant-

garde cinema to being another ethnic illusion of Western cultural hegemony.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the methodological foundation required for studying Chinese-language avant-garde cinema is excessively multiplex and complicated. This specific genre involves various types of art, such as film, literature, fine art, and music; it is also informed by various modernist ideologies, such as absurdism and surrealism. Moreover, it includes local content and a local spirit that cannot be completely qualified using Western methodologies. Within Mainland China, the majority of avant-garde cinema studies are limited in their interpretation of context. These studies usually focus on minute details or discrete issues, such as poetic studies, camera skills, or the esthetic analysis of single work or author. Therefore, this field has generally become fragmented and isolated. This thesis argues that if we expect a more constructive contribution to be made to further develop for Chinese-language avant-garde cinema, or even the entire Chinese film industry, more generalized studies should be initiated.

Essentially, the development of locality in Chinese-language avant-garde cinema does reflect the integrative movement of avant-garde and traditional elements that has been popular in Chinese-speaking regions in various areas of art (such as fine art, music, and literature) since the 1980s. As mentioned above, based on the conscious separation from traditional narrative paradigms, Western avant-garde cinema has gradually developed a dual function: emphasizing the creativity of the format and simplifying the content. In contrast, most Chinese-language avant-garde cinema continues to directly integrate experimental formats and realistic content for historical and cultural reasons. It seems that avant-garde epistemology was introduced to Mainland China around the 1930s, a critical moment of history. However, due to the profound influence of traditional Chinese culture, the leading epistemologies that spread across the Western world after WWII, including

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<sup>17</sup> Chen Han, "The Drifting Youth of Chinese: Note on the Trend of Contemporary Chinese Avant-Garde Cinema," (PhD diss., Shandong Normal University, 2007), 135.

historical nihilism, neoclassicism, and postmodernism, only insufficiently penetrated into Chinese-speaking areas. Therefore, Chinese-language avant-garde art has taken on clear local qualities that established a new genre of cinema aimed at providing criticism and practical feedback on to the status of society in Chinese-speaking areas. Using Western avant-garde filming techniques introduced through an esthetic medium, these films usually present spectacularized landscapes, symbolic deconstruction, and artistic interpretations of these filmmakers' homelands, making the majority of Chinese-language avant-garde cinema distinct from other film genres. Thus, the content and spiritual core of Chinese-language avant-garde films have humanistic significance, forming a series of works that allude to the essence of Chinese civilization and collective memory.

Chinese-language avant-garde cinema not only possesses unique value among all Chinese-language films but also avoids the repetitive imitation of homogeneous cinematic works in the West. Therefore, this thesis holds that the genre warrants reconsideration. This genre allows us to stand on the opposite side of the collectivization, centralization, and linearization of mainstream Chinese cinema, as well as the outside of the rebellious and antitraditional nature of Western avant-garde cinema to create a brand new form of cinematic art. This thesis also notes a remarkable trend: In the past ten years, an increasing number of sixth-generation directors and young filmmakers have aimed to incorporate avant-garde elements into the mainstream theater market. We believe that achieving reciprocity between popular culture and avant-garde art is inevitable not only for writers but also for researchers. This thesis predicts that Chinese-language avant-garde cinema will eventually achieve a proper place in the global film market and would thus allow an increasing number of audiences to enjoy it.

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