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Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu. Transnational Chinese cinemas : identity, nationhood, gender

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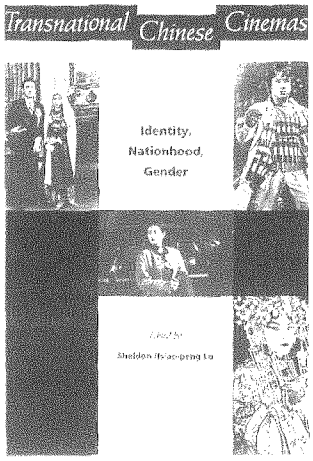
Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender. Ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997. 414 pp. US$28.00 (paperback). ISBN 0-8248-1845-8.

Q: When does the product of a national cinema become an international, or rather, a "transnational" phenomenon? A: It is when this specific film receives an award from an international film festival in the West—Berlin, Venice, Cannes, etc.

This is exactly what happened to the cinemas of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China in the 80s. As we the "Chinese" people (in its widest definition) find out that Westerners seem unable to tell a Taiwanese film from one from Mainland China, or confused about the origin of *Farewell My Concubine*, a crisis of identity is born. To further complicate the matter, I might add that the global flow of capital and the transnational composition of film-production teams have drastically problematized the notion of "national cinema." Any national cinema is under siege from outside by Hollywood mega-products and from within by subnational or transitional localization.

This is the problem raised in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*. It originated in a 1994 conference at the University of Pittsburgh, "Rethinking Cross-Cultural Analysis and Chinese Cinema Studies." Lu's thesis for the whole book is that "Chinese *national* cinema can only be understood in its properly *transnational* context" (italics his, p.3). He observed four levels of transnationalism in Chinese cinemas:



1) Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China have been independent geopolitical entities from the nineteenth century till 1997; 2) Films from the three entities are being produced, marketed and consumed by the global audience in the 90s; 3) The representation of "China" and "Chineseness" is examined in filmic discourse in the three cinemas; and 4) The history of Chinese "national cinemas" has been under review.

I can agree with his proposal that "Chinese cinema" should be in the plural

and that to study it is to do transnational film studies. But it is unclear how and why these four aspects justify applying the concept of transnationalism here. The prefixal "trans-" indicates a conscious desire to go beyond a certain status quo. In the case of "trans-national," the aim is to transcend the limits and interests of a single nation-state. Presenting the fact that Taiwan, Hong Kong and China are split politically and culturally does not allow one to see any sign of perceivable boundary breaking.

It seems to me, however, that the source of production capital is an essential factor involved in the understanding of transnational Chinese cinemas. Well-known examples, as Lu also listed, are *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Farewell My Concubine.* Directed respectively by two of the most important Chinese auteurs, Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, both films are funded by Taiwan money and belong to Hong Kong (their place of origin). Nevertheless, the "Chineseness" prominent in both films is unmistakably felt by Chinese as well as international viewers. The articles by Wendy Larson (332) and Yingjin Zhang (96) prove this point, as does Lu's (105).

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So, where do "transnational Chinese cinemas" stand? We might look at how this book is organized. A total of 14 essays is included and presented in three parts. The first three articles in Part I, titled "Nation-Building, National Cinema, Transnational Cinema," are not so much about transnationalism as about the historical construction of a national Chinese cinema. Zhiwei Xiao's article on "Anti-Imperialism and Film Censorship During the Nanjing Decade, 1927-1937," for example, describes a glorious chapter of Chinese film history when government, the film industry and audience joined together to boycott Harold Lloyd's *Welcome Danger* for its racist depiction of Chinese people and thus forced a theater to be shut down for showing it.

It is only in Lu's article, "National Cinema, Cultural Critique, Transnational Capital: The Films of Zhang Yimou," that the subject matter of transnationalism is foregrounded. After giving a close textual analysis of Zhang's films, Lu spends the last few pages writing about the significance of Zhang Yimou and his films in the global film market. Once again we hear echoes from his introductory essay: it is transnational capital that brought mainland Chinese cinema into the international market. As for the main feature which permeates all of Zhang's films, Lu

believes it to be the self-created spectacle for the West, citing both Zhang Yiwu from China and Liao Ping-hui from Taiwan. He also notes that Chinese films are produced mostly for art-theater audiences in the West. Even so, his article ends confidently with the following statement: the arrival of Chinese films in the international market "breaks the closed circuit of First-World cinema in the political economy of global film culture"(133).

侯孝賢

The discussion of films from Taiwan and Hong Kong appears in Part II only. The problem of identity is once again brought up in the first three essays. A Taiwanese film scholar would be amazed to see in June Yip's article ("Constructing a Nation: Taiwanese History and the Films of Hou Hsiao-hsien") the view that *Good Men, Good Women* is a continuation of *City of Sadness* and *The Puppetmaster*, together forming Hou's "Taiwan Triology." I would argue that these three films are in fact produced under different socio-historical conditions, even though they all deal with Taiwanese collective memories. To discuss Taiwanese cinema as transnational, one would easily find examples from Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-liang and Ang Lee, rather than Hou. Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung's wonderful article ("Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee") does focus on Ang Lee, whose films to both authors cross boundaries on many levels—from the local to the global.

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Real transnational "action" takes place in Hong Kong, represented by John Woo's move to Hollywood and Jackie Chan's world-wide popularity. Steve Fore in his "Jackie Chan and the Cultural Dynamics of Global Entertainment" recounts as successful stories not only John Woo's career move but also Ang Lee's and Ringo Lam's. But his main interest is on Jackie Chan, in whom we can sense a twist to the notion of transnationalism. After a careful analysis of the promotional strategy to bring *Rumble in the Bronx* into the U.S. commercial film market, Fore points out that the narrative structure, the music score and even Jackie Chan's persona in the film are significantly adjusted to meet the expectations of the mainstream audience in the U.S. as regards foreign films in general and action films in particular. Once again it is marketing forces that overdetermine foreign acceptance of Jackie Chan. His "Chineseness" becomes played down for the same reason.

The articles in Part III are cross-cultural readings of specific mainland Chinese films. The issues raised here are perhaps irrelevant if the whole collection wishes to address the notion of transnationalism. However, it is interesting to note that *Farewell My Concubine* appears in three articles, *Ju Dou* in two, while Taiwan and Hong Kong movies are nowhere to be seen.

All told, this is a valuable book in updating our study of the cinemas of the three Chinas—even though such an arrangement of articles seems to suggest a Mainland China-centered discursive position, while Taiwan and Hong Kong are left on the margin. What we would like to see, from now on, is more studies of films from three areas, the best example being Steve Fore's article in this book, which might be said to bear the true color of transnationalism.

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