

From Blockbusters to Video Art: Transnationalism and the Visual Reimagining of Post-Socialist China

Review of *Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture: Envisioning the Nation* by Sheldon Lu, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021

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The concept of Chinese film is as vague and constructed as the notions of Chinese nationality. A substantial body of cultural analysis has grappled with the conceptual boundaries of “Sino” and “Chinese.” Sheldon Lu’s book *Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture: Envisioning the Nation* (2021) examines Chinese cinema in the context of China’s globalization and economic transformation. Through close readings of films across various genres and visual forms, Lu seeks to reconfigure the concept of Greater China and its visual arts within a transnational framework. Rather than treating transnationalism as a recent or periodic development in Chinese filmmaking, Lu argues that transnationality has been embedded in the medium since its inception and is closely tied to the formation of Chinese national identity. In the book’s introduction, Lu conducts a meticulous literature review on transnationalism and its relationship to cinema. This review lays the groundwork for his subsequent analysis of a diverse, cross-genre collection of visual texts.

The book is divided into two parts: the first focuses on nationhood, gender, sexuality, and masculinity; the second examines cross-media experience

and its representation of the local, national, and global. While the first four chapters follow a more traditional cinema studies approach, the later chapters push boundaries by analyzing independent productions and other flexible video-based works. Lu's interest in diverse genres allows him to envision film art in an updated media environment, providing a broader view of visual representations of the Chinese nation in a new era.

In part 1, Lu includes films produced through varied mechanisms: blockbusters that project a self-asserting national image on the global stage and also films from different regions of Greater China that explore various approaches to sexuality. In selecting such a wide range of works, Lu foregrounds “the cracks, gaps, tragedies, and absurd comedies that emerge from the process of national development.”¹ From this perspective, his selection of films serves as a critique of the constructed image of the Chinese nation.

Chapter 1 examines feature films from a transnational perspective, tracing the intersections between China and Hollywood in shaping China's national image. Through a close reading of the film *China Peacekeeping Forces* (2018), focusing especially on its treatment of gender and race, Lu identifies a new genre of Chinese film emerging from China's ongoing globalization: a hybrid military/action film that is at once didactic, entertaining, and commercially appealing. This type of film, Lu argues, is a specific product of the post-socialist context as it “resorts to the resources and opportunities that have become available in the time of globalization.”²

Chapter 2 examines narratives of sexuality through films featuring prostitutes and depictions of masculinity with antiheroic tendencies. Lu argues that although these films operate within heterosexual contexts, they do not reinforce heteronormativity. Rather, they critique patriarchal society, since “historical trauma and social oppression occur through the bodies and inside the psyche of female prostitute and male characters even as they

1. Sheldon Lu, *Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture: Envisioning the Nation* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 19.

2. Lu, *Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, 52.

seek liberation from patriarchal bondage.”³ A particularly compelling contribution lies in Lu’s comparative analysis of how prostitution is portrayed across different historical periods in Chinese cinema. In his view, the trajectory of prostitute characters—from house sitter to streetwalker to border crosser—reflects the mobility and possibility of the modern age. At the same time, such mobility is not entirely liberatory; it also produces new forms of oppression and segregation in the context of globalization. The dialectics and subtleties of these transitions are vividly illustrated through Lu’s selected film corpus.

In chapters 3 and 4 Lu compares his transnational framework to concepts such as “Chinese-language film,” promoted by Hong Kong and Taiwanese scholars, and “Sinophone cinema,” coined to resist China-centrism. Lu reexamines renowned Chinese-language films produced in Hong Kong by placing them in their historical contexts, revealing the shift from one-directional migration to flexible citizenship. By juxtaposing female and male characters, as well as Hong Kong and mainland films, Lu builds his core argument: the handover and the globalization of China have profoundly affected the cinematic and social representation of masculinity.

Lu’s analysis in these chapters of what he calls the “mainlandization” process of post-handover Hong Kong cinema is especially insightful. He argues that this shift potentially accelerated the neoliberalization and loss of locality in Hong Kong cinema within a global and transnational framework.⁴ From here, Lu transitions to an analysis of independent filmmaker Jia Zhangke, who frequently pays homage to Hong Kong’s popular culture. Jia’s films also exemplify evolving portrayals of masculinity. By comparing these seemingly unrelated subjects, Lu draws connections between masculinity in cinema and broader national narratives. For example, the protagonist of *Xiao Wu* (1997)—a lover of Hong Kong pop culture—embodies both a tribute to pre-handover heroic figures and a defeated, localized masculinity reflective

3. Lu, 56.

4. Lu, 92.

of his own sociopolitical reality. Through a broader reading of Jia's work across three decades, Lu concludes that male characters serve as ordinary heroes precisely because they bear the burden of gender formation while enacting the multifaceted dimensions of life in post-socialist China.⁵

In part 2, Lu shifts attention to the blurred boundaries between mainstream and independent media, drawing on other scholars and organizing his material around the development of digital video. He argues that digital media "provides the condition for a more direct and fuller participation in social process," potentially helping to expand the public sphere.⁶ Chapters in part 2 include analyses of ballet and its intersections with film to envision China's cultural communication with foreign countries. Lu also examines TV dramas featuring Russian female characters in China, arguing that the fetishization of the Russian female body reinforces the subjectivity and centrality of Chinese protagonists.

The final chapter analyzes multiple visual arts, including architecture, site-specific artworks, and photography that reflect the transformation of Beijing during and after the 2008 Olympics. Specific examples include paintings emerging at the intersection of the capitalist West and post-socialist China, monstrous architectural structures symbolizing national ambition and global aspirations, graffiti and poster art negotiating between propaganda and grassroots expression, and assemblage pieces involving Apple products and poetic reflections by migrant workers in Chinese Apple factories. Lu briefly touches on environmental issues as well.

In the conclusion, Lu reinforces the concepts of "internal globalization" and "walling" as defining characteristics of China's globalization process. He argues that, despite political constraints, Chinese cinema continues to reinvent itself within cyberspace, maintaining its role as a key reference for understanding contemporary Chinese society.⁷ One of the

5. *Lu*, 112.

6. *Lu*, 135.

7. *Lu*, 199.

book's notable strengths is its expansive media corpus. Lu does not limit himself to traditional film texts; instead, he engages with a wide array of visual materials—including painting, architecture, ballet, and television—to demonstrate how film, as an expanded medium, participates in a broader visual culture. This inclusive approach reflects the complexities of contemporary media and the increasingly blurred boundaries between film and other visual art forms. Lu's ability to weave these diverse materials within a coherent analytic framework invites readers to reconsider the relevance and adaptability of film studies in an evolving media landscape.

