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Letter from the Editor

YING ZHU

After much wider geopolitical and geocultural coverage in our inaugural issue, the second issue of *Global Storytelling* narrows its focus on aspects of storytelling in East and Southeast Asia.

In her essay "Consuming the Pastoral Desire: Li Ziqi, Food Vlogging, and the Structure of Feeling in the Era of Microcelebrity," media scholar Liang Limin zeroes in on the case of Li Ziqi, whose videos celebrating bucolic life won her popularity in China and overseas. Liang examines how the new cultural form of food vlogging engages the perennial debate on tradition and modernity. Her study of the production and reception of Li's videos reveals the role played by the market and the state in appropriating and managing contemporary Chinese urbanites' desire for, and consumption of, the pastoral for the construction of "modern identities"—both individually as a consumer and collectively as a nation. Liang posits that if the market promotes a narrative that caters to the "aesthetical turn" in everyday life in a consumer society, the state's validation and appropriation of Li points to a "cultural nationalism" that departs from political nationalism and is more commensurate with consumerism. Liang points out further that the Chinese state also tries to transcend the market discourse by positioning itself as an integrative force that bridges the urban-rural gap. In Liang's telling, by making Li Ziqi a social media phenomenon, the market uses the rural as a resource to meet the urban desire for authenticity, while the Chinese state reappropriates the icon of marketized media in its "rural rejuvenation" campaign to help the disadvantaged rural other regain its agency.

Also focusing on media practices in Mainland China, in her essay "This Is Not Reality (Ceci n'est pas la réalité): Capturing the Imagination of the People Creativity, the Chinese Subaltern, and Documentary Storytelling," media scholar Paola Voci zooms in on documentary narratives by and about the creative subaltern originating from China's so-called cool cities, a

celebratory and romanticized idea of prosperous and creative urban spaces that embrace skilled mainstream creative practitioners. Voci points out that documentaries by the creative subaltern have played an important role in shaping the discourse on the subaltern as a creative subject. Voci holds firm that nonplot-driven narratives of many such documentaries are capable of reconciling imagination with reality by capturing the complexity, heterogeneity, and contradictoriness of the subaltern condition.

Moving to Hong Kong SAR, the veteran film scholar Gina Marchetti takes up the film practice of Ann Hui, one of the most celebrated female directors in Hong Kong, as an exemplary case study of the role film festivals have played in shaping the career of Hong Kong female directors. By tracing the circuitous paths women filmmakers follow to tell their stories on transnational screens, the article reminds us how narratives of the film festival frame one's creative identity and thus shape one's filmmaking trajectory.

Ruepert Cao's essay, "'Retweet for More': The Serialization of Porn on the Twitter Alter Community," takes us to the Philippines in Southeast Asia and to the virtual platform of Twitter. Cao examines the notion of seriality and storytelling in the context of the Filipino alter community, a network of Twitter users who produce, distribute, and consume pornographic images. Cao argues that the short Twitter platform and real-time content generation foster a particular kind of seriality, and that serial pornography is instrumental in satisfying both the present and long-standing affective, sexual, and social needs of gay men. These needs, as Cao articulates, stem from a long history of minoritization of homosexuality. Cao proposes further that serial porn images are strategically constructed narratives of sexual encounters that aim at garnering higher social engagement and validation. Cao's research contributes to an understanding of how pornographic images and serial narratives fit into consumerist culture and how platforms exploit long-standing affective needs of sexual minorities to ensure extended production and consumption of contents.

To cap the East and Southeast Asia focused essays in this issue, our book review column features Harriet Evans's review of Margaret Hillenbrand's research monograph *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China* and Min Hui Yeo's theme-based review of Gerald Sim's book *Postcolonial Hangups in Southeast Asian Cinema: Poetics of Space, Sound and Stability* and *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945–1998)* edited by Gaik Cheng Khoo, Thomas Barker, and Mary Ainslie.

In this issue, our journal is happy to launch a film review column with a review of *Nomadland* (Chloe Zhao, 2021) by Ying Zhu, which situates the Oscar-winning film at the center of an evolving Sino-US discourse, and a review of *Mank* (David Fincher, 2021) by the renowned expert on Hollywood studio systems, Thomas Schatz that illuminates the formation of Hollywood's "creation tale."

And speaking of "creation tale," in a theme-based film review, "Superheroes: The Endgame," veteran film critic and perennial biographer of Hollywood, Peter Biskind, laments the passing of a bygone era when superheroes were endowed with superhuman strengths and tricks. As Biskind charges, unlike the superheroes of the 1980–1990s (Batman and Superman) who were more posthuman/antihuman, modern movie superheroes are all "too human" in their propensity to showcase feelings and emotions, albeit often pitched as a weakness. The humanity that traps the new breed of superheroes, seen by Biskind, is the continuation of World War II–era comic books that subjected heroes to ordinary, petty human squabbles. In offering his thought-provoking assessment that "the effect of humanizing superheroes, abandoning post-humanism, and sentimentalizing the family is paradoxically to move an historically left-leaning franchise to the right," Biskind calls to our attention superhero movies' dialectic relationship with humanity, posthumanism, and "antihumanism." The inclusion of Marvel's *Black Widow* makes his analysis all the timelier.

Moving from film review and criticism to film pedagogy, Christopher Rea's autoethnographic essay applies global storytelling as a framework to

reflect on his decade long research-based practice of teaching Chinese film classics at a university in Canada. Rea explores how filmmaker, translator, educator, student, and the online public intersect, particularly during the period of pandemic lockdown, shape the evolving dialogue concerning Chinese film classics.

Our issue 1.2 ends with a report on, "Narrating New Normal," a post-graduate student symposium hosted by the journal in the spring of 2021, which interrogates the notion of "new normal" in a COVID-ravaged pandemic world, yet another timely concern.

Research Articles

Consuming the Pastoral Desire

Li Ziqi, Food Vlogging, and the Structure of Feeling in the Era of Microcelebrity

LIMIN LIANG

Abstract

This article studies how the new cultural form of food vlogging intervenes the perennial debate on tradition and modernity by focusing on the case of Li Ziqi, whose cinematic videos celebrating bucolic life won her popularity in China and overseas. A study of the production and reception of Li's videos not only shows urbanites' nostalgia for a pastoral way of life but also reveals the role played by the more structural forces—that is, the market and the state—in appropriating and managing the desire for and consumption of the pastoral for the construction of modern identities—both individually as a consumer and collectively as a nation. The market forces, including the ideology of consumerism, its attendant aesthetics, and the entire regime of social media marketing, were present throughout Li's celebrification. Meanwhile, the state became involved after Li's rise to fame, when it became aware of her value for domestic and international publicity. If the market promotes a narrative that caters to the "aesthetical turn" in everyday life in a consumer society, the state's validation and appropriation of Li points to a cultural nationalism that departs from political nationalism and is more commensurate with consumerism. However, the Chinese state also tries to transcend the market discourse, whose egalitarian form conceals substantive inequality by positioning itself as an integrative force that bridges the urban-rural gap. By making Li Ziqi a social media phenomenon, the market uses the rural as a resource to meet the urban desire for authenticity while the Chinese state reappropriates the icon of

marketized media in its "rural rejuvenation" design to help the disadvantaged rural other regain its agency.

Keywords: Li Ziqi, vlogging, urban-rural relations, structure of feeling, microcelebrity, consumerism, cultural nationalism, tradition and modernity, food media

Raymond Williams uses the term "structure of feeling" to capture the coexistence of permanent human desires and the historicity of the social form in the evolution of the country and the city. "In country and city, physically present and substantial, the experience finds material which gives body to the thoughts."[1] Our experiences with the country and the city as two ways of settlement are associated with two fundamental human needs and aspirations: "the idea of pastoral innocence" versus "civilizing agency"[2] or the need for quiet contemplation as well as the desire for action and progress.

While the transition from traditional to modern society saw "a victory of town over country"[3] and reduced the latter to a role of providing material subsistence for the former, urban life, with its emphasis on standardization and the separation of production from consumption, breeds alienation. As it is, in popular imagination, city life has come to be associated with "artifice, dissonance and superficiality," whereas rural life, which connotes "purity, simplicity and rootedness," symbolizes authenticity.[4] To ameliorate the lack, it is believed that in modern life, authenticity can be crafted from appearances rather than essence and secured through the practice of consumption.[5] Mass media play an important role in constructing identity through both offering symbolic consumption and facilitating material consumption.

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1. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), 291.
2. Williams, *The Country and the City*, 290.
3. Williams, 30.
4. Helene Shugart, "Sumptuous Texts: Consuming 'Otherness' in the Food Film Genre," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no.1 (2008): 68–90, 73.
5. Shugart, "Sumptuous Texts."

In media representations, rural life is often portrayed as the "authentic other" to nourish the artificiality of city life.

Meanwhile, with an egalitarian ideology that valorizes the everyday experience of the average person, the social media era lends new cultural forms to the expression of these permanently conflicting human feelings and desires. Vlogging, for instance, empowers the grassroots rural population so that they need no longer be represented by professional media but can give voice to their own needs and represent their own lives. This gives rise to a microcelebrity phenomenon such as Li Ziqi, a Chinese vlogger whose cinematic videos celebrating bucolic life won her popularity in China and overseas.

Li started filming her life in her rural hometown in southwestern China's Sichuan province in 2015 and gradually built her social media presence. By 2019 she had become a household name. Today she has a huge following on every major social media platform based in China, such as the leading microblogging site of Weibo (27.57 million followers) and Bilibili, a popular video-sharing site (7.92 million followers). Her videos show her preparing exquisite meals using garden-fresh ingredients and traditional techniques. The picture-perfect rural scenery in Sichuan's mountainous areas, the organic food, and the peaceful pastoral life she shares with her grandmother are all key elements of her appeal, particularly for urban dwellers, who constitute the majority of Internet users in China today.[6] This seems to suggest "an unbreakable tie to the soil" for the Chinese,[7] who are descendants of an agrarian civilization of thousands of years, despite the country's recent embrace of modernization and global capitalism. But Li's fame extends beyond China. She also commands the largest number of followers for a Chinese-language channel on YouTube (16.4 million followers). This makes

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6. According to the *48th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development* conducted by CNNIC (August 2021), urban Internet users constitute 70.6 percent of the total number of Internet users.

7. Fei Xiaotong, *Xiangtu Zhongguo* (*From the Soil, the Foundations of Chinese Society*) (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1948 [2006]).

her success especially appealing to the Chinese government, which is eager to promote the nation's soft power, both domestically and overseas.

By studying the rise of Li Ziqi, this paper adds to the perennial debate over tradition and modernity in contemporary China. How does the new media form of food vlogging construct Li's double roles as a farmer and a microcelebrity and maintain her authenticity? What is the uniqueness of Li that led to her popularity? Situating the Li phenomenon in the larger political-economic context, what are the roles of the market and the state in her celebrification? Finally, how does food vlogging represent or negotiate the power relations between the country and the city for a society going through rapid modernization such as China? These are the questions that this paper tries to answer. For an analysis of the narrative strategies adopted by Li Ziqi, I immersed myself in viewing Li's content on her Bilibili and YouTube channels before zeroing on one particular episode ("The Life of Wheat") for a closer analysis. I also gathered the top twenty comments under each of the top ten most-watched videos from Li Ziqi's Bilibili and YouTube channels to gain an idea on how domestic and overseas viewers react to her content. Finally, I drew extensively from the media coverage on Li along her road to fame and on the rural rejuvenation plan proposed by the Chinese government to explore the links between the Li Ziqi phenomenon and the influence from larger structural forces, including the market and the state.

Li Ziqi's Story

Li Ziqi grew up in a village near the city of Mianyang in the Sichuan province. She had a miserable childhood. Her parents divorced when she was very young. Her father then passed away and her stepmother mistreated her. Her grandparents brought her under their roof and raised her.[8] Due to

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8. According to an interview by Goldthread, a column of the *South China Morning Post*, September 17, 2019.

the struggling family circumstances, she quit school at the age of fourteen and went to the city looking for a job. For a while she worked as a DJ in a bar. When she learned that her grandmother fell ill in 2012, she decided to return to her hometown to care for the elderly. She started filming short videos to promote her e-shop selling food and snacks in 2015. While her sales tanked, her short videos gradually drew attention from the online public.

At first, Li's videos averaged around five minutes and featured only food preparation or handicraft making. In 2017, Li began to partner with Hangzhou-based Weinian Technology Inc., an MCN (multichannel network) that specializes in the celebrification of up-and-coming social media influencers.[9] The style of her videos received a discernible facelift in the following year.

By 2018, Li's average video length doubled as the production quality improved in storytelling, cinematography, and editing. She extended the scope of her lens to cover the entire life cycle of food production. In her videos, she grows and harvests staples and vegetables or gathers wild food ingredients from her beautiful natural surroundings before she demonstrates her exquisite cooking skills. In addition to the enriched rural theme, her stories began to center on family relationships, foregrounding her role as a filial granddaughter. Li gradually established herself as an iconic vlogger representing an idyllic pastoral life.

However, the rise of Li has not been universally acclaimed, particularly within China. It has been accompanied by controversy ranging from criticism that she beautifies the country to reservations if her content contributes to China's soft power because it represents a "backward China," and from early suspicion that her content production involved media professionals[10] to skepticism that commodification compromised her authenticity.

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9. Liu Qian, "Li Ziqi baohong beihou de nabizhang" (The balance sheet behind the rise to fame of Li Ziqi), *The Paper*, January 19, 2019, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_5561288.

10. Li Ziqi acknowledged in 2017 that she now had support from a small team consisting of a cinematographer and an assistant.

The Li Ziqi phenomenon provides us with an excellent opportunity to observe how the market, the state, social media technology, and public opinion interact with each other in crafting, debating, and appropriating the popularity of a celebrity vlogger and how the new media form of food vlogging may negotiate urban-rural relations in China.

Mediated Food through the Lens of Consumerism and Cultural Nationalism

Occupying the opposite ends of the material spectrum, food and media technologies form an interesting comparison in their relationship to the country and the city. As both nature's bounty and the product of human labor through agriculture, food is the fundamental material source that sustains human life. As such, it is intimately associated with rural life, given its rootedness in land, and with city life, which it nourishes. Food's unique position on the interstice between the country and the city makes it an ideal fetish that mediates urban-rural relations. Embodying the paradoxical nature of all rituals, food simultaneously "defines inclusion and encourages solidarity"[11] and effectively maintains and patrols social boundaries. Indeed, food articulates power relations in the starkest terms, "demarcating those who eat from those who are eaten (or provide food)."[12] If the transformation of nature via land cultivation and cooking makes food a potent signifier "that marks the distinction between nature and culture,"[13] then in modern life, it is the side that represents "culture," or urban civilization, that takes precedence over "nature," which represents the country.

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11. Judith Goode, "Food," in *Folklore, Cultural Performance, and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-Centred Handbook*, ed. R. Baumann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 233–45, 234.

12. Mervyn Nicholson, "My Dinner with Stanley: Kubrick, Food, and the Logic of Images," *Literature Film Quarterly* 29 (2001): 279–90, 280.

13. Shugart, "Sumptuous," 69.

Meanwhile, mass media, as material instruments for symbolic production and dissemination on a massive scale, mark the epitome of technological development, which is humanity's intervention in nature that has thrived under urban civilization. Mass media fulfil individual needs for impersonal sources of information in a society that is no longer bound by small kinship-based communities but by instrumentality and division of labor. At the same time, mass media help cultivate identities and foster a sense of solidarity through creating an "imagined community."[14]

Given food and media's complex connection to the country, the city, and the notion of authenticity, when food becomes a media theme, it is an especially interesting window for studying urban-rural relations of a society. According to Laura Lindenfeld, "Food and media condition the consumption of each other and thus form a locus of struggle and contestation where various kinds of cultural work gets done."[15] Such cultural and ideological work is further embedded in the social, political, and economic arrangements that inform the media system of a society.

Since commercialization is the underlying logic that defines media in most parts of the world today, food media's intervention in cultural politics is inevitably bound up with the role played by the market. To date, food media genres are predominantly consumption oriented and implicitly urban centered—that is, they favor commercialized media aesthetics in which the authenticity of identity is achieved through consumption. Among them, different genres target specifically classed consumers. For instance, food films within the international art house genre cater to the upper-middle class's pursuit of cultural capital by "cultivating a 'popular connoisseurship' in matters of taste" while advertisements of ethnic-themed restaurants

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14. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2006).

15. Laura Lindenfeld, "Feasts for Our Eyes: Viewing Films on Food through New Lenses," in *Food as Communication: Communication as Food*, eds. Janet M. Cramer, Carlnita P. Greene, and. Lynn M. Walters (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 3–21, 5.

appeal to middle-class sensibilities by emphasizing close kinship ties.[16] In these media productions, a universal consumerist discourse belies distinctions underlying market segmentation strategies—that is, they validate the tastes of dominant groups within identity communities. Implicitly, the rural is offered up as an object of desire to ameliorate the artificiality of urban life but to eventually reaffirm its superiority.[17]

Meanwhile, food media also intersects with the influence of the state. The turn toward "banal nationalism"[18] makes food, a mundane object, a fitting symbol in studying the representation of nations. Since food falls within the realm of everyday consumption, in enlisting food as a theme in nation branding, a state usually gives a dominant role to the private sector, such as the "Global Thai" and "Cool Japan" campaigns launched by their respective governments to promote the countries' cuisines and cultural industries.[19] But consumption need not be the only prism through which food is appropriated in cultural nationalism. In the case of China, despite the country's recent embrace of market economy, which makes consumerism a salient public discourse, given its agrarian history and the Communist Party's roots in the country, paying tribute to the *production* side of rural life may figure more prominently into the party-state's publicity efforts domestically and overseas.

Yang's study of the popular food-themed documentary series *A Bite of China* presents a case of state-market coproduction of cultural nationalism through a nuanced presentation of the production and consumption of Chinese food. As a product of a marketized state-media system

16. Diane Negra, "Ethnic Food Fetishism, Whiteness, and Nostalgia in Recent Film and Television," *Velvet Light Trap* 50 (2002): 62–76, 62.
17. Zhang Heyang, "Shisu tiyan lei man zongyi jiemu 'xiangtu xing' de shendu jiexi" (An analysis of the "the rural" in the food-themed slow entertainment reality show), *Sichuan Drama* 8 (2020): 127–29; Zeng Yiguo and Shi Jing, "cong 'qinggan anmo' dao 'qinggan jiegou': xiandaixing jiaolv xia de tianyuan xiangxiang" (From "emotional massage" to "structure of feeling": Li Ziqi and pastoral imagination under modern anxiety), *Journal of Fujian Normal University* 221 (2020): 122–30.
18. Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (New York: Sage, 1995).
19. Atsuko Ichijo and Ronald Ranta, *Food, National Identity and Nationalism from Everyday to Global Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

(i.e., China Central Television),[20] the documentary's aesthetics resemble those of nature documentaries by Western channels, such as the BBC and National Geographic.[21] It flattens the complex political and economic struggles to foreground protagonists that are bound by kinship ties and focuses on the "geographical, historical and cultural dimensions of what Chinese people eat."[22] At the same time, Yang took note of the series' departure from usual food television's promotion of consumption to emphasize on food production. In these portrayals, the TV producers were careful to balance the requirements of a commercialized media form that turns labor into a spectacle and the socialist realist filmmaking tradition that valorizes the laboring people.

With the penetration of market influence, the documentary seems to bear no trace of the state. But the state made its voice heard after the series' success, when senior cultural officials hailed it as an exemplar of original content with success in the international audio-visual market and hence a contributor to China's soft power. Here, the state morphed from its former role as a mobilizer of politicized culture to a cheerleader in a commercialized cultural field.

Interestingly, the key elements of *A Bite of China*'s success, including the emulation of a globally dominant form of visual storytelling, the focus on food production, and the state's appropriation of the market success of a cultural product, are all replicated in the Li Ziqi phenomenon—except this time the cultural icon celebrated is a product of the social media field. Social media, which democratize access to means of symbolic production and dissemination, seem to confer greater agency on rural population in giving voice to their own aspirations, with the potential to alter the power dynamics

20. Yang Fan, "A Bite of China: Food, Media, and the Televisual Negotiation of National Difference," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 5 (2015): 409–25, 414.
21. Martin Roberts, "'Baraka': World Cinema and the Global Culture Industry," *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 3 (1988): 62–82.
22. Bai Shi, "Tasting China," *Beijing Review*, June 14, 2012, http://www.bjreview.com/quotes/txt/2012-06/15/content_459808.htm.

in urban-rural interactions. But this statement needs qualification. Despite its egalitarian ethos, the social media field still largely operates according to the principles of the market and attention economy, which prioritize consumption as a means of acquiring identity. In Li Ziqi's case, the market forces, including the ideology of consumerism, its attendant aesthetics, and the entire regime of social media marketing, are integral to her celebrification. But at the same time, her vlog also showcases the previously obscure scenes of rural labor. This tension is embodied in Li Ziqi's double roles. As a farmer, she is anchored in the land, and what defines her are farming and food preparation techniques, which she referred to as her survival skills in an interview.[23] However, as a celebrity vlogger, her identity is closely associated with commercial culture, which looks for the presentation of an idealized version of pastoral life. Her embeddedness in land, which anchors her and gives her authenticity, and her media persona, which deterritorializes and yet reterritorializes her for the social media age, make her a boundary spanner. Meanwhile, because Li's success was incubated within the market, it was not until after she acquired stardom that the state became aware of her iconic value for domestic and international publicity. The state's validation and appropriation of Li points to a strand of "cultural nationalism" that departs from earlier political nationalism and is more commensurate with consumerism. However, because the Chinese state also espouses socialism, it tries to transcend the market discourse, whose egalitarian form conceals substantive inequality, by reappropriating the icon of the vlogging world to tackle urban-rural inequality. Indeed, setting Li Ziqi up as a role model for farmers is reminiscent of the Communist-era propaganda practice of creating an archetype from the masses in service of the socialist cause. This time, the role model still arises from the rural grassroots, but the selection mechanism is the market.

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23. Interview by Goldthread, a column of *South China Morning Post*, September 17, 2019.

Consumerism and the Market's Role in Managing Pastoral Desire

Visualizing Farm Production as the "New Face" of Consumerism

A compelling story usually requires ingredients such as "moral agonism" and "twisting and turning in plots."[24] However, Li Ziqi's story does not thrive on human conflicts. Instead, it captures the traditional Chinese cultural ideal of "the unity of heaven and man." The setting is a picturesque village tucked away in the mountains with no discernable geographical or linguistic markers, except for the few scenes when she converses with her grandma in Sichuan dialect. Her storyline is organized around the temporal rhythm of crop growth, which is cyclical in nature. It also portrays idealized social relations. Apart from Li Ziqi, recurring figures include her grandmother and her assistant, the latter of whom is like a younger sister. Once or twice her cousins visit her for a family dinner. Occasionally, villagers would help her with farm work or provide her with food sources, such as livestock, that she does not raise at home. The transactions are conducted through bartering, invoking the most basic form of exchange untainted by commercialization.

Take an episode from her staples series, "The Life of Wheat," as an example. In the nineteen-minute video, the first seven minutes are devoted to the cultivation of wheat. While the growth cycle is long and involves strenuous work, under Li's lens, farming life acquires a poetic language. The cultivation process is distilled into key moments surrounding particular solar terms. It starts with Li planting the wheat seeds on a windy autumn day, moving swiftly through the sprouting of green shoots around "Light Snow (小雪)," with the use of time-lapse devices and extreme close-up shots, to

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24. Jeffrey Alexander, "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy," *Sociological Theory* 22, no. 4 (2004): 528–73.

a scene of the maturing wheat field near the "Spring Equinox (春分)" the next year, with lush green plump ears of wheat glowing in the sun.

The highlights in the segment on wheat production feature the harvesting season at "the Beginning of Summer (立夏)," which foregrounds intense yet fulfilling labor. The ripened wheat field looked like undulating amber waves under the morning sun as Li and the aunties in the village who joined her in the harvest frantically waved their sickles, leaving a neat swath behind them (see figures 1 and 2).

Part of the sequence is in fast motion to enhance viewer sensation. This is juxtaposed with scenes of Li and aunties singing, dancing, and laughing aloud in the field. After a day's backbreaking work, Li treated the aunties with wine and a bountiful feast made of fresh produce from her farm. The close neighborly ties are conveyed when Li parted with the aunties: "Call me if you need my help in the field." The harvesting segment is followed by scenes of reaping, threshing, and winnowing in Li's backyard. Premodern tools are chosen for these procedures instead of a combine, to underscore that traditional farming techniques are preserved (see figures 3 and 4).
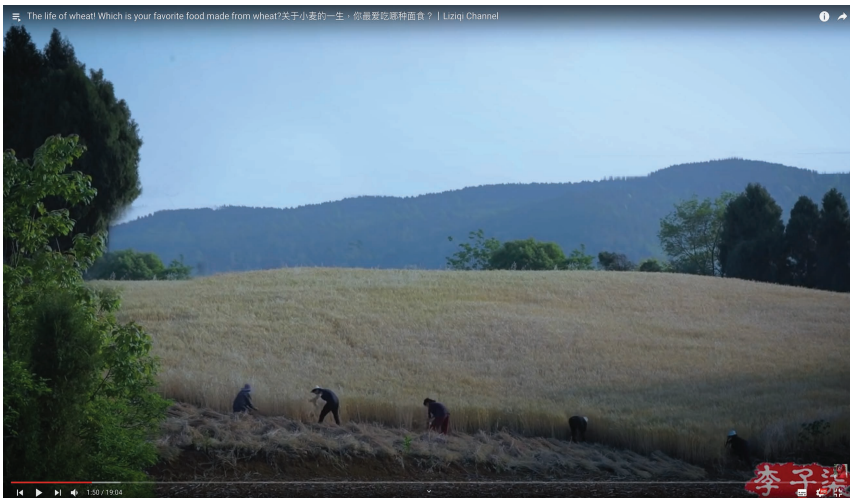
Figure 1: Pan shot of the wheat field. *Source*: "The Life of Wheat," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo.

Figure 2: Harvesting in the wheat field. *Source*: "The Life of Wheat,"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo.

Figure 3: Traditional way of threshing. *Source*: "The Life of Wheat,"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo.

Figure 4: Winnowing in the sun. *Source*: "The Life of Wheat," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo.

The rest of the episode moved from food production to preparation, in which Li demonstrated her genius as a jack-of-all-trades in turning every part of wheat into something delicious or useful. She wove wheat stalk into straw hats, made malt paintings from germinated grains, used the remaining grains to feed poultry or nourish plants, and turned freshly grounded flour into a feast of delicacies, including fried dough twist, cold rice noodles, steamed meat bun, roasted gluten, and so on. The segment adopted the form of TV cooking programs, with midrange or close-up shots to showcase the freshness of the food ingredients as well as the dexterity of her culinary skills. The camerawork was meticulous. Some viewers even likened her kitchen shots to famous paintings such as Vermeer's "Milkmaid" (see figure 5).

Viewers also resonate with the interaction between Ziqi and her grandmother, such as a scene in which her granny was asked to spin a wheel to choose a pattern for the malt painting: "The grandmother's laugh at the drawing spin was the sweetest!" (see figures 6 and 7).

Figure 5: Making *Liangpi*. *Source*: "The Life of Wheat," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo

Figure 6: Granny and maltose painting. *Source*: "The Life of Wheat," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo.

Figure 7: Enjoying the feast. *Source*: "The Life of Wheat," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo.

The incorporation of food-production scenes into consumption is what distinguishes Li Ziqi from most consumption-oriented food vloggers. These scenes convey the toil and joy of farmers when cultivating, harvesting, processing, and enjoying the fruits of their labor. But despite a conscientious effort to foreground the labor motif, her videos idealize pastoral life while papering over any actual social, economic, or political struggles going on in the village. Faithful to the life of a farmer, her videos emphasize the essential farming techniques. But at the same time, Li is playing the role of an archetypal farmer. The script selects and organizes certain elements of village life for presentation and turns the ordinary into the extraordinary. In celebrating the pastoral idyll, a life of abundance, and the harmony among villagers and between villagers and nature, it fails to mention, for instance, that the village remains poor in the region.[25] It also omits the interim stage

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25. The original report by the *Times Weekly* revealing this fact has since been deleted. "寻找李子柒家的48小时" (48 hours to Find Li Ziqi's house), *China Digital Times*, December 22, 2019, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/630843.html.

of industrialized food processing and distribution, which is an integral part of the commodity supply chain that underlies the actual encounter with food for most Chinese today.

According to Helene Shugart, "In a consumer landscape increasingly characterized by artifice, replication, transience, and superficiality, the quest for novelty and uniqueness is endowed with greater market value."[26] The emerging interest in incorporating scenes of farm labor into food media is but the latest expression of such a quest—hence the rise of the "slow entertainment" movement, which has spun new reality shows planned around activities of rural life, such as Hunan Satellite Television's popular *Back to the Field* series. In these shows, scripts underplay elements of competition or drama that characterize earlier reality genres. Instead, they feature celebrities in their reconstructed roles retiring to a bucolic setting and engaging in everyday activities such as harvesting and food preparation. Li Ziqi's video style echoes this trend. These efforts can be read within the context of the "aestheticization of everyday life,"[27] a movement of the consumer society that fetishizes mundane objects and experiences previously out of the purview of aesthetic contemplation, to facilitate the quest for identity. In Li Ziqi's videos, country-grown and homemade food as well as handmade furniture and artefacts are fetishized to represent a mode of life underlining tradition, closeness to nature, and familial ties.

By turning both food production and preparation into a media spectacle, authentic labor becomes a media commodity capable of generating profits in terms of both social media user subscriptions (here, Li's videos are seen as a form of cultural content) and advertisements by platform sponsors (here, the audience attention garnered by Li's videos becomes another form of commodity). Further, Li's videos are a direct form of advertising for her brand merchandise, which is her primary source of revenue. The mass production of her brand items, such as lotus powder and snail rice noodles, is

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26. Shugart, "Sumptuous," 73.
27. Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (New York: Sage, 2007).

outsourced to other manufacturers, except that they are sold at much higher prices than lesser-known brands. When Li's e-store selling food and handicrafts opened on T-Mall, China's largest e-commerce platform, in 2018, her sales exceeded 10 million RMB yuan within just three days. During the "Double 11" ("November 11") Shopping Festival of 2019, her sales topped 80 million yuan.[28] Ultimately, Li's videos are reincorporated back into a system of capitalist production, accumulation, and consumption. One might argue that the invisible scenes of assembly-line workers toiling away in food factories producing the Li Ziqi brand items are the true faces of "laboring people" in today's society. Omitting them while foregrounding Li's performance is perhaps the real irony underlining the popularity of these video series.

Mobility via Social Media Facilitates Retrenchment of Identity

In food films, authenticity always entails simplicity and wholeness and is associated with land made distant by time or space.[29] Similarly, Li Ziqi's story takes place in a village removed from big-city influences and portrays a life dependent on farm labor or simply on nature's bounties. Her persona has a sense of mysteriousness. To date, the whereabouts of her country abode remains unknown. Once a Guangzhou-based newspaper published an article in which a reporter embarked on a trail discovering the exact location of Li's hometown. However, as of this paper's writing, the original article and its reprints have all but disappeared from Chinese websites.[30]

    In addition, Li's life is isolated from those of her fans. Unlike most social media influencers who have to constantly update their accounts to retain

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28. Sun Pengfei, "Li Ziqi buzhi shi xiannv, haishi fupo" (Li Ziqi is not only a fairy, but also a rich woman), *IT Times*, January 10, 2020.
29. Shugart, "Sumptuous," 83.
30. "寻找李子柒家的48小时" (48 hours to Find Li Ziqi's house). It is unclear who engineered the deletion.

web traffic, Li has few videos (128 in total on YouTube) and updates infrequently, partly as a result of the long production cycle involved in making one episode. While other vloggers frequently interact with their followers, Li Ziqi rarely directly communicates with her fans and seldom gives interviews. She is known as one of China's most mysterious microcelebrities.

Therefore, even as mobility and interactivity characterize the era of social media, Li Ziqi's identity as a microcelebrity speaks more to a retrenchment rooted in the local. Her identity is better described as a returnee to the countryside. A similar pattern can be found in the protagonists of major food films, such as *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Woman on Top*, who are rural ethnic females possessed with extraordinary culinary acumen. Their vicissitudes send them away for a sojourn in big cities, where their culinary skills become recognized and earn them worldly success. However, they eventually return to their rural homes, which anchor their identity, but with greater power vis-à-vis the country folks. In Li Ziqi's case, social media, which promotes her farming and culinary expertise, serves as the medium of mobility and confers power on her. But such power should be better conceived as offering her identity up as a resource that gratifies the urbanites' fantasy for a rural world of simplicity and purity.

This said, Li's experience in the city is indispensable to her eventual rise as a famous vlogger. Those years away from home arguably acquainted her with the taste of urbanites. (While working as a DJ in a bar, she was in a position to observe the leisurely urban lifestyle up close.) In the city, she initially remained obscure as one among millions of migrant workers. But after internalizing urban middle-class taste by tapping into her rural identity through vlogging, she started to make a name for herself. Still, her popularity did not soar until after her partnership with a well-known MCN—a new kind of intermediary born in the social media age and the city.[31] It was with the sup-

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31. Ramon Lobato, "The Cultural Logic of Digital Intermediaries: YouTube Multichannel Networks," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 22, no. 4 (2016): 348–60.

port of the MCN's marketing strategies, data analytics capacity, and capital that she transformed from an obscure vlogger to a social media influencer with a unique angle in depicting rural life. As her success suggests, her value to the market does not lie in her actual role as a farmer but in her symbolic role as an archetypal farmer who portrays an idealized rural life removed of rough edges. In the contemporary "structure of feeling," if conceptualizing Li's social media performance as conveying the "feeling" of the era (e.g., pastoral desire), it is the complex marketing forces enabling the production and dissemination of this performance that constitute the "structure."

If Li's retrenchment of identity facilitated by the mobility of social media gave her success, the same technology, when combined with the *actual* physical mobility of rural workers, produces a different type of subculture: *Tuwei* (土味) videos, which originate from small town/rural youth who migrated to larger cities looking for employment and who are active on short video mobile apps, such as Kuaishou.[32] While the character "tu (土)" means being "rural," the videos may have no immediate connection to rural life. Instead, it is more like a condescending title that urbanites confer on the "unrefined" group of youth who aspire to city fashion but are without the social and economic means of doing so. Unlike Li Ziqi whose identity is tied to the land, the identity of Tuwei vloggers seems to be in a state of betwixt and between. The videos become a way to vent their frustration at the lack of recognition by parodying urban fashion through dressing codes, such as Korean-style outfits, leggings, and gommino loafers as well as tacky performances with exaggerated body movements and easy-to-remember rhyming memes. If "fairy" Li Ziqi is associated with the traditional rural virtues of diligence and temperance, some Tuwei vloggers are shown in the archetype of a glutton, with a carnival-like style that intentionally tramples all standards that middle-class taste deems appropriate. Moving in the opposite

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32. Liu Tao, "Duan shipin, xiangcun kongjian shengchan yu jiannan de jieceng liudong" (Short videos, rural spatial production and low class mobility), *Education and Communication Research* 17 (2018): 13–16.

direction of "the aestheticization of everyday life," they appeal to the voyeuristic pleasure for the illicit, and are thus temporarily exempt from the middle-class moral regime of self-discipline.

Cultural Nationalism and the State's Role in Co-opting Pastoral Desire for Solidarity-Building

Making sense of Li Ziqi: Idealism versus Realism

The elevation of Li Ziqi to a cultural phenomenon has a lot to do with her huge success on YouTube, which seems more total than her domestic appeal. Each of the ten most-watched videos on her YouTube channel accumulates views ranging from 18.72 to 55.08 million, and some attract comments well over fifty thousand. To have an idea of how overseas viewer reaction may differ from those of domestic viewers, I gathered the top twenty comments under each of the top ten most-watched videos from Li Ziqi's Bilibili channel and YouTube channel. While both samples seem overwhelmingly positive upon first reading, they show interesting differences when I start to look for references to any existing controversy concerning Li Ziqi. In other words, a comment may be coded as positive but is written in a way that explicitly defends Li against her critics. While only 4 percent of the comments from the YouTube sample refer to any kind of controversy over authenticity, about 28 percent of the comments in the Bilibili sample point to the existence of a wider debate.

The YouTube comments focus more on the immediate textual meanings offered by Li's videos than on interrogating the structural factors that inform her video production. A majority of comments converge on praising Li's versatility, especially her culinary skills, and treating the videos as a DIY manual (e.g., "Liziqi channel is like an entertaining documentary + plant life lessons + farming lessons + heritage lessons + lifestyle tips all in a way that will make you love learning and working"; "As a Chef myself for the

last 40 years, she's my IRON CHEF. Her selection and presentation are amazingly simple yet elegant. Certainly, if she were to have cooking classes or books, they would definitely be top notch"; and "I have insurmountable respect and admiration for this woman . . . the fact that she's bringing back to life an archaic way of doing things. Because of her I've learned a lot about culture . . . and gained several new skills."). Many are equally fascinated by the natural scenery presented ("If I die and go to heaven, this is what I want my heaven to look like"). For one thing, Li's village scenes lack a specific geographical marker. In fact, only 3 percent of the YouTube comments in the sample mention the words "China" or "Chinese." It is possible that the YouTube viewers are more drawn to the aesthetic value presented by Li's videos as a form of leisurely consumption than are concerned with the social economic reality confronting her as an actual farmer.

On the other hand, if we probe into the comments in the Bilibili sample that indicate controversy over Li's authenticity, coupled with a brief survey of the coverage of Li Ziqi during her rise to fame by the Chinese language press, we find that in 2017 there was a heated debate over whether Li's content was faithful to rural reality and whether she was true to her "one-woman-show" brand or had enlisted professional support. In 2018, upon the opening of Li's e-shop on T-Mall, the controversy shifted to whether commercialization compromised her authenticity. Finally, at the end of 2019, the debate was over whether her videos constituted a successful form of Chinese cultural export.

For sure, Li's portrayal of an idealized country still appeals to millions of Chinese, especially those who try to escape the stress of modern metropolitan life. It may even be said that those who resonate with her vlogging the most, and who find her videos invoking a strong feeling of nostalgia, are rural emigrants to the city. In fact, this viewer niche authors some of the most emotion-fraught comments on Li's vlogging channel. To them, it is enough that the videos bear narrative fidelity to the countryside of their childhood memories. However, to others, a mere appreciation of the cultural truth conveyed by Li's videos in the form of an idealized pastoral life seems

inadequate. For one thing, Chinese viewers have ready access to alternative discourses on rural China that compete with Li's representation. Among others, there are the "carnivalesque rural China" invoked through the Tuwei subculture, the "decaying rural China" illustrated by realist-themed films and literary works, which underline deeper social problems such as population exodus and a struggling rural economy, and state-run China Central Television Chanel 17 (CCTV-17) devoted to agricultural programming, which seeks to portray the country realistically but with an upbeat tone. When these diverse discourses vie for public attention, it is more difficult for one version to triumph as the most authentic image of rural China.

As such, Chinese social media users are more likely to be concerned about the immediate social environment and the structural conditions that inform Li Ziqi's video production and her rise to fame. When viewers with firsthand rural knowledge contend that Li's beautification of the country glosses over the struggles of farmers in their daily lives, or when they challenge that the use of professional media expertise or outright commercialization contaminates Li's authenticity as a vlogger, they are not only concerned about the fidelity of Li's performance with a quintessential Chinese cultural script but are interrogating the "empirical credibility" and "experiential commensurability"[33] of Li's vlogging with actual reality. Throughout these debates, urban-rural tension is never far from the surface.

The State Recruits Li Ziqi as a Role Model to Bridge the Urban-Rural Divide

When the market fails to adequately address the urban-rural conflict in Chinese reality, the state can make a difference. A December 2019 debate on social media over whether Li Ziqi constituted a positive form of Chinese

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33. David Snow and Robert Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization," *International Social Movement Research* 1 (1988): 197–217.

cultural export led to the state's involvement in the Li phenomenon. A major criticism against Li in the debate was that, since she showcased the "backwardness" of rural China, her vlogging should not qualify as an exemplar of Chinese culture.

Key social media influencers soon came to Li's defense. An article by Internet opinion leader Lei Siling that first appeared on WeChat on December 5 and gained millions of views and pulled in 63,000 comments overnight summarized well the views in support of Li.[34] According to the article, those who dismissed Li's videos as backward had misguided faith in modernity, one that viewed anything associated with "the rural" as inferior to the "urban." However, much wisdom in Chinese culture is preserved in its rural way of life: "Through recording and presenting her life to make a living, Li inadvertently diffuses Chinese ancient wisdom and culture to inspire a world audience."[35]

The state media were also quick to endorse. It was the first time a microcelebrity broke into the official discourse on soft power. China Central Television and the Communist Party organ People's Daily both lavished Li with praise, believing that her popularity in the West would make the nation more appealing. The CCTV commentary goes, "Without a word praising China, Li tells a good China story."[36] An editorial from *China Daily*, China's state English-language newspaper, summed it up: "Technically, the fine quality of her cinematographic output is eye-catching. . . . Culturally, what touches the heart of Li's followers is the universal language of love, inner peace, caring for the family and love for nature"[37].

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34. Lei Siling, "Li Ziqi zenme jiu bushi wenhua shuchu le" (Why not consider Li Ziqi as a form of "cultural export"?), *Wei ni xie yige gushi* (*Writing a Story for You*), December 5, 2019, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/NWEEIW2ntGbjUpKUJmHf3Q.

35. Lei, "Li Ziqi."

36. "Wo ye man zihao, yinwei wo jiushi Li Ziqi zuoping beijing lide yige dian" (I am very proud, since I am also one dot in the background of Li Ziqi's video), CCTV News, December 10, 2019, https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404447882362093714.

37. Xu Xiaohong, "A Very Good Way to Tell China's Story to the World," *China Daily* (Hong Kong Edition), December 21, 2019.

This online debate pertains to the larger theoretical question on tradition versus modernity in China and the official stance on it. Here, the state's subsequent involvement in the Li Ziqi phenomenon bespeaks a kind of "cultural nationalism" that is, to some extent, commensurate with, but also transcends, the consumerist discourse promoted by market modernity. In doing so, the state draws on alternative ideological resources, including both Confucianism and Chinese communism.

Confucianism was the dominant ruling ideology throughout China's agrarian history. While Confucius as an intellectual had a rather condescending attitude toward farming, Confucianism as a school of thought enjoined the feudal state to attach great importance to agriculture. Historically it was a common practice for Chinese officials at various levels, even the emperor, to engage in "quan nong (劝农)" activities (i.e., activities to promote agriculture), such as the ritual of "gong geng" (i.e., 躬耕, tilling by oneself to set an example for farmers), so that the laboring class would be dedicated to their undertakings.[38]

Confucianism lost its sway after the May Fourth Movement and the Communist Revolution. While communism, adopting a singular vision of modernization, saw urban life as a higher form of society (in a rare instance in which capitalists were given credit, Marx said, "The bourgeoisie had rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life")[39], the Chinese Communist Party innovated Marxism, and its own rise was inextricably linked to rural roots. Defeated in the cities, the party went to the country and gained its ultimate strength there—known as the strategy of "the countryside surrounding the city." During the Maoist era, the laboring people (劳动人民) were upheld as the nation's masters. Mao famously said, "The issue of peasants is the fundamental issue of the Chinese

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38. Zeng Xiongsheng, "Ruxue yu zhongguo chuantong nongxue" (Confucianism and traditional Chinese agriculturalism), *Traditional Culture and Modernization* 6 (1995): 55–62.

39. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975), 14.

revolution. . . . Raising mass cultural awareness means elevating the cultural awareness of peasants."[40]

After the cultural revolution, the party reoriented itself and embraced market economy while sticking to political authoritarianism, leading to a loss of ideological hegemony. The successive party leaderships resorted to nationalism to fill the ideological vacuum and drew from the rich Chinese traditions to buttress their legitimacy. The Confucius revival since the start of the twenty-first century placed state-led nationalism on a broad, popular footing.[41] Meanwhile, China's economic transformation and urbanization has produced a massive exodus of peasants who left the rural areas (hence losing connection to the land) in search of higher-paying jobs in cities. China's urban population exceeded its rural population for the first time in 2012. But during this massive migration, farmers lost their subject status while the vast rural areas lost vitality. Six hundred million Chinese today still live under a monthly income of 1,000 yuan and most of them live in the countryside.[42] The widening urban-rural gap is one of the most serious social problems that the party has to tackle if it wants to realize the ambition of achieving common prosperity by 2035. As such, the revitalization of rural China has become the top priority of the Xi Jinping administration, which tries to simultaneously spearhead innovation in agricultural science and technology and to graft ancient Chinese values onto the country's modernization.

These developments point to the complex role of the contemporary Chinese state in mediating tradition and modernity. Its policy of pursuing a market economy and urbanization-driven development has led to the marginalization of the country. Meanwhile, in embracing the commodification

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40. Mao Tse-Tung, "On New Democracy" (Xin minzhu zhuyi), in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1967).

41. Florian Schneider, *Staging China: The Politics of Mass Spectacle* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020).

42. Zhou Xin, "Is China Rich or Poor? Nation's Wealth Debate Muddied by Conflicting Government Data," *South China Morning Post*, May 29, 2020.

of culture, the party-state is no longer an agitator in a Maoist-style politicized culture but more of a cheerleader in a demobilized culture driven by the market. However, the widening urban-rural gap impedes further growth, and once again rural development is elevated to strategic importance. By tapping into the symbolic power of Li Ziqi in her double identity as a farmer and as a social media celebrity, the state positions itself as a mediator of tradition and modernity and, by extension, of the urban-rural conflicts.

As a food and lifestyle vlogger, Li's defining role is a farmer. Food connotes intimacy to soil, active cultivation, and a vital source of life for the city. Indeed, food security is the most fundamental concern facing every nation. Here, Li seems well poised as the poster girl of the party's policy priority to rejuvenate the rural area. She has since been recruited into a number of government initiatives to alleviate rural poverty, including her appointment as an "ambassador" to a Communist Youth League-sponsored campaign to help rural youth become rich and her participation in the Chinese Farmers' Festival sponsored by the Ministry of Agriculture. This opens a new chapter in the good old party practice of setting up a grassroots role model to serve the socialist cause. A *Strait Times* op-ed piece that referred to Li's videos as "a window to a parallel universe in which it was not Chairman Mao who won the Chinese Civil War, but Walt Disney"[43] captures the gist of the party's publicity strategy tailored to the new media age. While consumerism had no place for agitating the masses under a mobilized political culture, four decades into China's reform and opening up, the mechanism for selecting a grassroots role model has gone to the market while the state learns to co-opt the fame of a market-incubated rural microcelebrity in a post-hoc manner. But at the same time, the state's validation of production-centered rural values instead of an outright celebration of consumerism indicates that it

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43. John Lui, "Gig Economy: Staying at Home 24/7 Is Now Possible, but Should You?" *Strait Times*, January 4, 2020.

is paying tribute to its socialist origin and the country's traditional cultural roots. But herein also lies the contradiction.

For instance, in one project, the website of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection enlisted Li's video on rice farming to promote the party's "Clean the Plate" campaign against food waste,[44] which is part of the new national strategy of ensuring food security amid domestic and international uncertainty (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters), echoing Xi Jinping's admonition that "the rice bowl of China must be firmly held in Chinese hands."[45] On the surface, Li Ziqi does seem the perfect candidate to promote the campaign, as her videos can be read as an ode to rural labor. But at the same time, her qualifications as an ambassador for the campaign are predicated on the symbolic fame she achieved via social media, whose very culture is essentially a celebration of consumerism.

This said, Li's initiation to the country's role model does form a sharp contrast to the fate awaiting those microcelebrities who are linked to the "rural" in a pejorative sense—that is, the Tuwei livestreamers who became popular by posing themselves as gluttons and who were seen to represent a perverse form of consumerism and the opposite to values like thrift. While Li Ziqi was being elevated by officials, the propaganda authorities closed in on livestreamers who performed binge eating to attract online traffic. In any case, the state enlists the power of the market in celebrity manufacturing in its fight against excessive consumption, even as its official policy implicitly endorses consumerism.

The other part of the state's validation of Li is more directly related to her role as a social media influencer in promoting traditional culture. Unlike food, "media" is considered an innovation of the city and entails the creation

44. "A Special Programme by the Website of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection: Follow Li Ziqi in Discovering the Life of Rice," Website of the State Supervision Commission of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, August 25, 2020, http://v.ccdi.gov.cn/2020/08/25/VIDEuvfbPAke0Uvsf6Qx02Xr200825.shtml.
45. Frank Tang, "China's Xi Jinping Vows New Push to Revitalize Rural Economy in Post-Coronavirus World of Uncertainty," *South China Morning Post*, December 30, 2020.

of mediated spectacles for consumption. After all, it is the technological affordance of social media that confers mobility on Li, enabling her presentation of a pastoral life to be appreciated by millions of urbanites. In this sense, Li realized the government's Internet+ strategy by tapping into the potential of interactive media and became a successful cultural entrepreneur. Because of this, she was invited to the "Dialogue between Asian Civilizations", a conference under the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, and met with the royal family of Malaysia, to whom her handmade stationery was presented as gifts. She also partnered with leading official brands in the preservation of traditional culture, such as the Palace Museum in Beijing, as a government gesture to create more synergy between the official and the grassroots players in the cultural field.[46]

Just like the irony implicit in Li's role in the campaign against food waste, in which a microcelebrity cultivated by a consumerism-inflected culture was enlisted to fight excessive consumption, here, the latest form of media technology plays a key role in promoting traditional values, such as harmony between humans and nature and filial piety. In fact, the mobility of the new technology facilitates the retrenchment of rural identity. Similarly, identifying Li Ziqi as a role model in the rural rejuvenation drive is a little odd because, after all, Li's portrayal of the pastoral idyll is far removed from a world of modern farming technologies, which is precisely the centerpiece of the rural revitalization strategy. These little oddities notwithstanding, affirming the state's commitment to rural development through a popular icon is perhaps the more important message here.

All in all, while the market's penchant for "a universally human" narrative reduces the texture of rural life into a spectacle for global consumption with its hidden class-based taste preferences, the state's incorporation of Li into various policy initiatives shows its resolve to reduce the substantive

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46. Li Wei. "Jiemi Li Ziqi baohong beihou de ta: weibo, wanghong datuishou, xinmeiti touzijia" (Uncovering the mysterious man behind Li Ziqi's rise to fame: Incubator for microcelebrity and investor in the new media), *The Lens*, December 12, 2019, https://new.qq.com/omn/20191212/20191212A0F0OX00.html.

inequality between the country and the city, as well as its intent to pro-mote traditional Chinese culture overseas. In a quixotic way, by making Li Ziqi a social media icon, the market uses the rural as a resource to meet the urban desire for and consumption of the pastoral. Meanwhile the state reappropriates the icon of marketized media to help the disadvantaged rural other regain its agency. Here, the state is trying to play an integrative role that bridges the urban-rural divide, despite the many contradictions during this process.

Conclusion

At a fundamental level, food and media technology occupy opposite ends of the material spectrum and symbolize rural and urban civilization, re-spectively. When combined in the new cultural form of food vlogging, they mediate the fundamental human aspirations—"the idea of pastoral inno-cence" versus "the city as a civilizing agency"—in interesting and complex ways. This article examines the rise of food and lifestyle vlogger Li Ziqi, whose "isolated DIY fantasy world offers both dreamy escape and a lesson in self-reliance"[47] and wins her popularity in both Chinese and overseas-based social media platforms. Specifically, the article studies how the construction of her authenticity—at the heart of which is a desire for the pastoral by urbanites in contemporary society—is intimately associated with structural forces, including the market, the state, social media technology, and the public responses represented by media.

Both the market and the state take an active interest in appropriating the traditional way of Chinese life represented by Li Ziqi, though with dif-ferent manifestations. This is perhaps natural, considering that both are in-stitutions growing out of urban civilization vis-à-vis the country. Because the social media field largely operates according to the principles of market

47. Tejal Rao, "A Fantasy Princess Living off the Land," *New York Times*, April 29, 2020, P3.

capitalism, the market's influence can be felt throughout the celebrification of Li Ziqi. The offering up of the pastoral desire for urban consumption, leading to the reaffirmation of the privilege of the urban, is a familiar line of critique in cultural studies. But the terms of such consumption—that is, the production and dissemination of Li Ziqi's content—deserves closer scrutiny. As a vlogger, Li's niche lies in her idealized presentation of rural life, particularly farming activities. But the visualization of her productive activities is more like a new face of consumerism, which is the latest manifestation of the market's unrelenting quest for novelty and uniqueness. Meanwhile, social media technology, which deterritorializes farming life, provides Li with the capacity to reach her fans around the world while fixing her identity as local, isolated, and uncorrupted by urban influence.

However, the lived experience of the half-billion rural population cannot be merely reduced to a single spectacle. Even across China's media landscape, the pastoral idyll portrayed by Li has to compete with other images, such as the "carnivalesque rural China" invoked in the Tuwei videos and the "decaying rural China" featured in realism-themed films and literary works. These images present a far less flattering image of rural China, whose identity can no longer be kept intact from the onslaught of urbanization. They also bring into sharp relief social problems, such as the population exodus and the widening urban-rural gap, which call for redress by the state. The contested representations of the "rural other" partly explain the lack of consensus over Li Ziqi's authenticity within China, which contrasts with her near universal acclaim overseas. Meanwhile, the state is quick to tap into the cultural resonance that Li Ziqi builds with viewers at home and abroad for its own policy agenda.

Since the disembedding of the city from the country, the latter has always been in a subordinate position, whose main role lies in providing material subsistence for the city, which enjoys a more thriving cultural life. But today, in China's seemingly unstoppable modernization drive (and similarly elsewhere), the alienated urban self seems constantly in need of nourishment by the values that the country stands for while the "backward"

country needs material support from the city in the form of advanced science and technology, as well as modern media. Promoting mutual consumption between the country and the city seems to be the implicit message in the Chinese government's rural rejuvenation design. Here, different from the market's role in distinction making, the Chinese state tries to position itself as an integrative force, to bridge the urban-rural gap, and to restore the lost agency of the rural population. This will be done through "bringing the urban civilization to the country" in the form of promoting the diffusion of not only science and technology but also new media and the concept of consumerism, so as "to make farming efficient, the countryside good for living, and the country's peasants rich."[48] Meanwhile, it will also bring the country to the city, not only by ensuring food security and agricultural development but also through encouraging cultural entrepreneurship among the rural population, in which Li Ziqi stands out as a role model. The state's response to the Li Ziqi phenomenon in particular, and its agricultural policy in general, is a reflection of its approach to tradition and modernity. As Hubbert put it, "China did not locate tradition as antithetical to modernity but instead wed cultural history and heritage to economic growth and technological advancement to offer tradition as a prescription for addressing modernity's putative hazards."[49] Such state initiative often results in a cultural nationalism that is part postmodern consumerism, part socialist realism, and part traditional Confucianism, though its realization is not without challenge.

The convergence of these forces can be gleaned from Li Ziqi's most recent appearance on Weibo Night in February 2021. As the Chinese microblogging site's equivalent to the Oscars, the event gathers the most prominent mass media celebrities and newly minted social media microcelebrities, in which Li was awarded "Weibo Person of the Year." For the occasion, instead

48. Orange Wang, "China's Food Security at Core of Beijing's New Five-Year Rural-Revitalization Plan," *South China Morning Post*, February 23, 2021.
49. Jennifer Hubbert, "Back to the Future: The Politics of Culture at the Shanghai Expo," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (2017): 48–64, 51.

of couture gowns, Li wore a rather modest summer mint chiffon dress and a jacket with Chinese embroidery. A hairpin made of bamboo leaves indicated her rustic roots. In interviews with media, she said she was thinking about her grandmother back home and the vegetables she grew in her backyard, which had just sprouted and needed caring. But as she walked the red carpet along with the nation's hottest media stars—albeit a bit shyly—her role as a "microcelebrity" trumped her role as a "country girl." Her look for the night was scrutinized against those of other celebrities and made the tabloids' gossip column in the following days. But the other facet of reality—which is more lackluster—consisted of increasing complaints from consumers online of quality problems found within her brand of food/snacks, whose production she had outsourced to certain factories. A new round of debate on food safety followed, with calls for more government regulation on microcelebrities. So, the story of Li Ziqi goes on, offering us a rich text in studying the "structure of feeling" of our era—namely, the nostalgia for a pristine way of life in late modernity that is being negotiated by various stakeholders, via food vlogging.

Acknowledgments

This Is Not Reality (Ceci n'est pas la réalité)

Capturing the Imagination of the People Creativity, the Chinese Subaltern, and Documentary Storytelling

PAOLA VOCI

Abstract

How has documentary (re)presented subaltern creativity? Focusing on post-socialist, globalizing China, I examine documentary narratives by and about the creative subaltern originating from Chinese "cool cities" and expanding in the virtual space of global digital media. In these narratives, the creative subaltern has appeared obliquely, tangential to other narratives, subordinate to internationally recognized artists, or with a more central role, as the author or the protagonist of documentary films. I analyze these narratives' entanglement with elitist definitions of creativity, the representation of subaltern reality, the expression of subjectivity, and the tension between the political and the personal.

I argue that documentary has played an important albeit ambiguous role—provocative and empowering, but also, at times, formulaic and constricting—in shaping the discourse on the subaltern as a creative subject, by amplifying creativity's indexicality to the real and obfuscating its imaginative quality and its ambition of breaking free from the real. Reflecting on the contemporary relevance of the Free Cinema movement's advocacy for a subjective, personal approach to capturing the "imagination of the people" and exploration of lyric realism in documentary filmmaking, I propose that documentary can and

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should dare to "make poetry." Forms of documentary expressivity such as poetic, non-plot-driven narratives can reconcile imagination with reality and offer alternative, more appropriate means of capturing the complexity, heterogeneity, and contradictoriness of the subaltern condition, and for subaltern creativity to be expressed, appreciated, and affirmed.

Keywords: creativity and imagination, Chinese subalternity, documentary storytelling, poetic film and lyric realism, personal and political

> Tell us what you want to express so that more people will understand what you want.
>
> —Wen Hui, *Dance with Farmworkers* (2001)

> Have I become an artist?
> Do I have anything that deserves appreciation?
>
> —Zhao Xiaoyong, *China's Van Goghs* (2015)

Prologue

In cinema's mythology, the contraposition between the Lumière brothers' cinema of the real and George Méliès's cinema of illusion has set the stage for the ontological tension between reality and imagination in film practices, histories, and theories. Documentary storytelling has been traditionally linked to the former and has played a major role, especially in giving visibility to the reality of marginalized groups. In China, independent documentary "has long been associated with the production of images of the subaltern,"[1] and subaltern struggles and agency have been a focus of many

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1. Luke Robinson, "'To whom do our bodies belong?' Being Queer in Chinese DV Documentary," in *DV-Made China: Digital Subjects and Social Transformations after Independent Film*, eds. Zhen Zhang and Angela Zito (Hawaiʻi: University of Hawaiʻi Press 2015), 289.

documentary films.[2] What happens when the reality that the documentary seeks to capture is that of subaltern creativity? How has documentary (re)presented its imaginative quality? The answer is a transnational, transmedia story that develops from China's "cool cities" and expands in the virtual space of global digital media, in which the creative subaltern plays multiple, intersecting, and conflicting roles: the (subordinate) performer, the (self-determined) author, and the (aspiring) artist.

No Film Can Be Too Personal

In "Get Out and Push!," Lindsay Anderson sought to reconnect (political) resistance and (personal) creativity. He criticized those for whom "art remains a diversion or an aesthetic experience," reclaiming creativity as essential to documentary filmmaking.[3] While committed to social observation and critique, he advocated for the freedom to express one's subjective impressions and emotions about reality:

> A socialism that cannot express itself in emotional, human, poetic terms is one that will never capture the imagination of the people—who are poets even if they don't know it. And conversely, artists and intellectuals who despise the people, imagine themselves superior to them, and think it clever to talk about the "Ad-Mass," are both cutting themselves off from necessary experience, and shirking their responsibilities.[4]

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2. Eric Florence, "Rural Migrant Workers in Independent Films: Representations of Everyday Agency," *Made in China* 3, May 18, 2018, https://madeinchinajournal.com/2018/05/18/rural-migrant-workers-in-independent-films/.

3. Lindsay Anderson, "Get Out and Push!," *Encounter* (1957): 14–22, https://www.unz.com/print/Encounter-1957nov-00014/.

4. Anderson, "Get Out and Push!," 22.

Anderson put this view into practice, becoming a leading filmmaker in the Free Cinema Movement.[5] This short-lived but influential movement is known for "six programmes of (mainly) short documentaries shown at the National Film Theatre (NFT) in London" between 1956 and 1959. Produced outside the film industry, in semiamateur conditions, the films "avoided or limited the use of didactic voice-over commentary, shunned narrative continuity and used sound and editing impressionistically."[6] In the movement's manifesto, the filmmakers declare:

> These films were not made together; nor with the idea of showing them together. But when they came together, we felt they had an attitude in common. Implicit in this attitude is a belief in freedom, in the importance of people and the significance of the everyday.
>
> As filmmakers we believe that
> No film can be too personal.
> The image speaks. Sound amplifies and comments.
> Size is irrelevant. Perfection is not an aim.
> An attitude means a style. A style means an attitude.[7]

Predating the development of postcolonial and subaltern studies, when leftist intellectual elites were beginning to debate their position vis-à-vis mass culture and mass media, Free Cinema aspired to extricate individual subjectivity from the "mass" and "capture the imagination of the people," relying on personal perspectives while making a political intervention.

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5. The name refers to freedom from "the pressures of the box-office or the demands of propaganda" and freedom to explore realities beyond metropolitan ones. See Christophe Dupin, "A History of Free Cinema," BFI Screenonline, accessed August 9, 2020, http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/444789/index.html.

6. Dupin, "A History of Free Cinema."

7. Lindsay Anderson, Lorenza Mazzetti, Karel Reisz, and Tony Richardson, "Free Cinema Manifestos (UK, 1956–1959)," in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Scott MacKenzie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 149.

Taking Free Cinema as a departure point and postsocialist, global-izing China as its context, this study examines how "the imagination of the people" is captured on screens and, more specifically, its entanglement with elitist definitions of creativity, the representation of subaltern reality, the expression of subjectivity, and the tension between the political and the personal. In China, documentary has played an important albeit am-biguous role—provocative and empowering but also, at times, formulaic and constricting—in shaping discourse on the subaltern (more precisely, in the Chinese context, *nong min gong* [rural migrant worker] or *dagong* [working-for-the-boss, hired-hand worker]) as a creative subject. Documen-tary is one of the expressive forms explored in subaltern creative practices, and it has become a privileged medium for their representation and inter-pretation. While documentary narratives by and about the creative subal-tern have made subaltern creativity visible and contributed to the emergence of subaltern celebrities, they have also devalued subaltern authorship and cast doubt on the artistic significance of subaltern creative works.

Over the past twenty years, the Chinese subaltern has taken advantage of the availability of new Digital Video (DV) technology to create documen-tary videos, reclaiming control over their life stories and their creative prac-tices.[8] Online platforms and social media have expanded their viewership. In 2005, the observational-style and interview-format documentaries focusing on village life produced by the apprentice amateur filmmakers participating in the China Village Documentary Project only reached limited, specialized audiences. Today, Li Ziqi's documentary videos celebrating idyllic life and traditional cooking and crafts in rural Sichuan total 1.6 billion views. Yet, rather than a creative subject, Li is largely considered a DIY "food celebrity."[9]

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8. Jia Zhangke, "Youle VCD he shuma shexiangji yihou 有了 VCD 和数码摄像机以后" (Now that we have VCDs and digital cameras), in *Yige ren de yingxiang: DV wanquan shouce* 一个人的影像: DV 完全手册, ed. Zhang Xianmin 张献民 and Zhang Yaxuan 张亚璇 (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1999), 309–11.

9. Tejal Rao, "The Reclusive Food Celebrity Li Ziqi Is My Quarantine Queen," *New York Times*, last modified April 20, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/dining/li-ziqi-chinese-food.html.

In addition, nonsubaltern creative practitioners (i.e., educated urbanites with backgrounds in filmmaking, visual arts, academia, or journalism) have sought to make subaltern creative practices and aspirations visible, often advocating for solidarity with their struggles. In these documentary narratives, the creative subaltern is framed in transformative stories that record and dramatize life journeys. However, such documentary storytelling often amplifies creativity's indexicality to the real and obfuscates its imaginative quality and ambition of breaking free from the real, thus entrapping creativity in the very subaltern condition it seeks to overcome.

By reflecting on Free Cinema's advocacy for a subjective, personal approach to capturing the "imagination of the people," I propose that other forms of documentary expressivity—such as poetic, non-plot-driven, narratives—offer alternative, more appropriate means of capturing the complexity, heterogeneity, and contradictoriness of the subaltern condition in order for subaltern creativity to be expressed, appreciated, and affirmed.

I begin by contextualizing the discourse on creativity and subalternity as being inescapably connected with urbanization and the "cool city."[10] China has embraced this "alignment of creativity with the cool, sophisticated and metropolitan," which has led to valuing creativity in terms of "its capacity to make profits and conforms to the entrepreneurial imperatives of city managers, reinforcing the strategic role of creative industries in economic development and urban renewal."[11] Therefore, in the Chinese context, as elsewhere, subaltern creativity develops within and in conflict with the economic drive, intellectual elitarianism, technological prominence, and class bias that characterize cool cities.

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10. Jeffrey Zimmerman, "From Brew Town to Cool Town: Neoliberalism and the Creative City Development Strategy in Milwaukee," *Cities* 25, no. 4 (2008): 230–42; Reeman Mohammed Rehan, "Cool City as a Sustainable Example of Heat Island Management Case Study of the Coolest City in the World," *HBRC Journal* 12, no. 2 (2016): 191–204.
11. Tim Edensor and S. D. Millington, "Spaces of Vernacular Creativity Reconsidered," in *Creative Placemaking: Research, Theory and Practice*, eds. Cara Courage and Anita McKeown (London: Routledge, 2018), 33.

Defining Creativity: The Cool City and Four-C Model

Creativity has become a marker of urban modernity and postmodernity. Scholars have documented, evaluated, and theorized online creative practices in popular cultures, such as DIY, amateur digital writers, photographers, animators, and video makers. Rather than defining creativity as having intrinsic qualities, media and cultural studies have focused on how (i.e., through which medium, when and where, for which purpose) creativity develops. Building on notions of active audience and expanding to vernacular creativity in the context of new and spreadable media, creativity is considered a highly contextualized practice, which includes the creative expressions of participatory cultures, media social activism, and transmedia and digital storytelling.[12] Understanding creativity means analyzing texts in their context and unpacking their construction of meanings and power relations.

Creativity has also been mapped, categorized, and indexed as a tangible and measurable factor in the context of creative industries and economic development. Economist and urban studies scholar Richard Florida argues that "the key to economic growth lies not just in the ability to attract the creative class, but to translate that underlying advantage into creative economic outcomes in the form of new ideas, new high-tech businesses and regional growth."[13] He has developed a "creativity index" based on measurable

12. Stuart Hall, David Morley, and Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996); Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Ian Hargreaves and John Hartley, *The Creative Citizen Unbound: How Social Media and DIY Culture Contribute to Democracy, Communities and the Creative Economy* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2016); Carlos Alberto Scolari, "Transmedia Storytelling: Implicit Consumers, Narrative Worlds, and Branding in Contemporary Media Production," *International Journal of Communication* 3 (2009): 586–606; Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling and Entertainment: An Annotated Syllabus," *Continuum* 24, no. 6 (2010): 943–58.
13. Richard Florida, "The Rise of the Creative Class," *Washington Monthly*, 2002, https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/may-2002/the-rise-of-the-creative-class/.

categories, such as the creative class's share in the workforce and the diversity factor.[14]

In the Chinese context, creativity is seen as supporting and in tension with the state's interest in cultural economy as a key source for financial gain, national branding, and soft power.[15] Creativity is identified as an expression of a technologically literate urbanite culture, associated with a mobile middle class, often with transnational or diasporic identities, and situated in cosmopolitan cities such as Shanghai.[16] Scholars have concentrated on creative labor, defined by "contemporary industrial processes of cultural production, including media, design and arts."[17] Yiu Fai Chow has moved beyond "concerns with employment situations and place attractiveness," demonstrating that "creative class mobility" results from complex dynamics involving gender, age, and social and personal contingencies.[18] Critical of Florida's "optimistic rhetoric," "utopian vision," and "upbeat understanding of the creative class," Chow leaves aside the conceptual debate on the academic "creative turn," advocating instead for "more qualitative and empirical work on the *people* operating in these sites of cultural production."[19] While focusing on technologically literate urbanite culture, Jian Lin and Chow caution against

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14. While most of Florida's measurable factors rely on statistical data, the "diversity factor" is problematic. Rather than addressing the complexity of what diversity entails, Florida identifies diversity with "the Gay Index," which he describes as "a reasonable proxy for an area's openness to different kinds of people and ideas." See Florida, "The Rise of the Creative Class."

15. Michael Keane, *Creative Industries in China: Art, Design and Media* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013); Paola Voci and Luo Hui, *Screening China's Soft Power* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Ying Zhu, Kingsley Edney, and Stanley Rosen, *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

16. Xiaoye You, "Chinese White-Collar Workers and Multilingual Creativity in the Diaspora," *World Englishes* 30, no. 3 (2011): 409–27.

17. Jian Lin, "(Un-)becoming Chinese Creatives: Transnational Mobility of Creative Labour in a 'Global' Beijing," *Mobilities* 14, no. 4 (2019): 453.

18. Yiu Fai Chow, "Exploring Creative Class Mobility: Hong Kong Creative Workers in Shanghai and Beijing," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 58, no. 4 (2017): 362.

19. Chow, "Exploring Creative Class," 364. Emphasis added.

the celebratory, romanticized view of the prosperous, creative cool city, enriched by and welcoming of skilled creative practitioners.

Even more critical of the cool city's optimistic rhetoric are scholars who have examined the creative practices of those earning lower incomes and/or living on the margins of urban space, separated from cities by geographical distance or displaced within them. Human geographers Tim Edensor and Steve Millington "welcome the rejection of creativity as intrinsically economic, urban and singularly individualistic" and "anticipate that elitist, class-ridden definitions will be more widely rejected, recognised as signifying banal efforts to acquire cultural capital and status, and the protean nature of creativity will become ever more apparent."[20]

Yet such "elitist, class-ridden definitions" often remain unchallenged and are still used to describe and qualify creativity. In an influential article, James Kaufman and Ronald Beghetto address the distinction between minor, ordinary creativity ("little-c") and major, extraordinary creativity ("Big-C") and propose a four-step approach to creativity, a "Four-C model" that identifies two additional categories: protocreativity ("mini-c") and professional creativity ("Pro-c").[21]

What interests me are the premises upon which these steps are identified. With the exception of mini-c, these premises rely on the acquisition of "cultural capital and status" as an objective measure in assigning c/C status. For instance, when referring to the highest level of creativity, defined by "greatness" and "legend," the authors explain: "Examples of Big-C creativity might be winners of the Pulitzer Prize . . . or people who have entries in the Encyclopaedia Britannica longer than 100 sentences."[22]

If we transfer these markers to digital cultures, evidence of Big-C status may include a lengthy Wikipedia page or other measurable factors, such as Li Ziqi's twelve million subscribers and 1.6 billion views. However,

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20. Edensor and Millington, "Spaces of Vernacular Creativity Reconsidered," 38.
21. James C. Kaufman and Ronald A. Beghetto, "Beyond Big and Little: The Four C Model of Creativity," *Review of General Psychology* 13, no. 1 (2009): 1–12.
22. Kaufman and Beghetto, "Beyond Big and Little," 2

the absence of prestigious awards and posthumous recognition (listed as evidence of Big-C creativity) may assign Li's creativity little-c status. Furthermore, because professionalism (Pro-c) is shown as a necessary step to achieving Big-C, this model privileges accredited institutions and creative industries as means to develop creative talent and acquire Professionalism (capital P), making those who have no access, no resources, or no time to gain professional training (e.g., subaltern artists) incompatible with Pro-c and Big-C.

The assumptions and assertions the model makes about creativity show how widespread and ingrained highbrow cultural biases and socioeconomic hierarchies are. These biases and hierarchies are central to my examination of Chinese subaltern creativity and its expression, representation, and interpretation in documentary filmmaking. I share Edenson and Millington's concerns and support their call for a more inclusive appreciation of creativity, beyond the cool city, and/or its value in terms of economic growth, cultural industries policies, and global flows. However, creativity remains constrained by "elitist, class-ridden definitions": the cultural economy is viewed as a source for financial gain, national branding, and soft power, and, as reflected in the Four-C model, creativity is associated with "cultural capital and status." In China, creativity's position within and outside the cool city is further complicated by the Chinese discourse on subalternity.

Globalizing China: The Subaltern as a Creative Subject

In the Chinese context, subalternity is entangled with rural-to-urban migration, social displacement, and conflicting cultural belonging. As Sun Wanning observes,

> The migrant worker exists in the contested and fraught space between
> the government's propaganda, market driven urban tales inundating

the popular culture sector, the so-called independent, alternative, or underground documentaries on the transnational art circuits, and various forms of cultural activism engaged in by NGO workers and their intellectual allies.[23]

Navigating this "contested and fraught space" means understanding the limitations and contradictions involved in all these players' perspectives and agendas and recognizing that subaltern perspectives and agendas are similarly multiple and diverse. Scholars have unpacked the unjust, exploitative, degrading, and destructive conditions of those living at the bottom of social and economic hierarchies.[24] They have recognized degrees of agency, identifying the "weapons of the weak" and the strategies through which they survive, negotiate, fight against, and break through the system that crushes and tries to silence their labor and human rights.[25]

An emerging "activist sinology" has expanded academic discourse on subalternity, relying on open-access digital platforms and engaging with civil society.[26] For example, *Made in China Journal*, a quarterly "on Chinese labour and civil society," seeks "to bridge the gap" between scholars and the public and believes open access reappropriates research from publishers "who restrict the free circulation of ideas."[27] Located outside academia and

23. Wanning Sun, "Subalternity with Chinese Characteristics: Rural Migrants, Cultural Activism, and Digital Video Filmmaking," *Javnost-The Public* 19, no. 2 (2012): 84–85.

24. Anita Chan, *China's Workers under Assault: Exploitation and Abuse in a Globalizing Economy* (London: Routledge, 2016); Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

25. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Ivan Franceschini, "Labour NGOs in China: A Real Force for Political Change?," *China Quarterly* 218 (2014): 474–92; Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

26. Paola Voci, "Activist Sinology and Accented Documentary: China on the (Italian?) Internet," *Modern Italy* 24, no. 4 (2019): 437–56.

27. Made in China Journal, "About Us," accessed July 30, 2020, https://madeinchinajournal.com/.

aiming to hold the official trade union "accountable to its members," the China Labour Bulletin, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) based in Hong Kong, is committed to fostering "lasting international solidarity."[28]

The creative practices of worker-performers, worker-poets, worker-painters, and worker-filmmakers are "entangled" with this contested, fraught space of subalternity, where they live, work, and create.[29] Sun pioneered the investigation of migrant workers' creativity in printed and screen media.[30] Maghiel van Crevel's research on worker-poets in relation to ownership and translatability and Gong Haomin's examination of ecopoetics in *dagong* poetry have disentangled the constraints that limit the reach and appreciation of subaltern literary works.[31] Focusing on worker-painters, Winnie Wong's study of Shenzhen's Dafen Village painters exposes porous dichotomies and belongings, deconstructing clichés, unpacking assumptions about "mindless imitation" or "mechanical techniques," and pointing out that the painters "understand themselves as *both dagong* workers and independent artists."[32]

Alongside traditional arts, digital video and online media have become venues for the Chinese subaltern to communicate "aspirations," "frustrations," and "activist ethos and imaginary," although "the extent to which migrant individuals can be empowered by this visual and technological

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28. China Labour Bulletin, "About Us," accessed July 30, 2020, https://clb.org.hk/.

29. Rey Chow, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

30. Sun, "Subalternity with Chinese Characteristics"; Wanning Sun, *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Wanning Sun, "From Poisonous Weeds to Endangered Species: Shenghuo TV, Media Ecology and Stability Maintenance," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44, no. 2 (2015): 17–37.

31. Maghiel van Crevel, "The Cultural Translation of Battlers Poetry (Dagong shige)," *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* 現代中文文學學報 14, no. 2 (2017): 245–86; Maghiel van Crevel, "Debts: Coming to Terms with Migrant Worker Poetry," *Chinese Literature Today* 8, no. 1 (2019): 127–45; Haomin Gong, "Ecopoetics in the Dagong Poetry in Postsocialist China: Nature, Politics, and Gender in Zheng Xiaoqiong's Poems," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 25, no. 2 (2018): 257–79.

32. Winnie Wong, *Van Gogh on Demand: China and the Readymade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 56.

means of expressing oneself is unclear."[33] Being creative allows for self-expression but not necessarily self-emancipation. Ngai-Ling Sum examines the multiplicity and fragmentation of working-class groups, focusing on how young migrant workers explore the tension between self-expression and self-emancipation online, via memes, texts, and photos centered on *diaosi* (loser) identity, which, he argues, reflects a subaltern "contradictory consciousness."[34]

In the context of digital video and online media, Chinese news media has covered the growing phenomenon of subaltern performers going viral, often celebrating their talent and success as evidence of the fulfilled promises of the China dream and in support of national strength and unity. For instance, Chinese- and English-language news reported on Peng Xiaoying and her husband, two corn growers in Wenzhou, who invented dance steps that "cheered up millions of Chinese netizens who salute the couple's smiling faces and their easygoing approach to life."[35] The *China Daily* co-opted the state's agenda of nation building and soft power in its story on Ma Ruifeng, a farmer-*hua'er* singer who livestreams performances, quoting him: "Life can be difficult, but the support and understanding from family can keep us going. As long as you work hard, things will get better."[36] It pointed out, "The regional government spends 600,000 yuan ($86,000) every year on teaching and performing centers for the folk music," protecting and promoting it and subsidizing "over 40 inheritors of the tradition across Ningxia, including Ma."

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33. Sun, "Subalternity with Chinese Characteristics," 98.
34. Ngai-Ling Sum, "The Makings of Subaltern Subjects: Embodiment, Contradictory Consciousness, and Re-hegemonization of the *Diaosi* in China," *Globalizations* 14, no. 2 (2017): 298–312, https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2016.1207936.
35. Zhenhuan Ma, "Dance with Zhejiang Couple Lifts Spirits of Millions," *China Daily*, last modified June 8, 2020, https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202006/08/WS5ede16e7a3108348172519a3.html.
36. China Daily, "Online Folk Singer Gives a Voice to Migrant Workers," *China Daily*, last modified January 17, 2020, http://epaper.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202001/17/WS5e20efc7a310a2fabb7a1982.html.

Within this broad spectrum of traditional and digital arts and media, documentary filmmaking has emerged as a singularly suitable text and metatext for subaltern creativity.

The Creative Subaltern as the Performer: Oblique Incursions

Subaltern creativity has been represented obliquely in documentary filmmaking and in fiction films with a strong indexicality to the real, which are often described as having a documentary style, such as the works of the Sixth Generation filmmakers.[37] By *obliquely*, I mean that, in these films, the subaltern's desire and ability to be creative are not the main foci of the narrative. Rather, they are either subordinated to it or become "accidently" visible. This is what happens, for example, when Ruijuan dances alone in her office at night (*Platform*, directed by Jia Zhangke, 2000) or when a dreamlike animation visualizes Tao's interior life (*The World*, directed by Jia Zhangke, 2004). The grey, still environment of subaltern reality is transformed temporarily in lyric scenes, filled with color, music, movement, and imagination. These scenes briefly rupture the main narrative; creativity and imagination are presented as fleeting moments before the crude reality of subaltern life resumes.

Oblique incursions of creativity in subaltern lives also occur in early independent documentary filmmaking. The films record the humorous "rapping" improvised by Da Pangzi (Big Fatty), one of the trash collectors in

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37. Zhen Zhang, "Transfiguring the Postsocialist City: Experimental Image-Making in Contemporary China," in *Cinema at the City's Edge: Film and Urban Networks in East Asia*, eds. Yomi Braester and James Tweedie (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 95–118; Xiaoping Wang, "Portraying the Abject and the Sublime of the Subaltern," in *Postsocialist Conditions*, 199–245; Jin Liu, "The Rhetoric of Local Languages as the Marginal: Chinese Underground and Independent Films by Jia Zhangke and Others," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 163–205.

Street Life (*Nanjing lu* 南京路，directed by Zhao Dayong, 2006), or the self-staged clips of citizen activist Zhang Jinli in *Meishi Street* (*Meishi jie* 煤市街, directed by Ou Ning, 2006) who takes over the camera and confidently acts as a singer and martial arts performer. In both cases, these creative performances are temporary ruptures in documentary narratives that focus on the subaltern's everyday struggle to survive (*Street Life*) or seek justice and compensation for the loss of their homes (*Meishi Street*) (see figure 1).

Besides these accidental incursions, the subaltern as a creative subject has been a prominent theme in documentary-style art videos produced in the context of contemporary avant-garde participatory art and performance. For instance, multimedia artist Cao Fei's *Whose Utopia?* (*Sheide wutuobang* 谁的乌托邦, 2006) recorded workers' daily lives at the Osram lighting factory, interviewing them and then involving them in performances. One video summary describes how "anonymous figures dance and play music" and how Cao's "poetic, dreamlike vision of individualism within the constraints of industrialization illuminates the otherwise invisible emotions, desires, and dreams that permeate the lives of an entire populace in contemporary Chinese society."[38] According to Chris Berry, the video provocatively reflects contemporary Chinese urbanization and reenchants the metropolis.[39]

Figure 1: Subaltern performers: Da Pangzi (left) and Zhang Jinli (right). *Sources*: *Street Life* (*Nanjing Lu*, directed by Zhao Dayong, 2006) and *Meishi Street*, (*Meishi jie*, directed by Ou Ning, 2006).

38. Nat Trotman, "Cao Fei: Whose Utopia," Guggenhein, accessed October 7, 2020, www.guggenheim.org.
39. Chris Berry, "Images of Urban China in Cao Fei's 'Magical Metropolises,'" *China Information* 29, no. 2 (2015): 202–25.

Exemplifying participatory art's aim "to demystify art, removing the idea of the individual genius and reclaiming it as a social process shared by all," Cao's project places herself (the artist) and the workers in the same creative space, in order to "maximize reflection that is open-ended and not structured by an agenda." The subaltern's creative desires and capabilities are central foci of the video narrative, and Cao notes how the workers communicated to her their realization that "art is life itself" and that "we are all artists."[40] Yet the expression of their creativity remains oblique, as it is still subordinated to the educated, urbanite artist who, despite a genuine commitment to collaborate with and empower the workers, retains full control and authorship of the project.

One of the earliest examples of the contested, fraught relationship between the professional Artist (capital A, considered as having Big-C status) and the untrained creative subaltern is *Dance with Farmworkers* (*He mingong tiaowu* 和民工跳舞, directed by Wu Wenguang, 1999). The film documents the lead-up to the performance of ten actor-dancers from China's Living Dance Studio (led by Wen Hui, Song Dong, Yin Xiuzhen, and Wu Wenguang) and thirty migrants working in construction in Beijing. When it was released, mostly reaching academic and art circles in China and abroad, the documentary was praised as a bold, unconventional project that empowered the laborers, who originally "were only concerned about getting paid 30 Yuan a day for their efforts" but, thanks to this creative experience, then discovered that "the lowest of 'the lower class' could be standing at center stage and making a statement."[41] In contrast to this positive appraisal, Wen Hui and Wu Wenguang have been criticized for co-opting the workers in a live performance and media event while remaining in full control of authorship and being the only ones "standing at center stage and making a statement." For instance, Miao

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40. Berry, "Images of Urban China," 214.
41. CEAS, "CEAS Film Series," Yale, accessed October 12, 2020, https://ceas.yale.edu/events/dv-china-2002-dance-farm-workers-2001.

Fangfei critiques the "objectification of farm workers," who "function as bodies, not subjects," and questions the unaddressed tension between the workers' subaltern condition and "social elites" to which the producers and audiences belong[42]:

> Chinese farm workers, although participating in the creation of the performance and the film, rarely receive a seat among the audiences. The elites . . . speak to themselves about the working class, and the working class functions as a topic in that conversation. . . . Wen Hui and Wu Wenguang speak to other intellectuals and elites using their shared language—dance and documentary film. By so doing, they marginalize and objectify Chinese farm workers.[43]

In 1999, Wu Wenguang also produced a documentary entirely focused on subaltern performers. *Jiang Hu: Life on the Road* (*Jiang hu* 江湖, aka *Life on the "Jianghu"*) follows the Yuanda Song and Dance Tent Show, a troupe from the rural Henan province. In this case, subaltern creativity is given full agency: performing is their livelihood and members control their show, although their performances are represented obliquely, subordinated to the main narrative focusing on their itinerant life and the struggles they experience when, as migrant workers, they face the city's hostility.

Twenty years on, the creative subaltern continues to be represented on-screen as marginalized by an increasingly wrecked urban modernity. Traditional artists have a higher artistic status than the karaoke singers in *Jiang Hu*, but their fate is not much different. Johnny Ma's *To Live to Sing* (*Huozhe changzhe* 活著唱著, 2019) tells the story of the Jinli Sichuan Opera Troupe on the outskirts of Chengdu, centering on manager Zhao Li and her attempts to save the troupe from its inexorable decline. A real-life

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42. Fangfei Miao, "Here and Now—Chinese People's Self-Representation in a Transnational Context," *Congress on Research in Dance Conference Proceedings* (2015): 114, https://doi.org/10.1017/cor.2015.19.

43. Miao, "Here and Now," 115.

opera performer, Zhao Xiaoli plays the lead role, giving the film a quasidocumentary quality. Although not strictly a documentary film, *To Live to Sing* follows in the footsteps of the Sixth Generation's urban realism and echoes Jia Zhangke's surrealist ruptures by combining a documentary-style narrative with "dreamy, fantastical sequences" that make us "step into another world."[44]

This overview shows how incursions of subaltern creativity in documentary filmmaking have reflected broader tensions between authenticity and subjectivity, realist and fictionalized narratives. Subaltern creativity has been captured as having an extemporaneous or amateur quality, vicariously and critically intervening in the city's modernity, albeit only thanks to the mediation of intellectual elites (as in *Dance with Farmworkers* or *Whose Utopia?*). Alternatively, subaltern creativity has been identified as an unappreciated professionalism (as in *Jiang Hu* or *To Live to Sin*g), at odds with the city that marginalizes and rejects it.

In all these incursions, even when subaltern talent and agency is visible and recognized in the audiovisual text, the subaltern is largely absent in the processes of circulation and reception. Even though filmmakers have become more aware of the ethical issues involved in producing documentary narratives about the subaltern, the questions, Can the subaltern speak through the lens of a camera? and, Can subaltern creativity be expressed through the lens of a camera? can only be answered affirmatively if accompanied by caveats and critical scrutiny about the filmmakers (i.e., those who are behind the camera), whose agency determines the content of the audiovisual narrative and impacts on its circulation, distribution, and reception.[45] What happens when the creative subaltern takes control of the creative process and reclaims authorship?

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44. "To Live to Sing," NZIFF, accessed October 12, 2020, https://www.nziff.co.nz/2020/at-home-online/to-live-to-sing/.

45. Ying Qian, "Just Images: Ethics and Documentary Film in China," *China Heritage Quarterly* 29 (2012), http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/scholarship.php?searchterm=029_qian.inc&issue=029.

The Creative Subaltern as the Author: Is a "Googleable Name" a Marker of Authorship?

In documentary videos produced *by* the subaltern, oppression, resistance, and solidarity remain key themes and motivations, but they are expanded, complicated, and pushed to the background in order to foreground the need for self-expression and self-representation.

Among the earliest attempts to give creative rights to the subaltern was Wu Wenguang's *Village Video Project* (*Cunmin yingxiang jihua* 村民影像计划, 2006), in which a group of villagers individually produced a ten-minute documentary on experiments with local governance. While the project aimed to empower the villagers and provide them with the means to produce and circulate their videos, unresolved tension existed between the global, recognizable artist and the local, anonymous subaltern. The video makers' names are listed at the beginning of each video, but only the name of the overarching architect—Wu Wenguang—is credited for the project's authorship.

More recently, online platforms and social media offer more direct channels for self-expression and self-representation. In a complex process of alliances with and distancing from prominent intellectuals and artists with links to transnational and global audiences and established domestic channels that promote creative practices in the cool city, the creative subaltern has turned to the Internet to reclaim direct and independent authorship.

In March 2007, Zhou Shuguang 周曙光 (nom-de-blog Zuola 佐拉, aka "Zola") made a name for himself when, "driven by [his] sensitivity to news and [his] designs to become famous overnight," he went to Chongqing to report on the "nail house incident."[46] From 2007 to 2010 (especially 2007 to 2008), Zhou's vlogs attracted the attention of China's principal blogs (e.g., *China Media Project*) and international newspapers (e.g., the *New York*

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46. David Bandurski, "Chinese Blogger 'Zola' Reports from the Scene on Chongqing's 'Nail House,'" *China Media Project* (blog), March 30, 2007, http://chinamediaproject. org/2007/03/30/chinese-blogger-zola-reports-from-the-scene-on-chongqings-nail-house/.

Times). Consequently, Zhou was featured in the documentary *High Tech, Low Life* (directed by Stephen Maing, 2012), increasing his visibility and fulfilling his desire for popularity.

Zhou currently is moving within news reporting, documentary film-making, writing, and performance. In English-language media (including his own website, http://www.zuola.com), he is referred to as an activist and a blogger, yet he describes himself as an *artist* who has produced many performance art works.[47] Since migrating to Taiwan in 2011, he has expanded his online presence to a multimedia website while maintaining his weblog. On his home page, Zhou has a photo of his younger self in Tian'anmen Square with the caption: "a lonely knight, always selfieing by left hand" (see figure 2).

In contrast to Zhou's "lonely knight" identity and its focus on personal recognition, Wang Dezhi has developed a community-centered creative agenda. He remains localized as a storyteller of "the workers' experience from an explicitly and unambiguously workers' point of view . . . raising the class consciousness of . . . marginal social groups."[48] Wang cofounded the

Figure 2: Zhou Shuguang. *High Tech, Low Life* (left) and zuola.com (right). *Sources*: *High Tech, Low Life* (directed by Stephen Maing, 2012) and https://www.zuola.com/.

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47. Zhou Shuguang, "About," Zuola.com 佐拉, accessed October 12, 2020, https://www.zuola.com/about.htm.
48. Sun, "Subalternity with Chinese Characteristics," 89.

Migrant Workers Home (Gongyou zhi jia 工友之家) in Picun (Pi Village), Beijing, and partakes in various cultural projects.[49] Seeing himself more as a cultural activist than a filmmaker, he has taken inspiration from professional filmmakers such as Jia Zhangke who have represented the subaltern but who, according to Wang, are too concerned with developing distinctive film aesthetics and gaining international recognition.[50] Wang has produced several documentary and quasidocumentary narratives along with fictionalized accounts focusing on subaltern realities, including *Pi Village* (*Picun* 皮村, 2007), *A Fate-Determined Life* (*Mingyun rensheng* 命运人生, 2008), and *Shunli Goes to the City* (*Shunli jin cheng* 顺利进城, 2009), attracting academic attention.[51] Wang also made a name for himself. His story and his face, voice, and words have appeared in state media (e.g., in CCTV's five-episode documentary on Pi Village, marking the first migrant-worker Spring Festival Gala *Dagong chunwan* 打工春晚 in 2012) and in Huang Chuanhui's award-winning reportage, recently translated into English.[52]

In line with his commitment to cultural activism, Wang has used his established individual authorship to develop collaborative projects. He is credited as screenwriter and director in *Second-Generation Migrant* (*Yimin erdai* 移民二代, 2017), produced by the "New Worker Video Team." Described as Wang's first feature film, its story, acting style, and narrative techniques (which include mock-documentary interviews) navigate the blurring lines between fiction and actual.[53] At screenings and during in-

49. In 2002, Wang and Sun Heng "set up the first *dagong* amateur art and performance troupe in China and gave more than 100 [free] concerts for migrant workers." They were "motivated by a desire to 'give voice through songs, to defend rights through law.'" See Sun, "Subalternity with Chinese Characteristics," 88.

50. Sun, *Subaltern China*, 138–39.

51. Sun, *Subaltern China*, 139–40; Jenny Chio, "Rural Films in an Urban Festival: Community Media and Cultural Translation at the Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival," in *Chinese Film Festivals*, eds. Chris Berry and Luke Robinson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

52. Chuanhui Huang, *Migrant Workers and the City: Generation Now* (Black Point: Fernwood, 2016).

53. Hatty Liu, "Migrant Identities," *World of Chinese* (blog), July 3, 2017, https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2017/03/migrant-identities/.

terviews, Wang has emphasized the collective process, focused on advocacy and his localized belonging, distancing himself from the discourses on the creative subaltern shaped by either international independent art circles or national propaganda.

Diametrically opposite to Wang's cultural activism, although displaying equal agency and resistance to be co-opted in those discourses, video blogger Li Ziqi (real name Li Jiajia 李佳佳) is a social influencer with vast popularity. Li has reframed subaltern creativity within the safe boundaries of traditional craft and folklore (presented as beautiful and peaceful), in striking contrast to Wang's problematic, contentious, and unsettled urban narratives. Li's videos are widely viewed and praised for their lyricism and their reappraisal of slow living as an alternative to urban fast living, although they have been criticized for being romanticized and too "perfect."[54]

Li has become one of the most "Googleable" or "Baiduable" Chinese subaltern celebrities. Her online presence is remarkable, and one can read about her life and expanding activities in domestic and international news media (e.g., *People's Daily* and *The Guardian*), specialized art and craft online magazines (e.g., *Garland*), blogs, and, of course, social media. Her short documentaries have reached millions of viewers in China and abroad and have attracted considerable media and academic attention, domestically and globally.

Li's agency is characterized by two main claims, which may or may not be true but are clearly communicated in her videos and in the interviews she has released. Firstly, Li proudly declares a rural subaltern identity: Li and her creative works are localized in her home village, away from urban modernity and the cool city, where she lived for eight years before returning to her grandparents' village in 2012. Her documentaries support Edensor and Millington's proposition that "creativity proliferates and seethes in everyday

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54. Alex Colville, "Li Ziqi, the New Face of China's Countryside," *SupChina* (blog), July 27, 2020, https://supchina.com/2020/07/27/li-ziqi-a-reclusive-country-vlogger-who-became-an-online-celebrity/.

life and in quotidian spaces, . . . cannot only be associated with entrepreneurs and artists, and is undoubtedly located in settings that are far from urban centres."[55] Secondly, Li appears to have full control of her creative process and circulation. She has repeatedly stated that her earlier videos were scripted, video recorded, and edited entirely by her and that, even though she now relies on the support of camera operators and editors, she is still the one who calls the shots. Even though state media has claimed her for upholding the same values as the Communist Party, Li has no need for government funding or additional exposure (tens of millions subscribe to her video channels and Weibo, with billions of views in China and abroad, easily surpassing television's reach). Self-reliant, she has launched an online English-language website (https://liziqishop.com/), which includes a bio, news, links to her YouTube channel, and online shopping options to purchase Li Ziqi-branded merchandise (see figure 3).

If one of the oppressive conditions of subalternity lies in its anonymity, one should see Li's fame as a positive development for the creative subaltern. In *Street Life*, the trash collectors are referred to by nicknames and do not call each other by names; instead they use hometown names. In *Dance with Farmworkers*, one scene captures a moment in their training when all the participants (both workers and professional dancers), one after
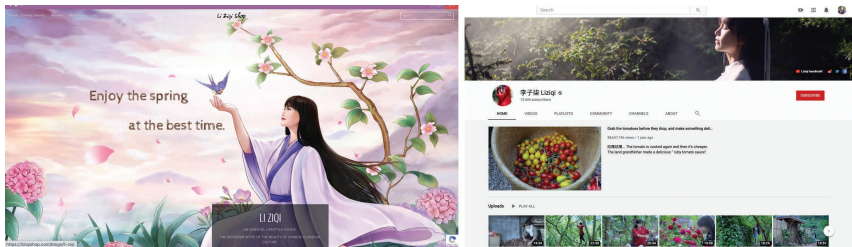
Figure 3: Li Ziqi's English-language website (left) and YouTube channel (right). *Source*: https://liziqishop.com/ and https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoC47do520os_4DBMEFGg4A.

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55. Edensor and Millington, "Spaces of Vernacular Creativity Revisited," 39.

another, perform their names (i.e., they say their name with an associated movement) while the group collectively repeats the name and movement in acknowledgment. In a similar process, the repetition of Li's name online is loud; she has stepped out of anonymity and appears to have done so on her own terms.

While different in their agendas and filmmaking styles, Li and Wang share a determination to retain a rural migrant identity and full control over their creative practices, distancing themselves from both national propaganda and international independent art circles. They do not see themselves as "artists," nor do they wish to be recognized as such. Such ambition to belong to the Art (capital A) world instead becomes a main narrative focus in documentary films *about* worker-poets and worker-painters.

The Creative Subaltern as the Artist: Transformative Stories

Within the discourse of subaltern creativity, poetry and painting have become the foci of two acclaimed feature-length documentary productions: *The Verse of Us* (*Wode shibian* 我的诗篇, directed by Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue, 2015, released internationally as *Iron Moon*) and *China's Van Goghs* (directed by Yu Haibo and Yu Tianqi, 2016). In both cases, the audiovisual narrative was expanded and connected with other multimedia projects. Focusing on worker-painters, *China's Van Goghs* intersects with photojournalist Yu Haibo's exhibitions, Winnie Wong's monograph *Van Gogh on Demand*, Wong's interview on the Shanghaiist website, the *New York Times'* story "Own Original Chinese Copies of Real Western Art!," and the state-supported Dafen International Oil Painting Biennale.[56] Similarly, *The Verse*

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56. Paola Voci, "Can the Creative Subaltern Speak? Dafen Village Painters, Van Gogh, and the Politics of 'True Art,'" *Made in China Journal* 5, no. 1 (2020), https://madeinchinajournal.com/2020/05/13/can-the-creative-subaltern-speak-dafen-village-painters-van-gogh/.

of Us, which focuses on worker-poets, intersects with an anthology of translated poems and other publications on *dagong* poetry.[57] The worker-poets presented in the documentary and anthology participate in local events and publications, thus connecting with grassroots literary movements and state-sponsored institutions.

In these two films, the subaltern is the creative subject, not the subordinated collaborator in a project that is authored and owned by others. The subaltern's artistic works (paintings and poems) are showcased, their authors explaining, reflecting, and commenting on who they are, how their art came to be, and what they wish to convey. The filmmakers clearly are committed to making subaltern art known and appreciated. In *The Verse of Us* particularly, the subaltern artist appears on-screen, and off-screen they remain an active albeit unequal participant in the documentary event. Furthermore, in these films, the creative subaltern are the protagonists, their life stories emplotted in the documentary and used to provide explanations, commentaries, and meaning. However, the emphasis on transformative storytelling risks overlooking the cultural and social hierarchies that devalue subaltern art and reducing its complex, ambiguous expressivity by explaining it, often didactically, as a mere reflection of the authors' subaltern condition.

The Verse of Us focuses on the lives and poems of five poets. Wu Xia 邬 霞, a garment worker living in Shenzhen; Wu Niaoniao 乌鸟鸟, a forklift driver; Lao Jing 老井, a coal miner; Chen Nianxi 陈年喜, a demolitions worker; and Xu Lizhi 许立志, the "absent" poet who killed himself while working at Foxconn and whose poem refers to the "iron moon" used as the title of the English-language version. The poets' life stories are foregrounded as they step into the public space with their poetry. This space is welcoming and receptive, unlike their alienating, oppressive workplaces.

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57. van Crevel, "The Cultural Translation of Battlers Poetry (Dagong shige)"; Maghiel van Crevel, "Debts: Coming to Terms with Migrant Worker Poetry," *Chinese Literature Today* 8, no. 1 (2019): 127–45; Gong, "Ecopoetics in the Dagong Poetry in Postsocialist China."

The film starts with shots of buildings, streets, and an airplane with the caption "Beijing"; a voice-over states, "I believe that in Chinese poetry's history of several thousand years, this conference of worker-poets will leave a deep impact." The scene cuts to a spotlight in a small, crowded hall; the voice belongs to the figure standing onstage, Yang Lian 杨炼, whom the caption describes as *guoji zhuming shiren* 国际著名诗人 (famous international poet). Yang introduces the first worker-poet, Wu Niaoniao. As Wu walks up to the stage, the camera follows him from behind, then slowly turns quasi-360 degrees, shifting from the audience's point of view to a close-up of his face. With visual symbolism, the worker-poet is shown emerging from an obscure, anonymous audience, as the named, international poet offers him the spotlight.

The scene fades into a snowfall. The snowflakes are in the foreground with a blurred image of a city behind, then sharp images of snow-covered trees follow as Wu's voice-over recites the first lines of his poem. Cutting back to the hall, the camera has now completed the 360-degree circle, taking Wu's point of view, with an over-the-shoulder shot that shows the audience, blurred, as the spotlight blinds him (and us, the viewers). While Wu recites the poem on- and off-screen, the scene alternates close-ups of his face with images of the forest, a snow-covered city street, cars moving in slow motion, white pigeons on electric cables, and, in slow motion, people by railroad tracks, all covered in snow as the snowfall continues, ending with Wu uttering the final lines. A piano piece accompanies images of the snow-covered city as the film credits are interspersed with quotations from poems by Chi Moshu 池沫树, Xie Xiangnan 谢湘南, and Zheng Xiao-qiong 郑小琼 (worker-poets not included in the documentary), ending with the opening lines of Xu Lizhi's "I Swallowed an Iron Moon." A black screen follows, with the directors' names, then the title, graphically composed to make the Chinese characters resemble snowflakes. Below, a small under-title quotes the closing line of Walt Whitman's "O Me! O Life!" ("The powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse"), beneath which the English translation of the title appears, rendered as "The Verse

of Us," a marker of the film's transcultural and translingual agenda (see figure 4).

This opening presents subaltern poetry as championed and validated by an intellectual elite that is domestically situated and internationally recognized. It establishes a dark-to-light symbolic trajectory to visualize the worker-poets' journey out of their gloomy *dagong* condition. The snow contrasts with the grey of the polluted cities/factories and the darkness of the mines where the poets work and which the poems describe.

Poetry is brought on-screen. At times, poems are connected with their authors, who recite their work in intimate close-ups or as voice-overs to shots of their work or living environment. Wu, Xu Hongzhi 许鸿志 (Xu Lizhi's brother), and Jike Ayou 吉克阿优 (in traditional Yi minority dress) are shown reciting their poems at a public reading. Other times, poems are associated with images reflecting and expounding their content. For instance, Xu Lizhi's "Liushui xiande bingmayong 流水线的兵马俑" is recited with an echoing effect over an ominous soundtrack while a sequence of cranes, factories, and buildings appears on-screen in foggy, greyish surroundings.

Figure 4: Opening title, *The Verse of Us. Source*: *The Verse of Us* (*Wode shibian* 我的诗篇, directed by Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue, 2015).

The poem's final lines are associated with a slow-motion shot of workers clocking in; then, as fast-paced music begins, workers assemble in rows; a montage follows of assembly lines, machines, and containers shown in fast-motion, intercut with static images of Xi'an terra-cotta warriors.

These examples show how the film "is interspersed with written and spoken moments of poetry," adding "an inspirational angle."[58] These moments, however, are outweighed by the worker-poets' life stories. Their work and family conditions are foregrounded while the poetic dimension is an oblique, temporary incursion in the reality that poetry can momentarily escape but not impact on.

In *China's Van Goghs*, paintings are more than "interspersed" moments. The art form suits visualization on-screen, and the camera focuses at length on the paintings' textures, strokes, and colors and the workshop's palettes, brushes, canvasses, and squeezed paint tubes. While playing a significant role in the film's cinematography, subaltern Art is subordinate to the protagonist Zhao Xiaoyong, whose life story forms the main narrative. The documentary shows his interactions with his family, apprentice workers, and fellow painters while they eat, drink, work, or sing at a karaoke bar. The main story line centers on a trip to Europe, where Zhao encounters a client and sees Van Gogh's original paintings, the inspiration for his own artistic self-discovery.

During the film, Zhao expresses his views about art and his ambitions, not always coherently. He sometimes conveys these reflections during meals, when everybody is inebriated. One night while he is in Amsterdam, Zhao strolls the streets with his friends, fantasizing about being *true* artists like Van Gogh: "Now, it's not me. I've turned into Van Gogh." Back in his hotel room, he is shown throwing up while his friend pats his shoulder and lights a cigarette. Next, a close-up of real sunflowers takes us to the Orville

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58. Maghiel van Crevel, "Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry and Iron Moon (the Film)," *MCLC Resource Center Publication* (blog), February 2017, https://u.osu.edu/mclc/book-reviews/vancrevel4/.

cemetery in France, where Zhao is paying respect to Van Gogh's grave. Then we are back in Shenzhen with its crowded buildings and myriad lights; the city at night contrasts with the colorful, bright palette of the Orville cemetery. During a meal with his fellow painters, the inebriated Zhao shares his memories and his determination to be more than a copy painter. The epilogue presents an insight into his transformed life: original paintings adorn his workshop, depicting the worker-painters themselves, a mise en abyme of subaltern art (see figure 5).

The Verse of Us and *China's Van Goghs* bring into focus subaltern Art, giving the creative subaltern unprecedented prominence. However, while the artworks (poems and paintings) are presented on-screen, the films concentrate on the artists' stories, emphasizing their transformative journeys (from dark mines to the stage spotlight, from Shenzhen to Amsterdam, etc.).[59]

Figure 5: Becoming an artist? Screen shot, *China's Van Goghs*.
Source: *China's Van Goghs* (directed by Yu Haibo and Yu Tianqi, 2016).

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59. Similarly, *Still Tomorrow* (directed by Fan Jian, 2016) focuses on the "transformative story" of *dagong* poet Yu Xiuhu, a woman struggling with cerebral palsy and an arranged marriage, whose fame on social media leads to financial freedom and emancipation.

Tellingly, film reviews invariably only discuss the protagonists' subaltern condition, not mentioning how their artworks intervene in China's literary and art worlds, from which subaltern creativity continues to be excluded.

Transformative storytelling has become a main activist strategy for nonprofit organizations that advocate social change. For example, Transformative Storytelling for Social Change (2020) proposes that "creative storytelling approaches combine a participatory, collaborative methodology with the creative use of technology to generate stories aimed at catalysing action on pressing social issues."[60] In documentary filmmaking, deploying transformative narratives has become a means of conveying stronger, more effective messages, especially when addressing social inequality.[61] Chinese documentaries focusing on the subaltern have shared this drive. Concerned about social change and developing a participatory methodology, cultural activist Wang Dezhi embraces transformative storytelling's principles, showing that "the personal is political" and that the tension between the two is still relevant and pivotal to our understanding of storytelling in the postmedia age.[62] I am not suggesting that this powerful method for community building and grassroots activism should be dismissed as inherently flawed. However, in documentary filmmaking *about* (subaltern) creativity, transformative storytelling may obfuscate creativity and its ability to (re)imagine, rather than observe and reflect, reality. Plot-driven transformative stories may not be the best way to "capture the imagination of people."

In 2018, a group of "practitioners and scholars drawn to documentary because of its potential to intervene in the dominant consensus of the perceived world" produced "Beyond Story," an online community-based

60. "Handbook," Transformative Storytelling for Social Change, last modified August 30, 2020, https://www.transformativestory.org.
61. Sheila Curran Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling: Creating Nonfiction Onscreen* (New York and London: Focal Press, 2012); Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman, "Storytelling for Social Change: Leveraging Documentary and Comedy for Public Engagement in Global Poverty," *Journal of Communication* 67, no. 5 (2017): 678–701.
62. Carol Hanisch, "The Personal Is Political," in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara A. Crow (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

manifesto, as a critique of "story-driven docs . . . built to neatly hold a compelling cast of characters in their clear and coherent world." The manifesto attacks the pervasive nature of documentary stories focused on (1) "a small number of recognizable characters around whom feelings are generated, primarily by way of identification and cathexis, humanism and empathy" and (2) "said characters' actions being arranged through a set of recognizable spatial/temporal templates that cohere only nominally to lived reality given that they are arranged through a cause-effect logic that does not remotely resemble reality as it is experienced."[63] Not opposed to stories per se, the manifesto calls for less formulaic documentary and echoes Free Cinema's advocacy to embrace a spectrum of narrative possibilities, including disruptive and associative nonlinear expressive forms. By exploring these alternatives and breaking free from plot-driven narrative, documentary may intervene more effectively in the discourse of subaltern creativity.

Epilogue: Ceci n'est pas la réalité: Imagination, Lyricism, and Attitude

Entangled in the "contested, fraught space" of subalternity and discourse about creativity, with its "elitist, class-ridden definitions" and its privileged association with the cool city, documentary in China has functioned as both a text and a metatext for subaltern creativity. I have argued that subaltern creative practices have appeared obliquely in documentary films, tangential to other narratives or subordinate to the authorship of internationally recognized artists. More recently, the subaltern *creator*—rather than the creative *subaltern*—has acquired a more central role, becoming an author or the

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63. Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow, "Beyond Story: An Online, Community-Based Manifesto," *World Records Journal*, accessed July 20, 2020, https://vols.worldrecordsjournal.org/02/03.

protagonist of documentary films. In the films discussed, subaltern creative practices are not a cohesive set of works (least of all a "movement"); rather, they diverge significantly in their content, form, goals, and audiences. Yet, even though they are "not made together," they have a common "attitude," a shared "belief in freedom, in the importance of people and the significance of the everyday."[64] Taking my essay to its conclusion, I return to the ideas and practices developed by Free Cinema.

A participant in the Free Cinema movement, Lorenza Mazzetti was an Italian migrant who had moved to the United Kingdom in 1951. "On her first day at the Slade School of Fine Art," she "declared herself . . . a genius" in order to get support for her first short film *K*.[65] Later, with support from the Slade and BFI's Experimental Film Fund, she directed *Together* (1956), a "quasi-documentary account of day-to-day survival," and she became known as the Italian who renewed British documentary.[66] In *Together*, the subaltern protagonists—two dockworkers living humbly in London's East End—are both deaf and mute; their friendship with each other and their alienation from others are marked by silence. Mazzetti's goal was to express the isolation and disorientation that she had personally experienced. She maintained that *Together* was "a poetic film."[67] In line with the Free Cinema manifesto, Mazzetti showed that "you can use your eyes and ears. You can give indications. You can make poetry."[68] This emphasis on personal and lyric expressivity is relevant in a context (such as the Chinese one) in which subaltern creativity still remains largely collectivized and actualized while its imaginative, subjective, and artistic qualities are devalued. The question

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64. Anderson et al., "Free Cinema Manifestos," 149.
65. Pamela Hutchinson, "Lorenza Mazzetti Obituary," *The Guardian*, last modified January 20, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jan/20/lorenza-mazzetti-obituary.
66. Francesca Massarenti, "'Not My Country, Not My Home, Nobody in the Whole World': The Life and Cinema of Lorenza Mazzetti (1928–2020)," *Another Gaze*, last modified January 8, 2020, https://www.anothergaze.com/not-country-not-home-nobody-whole-world-life-cinema-lorenza-mazzetti/.
67. Massarenti, "'Not My Country."
68. Anderson et al., "Free Cinema Manifestos," 150.

then is: In order to capture the imagination of the people, can documentary "make poetry"?

While not "poetic films," *China's Van Goghs* and *The Verse of Us* include incursions in personal and lyric expressivity in their transformative storytelling. For example, the documentary's narrative almost comes to a standstill in one scene that shows Zhao painting a Van Gogh self-portrait. With nondiegetic music and no ambient sound, the painter and the act of painting are captured via a sequence of extreme close-ups of the canvas, the brush strokes, and details of Zhao's eyes, mouth, and pores. Similarly, while cinematographically less sophisticated and symbolically more explicit, the interspersed moments of poetry in *The Verse of Us* rupture the observational style of the main narrative, allowing the worker-poets and their poems to explore a semiotic world beyond the reality of their subaltern condition. In the same way, Da Pangzi's and Zhang Jinli's performances can also be seen as brief, albeit meaningful and impactful, insertions of lyric realism, which suspend the documentaries' main narratives so that their reality resembles, but is no longer, what society expects it to be. In these quasiaccidental "exhibitionist" moments, their subaltern condition (the political) remains visible but is interpreted as a personal and subjective experience.[69]

Comparing Mazzetti's personal and lyric expressivity to Li Ziqi and her short documentaries is a thought-provoking exercise. Once we factor in the diverse historical, technological, and cultural contexts in which these two filmmakers turned their cameras to the everyday, meaningful similarities exist between their creative perspectives. Mazzetti and Li are "unlikely" filmmakers, initially self-taught and navigating a male-dominated context. They place the personal at the core of their filmmaking, emphasizing silence and actions rather than words or plot-driven narratives.

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69. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: BFI, 1990).

Li, however, is positioned outside—and in opposition to—the discourse of the avant-garde. She borrows visual techniques and conventions from mainstream advertising and TV food documentaries and is located as a social influencer within digital cultures and social media, thus differing from the antimainstream attitude of Free Cinema's Mazzetti. Yet Anderson advocated for "a new kind of intellectual and artist, . . . who does not see himself as threatened by, and in natural opposition to, the philistine mass; who is eager to make his contribution, and ready to use the mass-media to do so."[70] Anticipating later developments brought about by digital cultures and challenges by fans and amateur artists to highbrow/lowbrow divides, Anderson thought it possible and appropriate to "capture the imagination of the people" by using different expressive forms, including mainstream media.

Can we therefore evaluate Li and her videos "in emotional, human, poetic terms"? Can we consider her work "poetic film" and, if not, why? Is the way Li captures "the imagination of the people" to be discarded because of its sentimental idealization of country life or her mainstream media popularity? Or does she still "intervene in the dominant consensus of the perceived world"?[71] Instead of relying on elitist, class-ridden definitions and untenable divides between highbrow and lowbrow cultures (Big-C, little-c), we can address these questions if we understand that subaltern creative practices and Li's short docs, while rooted in the reality of their subaltern condition, are not merely a reflection of it. Ceci n'est pas la réalité, this is *not* reality.

In his study on Magritte's "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (The treachery of images), Michel Foucault examines the tension between image and text in the painting and argues that it makes us ponder how we perceive reality precisely because it brings together two separate, distinctive semiotic systems:

70. Anderson, "Get Out and Push!," 22.
71. Juhasz and Lebow, "Beyond Story."

images and words.[72] The encounter between creativity and subalternity involves a similar antagonist tension between two semiotic systems—subalternity and creativity—which both deal with reality but approach it, see it, understand it, and experience it differently. As a creative subject, the subaltern does not seek the delusion of a "fantasy world" but reclaims the freedom to interpret and reimagine reality and her/his/their own place in it.[73] As an expression of (political) resistance and (personal) creativity, imagination is reconcilable with reality: it is a key attitude in representing, interpreting, and intervening in it. In order to capture the imagination of the people, documentary still needs to bear witness to reality ("use your eyes and ears") but can and should also dare to "make poetry."[74]

Acknowledgments

72. Michel Foucault, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," trans. Richard Howard, *October* 1 (1976): 7–21.
73. The media emphasis on Li Ziqi's "D.I.Y. fantasy world" and how "her D.I.Y. pastoral fantasies" are "source of escape and comfort" undervalues Li's creative choices—her style and attitude—in capturing her own subaltern reality. See Rao, "The Reclusive Food Celebrity Li Ziqi".
74. Anderson et al., "Free Cinema Manifestos," 150.

The Networked Storyteller and Her Digital Tale

Film Festivals and Ann Hui's *My Way*

GINA MARCHETTI

Abstract

In cooperation with China's Youku online channel, the Hong Kong International Film Festival Society commissioned Ann Hui to make a short film, *My Way*, to be part of an omnibus production, *Beautiful 2012*. In order to be considered for this commission, Hui needed to be acknowledged at international film festivals and be a recognized auteur known in the Asian region and beyond. Without Hui's festival credentials and the reputation of the other directors in the curated production, the collected shorts would have little appeal to other programmers and distributors. Although she has famously resisted the label of "film auteur" in the past, Ann Hui undoubtedly stands as the most celebrated female director based in Hong Kong active before and after the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) in 1997.

Given the length of her career as well as the impressive critical and scholarly attention her work has garnered, Hui serves as an exemplary case study of how film festivals play a vital role in the career of a Hong Kong female fiction film director. In the case of *My Way*, the festival circuit permits a specific type of production and digital distribution that enables Hui to craft a network narrative, which places the transition of its protagonist from male to female within a broader community connected through a shared gender identity. By analyzing Ann Hui's presence at the festivals in Venice and Hong Kong, as well as the link between her festival exposure and her Internet success, *My Way* offers insight into the circuitous paths women filmmakers follow in order to tell their stories on transnational screens.

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Keywords: Hong Kong International Film Festival, Ann Hui, Hong Kong women filmmakers, queer/LGBTQ plus, digital distribution

All narratives need networks to exist. Economic, social, and cultural systems play their parts in creating the human connections necessary to produce, disseminate, critique, and consume stories. In fact, even if telling oneself a tale, that story relies on linguistic, stylistic, iconic, rhetorical, discursive, aesthetic, symbolic, and many other semiotic networks in order to run through the mind. Film narratives depend on multiple complex and interconnected networks in order to bring plots to the public. Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley, for example, draws on Mark S. Granovetter's work on the "strength of weak ties"[1] to examine the role *guanxi* (personal connections) play in facilitating film networks connecting Taiwan with local and cross-border partners.[2] In her book *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms*, Patricia White speaks specifically about Asian women filmmakers in terms of "network narratives" as follows:

> Neither catalogs of women's contributions to national cinema nor auteurist studies alone can account for the creativity and impact of Asian women's filmmaking today. . . . These regional, gendered dynamics in world film culture generate what I will call network narratives.[3]

White links these network narratives to feminism and digital technology through Donna Haraway on cyber networks[4] and Bruno Latour's

1. Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (May 1973): 1360–80.
2. Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley, "Culture Translation Between 'Local' and 'International': The Golden Harvest Award in Taiwan," in *Chinese Film Festivals: Sites of Translation*, eds. Chris Berry and Luke Robinson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 57–78.
3. Patricia White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 133.
4. Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–81.

actor-network theory[5] to the emergence of film festival-network studies. These network narratives create institutional parallels to specific types of storytelling that highlight plots that bring characters together, often unexpectedly, through expansive temporal, spatial, social, and cultural networks.

Acclaimed Hong Kong director Ann Hui, mentioned briefly in White's book, provides one example of a filmmaker enmeshed in overlapping international networks that shape the narratives she presents on screen. Educational, economic, media, and cultural institutions serve as anchors while social connections transform this institutional support into projects and cultural networks link the business of filmmaking to the critical framework that bonds viewers to the story on screen. Studios, guilds, unions, film schools, arts associations, regional media hubs, distribution firms, publicity offices, and various professional networks complement the less formal connections among the viewers of these stories. Cinematic narratives exist at the core of these webs of networked relationships. While it may be tempting to look at networks as open, horizontal, and rhizomatic—following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari[6]—hierarchies, in fact, define networks, and, for women, male domination and gender bias pose limits on their functionality.

Film festivals offer examples of institutions that take pride in providing opportunities for cinematic networks to emerge.[7] Producers, writers, directors, and performers meet while presenting their own films and watching work by their competitors and potential collaborators; they meet buyers and possible financiers at the markets attached to many festivals; other

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5. Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications," *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996): 369–81, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40878163.

6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1987).

7. For example, see this guide to networking at the Berlin International Film Festival: Elizabeth Grenier, "6 Ways to Build Networks in the Film Industry," Deutsche Welle, February 18, 2016, https://www.dw.com/en/6-ways-to-build-networks-in-the-film-industry/a-19053827. For an examination of how these networks function, see Luke Robinson, "Sole Traders, Cultural Brokers, and Chinese-Language Film Festivals in the United Kingdom: The London Taiwan Cinefest and the Chinese Visual Festival," in *Chinese Film Festivals*, 193–213.

programmers and curators may become acquainted with their film in order to pick up their next offering; filmmakers may win awards, creating news items for entertainment and arts journalists; and films cultivate audiences, encourage social media buzz, and possible further scrutiny of film critics, researchers, and educators. Although film festivals can be thought of as forming circuits,[8] they also provide, as Marijke de Valck notes, "a rhizome or network"[9] for films, filmmakers, and other film professions. Although women's involvement in film as an art and industry worldwide dates back to the very genesis of the medium, film festivals fall short of gender balance in most instances. Women, of course, have their own gender-specific networks of film festivals,[10] distributors, and professional organizations dedicated to the women who make movies. As programmers form networks, the growth of women's and LGBTQI film festivals has brought more women and sexual minorities into the spotlight.[11] Within Chinese-language cinema, women, however, still struggle for visibility in festival circles. However, while many women's film festivals have made their mark, including the Créteil International Women's Film Festival in France, Women Make Waves in Taiwan, and the Seoul International Women's Film Festival (SIWFF) in South Korea, none enjoy the global prestige of Cannes (France) or the regional significance of Busan (South Korea), for example.

Film festivals in Asia provide important gateways for directors to enter the global arena, and they are even more vital as regional markets for

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8. For more on the festival circuit in relation to the network, see Skadi Loist, "The Film Festival Circuit: Networks, Hierarchies, and Circulation," in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, eds. Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 49–64.

9. Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 102.

10. "9.1.2 Women's Film Festivals," Film Festival Research Network, accessed September 30, 2020, http://www.filmfestivalresearch.org/index.php/ffrn-bibliography/9-specialized-film-festivals/9-1-identity-based-festivals/9-1-2-womens-film-festivals/.

11. See Stuart Richards, *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

transnational distribution.[12] In addition, the need to match audiences with films that reflect their interests and tastes has become imperative as festivals compete for premieres and jockey for position within the international circuit. To this end, film festivals now encourage production with grants as well as commission films to guarantee premieres of works by recognized global auteurs. The Hubert Bals Fund (HBF), part of the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR), offers one example of this.[13] Established in 1989, it concentrates on providing finishing funds for projects from Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America. Many film festivals have followed, and the Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF) Society, for example, commissions filmmakers to produce films to premiere at the festival with an eye on distribution afterward.

In cooperation with China's Youku online channel, the HKIFF Society commissioned Ann Hui to make a short film, *My Way*, to be part of an omnibus production, *Beautiful 2012*. In order to be considered for this commission, Hui needed to be acknowledged at international film festivals and be a recognized auteur known in the Asian region and beyond. Without Hui's festival credentials and the reputation of the other directors in the curated production, the collected shorts would have little appeal to other programmers and distributors. Although she has famously resisted the label of "film auteur" in the past,[14] Ann Hui undoubtedly stands as the most

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12. See Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung, eds., *Film Festival Yearbook 3: Film Festivals and East Asia* (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2011).

13. "About the Hubert Bals Fund," International Film Festival Rotterdam, accessed September 30, 2020, https://iffr.com/en/about-hubert-bals-fund

14. See Patricia Brett Erens, "The Film Work of Ann Hui," in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, eds. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 176–96; Elaine Yee Lin Ho, "Women on the Edges of Hong Kong Modernity: The Films of Ann Hui," in *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 162–90; Yuen Man Lam, " 'I Am (Not) an Auteur': A Study on Ann Hui's Female Film Authorship as Ethical Subjectivity" (PhD diss., Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2012); and Mirana M. Szeto, "Ann Hui at the Margin of Mainstream Hong Kong Cinema," in *Hong Kong Screenscapes: From the New Wave to the Digital Frontier*, eds. Esther M. K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and See Kam Tan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 51–56.

celebrated female director based in Hong Kong active before and after the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) in 1997. Given the length of her career as well as the impressive critical and scholarly attention her work has garnered, Hui serves as an exemplary case study of how film festivals play a vital role in the career of a Hong Kong female fiction film director. In the case of *My Way*, the festival circuit permits a specific type of production and digital distribution that enables Hui to craft a network narrative, which places the transition of its protagonist from male to female within a broader community connected through a shared gender identity.

Unlike her male colleagues, Wong Kar-wai and Stanley Kwan, who have had more success at A-list festivals such as Cannes and Berlin, Hui's international festival career appears to be more modest. However, she has consistently been showcased at European international festivals—A-list as well as second-tier and specialty festivals—and she has received the most prestigious awards available to Chinese-language directors such as the Golden Horse and Hong Kong Film Awards. In fact, when looking at her overall performance, her list of accolades is undoubtedly impressive, as demonstrated by the 2020 life achievement honor she received at the Venice Film Festival.

In the case of *My Way*, the involvement of Youku promised a distribution channel online in China. Having worked across the border in Mainland China and having shown her films at festivals internationally, Hui had the necessary expertise to create a film appealing to both Mainland Chinese viewers and festival regulars. This analysis examines how Ann Hui managed to tell a story about the transgender community in Hong Kong to local festival viewers, Mainland Chinese netizens, and the world online and in movie theaters. It looks at the fit between the tale Hui tells in *My Way* and the off-screen story of the festival connections that enabled her to craft that on-screen networked narrative about the transsexual community in Hong Kong. Hui's formidable network connections through her involvement with international film festivals, such as the Venice Film Festival, and the story

she tells about gender difference and public scrutiny in *My Way* form an intriguing double plot that provides insight into what stories are told by whom for the world to see.

The case of Ann Hui's achievements at international and regional film festivals provides an opportunity to see how a female filmmaker can bring a story about gender and sexual minorities to world audiences. This is, then, simply one story of how a woman director from Hong Kong[15] drew on an elaborate network that took decades to forge in order to narrate the tale of a male-to-female transsexual to an online audience within the Chinese-speaking world. Given the heavy censorship of film in the People's Republic of China (PRC), the great firewall separating Mainland China from the rest of the world, the challenges faced by the LGBTQI community to get their stories told globally, and the difficulties faced by women filmmakers to survive in the industry, this saga in which the on-screen story of gender reassignment parallels its off-screen production provides insight into the challenges that lie at the root of contemporary Chinese cinema. In the case of *My Way*, the film festival as an increasingly important site of film production as well as virtual distribution, exhibition, and marketing becomes a vital part of the story as well.

However, Ann Hui's success in the Sinosphere tells only one part of the story. *My Way* also circulates beyond Hong Kong and adds to Ann Hui's international profile. By analyzing Hui's presence at the festivals in Venice and Hong Kong, as well as the link between her festival exposure and her Internet success, *My Way* offers insight into the circuitous paths women filmmakers follow in order to tell their stories on transnational screens.

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15. For a listing of women filmmakers currently active in Hong Kong, see "Hong Kong Women Filmmakers," Wordpress, accessed September 30, 2020, https://hkwomenfilmmakers.wordpress.com/.

The Gender of Storytelling in *My Way*:
Ann Hui and the Network Narrative

Many networks come into play in the production of Ann Hui's short film *My Way*, commissioned by the Hong Kong International Film Festival and produced by her longtime associate and fellow film director Sylvia Chang. Chang coproduced and starred in Hui's first feature *The Secret* (1979), so artistic and commercial ties link these two creative women across decades. An inaugural work of the Hong Kong New Wave created by exceptional female talent behind as well as in front of the camera, *The Secret* rejuvenated the industry with its cosmopolitan vision and commitment to local stories. Television producer Selina Chow teamed up with then emerging Taiwanese actor-director Sylvia Chang to set up a film production company for *The Secret*, with Hui directing and Chang taking a starring role. Working with scriptwriter Joyce Chan, Hui brought a female-centered investigation of a true-crime story to the screen with elaborate flashbacks used to create suspense as well as provide insight into the psyches of her female protagonists. Scholars such as Cheuk Pak Tong[16] and Ackbar Abbas[17] remark on Hui's distinctive use of the layered flashback, nonlinear narrative structures, cinematic exploration of history and memory, and commitment to women's stories. From *The Secret* to *My Way*, Hui consistently pushes back against conventional ways of seeing gender in all of her films.

Working with Sylvia Chang over the years enables both auteurs to reinforce each other's considerable talents. Chang has particularly strong regional and international connections. She started her acting career in Taiwan in the 1970s and directed her first film in the early 1980s. She moves between Hong Kong and Taiwan, working as an actor, screenwriter, producer, and director, with strong connections throughout the Asian region. Chang

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16. Pak Tong Cheuk, *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema, 1978–2000* (Bristol: Intellect, 2008).
17. Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997).

serves as the producer for *My Way*. Both Hui and Chang have strong ties to the HKIFF,[18] so pairing them for this project highlights the significance of this type of production platform as mutually beneficial to filmmakers as well as festival organizers. The short showcases the importance of these networks in providing female filmmakers access to production funds and audiences in order to tell stories about gender identity, domestic life, and sexuality from women's points of view.

My Way appears in the same omnibus film *Beautiful 2012*, with shorts by other auteurs, including Taiwan's Tsai Ming-liang. Ann Hui, of course, knows Tsai, and she appears in a cameo in his film *The River* (1997), so including them together in *Beautiful 2012* reinforces their common ties to the Asian "new" cinemas of Hong Kong and Taiwan. In her contribution, Hui challenges her Mainland Chinese online viewers with a story about a transgender woman, Chow (Francis Ng), as she prepares and undergoes male-to-female sex reassignment surgery. Produced by the HKIFF and shown for free on Youku, *My Way* occupies a liminal creative space somewhere between the "micro movie" and the "festival film." As Adrian Wan describes the phenomenon, Chinese micro movies emerged in the second decade of the twenty-first century:

> Tapping into China's rapid internet expansion, filmmakers of all stripes have utilised the online space to get creative or tackle topics that are unlikely to appear on big screens.
>
> The result is a swelling river of micro movies, as short films are called on the mainland, produced by businesses as well as independent directors. Industry observers say about 4,000 micro movies were released in 2012, with the bulk of content appearing on the country's top three video sharing sites - Youku Tudou, Iqiyi (which is owned by Baidu) and Sohu.[19]

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18. For more on the HKIFF, see Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong, *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011).
19. Adrian Wan, "Chinese Directors Find Greater Freedom Online Making Micro Movies," *South China Morning Post*, January 9, 2014, http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/article/1401565/chinese-directors-find-greater-freedom-online-making-micro.

As a micro movie, *My Way* opens up the screen to exploring Hong Kong's sexual minorities for audiences that may not have access to feature films on topics censored in the PRC. Moreover, *My Way* functions as a festival film as a work by a globally recognized auteur for exhibition on the festival circuit. The short film reflects the growing importance of funding projects designed for initial exhibition at specific film festivals to guarantee premieres by well-known directors to boost festival attendance.[20] These films comprise a subset of a broader category of "festival films" designed to be shown primarily within the film festival circuit that Thomas Elsaesser describes:

> For these films, international (i.e., European) festivals are the markets that can fix and assign different kinds of value, from touristic, politico-voyeuristic curiosity to auteur status conferred on directors. Festivals such as Berlin and Rotterdam set in motion the circulation of new cultural capital, even beyond the prospect of economic circulation (art cinema distribution, television sale) by motivating critics to write about them and young audiences to study them in university seminars.[21]

Even though she shows her films at international film festivals, Ann Hui does not enjoy the same reputation as fellow director Wong Kar-wai, who creates films with specific festival openings in mind (e.g., *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Cannes).[22] While some filmmakers rely almost exclusively on the festival circuit and niche video market for the circulation of their films,

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20. For an analysis of another short commissioned by the HKIFF, see Gina Marchetti, "Clara Law's Red Earth: The Hong Kong International Film Festival and the Cultural Politics of the Sponsored Short," in *Chinese Film Festivals*, 259–77.

21. Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 46. See also Bill Nichols, "Global Image Consumption in the Age of Late Capitalism," in *The Film Festivals Reader*, ed. Dina Iordanova (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2015), 29–44 (reprinted from *East-West Film Journal* 8, no. 1 [January 1994]: 68–85).

22. See Gina Marchetti, "*In the Mood for Love* (2000), Wong Kar-wai," in *Film Analysis: A Norton Reader*, eds. Jeffrey Geiger and R. L. Rutsky (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 966–89.

Ann Hui seldom makes features without a market in mind. This detour into micro cinema marks a departure for her, but it also opens up opportunities through the digital platform as well as the festival circuit with a story that highlights the importance of the networks that connect the transgender community locally in Hong Kong and transnationally throughout the Chinese-speaking world and beyond.

In *My Way*, Hui addresses online viewers who may need to be introduced to her own distinctive narrative style and the performance capabilities of Hong Kong thespians such as Francis Ng. Hui's authorial brand shines through the use of flashbacks, interview techniques, arresting high-angle shots, and an eye for domestic details such as food, which defines characters and the distinctive stories associated with Hong Kong's unique cultural milieu. For cross-border viewers, the city of Hong Kong itself, as well as its sexual minorities, may be quite foreign and in need of some introduction. While Ann Hui has made many films set in the PRC for Mainland Chinese audiences, this short still serves as her calling card for new online audiences. Younger and less sophisticated viewers, as well as those not exposed to her many films that cannot cross the border for political reasons—films such as *Ordinary Heroes*, which partially deals with Hong Kong's response to the 1989 democracy movement in Tian'anmen and its suppression on June Fourth—need an introduction to her storytelling style. The title of the short assures viewers that both the director, through the story of her trans-woman protagonist, will take her own road and do the film her way.

Hong Kong filmmakers, in fact, draw on a rich tradition of folklore, opera, and cinematic antecedents to tell stories about trans characters. Hong Kong cinema history features the celebrated Yam Kim-Fai, a female actor known for playing the male lead in Chinese operas on the stage and screen. In addition, comedies such as Peter Chan's *He's a Woman, She's a Man* (1994), martial arts films such as Tsui Hark's *The Swordsman* (1992–1993) series, and dramas such as Jun Li's *Tracey* (2018) all include stories involving cross-dressing and gender-bending characters. In fact, Esther C. M. Yau sees this androgyny as an essential part of Hong Kong cinema's global viability,

and Ann Hui's *My Way* taps into the "wit, hyperbole, and sentiment" of the "cultural androgyny of Hong Kong movies."[23]

In one self-reflexive sequence, *My Way* shows its protagonist Chow (Francis Ng) on a trip to the cinema. This scene parallels the experiences of festival spectators while reminding online viewers of what they may be missing by not being in a physical movie theater. Still self-conscious as a woman in public, Chow asks, with lowered head and soft voice, the ticket seller for help choosing a seat. Wearing dark glasses until safely inside the auditorium, Chow finally manages to put up her feet and enjoy the complete cinematic experience with popcorn and a Coke. The theater may be nearly empty but it offers a secure public place to try new identities and gives online viewers a glimpse of what they are missing. The facsimile of the movie theater offers feelings of privacy to sanction its exploration of the world of transsexuals on screen.

Hui also deals with sexual minorities in her story of a lesbian romance between bisexual single mothers in *All About Love*, and she tackles similar subject matter in *My Way*. Drawing on her background in documentary as well as melodrama and comedy, Hui carefully places the individual stories of her protagonists into the larger networks of the extended family, the LGBTQI community, and the wider urban fabric of Hong Kong. Hui has a keen sense of temporal and spatial perspective, and she brings her viewers close to Chow at some points while creating distance through flashbacks and long shots. By focusing on the challenges faced by a trans woman, Hui comments on the construction of femininity and the suffocating constraints and cruel limitations of the patriarchal family for both men and women.

The film begins with a close-up of Chow applying mascara in the mirror as an indicator of the character's self-conscious construction of a gendered self. Hui often uses mirrors, windows, doorways, arches, and other visual framing devices in much the same way as French New Wave auteurs, to

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23. Esther C. M. Yau, "Introduction: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World," in *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, ed. Esther C. M. Yau (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 7.

place physical barriers between spectators and characters. These alienation techniques make viewers aware of the capacity of the filmmaker to create a frame, highlighting the intrinsic voyeurism of the cinema, while also providing critical distance from which to view characters as embodiments of particular ideas. In this case, Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "women are made and not born" comes to mind.[24] Practicing a feminine voice, Chow sings and talks to a stuffed bear on a window divan while happily pulling on nylon stockings, legs kicking insouciantly in the air. However, Hui complicates the mood by silhouetting Chow against the flat's window, which opens out onto a drab apartment block characteristic of urban Hong Kong. Inside, Chow can happily be a woman, but the city may not accept this identity. In the scene that follows in the MTR subway, Chow hides behind dark glasses and avoids eye contact.

This gender alienation can be keenly felt in a window-shopping scene, in which Chow remains outside a shop with dresses on display as the camera returns her gaze from the interior (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Chow (Francis Ng) remains outside a shop with dresses on display as the camera returns her gaze from the interior. *Source*: *My Way*, frame grab.

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24. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage, 2011).

Chow does not enter the store, hesitantly waving the frock goodbye while exiting the frame. Later, at the office, Chow's coworkers shun their colleague, and they quickly exit the restroom when she enters. A high-angle shot of Chow pulling down panties to sit on the commode shows an adjacent empty cubicle indicating the character's isolation. Hui has used the high-angle shot in similar ways in her other films, and the technique serves as a key signature of her narrative style. She also often uses cuts to mark abrupt changes in time or mood, and the next shot shows Chow's hand, close up, pruning a green plant in a glass jar. This tender gesture indicates the possibility of endurance and renewal presaging the character's sex reassignment surgery. With a glance in the mirror, Chow adjusts the bra under her dress, ready again to face an unwelcoming world. As the mirror shots show, Chow endures layers of gender scrutiny as she watches herself being watched by female peers who themselves are subject to what Laura Mulvey terms the "male gaze"[25] (see figure 2).

This politics of gendered looking becomes the topic of conversation among a group of pre- and postoperative trans women in the following

Figure 2: Chow endures layers of gender scrutiny subject to what Laura Mulvey (1975) terms the "male gaze." *Source*: *My Way*, frame grab.

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25. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

scene. The switch from the isolation of the apartment and the office wash-room cubicle to the networked solidarity of the trans community marks a turning point in the narrative. Similar to an episode in *All About Love* in which characters chat about feminism, bisexuality, and same-sex desire in a lesbian bar, the camerawork, use of available lighting, and ambient sound, as well as the structuring of the conversation as a question-and-answer inter-view about sex reassignment surgery, allows *My Way* to mimic the authentic-ity normally reserved for documentary films. For both films, Hui researched Hong Kong's LGBTQI communities in order to create these scenes.

In *My Way,* the characters talk candidly about breast size and shape, hormones, various surgical procedures, pain, and the possibility of death on the operating table. Hui does not shy away from including medical details such as a lineup of the various sizes of the inserts that Chow must use after the operation to create a vaginal opening. Later, Chow's trans friends bring inflatable rings, sanitary napkins, and fruit to the hospital to speed recovery. These details may satisfy outsiders' curiosity, but they also help LGBTQI viewers to see themselves and the concerns of their communities on-screen. Bringing these details into the movie theater as well as the digital realm takes *My Way* beyond the comedies and melodramas in which trans charac-ters remain on the sidelines and the details of gender reassignment surgery receive no mention or little attention.

However, Hui does not limit her short film to Chow's transformation, public acceptance, and support network. Careful in most of her features to show multiple points of view with dialectically opposed interests, the direc-tor expands Chow's network to include an ex-wife (Jade Leung) and teenage son as part of the plot. Quotidian concerns complicate Chow's struggle, and the ex-wife has little sympathy for the expenses associated with sex reassign-ment surgery when she needs to pay maintenance fees on their flat with de-creasing proceeds from underperforming stocks. The financial consequences of being a transsexual become concrete as Chow eats noodles out of a pan and drinks from a plastic cup. Flashbacks to arguments about the female clothing Chow's wife discovered point to a materially more prosperous, but

miserable, existence within the confines of a heterosexual marriage. The drained colors of these scenes parallel Chow's etiolated state as the red blood from a cut finger after a botched suicide attempt visually intrudes on the image and precipitates the end to the marriage. Hui excels at the use of flashbacks to create narrative parallels, and this short film does not disappoint in making stunning use of the technique.

By imaginatively taking viewers through the process of Chow's surgery, *My Way* promotes individual, familial, and social healing. Distressed by a male roommate in the hospital before the operation, Chow wakes up next to a smiling woman afterward. Social acceptance comes in the form of a reconciliatory visit from the recovering patient's ex-wife, and the film concludes with Chow walking on the street with confidence, enjoying the company of some lively pigeons and turning to face the camera to take on the world without apologies. The male gaze has been flipped and the cinema expanded to include a wider range of gender perspectives.

Mirana M. Szeto characterizes Ann Hui's career as existing between the "margin and the mainstream,"[26] and this celebration of the queer within the context of Youku and the festival circuit pays tribute to Hui's courage to take on new challenges as well as her talent for being accessible beyond the arthouse. Somewhere between documenting LGBTQI discrimination and telling a melodramatic tale of a disintegrating family, *My Way* manages to cover novel subject matter using Hui's considerable cinematic storytelling talents to attract new audiences, with two million views in a single week on Youku.[27] However, making this connection to queer cinema and transgender visibility has implications. In *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, Sarah Banet-Weiser quotes trans activist Reina Gossett who says

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26. Mirana M. Szeto, "Ann Hui at the Margin of Mainstream Hong Kong Cinema," in *Hong Kong Screenscapes*, 51–56.

27. Anna Leach, "Internet-Released Transgender Film Gets 2 Million Views in a Week," *Gay Star News*, April 19, 2012, https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/internet-released-transgender-film-gets-2-million-views-week190412/.

that, for the trans community, "visibility is a pillar of criminalization, not a tenet of liberation."[28] Banet-Weiser goes on to critique this visibility online:

> Within the *politics* of visibility, bodies that are disenfranchised and marginalized are moved into the spotlight so as to highlight that disenfranchisement and marginalization. Within an economy of visibility, the *spotlight* on their bodies, their visibility, the number of views, is in fact its politics. This spotlight is literally designed for social media such as Instagram, Tumblr, and Snapchat.[29]

In fact, public discussion of sexual reassignment surgery in Mainland China predates Hui's film. Jin Xing, a prominent male-to-female dancer, enjoyed considerable celebrity before and after her transition.[30] Filmmaker, scholar, and LGBTQI activist Cui Zi'en inaugurated the Beijing Queer Film Festival in 2001,[31] and, although subject to government constraint, other queer film festivals that feature films about transsexuals link Mainland China to LGBTQI cinema networks in other parts of the Chinese-speaking world and beyond. Digital networks facilitate these cross-border interactions and open pathways for films such as *My Way* to find receptive audiences.

The queer component of Hui's *All About Love* and *My Way* opens up other networks for distribution, exhibition, and critique as well. With the rise of what B. Ruby Rich labelled "new queer cinema" in a 1992 essay in New York City's *The Village Voice*,[32] festival programmers outside of established LGBTQI community circuits began to take notice of the

28. Quoted in Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 26.
29. Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*, 27. Italics in the original.
30. Lisa Cam and Laramie Mok, "Who Is Jin Xing, China's Only Transgender Celebrity?" *South China Morning Post*, November 16, 2018, https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/people-events/article/2173609/who-jin-xing-chinas-only-transgender-celebrity.
31. Hongwei Bao, "Queer as Catachresis: The Beijing Queer Film Festival in Cultural Translation," in *Chinese Film Festivals*, 79–100.
32. B. Ruby Rich, "A Queer Sensation," *Village Voice* (1992): 41–44.

mainstream appeal of stories revolving around the lives of sexual minori-
ties. This translated into the success of films such as Ang Lee's *The Wedding
Banquet* (1993) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). For Hong Kong cinema,
Wong Kar-wai's Best Director win at Cannes in 1997 with the gay romance
Happy Together marked a milestone at the world's most prestigious inter-
national film festival. In her 2001 article, Helen Leung speaks eloquently
about the importance of the "queerscape" to the transnational circulation
of LGBTQI-themed cinema from Hong Kong.[33] Ann Hui's entry into New
Queer Cinema takes a different route by exploring the neglected topics
of bisexuality, lesbian romance, and sex reassignment surgery for male-
to-female transsexuals. Because of this, these stories circulate within queer
film circles as well.

Although there is certainly some overlap with the HKIFF,[34] queer film
circuits cultivate different viewers with divergent interests. Hong Kong, for
example, boasts the oldest lesbian and gay film festival in Asia. Edward
Lam inaugurated the first Hong Kong Tongzhi Film Festival (Hong Kong
Lesbian & Gay Film Festival) in 1989, coining a term *tongzhi* as a play on
the Chinese word for "comrade" that continues to be used to hail LGBTQI
people throughout the Chinese-speaking world to this day. Raymond
Yeung, Shu Kei, and Wouter Barendrecht of Fortissimo reestablished the
festival in 2000, and Denise Tang presented the first sidebar devoted to
lesbian films in 2003. In her 2009 article "Demand for Cultural Represen-
tation: Emerging Independent Film and Video on Lesbian Desires,"[35] Tang
discusses the history of the Hong Kong Lesbian & Gay Film Festival and

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33. Helen Hok-sze Leung, "Queerscapes in Contemporary Hong Kong Cinema," *positions:
asia critique* 9, no. 2 (2001): 423–47, Project MUSE, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/27984.

34. For more on small festivals in Hong Kong, see Esther C. M. Yau, "What Can Small
Festivals Do? Toward Film Festivals as Testimony to Expanded Civic Engagement in
Post-Handover Hong Kong," in *Chinese Film Festivals*, 141–67.

35. Denise Tse Shang Tang, "Demand for Cultural Representation: Emerging Independent
Film and Video on Lesbian Desires," in *Futures of Chinese Cinema: Technologies and
Temporalities in Chinese Screen Cultures*, eds. Olivia Khoo and Sean Metzger (Bristol:
Intellect, 2009), 169–90.

explores some of the reasons for the neglect of work by and about women. However, as she notes, women filmmakers are gaining more attention in Asian queer-film circles, and this opens up possibilities for Hong Kong female directors.

A film such as Hui's *My Way* then, through its networked narrative, brings together various strands running through international festival circuits, digital production and distribution, and the dynamic relationship between stories about gender and sexual minorities that expose audiences to ways of seeing outside of the male mainstream. Unearthing the journey from the European film festival to Youku opens up another dimension of Ann Hui's networked story.

Ann Hui and the Venice Film Festival

At the seventy-seventh Venice Film Festival in 2020, Ann Hui became the first female director to receive the Golden Lion Lifetime Achievement Award. Hui has been honored with life achievement awards at the 2015 Asian Film Awards in Hong Kong as well as its major rival the Busan International Film Festival in Korea in 2014 in order "to acknowledge her contribution to Asian cinema and to recognize her spirit that produced outstanding works of the generation."[36] However, Venice marks a new high in her career. In an interview, she stated:

> After getting this prize, if I get to be more well known, I will hope to use this influence to work more for the Hong Kong film industry. . . . Now is an unprecedented low. There is no investment and people are at a loss as to

36. Clifford Coonan, "Busan Fest to Honor Hong Kong's Ann Hui as Asian Filmmaker of the Year," *Hollywood Reporter*, March 8, 2014, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/busan-fest-honor-hong-kongs-723064.

what to do. Younger filmmakers are having a very, very difficult time. And if I can help to raise money for them, I will try to do that.[37]

This comment underscores Hui's generosity of spirit in hoping to use the added clout the prestigious award confers in order to help aspiring filmmakers. However, Hui also tacitly acknowledges two important facts of feature filmmaking. First, motion pictures need money to make it to the screen, and, second, connections matter in the film business. In his magisterial *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu recognizes three fungible forms of "capital": economic, social, and cultural.[38] After receiving this honor at the oldest film festival in the world, Hui plans to use her social capital as a well-connected celebrity auteur to raise economic capital from investors in order to create cultural capital in the form of new films, which promise to be profitable in order to continue the cycle. As Bourdieu notes, institutions undergird this system linking social class, economic fortune, and aesthetic taste together. Ann Hui has distinguished herself by receiving this award at Venice, and this institutional boost may allow her to help others in her network.

However, Ann Hui's success at Venice tells only part of the story. Favoring the "male genius" at odds with the system, the roles played by collaboration, networking, and institutional support fall by the wayside of what Jean-François Lyotard might call this "grand narrative" of the history of cinema when narrating the tale of the success of female directors.[39] At the margins of a male-dominated industry, women rely on these collaborative networks to get their stories told. When looking at the careers of

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37. James Mottram, "Venice 2020: Ann Hui on Saving the Hong Kong Film Industry, and her Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement," *South China Morning Post*, September 10, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3101038/venice-2020-ann-hui-saving-hong-kong-film-industry-and-her.
38. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 114.
39. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

female filmmakers such as Ann Hui, connections among women stand out within male-defined and dominated production, distribution, and exhibition circuits. Arguably, at a time of rapid change and crisis, these networks take on even greater significance as a means of survival in a particularly precarious industry.

As Hui notes in the interview cited here, the industry is at an "unprecedented low." Hui has directed several films that reflect directly on the vicissitudes of film production, including the semiautobiographical *Song of the Exile* (1992); *The Stuntwoman/Ah Kam* (1996); and *A Simple Life* (2011), based on a memoir by producer Roger Lee, so she has told the story of highs and lows of the industry on more than one occasion. In Hui's on-screen reflections on the movie industry, Hong Kong cinema suffers through the 1967 riots, the waning popularity of martial arts action, and the growing influence of the Mainland Chinese market. Moreover, even before the COVID-19 crisis shut down production as well as theatrical exhibition, the digital revolution had eroded traditional patterns of film production, distribution, and exhibition through streaming services' move into filmmaking. Many film festivals, in particular, experienced an existential crisis when determining whether to allow films such as Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman* (2019) or Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2018), made primarily for streaming rather than theatrical release, to compete.

Given their marginal status in the industry worldwide, women have been hit particularly hard by the global pandemic.[40] However, at this low point, Ann Hui shoots to the top. At a time when the festivals scale back and the industry hits rock bottom, women fill the gaps. For Venice, this

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40. Although the extent of the impact on women in film has yet to be determined, preliminary studies indicate a gender divide. See Manori Ravindran, "Women in Film and TV Falling through the Cracks in U.K.'s Coronavirus Crisis," *Variety*, April 3, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/biz/entertainment-industry/women-in-film-and-tv-falling-through-the-cracks-in-u-k-s-coronavirus-crisis-1234570229/; and Anne Cohen, "How Women In Hollywood Are Dealing with Their Sets Being Shut Down," Refinery29, March 27, 2020, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/03/9585542/hollywood-women-coronavirus-stories.

makes perfect sense. In the wake of #MeToo and the reevaluation of gender bias and sexual harassment in the motion-picture business globally, Venice's poor record on including women in competition came under fire in recent years.[41] In addition, the Venice Film Festival received unwelcome publicity as the backdrop for some of Harvey Weinstein's sexual crimes reported by journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey.[42]

One of Weinstein's victims, Rowena Chiu, illustrates the darker side of the cinematic networks connecting Venice and Hong Kong. After harassing her in Venice and settling with her, Weinstein transferred Chiu to his Miramax offices in Hong Kong. Chiu, whose family emigrated from Hong Kong to the United Kingdom before she was born, left the position after realizing Weinstein had little real interest in her professional development. As the 2020 COVID-19 crisis put the brakes on many productions, limiting competition as well as the extravagance of the events on the Lido, the scaled-down seventy-seventh Venice Film Festival provided the ideal opportunity for the festival to make amends by celebrating women.

In addition to recognizing Ann Hui in 2020, the festival also honored female actor Tilda Swinton, and female director Chloé Zhao took away the best picture honor for *Nomadland*, awarded by a gender-balanced jury headed by actress Cate Blanchett. The fact that two of the women given top prizes at the festival were born in China may have something to do with the fact that Venice's programmer for Chinese and Korean films, Elena Pollacchi, is female. A scholar of Chinese language and culture, Pollacchi also hosted a festival masterclass with Ann Hui on September 9, 2020,[43] and

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41. Nick Vivarelli, "Women's Groups Blast Venice Film Festival for Lack of Female Representation," *Variety*, August 10, 2018, https://variety.com/2018/film/news/venice-film-festival-under-fire-women-directors-1202901723/.
42. Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, *She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story that Helped Ignite a Movement* (London: Bloomsbury Circus, 2019).
43. "Masterclass with Ann Hui," La Bienniale di Venezia, accessed September 30, 2020, https://www.labiennale.org/en/cinema/2020/program-cinema-2020-pass-holders/masterclass-ann-hui-2020-09-09-15–00.

Hui's most recent film, *Love After Love*, had its premiere at the 2020 festival as well.

The choice of Ann Hui makes considerable sense because of the director's long history of involvement with Venice as one of the very few female directors from the Chinese-speaking world to return to the festival on more than one occasion. However, before attracting the attention of Venice programmers, Hui enjoyed some success at other European film festivals. For example, her second feature, *The Spooky Bunch* (1980), screened as part of the "Berlin Panorama," which is an official, but noncompetitive part of the Berlinale devoted to broadening the offerings of the festival.[44] This screening helped to establish Hui's early link to Berlin, where she headed the jury in 1996 and has had screenings in competition (although no major awards) for features such as *Ordinary Heroes* (1999).

Another feature, *Summer Snow* (1995), also did well in Berlin, garnering some minor awards (as well as a major win for Josephine Siao as best actress) but drew more attention later at the Créteil International Women's Film Festival in France by winning the Grand Prix. Hui has not consistently exhibited her work at festivals devoted to female filmmakers; however, in this case, a major win at likely the most prestigious festival for women filmmakers in the world boosted her standing as a major international talent. It further contributed to her ranking among the most prolific and acclaimed female directors in the world. Although, until recently, Hui has denied any support for feminism, she does admit to a particular interest in stories about women. *Summer Snow*, which could be classified as a "woman's film" or female-centered melodrama, also did exceedingly well regionally—winning major awards at the inaugural Golden Bauhinia Awards in Hong Kong as well as at the Golden Horse Awards, the Hong Kong Film Awards, and the Hong Kong Film Critics Society Awards.

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44. "Panorama Regulations 2012," Internationale Filmfestspiele, accessed September 30, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20120401104955/https://www.berlinale.de/en/branche/_filmanmeldung/richtlinien_panorama/index.html.

In 1983, Cannes showed Hui's *Boat People* out of competition. Even though *The Spooky Bunch* and *Boat People* were not eligible for awards, these screenings broadened the director's international reputation. The screening of *Boat People*, in particular, created considerable controversy, given its negative perspective on Vietnam, a former French colony and site of deeply ambivalent feelings in the years following the reunification of the country in 1975 and the ensuing refugee crisis in the South China Sea.[45] However, as one of the first films allowed to shoot on location in the PRC after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), *Boat People* also established Hui as a Hong Kong director adept at working across the border. In fact, Hui, born in Anshan in Manchuria, turned to Mainland China to make films set largely or exclusively in the People's Republic such as *My American Grandson* (1991), *Eighteen Springs* (1997), *Jade Goddess of Mercy* (2003), *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt* (2007), *Night and Fog* (2009), *The Golden Era* (2014), *Our Time will Come* (2017), and *Love After Love* (2020). As China became an increasingly important film market in the post-Mao era as well as a source of acclaimed films from Fifth and Sixth Generation directors, Hui's position as a Hong Kong New Wave[46] filmmaker with considerable expertise in the People's Republic of China made her stand out even more in international circles. This long association with networks connecting Mainland China to the European film festival circuit put Hui in an ideal position to push gender boundaries in *My Way*.

In 2003, Ann Hui served on the jury in Venice and, in 2014, headed the Horizons section of the seventy-first Venice Film Festival. *A Simple Life* (2011) won critical acclaim and several awards at the sixty-eighth iteration of the festival. Ann Hui's *The Golden Era* (2014) closed the seventy-first

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45. Julian Stringer, "Boat People: Second Thoughts on Text and Context," in *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 15–22.

46. For more on the Hong Kong New Wave, see Gina Marchetti, "The Hong Kong New Wave," in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Somerset: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 95–117. See also Ching Yau, *Filming Margins—Tang Shu Shuen, A Forgotten Hong Kong Woman Director* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004).

Venice Film Festival.[47] Curator Elena Pollacchi, with the linguistic skills and cultural expertise to showcase the work of a director such as Ann Hui, provided a path for her.

A Simple Life, *The Golden Era*, and *Love After Love* tell stories about women. *A Simple Life* narrates the tale of film producer Roger Lee Yan-Lam (played by actor Andy Lau on screen) and his elderly housekeeper Chung Chun-Tao (Ah Tao/Peach), played by actor Deanie Ip, as she transitions from domestic service to a nursing home because of a debilitating stroke. Deanie Ip won the prestigious Volpi Cup for best actress at the festival, and *A Simple Life* also secured various other awards, including the La Navicella Award (for "human values"), the Equal Opportunities Award, and Honorable Mention for the Roman Catholic SIGNIS award.[48] With its location shooting and focus on a working-class woman, *A Simple Life* spoke to the director's aesthetic debt to Italian neorealism at a time when the festival's commitment to bringing Chinese-language cinema to the world had been established with successes such as Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness*, the Golden Lion winner in 1989, and Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*, which won the Golden Lion in 2006.

Ann Hui's *The Golden Era* (2014) closed the seventy-first Venice Film Festival. A biography of noted female writer Xiao Hong, who was born in Northeast China (like Hui) and died in Hong Kong (where Hui now lives), the film looks at the relatively short career of one of China's most celebrated leftwing novelists of the Republican era. The decision for Venice to spotlight this particular feature owes much to Hui's talents and connections. It is difficult to imagine the other film on the exact same subject, Xiao

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47. For a discussion of *The Golden Era* in relation to soft power, see Gina Marchetti, "The Feminine Touch: Chinese Soft Power Politics and Hong Kong Women Filmmakers," in *Screening China's Soft Power*, eds. Paola Voci and Hui Luo (New York: Routledge, 2018), 229–51.

48. For a detailed discussion of *A Simple Life* and the festival circuit, see Ruby Cheung, "A Chinese Diasporic Festival Film in the Making? The Interesting Case of Ann Hui's *A Simple Life*," in *Chinese Cinemas: International Perspectives*, eds. Felicia Chan and Andy Willis (New York: Routledge, 2016), 167–80.

Hong—*Falling Flowers* (2012) by Huo Jianqi, for example—being given this coveted spot at the Venice Film Festival. However, it was a gamble—in spite of having Tang Wei, best known for her controversial, erotic performance in Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* (2007), in the lead—and the critical response has been mixed. Guy Lodge of *Variety* summarizes the general view: "Ann Hui's lengthy Venice closer is a handsome but unilluminating biopic of trailblazing Chinese writer Xiao Hong."[49]

The film Ann Hui brought to Venice in 2020, also shown out of competition, *Love After Love* (2020), which has much in common with war-era set *The Golden Era*, received mixed reviews. Jessica Kiang, writing for *Variety*, calls it a "pretty but empty melodrama."[50] Based on an Eileen Chang story, the film has been compared to Ang Lee's Chang adaptation *Lust, Caution* (2007).[51] Of course, Ann Hui directed two other adaptations of Eileen Chang novels as well, *Love in a Fallen City* (1984) and *Eighteen Springs* (1997). Although coming from different generations, Chang and Hui share some common experiences. Chang lived in Japanese-occupied Shanghai while Hui's Japanese mother and Chinese father met during the war, and both were drawn to stories set in that period. Moreover, both Hui and Chang studied at the University of Hong Kong, which helped shape their cosmopolitan outlook through English-language higher education in what was then a British colony. Hui worked with renowned female author Wang Anyi on the script.

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49. Guy Lodge, "Venice Film Review: 'The Golden Era,'" *Variety*, September 6, 2014, http://variety.com/2014/film/festivals/venice-film-review-the-golden-era-1201298611/.

50. Jessica Kiang, "'Love After Love' Review: Ann Hui's Pretty, Empty Melodrama Set in Pre-War Hong Kong," *Variety*, September 8, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/reviews/love-after-love-review-ann-hui-1234762087/. The review in the Hollywood Reporter is kinder: Boyd Van Hoeij, "'Love After Love' ('Di Yu Lu Xiang'): Film Review, Venice 2020," Hollywood Reporter, September 15, 2020, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/love-after-love-di-yu-lu-xiang-film-review-venice-2020-4060111/.

51. Laramie Mok, "Ann Hui's *Love After Love*, Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* and 4 More Films Adapted from Eileen Chang Books, 25 Years after the Celebrated Chinese Writer's Death," *South China Morning Post*, September 7, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/celebrity/article/3100486/ann-huis-love-after-love-ang-lees-lust-caution-and-4-more.

Simply looking at Ann Hui's Venice successes, the importance of women's networks emerges involving female actors such as Deanie Ip and Tang Wei, scriptwriters such as Wang Anyi, and curators such as Elena Pollacchi—all successes based on stories about women. However, when asked about being a female pioneer in the industry, Hui demurs:

> I don't feel very proud that I'm among men working. . . . I don't feel it's an advantage or a disadvantage. That is maybe why I survived. I don't go around feeling I'm a woman and I'm different. I try to do what the guys do. I even carry the equipment when necessary.[52]

When asked in a 2010 interview whether she resented the label of "female director," she replied:

> For a time I did. In the 1980s, when feminism came to Hong Kong, I was often invited to share my sob stories as a woman director. And I couldn't tell any! So people were very dissatisfied. I was, too, frustrated. Why were they always asking me about sob stories? I didn't have any! If I had I would certainly have told. Perhaps I was too tomboyish, so everyone treated me as one of the guys on set. I might be an exception. Eventually I stopped minding being called a female director. I thought, whatever.[53]

Her 2020 award in Venice represents the tip of the iceberg of carefully constructed and maintained networks among women as well as men who have made a career of telling stories about women in an industry that favors male heroes engaged in traditionally masculine pursuits in films made primarily by men. Hui's closest connections to important men in the film industry link her to King Hu, Xie Jin, and Stanley Kwan, directors known

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52. Mottram, "Venice 2020."
53. Karen Chu, "Q&A: Ann Hui," Hollywood Reporter, October 11, 2010, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/qampa-ann-hui-29010.

for their interest in female-centered stories. Hui, of course, is aware of her propensity for telling women's stories, as she says in an interview:

> The reason that I so often tell women's stories in my movies is because I find it very easy to put myself in their shoes. For me, my identity as a woman does not mean feminism, but a way of thinking and a perspective of looking at the world. I cannot avoid that.[54]

Although she resists ties to feminism, Hui not only narrates stories about women, she gravitates toward tales about gender injustice and the negative impact of sexual inequality and bias on society. *My Way* provides only one example of the importance of gender to her success as a storyteller and as a fixture on the film festival circuit.

Conclusion: The Continuing Difficulty of Telling Women's Stories on Global Screens

Ann Hui's recognition at the Venice Film Festival in 2020 marks a new high for her career as well as an important first for the world's oldest film festival. However, Hui has also suffered setbacks. *Our Time Will Come* (2017), the follow-up to *The Golden Era*, was scheduled to open the Shanghai International Film Festival,[55] also celebrating the twentieth anniversary of its establishment as an A-list award-granting international film festival in 1997.[56] However, *Our Time Will Come* did not open the festival. Instead,

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54. Pang Li, "Ann Hui, a Director Who Captures Ordinary Women's Lives," China.org.cn, April 15, 2020, http://www.china.org.cn/arts/2010-04/15/content_19820089.htm.

55. For a comparison of the Hong Kong and Shanghai festivals, see Ran Ma, "Programming China at the Hong Kong International Film Festival and the Shanghai International Film Festival," in *Chinese Film Festivals*, 237–58.

56. Zhaoyu Zhu, "The Political Prism: The 20th Shanghai International Film Festival," *Senses of Cinema* 84 (2017), https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/festival-reports/20th-shanghai-international-film-festival/.

another feature, *The Chinese Widow* by Danish director Bille August, also set in China during the same time period covering the anti-Japanese war, occupied the opening slot.[57] With no reason given for the change, it is difficult to speculate on the rationale for replacing a film by a Hong Kong woman with one by a Danish man.

Despite her achievements, Ann Hui clearly still struggles for recognition. Serving on juries at major festivals shows that she has been accepted as a reliable voice within international film circles; however, Bille August—who won the Palme d'Or at Cannes twice, served on the jury at the Beijing International Film Festival, and heads a studio in Hangzhou, Tianpeng Media—clearly has more clout.[58] European men continue to make their mark in a global system that marginalizes Asian women. Nevertheless, Ann Hui's extensive production networks as well as her strong ties to international festivals indicate possible avenues for women's development as directors in world cinema.

Since the accusations against Harvey Weinstein went viral in 2017,[59] #MeToo continues to roil the global film industry and beyond. As the consummate "networker" at film festivals such as Cannes and behind the scenes mover and shaker at major awards such as the Oscars, Weinstein's navigation of these film networks likely enabled his sexual predation. Women in film stood up, not only as individual victims but as a group. Through the digital presence of #MeToo and #TimesUp, women's voices became amplified throughout the entertainment industry and beyond. In 2018, women took their dissatisfaction to the red carpet at the Cannes Film Festival.[60]

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57. Liz Shackleton, "'The Chinese Widow' to Replace 'Our Time Will Come' as Shanghai Film Festival Opener," Screen Daily, June 12, 2017, https://www.screendaily.com/news/the-chinese-widow-to-replace-our-time-will-come-as-siff-opener/5118986.article.

58. Yao Cheng, "Academy Award-Winning Director Bille August Opens His Studio in Hangzhou," *Asia Pacific Arts*, April 10, 2011, http://asiapacificarts.usc.edu/article@apa-academy_award-winning_director_bille_august_opens_his_studio_in_hangzhou_17467.aspx.html.

59. Karen Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

60. Neil Smith, "Cannes 2018: Female Stars Protest on Red Carpet for Equal Rights," BBC, May 12, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-44095914.

Cate Blanchett, the head of the jury in Venice in 2020, was a vocal leader criticizing the Cannes Film Festival in 2018. Overseeing the award of Venice's Golden Lion to Chloé Zhao at the same festival in which Ann Hui was duly honored should give Blanchett reason for optimism. As film festivals serve as a conduit for the industry's attitudes, values, and ideologies through motion pictures as well as the people who make them, this celebration of women in 2020 helps to counter what Sylvia J. Martin terms "Harvey Weinstein's transpacific processes of power"[61] that link Hong Kong as well as Hollywood to the festival circuit. Digital networks connect micro festival films such as *My Way* as well as massive feminist movements such as #MeToo. Just as *My Way* managed to cross the Chinese Internet firewall to tell a story about the transgender community, #MeToo disguised as "mi tu" (characters translated as "rice bunny") to get around Mainland Chinese Internet censorship facilitates the formation of networks across the Chinese-speaking world.[62]

However, even with the digital connectivity of these new networks, female filmmakers struggle not just in Asia but around the world to tell their stories. In the case of Hong Kong, women filmmakers take advantage of various networks to build not only their own careers, but enable the stories by other women to find an audience. This has helped to diversify Hong Kong's film culture, assisting the cross-fertilization that keeps the local industry healthy by allowing a variety of narratives by women (as well as men) to be distributed, discussed, debated, and digested domestically as well as beyond the territory's borders.

61. Sylvia J. Martin, "Anthropology's Prophecy for #MeToo: From Hollywood to Hong Kong." *Visual Anthropology Review* 37 (2021): 138.
62. Simina Mistreanu, "China's #MeToo Activists Have Transformed a Generation," Foreign Policy, January 10, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/10/chinas-metoo-activists-have-transformed-a-generation/.

Acknowledgments

"Retweet for More"

The Serialization of Porn on the Twitter Alter Community

RUEPERT JIEL DIONISIO CAO

Abstract

This article examines the notion of seriality in the context of the Filipino alter community, a network of Twitter users producing, distributing, and consuming pornographic images. The alter community is prominent among Filipino gay men who satisfy their need for sexual arousal, collective identity, and validation of their sexuality. Seriality is influenced by technological features and affordances of a media platform. In the case of Twitter, the platform's short form media formats and real-time content generation fosters a particular kind of seriality. This essay analyzes data from online observations, content analysis of tweets and profiles, and interviews and is informed by theories on seriality, gay sexuality, and Internet studies. In situating seriality within the context of gay amateur porn economy, this article argues that serial pornography is instrumental in satisfying both present and long-standing affective, sexual, and social needs of gay men. These needs, this essay claims, stem from long history of minoritization of homosexuality. As Twitter renders older tweets ephemeral and quantifies social engagement, seriality enables gay men to satisfy the aforementioned needs longer. Furthermore, this essay proposes that serial porn on Twitter brings new insights to how seriality is conceived. Serial porn images are strategically and carefully constructed narratives of sexual encounters aimed at garnering higher social engagement and validation. Thus, serial narratives can resolve present and urgent affective tensions and needs that unravel within an ongoing life narrative rather than working toward supporting a plausible ending, as seen in other serial forms. This article

contributes to an understanding of how pornographic images and serial narratives fit into consumerist culture and how platforms exploit long-standing affective needs of sexual minorities to ensure extended production and consumption of contents.

Keywords: Seriality, Serial porn, Gay pornography, Twitter, Alter community

Introduction

In late 2020, a Filipino gay pornographer named Anton (not his actual name) tweeted, "You want to see me getting fucked by this hot and muscular athlete? Follow me and retweet for more."[1] After a few days, the tweet did not go past his target of two hundred retweets, and he claimed he did not garner enough followers. In a tell-all thread, Anton narrated how he is tired of feeling embarrassed because he was "begging" his followers to like and retweet his porn videos. In his last tweet, he thanked his followers and bid goodbye to the alter community. I tried returning to his profile after three days to get screenshots of this and to see how his farewell fared with his followers. Unfortunately, it seems that he deactivated (if not outright deleted) his account. Meanwhile, other pornographers in the alter community do not ask for retweets and more followers. Instead, they simply release portions of their recorded sex videos in a series of tweets and wait until they get more followers. In the words of Gabriel (not his real name), who has more than ninety thousand followers, he lets his porn videos do the work of increasing his followers.[2] Gabriel's Twitter feed is an assemblage of porn videos, narratives of everyday life, stories of sexual encounters, and musings about his romantic desires.

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1. Translated from Tagalog. Tweet retrieved on July 20, 2021.
2. Personal communication with the author, October 29, 2019.

In both ways, pornographers weave written narratives about sexual pleasure and their sexuality on Twitter, writing details about themselves and their sex partners in each porn video as if they are characters in serial newspaper columns or television shows. Unlike amateur pornographic videos that generally do not have fully detailed characters and narrative or recognizable settings, amateur porn in the alter community has developed characters, narratives, and settings that unfold over time.[3] Once attacked by cultural critics as being shallow and offensive to women, porn has developed, serving different functions and assuming different forms thanks to advances in digital and online technologies.[4] Sex, if used in storytelling or as a storytelling device, stirs emotions and fantasies, and this enriches our understanding of sexuality and its relationship with digital media.[5] However, despite the emancipatory potentials of the Internet, networked publics and digital media can also subject sexual minorities to conditions that reinforce their minoritization.[6] The Internet is a vital site where sexual minorities seek validation, approval, or a sense of belonging, and how these things are metrified and quantified by social media platforms may have significant impacts on why and how sexual minorities conduct their online activities.[7] Twitter, for example, shows the number of hearts and retweets and how

3. John Mercer, *Gay Pornography: Representations of Sexuality and Masculinity* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 183–85. Ruepert Jiel Dionisio Cao, "Amateur porn in Filipino Twitter Alter Community: Affordances, commodification, ghettoization, and gay masculinity," *Media International Australia* 179, no. 1 (2021): 57–60; Ruepert Jiel Dionisio Cao, "Primitive Aesthetics in Twitter Porn in Filipino Alter Community," *Synoptique: An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image* 9, no. 2 (2021): 130.

4. Feona Attwood, "Introduction: Porn Studies: From Social Problem to Cultural Practice," in *Porn.com: Making Sense of Online Pornography*, ed. Feona Attwood (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 1.

5. Lindsay Coleman, "Introduction," in *Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema: Explicit Sex, Performance and Cinematic Technique*, ed. Lindsay Coleman (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 3.

6. Mike Grimshaw, "Digital Society and Capitalism," *Palgrave Communications* 3, no. 1 (November 2017): 1.

7. Carolin Gerlitz and Anne Helmond, "The Like Economy: Social Buttons and the Data-Intensive Web," *New Media & Society* 15, no. 8 (December 2013): 1358.

many followers one has. To achieve higher numbers that represent social ties, attention, or validation, one has to work or perform labor, and online platforms encourage frequent production and consumption of contents through their design and algorithms.

Even pornography, which has recently been more ubiquitous in different social media sites such as Twitter, has assumed various forms. Apart from the usual porn videos that last around twenty to thirty minutes, there are also livestream pornographic shows, GIF porn, and short porn clips on Twitter.[8] These porn formats are shaped by the affordances of the platform that hosts them, and these formats may give rise to other functions of pornography. On Twitter, for example, amateur pornography can be serialized to resemble a full-length porn video that covers foreplay until ejaculation. This paper follows this notion and investigates the serialization of porn on the Twitter alter community, a collective of Filipino gay pornographers involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of amateur porn on the platform. It examines how Twitter's platform design and the motivations of alter community members give rise to the serialization of porn on Twitter. In this article, I view serialization both as a strategy that maximizes social capital and affective experiences of making pornography and as an inevitable outcome of Twitter's design that exacerbates gay men's need for validation, a sense of belonging, and collective identity. Instead of considering serialization as a way to circumvent Twitter's technical limitations within a video's duration, this essay argues that serialization feeds into gay men's needs for validation and a sense of belonging to a community. It further proposes that serialization, as an outcome of Twitter's algorithms and affordances, is labor intensive, requiring various kinds of resources from the pornographers and viewers. Such settings, this article suggests, maintains an illusion of sexual liberation while turning gay

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8. Katrien Jacobs, "Smouldering Pornographies on the Chinese Internet," *Porn Studies* 7, no. 3 (2020): 337–45; Helen Hester, Bethan Jones, and Sarah Taylor-Harman, "Giffing a Fuck: Non-Narrative Pleasures in Participatory Porn Cultures and Female Fandom," *Porn Studies* 2, no. 4 (2015): 356–66; Cao, "Amateur Porn in Filipino Twitter," 52–65.

men into enterprising agents responsible for their own social networks and emotional fulfillment. This also expands current insights on the nature of serial narratives. This essay suggests that instead of supporting a predetermined ending, serial pornography addresses present and enduring social issues gay men face.

The serialization of pornography in the alter community brings to light one important question: Does pornography have a narrative? Scholars and cultural critics have repeatedly attacked porn, not only because they objectify femininity but also because they have flimsy narratives.[9] Feminist porn makers try to make porn women friendly by investing them with more detailed characterization and plot elements with slower sexual intercourse.[10] Whatever the case, many scholars do not emphasize how sexual intercourse is a narrative that has a long-standing history of beginning with foreplay and ending with male ejaculation.

Some remark that some porn (specifically short ones) can have complete absence of narrative because of their length.[11] The shortening attention span of viewers and the advancement of digital technologies to cater to this gave birth to short forms of porn that are devoid of any narrative.[12] These forms of porn show only very short clips of sexual intercourse with no known character, setting, or place. These are vogue in amateur porn circuits, which are borne out of online participatory culture and whose aesthetics center on anonymity.[13] But such conclusion is potentially problematic when applied to Twitter and other porn platforms because the Internet also provides spaces where porn can gain new functions and meanings.

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9. Alexandra Hambleton, for example, cites the various settings female porn actors needed to endure in porn videos, including having sex with octopus tentacles. See Hambleton, "When Women Watch: The Subversive Potential of Female-Friendly Pornography in Japan," *Porn Studies* 3, no. 4 (December 2015): 431.
10. Hambleton, "When Women Watch," 431–32.
11. Peter Lehman, *Pornography: Film and Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 95.
12. Hester, Jones, and Taylor-Harman, "Giffing a Fuck," 356.
13. Hester, Jones, and Taylor-Harman.

This study employs participant observations and content analysis of tweets and profiles since September 2019. These are considered more frank but also limited in scope and depth than interview data.[14] Participant observations and analysis of tweets and profiles focus on how pornographers weave narratives of sexual desires and feelings using pornography and how these narratives are serialized. I started my personal engagement with it in 2016 when I encountered alter community profiles on Grindr.[15] I follow 150 alter community profiles using an account to lurk, meaning I simply watch videos and retweet porn videos I find interesting.

These porn videos may contain sexual intercourse I find titillating, pornographers that I find attractive, or narratives I find touching. Many of these are archived in my personal alter community handle, which I also use to interview some alter community members. To enrich the analysis, this essay also includes interviews with seven alter community members conducted since September 2019.

This study contributes to the study of serial narratives, digital media, gay sexuality, and pornography. It suggests new ways of thinking about serial narratives when appropriated in different technological and textual contexts. This essay offers an explication of serial narrative as a strategy that addresses both present personal needs and lasting social issues. This study also offers explanations on how platform affordances and features reshape the articulations of sexuality and the economics that govern them. Situating serialization in the context of gay porn production allows us to view the complexities of the affective and emotive dimensions of pornography. As such, this essay contributes to a better understanding of serialization of narratives and its relationship with platform features and affordances and with user motivation.

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14. Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 159–63.
15. Grindr is a gay socialization app geared toward anonymous sexual encounters. When constructing profiles on the app, users can link their social media handles. A widespread practice is to link one's alter community Twitter account in order to preserve the users' anonymity.

Pornography in the Philippines

The literature on pornography in the Philippines is scarce, and most articles paint or regurgitate the negative attitude society has on pornography and discourses of sexuality. In a historical account of the development of Philippine cinema, eminent film historian Clodualdo del Mundo Jr. shows how cultural critics in the 1970s considered the proliferation of soft-core porn films to be the lowest point in Philippine cinema history.[16] Likewise, Jose Florante Leyson writes that because of the powerful influence of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, nonnormative sexual practices became unacceptable and sex media considered illegal in the country.[17] Most of the recent takes on pornography view it as a harmful medium that endangers conservative moral values.[18] These perspectives propose that the rise of pornography represents the changing values and standpoint on sexuality, but they also suggest that these developments are disastrous because they disrupt established social relations. Bernarte and colleagues, for example, explain that pornography hurts the unity of the nuclear family because it encourages sexual experimentation and, therefore, infidelity. According to them, the rise of pornography and the emergence of more liberal sexual attitudes among youth can be changed by educating youth about the moral implications of pornography. But such education, according to Cordero, must be based on Christian moral teachings on sexuality, which emphasizes abstinence and rejects premarital sex.

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16. Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., "Philippine Movies in 2001: The Film Industry Is Dead! Long Live Philippine Cinema!," *Asian Cinema* 14, no. 1 (March 2003): 167.
17. Jose Florante Leyson, "The International Encyclopedia of Sexuality: Philippines," web. archive.org, 2004, https://web.archive.org/web/20130508201931/http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/IES/philippines.html.
18. Dalmacito Cordero, "Understanding the Broader Horizon of Sexual Encounter: A Case Study on Sexual Engagement among Filipino Teens," *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 18, no. 1 (2018): 46; Racidon Bernarte et al., "Internet Pornography Consumption and Relationship Commitment of Filipino Married Individuals," *Asia Pacific Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 4, no. 3 (2016): 40.

Interestingly, despite all the negative connotations on pornography and the restrictions on its production and distribution in the Philippines, the country has a significant record of consuming pornography. Leyson writes that since the 1950s, porn consumption in the Philippines has been geared toward adding excitement to married couples' sex lives by educating themselves about sex techniques. He further adds that with the availability of electronic and optical media, porn consumption in the Philippines grew. Del Mundo's work also discusses *bomba* films, or soft-core pornographic films, that were vogue in the 1970s.[19] Del Mundo describes the proliferation of pornographic films to be the lowest point in Philippine cinema. He suggests that the proliferation of pornographic films was because of the dismal financial situation enveloping the Philippine film industry. He reminds us that to film studios, porn films are the surest way to quickly gain money.

In the Philippines, amateur porn on the Internet has been around since blogs became ubiquitous in the 2000s. Some of these sex blogs are still active today as moderators upload stories on a weekly basis. Apart from blogs and amateur porn videos on porn sites such as XVideos, online communities and networks on social media, such as the alter community, are popular online venues for amateur porn production, distribution, and consumption. The alter community refers to the network of anonymous Twitter users who are involved in the production, distribution, reappropriation, and consumption of amateur pornography.[20] Like other videos and tweets on the platform, porn videos and sex stories in the alter community are restricted by Twitter's features and technical limitations.

The alter community is not exclusive to gay men, but it is a popular venue for Filipino gay men. Some profiles belonging to gay men command over one hundred thousand followers and their videos viewed, retweeted, and hearted several thousand times. In an earlier article, I proposed that the popularity of

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19. Del Mundo, "Philippines Movies in 2001," 167.
20. For a fuller description of the alter community, see Cao, "Amateur porn in Filipino Twitter," 52–65; Cao, "Primitive Aesthetics," 52–65.

the alter community among gay men can be attributed to the lack of cultural space that caters to the needs of gay men.[21] Despite Twitter's problematic sensitive media policies that restrict all expressions produced by porn producers (including their tweets that do not talk about sex), the alter community remains a popular site for gay men to socialize, explore their sexuality, and discuss the problems that gay men experience. Just like amateur porn on different porn sites, amateur porn in the alter community features anonymous actors shot using mobile phones and has no professional editing, lighting, or sound quality.[22] But unlike porn videos on porn sites, alter community porn embodies the range of affective potentials of pornography. As Susanna Paasonen argues, pornography can cultivate various feelings and emotions in the audiences, including feelings of disgust, arousal, shock, shame, and fear, among others.[23] Similarly, the posts and videos shared by alter community members cultivate different feelings and emotions among its members, including feelings of gratification arising from experiencing validation of their sexuality.

In this paper, I pay closer attention to one of the defining characteristics of alter community pornography, which is the serial format of porn. By this, I refer to the episodic format of porn videos that begin with foreplay and end with male ejaculation. I examine the parallels of the serialization of pornography with serials found in other media. This essay intends to sketch the defining characteristics of serial pornography on Twitter, taking into account the pertinent features of the platform. It also aims to investigate how serial porn compares with and differs from the nature and characteristics of other forms of serials. Lastly, this research investigates how the serialization of pornography on Twitter feeds into the sexual needs of gay men and the social issues surrounding their minoritization. Thus, this article adds to the understanding of the nature of serial narratives and how media platforms shape serial narratives.

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21. Shawn Suyong Yi Jones, "*Jemok Eopseum*: The Repurposing of Tumblr for Gay South Korean DIY pornography," *Porn Studies* 7, no. 3 (2020): 303–14.
22. Mercer, *Gay Pornography*, 183–85.
23. Susanna Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2011), 217–25.

It also contributes to the understanding of how serials operate when situated in a distinct sociopolitical, sociocultural, and technological setting.

As various scholars explain, porn is the only way to see the unseeable (i.e., sexual intercourse) and learn about sex techniques.[24] This is even more interesting because with amateur pornography, porn imbibed a sense of "realness" or authenticity. As Niels van Doorn explains, amateur porn's use of ordinary people (as opposed to porn actors) having sex in nondescript locations and recorded without the use of professional video production techniques contribute to amateur porn's "claim to 'realness.'"[25] By this, van Doorn means that amateur porn projects itself as real sexual encounters, the culmination of porn's quest to maintain an illusion of realness of the sexual fantasies it stages. But despite the "free" cost of amateur porn to the pornographers and their audiences, amateur porn's ubiquity conceals the influence and operation of neoliberal logics and the labor required to produce, distribute, and consume amateur porn.[26] This article considers the serialization of porn in the alter community as an outcome of Twitter's features, affordances, and algorithm, but it is also a form that responds to gay men's needs, desires, and social standing.

Seriality: From Old to New Media

Serialization refers to narrative structure where the plot progresses episodically, often within a predetermined span of time. Serialized narratives were

24. Marcel Barriault, "Bucking Heteronormativity: Buck Angel as Porn Performer, Producer and Pedagogue," *Porn Studies* 3, no. 2 (April 2016): 139–40; Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 332.
25. Niels Van Doorn, "Keeping It Real: User-Generated Pornography, Gender Reification, and Visual Pleasure," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 16, no. 4 (November 2010): 414–15.
26. Bonnie Ruberg, "Doing It for Free: Digital Labour and the Fantasy of Amateur Online Pornography," *Porn Studies* 3, no. 2 (April 2016): 150–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1184477.

first popular in literature but have since expanded in television, cinema, comic books, manga and anime, and even social media posts.[27] In contrast to series programs that have self-contained episodes, serials have episodes or installments that are part of ongoing narratives that stretches across a span of time (e.g., one season). Serials are often described as complex because they possess and emphasize "cinematic style, novelistic scope, critical potential, complex character development, self-reflexivity, and epic or poetic form."[28] Babette Tischleder argues that complexity relates to the "quantity" of "parallel storylines that develop in different directions and intersect in multiple ways."[29] The narrative structure of serials often feature a main story line that intersects with various subplots of varying importance and use storytelling techniques that experiment with diegetic space and time.[30] For example, each episode of a television show or an online serial (e.g., *The Crown*) has smaller plots unfolding per episode but contribute to the advancement of the larger story and long-term character development. The story may have multiple principal characters (i.e., multiple protagonists, antagonists, and everything in between) usually played by an ensemble cast.

In works of fiction, serials are demanding to both produce and watch. On the production side, serial narratives are plotted to hold the audience's interest for one or more season and each episode, installment, and/or season may end in cliff-hangers.[31] Hagedorn notes that in serial narratives,

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27. Serial narratives were first associated with Victorian novels, which were serialized in periodicals and were later bound in volumes. Literary classics such as *The Count of Monte Cristo, The Three Musketeers* (both by Alexandre Dumas), and *Oliver Twist* (by Charles Dickens) were first serialized in periodicals and were reprinted as novels. See Tore Rye Andersen and Sara Tanderup Linkis, "As We Speak: Concurrent Narration and Participation in the Serial Narratives '@ I_Bombadil' and 'Skam,'" *Narrative* 27, no. 1 (2019): 84–85; Federico Pagello, "The 'Origin Story' Is the Only Story: Seriality and Temporality in Superhero Fiction from Comics to Post-Television," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 34, no. 8 (July 2017): 726.
28. Babette Tischleder, "Thickening Seriality: A Chronotopic View of World Building in Contemporary Television Narrative," *Velvet Light Trap* 79 (2017): 122.
29. Tischleder, *Thickening Seriality*, 122.
30. Tischleder, 120–22.
31. Dennis Broe, *Birth of the Binge: Serial TV and the End of Leisure* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019), 3.

"installment ends at a point of unresolved narrative tension, precisely to leave the readers in suspense."[32] This makes serial narratives riskier investments for TV networks and production houses compared to series with self-contained episodes. Serial TV shows, regardless of methods of distribution, highly depend on strong viewership (i.e., ratings and/or number of views). Writing on the consumption of serials, Lorenz Engell argues that serials can be demanding to watch because the progression of the story needs to be understood by watching it from start to finish.[33] This is a challenging feat to maintain because serials need to be plotted and paced to keep the viewers' interest strong. Unlike series programs, which can be viewed in any order, serials are not friendly to newcomers who jump into the program halfway. Despite these difficulties, successful serials have a strong following among a dedicated fan base. These fans perform invaluable labor by watching the shows, creating fan products, and popularizing the shows through word of mouth, sharing or posting on social media, or buying merchandise.

The recent scholarly attention given to serials in digital media largely stems from works of fiction and traditional media.[34] New media platforms have lasting impacts on the economics and politics of serial narratives. Scholars working on fictional serials on social media note how the Internet merges the processes of production, distribution, and consumption into one platform.[35] The affordances and features of online platforms fundamentally alter

32. Roger Hagedorn, "Doubtless to Be Continued: A Brief History of Serial Narratives," in *To Be Continued . . . Soap Operas around the World*, ed. Robert Allen (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 31.

33. Lorenz Engell, *Thinking through Television* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 142.

34. Ruth Page, "Seriality and Storytelling in Social Media," *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 5 (2013): 31; Dominik Maeder and Daniela Wentz, "Digital Seriality as Structure and Process*," Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 8, no. 1 (2014): 144.

35. Tore Rye Andersen, "Staggered Transmissions: Twitter and the Return of Serialized Literature," *Convergence* 23, no. 1 (2017): 36; Elke D'Hoker, "Segmentivity, Narrativity and the Short Form: The Twitter Stories of Moody, Egan and Mitchell," *Short Fiction in Theory & Practice* 8, nos. 1–2 (2018): 7–20. Andersen and Linkis, "As We Speak," 83–84.

the aesthetics, formats, and affective potentials of serial narratives. Scholars working on Twitter serial fictions, for instance, note how the shorter character limits pushes the aesthetic and affective boundaries of serials.[36] Tore Rye Andersen analyzed how authors use Twitter to write works specifically for the platform. Andersen argues that compared to episodes on older media, each tweet must contribute to the development of the narrative and must lead the viewers to the ending (if not buying a new book teased by Twitter serial fictions). Scholars also argue that digital media changed the temporality of serial narratives. Whereas episodes in older forms of serials are released on a regular basis, episodes of online serial fictions may not follow such a rigid schedule. Thus, the spacing and silence between posts carries affective and semiotic potentials, allowing them to stir the audience's emotions or become part of the narrative structure of the serial.[37]

But perhaps the greatest change digital media brought to the theory and practice of serial narratives is the serialization of nonfiction narratives written by different kinds of social media users. Ruth Page tells us that nonfiction serials in the form of wikis and social media posts do not have narratives. While the sequencing of episodes is important in serial narratives, Page writes, "Simply producing a text in segments over time does not a narrative make: the content of that text must demonstrate narrativity."[38] Page argues that nonfiction serials fundamentally changed the nature and structure of serial narratives when appropriated in nonfiction narratives. The most important is what Page calls "non-teleological" narratives.[39] These narratives do not have to serve a particular resolution that marks the end of a narrative, nor do they have to achieve resolution after a predetermined time span. Because serials on online platforms serve different purposes, such as relaying constantly updating information (e.g., Wikipedia) or an online avatar (e.g., Facebook), they do not have to necessarily bring the readers closer to the

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36. Andersen and Linkis, 87.
37. D'Hoker, "Segmentivity, Narrativity," 7–8.
38. Page, "Seriality and Storytelling," 33.
39. Page, 49.

ending. Page argues further that the purposes serials serve now depend on the context where they are used.

Serialization and seriality bring some questions to the discourse and practice of pornography in the alter community. First, what functions do serialization and seriality have in the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography? Second, how does the serialization of porn on Twitter differ from serial narratives on television and other forms of media? Third, how does seriality contribute to capital accumulation and the institution of labor in the alter community?

The Serialization of Porn in the Alter Community

One prominent characteristic of the alter community's porn videos is the serialization of pornography. The serialization of pornography can be described as a direct outcome of Twitter's own affordances and architecture, but it changed the way pornography and serials are made. Particularly, the serialization of porn has emotional and affective dimensions that feed into gay men's status as sexual minorities.

Most porn videos in the alter community are serialized in four to six tweets. Each part contains a specific portion of sexual intercourse, with the first episode depicting foreplay (i.e., kissing, touching, or stimulation of nipples) followed by oral sex, anal sex, and, finally, ejaculation. In gay pornography, porn videos are plotted to show anal sex and ejaculation as the climax of intercourse, presenting the "proof" of male sexual pleasure. In the alter community, most videos follow the same narrative trajectory, but each part is spliced into two-minute (or less) clips, following Twitter's limitations, and then released in a series of tweets. Each tweet serves as an episode and tends to be open-ended and edited to show the most titillating or intense part of the sexual intercourse. The captions end in phrases such as "retweet for more" to signify that more videos or images can be released. As the videos

Figure 1: A video of a serialized porn on Twitter. Note that the owner of the tweet marks the video as "Part 1," which opens the possibility of a sequel. The narrative being told in the tweet provides a detailed account of what the actor feels during the sexual encounter. *Source*: Screenshot by the author.

show passionate thrusting and the loudest moaning from the participants, the captions stress the feelings and thoughts of the uploader or author (see figure 1). The captions become a storytelling device that contains the progression of sexual encounters and the feelings the author feels during these moments. In figure 1, for example, the video shows the "passionate sex" and how it progressed. The video may not show the progression of this encounter, from gentle penetration to rough, but the author details all of it in the tweet. The same happens throughout the entire serial—the pornographer would use the captions to embellish the videos with emotive textual expressions that deepen the affective potentials of porn.

Figure 2: One example of serial porn on Twitter. The porn video is divided into four parts that show the progression of sexual intercourse between two participants. *Source*: Screenshot by the author.

In figure 2, the uploader spreads his anal sex over four tweets. In each tweet, the pornographer writes about his sexual abilities and how this sexual encounter was special to him. In a succession of tweets, he writes about his bottom's manly qualities (e.g., the tan complexion and huge penis) and how he dominated his bottom with his superior sexual performance. This superior performance pertains to the relentless penetration of the anus until the bottom becomes submissive. The tweets descend into a fiercer performance of sex and a more pronounced use of violence to express sexual prowess. The penetration here symbolizes the total domination of the bottom who eventually asked the top to be gentler. While the series did not end in ejaculation, it did provide a sense of closure with the emasculation of the bottom.

Like Twitter fiction, spaces and breaks between episodes in porn serials have semiotic and affective functions. Spaces and breaks between tweets carry meanings that push the narrative forward. To some pornographers, putting a break between tweets allows them to interact with their followers who demand that the next tweets be released. In the page of Danny, a famous pornographer who identifies as a daddy, porn video threads are filled with requests for collaborations or for next episodes. At one point, Danny felt so touched by the overwhelming support that he wrote a tweet thanking his followers. To some pornographers like Anton, the breaks represent

an attempt to garner more likes and retweets. In a recent interview with Thomas (not his real name), retweets and hearts are important metrics that signify attention.[40] Thomas notes that if people react to their porn videos, it means that the pornographers are doing something attractive or titillating. Thomas says that posting nude photos or porn videos allows them to seek attention and admiration from other men and empowers them to quickly find followers who can be their sex partners, friends, dates, or romantic partners. By serializing pornography or nude images, Thomas says that they can continue releasing sexually explicit images to sustain positive feelings and interactions from their followers. I will return to this point at a later section in this essay.

Just like the serials in other media platforms, each episode brings us closer to a sense of an ending of each sexual encounter. Each tweet brings us closer to orgasm, which marks the end of a serial. The end of a porn serial marks the beginning of a next porn project with another on-screen sex partner and an attempt to expand their social circle and extend the positive feelings they get from the alter community. But pornography in the alter community is also nonteleological in the sense that there is no definite end in sight and pornographic images are not released to support a particular ending. Nor do pornographers aim for a particular statistical figure in terms of their social engagement. As Thomas told me, accessing the alter community and distributing porn images is always an "on-going endeavor, dependent on your need to satisfy your [sexual] urge or to find people who will tell you that you're good."[41] To many pornographers, the alter community is also a personal space where they express both important and mundane details of their lives. I suggest that the alter community posts be viewed as an ongoing account of one's life that is accessed and updated based on one's emotional and social disposition and not because of a need to find a logical ending to a narrative. The tweets of alter community

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40. Private communication with the author, June 21, 2021.
41. Translated from Tagalog and English.

members comprise the serial narratives of their own lives, complete with subplots of their personal relationships, anonymous hookups, encounters with regular sex partners, musings about their sexuality and desires, and at times their daily activities. One HIV-positive pornographer tweeted that if his followers want to know his motivations for making pornography, all they have to do is to scroll down his (extremely long) profile feed. Indeed, while he never posted porn videos spliced into parts, his entire alter community profile is one ongoing narrative replete with people and events that resemble various characters and subplots. His porn videos are equally emotive, usually expressing his various feelings when having sexual encounters. He narrates that as a person living with HIV, he feels glad that people find him sexually desirable. He intertwines his sexual encounters with tweets about his advocacy as an HIV counselor and various happenings in his personal life. Even the pornographer in figure 2 sometimes admits his personal hardships in his tweets. Sometimes he apologizes to his followers for not being able to make new porn videos because, according to him, he needs some time alone. As such, alter community profiles serve as ongoing and constantly evolving narratives of gay men's sexual and personal lives.

In the alter community, porn has a strong emotive side that expresses various feelings and emotions the pornographers feel. These feelings and emotions unfold during the serialization of porn. While some express a variety of emotions and feelings of intimacy and sexual fulfillment, others take the chance to express and prove their masculinity. Whatever the case is, gay men use the alter community to find emotional gratification because they have no other outlet to express their sexuality. As these pornographers tweet, being able to serialize their porn means they can engage with more users and gain more followers. Serialization functions to prolong these experiences of emotional gratification, allowing gay men to enlarge their social capital by publishing porn videos and revealing parts of their lives. But serialization is also brought about by Twitter's design and algorithms.

Twitter's Design, the Serialization of Porn, and Labor

As I mentioned above, the serialization of porn in the alter community stems from Twitter's design. Twitter's features are conducive to the rise of an attention economy where users are pitted against each other for the limited attention from their followers and exposure. Two features of Twitter are related to this. First is Twitter's newsfeed, which displays contents in reverse chronological order that constantly updates with new contents. Instead of rendering content present and permanent, such design renders older content ephemeral.[42] While older content remains on Twitter and can be retrieved in the future, users can only scroll so much that older content may simply be inaccessible. Depending on the number of profiles one follows and the activity of these users, one's news feed can update extremely fast. This means that older tweets can be near impossible to find because new tweets come in. Twitter's own news feed design gives content (and users) its few minutes (or seconds, perhaps) of fame before it gets buried under a deluge of new tweets. Even when one is scrolling one's newsfeed, Twitter actively asks the user to reload the newsfeed so they can view new tweets. Ephemerality is also exacerbated by the (in)frequency of access. Like cruising spaces,[43] the alter community is only accessed for immediate sexual needs. This means that long breaks separate access to the platform. As Thomas and Gabriel admitted, they only visit the alter community for short glimpses during the day or when they are socializing, watching porn, or just mindlessly scrolling. Thus, every time they visit the platform, they see new tweets and they may not be able to find older contents. I argued elsewhere that serialization of pornography can be understood as a way to circumvent

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42. Dhiraj Murthy, "Twitter: Microphone for the Masses?" *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 5 (2011): 786.
43. Jose Antonio Langarita Adiego, "On Sex in Fieldwork: Notes on the Methodology Involved in the Ethnographic Study of Anonymous Sex," *Sexualities* 22, nos. 7–8 (2019): 1262.

Twitter's technical limitations and the ephemerality of content there.[44] Furthermore, being "present" in another's newsfeed at a given moment does not guarantee that one can garner enough attention from one's followers.

Attention on Twitter is metrified and can be expressed, counted, and seen through hearts, retweets, number of views, and number of followers.[45] Twitter readily visualizes and quantifies the influence and reach one has, and these numbers buttress the feelings of emotional relief alter community members experience. To many gay men, the alter community is their space where they can claim cultural legitimacy, forge a collective identity, and seek emotional and social connection with one another. Thomas states that by releasing nudes, gay men hope to gain more followers, reactions, and retweets—in short, attention. On Twitter and other social media sites, it is not enough to attract gazes and glimpses. Attention is expressed through clickable buttons, and to the alter community members, garnering high numbers translates to positive emotions. To some pornographers, high numbers make them feel validated. Without adequate representation from the mainstream media, legally guaranteed rights and protection from discrimination, and with a moral framework that considers homosexuality deviant, these numbers embody validation of gay men's sexuality and desires. These numbers are also a resource, allowing gay men to garner higher hearts and retweets, garner more followers, and stay longer in other users' newsfeeds. Higher engagement gives them the potential to expand their social circle and to find like-minded individuals who they can establish different kinds of relationships with.

Because the Internet enables instantaneous mass communication, it is easy to imagine that platforms prioritize fresh and currently unfolding events. This real-time communication makes it appear that tweets are fresh and genuine.[46] In the case of serial porn, tweets happen after the fact and are released based on the motivations of the users. Serial porn is a strategic and

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44. Cao, "Amateur Porn in Filipino Twitter," 58.
45. Gerlitz and Helmond, "The Like Economy," 1361.
46. D'Hoker, "Segmentivity, Narrativity," 58.

planned exercise, a product of emotional, sexual, and social labor aimed at expanding users' positive emotions and social network. It is a format shaped by Twitter's technical limitations and tendencies to render contents ephemeral. In order to circumvent Twitter's features, gay men serialize their porn to allow them to garner higher social engagements and connections. These are, however, accompanied by laborious processes. Pornographers are expected to use their own technical and social networking skills in an attempt to secure higher social engagements.[47] Serial porn is not an on-the-fly, as-it-happens transmission or recording of a sexual encounter. Pornographers spend time and skills to produce and record their sexual encounters, edit these into two-minute clips that show their best physical and sexual qualities, and release these videos while interacting with their followers and sometimes teasing for next updates. As Thomas said and other participants posted, while pornographic materials reflect actual sexual encounters, the way these images are captured, edited, and released take skills to process. Thomas notes that what images are shown and how these are shown impact how much engagement these posts can generate. He said that, for example, begging too much for retweets looks like a hard sell while posting lethargic sexual performance would attract negative publicity. Indeed, some alter community pornographers criticize or poke fun at some amateur porn videos where the participants do not moan or show no physical gesture of satisfaction. Some fill the thread with negative comments when the video is too dark. Even the setting of the sexual encounter does not escape the attention of the viewers. In one case, a pornographer released a video of anal sex with the television playing a children's show in the background. One commenter wrote, "Okay *na sana eh, kaso nakakalambot ng titi 'yung kanta [na pambata]* (laughing emoji)" (it should have been okay, but the [kids'] song makes my dick limp).[48]

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47. Katrien Jacobs, *Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007): 56; Ruberg, "Doing It for Free," 156.
48. Tweet retrieved on February 2, 2020.

Amateur pornographers position their cameras to capture the motion of the penis while maintaining the anonymity of the participants. The pornographers then select clips that follow the plot established in professional pornography—foreplay, oral sex, anal sex, and ejaculation. The pornographer also creates captions, weaving narratives or details that go into each episode. Some pornographers simply describe what is going on in the video while others pen emotional or reflexive tweets. Others describe the participants on the video. Still, others ask others to retweet their videos or to follow them with a promise of more content. Once the videos are tweeted, the pornographers are expected to interact with the commenters and release more videos.

The serialization of porn is a labor-intensive process that requires skills and commitment from the pornographers. The structure, architecture, features, and affordances of Twitter are instrumental in the emergence of a virtual environment that requires different kinds of labor from the participants. In order to garner and sustain the affective and emotional gains they get from the alter community, the pornographers are expected to frequently produce contents that capture the attention of their viewers. This has implications on how we understand social media channels as platforms for authentic and spontaneous communication. As this section shows, serialized pornographies are neither spontaneous nor are they posted to simply project repressed sexuality. They are also strategic and processed to fit into consumerist cultures. While serial porn shows actual sexual encounters, they are articulated and used to achieve a specific goal. In the alter community, actual sexual experiences are captured, processed, and transformed into a commodity that is set for consumption. The serialization of pornography can be interpreted as a process of continuous consumption and production of pornography as gay men attempt to negotiate their sexuality and seek affective satisfaction for it. The metrification of consumption and validation on Twitter creates an environment where attention and validation can be measured and increased seemingly without end. As Gabriella Lukacs argues, platform architecture is usually designed to compel users to perform

emotional labor.[49] She proposes that fans of idols are embroiled in economies of emotion as they produce and consume contents that give them emotional gratification while the idols that they support gain monetary compensation. Thus, to Lukacs, digital platforms reproduce capitalist logics and its exploitative tendencies, which conceal the labor audiences exert in the process of accumulation of capital.

The impetus for the production of serial porn is complex. On the one hand, the pornographers need validation, space for socialization, cultural legitimacy, and collective identity that they try to forge in the alter community. Twitter readily facilitates the provision of these needs, leading to emotional and affective satisfaction for its members and the pornographers. On the other hand, the articulations and expressions of sexuality on Twitter are also shaped by what the audiences want to see so they can give likes, retweets, or follow a specific pornographer. The serialization of pornography, then, feeds into these two. It is a strategy that aims to prolong a pornographer's presence on their follower's newsfeed while attempting to garner attention from their followers. Thus, the negotiation between the need for attention and the need to attract positive feedback and higher social engagement in a prolonged span of time form the basis of serial porn on Twitter.

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

This essay has examined the serialization of pornography in the case of the Filipino alter community. It presents some key arguments that enrich our understanding of pornography, gay sexuality, and serial narrative/serial formats. This study proposes that the alter community is an important virtual space for gays to seek cultural legitimacy and sexual satisfaction and to forge

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49. Gabriella Lukacs, "The Labor of Cute: Net Idols, Cute Culture, and the Digital Economy in Contemporary Japan," *Positions: Asia Critique* 23, no. 3 (August 2015): 494, https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847–3125863.

a collective identity. Without institutions or representations that affirm their sexuality, gay men take it on themselves to forge an organic network that they can collectively claim as their own. In the alter community, pornography plays an important role in forging and expressing gay identities. It also suggests that the serialization of pornography on Twitter borrows from older serial forms (e.g., TV serials), and the affordances and properties of Twitter imbue it with distinct characteristics. Taken together, the tweets written and posted by a pornographer can be understood as an ongoing life story, a non-teleological serial without a guaranteed ending. Instead, as this essay argues, the aim of serial porn is to satisfy present and enduring affective, sexual, and social needs. The urgency of sexual and emotional needs of pornographers and the lasting need for validation are the goals of the production of pornography on Twitter. Serial pornography is strategic, meaning it is geared toward amassing attention and validation, which are metrified and simplified by Twitter. Thus, amateur pornography can be understood as representations of authentic or actual sexual experiences shaped to fit into consumerist culture. Twitter facilitates the commodification and metrification of attention and validation. By rendering tweets ephemeral and by quantifying attention and validation, serial pornography becomes a way to ensure the extended production and consumption of gay porn.

This essay advances arguments that the way serial pornography fits into consumerist culture and neoliberal logics places the responsibility of seeking validation on the shoulders of the individual gay pornographers. Twitter facilitates an environment where sexual minorities are compelled to commodify their sexuality and their bodies in order to seek validation from others. In the alter community, individuals use their skills, resources, and energy to continuously experience affective and emotional satisfaction brought on by the validation of their sexuality. In the same venue, they compete with other individuals who have the same aim and use the same strategies to garner attention. Twitter facilitates the metrification and circulation of affect, but at the same time, it limits this metrification and circulation as it invites people to pay attention to newer content. Thus, the need for validation, which

is constant, fuels the production of content on Twitter that the platform eventually renders ephemeral. As far as serial porn satisfies any affective or emotional need, this research sees that such satisfaction is only momentary. Once the life span of the tweet is spent, pornographers are compelled to release a new set of tweets that will allow them to reach higher retweets, hearts, or followers. In the end, this pattern becomes a cycle that eventually exhausts many pornographers.

In seeking validation for their sexuality, gay pornographers are performing labor that feeds into an attention economy. As such, pornographic media in the alter community are commodities whose production and consumption carry affective and emotional value for its producers and consumers. Yet, it also shows us at what lengths gay men are compelled to go in search of intimacy, sexual contact, and collective identity. In the alter community, the pornographers have become enterprising individuals who are responsible for their own experiences of happiness and validation.[50] Garnering likes has become a responsibility for many pornographers who would only release pornography in exchange for hearts, retweets, and following.

Here, we can also consider that the alter community and serial porn provide opportunities for meaning-making. By weaving narratives and selecting appropriate images to represent their feelings, the alter community members seek to make sense of themselves in relation to other people's perspectives of sexuality. In situating pornography within an ongoing narrative of one's life and evolving sexuality, the alter community merges narratives and affect to evoke what gay men feel about themselves and others. It embodies a place where gay men can feel good about themselves while attempting to seek and make meaning out of their interactions with other people. Through the buttons, the simple buttons, and character limits Twitter has, the alter community becomes a site where gay men understand and express their sexuality. By making narratives and presenting images of their sexual

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50. Roger Foster, "The Therapeutic Spirit of Neoliberalism," *Political Theory* 44, no. 1 (2016), 10.

exploits and their everyday life, the alter community members interpret the quantification of social engagements as signs of validation and approval from their peers.

Ultimately, the emergence of the alter community and the forms of pornography it encourages reflects the real-life situations gay men face. We must also ask to what extent the alter community contributed to the resolution or improvement of the situations of gay men. Surely, as a new space for the expression of sexuality and as a space that enables the circulation of affect, Twitter encourages experimentation and creativity. This gives rise to new forms of pornography that is distinct to Twitter. Yet, it also invites an examination and rethinking of its role in gay sexual politics. The alter community's promise of sexual freedom is, to an extent, illusory. In providing a space for sexual expressions, the operation and dynamics of the alter community hides the mechanisms that shape the logic and impetus behind the formats of pornography emerging from it. Under the guise of sexual liberation, sexualized expressions in the alter community have become commodities that partially answer to market demand like serials in other media forms. But unlike fictional serials that have an end in sight, serial amateur porn will remain a strategy for prolonged visibility so long as the social issues surrounding gay sexuality remain unsolved.

Acknowledgment

Book Reviews

Dazzling Revelations

Review of *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China* by Margaret Hillenbrand, Duke University Press, 2020

HARRIET EVANS

Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China by Margaret Hillenbrand is a dazzling display of rigorous interdisciplinary scholarship. It mounts a compelling argument about the "photo-form" as a critical category that shifts our attention away from the duality of censorship and amnesia to explain the occlusions of the historical record in China's recent past. The photo-form refers to how photographs and other visual media are repurposed in different forms and offer potentially transgressive and transformative glimpses into the afterlives of traumatic events, commonly silenced by the party-state's systematic attempts to suppress public discussion. In the current environment, the notion of the photo-form is elaborated to embrace a series of online techniques, from playful memes to smartphone apps, that may confirm the relationship between the physicality of the holder of a smartphone and the place of past events. Hence their subversive potential to commemorate and share moments that might otherwise be silenced by party-state power. The photo-form shares knowledge about "public secrets" and simultaneously shares in sustaining the secrecy of the secret.

Hillenbrand traces her argument centrifugally from its core in China out to different political systems across time and place. The book begins with reference to the pictures of June 1989 taken by the Beijing-based photographer Xu Yong, who hid his negatives of the events until in 2014. It concludes by aptly quoting Diane Arbus (1923–1971), whose words

effectively summarize the argument built up in the preceding chapters: "A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know."[1] The influential US photographer put her energies into humanizing the "freak" in pictures by placing them in familiar settings, yet the very contrast between the "strange" and the "banal" does little to reveal the secret of the strange.

In China, the photo-form has not always been used for subversive purposes. The artist Zhang Dali, who makes an important appearance in the concluding chapter, pairs images of "original" and "manipulated" photos of leaders and places in his archival project *A Second History* (2003–2006). In this, he shows how the Chinese Communist Party has "doctored" its own photographic record of the revolution by scrubbing individuals out of the frame (recall the disappearance of Lin Biao and Jiang Qing, for example, from the official record of party leaders at key celebratory events) by adding slogans to a scene, by altering the backdrop of a portrait with tree blossoms, or by airbrushing wrinkles from the portraits of aging leaders.

But there is nothing specifically Chinese about the photo-form, even if its political potential is heightened in an environment where public secrecy reigns. Photo-forms appear across many places and spaces, from Marlene Dumas's photo portraits of Osama bin Laden, Gerhard Richter's famous picture cycle of the Baader-Meinhof photographs, to Lawrence Holofcener's bronze sculpture *Allies* (1995) of Churchill and Roosevelt sitting on a bench in central London, doubtless exchanging comments of relief at the absenting of Stalin from his seat at the Yalta Conference.

One doesn't need to look far to find relevant examples of public secrets in liberal democracies either, such as those propelled into public scrutiny by the Black Lives Matter movement concerning the barbaric histories of slavery, the systematic attempts by the British and US establishments to forcibly and inhumanely silence the revelations of their lies brought to light

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1. Margaret Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 209.

by whistleblowers and Wikileaks, or the hidden, nepotistic, and "chumo-cratic" practices explaining the US and British governments' mishandling of the COVID crisis.

Hillenbrand's brilliant and often moving exposition of the repurposing of the iconic image of the Tank Man reveals that what may be celebrated as a powerful emblem of the struggle in one context may in another—China—be subject to absenting and forgetting, such that the image is little known to China's young millennials. Even further removed from the living memory of millennials is Bian Zhongyun, who, thanks to filmic and online reme-diation, has effectively become a metonym for the violence of the Cultural Revolution. The former vice principal of the elite Girls Middle School attached to Beijing Normal University, Bian was arguably the first high-profile person to be killed by Red Guards in August 1966. After four decades of total public silence about her murder, Hu Jie, the now internationally known independent documentary filmmaker, persuaded Bian's widower, Wang Jingyao, to reveal the story of her death. Following Hu Jie's 2005 film *Though I Am Gone* (*Sui wo siqu*), Bian Zhongyun's photograph, long kept hidden by Wang Jingyao, acquired an exceptional afterlife as photo-form in diverse online displays.

So the key question is why, so many decades down the road when the architects of the Cultural Revolution are no longer around, has there not been any public reckoning of the abuses of the past? Why are the party-state censors at pains to prevent such a reckoning, thus spawning the extensive production of Bian's photo-forms and contributing to a collective knowledge of this public secret? One answer is that these photo-forms have become the visual code for problematizing the power of the party-state's princelings, some of whom may have been involved in Red Guard violence of the time and may be complicit in concealing Bian's murderers. The chapter thus hones in on how the photo-form operates as a means of reckoning with regimes of secrecy.

Hillenbrand makes comparisons to Edward Snowden and Abu Ghraib (and one could add here Julian Assange), where state secrecy was upheld in

the name of national security, arguing that while the drive for "full-frontal" publicity continues in liberal democracies, the state's demand for secrecy is clearly tied to power holding. In China, the online exposure of the secret of Bian's death creates an anonymous community and agency in visually transgressing the party-state's imposition of silence. Such practice can be aptly compared to black bloc activists' use of dark scarves and balaclavas in order to "disappear into a secret collective" that brashly taunts the secrecy of elites and the state. Yet the question remains: Can such attempts through the photo-form to expose the party-state's systematic attempts to prevent a societal reckoning of the Cultural Revolution succeed in their objective? Or are the cryptocratic interests of the party-state so deeply embedded in the party's leaders that they are impervious to the effects of visual transgressions?

Repurposed and displayed in more recent aesthetic forms by younger artists and photographers, the private and family photograph, including the selfie, has been reclaimed as a visual mode of attempting to compensate for the failure of societal reckoning with the past. Yet, however much they function as sites of unforgetting and commemoration, such remediated photographs may also serve the interests of the state by showing the extent to which public secrecy still reigns in the new millennium. Whether in photo-form of the man awaiting execution by Japanese swordsmen of the Nanjing Massacre of 1937, of Tank Man, or of Bian Zhongyun, the return of spectral images into the present demonstrates the dual effect of the power of ghosts to haunt the living: on the one hand, they can cement a sense of shared commitment to commemorate a traumatic past in order to secure well-being in the present, and on the other hand, they can pose an immanent threat to the sustainability of party-state control. Both effects suggest a reprise of the traditions of ancestor worship as rituals of respect of the dead in order to thwart the baleful revenge of their restless and hungry ghosts on the living. And in the process they acquire an uncanny iconic status.

While the spirit of the Tank Man makes his return in these forms, questions have to be asked about the party-state's response. It is impossible to

imagine, for example, that in viewing the "Rambo-esque bullet fest" of *Wolf Warrior 2* the state censors simply did not see the parallels between the long-shot of a standoff between the film's hero and a tank and its iconic forerunner of the 1989 Tank Man.[2] Could it be, therefore, the author asks, that the party-state is now attempting to come to terms with the troubled legacy of June 4, 1989, to neutralize its effects by appropriating, even "cannibalizing," the image? Rather than censorship or silencing, the "most imminent danger faced by Tank Man, China's little boy of legend, is that the emperor will laugh back and steal his legendary thunder."[3] This suggests however, that the emperor has to admit to his nakedness, that the public secret not only exists but is troubling.

A review of this length cannot do justice to the complexities and multilayered contours of Hillenbrand's analysis. Her narrative combines familiarity with the languages of popular culture, digital innovations in online visuality, film, and contemporary art, along with theorized interrogation of how systems of public secrecy and the "cryptosphere" take effect globally across very diverse political systems. And all made manifest through an unusual, erudite, and sometimes playful use of language that welds an array of readings seamlessly together with nods to the tech savvy of young creatives in the app industry.

In all, *Negative Exposures* is a powerfully and colorfully argued theorization of the tense and sometimes spirited competition between the state censors, ordinary people who prefer to "forget," and others committed to prizing open and restaging the events of the past in the photo-form. Its analysis makes no claims to offer any overall evaluation of the main events examined here; hence, there is no reference to the role of the urban proletariat in the protests of the spring and summer of 1989, nor to those for whom the Cultural Revolution was less traumatic than the Great Leap Famine.

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2. *Zhan lang 2*, directed by Wu Jing, 121 minutes (Beijing: Bona Film Group, 2017). Discussed in Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures*, 168–69.
3. Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures*, 207.

Nor does the book address the issue of how, in turn, the particular emphases of the dominant photo-forms examined in it discursively contribute to shaping and delimiting contemporary narratives on the same historical material. They too become elements of how we understand our pasts, in China as elsewhere.

Speaking Nations, Edge Ways

Reviews of *Postcolonial Hangups in Southeast Asian Cinema: Poetics of Space, Sound and Stability* by Gerald Sim, Amsterdam University Press, 2020; and *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945–1998)* edited by Gaik Cheng Khoo, Thomas Barker, and Mary Ainslie, Amsterdam University Press, 2020

MIN HUI YEO

Scholars working on Southeast Asian cinema in English-language academia have long lamented about the field's arid state of research. Thus, it was delightful to see two books about Southeast Asian cinema published in quick succession in 2020. *Postcolonial Hangups in Southeast Asian Cinema: Poetics of Space, Sound and Stability* by Gerald Sim and *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945–1998)* coedited by Khoo Gaik Cheng, Thomas Barker, and Mary Ainslie, are commendable efforts to expand and energize the hitherto slow-growing Southeast Asian cinema studies. Both works seek to get a word in edgewise for the case of Southeast Asia in film studies—a discipline rightly criticized as focusing lopsidedly on East and South Asian cinemas, all too often sidelining Southeast Asia on the world cinema map.[1]

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1. Khoo Gaik Cheng, "Introduction," in *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945–1998)*, eds. Khoo Gaik Cheng, Thomas Barker, and Mary Ainslie (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 13; Gerald Sim, *Postcolonial Hangups in Southeast Asian Cinema: Poetics of Space, Sound and Stability* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 30.

The two books cover a remarkable lot of ground. Despite a similar subject that they are dealing with, their research directions and methodologies differ in significant ways. *Southeast Asia on Screen* adopted a "sum of parts" approach to ensure that each member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Burma/Myanmar, Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia—is fairly represented in the anthology. Brunei, Laos, and Cambodia are absent only because the call for papers reportedly did not attract any responses about these regional fields. This is understandable, for as Khoo explains, "Nascent independent filmmaking activities are only now appearing in these three countries."[2] Khoo's comprehensive introductory paper succinctly points out the uneven developments across Southeast Asian film industries and within Southeast Asian film studies. The difficulty in assigning equal space to each constituent cinema in the anthology is another reminder of the tremendous work that remains to be done in Southeast Asian cinema studies.

Postcolonial Hangups assumes a different regional and geopolitical approach. In invoking the term *Southeast Asian cinema*, the author refers more to a region-specific postcolonial experience than to the term's geopolitical dimension. The book examines three particular Southeast Asian cinemas: Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Sim justifies this specificity by identifying a distinctive postcoloniality purportedly shared across these countries— that is, postcolonial identities defined with relatively little hostility; an unconflicted warmth with which these Southeast Asian countries remember colonialism.[3] Sim argues that positive affinities with colonial histories are "unmistakable Southeast Asian stories," which we "cannot help but sense it on the ground and in the air." Such observations may be surprising "to the uninitiated and those who expect the postcolonial condition to leave subjugated peoples clinging to enmity," though not so much to "those who

2. Cheng, "Introduction," 13.
3. Sim, *Postcolonial Hangups*, 24–25.

are more acquainted with critical studies of this sort."[4] This is a bold and potentially controversial claim that could benefit from greater in-depth justification. Sim's brief substantiation of the book's regional claim leaves much room for negotiation, but his selective focus nonetheless unfurls into four substantial, meticulously researched chapters—two on Singapore and one each on Malaysia and Indonesia—that survey the three cinemas with in-depth examination. Read together with *Southeast Asia on Screen*, the reader is poised to gain a rather comprehensive scope of a very diverse Southeast Asian cinema. The two books also complement each other on temporal dimensions. *Postcolonial Hangups* tends toward contemporary films by such directors as Tan Pin Pin, Yasmin Ahmad, and Joshua Oppenheimer whereas *Southeast Asia on Screen* investigates filmmaking activities from "the end of World War Two, a significant period after which many of such nations gained national independence, and up until the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997–1998."[5]

The allusion to the "nation" is of critical interest here. The national axis unmistakably cuts through the individual chapters in *Southeast Asia on Screen*. Organized into three sections ("Independence and Post-World War II Filmmaking: Nation-building, Modernity and Golden Eras"; "Key Directors"; "Popular Pleasures"), the essays address a range of concerns, including gender issues, film-market operations, the politics of genre, auteurism, and transnationalism. Across the chapters, the notion of nationhood is a recurring motif that strings them together. Chapter 1 demonstrates the inherent paradoxes of Indonesia's classical national cinema, which not only envisions but also consistently questions the viability of President Soekarno. Chapter 5 explores how Indonesia's New Order war films created heroic spectacles for the military in Indonesia with a strong nationalistic sentiment. By contrast, political negotiations done by civilians and politicians and their struggles for independence were rendered insignificant. Two other chapters in the

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4. Sim, 24.
5. Cheng, "Introduction," 13.

book deal with the possibility of a resistant cinema in Indonesia. Indonesian directors Sjuman Djaya and Teguh Karya are discussed in chapter 6 to shed light on how the filmmakers engaged with and countered social discourses, the repressive Suharto New Order regime, and its forms of censorship. The theme of an oppositional cinema is picked up in chapter 11, which examines the production of exploitation cinema as an alternative form of cultural resistance against the repressive authoritarian regimes of Suharto in Indonesia and Marcos in the Philippines, as well as a transgression of nationhood by an unorthodox cinema intended for the global market.

Chapter 2 explores the practice of *komiks*-to-film adaptation as a form of vernacular modernism in the Philippine context and key to shaping the national-popular imaginary in popular media. Chapter 9 probes director Mike de Leon's place in the second golden age of Philippine cinema. The director continually reconceives and reinvents his cinema to challenge the "cinema that imagines itself as national cinema" during President Marcos's martial-law period.[6] He also reflexively interrogated the significance of the golden age and accepted histories in the post-Marcos era. This book explores the complex interplay of stardom and politics in chapter 10. It looks into the potentially subversive image of popular teenage jukebox-musical star Nora Aunor and how it was tempered—in essence, co-opted—by the state and film studios to become an icon for a safe expression of freedoms as permitted by the Marcos regime.

Chapter 8 reevaluates the position of the "father" of Thai cinema, Ratana Pestonji, by detailing his history and relationship with Hollywood studios in the early 1950s. The account disputes nationalistic constructions of the filmmaker in posthumous popular opinions, which had seen him as being untouched by the trappings of commercial filmmaking and the Hollywood system. The Boonchu comedy series that addresses the relationship between ruralism and Thai localism is the subject of chapter 13. The author suggests

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6. Cheng, Barker, and Ainslie, *Southeast Asia on Screen*, 207.

that the series offers a nuanced negotiation, rather than complete rejection, of the various influences of modernity.

The book supplements an important account of Burmese nationalist cinema history in chapter 3. It delineates a turn in cinematic representation starting from earlier colonial-era practice, in which films conjured up the grandeur of Burmese dynasties to reclaim Burmese sovereignty. The genre of historical-fiction war films was later produced to consolidate archetypes of enemies and glorify the Burmese military and peasants as heroes. Examining *Pearl Tears* (1962) and *Nga Ba* (1961), the author argues that war films advocated national unity over ethnic factionalism, and the country's popular culture industries might have connected audiences with political issues, ideologically aligning them with the army's political projects. Chapter 4 turns to the role of women in Vietnamese revolutionary cinema, focusing on female mobility and spatial transformation in *On Top of the Wave, On Top of the Wind* (1967). Chapter 7 reconfigures the position of director Hussain Haniff in Malay film history by showing how he effectively strad-dled between auteur and popular cinema, social realism and commercialism. Chapter 12 deploys Kristin Thompson's concept of "cinematic excess" to read *They Call Her . . . Cleopatra Wong* (1978), showing how the film reveals regional-national tensions and the specificities of regional and national (Singaporean) imaginaries within ASEAN in the 1970s.

Taken together, these chapters fulfil the anthology's objective to look into "how film industries re-generate against a backdrop of war, (post) colonialism and, ultimately, recovery" by elaborating on "specific periods, popular films and key figures that slice across post-World War II Southeast Asian national cinemas."[7] Although the anthology "does not purport to be a textbook that provides distinct national film histories," the centrality of nationhood in defining and approaching Southeast Asian cinema, alongside its "sum of parts" editorial strategy, translates into a compelling approach to "explore the conditions that have given rise to today's burgeoning Southeast

7. Cheng, Barker, and Ainslie, 14.

Asian cinemas," piecing together the early history of the region's cinemas as a coalition of national cinemas steeped in their distinctive nation-specific histories, politics, and aesthetics.[8] In this regard, *Southeast Asia on Screen* complements preceding anthological efforts such as *The Films of ASEAN*, *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia* and *Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Cultural Interpretation and Social Intervention*, crucially filling a temporal gap with its focus on the understudied 1945–1998 period.[9]

The same is true for *Postcolonial Hangups*. Within the scope of Singapore, Malaysian, and Indonesian cinemas, Sim further zooms into "films that make national statements,"[10] initiating a "nationally delineated study"[11] that "conceives postcolonial film style along national lines," thus producing "portraits of national cinema."[12] Sim's concern with nationalism is intrinsically tied to his interest in the peculiarities of these nation-states' postcolonial conditions in which various film styles transpire. The book begins with a study of Singapore cinema in chapter 1. Sim argues that Singapore cinema has always been spatially oriented from golden-age Malay films to contemporary films by such directors as Royston Tan, Boo Junfeng, Charles Lim, Tan Pin Pin, etc. Singapore cinema is habitually attentive to social and politicized spaces, invested with representations of the island-state in the form of aerial maps, bird's-eye views, and cartographic symbols.[13] It exhibits "a national aesthetic that relies heavily on space to

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8. Cheng, Barker, and Ainslie.

9. Jose F. Lacaba, ed., *The Films of ASEAN* (Quezon: ASEAN Committee of Culture and Information, 2000); May Adadol Ingawanij and Benjamin McKay, eds., *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2011; David Lim and Hiroyuki Yamamoto eds. *Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Cultural Interpretation and Social Intervention* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

10. Sim, *Postcolonial Hangups*, 45.

11. Sim, 38.

12. Sim, 36.

13. Sim, 62 and 78.

define identity and orient itself within the world system."[14] This spatial obsession is not simply a postmodern condition (spatializing temporality à la Fredric Jameson), Sim asserts, but a manifestation of Singapore's geographical and sociopolitical reality: "This country's imagination was always spatially defined. Without a developed pre-colonial identity, and after a postcolonial phase that lurched headlong into Late Capitalism, its past hardly existed before the eternal present arrived."[15] Sim explains that this spatial preoccupation is also interwoven with colonial residues, recalling colonial mapping impulses and scanning, often affectively, material remnants from British colonialism—colonial architectural and geographical identifiers that are ubiquitous in the country.[16] Sim thus coins the term *colonial cartographic cinema* to describe Singapore cinema, in which "spatial awareness, along with aerial and affective instincts, become readable as a national style—a colonial cartographic cinema," positing that "a colonial atlas is part of Singapore's spatio-cinematic vocabulary through every phase of its national cinema history."[17]

Sim further develops his thesis from a historical perspective in chapter 2. Although film production lay essentially dormant for approximately twenty-five years between the golden age and mid-nineties revival, Sim identifies a "common cartography" and "spatial poetics" in Singapore cinema, which functions to "unify the older and contemporary eras by illuminating the less obvious colonial intonations within recent films."[18] In this regard, Sim joins scholars like Sophia Siddique in addressing the "25 years" gap in Singapore film history.[19] This chapter also unpacks spatial characteristics of new-wave films in contemporary Singapore cinema in the treatment of space

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14. Sim, 63.
15. Sim, 62.
16. Sim, 85 and 92.
17. Sim, 84 and 92.
18. Sim, 98.
19. Sophia Siddique, "Images of the City-Nation: Singapore Cinema in the 1990s" (PhD thesis, University of Southern California, 2001).

that brings to mind the Deleuzean concept of "time-image" but works out in quintessentially Singaporean ways. Recurrent images of subjects disconnected from their environment can be read in line with Deleuze's exposition, relating to symptoms of modernity's failure and debilitations brought on by late capitalism and an authoritarian state.[20] Yet this cannot fully account for the films' often dispassionate gaze on spaces because, herein, "natural history" and "historical history" (original term in the book), in Deleuzean terms, are not binary opposites. A spatial contradiction between attachment and alienation exists in these time-images, as the Singaporean subject is never completely alienated from the physical spaces in this nation—they are inescapably invested in them.[21] In this way, Sim effectively speaks against theories of cultural authenticity and contamination, which assume that borrowed new-wave aesthetics (e.g., the language of alienation) denote "foreignness," "Westernness," or "otherness."[22]

Chapter 3 turns to Malaysian cinema and examines director Yasmin Ahmad's oeuvre. In reading Ahmad's films' under subtitling and overloaded soundtrack, Sim seeks out a "locally particular phenomenology" via Jean-Luc Nancy's concepts of "ecouter" and "resonance." In Ahmad's films, it is the cacophonous, linguistically indistinguishable soundscapes that define the characters' subjectivities rather than linguistic hybridity and heteroglossia per se. Hence, Ahmad's films invite audiences to inhabit this liminal "resonant subjectivity," which, in turn, "houses a Malaysian character, specifically that of a multicultural society with a globalized economy."[23] Interracial romantic melodramas set in globalized milieus, Ahmad's films are not "stylistically radical or politically confrontational"; The director is, strictly speaking, "not an anti-colonial radical."[24] Yet the social and political strength of her films lie in their deftness in conjuring sentiments and affects

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20. Sim, *Postcolonial Hangups*, 116–17 and 121.
21. Sim, 129 and 135.
22. Sim, 128.
23. Sim, 155–56.
24. Sim, 160–61.

that enable us to "sympathize with Malaysia's postcolonial experience and apprehension of the world" (i.e., "Malaysian signs of a global affliction").[25] This entails a crisis of "sense" and "world," an obliteration of meaning, and breakdowns in subjectivities. In other words, Ahmad's films' "keenest insight is an understanding of the Malaysian postcolonial-global amalgam."[26] More than just vivid snapshots of local culture and discourse, her ethnic and cultural pluralism exudes a sense of illusory warmth that can be understood "as statements on behalf of capitalism, an ideology that has no use for cultural difference that is not commodified for the market."[27] This befits Malaysia's postcolonial, multicultural legacy that has always been entwined with economic prosperity and a penchant for globalization uncharacteristic of postcolonial experiences in the "developing world."[28] Sim's reading renders familiar postcolonial models and tropes such as Third Cinema, accented cinema, hybridity, and creolization not entirely fitting for the case of Malaysian cinema.

Sim scrutinizes Indonesian postcoloniality in chapter 4 to redefine Indonesian colonialism vis-à-vis American influences and locates a key characteristic of its cinema in the "appearance of an American uncanny through film genre discourse."[29] Here, Sim reassesses the generic stability of contemporary Indonesian cinema—in particular the post–New Order *reformasi*-inspired films, positing that "deep within genre films lie the vestiges of a national imperative on stability and order that once served both the New Order and America's Cold War machinations."[30] Noting Indonesian cinema's deep ideological commitment to Hollywood storytelling in terms of the classical principles of coherence and closure, Sim contends that the seemingly anticolonial, politically critical Indonesian

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25. Sim, 163 and 165.
26. Sim, 162.
27. Sim, 161.
28. Sim, 144.
29. Sim, 174 and 183.
30. Sim, 177.

films could have been conduits of Americanism,[31] which reenacted New Order priorities and delimited aesthetic choices for films to negotiate the past.[32] Genre stability, which was previously thought to be Indonesian cinema's localizing quality, in fact "underwrite[s] the values of stability and order that legitimized Suharto."[33] It demonstrates how US neocolonialism had held sway on Indonesian subjectivity and memory.[34] Sim argues that this has stultified post-Suharto reformasi filmmaking as the practice set to work through the traumas of Suharto's US-backed New Order violence.

Overall, Sim's main thesis is that postcoloniality "manifest[s] stylistically through Singapore's preoccupations with space, the importance of sound to Malay culture, and the Indonesian investment in genre."[35] His book covers the topics of Singapore-space, Malay(sia)-sound, and Indonesia-(genre) stability, adding new insights to similar subjects in previous studies.[36] The book succeeds in "vary[ing] and renew[ing] postcolonial film studies"[37] and broadening the aesthetic taxonomy of postcolonial cinema and postcolonial theories.[38] It is a valuable addition to the study of national cinema poetics, with its demonstration of how these national cinemas and their postcolonial poetics diverge from conventional Anglo-American studies of postcolonial film aesthetics that tend to emphasize hybridity, syncretism, and creolization extracted primarily from experiences from the Middle East, South Asia,

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31. Sim, 186.

32. Sim, 196.

33. Sim, 186.

34. Sim, 194.

35. Sim, 19.

36. Lilian Chee and Edna Lim, eds., *Asian Cinema and the Use of Space: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, first ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015); Adil Johan, *Cosmopolitan Intimacies: Malay Film Music from the Independence Era* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2018); Thomas Barker, *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019).

37. Sim, *Postcolonial Hangups*, 32.

38. Sim, 33 and 46–47.

Africa, and Latin America.[39] With its contextualized use of critical theory, the book also has potential in "rejuvenat[ing] Southeast Asian studies by 'deparochializing' the field and encouraging greater interaction 'between scholars of and from the region.'"[40]

Considering that the national paradigm has lost much of its luster over the past decades (giving way to the rise of border transcending and the "transnational" approaches), it is noteworthy that both *Southeast Asia on Screen* and *Postcolonial Hangups* invoke the "national" in framing their subjects. Taking into account factors such as the lingering effects of founding Southeast Asian national narratives and the rise of Southeast Asian "new nationalisms," among others, the "national" remains a germane conceptual tool for studying a complex geopolitical region that bears its recent histories of anticolonial, nationalist, and independence movements.[41] Even as global(izing) forces continue to mine "post nation-states" or the condition of the "postnational," the notion of nationhood remains one of the most preeminent forces shaping the realities and imaginations of the region and its peoples. In this regard, Sim is forthright in his defense of the national model, expressing a strong resolve from the outset to "withstand strong intellectual countercurrents [against the national model]."[42] In the introductory chapter, Sim contends that transnational cinemas are "ill-fitting categories for what remain nationally specific experiences in Southeast Asia."[43] Likewise, several chapters in *Southeast Asia on Screen* demonstrate the histories of state interventions and various nationalization schemes in the film industries of Southeast Asian countries between 1945 and 1998. These books

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39. Sim, 19 and 25.

40. Sim, 47.

41. Maya Tudor and Dan Slater, "Nationalism, Authoritarianism and Democracy: Historical Lessons from South and Southeast Asia," *Perspectives on Politics* (May 2020): 1–17; Tuong Vu, "Southeast Asia's New Nationalism: Causes and Significance," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia*, special issue, *Redefining and Recontextualising Politics in Southeast Asia* 1, no. 2 (July 2013): 259–79.

42. Sim, *Postcolonial Hangups*, 37.

43. Sim, 37–38.

suggest that the paradigm of "national cinema" proves to be indispensable in understanding filmmaking activities in the Southeast Asian region.

Having said that, both books seem to work strategically at the "edges" of things, presenting two different methodologies in critically invoking the concept of the national. *Southeast Asia on Screen* pushes the boundaries of nationalism further to address a broad spectrum of Southeast Asian nationalisms instead of conforming to state-endorsed nationalism. The ideological analysis and causal reasoning in some of the chapters may seem a little overdeterministic at certain points, but their collective perspectives concur with the editor's claim that the chapters "address counter-narratives told on screen" and "interrogate how 'the national popular' is both imagined and represented, highlighting obedient state-aligned depictions as well as subtle critical response and the wider transnational trends impacting across the region."[44]

If *Southeast Asia on Screen* urges us to reevaluate Southeast Asia national cinemas and rethink their conceptual boundaries vis-à-vis state-endorsed versions, Sim's theoretically invested work reinstates the nationalistic value of films that fundamentally reject or rupture epistemological traditions and boundaries. Sim seems to point the reader to a critical discourse of postcolonial nationalist self-determination effected through filmmaking practices that question conventional means of interpretation, myth making, and meaning making. With reflexive quality, Tan Pin Pin's cartographic cinema foregrounds the impossibility of representation and the difficulty in grasping the past with absolute certainty. Yasmin Ahmad's cinematic soundscape is logos defying and recalls Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of "resonance" and his counsel to deprioritize the search for absolute meanings. The Indonesian *reformasi* films unwittingly inherit US neocolonialism and the New Order regime's claims to legitimize order and stability as a result of their adherence to the road films' narrative and formalistic structures. Throughout the book, Sim seems to affirm the transformative potential of formalistic

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44. Cheng, "Introduction," 14.

experimentation over structural conventions, suggesting that cinema's boundary-blurring practices can be a salient way of constructing a self-reflexive (postcolonial national) self that has a nuanced understanding of the past and the present and is better equipped to deal with power complexities and potential "colonial hang-ups."

This self-conscious spirit guides the author's extensive analysis of Indonesian director Edwin's films *Blind Pig Who Wants to Fly* (2008) and *Trip to the Wound* (2008) in his concluding chapter. Sim notes that Edwin's films are coated with ambiguity. The director "insists on obliqueness over direct narration, distance instead of immersion, and defamiliarization not identification," overloading images with "stylistic gestures that deposit opacity on screen."[45] Hailed as a "trailblazer for Indonesia" at international film festivals where Western critics celebrate his visual excess and lackadaisical plots, Edwin has, however, been derided by his fellow Indonesian critics because his stylized films are viewed as "facile, self-indulgent veneers that distract him from serious issues."[46] Local critics have faulted Edwin for "abdicating responsibility to speak more directly on politics, and selfishly seeking festival approbations by fashioning a pastiche of foreign art cinema instead."[47] Even though his films "dwell intently on Indonesian cultural politics and pick at some of the freshest scars in its national history of social conflicts," Edwin is, at best, "critically marginalized in and around his own country."[48] Sim recuperates Edwin's socially conscious works from their bipolar assessments and finds "productive connections between Edwin's style and politics" by reading the films through the lens of haptic cinema and essayistic filmmaking.[49] Sim argues that Edwin's films engage the viewer through distantiation as "the Brechtian thinking goes."[50] Since the director encourages witnesses to

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45. Sim, *Postcolonial Hangups*, 212 and 217.
46. Sim, 219–21.
47. Sim, 221.
48. Sim, 212.
49. Sim.
50. Sim, 219.

grasp the artistic encounter politically and invites self-determination in his films, the unbound narratives free audiences to harbor doubt and insecurity, as well as autonomy and possibility, and raise a forceful counterpoint to the ideological classicism of transparent storytelling and formulaic genres. In light of links between US neocolonialism, authoritarian New Order ideology, and genre conformism, Sim reaffirms Edwin's aesthetic style as a powerful tool for postcolonial (self-)critique and political criticism: "Whereas many [*reformasi*] films making willful interventions in social controversies and hot button issues remain constrained by a generic affliction of postcolonial history, Edwin in contrast seems indifferent when he wanders from the aesthetic mean. His work eschews clarity and the ideological mandate for ordered and stable texts."[51]

Sim's assessment of Edwin's style is a vindication of cinematic self-reflexivity that threads through *Postcolonial Hangups*. The author embraces self-critical, nonconformist, edge-tottering aesthetic styles as the productive means to interrogate national and postcolonial subject formation in Southeast Asia. His apparent disdain for (or suspicion of) fixed and stable edges in cinematic representation is informed by his staunch belief in the importance of self-analysis in subject formation:

> This means taking seriously the best values of *humanitas*, the "self-reflective knowing about knowing and . . . the legislation of new means of knowing to which 'man' willingly subjects himself," Those words echo in Chen [Kuan-hsing]'s proposal for the colonized as well to undergo "self-critique, self-negation, and self-discovery . . . to form a less coerced and more reflexive and dignified subjectivity." Collectively, they inform the process of self-analysis that I began in the introduction and continued here. Among the filmmakers presented, Tan Pin Pin and Edwin are exemplary in that regard, inordinately ready to test the limits and contingencies of their respective subjectivities. For Chen, underwriting these risks is part of

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51. Sim, 212.

the painful but necessary process of deimperialization, during which both colonizer and colonized transform their understandings of each other. This ultimately rehistoricizes and decenters the world. The focus of this conclusion, by holding a mirror up to itself, represents the book's resolve to fulfill that duty.[52]

Sharing a critical interest in examining the "national" in Southeast Asian cinemas, *Postcolonial Hangups* and *Southeast Asia on Screen* make use of distinctly different methodologies and focus on diverse geopolitical regions and their cinemas. The two books expand the limits of Southeast Asian, Asian, national, and postcolonial cinema as well as lend insights to film aesthetics. Both books have incorporated valuable and new perspectives with much-appreciated historical depths. Invested readers will surely benefit from the vast array of film texts examined as well as the knowledge and critical perspectives offered by these specialists of the field.

52. Sim, 229–30.

Film Reviews

Nomadland: An American or Chinese Story?

Review of *Nomadland* (Chloe Zhao, 2020)

YING ZHU

The Hollywood novice and outsider Chloe Zhao wrote, directed, and edited *Nomadland* (2021), the Oscar-crowned best picture that has generated far more international attention than all the rest of its fellow academy Best Picture nominees for 2021, including the much talked about (at least among seasoned Hollywood watchers and practitioners) *Mank*, a meta cinematic tale about the birth of Hollywood's legendary film *Citizen Kane*, from the quintessential US film industry insider David Fincher. *Nomadland*, a film set in the American hinterland, has somehow outshined *Mank* among the chattering classes—not necessarily for its cinematic feats but for the director's Chinese origin. It is China—not the Academy Award nor *Nomadland* as an artistic text—that has become the focus of most of the media coverage about the film.

The China-born but UK- and US-educated Chloe Zhao won the Best Director award at the Golden Globes on February 28, 2021, in an early harbinger of the film's later award season success. The Chinese Internet lit up in response to Zhao's Golden Globe, proudly claiming the otherwise little-known filmmaker as China's native daughter. But the initial euphoria in China quickly turned sour when old interviews surfaced that Zhao had been critical of China on a couple of occasions, including an interview she gave that revealed she was drawn to stories about the American heartland as a result of her upbringing in China, "a place where there are lies everywhere,"

to use her own words.[1] Zhao's subsequent Oscar win received scant official coverage in China but provided fodder for ample coverage in the West of censorship, making *Nomadland* an obligatory story about China. In an era when China has become the single most dominant topic, the story of *Nomadland* inevitably falls into the normative China discourse. Is *Nomadland* an American or Chinese story?

Nomadland as an American Myth

A story about mostly elderly van dwellers set in modern-day United States, *Nomadland* is an adaptation of Jessica Bruder's 2017 nonfiction book *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*, which follows a group of itinerant workers—predominantly white and in the Trump world literally and metaphorically—as they travel the path of seasonal jobs to eke out a meagre living. If there is a strong political and moral condemnation of a system that has failed to protect the dispossessed and the elderly in Bruder's original text, the film has mostly transformed such a repudiation into a celebration of resilience, self-reliance, and the rugged individualism and freedom engendered by the open road. The film casts a utopian light on the roaming workcampers, projecting them as individuals who willingly combine work with travel by swapping brick and mortar real estate for the liberating vans, RVs, and other forms of "wheel estate." Instead of seeing the work campers as the casualties of the 2008 economic downturn, Zhao's cinematic rendition amplifies the liberating power of their journey toward self-discovery and self-fulfillment as it spotlights the gumption and work ethic of the wanderers. Muted is the critique of the systematic letdown of the elderly and the working class. Unlike the desperate white Okies in *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940) who are forced to travel to escape poverty,

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1. Suyin Haynes, "Here' Why Chloé Zhao's Oscars Win Was Censored in China," *Time*, April 27, 2021, https://time.com/5959003/chloe-zhao-oscars-censorship/.

the characters in *Nomadland* are the brave and the bold who embrace the life of an open road, with no desire to settle and no need for a home to return to. "I'm not homeless," as Fern, the main character in *Nomadland*, declares, "I'm just houseless."[2]

The people living on the edge of society wander as a choice rather than a condition in the film. The transformation of *Nomadland* from an expose about American poverty to a film about individual resilience is unmistakably Zhao's touch. Such an attitudinal orientation is reflected in her two previous films, *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015), which explores the bond between two Lakota Sioux siblings set in the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, and *The Rider* (2017), which features a young cowboy in South Dakota fighting to regain his footing in the world after suffering a life-threatening injury. Both films celebrate the triumph of people on the

Figure 1: Frances McDormand as Fern in *Nomadland*. This shot is one of the most popular from the film. *Source*: © Searchlight Pictures.

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2. Eric Kohn, " 'Nomadland': How Chloé Zhao Made a Secret Road Movie While Becoming a Marvel Director," IndieWire, September 8, 2020, https://www.indiewire.com/2020/09/nomadland-interview-chloe-zhao-1234584703/.

margins who overcome hardship and inner demons, and in the process learn to connect and make peace with the land and the natural environment. There is almost a sacred deference to the landscape in all its natural glory throughout all three films that Zhao has made so far, which inadvertently resurrects the myth of the American West.

Debunking or Celebrating the Myth of the American West

Emily VanDerWerff, a critic at large for Vox who herself grew up in the American hinterland is critical of Zhao's perpetuation of such a myth: "She [Zhao] is superb at capturing how that part of the country feels about itself—a rugged, romantic individualism full of cowboy myth and rough-and-ready ideals. But I think she is sometimes too unwilling to puncture that myth, for whatever reason."[3] The "whatever reason" might have to do with Zhao's position as a cultural outsider with no historical memory and political urgency nor certain ideological predispositions to unpack the myth of the frontier that has advanced the most ruthless version of US capitalism.

But the "whatever reason" might also be that Zhao has her own unique take on the American West, which genuinely embraces a more celebratory view of US individualism and averts films that take a critical stand on political issues. Consistent throughout Zhao's short oeuvre is her insistence on a nonjudgmental approach that lets the characters define their own stories. Both *The Rider* and *Nomadland* feature real-life characters with voices of their own that set the tone on how they wish to be perceived by the world—not as problems but as individuals who control their own destiny. In a live interview conducted at the University of Oregon in May 2018, after she made *The Rider*, Zhao told eager film students that "I was much more interested in portraying them [the characters in *The Rider*] as human beings

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3. Kohn, " 'Nomadland.' "

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rather than issues."[4] "I know they don't want to be remembered as an issue, as victims. They want to be remembered with dignity," reiterated Zhao in a later interview with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in February 2021, this time about *Nomadland* after the film brought her the Best Director award at the Golden Globe.[5] "Issues" in Zhao's usage can perhaps be more accurately interpreted as staking a political and ideological positioning.

The Aversion to Politics and Zhao's China Link

The "not a film about issues" claim is not surprising, given Zhao's personal background as the daughter of a ranking Chinese Communist Party (CCP) family with a front-row seat on the viciousness of frequent "issues" masking party politics. Zhao's maternal great-grandfather was Huang Huoging, the procurator-general of the Supreme People's Procuratorate of China from 1978 to 1983 who presided over the persecution of the notorious Gang of Four.[6] Huang Yichen, Huang Huoqing's son, and Zhao's grandfather, was the People's Republic of China's minister of energy from 1988 to 1993. The hushed official Chinese coverage of Zhao upon her Oscar nod likely followed the party's as well as the family's wish to remain under the radar so as to avoid a potential political fallout by incurring the wrath of the new party elite or the patriotic Chinese netizens who questioned Zhao's political

4. Mia Vicino, "Filmmaker Chloé Zhao Visits UO to Teach Directing and Discuss Her New Film 'The Rider,' Realist Cinema, and More," *Daily Emerald*, May 2, 2018, https://www.dailyemerald.com/arts-culture/filmmaker-chlo-zhao-visits-uo-to-teach-directing-and-discuss-her-new-film-the-rider/article_91a46373-bdde-55ba-9c6e-484dccdefb0b.html.

5. Gary Thompson, "'Nomadland' Director Chloé Zhao Saw Frances McDormand as 'a Modern-Day John Wayne,'" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 24, 2021, https://www.inquirer.com/entertainment/nomadland-diretor-chloe-zhao-frances-mcdormand-20210224.html.

6. The Gang of Four refers to a political faction composed of four Chinese Communist Party officials led by Jiang Qing, Mao's last wife who came to power during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and were later charged by the post-Mao Chinese government for the worst excesses of their political turmoil. Their downfall in 1976 marked the end of a turbulent political era in China.

allegiances. Though her particular family background puts her in a tenuous position, Zhao is not unique in wanting to steer clear of politics and ideology. The urge to avoid engaging politics is symptomatic of the deep-rooted suspicion and apprehension among generations of Chinese living under the CCP's incessant and invasive political campaigns, which have politicized all aspects of people's lives. Seen in this light, the aversion to political engagement is not a simple matter of lack of critical awareness.

Interesting to note that, in making her films, Zhao has in mind audiences back in China: "I keep thinking about my family back in China—how would they feel about a cowboy in South Dakota, or a woman in her 60s living in America?" she said: "If I make it too specific to any issues, I know it's going to create a barrier. They'd go, 'That's their problem.'"[7] Elsewhere, Zhao said that "I always think when I make a film, I want my family back

Figure 2: Frances McDormand and director Chloe Zhao share a moment in the set of *Nomadland*. *Source*: © Searchlight Pictures via France24 (https://www.france24.com/en/culture/20210411-gig-economy-film-nomadland-wins-four-bafta-awards-including-best-picture).

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7. Kohn, "'Nomadland.'"

in China, who don't speak English and don't care much what is happening here, to be able to watch this movie and relate. To do that, I have to focus on human stories."[8] But watch they cannot, back in China—at least, not officially, though I ironically watched it, before the film was officially distributed in Hong Kong on an illegal Chinese streaming site with Chinese subtitles supplied by a film buff in China.

Zhao's nonissue posturing notwithstanding, American critics do "take issues" with *Nomadland* for its airbrushing of the exploitations of Amazon, for its lack of racial diversity by featuring mostly white characters and for its thematic neutrality. Where the original book calls our attention to the shady practices of Amazon for offering free painkillers that makes it possible for the elderly employees to bend and lift for ten hours at a stretch, Zhao's film shows the company giving jobs to people in need. At a group discussion about the film, Emily VanDerWerff expressed her frustration over the film's lack of a clear message: "I wouldn't need it to be more direct about capitalism if it was less evasive with Fern, and vice versa. As it stands, it's a movie about something failing somebody, and then it all ends with a vague justification of, 'Well, we're all sad.' "[9]

As for the charge of whiteness, one critic wonders how the film might look and feel if, say, a black or brown actor instead of Frances McDormand were to be cast as Fern.[10] Would the film elicit different reactions were it to feature an Asian in the lead? Zhao's racial insensitivity or "color-blindness" might have been the result of her lack of exposure and deep understanding of the history of racial tension in the United States. But accentuating race

8. Stephanie Bunbury, "Why Frances McDormand Chose Director Chloe Zhao to Tell the Nomadland Story," *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 25, 2020, https://www.smh.com.au/culture/movies/why-frances-mcdormand-chose-director-chloe-zhao-to-tell-the-nomadland-story-20201218-p56or7.html.

9. Alissa Wilkinson, Dylan Scott, and Emily VanDerWerff, "On Nomadland, the Oscars, and that Amazon Question," Vox, April 20, 2021, https://www.vox.com/22364048/nomadland-oscars-best-picture-roundtable-amazon.

10. Wilkinson, Scott, VanDerWerff, "On Nomadland."

would have turned the picture into an "issue film," something Zhao has insisted on avoiding.

As if to ward off any potential political traps, Zhao has been persistently adamant about the nonissue nature of her work. In an interview with *Indiewir*e in September 2020, Zhao let it be known that she made a deliberate effort to depoliticize the story: "I tried to focus on the human experience and things that I feel go beyond political statements to be more universal—the loss of a loved one, searching for home."[11] In December 2020, during an interview with the *Sunday Morning Herald*, Zhao said, "My instinct is to talk more about the things that relate us than the things that can potentially divide us."[12] In February 2021, to the same *Indiewire*, Zhao again reiterated, "I want to make films that last, that have a timeless feel to them, that aren't just a flash in the pan with whatever topic is trending on Twitter right now. I'm not interested in that stuff."[13]

In the end, *Nomadland*'s "whiteness" both in culture and in characters it features is very much a given, as the story takes place in white Trump country, the place its leading lady, Frances McDormand, was born into.

Nomadland and Frances McDormand

Though the film is directed by Zhao, it is Frances McDormand—an actress who has called her own upbringing "white trash"[14]—who lends the weight to, and whose very presence makes the film. *Nomadland* singles out the story of Fern, a newly widowed woman and novice van dweller who joins others

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11. Kohn, " 'Nomadland.' "
12. Bunbury, "Why Frances McDormand."
13. Ryan Lattanzio, "Chloé Zhao Sets 'Nomadland' Followup with Sci-Fi Western Spin on 'Dracula,' " IndieWire, February 4, 2021, https://www.indiewire.com/2021/02/chloe-zhao-dracula-sci-fi-western-nomadland-1234614833/.
14. Jordan Kisner, "Frances McDormand's Difficult Women," *New York Times*, October 3, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/03/magazine/frances-mcdormand-difficult-women-career-surge.html.

to spend their golden years working odd jobs across the American West. The silhouette of a solitary Fern/McDormand with her impenetrable yet soft gaze into the distance against the vast landscape embodies *Nomadland*. In what Justin Chang describes as "the innate kinship between character and actor," McDormand's serenely wistful face embodies Fern, whose character remains an enigma to us with her guarded smile and watchful gaze and the skeletal personal history that the film cares to reveal to us.[15] There is pain but also beauty in Fern's loneliness.

Despite the stillness of her weathered face and her easygoing smiles for new friends, there is a restlessness in Fern that pushes against societal norms.[16] A reluctant work camper initially, Fern must overcome trepidations. "I couldn't pack up and move on," Fern says in the film: "I couldn't leave [Beau] . . . we didn't have kids . . . if I left, it would be like he never existed, so I stayed as long as I could." Fern finally hits the road, taking her

Figure 3: Frances McDormand as Fern in *Nomadland*.
Source: © Searchlight Pictures.

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15. Justin Chang, "Review: Frances McDormand Is at Her Finest in 'Nomadland,' a Sublime Ode to American Wanderlust," *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 2020, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2020-12-02/nomadland-review-frances-mcdormand.
16. Irene Chou, " 'Nomadland,' A Poignant Portrait of Grief and Healing," *Brown Daily Herald*, March 9, 2021, https://www.browndailyherald.com/2021/03/09/nomadland-poignant-portrait-grief-healing/.

uncalled-for freedom for the ride. On the road alone, with the vast un-known, must be unsettling, but the hauntingly beautiful wildness is equally alluring. Traversed by the real-life nomads, the landscape of the American West adds new meanings to the old iconographies of Hollywood's westerns. McDormand transforms Zhao's at-times romanticized version of the Western frontier into a meditation on loss and the struggle to simultaneously hold onto and let go of the past.

As one blogger put it while commenting on *Nomadland*, "Loss can feel like a nowhere land of moving aimlessly from feeling to feeling, place to place, inside your mind. You've lost the home you know, with a person that you love. There's sadness, anger, memories—as you grapple with the challenges of an uprooted life. Chloé Zhao's Best Picture nominee, *Nomadland*, takes us there, with Frances McDormand's Fern leading the way through the open expanses of loss. Loss is a journey, not unlike the one Fern takes in her trusty van, Vanguard."[17] And there is so much Fern holds in that we are left with the overwhelming sensation of loss and longing, all kept behind McDormand's eyes. While uniquely American set against the North America landscape and personal to Fern, the theme of loss and grief is universal.[18]

In an interview with the *Sunday Morning Herald* in December 2020, McDormand quoted an observation made by a journalist about her performance in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*: "They said, you know, that 'a close-up of Frances McDormand's face is like visiting a national park.'"[19] McDormand loves the quote "because it is about an unaltered, ageing face that gives you perspective, like a natural landscape."[20] Indeed, McDormand's face is the embodiment of the weathered yet resilient America

17. Sandra E. Cohen, "Nomadland: A Lonely Nomad in the Land of Loss," Characters on the Couch, accessed October 1, 2021, https://charactersonthecouch.com/film/nomadland-a-lonely-nomad-in-the-land-of-loss/.
18. Kyle Buchanan, "What Frances McDormand Would (and Wouldn't) Give to 'Nomadland,'" *New York Times*, February 22, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/22/movies/frances-mcdormand-nomadland.html.
19. Bunbury, "Why Frances McDormand."
20. Bunbury.

that refuses to be beaten down, which is the motif of *Nomadland* under Zhao. The tough-as-nails spirit in Fern fits into Zhao's cinematic universe.[21]

Interestingly, it takes a sojourner from across the ocean to discover anew, and shine the light on, the enigmatically weathered face of McDormand. Hollywood worships the young and eschews the wrinkled when it comes to featuring female leads. Now a sexagenarian and never a conventional beauty, McDormand is finding it challenge to secure good roles. Hollywood "is such an ageist industry," Zhao told a *New York Times* reporter: "Someone like Frances McDormand who is just so authentically herself, who has not tried to erase those lines on her face or cover that up to fit into the industry—to me, she'll be relevant forever."[22] It takes an outsider to appreciate and preserve the face of McDormand and, in turn, America. The result is a performance that simply lets the aged actor be.

Figure 4: Zhao and McDormand in the set of *Nomadland*.
Source: © Searchlight Pictures via *India Times*.

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21. Chou, "'Nomadland,'"
22. Buchanan, "What Frances McDormand."

Last but not the least, there is "a spiritual presence" hovering over the film, notes Justin Chang, who uses the term *grace* to capture the aura of this sparingly plotted yet emotionally rich movie. The grace is what transcends a potentially "issue film" into a film about humanity.[23] The grace is delivered by "plaintive musical score"[24] of Ludovico Einaudi and the meditative landscape captured by the cinematographer, who happens to be Zhao's beau. The film is a profound meditation on the impermanence of life and on our simultaneous yearning for solitude and for the company of others. The film in the end is about an attitude and a world view.

"I'll see you down the road," calls out Bob Wells, one of the real-life characters, which encapsulates the film's almost Zen-like acceptance of one's inner peace and solitude as we embark on our journey, crisscross each other, and be at each other's side when chance encounters allow. For the duration of the film, we as viewers are offered the privilege of traveling alongside Fern and her fellow nomads. Watching the film is akin to embarking on an adventure with random encounters, some long-lasting, some transitory, but always thrilling. In the end, *Nomadland* is a universal story located in the American hinterland and seen through the eyes of a Chinese sojourner.

23. Wilkinson, Scott, and VanDerWerff, "On Nomadland."

24. Eric Kohn, " 'Nomadland' Review: Frances McDormand and Chloé Zhao Create Magic in a Lyrical Road Movie," IndieWire, September 11, 2020, https://www.indiewire.com/2020/09/nomadland-review-1234585838/.

New from Netflix: *Mank*, Fincher, and A Hollywood Creation Tale

Review of *Mank* (David Fincher, 2020)

THOMAS SCHATZ

Mank is a study in paradox—at once classical and modernist, retro and cutting edge, an exquisite recreation of Golden Age Hollywood and a blithely inaccurate recounting of how one of its greatest achievements came to be. The film charts the writing of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941)—or, more precisely, the screenplay's first draft—by Herman J. Mankiewicz while also conjuring (in an elaborate weave of flashbacks) the writer's inspiration for Charles Foster Kane via his relationship with William Randolph Hearst. And in terms of the story it tells, the manner of its telling, and the process of its making, *Mank* probes an elemental paradox of commercial cinema: the nagging issue of authorship.

Mank was directed by David Fincher from a screenplay by his long-deceased father, Jack Fincher (who died in 2003) and was financed and released by Netflix. It was Fincher's first feature since *Gone Girl*, an enormous hit for Fox in 2014, released just after he pivoted to series work for Netflix on *House of Cards*. Fincher was an executive producer on the hit series and directed the first two episodes, which ran in 2013 and earned him an Emmy. Since then, he's been similarly involved in Netflix's *Mindhunter* (2017–2019). Now Fincher is pivoting back to feature films, and not just with *Mank*. Just before Netflix rolled out the film in November 2020, Fincher disclosed a four-year deal with Netflix specifically geared to features. "I like the idea of having a body of work," he told *Premiere* magazine, admitting

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that "it feels strange, after 40 years in this profession, to have only ten films to my credit."[1]

Actually, Fincher is credited with eleven features but refuses to include the first of them in his oeuvre, the disastrous *Alien 3* (1992, also for Fox), on which he replaced a dismissed director, battled the studio throughout production, and watched helplessly as the film was butchered in postproduction and then flopped. Fincher retreated from Hollywood for three seething years after *Alien 3*, directing TV commercials and music vids for Propaganda Films, a company he cofounded in the 1980s while still in his twenties that ruled the MTV rotation. Fincher had created Propaganda with the express intent of storming the Hollywood bastille, and he did come storming back in 1995 with *Se7en*. That breakout hit jump-started his filmmaking career, and over the next two decades, Fincher became one of the industry's most celebrated auteurs, specializing in dark psychodramas á la *Se7en* and others such as *Fight Club* (1999), *Zodiac* (2007), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), and *Gone Girl* and offbeat character studies like *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) and *The Social Network* (2010).

The genesis of *Mank* dates back to the unhappy *Alien 3* period in the early 1990s when Fincher's father, Jack, a retired bureau chief for *Life* magazine who had taken up screenwriting, was casting about for a subject. David suggested that he reread Pauline Kael's "Raising Kane," her sensational and notoriously one-sided account of the Mankiewicz-Welles collaboration on *Citizen Kane*.[2] As David recalls: "I said, Is there a movie in Mankiewicz pulling

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1. Francois Léger, "Mank: David Fincher a un contrat d'exclusivité de 4 ans avec Netflix," *Premiere*, November 11, 2020. *Premiere* is a leading French film publication. Fincher's comments were immediately picked up and widely reported in the US press. See, for example, Elsa Keslassy, "David Fincher Has Signed a Four-Year Deal with Netflix, Director Tells French Magazine," *Variety*, November 12, 2020; Zach Sharf, "Fincher 'Feels Strange' about His Lack of Output, Joined Netflix to Strengthen His Body of Work," *IndieWire*, November 11, 2020. Translation of Fincher's comments vary slightly; quoted material in this piece are my translations.

2. Pauline Kael, "Raising Kane—I," *New Yorker*, February 20, 1971; and Kael, "Raising Kane—II," *New Yorker*, February 27, 1971.

this thing out the ether and laying it out for this movie brat to make? And Jack went off and wrote the script."[3]

As Fincher's suggestion indicates, Kael's take on the creation of *Citizen Kane* had been required reading for anyone interested in cinema and in film criticism in the early 1970s, when auteurism was all the rage and the Hollywood renaissance was putting a new generation of "movie brats"—Coppola, Bogdanovich, Scorsese, Spielberg, and the rest—on the industry map. Kael was America's most prominent critic, and "Raising Kane" was a major publishing event in 1971, initially as a two-part fifty-thousand-word essay in the *New Yorker* (where Mankiewicz toiled briefly as a drama critic before he lit out for Hollywood), then in *The Citizen Kane Book*, where it appeared as a lengthy preface to the film's "shooting script."[4]

In "Raising Kane," Kael contended that Mankiewicz was the chief progenitor of the *Kane* screenplay and that his contribution was as important to the film's singular artistry as Welles's direction. And while deflating the origin story of a canonized classic, Kael also renewed a scuffle with Andrew Sarris dating back to his introduction of the "auteur theory" to US cinephiles in the early 1960s.[5] "Raising Kane" set off a firestorm that went on for several years, highlighted by "The Kane Mutiny," an in-depth refutation by critic-turned-filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich that appeared in *Esquire* in October 1972 and by scholar Robert L. Carringer's analysis of the screenplay's development (through seven drafts) in "The Scripts of *Citizen Kane*," a 1978 article in *Critical Inquiry*. Carringer expanded that piece into a 1985 book, *The Making of Citizen Kane*, which detailed the Mankiewicz-Welles

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3. Fincher, quoted in Jonah Weiner, "David Fincher's Impossible Eye," *New York Times Magazine*, November 19, 2020.

4. Pauline Kael, *The Citizen Kane Book* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

5. Sarris introduced the French critics' "*politique des auteurs*" to the US community in Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," *Film Culture* (Winter 1962–63). Kael first went after Sarris in Pauline Kael, "Circles and Squares," *Film Quarterly* (Spring).

collaboration, spelled out their shared responsibility for the conception and writing of *Citizen Kane* and seemed to finally settle the matter.[6]

Thus, the *Kane* screenplay controversy was well-trod ground when the Finchers returned to it in the early 1990s, and there was precious little basis for a making-of yarn that had Mankiewicz pulling the story of *Kane* "out of the either and laying it out for this movie brat to make." But Jack doubled down on that version, and in fact David found his father's first draft too stridently anti-Welles—"An arbitration screed," he told *Variety*, "that seemed to me like a lot of sour grapes." He convinced Jack to tone down Welles's bullying and Mankiewicz's victimization in subsequent drafts, and David himself continued to refine (and tone down) the story in his own later rewrites.[7]

Mank was in and out of development over the years but failed to materialize, due mainly to Fincher's insistence that it be shot in black and white. It finally came together in 2019, when Netflix greenlit the picture in the $30 million range. That was well below the budgets on Fincher's studio pictures, but still he was able to reconvene the unit he'd assembled for those films, including production designer Don Burt, director of photography Erik Messerschmidt, costume designer Trish Summerville, sound designer Ren Klyce, editor Kirk Baxter, and composers Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross (all of whom worked on *Gone Girl*).

New to Fincher's orbit was Gary Oldman in the title role, who is in every scene in *Mank* and deftly carries the picture. He is equally compelling in the film's present-day sequences (in 1940), composing the screenplay while sequestered at a desert ranch in Victorville outside Los Angeles while convalescing from a broken leg, and also in its frequent flashbacks,

6. Peter Bogdanovich, "The Kane Mutiny," *Esquire*, October 1972; Robert L Carringer, "The Scripts of *Citizen Kane*," *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 2 (1978). In 1985, Carringer produced an even more definitive assessment, *The Making of Citizen Kane* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
7. Fincher, quoted in Brent Lang, "Magnificent Obsession: David Fincher on His Three-Decade Quest to Bring 'Mank' to Life," *Variety*, November 12, 2020

flamboyantly striding—or drunkenly stumbling—between Hollywood and the Hearst estate at San Simeon. Oldman was just off an Oscar-winning turn as Winston Churchill in *The Darkest Hour* (1917), playing someone many years older, and here the stretch was in the other direction. Oldman was sixty-one when *Mank* was shot, and Mankiewicz was just forty-three in 1940. But Fincher "needed an actor's actor," and Netflix staunchly supported the casting move, selling *Mank* on Oldman's marquee value as well as Fincher's.[8]

Mank was prepped in four months, shot it ten weeks, and then edited in another ten weeks—a remarkably tight schedule for a period film with such elaborate design and effects work and for a notoriously demanding director prone to shooting dozens, even hundreds, of takes. Facilitating the workflow was the fact that Fincher and Messerschmidt were shooting digitally on a specially made RED 8K Helium Monochrome (black and white) camera. And the cinematography was another of *Mank*'s paradoxical qualities, strongly invoking Gregg Toland's camerawork on *Kane* and the monochromatic esthetic of classical Hollywood while *Mank*'s wide-screen format, stunning day-for-night sequences, and digital effects give it a very contemporary look and feel. Digital technology also was used to effectively antiquate the footage and create *Mank*'s film-grade "patina," as Fincher called it—adding the scratches and crackles that typified celluloid, for instance, and inserting reel-change cues (and the accompanying audial pops) throughout the film.[9]

Mank's story structure invokes *Kane* as well, with the steadily intensifying present-day drama—Mankiewicz's deadline-driven quest to deliver a satisfactory screenplay draft to Welles—intercut with flashbacks presented chronologically, for the most part, tracing three narrative arcs: Mank's professional decline and deepening disillusion with Hollywood, the unionization

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8. Tim Gray, "David Fincher on 'Mank': I Don't Want Sympathy for Mankiewicz, I Want Empathy,'" *Variety*, January 15, 2021.

9. On the digitally created effects and "patina," see Mark Harris, "Nerding out with David Fincher," Vulture, October 23, 2020, https://www.vulture.com/2020/10/david-fincher-mank.html. See also Lang, "Magnificent Obsession."

of Hollywood writers and the 1934 California gubernatorial race between Republican Frank Merriam and Democrat Upton Sinclair (a celebrated writer and avowed socialist), and Mankiewicz's relationship with Hearst (Charles Dance), which progresses from mutual bemusement to something much darker. This dark turn is fueled by Hearst's support of the effort to stop Sinclair, spearheaded in Hollywood by MGM (Mankiewicz's employer) and top executives Louis B. Mayer (Arliss Howard) and Irving Thalberg (Ferdinand Kingsley).

Mank's third act is dominated by two impressive set pieces. The first is MGM's 1934 election night party at the Trocadero, a raucous celebration of Merriam's victory but a dismal affair for Mankiewicz (see figure 1). As the party ends, he gets a call from Shelly Metcalf (Jamie McShane), an old pal at MGM who directed the fake newsreels and is crushed by Sinclair's defeat. Despite Mankiewicz's efforts to stop him, Shelly commits suicide. The other set piece is a lavish 1937 dinner party at San Simeon that Mankiewicz crashes and, in a drunken tirade, regales Hearst and his guests with a movie idea—an update of *Don Quixote* and an obvious warm-up for *Citizen Kane*. The pitch ends with Mankiewicz vomiting on the marble floor of the ornate dining hall and being escorted out by Hearst in what we sense is their last encounter. Before closing the door, Hearst pitches a story of his own, "The parable of the organ grinder's monkey," an obvious swipe at Mank, his newly banished court jester.

The two set pieces are intercut with visits to the Victorville ranch by various stakeholders in the screenplay. Mankiewicz by now is out of bed and sitting upright and has noticeably softened. The visitors include his brother Joe (Tom Pelphrey), a politically astute contract writer who warns Mankiewicz not to cross Hearst but also tells Herman that the screenplay is the best work he's ever done. Another is Marion Davies (Amanda Seyfried), a movie star and Hearst's longtime lover whose relationship with Mankiewicz is in many ways the emotional core of the story. The last visitor is Orson Welles (Tom Burke), barely glimpsed until the climactic confrontation. After they agree to press on with the picture despite Hearst's opposition, Mankiewicz rather

Figure 1: The election night party. *Source*: *Mank*, screenshot.

calmly asks for screen credit. Welles responds with a histrionic fit—but also bellows, "No doubt you'll get your credit," before storming out (see figure 2). As Welles drives off, Mankiewicz's long-suffering secretary, Rita (Lily Collins), gets word that her husband, a missing Royal Air Force pilot, has been found. "He's alive!" she cries, throwing her arms around Mankiewicz, who in the aftermath of the Welles meeting is also very much "alive," so to speak.

That closes the Victorville narrative, which is followed by a long fade to black and a brief three-scene coda: the 1942 Academy Awards, which Mankiewicz and Welles did not attend, as their Oscar for best original screenplay is announced (*Kane*'s only win on nine nominations); a Welles radio interview, his voice played over a black screen with a screenplay-style slugline (a clever conceit used throughout the film) placing him in Rio, who playfully tells Mankiewicz he "can kiss my ass"; and Mankiewicz's belated Oscar acceptance speech to the press. Standing alone, Oscar in hand, he states, "I am very happy to accept this award in the manner in which the screenplay was written, which is to say, in the absence of Orson Welles" (see figure 3). This is the only significant scene change in the film that is not introduced with a screenplay slugline, and as Mankiewicz smiles and holds up the statuette, a flashbulb ignites and the image freezes, giving it an eerie

Figure 2: Mankiewicz asks for screen credit. *Source*: *Mank*, screenshot.

Figure 3: Mankiewicz's belated Oscar acceptance speech. *Source*: *Mank*, screenshot.

newsprint quality. The camera slowly pulls in on the smiling Mankiewicz and his Oscar, as we learn in a final epigraph that he continued his self-destructive ways and died of alcoholism at age fifty-five. And so the moment of triumph morphs, finally, into an obit.

Netflix gave *Mank* a limited theatrical release in November to qualify for the Oscars and began streaming the film on December 4, 2020. It was not a streaming favorite, spending only a single day on Netflix's list of top-ten shows (on December 5, at number ten).[10] But its prestige value and critical cachet were readily evident—most notably when it topped the Critics' Choice Awards with twelve nominations, hoisting Netflix to a record forty-six nods. The film scored with the Academy as well, topping the industry with ten Oscar nominations, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor, and leading Netflix to thirty-five total nominations, more than double its closest competitor, Disney.[11]

The critics were virtually unanimous in their praise for Fincher's direction, Oldman's performance, and the film's production design. But in a curious disconnect with the historical record, even the top critics were inclined to give the Finchers a pass for their blatant distortion of *Citizen Kane*'s authorship. A.O. Scott in the *New York Times*, for instance, was scarcely surprised that *Mank* is "unreliable as history," noting that its real-life figures and events "are embedded in a spectacle that shimmers with knowing artificiality." Justin Chang in the *Los Angeles Times* acknowledged *Kane*'s "bitterly contested authorship" and then lauded Fincher's "imaginative weave of scholarship and speculation."[12] Anthony Lane of the *New Yorker*, where Kael's "Raising Kane" initially appeared, recapped the critical contretemps but had the temerity to ask, "Who cares who wrote 'Citizen Kane'?" He waves off the linkage between the 1934 campaign and Mankiewicz's conception of *Kane* and concludes—in a witticism worthy of Mankiewicz

10. Adam White, "Mank Slips Out of Netflix's Top 10 Most-Watched List within a Day of Release," *The Independent*, December 8, 2020.
11. Netflix's other top nominees were *The Trial of the Chicago 7*, with six nods, and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, with five. Disney and its various subsidiaries (Pixar, Searchlight, Hulu, et al.) scored fifteen nominations.
12. A. O. Scott, "A Rosebud by Any Other Name," *New York Times*, December 3, 2020. Justin Chang, "A Cinephile's Delight," *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 2020.

himself—that *Mank* "is a story within a story, and, for all its great beauty, it winds up chasing its own tale."[13]

While the critics tended to hedge on the authorship issue, they seemed generally clueless regarding the 1934 gubernatorial campaign. Midway through the film, Shelly Metcalf screens one of his anti-Sinclair films for Mankiewicz and asks whether "it's got that raw newsreel feel." "But it isn't news," replies Mankiewicz, "and it isn't real." The same can be said of *Mank*'s depiction of the anti-Sinclair campaign, at least in terms of both Mankiewicz's and Hearst's purported involvement. While Hearst's newspapers staunchly supported Merriam and routinely smeared Sinclair, there is no evidence that Hearst was in any way connected with the MGM misinformation campaign. According to Greg Mitchell, who literally wrote the book on the Merriam-Sinclair race (*The Campaign of the Century*), there's no evidence that Mankiewicz had any interest in Sinclair's candidacy. The suicidal Shelly Metcalf was also pure fiction, although there was an MGM test shot director who moved up to features after directing the newsreels.[14]

In the final analysis, I can live with *Mank*'s fabrications about the 1934 campaign, which don't alter the fact that *Citizen Kane* was provoked by Mankiewicz's animus toward Hearst, who indeed allowed him into his San Simeon circle and eventually cast him aside. Far more troubling are the strategic omissions about the writing of *Citizen Kane*. Shortly before the release of *Mank*, Fincher took a shot at Pauline Kael, oddly enough, in a conversation with film historian Mark Harris. "Pauline Kael knew a lot about watching movies," said Fincher: "What Pauline Kael didn't know about *making* movies could fill volumes."[15] Fincher does little to set things straight in *Mank*.

13. Anthony Lane, "'Mank" and the Making of 'Citizen Kane,'" *New Yorker*, November 13, 2020.

14. Greg Mitchell, "'Mank' and Politics: What Really Happened in 1934 California," *New York Times*, December 7, 1920.

15. Harris, "Nerding out with David Fincher."

In the film's opening scene, as the Mankiewicz entourage arrives at Victorville, Welles's producing partner John Houseman (Sam Troughton) tells the writer that he has ninety days to complete "the first draft" of the screenplay. Their conversation is interrupted by a phone call from Welles who tells Mankiewicz he has sixty days, "and then we can noodle." Before hanging up, Welles quips, "I'm toiling with you in spirit, Mank." That's the full extent of the film's acknowledgement of Welles' role in the writing of *Kane*. There is no reference—let alone flashbacks—to the hours of brainstorming and the hundreds of pages of notes the two of them generated prior to the Victorville draft. And there is no indication of the "noodling" and the subsequent cowritten drafts, as "American" gradually became *Citizen Kane*, nor to the further revisions that Welles made during production.

All of this is elided with the two-year ellipsis between Welles's departure from Victorville and Oscar night, and its erasure is completed by Mankiewicz's closing quip about writing *Kane* in the absence of Orson Welles. Thus one can only assume that the uninitiated viewer (i.e., someone not acquainted with Hollywood lore or the firestorm that Pauline Kael ignited) will come away from *Mank* thinking that Herman Mankiewicz alone was responsible for writing *Citizen Kane*.

Which raises the question of whether there is such a viewer and also the question of who actually is watching *Mank*. Critics seemed to assume, as did Fincher, that viewers are familiar with *Kane* and with the authorship flap, and are quite open to considering Mankiewicz's side of the story. Netflix, meanwhile, undoubtedly knows who's watching *Mank* but is not likely to share that information. The company is notoriously proprietary with audience data, although we know all about its algorithms. Indeed, Netflix's capacity to gauge potential viewership was a key factor in its decision to produce *House of Cards*, its first original in-house series, and to launch it with Fincher at the helm. Netflix undoubtedly ran the numbers again before greenlighting *Mank* and then ran them yet again before signing Fincher to the exclusive four-year deal.

Data aside, there are obvious risks involved in entering a long-term pact with the headstrong Fincher. But so far Netflix's risks have been rewarded, and signing a house director who is also a high-profile resident auteur may prove to be another watershed for the upstart studio. The Netflix-Fincher alliance is certainly off to a strong start with *Mank*, a prestige picture par excellence and the most heavily nominated film of 2020. Fincher is singing the praises of his new home while distancing himself from the "legacy" studios. "I've never been happier working at a place than I am at Netflix," he told *Variety*'s Brent Lang prior to *Mank*'s release: "They're building a repository. It's nice that movies have a place to exist where you don't necessarily have to shove them into spandex summer and affliction winter." And unlike so many of his big-screen colleagues, Fincher is not lamenting the sorry state of the theatrical marketplace. "Let's be real," he told Lang, "the exhibition experience is not the shining link in the chain right now."[16]

While Fincher signaled his comfort level with Netflix, he also distanced himself from TV series work. "I wasn't meant to be a showrunner," he told *Premiere* and became one "by default" on *Mindhunter*. But he came to realize he was "too obsessive and too finicky" to run a series and was unwilling to make the kind of time commitments required to sustain a hit.[17] He might also have mentioned that most successful showrunners are hyphenate writer-producers while series directors are invariably hired guns with little creative control. Fincher, in contrast, is exclusively a director with no designs on screenwriting, or producing, for that matter, which he leaves to his wife and longtime partner Ceán Chaffin. He also told *Premiere* that the agreement with Netflix is "to deliver them 'content'—whatever that word means," but it's abundantly clear that what Fincher means by "content" is feature films. And although he plans to "try very different things" at Netflix, his

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16. Lang, "Magnificent Obsession."

17. Léonard Haddad, "David Fincher: 'I signed this Netflix deal to work in the way Picasso painted' [interview]," *Premiere*, November 23, 2020, https://www.premiere.fr/Cinema/News-Cinema/David-Fincher-I-signed-this-Netflix-deal-to-work-in-the-way-Picasso-painted---interview.

first picture under the new pact is much safer bet than *Mank*—an assassin thriller written by Andrew Kevin Walker, who scripted *Se7en* (and worked uncredited on *Fight Club* and several other Fincher-directed studio films).[18]

But one can expect Fincher to take more chances on future projects, given the success of *Mank* and Netflix's growing penchant for spending and risk taking in the current streaming boom. In January, Netflix unveiled a release slate of some seventy features for 2021 as its global subscriber count approaches two hundred million.[19] This output far outpaces the traditional studios; in fact, Netflix may well release more films in 2021 than all the surviving Hollywood majors combined. Indeed, it harkens back to the halcyon classical era, when the studios controlled the marketplace and rolled out a new feature every week, which sounds a lot like Netflix today. The streaming giant will be competing with the major studios in the heady franchise arena as well. In March, it started production on *The Gray Man*, a $200 million series-spawning globe-trotting action film starring Ryan Gosling, with writer and director teams on leave from Marvel.[20] And weeks later, Netflix plunked down a staggering $450 million for two sequels to the 2019 hit *Knives Out*, with writer-director Rian Johnson and star Daniel Craig attached.[21]

Those Netflix incursions into the mainstream—and into what looks increasingly like an arms race with Disney—takes the pressure and spotlight off Fincher. As he settles in at Hollywood's newest studio, he appears to be ideally positioned to recast the house directors and resident auteurs of old—Frank Capra at Columbia, John Ford at 20th Century Fox, Vincent Minnelli at MGM—as Netflix reboots the studio system for the streaming era.

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18. Rebecca Rubin, "David Fincher to Direct Netflix Assassin Drama 'The Killer,'" *Variety*, February 24, 2021.
19. Nicole Sperling, "Netflix, Flexing Its Muscles, Announces 2021 Film Slate," *New York Times*, January 12, 2021.
20. Directing *The Gray Man* are the Russo Brothers (with four MCU films to their credit); the writers are Christopher Marcus and Stephen McFeely (three MCU films); costarring with Gosling is Chris Evans (*Captain America*).
21. Brent Lang and Matt Donnelly, "Netflix Buys 'Knives Out' Sequels for $450 Million," *Variety*, March 31, 2021.

Superheroes: The Endgame

Review of Superhero Movies

PETER BISKIND

Abstract

Comic book movies can't decide whether superheroes are human or posthuman, but either way they have reached a dead end.

For years we've been throwing our box office dollars at beefy men in tights (aka superheroes) who promise to protect us from a laundry list of dangers after the imbecile authorities have failed yet again to do so. And it's not only the cops and politicians who are largely absent from the comic book blockbusters, or, if present, they are part of the problem, but it's us, humans, who just aren't up to doing the job themselves. And now we see that the superheroes don't seem to be much good at it either. In the Russo brothers' *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), they allow melancholy Thanos, the big, bad ender-of-worlds in the two most recent Avenger movies, to turn them and half of humanity into ash by snapping his fingers. It takes them five and a half hours spread over two movies, not to mention the waste of a considerable amount of acting talent, to repair the damage. What is it with these costumed freaks? The problem seems to be that they are, when all is said and done, too much like us, too human.

This was never the case in the past, when Superman and Batman dispatched our enemies with ease. The splashy costumes they favored worked to emphasize the differences that distinguish them from mere mortals. Reflecting on his outfit in one of the *Dark Knight* movies, Batman says, "A man, however strong, however skilled, is just flesh and blood. I need to

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be more than a man. I need to be a symbol."[1] As he puts it, by transforming himself into a symbol, he dehumanizes himself.

Discarding the human, and favored with extraordinary powers, super-heroes are by definition *posthuman*. (In *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* [2016], they're called "metahumans" and elsewhere "transhumans.") Posthuman, an imprecise, omnibus term that describes real-world human upgrades facilitated by advances in AI, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and prosthetics along with, in the unreal world of these narratives, a grab bag of transformations caused by encounters with aliens, radiation, and so on.

Posthumanism has been theorized in many ways, but generally speaking, it is a species of *antihumanism*. One thread that runs through its iterations is that of *decentering* humans, elbowing them out of their place at the center of the universe where humanism had placed them, discarding the notion of human autonomy and exceptionalism, and reembedding them in the social and/or evolutionary pudding from which they emerged. Posthumanists would probably agree with Stephen Hawking's famous characterization of his species, when he called it "an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star."[2]

Thus minimized, humans have nearly disappeared from the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe). The few who appear are usually those useless authority figures, the senators, generals, and presidents. With few exceptions, every one of them is small-minded, stupid, and/or corrupt. In most of these shows, our superheroes are at war with external enemies, aliens of one sort or another, but in a real sense, they're just a pretext. The real enemies are at home, in our government and among our "friends." In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), they want to send Black Widow to

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1. *Batman Begins*, directed by Christopher Nolan (Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 2005).
2. Jane Onyanga-Omara, "Stephen Hawking's Memorable Quotes: 'We Are Just an Advanced Breed of Monkeys,'" USA Today, March 14, 2018, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/03/14/stephen-hawking-quotations/423145002/.

prison for dumping compromising files onto the Internet, Snowden-style, and the movie sides with her, not them. In *Iron Man 2* (2010), actor Garry Shandling's generic senator tries to claim Tony Stark's Iron Man super suit for the US government. Tony refuses, and the movie sides with him, not the government.

Samuel L. Jackson, who is (or was) a bigger star than most of the interchangeable ingénues of both genders behind those kitschy masks and hoods, plays Nick Fury, a mere mortal at one time and a mainstay of the MCU, but he's largely disappeared from the movies. Jackson's problem isn't that he's black—there are plenty of people of color in these films—it's that he's human and has therefore been marginalized. Explaining his absence from *Avengers*: *Age of Ultron* (2013), Jackson observed, "It's another one of those 'people who have powers fighting people who have powers' [movies]. . . . There's not a lot I could do except shoot a gun,"[3] and guns, by this time, are little better than tomahawks or slingshots. The same holds true for *Captain America: Civil War*. In *Infinity War*, the darkest-before-the-dawn first installment of the recent two-parter, Fury has a cameo in the obligatory buried-in-the-credits Easter egg, but no sooner does he appear than he disappears, turned to ash by the Thanos before he can even finish a phone call.

Absent in *Infinity War* and *Endgame* is the issue of collateral damage that preoccupied the two films, *Civil War* and *Ultron*, that preceded them. Concern for the welfare of the human bystanders who were casualties of the conflicts that consume these shows became irrelevant when there are virtually no bystanders—that is, humans, in either of the latter. Like our superheroes, they're presumably turned to ash, but we rarely see it. Moreover, it's the remnant of humanity in superheroes that gets them into trouble.

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3. Graeme McMillan, "Samuel L. Jackson on 'Avengers: Age of Ultron' Role: 'I'm Not Doing So Much,'" Hollywood Reporter, March 26, 2014, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/samuel-l-jackson-avengers-age-691388/

Superheroes have always shown emotions, however attenuated, but now, when they express their feelings, it's their undoing, like Dr. Strange who has to hand over the Time Stone to Thanos to save Tony's life. Scarlet Witch refuses to deny Thanos the Mind Stone by destroying it, because it's embedded in Vision's forehead. Thanos, unimpeded by human emotion, gets it anyway, by tearing it out of his head, and in the process kills Vision.

It is precisely Thanos's inability to experience emotion that gives him the advantage over the Avengers. He professes to feel for his daughter Gamora, but he hurls her to her death anyway, so he can secure the Soul Stone, the last of the six stones that will give him infinite power. Before she disappears into the void, she tells him that he "loves no one," and she's right, sort of. It's not Gamora he loves but himself. As he puts it, "I ignored my destiny once. I cannot do that again." We know from *Game of Thrones* that destiny lovers are tyrants waiting to happen.

The triangular relationship between Clark Kent, Lois Lane, and Superman varies from film to film depending on who's writing, directing, and producing, but initially, at any rate, Clark loves Lois who loves Superman; its only human Lois and faux-human Clark who are allowed feelings. When Superman finally comes around and decides to marry her, he has to shed his super powers. Later, Lois becomes his Achilles heel, used against him by Lex Luthor, just as Thanos manipulates the Avengers into giving up the stones by threatening their friends and loved ones.

Secret identities like Clark Kent were the last outposts of the human in these stories, but with the exception of Peter Parker (aka Spider-Man), most of Marvel's superheroes have lost interest in them, another indication of the marginalization of humans. First to go was the "secret." Today's superheroes, Marvel's in particular, are well out of the closet. No more darting into phone booths for a quick costume change. (No more phone booths!) Everybody knows that Iron Man is Tony Stark, that Captain America is Steve Rogers, and DC's Wonder Woman is Diana Prince. The secret identities of some superheroes, like Thor, have disappeared into the mists of time. They no longer need to fly false flags and elude their human

charades in order to come into their own, because they no longer yearn to live "normal" lives. Their superhero identities have cannibalized their workaday human identities.

The original rationales for secret identities—protecting loved ones from bad guys and the superheroes themselves from the cops who don't take kindly to DIY justice—have evaporated, perhaps as a result of the decay of the rule of law and the consequent relaxation of the taboo against vigilantism.

To some extent, the characters in the most recent Avengers movies face the same problem as the characters in *Game of Thrones*: What is the best way to organize human society so that it will survive? It's a political problem, and both shows, despite the royals in *Game of Thrones* and the superheroes in the Avengers films, unsurprisingly come down on the side of democracy as opposed to tyranny. They endorse inclusion and consensus rather than exclusion and coercion. In *Game of Thrones*, the characters need to put aside the dynastic feuds with which they amuse themselves in favor of alliances that will enable them to defeat the army of the undead White Walkers. As Jon Snow tells Queen Cersei, trying to persuade her to join his coalition of the flesh and blood, "This isn't about noble houses, this is about the living and the dead." Likewise, in *Infinity War*, when Tony tells Bruce Banner that he can't enlist Cap in the struggle against Thanos because they're not on speaking terms, Bruce retorts, "Thanos is coming. It doesn't matter who you're talking to or not."[4] On the other hand, it doesn't matter whether the superheroes fight Thanos individually or in groups. They lose either way.

Superhero movies, on the whole, are darker than *Game of Thrones*. The message of the HBO series, "Win together, lose alone," is lost in the mayhem. In the Avengers and X-Men franchises, the issue is not so much political as ontological. *Game of Thrones* may ask the question, Of what sort of stuff is society made? The superhero movies, on the other hand, ask, Of

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4. *Avengers: Infinity War*, directed by Anthony and Joe Russo (New York: Marvel Studios, April 23, 2018).

what sort of stuff are humans made? In *X-Men: First Class* (2011), standing on a beach facing US and Soviet warships in the film's version of the Cuban Missile Crisis, mutant Erik/Magneto gets to the heart of the matter when he observes that the hostile forces arrayed against them, albeit themselves mortal enemies, are basically identical: "humans."[5]

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Where does this jaundiced view of human nature come from? Its roots can be traced back to the origins of both Marvel and DC Comics in the run-up to World War II. Superman first appeared in *Action Comics* #1, published in 1938. With Germany on the march across Europe, the United States was still officially neutral when, on December 20, 1940, almost a full year before Pearl Harbor, Captain America appeared on the cover of Timely Comics, which eventually evolved into Marvel, socking Hitler in the jaw. He represented writer Joe Simon's and artist Jack Kirby's contribution to the propaganda effort on behalf of America's entry into the war.

Marvel never outgrew its antifascist antecedents. World War II has always served as something of a touchstone for its family of superheroes. Two X-Men movies open in Nazi death camps, and as the MCU expands, we see that all those vile authority figures are actually Nazis, agents of Hydra, a secret society organized by the Waffen SS just prior to World War II, that has managed to penetrate every nook and cranny of America's government.

Marvel's long, albeit waning obsession, with Hitler, combined with concern that posthumans may turn against us, eventually undermines its attempts to achieve the posthuman. The kind of dehumanization of superheroes expressed by Batman is equated with fascism. In *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), it's Herr Schmidt, speaking for the rest of the Nazi *ubermenschen*, who tells Cap, "I am proud to say that we have left humanity behind."[6]

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5. *X-Men: First Class*, directed by Matthew Vaughn (New York: Marvel Entertainment, May 25, 2011).
6. *Captain America: The First Avenger*, directed by Joe Johnston (New York: Marvel Studios, 2011).

Once superheroes succeed in breaking free from the human, most of them shrink from the result and make their way back to it, as if its pull is so strong they can't escape it. When the posthumans in these shows look into the mirror, they don't like what they see. The truth is that the best superheroes are the least super, and the best posthumans are the least post—and the most human. The failure of these shows and movies to dramatize the posthuman suggests that despite their insistence that humanism is bankrupt, they are unable to move beyond it. There is no way out. They're trapped. The desire to break with the human has so far outpaced the ability of humans to imagine what a posthuman future might be like or what kind of creatures posthumans might be. No matter how much people long to escape the constraints of the human, they fall back to Earth. Which is one of the reasons the original *Planet of the Apes*, released in 1968, is one of the most prescient movies ever made.

The rehumanization of superheroes began in earnest with Peter Parker in 1962, when Marvel writer and editor Stan Lee decided they should be more relatable. He wanted the young Spider-Man to suffer from adolescent anxieties: acne, insecurity, girl trouble, and so on. He recalled, "My publisher said, in his ultimate wisdom, 'Stan, that is the worst idea I have ever heard. . . . He can't have personal problems if he's supposed to be a superhero—don't you know who a superhero is?'" The rest, as they say, is history. Not only did Peter Parker come into his own, but *Superman* spun off the TV series, *Smallville*, that ran for a decade (2001–11) and chronicled the adventures of a teenage Clark Kent. Fox launched its Batman origins series, *Gotham*, which dramatizes the lives of the youthful Bruce Wayne and his young-adult super villains.

Marvel's humanization of superheroes has gone so far that the Avengers are portrayed as a quarrelsome, jealous, and petty bunch who spend more time squabbling among themselves than they do battling their enemies, a side effect, no doubt, of the steroid smoothies they've been drinking and the testosterone patches hidden beneath their spandex suits. They have to be constantly reminded that they are in fact on the same side.

Tony Stark had been dipping his iron toes into the tepid waters of the mainstream for some time. He is torn between human and superhuman, confused about who and what he is. And like Spider-Man, he is a first-class neurotic. Indeed, director Jon Favreau explained that he wanted to make Iron Man vulnerable—that is, more human. In an early script draft of *Iron Man 3*, Tony even confides to his girl Friday and eventual partner, Pepper Potts, that ever since the Chitauri had their way with Grand Central Station in the original *Avengers* (2012), he has felt vulnerable, and he actually starts to weep, behavior so unbecoming a superhero that the scene was wisely omitted from the movie. Still, he may not have needed a Kleenex, but he does need a therapist. He suffers from anxiety attacks. Anxiety attacks? The series also features homelessness and even alcoholism—alluding to Robert Downey Jr.'s then personal problems.

Whereas Tony once considered the Iron Man suit—that is, his super-hero, posthuman alter ego—an asset, he now experiences it as a liability, a prison, even an adversary. Instead of clumsily climbing into it, as he once did, he devises a way of summoning the suit to him from afar. It soars through the air in pieces—a gauntlet here, a breastplate there—assembling itself around his body. Well enough and good, but just as often the pieces bang into him or, worse, refuse to coalesce and therefore fail him entirely. With an outfit like that, it's no wonder he spends most of *Iron Man 3* as Tony—minus his suit and superpowers. In *Civil War*, Tony doesn't become Iron Man until two-thirds of the way through, and then he's often without his helmet, reminding us that for all Iron Man's superpowers he is, as Tony once put it, no more than a "man in a can."

Tony's flop sweats are by no means unique. By the time *Logan* was released in 2017, four years after *Wolverine*, the X-Men, including the lupine superhero played by Hugh Jackman, are in decline. The one super villain that can't be denied is time, although our friends do manage to pull off a "time heist" in *Endgame*. As Logan puts it, "Nature made me a freak. Man made me a weapon. And God made it last too long. The world is not the

same as it was. Mutants . . . they're gone now."[7] Shaggy, scarred, and haggard, he looks half dead and actually dies at the end, mourning the human feelings that he long ago sacrificed for his superpowers.

Logan has plenty of company. In *Infinity War*, the entire MCU implodes. Twelve superheroes, including Black Panther, Spidey, and Doctor Strange, apparently breathe their last, as well as Loki who dies for the third time, all victims of Thanos. We won't forget the day that the invulnerable became vulnerable, just like humans. Thanks to quantum physics and especially multiverses that go all the way back to 1944's Mister Mxyzptik, a *Superman* character apparently from the fifth dimension, none of the Marvel superheroes, including those in the recent streaming hit *WandaVision*, really die; they all come back in one way or another. Kellyanne Conway, with her "alternative facts," was clearly a comic book fan.

True, Thanos seems to be culling the first-generation Avengers, preparing the way for a new crop coming up behind them, but who knew superheroes grew old and died or were just conveniently whisked off-stage when their contracts expired.

Even Batman has had enough. He may once have wanted to hollow himself of human emotion so that he might became a symbol, but by the time of *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), he is so eager to get out of those spandex tights that he fakes his own death so that Bruce Wayne can sip cappuccinos at a sidewalk cafe in Florence with Catwoman, Selina Kyle, like a normal person—that is, a human. Can marriage and family be far off? In *Endgame*, Cap is sent back in time to the 1950s, settles down with Peggy Carter, and stays there. Black Widow sacrifices herself so Hawkeye can seize the Soul Stone and his family, dissolved by Thanos, can be restored to him. Could it be that all that sturm und drang was just about restoring family? We learned from *Game of Thrones* that family is a double-edged sword, at

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7. *Avengers Endgame*, directed by Anthony and Joe Russo (New York: Marvel Studios, 2019).

the heart of the conflicts that rend the Seven Kingdoms. Loyalty to family is overrated. Maybe the Russos weren't watching.

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Not only do individual posthuman heroes drift back to the human, but humanity itself, after being savaged in show after show, movie after movie, makes a comeback. Pace Erik/Magneto and his ilk, it's not a cesspool of depravity after all. We come to suspect that its tawdry reputation is unfounded because the accusations against it are put in the mouths of villains. In *Wonder Woman*, it's Ares who tries to convince the Amazonian warrior to join him in exterminating humans because "they are ugly, filled with hatred, weak."[8] Ares, however, is a bad guy, the god of war, so we can discount his words. On the contrary, humanity needs to be saved.

Thanos is just one more in a long line of super villains who refuses to rehumanize dehumanized humanity. He's another version of Ultron, an AI created by Tony Stark to protect humanity from any and all threats. Ultron concludes, however, that humans themselves are the biggest danger to humanity and decides to exterminate them. Using similar logic, Thanos, cloaked with the mantle of an eco-warrior, says, "This universe is finite. Its resources are finite. If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist." He goes on, "It needs correction . . . but random, dispassionate, fair to rich and poor alike. . . . I call that mercy."

There's a Green Lantern comic in which a young woman is killed and crammed into a refrigerator. Comics writer Gail Simone coined the term "fridging" to refer to a common trope where women are harmed for the express purpose of motivating men to take action. If "humans" are substituted for "women," we have a key to unlocking *Endgame*.

Thanos's eco-argument may be no more than a rationalization for bad behavior, but he has a point. As the reality of human-caused climate change—extreme weather, rising seas, and the extinction of countless animal and plant species—becomes inarguable, we have come to understand

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8. Wonder Woman, directed by Patty Jenkins (Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 2017).

that humans *are* the biggest threat to humanity and our planet. For all that the MCU nods in the direction of racial and gender equality, *Endgame* locks humans in a refrigerator, as it were, to motivate the Avengers to get off their butts for round two against Thanos. Antman and Hawkeye rouse the far-flung superheroes who are feeling sorry for themselves, indulging the senses, or lolling about in domestic bliss, to do what they're supposed to be good at: avenging. This is all well and good, but by casting Thanos as an eco-warrior and then shrugging off his argument, *Endgame* implicitly sides with the climate-change deniers. Watching Marvel's two-parter, it would be easy to conclude that those who concern themselves with the health of our planet must be fought tooth and nail. The effect of humanizing superheroes, abandoning posthumanism, and sentimentalizing the family is paradoxically to move a historically left-leaning franchise to the right.

Black Widow, one of the latest off the Marvel assembly line, jumping back in time, sentimentalizes the family as well, at first by negation—the family Natasha Romanoff and her sister Yelena Belova thought they had but didn't. Initially, the picture seems like it could have been directed by Paige Jennings, the daughter who breaks with the family in *The Americans*, until Romanoff realizes that her real family is the Avengers. Little does she know what lies in wait.

Short Essay

Love and Duty

Translating Films and Teaching Online through a Pandemic

CHRISTOPHER REA

Abstract

The Chinese Film Classics project, launched in 2020, is an online research and teaching initiative aimed at making early Chinese films and cinema history more accessible to the general public. Led by Christopher Rea at the University of British Columbia, the project is centered on the website http://chinesefilmclassics.org and the companion YouTube channel Modern Chinese Cultural Studies. These two platforms together host new English translations of over two dozen Republican-era Chinese films, over two hundred film clips organized into thematic playlists, and a free online course of video lectures on Chinese film classics. This essay tells the story of how the Chinese Film Classics project grew from being a book project into a multiplatform translation, teaching, and publication project during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online teaching and social media publication involved multiple global storytellers: filmmakers, educators, translators, students, and the broader Internet public. How might moving things online change, or improve, the practice of cultural history? Rea highlights in particular the practical considerations facing the translator and gives examples of how, in a social media context, some of the stories are told not by creators and audiences but by data analytics.

Keywords: Chinese cinema, online teaching, translation, cultural history, YouTube

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To be a cultural historian is to confront profound storytelling problems. In books, in articles, and in the classroom, we try to persuade our audiences to care about events of the distant past. Which are "relevant"? Wars may be an easy sell. But what about events that are less momentous? Or nonevents? What about the feel, texture, or other intangible qualities of a bygone culture or a particular mode of expression? More generally, why should the storytelling preoccupations or styles of any bygone era matter to us, especially when we have much more pressing things to worry about—like a pandemic?

Having taught Chinese cinema for over a decade at a large, public university in Canada—mostly to students from China or of Chinese descent—I engage in, and with, multiple layers of storytelling. The historian in me is motivated to explain cinematic storytelling on its own terms; that is, in relation to the possibilities and constraints of a particular era or context—what I'd call the *integrity imperative*. Why do certain scenes in 1920s films use a color filter? Because color cinematography was not yet available, and filters were cheaper than hand tinting. Why do characters in *The Great Road* (*Dalu*, 1934) refer to the invaders not as "Japan" but as "the enemy"? Because of Nationalist government policy. Why does the woman warrior break into song at three moments in *Hua Mu Lan* (*Mulan congjun*, 1939) (see figure 1)? Because musicals were a lucrative genre for Chinese filmmakers in the 1930s. Historians take this type of essential contextualization for granted.

The storyteller in me is aware of a second imperative derived not from the source materials but from the audience: relatability. Why should inhabitants of the twenty-first century care about the stories Chinese filmmakers told nearly a century ago? Even students who identify as Chinese are several generations removed from the Republican era. Few know much about the Japanese invasion of China, much less about how it impacted the Chinese film industry. Which "national crisis" (*guonan*) is being invoked in *Wild Rose* (*Ye meigui*, 1932)? If you don't know, the storytelling might fall flat.

With foreign-language cinema, the art form that bridges between the two imperatives of integrity and relatability is translation. Most extant Chinese films made up to 1949 have not been translated into English, meaning

Figure 1: Mulan singing in Hua Mu Lan (1939). *Source*: Author's collection.

that a key element of their storytelling is unavailable to people without Chinese proficiency. While working on *Chinese Film Classics, 1922–1949* (Columbia, 2021), I began translating Republican-era films. So far, I've translated twenty films and edited five other translations, my goal being to make these films not just accessible and comprehensible but engaging. This essay explores how multiple types of global storytelling—by filmmakers, translators, educators, students, and the public—have intersected in the ongoing experiment that is the Chinese Film Classics project.

Pandemic-Accelerated Storytelling

The best way to tell stories about film, to me, is to use film form itself. For an audience, reading or listening to someone talk about a film is less satisfying than watching a video that makes use of sound, image, and text to illustrate

ideas. So, when I started writing a book about early Chinese films, I decided to create videos about those films simultaneously.

Thanks to University of British Columbia (UBC) grant funding, I was able to produce video lectures for an envisioned online course on Chinese film classics, focusing on the decades between the 1920s and the 1940s. The book I was writing focused on early Chinese films and their surrounding industry context, such as contemporaneous European and US films and Chinese film periodicals.

For the course, I decided to cover eleven of the fourteen films I discuss in the book—enough for a semester. For those chapters, I drafted the video lecture scripts simultaneously, following a two-part structure for each chapter, which resulted in two video lectures per film.

I did much of the drafting using voice-to-text software, instead of typing, to achieve a more conversational style of writing. (Fact-checking, footnoting, and other scholarly work was mostly done the traditional way.) My scholarly storytelling was also shaped by performing for the camera. I spoke every word aloud and edited down my drafts to achieve a standard length of roughly fifteen minutes per video. Storyboarding and video postproduction— especially the addition of film clips, stills, and other images—inspired me to write the book as part of a media ecology, which also includes the original films, clips from those films, and the video lectures.

Then, during postproduction, the pandemic hit. Everyone would be teaching online—I had two film courses of my own just two months away. No more screening the film in the classroom; all of them would have to be available online to students who had been sent home. Some were scattered across Canada; others were in China, Japan, South Korea, the United States, Hong Kong. I hit pause on editing the video lectures and switched to translating and subtitling films for online publication.

Between March and April 2020, I translated ten films and posted them on a YouTube channel I had originally created in 2017 for posting research lecture videos, Modern Chinese Cultural Studies. I now repurposed that platform to focus on cinema. I worked closely with UBC doctoral student

Liu Yuqing, who created subtitled MP4 files based on my translations. I knew that cinema instructors around the world would also be needing online teaching materials. So once the films were published, I informed colleagues at other institutions.

Chinese Film Classics, 1922–1949 is my ninth book, and when I began writing, I felt like I was already familiar with best practices for nonfiction storytelling. Immersing myself in film translation and in audiovisual digital production of video lectures made me more attuned to the multiple voices that tell stories about cinema history. Translators render stories comprehensible to new audiences. Instructors interpret and contextualize. Audiences, too, become storytellers. Students don't just passively watch films but find their own meaning in them and write commentaries, including in course assignments. Then there is the global audience for online films, such as YouTube viewers.

The films, clips, lectures, and other videos I've posted on YouTube and http://chinesefilmclassics.org since 2020 have garnered over 250,000 views from viewers from over eighty-five countries. Here are a few things this multifaceted production process has taught me about global storytelling.

Translator as Storyteller

In silent films, there is no sound to translate, only the text on-screen. One surprise for first-time viewers of Chinese silent films is that many include bilingual title cards in Chinese and English. Films like *Woman Warrior White Rose* (*Nüxia bai meigui*, 1928), *Two Stars* (*Yinhan shuangxing*, 1931), and *Song of China* (*Tianlun*, 1935) sought to tell stories to a global audience.

The challenges for the translator of films (silent or sound) are several. How to achieve precision in representing meaning? How to represent the distinctiveness of the idiom and avoid flattening different registers of language? How to represent archaic terms? Few Chinese people in 2021 speak the same way speech is represented in a silent film from 1927. But

Figure 2: Shop signs in *Laborer's Love* (1922). *Source*: Author's collection.

to render 1927 speech in 2021 vernacular could result in anachronism. Finally, how to fit all of the text into the frame without occluding the original image?

My policy is to translate everything—every line of dialogue, and every shop sign, letter, or other text on-screen. In *Laborer's Love* (*Laogong zhi aiqing*, 1922), the earliest known surviving Chinese-produced full film, I translated the signs in the fruit seller's shop (see figure 2), the doctor's office, the tea shop, and the All-Night Club, including the auspicious composite character 招財進寶 ("May riches arrive at this shop"), and the medical practitioner's self-flattering couplet, "Serving humanity with a benevolent heart/Reviving the aged with miracle hands"[1].

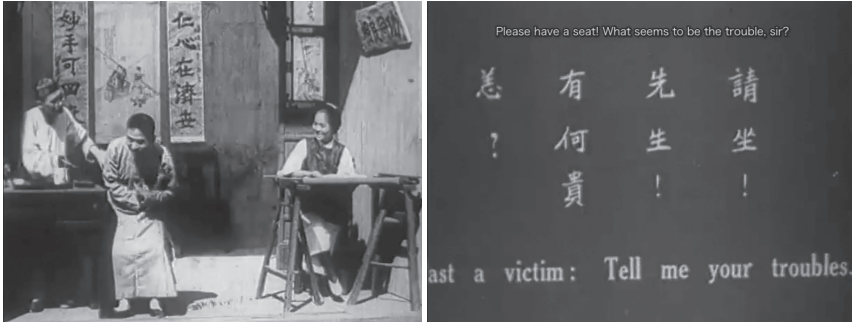1. *Laborer's Love*, directed by Zhang Shichuan (Shanghai: Mingxing Film Company, 1922).

Figure 3: "At last, a victim!" (but only in English), in *Laborer's Love* (1922). *Source*: Author's collection.

In silent films containing original Chinese *and* English bilingual title cards, I retranslate the Chinese when the meaning of the original English differs from the Chinese or is archaic, incomplete or misleading. In some cases, the original translator made a deliberate move to render the English differently than the Chinese, as when a man arrives at a clinic in *Laborer's Love* and the doctor says, "At last, a victim!" (The "victim" turns out to be not a patient but a con man; see figure 3.)

Then there are matters of tone. Take *Crows and Sparrows* (*Wuya yu maque*, 1949), a film about a struggle over housing set in Civil War–era Shanghai shortly before the Nationalist exodus. How would a midranking Nationalist officer in the late 1940s speak to a subordinate in Nanking? How about his mistress in their Shanghai love nest? Yu Xiaoying, Mr. Hou's kept woman, speaks in a mixture of Mandarin and Shanghainese and once jokes that the Mandarin word for penicillin—which she has never heard before—has a more deadly sound in Shanghainese: "Dead man coming up" (*pei ni si ren*).[2] The transliteration is voiced first by Yu, who is accepting it as a deposit for an apartment purchase, and later by her serving girl, Ah Ying, who later steals it to save a dying child. To capture the speaker's ignorance,

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2. *Crows and Sparrows*, directed by Zheng Junli (Shanghai: Kunlun Film Company, 1949).

the homophone that the joke turns on, and to highlight the item's key role in the plot, I translated the term as *pay-nee-shee-ling*.[3]

One partially extant silent film that I am currently translating is *Cave of the Silken Web* (*Pan si dong*, 1927), whose story is adapted from the Ming novel *Journey to the West*. That special-effects-intensive film was lost for over half a century, until a copy resurfaced in Norway. Staff at the National Library of Norway generously shared not only a high-resolution digital copy of the film but also the English translation they had commissioned of that copy's Norwegian subtitles.

While translating *Cave*, I discovered that some of the Chinese title cards appear in the wrong place. A few appear in multiple places, and others do not make sense in relation to the action. This corruption of the text was likely caused during the film's journey abroad, because the Norwegian text added to those title cards usually does not match the Chinese. In some cases, like the example shown below, the Norwegian translator added jokes based on their own understanding of the plot.

The eventual published version will have intertitles with four texts: Chinese, English translation of the Chinese, Norwegian, and English translation of the Norwegian—a crowded frame but also a unique document that will allow audiences to see how the Norwegian and Chinese meanings differ from each other (see figure 4). This is where online viewing is superior to traditional screening; if needed, one can press pause or rewind.

As we saw with *Laborer's Love*, film translation and subtitling are not just a matter of rendering the meaning of the words but also of representing fonts and typography and placing text at the correct part of the frame in the subtitling process so that it appears visually appropriate and meaningful. The opening credits of *Love and Duty* (*Lian'ai yu yiwu*, 1931), for example, feature the United Photoplay Service (*Lianhua*) logo as a life preserver surrounded by four slogans (see figure 5).

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3. Read the translated film script and watch the film here: Christopher Rea, trans., "Crows and Sparrows (1949)," MCLC Resource Center Publication, April 2020, https://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/crows-and-sparrows/.
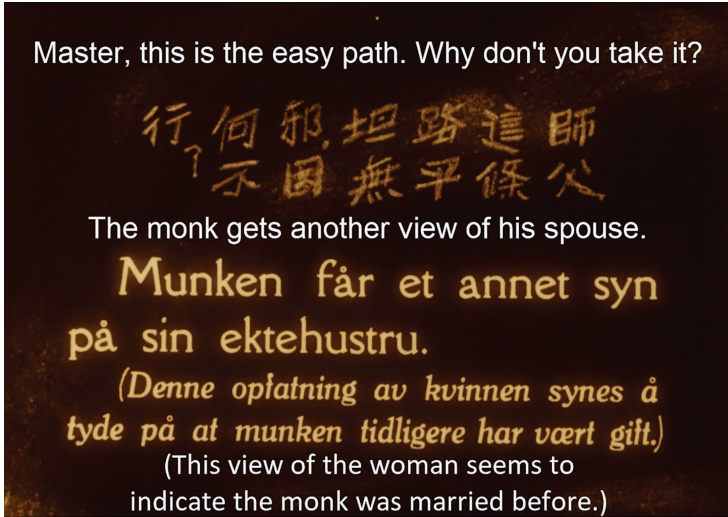
Figure 4: Four texts on one title card in the Chinese Film Classics project version of *Cave of the Silken Web* (1927). *Source*: National Library of Norway/author's collection.

Figure 5: The UPS logo in *Love and Duty* (1931) shows a high-flying company offering a life preserver to the Chinese film industry, surrounded by four corporate slogans. *Source*: Taiwan Film & Audiovisual Institute/author's collection.

Figure 6: Font design and placement in the title cards highlights significant phrases in the title cards of *Spring Silkworms* (1933), including this pun "PAWN ['Pon] my word—selling cocoons, of course!" *Source*: Author's collection.

Spring Silkworms (*Chuncan*, 1933), adapted from the Mao Dun story, represents all dialogue and narration in title cards and emphasizes key terms by rendering them in larger font or with special placement: PAWN, MONEY, HOPE, FEAR, FATE. The result is a stylized effect that mimics "louder" sounds visually and exaggerates allegorical meanings. At one point in the dialogue, a friend asks the lead farmer "Tongbao, will you be selling cocoons or spinning silk at home yourself?"[4] The larger font draws attention to a pun on a key word in Tongbao's response, which I rendered in figure 6.

In summer 2021, I commissioned Cambridge University PhD student Nick Stember to translate *Wild Rose* (1932), starring Wang Renmei. The film features a pair of funny secondary characters, played by veteran character actors, skinny Han Langen and fat Liu Jiqun. Han plays Lao Qiang 老槍, which, according to *Shanghai Slang Illustrated and Explained* (*Shanghai suyu tushuo*, 1935), is Shanghai slang for an opium pipe—an object consistent with Han's emaciated physique. I therefore suggested that the character's name be translated as Opie.

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4. *Spring Silkworms*, directed by Cheng Bugao (Shanghai: Mingxing Film Company, 1933).

Liu Jiqun's character is referred to in the credits as Ah Gang 阿戆, which is a familiar form of Gang da 戆大. The subtitler, Liu Yuqing, who is writing a PhD dissertation on Chinese pidgin English, especially from the Shanghai region, pointed out that Gang da is a pidgin term, a transliteration of the English word "gander." Gander in 1930s Shanghai was slang for idiot or dupe, as in *silly goose*. After some discussion, we agreed that the slang term is too archaic, and that if we called Ah Gang "Gander," English and Chinese viewers alike would be unlikely to catch that it means fool. Nick elected to translate the name as Dopey, to make a rhyming pair with Opie.

Of course, it is not just the translator—working decades later—who imagines, represents, and mediates as part of the storytelling process. *Wild Rose* (1932), *Daybreak* (*Tianming*, 1933), and *Sports Queen* (*Tiyu huanghou*, 1934) all feature representations of the life of a girl in the Chinese countryside. Their screenwriter-director, however, was a US-educated, city-dwelling man. Sun Yu made his own decisions about what he wanted a country girl to say and how. Lin Ying in *Sports Queen*, for example, comes across as a vehicle for castigating urban inequality when she remarks, "I think Shanghai is an odd little place. Some places people live are as big as royal palaces, while others are as filthy as dog houses! The people are odd too! Some are thin as skeletons, and others as fat as pigs!"[5]

Instructor as Storyteller

My four most recent film courses have been entirely online, and the teaching and learning has been primarily asynchronous—the pandemic norm. Only about a fifth of the teaching hours were synchronous, with live

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5. *Sports Queen*, directed by Sun Yu (Shanghai: United Photoplay Service, 1934).

conversation between students and instructors, in various time zones. So, like many instructors, I am learning to adapt my storytelling for a virtual classroom.

Many of my students are from China or speak Chinese, but most are unfamiliar with modern Chinese history. When I am preparing to lecture on historical context, I typically preface it with an upgraded pop quiz: When was the Chinese Communist Party founded? What were the dates of the Anti-Japanese War? (A tricky one!) When was the People's Republic of China founded? Many, sometimes most, students get the answers wrong. So, my video lectures identify the reference to the 1931 Yangtze-Huai River floods in *The Great Road*, which includes actual footage from that tragedy, and an allusion to the Second Republican Revolution of 1914 appearing in the horror-musical film *Song at Midnight* (*Yeban gesheng,* 1937). Students might have heard about the Mukden Incident of 1931, but would have to do some historical sleuthing in order to identify just how many films from the Republic of China make reference to that historical event, from *Wild Rose* (1932) and *Playthings* (*Xiao wanyi,* 1933) to *Spring River Flows East* (*Yi jiang chunshui xiang dong liu,* 1947).

Similarly, only a minority of my students have any background in film studies. I ended up creating three YouTube playlists with different types of video lecture: (1) Chinese Film Classics includes a pair of video lectures on each of eleven Republican-era films; (2) Chinese Film History (currently unlisted, not public), includes lectures on films and filmmakers after 1949; and (3) Film Form (also unlisted) focuses on topics such as mise-en-scène, diegetic versus nondiegetic sound, synchronous/nonsynchronous/off-screen sound, framing, editing, montage, auteur theory, genre, categorical form, and a variety of other concepts. In all, I ended up producing fifty to sixty video lectures. Video scripting, filming, and especially postproduction quadruple (at least!) the amount of time spent on each lecture. Still, for the instructor-storyteller, it can be a major time saver in the long run.

Student as Storyteller

What I learned from surveying students is that they did not mind that the production value of my videos was often low. Many reported that they found the self-produced videos showing PowerPoint slides with my voice-over easier to follow than some of the talking-head videos with professional production values.

Students told their own stories about Chinese films partly through assignments. They wrote sequence analysis essays and also created video essays—one analyzing a single sequence from a film and another answering a research question they developed using my YouTube archive of 250-plus films and clips.

These video-production assignments prompted students to tell stories about film storytelling. They also forced students to learn about cinematic storytelling through basic webcam filming (ah, self-framing!) and using video-editing software. Filmmaking lesson #1: a three-minute video essay can take hours to script and produce.

At the end of the course, each student had to create a one-minute video in which they recommend to their classmates one film not on the syllabus and explain why they consider it artistically or historically important. During our student film festival, each student responded to a video essay made by a classmate. This added a recursive peer-review structure to the whole storytelling enterprise: student comments on film, classmate comments on peer film-about-film, and then the instructor grades both of them.

This storytelling form of pedagogy drew out student talents and experiences that I had not known existed before the term began. One student in my History of Chinese Cinema course had worked for Zhang Yimou on the set of *Shadow* (*Ying*, 2018). Another student in Chinese Film Classics, a professional videographer, volunteered to lead a bonus session to help students learn how to use video-editing software to create their video essay assignments.

According to entry survey responses, many students had never watched a black and white film before, and most had never seen a silent film. By the end of the course, students had not only gained exposure to both but also practiced new cinematic storytelling techniques and gained a new appreciation for the transformative power of editing.

Netizen as Storyteller

Teaching early Chinese films online has involved what I call *playlist pedagogy*: I create a YouTube archive of films, film clips, and video lectures, arrange them into playlists, and then decide which to make available only to students in my courses (unlisted videos) and which to make public.

One of the benefits of the YouTube channel is that the channel host can track viewer behavior. I can see when the average viewer stops watching a particular video. If I see that students are not watching the video lectures to the end, I can adjust future quiz questions to encourage them to do so. The analytics keep students honest and provide insights to instructors about their products and their audience.

Equally valuable has been the unexpected feedback that I've received from people around the world in the form of YouTube comments. In September 2020, I published my translation of the earliest surviving Mulan film, the live-action *Hua Mu Lan* (1939).[6] Dozens of viewers wrote notes of appreciation, many claiming that they preferred it to Disney's 2020 live-action *Mulan*.

One specialist in the history of Chinese music, the director of a Chinese music ensemble in the United States, responded to the "Sounds of early Chinese cinema" playlist by writing extensive comments on multiple

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6. Tiffany Crawford, "UBC Professor Translates First Surviving Mulan Film from the 1930s," *Vancouver Sun*, September 1, 2020, https://vancouversun.com/news/ubc-professor-translates-first-surviving-mulan-film-from-the-1930s.

videos about the composers, arrangers, and librettists of their soundtracks. His comments about Huang Zi, Nie Er, Tian Han, Wang Luobin, Wei Zhongle (Wei Chung-Lo), and other composer-performers supplemented my original video descriptions. I have also received private emails from instructors who are using the films in their courses, from translators interested in contributing to the project to composers specializing in creating soundtracks for silent films. I have also heard from descendants of Chinese filmmakers, such as a producer of *Spring River Flows East*, who grew up in the United States not speaking Chinese and had been unable to fully appreciate their grandparents' work until they found my translations on YouTube.

I also hear from students asking questions about the films, such as this one about Eileen Chang's (Zhang Ailing) first-produced screenplay *Love Everlasting* (*Buliao qing*, 1947),[7] a film which presents a sympathetic view of romantic longing between a young woman and a married man:

> Hi, I just wonder why the movie is called "Love everlasting"? I saw the love affair between the leading actor and actress, and it is more like Mr. Xia cheated in his marriage and attempted to have another relationship with his daughter's tutor. How come is the relationship everlasting?

I replied:

> One interpretation might be that this is a love ("qing," or emotional connection) that is not constrained by societal conventions or institutions like marriage, and that the feeling outlasts the relationship. They won't stop loving each other, even though they part. Beyond these two people, one might even say that—whether society approves or not (and there are

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7. Modern Chinese Cultural Studies, "Love Everlasting 不了情 (1947) with English Subtitles," YouTube, September 30, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gjdbOeOs7Y&feature=youtu.be.

a lot of disapproving voices in this film)—"qing"/love always follows its own rules.

The commenter responded:

> Many thanks for sharing this view, which is really informative. I can understand that the leading actress confronted the dilemma over how to justify the relationship with Mr. Xia due to her moral code or exterior social norms. Actually, I am not a conservative person who fights for traditional moral principles and condemns her romance with Mr. Xia. Maybe Eileen Chang did not clearly explain why Mr. Xia felt lost and found out it is hard to maintain the relationship with his wife, or how is the marriage going to end. Thus, I cannot really stand on the same foot either with Mr. Xia and the girl (leading actress in the film). Perhaps true love should exist beyond the social norm and expectation from society or perhaps it is just a temporary love affair between those two characters.

Viewers tell stories about films based on individual or cultural perspectives. YouTube analytics, as mentioned above, tell stories too, especially about macro trends in viewer demographics and viewing habits. *Wanderings of Three-Hairs the Orphan* revealed two surprises after I published my translation on March 23, 2020. First, it quickly became one of the most popular videos on the channel, with over 19,000 views as of December 2021. As *Wanderings* is the only film I've tagged "Made for kids," I speculate that the kid-friendly setting is one factor in its popularity. Second, many viewers of *Wanderings* have been in the Philippines, and one of the most popular searches leading people to the Modern Chinese Cultural Studies channel has been "Sanmao Tagalog." I would welcome research into why Sanmao (Three-Hairs) is so popular in the twenty-first-century Philippines.

We hear a lot about digital literacy being higher among the younger generation. But in my experience as a professor, a filmmaker, a YouTuber, and now a TikToker (@christophergrea; @chinesefilmclassics), I've discovered that wading into new modes of storytelling—long form and short form—have benefits for teaching, research, and public conversation about cinema. We always need more translators. And I encourage my fellow cultural historians to do more experimenting with social media when telling stories about the storytelling of the past.

Acknowledgments

Report

Narrating New Normal

Graduate Student Symposium Report

RUEPERT JIEL DIONISIO CAO, MINOS-ATHANASIOS
KARYOTAKIS, MISTURA ADEBUSOLA SALAUDEEN,
DONGLI CHEN AND YANJING WU

Abstract

This article summarizes the events at Narrating New Normal: Graduate Student Symposium, held virtually on May 17–18, 2021. The symposium was organized by a number of graduate students from the School of Communication and Film (previously named the School of Communication) and was supported by *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images* and the School of Communication and Film. It was attended by an international roster of graduate students hailing from academic institutions and think tanks in different countries. The presentations focused on the usage of the phrase *new normal*, a popular term during crises, in various geopolitical, geocultural, and historical contexts. The essay discusses first the background and theoretical framework that informs the symposium. Conceived during the COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis that has seen the use of the phrase *new normal* in describing the shifts in our daily lives or imaginations of a postcrisis future. Taking a critical approach, the symposium aims to interrogate how the phrase is used by different social institutions, corporations, and individuals in various crises, considering how it normalizes precarity. This essay also summarizes the keynote lecture delivered by professor Michal Krzyzanowski (Uppsala University) on the discursive strategies of normalization and mainstreaming. It also covers the papers and discussions across four panels that examined the different aspects of normalization and of new normal in its various incarnations: geopolitics, networked media spaces, normalization of precarity in everyday life, and popular

culture. The article ends by offering a synthesis of the major threads that tie the presentations and addresses together. It proposes that while the phrase *new normal* normalizes and obfuscates precarity, it also suggests that there are pockets of optimism during crises where we can witness human resilience and individual agency.

Keywords: new normal, normalization, crises, precarity

Our journal, *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images* hosted a graduate student symposium, *Narrating New Normal*, on May 17–18, 2021. Organized by five graduate students[1] from HKBU's School of Communication and Film (formerly School of Communication), the symposium was supported by the Centre for Film and Moving Image Research, Academy of Film, School of Communication and Film. The symposium is concerned with the meanings and usages of the phrase *new normal* and how it suggests a vision of a stable future, even as it obscures and even sugarcoats a cluster of critical issues, least of which is social inequalities. The presentations in the symposium collectively investigate how *new normal* is used in various geopolitical, geocultural, and geohistorical contexts, paying close attention to the role of media in the deployment of the phrase. The presentations covered a wide spectrum of topics, ranging from the usage of new normal in national/international politics; to the struggles and experiences of gender, sexual, and racial minorities during crises; to how ordinary people use different media to make sense of the changes wrought by crises and the adjustments the new normal demands.

COVID-19 and the Ubiquity of New Normal

The world has been grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic for more than a year now. Millions have fallen sick and lost their lives, and many more lost their

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1. The authors of this report.

jobs. Economies have been declining and health-care systems have collapsed, leaving governments scrambling to contain the paralyzing effects of the pandemic on our political, economic, cultural, social, and personal lives. The media, governments, corporations, and even ordinary netizens readily deploy the phrase *new normal* to signify how the pandemic affected and disrupted our daily lives. Different organizations use the phrase to imagine how the postpandemic future will be. The United Nations, for example, claim that the new normal will see all facets of life integrated in digital systems, seeing how the pandemic forced all imaginable human activities to be conducted online.[2] Despite its ubiquity, the phrase is not new and has been used in the media in recent memory. Writing mostly on the financial measures individuals and families must observe following the 2008 financial meltdown, William Galston argued that the new normal must be a "new era of public [spending] restraint, not just private thrift."[3] The phrase was also used in China to refer to diminished GDP growth in the early 2010s. The People's Republic of China (PRC) president Xi Jinping described China's economy as entering a more stable new normal (*xin changtai* 新常态) compared to the rapid economic growth that China sustained for years.[4] As the Chinese media kept promoting and repeating the term, the public grew calmer and more assured, thanks to the framing of the issue as a new normal.

A thread that holds these deployments of new normal is how it legitimizes policies that ensure the organizational survival of governments, corporations, and institutions while treating individuals as expendable resources. New normal signifies a vision of a stable postcrisis future, obfuscating how new inequalities emerge and how the old ones survive and mutate. The new

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2. United Nations, "The New Normal Is Digital," United Nations, 2020, https://www.un.org/en/desa/new-normal-digital.

3. William A. Galston, "The 'New Normal' for the U.S. Economy: What Will It Be?," Brookings Institute, September 1, 2009, https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-new-normal-for-the-u-s-economy-what-will-it-be/.

4. "New Normal in Economic Development," *China Daily*, October 5, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-10/05/content_32869258.htm.

normal promises that crises are just temporary that will resolve by them-selves, giving rise to a new way of life, if not a new social order. The new normal signifies stories of survival, of how individuals cope in the face of adversity, and of how ordinary people get by as institutions and corporations ensure their own survival. Despite the optimism that the phrase carries, new normal also hides stories of inequalities that widen the gap between the rich and the poor, the have and the have-nots, and the majority and the minorities.

The Symposium

The foregoing serves as the impetus for launching the symposium. Held via Zoom, the symposium brought together graduate students from various

Figure 1: The faculty, students, and staff of the School of Communica-tion, HKBU, at Narrating New Normal: Graduate Student Symposium. *Source*: File photo.

institutions in thinking about new normal in different political, cultural, economic, and historical contexts. The symposium aimed to investigate how Internet users, film and media makers, institutions, governments, and cultural organizations weave narratives using new normal to shape reality, produce knowledge, and make emotional sense of drastic changes. Its goal is to be an academic platform where young scholars can present their debates about the affect (i.e., emotional aspects) and effect (e.g., social impact) of new normal. With its popular usage among governments, media, social institutions, and netizens, what exactly does new normal mean? What stories do people and organizations tell using new normal? Who tells these stories and how are these stories told?

The symposium commenced on May 17, 2021, with professor Yu Huang, the dean of the School of Communication and Film at HKBU, giving the opening remarks. Professor Huang stressed the importance of continuing debates and academic discussions even amid a crisis. He said that
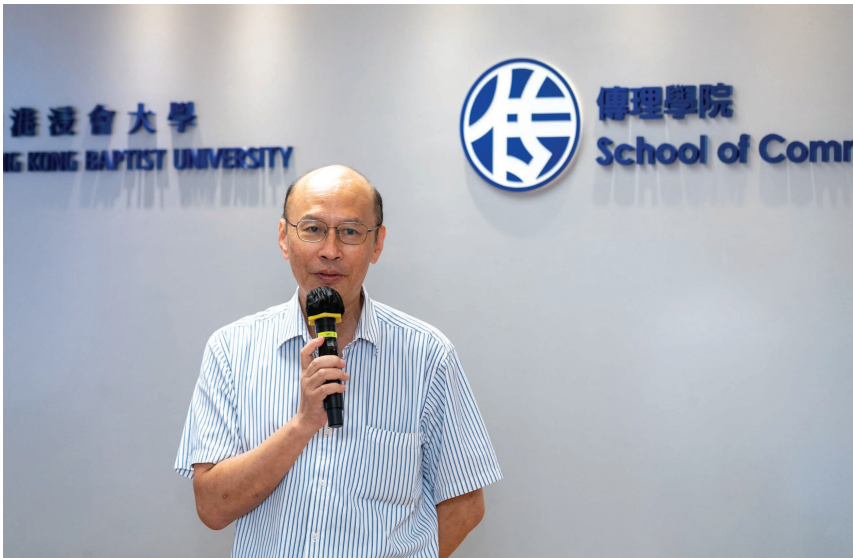

Figure 2: Professor Yu Huang, the dean of the School of Communication, delivers his opening remarks. *Source*: File photo.

universities have a role to play in advancing knowledge during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and engaging graduate students in academic discussions are important and rewarding learning experiences for academics. Professor Huang expressed hope that once the pandemic subsides, the school can host and invite graduate students again in lively face-to-face discussion. In his speech, the associate dean for postgraduate studies of the School of Communication and Film, professor Steve Guo, noted that this is the first international graduate student symposium the school has hosted. He remarked how the symposium captured the "3 Ds": diversity in presenters and topics, depth in probing, and developing the critical understanding of the world. Indeed, the symposium has an international roster of student-presenters—from the Philippines, Hong Kong, India, Mainland China, Nigeria, Greece—and come from diverse cultural backgrounds. They hail from academic institutions in Hong Kong, the Philippines, the United States, France, the PRC, Japan, and India, and all are within the various stages of their graduate studies. Dr. Celine Song, head of the Research Postgraduate Committee of the School of Communication and Film, also delivered the welcoming remarks on the second day of the symposium. Song emphasized how the symposium acts as a platform where graduate students can present their works to the wider academic community. She said that Narrating New Normal is an important inter- and cross-disciplinary venue where graduate students and the senior academics can learn from each other.

The keynote speech was delivered by Michal Krzyzanowski, chair professor at Uppsala University, Sweden. Krzyanowski is one of the leading scholars in the normalization of the politics of exclusion in the context of communication, media, and social changes.[5] In his lecture entitled "Crisis In/and the 'New Normal': Discursive Strategies of Normalization and Mainstreaming," he explored the notion of normalization by first

5. Michal Krzyzanowski, "Crisis in/of 'New Normal': Discursive Strategies of Normalization and Mainstreaming" (keynote lecture presented at Narrating New Normal: Graduate Student Symposium, May 17–18, 2021, Hong Kong Baptist University and through virtual platforms).

distinguishing the differences between norms, normality, normalization, and discourse. Then he argued that "the new normal" is a social and political construct that relies on a number of factors, including the legitimation of social and political norms and normalities triggered by imaginaries of crisis. By drawing examples from the most recent COVID-19 pandemics to the refugee crisis in Europe, he explained that normalization is a key step in the process of "discursive shifts" for the political and media practices, eventually contributing to the formation of the newer, wider, and more explicitly exclusionary "common sense." The talk laid the foundation for the panel discussion as Kryzanowski provided a theoretical explanation of what new normal really means, and the notion is not only confined by the current global pandemics but also a recurring phenomenon in many moments of crisis and social changes.

The first panel, "Public Agenda and the Geopolitics of Normalization," was chaired by professor Daya Kishan Thussu from the Department of Journalism. The papers in this panel examined the politics behind new normal in different geographical contexts. The panel analyzed the media's role in the construction of new normal from the perspective of political elites and ordinary Internet users. Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis (HKBU) presented a paper on how the government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Greece used the phrase *new normal* and *new normality* to weave narratives and promises of stability as the country was pummeled by economic problems and the COVID-19 pandemic.[6] Karyotakis noted how the phrase, which was supposed to mean a return to prosperity and stability, was weaponized to curtail fundamental rights and further polarized the Greek public. Using critical discourse analysis and securitization theory, Karyotakis's presentation argued that the new normal represented a decline in democracy, an issue that became more polarizing during the pandemic. Mistura Adebusola Salaudeen (HKBU) expounded on the new normality in the context

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6. Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis, "Storytelling the 'New Normality' of Covid-19 through Greece's Prime Minister on YouTube" (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

of China's growing presence in Africa and explored the articulations of Nigerian elites about the impact of China's soft power tactics on Nigeria's economic and political landscape.[7] Salaudeen, in her presentation, found that among Nigerian elites, there was a general admiration of China's diplomacy and an acceptance of Chinese partnership, albeit a disdain for Chinese products and a growing skepticism of China's uncertain motives and influence in Nigeria. She concluded that even though Nigerian elites admire China's rapid self-development and applaud its brazen challenge of Western dominance, they, however, doubt China's intentions for Africa are any different from Western imperialism, hence the general disposition of "mitigated skepticism." Srija Sanyal (Institute of Globally Distributed Open Research and Education) investigated how women are disproportionately affected by the pandemic in terms of workplace dynamics and economic prospects.[8] She argued that because the workplace and family life have been conflated into one space, women are forced to juggle different roles simultaneously while enduring domestic abuse from their partners. Sanyal noted how the unequal gender relations in India have been exacerbated during the pandemic and how these inequalities are normalized or obfuscated in workplaces and at home. Together, these presentations showed how the phrase *new normal* operates in a range of geocultural and geopolitical contexts. The cases elucidate how the new normal is being used and contested among political elites for control and political gains, and this contestation may not always benefit the ordinary people. As Karyotakis and Salaudeen's presentations showed, the power struggle that accompanies crisis and political changes mostly benefits the interests of the political elite. Sanyal's presentation showed us the other end of the spectrum. In a scramble to address the pandemic, corporations and governments provide policies and solutions that collapse private, professional, and public life in the domestic

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7. Mistura Adebusola Salaudeen, "Is China the New Normal? Analysing Elite Conversations on Sino-African Partnership" (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

8. Srija Sanyal, "Beating the Pandemic Effect Inside and Out: Stories of Indian Corporate Women" (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

sphere, causing disproportionate amounts of work, and sometimes abuse, to women.

The second panel, entitled "Negotiation of Normality in Networked Media Spaces," was chaired by Academy of Film assistant professor Dr. Mateja Kovacic. The panel presented cases on how new normal is deployed within online and networked spaces and how the phrase shapes collective memories, collective identities, and collective experiences of Internet users. Yaqian Lai (Central Academy of Fine Arts, China) and Xiaomo Liu (University of Bordeaux Montaigne, France) investigated how self-made audio-visual recordings of the medical situation in China during the COVID-19 pandemic reshapes people's collective memory of the crisis.[9] They argue that these user-generated narratives render the events not covered by mainstream media visible. Continuing their presentation, Lai and Liu suggested that these contents are recut and remixed by other users, and the emerging videos replicate the narratives propagated by mainstream media, producing a collective memory that is simultaneously sentimental and vague. Ruepert Jiel Dionisio Cao (HKBU) presented his paper on the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to gay amateur porn producers in the Philippines.[10] Cao argues that porn networks are important cultural, political, and affective spaces for gay men to legitimize their identity and sexuality. He suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic highlights how the crises reinforce traditional notions and attitudes on gay sexuality, leaving gay men struggling to fulfill their need for sexual contact, intimacy, and socialization. Cao proposes that, ultimately, the prevailing discourse on new normal glosses over people's needs to express themselves sexually and crisis becomes an opportunity to reinforce "normal" or conservative attitudes toward sexuality. Focusing on gaming,

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9. Yaqian Lai and Xiaomo Liu, "Urge to Remember, Rush to Forget: How Short-video Recuts on Social Media Reshape the Chinese Collective Memory of Covid-19 Outbreak" (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

10. Ruepert Jiel Dionisio Cao, "How COVID-19 Disrupted the Amateur Porn Circuits in the Philippines and Its Impact in Sexual Politics" (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

Zixuan Zhu (HKBU) reflected on how the advancement in new media technologies normalizes shorter, leaner, and fragmented narratives that warrant shallower intellectual and affective engagement from the player.[11] But Zhu argues that the online interactivity encouraged by contemporary games allows users to exercise their agency by constructing their own narratives about these games. Kovacic explained that a running thread in this panel was displacement and how crisis displaces people, creating new social relations and practices in the process. Kovacic explained that displacement creates new venues for contestation between the minority and the majority, between the powerful and the powerless. This, according to Kovacic, allows for the emergence of new social structures but at the same time cautions that crises may also result in the reinforcement of old hierarchies and power relations.

Figure 3: The symposium participants attending a presentation.
A small body of audience gathered at HKBU for the symposium.
Source: File photo.

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11. Zixuan Zhu, "Interaction and Narrative in Online Games" (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

The third panel, "Narratives of Precarity and Everyday Life Under the New Normal," centered on the everyday experiences ordinary people experience during crises and the predicaments and opportunities for creativity ensuing during difficult times. It was chaired by professor Cherian George, the associate dean (Research and Development) of the School of Communication and Film. In her presentation, Namrata Nagar (Rochester Institute of Technology, United States) showcased a "slice of immigrant life in the epicenter of COVID-19" through the images she captured about her everyday life in New York City. Nagar highlights the resilience ("the true spirit of the human race") of the citizens, alongside their feelings of frustration, when they respond to the crisis, which leads to a rethinking of the concept of new normal.[12] Nagar's presentation was both personal and conceptual. It tells of the changes that happened in New York City through her own subjectivities as an immigrant as she tried to grapple with the rapid changes and fast-paced life in the city. Yet, it also explores the notions of human resilience and adaptability and how digital media serves as an archive of narratives of resilience and adaptability. With a focus on how ordinary people use the Internet to meet their material and financial needs, Joy Hannah Panaligan (De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde) talked about online bartering in the Philippines.[13] This primitive system, practiced by pre-Hispanic Filipinos, involves trading raw materials instead of money and has seen a resurgence in the pandemic. Panaligan explains that the digital barter system allows people to help anonymously, changing the nature of the barter system from an economic system to a way of practicing one's social duty to help others (i.e., *bayanihan*). Panaligan also argues that the digital barter system is also a product of poor governance that leaves people fending for themselves. During the discussion, one theme that emerged was that of resilience and how resilience allows people to move forward despite adversity. Yet, as it was clearly discussed during the presentation that resilience is also a

12. Namrata Nagar, "The New Normal in New York City, 2020" (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).
13. Joy Hannah Panaligan, "Examining the Concept of Online Bartering System in Facebook Group Communities" (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

product of political and economic systems that ignore underprivileged sectors in the society.

Dr. Dorothy Lau, an assistant professor at the Academy of Film (HKBU) chaired the fourth panel of the symposium, "Popular Culture and the New Normal." In this panel, the presenters shared their perspectives of the new normal through popular culture such as music, films, and fandom community. Dong Wei discussed how Jia Zhangke's portrayal of Shanxi in the film *Mountains May Depart* indicates the passive handling and intervention of China's unsustainable development of industrialization. She frames the nation's official rhetoric of the economic slowdown and structural irrationality as the economic new normal.[14] Concluding with an overview of the miners in Jia's other films, Wei correlated the individual's fates with the nation's rhetoric of economic new normal, which is a passive route of industrialization in postsocialist China. Shiqi Lin analyzed Wuhan-themed music during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, where she unpacked her personal pandemic music library and related different moments of 2020 to songs of seemingly discrete contexts, ranging from Chinese rock band OYS's "Kill the One from Shijiazhuang" (*shasi nage shijiazhuang ren* 杀死那个石家庄人) to US hip-hop group the Black Eyed Peas' "Where Is the Love?"[15] She argued that the ephemeral, fragmentary, and relational nature of music has turned this particular medium into a "connector" of affects across different subjectivities, cultures, languages, and historical periods. Kris Li's paper analyzed the visual languages as well as the narrative tropes from idols' media products, primarily in the form of music videos during the prolonged coronavirus period.[16] He identified the different time-conceptions of the

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14. Dong Wei, "Passive Chinese Industrialization: Jia Zhangke's *Mountains May Depart* under the Context of Economic 'New Normal'" (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).
15. Shiqi Lin, "A Pandemic Music Library: Sonic Documentation in a Time of Crisis" (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).
16. Kris Li Chung Tai, "'I will always be here waiting for you!'—Reconfiguring Fan Community of Japanese Idols in the Coronavirus Time" (paper presented at Narrating New Normal).

pandemic: as a one-off shock and prolonged shared challenges faced by both idol groups and their fan community and how this factor further shapes the ongoing experience of a broken community.

Lau, concurrently the managing editor of *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images*, led the unveiling of the journal. Lau emphasizes the mission of the journal: to be a leading platform for intellectual debates on the "affect and effect" of storytelling across different media platforms. Published open access by Michigan Publishing, *Global Storytelling* aims to be an accessible platform for academics and intellectuals investigating the impact of media technologies on storytelling. The journal's mission resonated with the theme of the symposium. The symposium explored how new normal instigates specific emotional responses and the social impacts its usage brings. One theme that emerged from the symposium is how media weaves narratives of crises and normality that imagines a stable future yet conceals the oppressive nature of the process of normalization.

Bringing the symposium to a close, professor Ying Zhu, the founder and editor in chief of *Global Storytelling*, highlighted several key points emerging from the two-day symposium. Zhu reminded us how some of the new normals were indeed the continuation, if not perpetuation of, the old norms. Zhu illustrated the point with a Chinese saying: 旧瓶装新酒 (*jiuping zhuang xinjiu*, "new wine in old bottles") but that the reverse is true during crisis: "old wine in new bottles." She further proposed that crises such as COVID-19 reinforce and bring back old practices and existing class, racial, and gender divisions. In the time of digital storytelling where competing narratives coexisted, Zhu urged us to interrogate the notion of "norms, the process of normalization, and the forces behind this process." Lastly, Zhu said that now more than ever, "[the] imperative to engage in cross-border, cross-disciplinary, cross-ideological, and cross-cultural boundaries has never before assumed a greater social, political, and cultural relevance." The two-day symposium and *Global Storytelling* serve as a baby step toward the larger goal.

New Normal: Concealing Social Inequalities or a Beacon of Hope?

The symposium served as an opportunity for early-career researchers to present their work on and tell narratives about the new normal in its different historical and cultural contexts. Whether in times of war, economic collapse or slowdown, or pandemic, a crisis always triggers visions of a new way of life or social order. As Krzyzanowski explains, normalization ultimately leads to the development of forms of "common sense." He further explains that media institutions and communication technologies play a vital role in the processes of legitimation, normalization, and the construction of common sense.[17] Normalization always leaves the minorities out of the picture. As with the presentations by graduate students (i.e., Cao, Salaudeen, Lai and Liu, Panaligan, Nagar, Wei, and Sanyal), crisis and normalization do not work in the interest of the minorities, and in Krzyzanowski's analysis of the refugee crisis in Europe, normalization can legitimize xenophobic discourses. In these cases, the new normal is illusory and maintains the status quo. It gives economic disparities and other social issues a facelift, but new normal preserves in its core old societal problems. If one thinks of the postpandemic future, one will be tempted to think of a world that is more fully integrated with mobile and digital technologies, as what the United Nations predicts will happen. Yet, one should also think about the material costs such vision demands. A fully digital world will most likely only benefit those who have the financial capacity, material resources, and access to digital infrastructures. We do not have to look further to assess how the new normal of the COVID-19 pandemic—that of social isolation, limited mobility, work-from-home arrangements—are imposed by governments and institutions without

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17. Michal Krzyzanowski, "Normalization and the Discursive Construction of 'New' Norms and 'New' Normality: Discourse in the Paradoxes of Populism and Neoliberalism," *Social Semiotics* 30, no. 4 (2020): 431–48.

taking into consideration the capacity of individuals to adapt. From gay men whose prospects for sexual contact were limited by the pandemic, to Indian women whose duties at home and work now overlap, to migrant students and workers in the United States who had to endure more solitary lives during this crisis, the imaginaries of new normal and a stable future do not really cater to the interests of the underprivileged and the minorities. In some ways, new normal hides—if not outright legitimizes, naturalizes, or worsens—existing social issues and social structures that buttress these issues.

Yet, crises also bring out narratives of resilience (e.g., Panaligan), the beauty of relationships (e.g., Li), and introspection on human values and the meaning of life (e.g., Lin). Crisis also have pockets of optimism where individuals can exercise their agency to help others and cultivate relationships. Crisis can also bring opportunities where we can reflect on the things that make us humans. Lin's presentation, for example, suggests that there are moments that our solitary existence during the pandemic compels us to think about our relationships, reflect on our lives before the crisis, and establish an emotional connection with others through digital media. As Zixuan Zhu implies in his presentation, the "new" in the new normal also carries its own meanings and imaginaries for everyone. In his studies on the emergence of interactive and online games with little narratives or story plots, Zhu hints that changes, and crises, provide opportunities for us to exercise our agency in new ways. Thus, crises can contain potential for people to challenge the status quo and initiate meaningful changes to the society. New normal can embody hopes and aspirations for deeper human connections and a future that is not only stable but also more just. Furthermore, the conduct of the symposium represented some positive changes. While the online symposium hindered more personal social interaction among the participants and the audience, it also allowed the symposium to be watched by many people outside Hong Kong. In this way, we hope that the symposium has reached more people, allowing them to be more aware of the different meanings and uses of the new normal.

Narrating New Normal has been a fruitful and productive gathering of minds that aimed to tell and critically examine narratives of new normal. Now more than ever, the phrase *new normal* has become ubiquitous, which means that it demands our attention as the phrase has become a buzzword for a stable future or a new way of life under crisis. While the presenters in this symposium tell narratives of how the new normal reinforces old social issues, there are also glimmers of hope that the crisis can also pave the way for a more just society. In its own modest way, Narrating New Normal teased out how new normal operates in various sociopolitical, cultural, and historical contexts and what concepts and visions of the past, present, and future this ubiquitous phrase embodies.

Acknowledgments

CONTRIBUTORS

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Harriet Evans is Professor Emerita of Chinese Cultural Studies (University of Westminster) and Visiting Professor of Anthropology (LSE). She has written extensively on the politics of gender and sexuality in China, and on political posters and visual culture of the Mao era. Her main publications are *Women and Sexuality in China: Dominant Discourses of Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949* (1997), *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution* (co-edited with Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, 1999), and *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (2008). Her *Beijing from Below: Stories of Marginal Lives in the Capital's Center* (Duke University Press) was published in May 2020. A new volume, titled *Grassroots Values: Local Cultural Heritage in China* (co-edited

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Ying Zhu is a film studies faculty at both Hong Kong Baptist University and the City University of New York; an Adjunct Professor at the Film Studies Program, the Columbia University; and a Visiting Fellow at the Orient Institute, the University of Oxford. She has published ten books, including *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds* and *Two Billion Eyes: The Story of China Central Television*. Her writings have appeared in major academic journals as well as established media outlets such as *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, etc. Her works have been translated into Chinese, Dutch, French, Italian, and Spanish. She reviews manuscripts for major publications and research foundations in Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, the U.K., and the U.S. Prof Zhu is the recipient of a US National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, an American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship, and a Fulbright Senior Research Fellowship. Her new book, *Hollywood in China: Behind the Scenes of the World's Largest Movie Market* is forthcoming.

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Thomas Schatz is emeritus professor and former chair of the Radio-Television-Film Department at the University of Texas, where he has been on the faculty since 1976. He has written four books (and edited many others) about Hollywood films and filmmaking, including *Hollywood Genres*, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* and *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*. His writing on film has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Premiere*, *The Nation*, *Film Comment*, and *Cineaste*, and elsewhere. He is completing a book on contemporary conglomerate Hollywood that was awarded a film scholars grant by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. His next book will be a history of Universal Pictures for Routledge's Hollywood Centenary series.

Schatz also founded the UT Film Institute, a program devoted to training students in narrative and digital filmmaking. Together with its commercial counterpart, Burnt Orange Productions, the UT Film Institute produced five independent feature films, on which Schatz served as executive producer.

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Christopher Rea is the author of *Chinese Film Classics, 1922–1949* (Columbia, 2021) and *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China* (California, 2015), and co-author of *Where Research Begins: Choosing a Research Project that Matters to You (and the World)* (Chicago, 2022) (with Thomas S. Mullaney). He is also the creator of the Modern Chinese Cultural

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Ruepert Jiel Dionisio Cao, Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis, Mistura Adebusola Salaudeen, Dongli Chen, and Yanjing Wu are the graduate student organizers of *Narrating New Normal: Graduate Student Symposium*. The members of the organizing committee are under the School of Communication and Film, Hong Kong Baptist University. Cao's research interest is about the politics, economics, and technologies of gay pornography. Karyotakis's research is on environmental communication, hate propaganda, media ethics, and power relations. Salaudeen's research straddles the interconnection between journalism studies and international communication with a particular focus on Sino-African relations. Chen's research is about participatory culture and online video in Chinese social media. Wu works on the studies of Chinese television dramas and the entertainment industry in the era of streaming.