Global, National, Local
The love affair between Chinese glamour movies and transnational audiences continues. Its latest manifestation in the Australian market has been the ‘Silk Screen’ season, the first installment featuring films by familiar auteurs, Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, and the Taiwanese director, Ang Lee. There is also Takeshi Kitano’s Kikujiro, but, for the purposes of this essay, we will concentrate on films made by Mainland directors for the Mainland/overseas market. Silk Screen is a symptom of transnational cultural sharing. It is a welcome attempt to distribute films from non-English speaking cinemas to a global audience. By bundling the films of internationally well-known directors together with a couple of lesser known names, the season aims to distribute a selection of ‘Asian’ film to audiences that might actually go for the whole package. The downside of this is that the regional appellation obscures the distinct national and local contexts from which each film has arisen, and the embedded transnationalism in those that were co-productions in the first place. Silk Screen’s Asian cinema does not require audiences to move far from their zero points of spectatorship to enjoy themselves. These films are easily translated into universally recognisable stories of passion, intrigue, family love and so on. However, with that caveat in mind, we contend that the films are also readable as locally contextualised national productions, which comment in various ways on the global inflections of experience.

The tension between the global and the local, a universal problematic of disjuncture between global late capitalism and the resurgence of nativism, is particularly pronounced in the case of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This is because, unlike elsewhere, the formation and transformation of Chinese transnational consciousness is punctuated, at each crucial moment, by the towering presence of a strong...
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state. It is also burdened by a tenacious national memory of China's history.

Our point of departure, unlike some other recent theorisations of Chinese modernity and globalization, works with the notion of the 'national' in order to understand some less 'flexible', less deterritorialised, but nevertheless transnational cultural practices. We argue for an engagement with, and re-working of, issues of territoriality, national history and cultural memory in order to consider a more temporal dimension of cultural transaction. This dimension is not so much concerned with the spatial flow of cultural products across the borders. Rather, it holds the tension and negotiations between a relatively cohesive memory of a Chinese nation and the contemporary reality of globalisation, migration and displacement which threatens to render the remembering of the nation's history inarticulate. In these readings of high profile, internationally orientated films, we want to demonstrate both the usefulness of, and the potential risk in, considering travel as a metaphor for studying contemporary China. There is travel across China written into the narrative of each film, and the films have themselves travelled – both in China and across national borders. The films are viewed by – mainly art house – audiences, many of whom are themselves travellers in the global system of work and cultural advancement. They are also seen, especially in the domestic market, by audiences on the rack of satellite modernity, local people leapingfrogging into a modern imaginary through mediated images and material consumption. The formation of modern subjectivity through the cinematic in travelling of expectation is clearly at issue in the films of the PRC. As we argue below, there are sequences that might be read as naive by sophisticated transcultural critics (the electric shower in Shower). We suggest that such sequences should be understood as more sophisticated indeed. They narrate the disjunctures between fantasy and economic possibility, through a humorous and intertextual referencing of transnational clichés of technology.

Historical Memory

The season is apt for discussion because it ranges so widely across the thematic of historical memory in China today. The Road Home, Shower and The Emperor and the Assassin deal with three key moments in Chinese mythico-political periodization. The Road Home sets up a vision of the revolutionary state, and its disappointments, in a story that moves from the present day back to the late 1950s in rural China. Shower contributes to the process of mythologization of the urban experience of economic migration, family disintegration and community dispossession in the 1990s. Finally, The Emperor and the Assassin visits the full weight of cinematic grandeur on that most grandiose of historical characters, the first emperor of the Qin, the man whose ambition (and martial foresight) produced the Great Wall of China. This film achieves an extraordinary sleight of hand in which the concept of China as a primordial national space – just waiting for unification – is the heartbeat of the film's narrative passion and logic. In our account of these films we want to draw attention to three salient and complementary features of their dramatic impetus and their affective power. These features appeal to cultural memory, whilst acknowledging contemporary local disjunctures within the assumed flows of globalization.

First, we draw attention to the impossibility of return (huiji) that is the price of individual and social flirtations with modernity. In these films, men leave women, parents, but most importantly, places, in order to produce themselves as modern economic and political subjects in a new economy. When they return, through guilt at the death or supposed death of an elder, they discover that their transformation has worked well. They can perform the practices of their past, but they cannot respond instinctively to situations within the performative space of their childhood. They are involved only as visiting artists in a special performance of the local in what is for them a larger economic environment. This suggests an alternative to the notion of nostalgia-without-memory, in so far as the characters retain passive memories of the past, which become nostalgic but also painful when they realise, through the action of the film, that their memories are accurate but meaningless to their modern selves. The characters experience memory without full embodiment. Whether or not one would wish to retain the link between traditional behaviour and daily practice for the modern citizen, it is the realisation of de-linking which is well acknowledged in these films as probably necessary in the long term, but definitely painful in the moment of recognition.

Second, we note that an insistent cinematic re-invention of the nation underscores the nostalgia at the heart of the cultural evocation of such returns. Whilst the films draw on a
local aesthetic of community, expending great cinematic effort on the beauty, tragedy and quaintness of a carefully observed location, in the end, civic-national attention is invoked to replace local belongingness. The regional diversity and divisions across and within China’s provinces and metropolitan districts, and especially across the rural-urban dichotomy, are collapsed into a generalised narrative of China-in-modernity, and Chinese historical memory. The return is therefore always doomed to eventual collapse. It takes place in a narrative of civic-national ambition which must undermine the affective sources of its attraction whilst mobilising them for strategic support. Thirdly, the spectre of the global, as figured in mobile phones, Japanese-style techno-modernity, and self-conscious masculinity, is raised again and again. These references are, as we suggested in the opening section of this essay, both very naïve and highly sophisticated versions of economic modernity. The films invoke popularised tropes of everyday transition materiality, rather than appealing to the ambiguously feminised structures of feeling developed in Fifth Generation cinema and new poetry in the 1980s.

As the over-determination of the nation as an organising narrative trope sentimentalises the collective and the communal, so it throws approbrium on the global. The films rely on this political strategy to have their cake and eat it. In all the stories, the past eventually recedes before the present, because it must. The first emperor is a tyrant and a murderer, but he is also absolutely essential to the narrative of unification and modern China’s inevitable trajectory towards the nation state. So, the young man who returns home to make only partial re-acquaintance with their remembered child-selves must lose their battle with the global. They do so not as a poise to modern internationalism but strictly on behalf of the modern national economic interest.

The Road Home
It is the late 1950s. A young teacher arrives at a village, and oversees the building of a schoolhouse. Local men carry out the work, and the women cook for them. It is an idyllic scene of collective rural labour in the service of progress. The women climb the hill each day to lay out food on the workmen’s table, and the men take one bowl each. One girl, deservedly acclaimed as the most beautiful girl in the village, has fallen madly in love with the young teacher. She prepares dishes for him day after day, placing her (best) bowl on the table with all the others, hoping against hope that he will choose hers. Eventually the school is built, and adorned with a red banner for luck, which she (as the most beautiful girl in the village) has woven specially for the purpose. It is a fine weave, and offers him yet another material account of her growing passion. The schoolhouse is near the old well, which hardly anyone uses. She, however, goes there every day to draw water, caught by the sound of his voice reciting lessons for the children to repeat. The timbre of his voice is their love theme, which one day her son will repeat in the same schoolroom in his dead father’s memory, to appease the mother’s grief.

When the teacher starts work, he takes his meals in rotation with different village households. The visit to the girl’s house comes late but is a feast of romantic overstatement. He eats everything, and, needing the promise of his return, she offers him mushroom dumplings for his dinner. He does promise to return, but can only come back briefly to tell her that he has been recalled to the provincial capital for questioning. When he finally returns to the village, months later, it is a brief visit. However, the voice-over of their son reassures us that the two are re-united and live fruitful lives in the village up until the point of the commencement of the film we are watching.

The Road Home is a love story. It tells of love as experienced in youth, through grief, and as encapsulated in the collective memories of a village romance. The narrator is a man in his late thirties who returns home on the death of his father, to find that his mother is insisting that the body of her husband be carried back home from the town morgue on foot by the men of the village. He had worked as the village teacher for forty years, and she wants his service remembered and honoured. But this is a long road home across wintry rural terrain. The custom she invokes requires the body to be carried by strong peers, whilst the widow and others walk alongside the coffin, shouting to the deceased that this is the way home. The reminders are necessary to one who has died in hospital or in another place, lest he forget the road and wander lost in the afterlife.

As the film opens, it appears that her demand is problematic, and potentially costly. Most of the young men are now living in the town or further afield, and the older ones are too weak
to do the job. The village mayor calculates a sizeable sum as up to thirty-six neighbouring villagers would have to be hired to carry the coffin in a relay system. Furthermore, cigarettes and drink would be needed on the road, as the bodies of the living cannot carry the dead without sustenance. The journey from the town to the village is long and arduous in the cold of winter. The son's first instincts are pragmatic but, having seen his Mother's grief and remembering the love story which started her relationship with his Father, the son relents and pays the money. Or, as narrator, he is persuaded through our sensorium as audience, as we watch that long flashback to his parents' youth. Meal after meal is prepared and consumed in colour and relentlessly detailed and tactile close-up. The sound of the pottery bowl being placed on the table next to the others is repeated and exaggerated on the soundtrack.

As the lover is driven away after that almost-consummate meal, the girl runs desperately across the countryside to give him his mushroom dumplings. She slips and the dumplings fall from the broken bowl onto the yellow grass. The visual attention paid to these lost dumplings is significant both in terms of plot and with regard to the emotional credibility of the whole film. How does a film-maker tell an audience that a woman is in love? There must be activity, process and social anchors for the state of being in love to be available to the spectator's senses. Here, and in many films, food is the ordinary conduit to the extraordinary sensation of passion. As the mushroom dumplings rest on the grass, the extraordinary is translated through the audience's sensorial knowledge of his hunger (for her, for dinner on the cold road back to the city). This tiny detail of a love story impels the audience to support her decision as an old lady to help him home. Quietly, the lost taste of emotional repletion shadows the journey towards collective redemption shared by the narrator, and expected by the audience. The long march takes place as a group responsibility; nearby villagers are recruited, and the Father's ex-pupils drive from miles away to be part of the ceremony. The money is returned to the son; no-one expects payment. He and his Mother donate it to the cost of a new school building for the village.

These last scenes are necessarily cathartic and morally fine. The old lady is vindicated by the degree of participation in the labour of the process that she has initiated. She brings her husband home. She also brings home the children of the village, to the place in which they grew up and received their first education, and also to the memory of a certain collective approach to experience. For this story does not just revolve around an old lady's insistence on old-fashioned courtesies to the dead. As Andrew Kipnis has pointed out in Guanxi, his analysis of social relations in a northern Chinese village, funeral practices are open to contention:

Weeping was not simply a matter of honoring the deceased; it also claimed a relationship to the deceased and his or her family. Thus, the ban on interclass weeping did not prevent bad classes from honoring 'red' ones, but rather discouraged the formation of interclass relationships, a reasonable objective given the politics of that time."

'That time' refers to the years 1966–1976, the long version of the Cultural Revolution. This is not a spurious connection to the film's matter. The Road Home is similarly concerned with the relations between adults in certain social and historical moments. Food is the functional metaphor through which these relations are formed, anchored and understood. Similarly, intricate ceremonies such as a funeral (which also involves food and cigarettes) mark transitions in the structures of social experience. The funeral arrangements in the film call Kipnis' observations to mind, partly because the Mother demands inter-class attention to her husband's memory. He is a schoolteacher and not a poor peasant, and, as she is now reminding the village, he has been part of its social fashioning for forty years. He has educated its children, mailing them through the same voice that caught her ears on the daily trip to the well. The social aspect of the love song is invoked in the collective knowledge of the dead man. His love story and marriage have, after all, been narrativeized through the collective memory of village life. He has eaten in every house in the village, and has been cared for throughout his adult life by the material and emotional sustenance of the most beautiful of its daughters. His funeral is a necessary material code to a life lived in a particular social context. The construction of the social self through ritual practice is that to Kipnis' analysis, and the schoolteacher's subjective formation as a functional metonym of village history, is central to the film in question here.

The present-day narrative frames the love story in The Road Home. It is shot in black and white,
while the long central flashback is in colour. The simple tale of nervous admiration, shared attraction, acknowledged and the exchange of tokens, assumes dramatic impetus when the young man is taken away for political questioning. The girl waits for him on the road, falls sick, and nearly dies. On his return, Vronsky-like, to save her, their love is seen and accepted by the villagers, but the lovers are kept apart for a further two years whilst he undergoes political re-education. This is most probably a reference to the post-Hundred Flowers arrests of 1958 and is certainly not due to the Cultural Revolution (wenge), which started nearly a decade later. Nevertheless, in post-Cultural Revolution reform China, the introduction of a political subplot (which is very thinly sketched) is enough to signal the Girl/Mother's interest in rolling back political practice in favour of village mores and inclusion. This form of protest is not unknown in the 'real' world of political resistance, where, according to Jun Jing, the 'transfer of funeral symbolism to social protests ... is an important feature of China's political culture'. Jun relates the case of 1990s' environmental protests from several villages in the south-west region of China (near Chongqing), who planned to dress in funeral white to deliver a petition to officials in Beijing. Jun argues that this collective funeral symbolism demonstrates a radical readiness to 'die for their cause'.

Zhang's film emphasises that the widow's cause is also central to understanding her version of the normative and the unjust in her and the village's history. Her interest in referring to the truth through experience is embedded in the performance of the narrative itself. The structure of the plot is such that the ritual practices of sociability are performed through the individual stories of particular people. The love story is central to the pleasure of the film, and is beautiful in its own right, but it is, formally, the motivation for the son's acquiescence to his Mother's request for collective action. The structure thereby contends that the social self is a loving, grieving subject who loves and grieves through the body of collective memory and experience. It is not that the individual does not matter, but that the role of the individual is to embody collective practice through its performance, and thus develop as an individual social subject. The Girl/Mother performs romance in the melodramatic vein of screen lovers. She places extraordinary importance on the preparation of food that the lover might not eat. She drives herself almost to death waiting for his unlikely return. In fact, she has done little that lovers do not do. Love lives in its performance, in the passage between the subversive glance, the impassioned gaze and the embodied connection of love-making. It continues through the daily rituals of shared consumption, social activity and social memories, explicitly the memories of the love story that any person or couple has performed, almost always in public.

As a widow, the Mother's performance of funereal ritual is both the same and qualitatively different from ordinary and familiar acts of devotion and romantic re-enactment. The cooking and the freezing she did alone, although in the social context of village life. The broken bowl is worthless, but is mended by an itinerant craftsman, who is paid by her own mother. When her lover returns to pull her from her sickness, the village waits outside the school to see her walk unaided to his door. In these ways, the romance is a public affair. Likewise, the funereal procession can only happen through collective endeavour and respect. In this enactment of collective respect, the village as body politic makes itself party to the sufferings of absence that came to her lover and herself from external political attacks.

The film is therefore not finally about death, but rather, it is concerned with how death opens the way back to knowledge of loving in context, at home, and to re-establishing normative virtues in social practice. As we have suggested, however, the film enjoys this nostalgic version of going home, even though the paucity of the man's story is that he has grown away from the daily embodiment of village life and cannot in fact return in any lasting way. Nor would he really want to. Although it is said that so many young men have left the village, it is a requirement of economic development that they should do so.

The funeral arrangements (shot in black and white) frame the narrative, but the body of the film is the love story (shot in colour) that the son remembers when he looks into the face of his grieving Mother. He remembers that story through the chromatic lens of shared memory. The village 'knows' the love story as its own. The Mother's demand invokes this collectivity, folding the son, and other villagers past and present, back into the body of the village as a synchronic corporeal ontology of social memory.
That she does this in part through an appeal to youth makes it a nostalgic piece of cinema (although not a nostalgia-without-memory), and one that might be read as a paean to the perfectibility of collective sociability in a place that exists (almost) untouched by the vagaries of political effects and bullying. To this extent it shares the melodramatic optimism of Hibiscus Town (Furongzheng, Xie Jin, 1986). This present argument claims, however, that such nostalgia is not un-rooted in both past and present. It is described through historic narratives of the modern revolutionary nation, and emotionally anchored in shared socio-political memory. It also feeds the fantasy of 'get rich quick' (to paraphrase Deng Xiaoping) mass participation in the global economy. This fantasy is not at all peculiar to the Chinese transitional state and people, but it is particularly clearly exemplified in the return to revolutionary modernity as a fantasy structure for socialist market development, in which the past and present are coalesce in communardism. Nostalgic narrative form and content together articulate how collectivity might (but of course will not) perform wonders with rituals and practices such as food preparation and funerals, without finally disarming the overweening organizing logic of socialist governance, civic-nationalism and internationalised market-economics.

Collective Cinema
This argument depends on Chris Berry’s insights into the collectivity of the cinematic subject in his rebuttal of ideologically motivated formalism. Berry argues extremely persuasively for a genealogy of performed collectivity in Chinese film that may buttress a set of nationally orchestrated tropes of being, but may also undermine them by overstatement. He notices that the partial collapse of national cinema (and, one could add, of third cinema) as a prioritised thematic in film criticism is problematic. Refusing to recognize the address of the nation in cinema can assume the ascendancy of the Hollywood centre, without questioning its (also nationalistic) bias towards individual motivations within film, and in the processes of spectatorship. Berry argues that the collective address of film in the history of Chinese film-making, and in current traces of its practitioners’ aesthetic and structural decisions, must be understood in many ways, including that of nationalism and resistance. In underscoring this observation Berry notes again the impact of Yellow Earth (Huang Tudi, Chen Kaige, 1984) through re-iteration of social motifs and emotional exhortations. These accounts are also indebted to feminist and queer theory accounts of the body politic as actual embodiment on the level of inclusion.

The stylistic signature of The Road Home is couched in repetition. Moments of extreme pleasure or acute anxiety are prioritised over narrative pace. Repetition of simple sequences and movements, the twist of a waiting body, induce visual acceptance of the ordinary poignancy of deep feeling. Strong colour, already a reversal in a flashback, is employed to give the intensity of the remembered romance into the skin of the film. Identical sequences become ritualised through repetition at differing speeds – the placing of the bowl on the table, the turning of the girl’s head as her lover breast the hill with a group of children on the return from a school walk. The funeral arrangements reinvolve these intensities, and pull the present closer to the past. Arguably, Zhang’s old lady is making a political point when she insists on going the slow way home. Whereas the environmentalists reported by Jun Jing are performing a masquerade of funereal dignity (albeit at the risk of critical punishment), she is doing it for real. She is revisiting a formation of social subjectivity that individualizes the grief she feels, whilst acknowledging the history of political trouble which marked the early years of their relationship.

The Emperor and the Assassin
Set in the third century B.C., The Emperor and the Assassin is a story of power and ambition, conspiracy and intrigue. The vision of the King of Qin, Ying Zheng, to conquer the remaining six rival kingdoms and thus unify China. National unification was his rhetoric, and peace and prosperity of the people was the rationale of his crusade. ‘Imagine that people under the Heaven, including those we can see and those afar that we cannot see with our eyes, will be able to live as the subjects of a unified nation’. Ying Zheng’s capacity to imagine the nation seems surprisingly modern and bears a chilly resemblance to the vision of the pro-globalization optimists of the turn of the 21st century. It is noteworthy perhaps that the other great epic of 2000, Gladiator (Ridley Scott), also re-invents the politics of modernity as an ancient sinea quo non, blithely disposing of the Enlightenment in the process. In that film, democratic representation as a lynchpin of liberal nationalism is swallowed into a bloodthirsty populism. In The Emperor and the Assassin, the multiple histories of invasion,
foreign rule and inter-state rivalry, which are relieved in history only by the quiet self-righteousness of the Southern Sung, also disappear. China was reunited by its bloodiest hero, and we are invited to jump from that protracted moment to the present struggle between labour and capital. Unlike the strategies of transnational capitalists and world powers of today, Ying Zheng’s success was contingent upon bringing down the city wall, taking the capital of neighbouring states, raising the national flags, and declaring territorial conquest. However, Ying Zheng is confronted with resistance: what if the people (pei min bai xin) do not share his vision, especially peoples of other countries who are on the brink of being ‘unified’? Forces of resistance come from all corners. Lady Zhao, the Emperor’s lover, wants to leave Qin and go back to the kingdom of Zhao, her country of origin. Jing Ke, a professional assassin and a subject of the Kingdom of Yan, decides to kill again in spite of his vow never to do so, because his country is on the verge of being devoured by the kingdom of Qin. It seems reassuring that in times both ancient and contemporary, in China or elsewhere, whenever and wherever imperialism looms large, it is bound to confront the will of the people and the thorny issues of place, origin, community, national consciousness, yearning for homeland, exile consciousness, collective identity, and cultural memory. What is even more reassuring is that historical narrative dictates that the resistance is both a failure and a success. Unification happens, but it continually fractures over the subsequent centuries. The false completions of a battle, a meal, a family death or a love affair are tiny metaphors for the false completions of history itself.

Read in this light, The Emperor and the Assassin is not too different from the other films set in contemporary China. The narrative motivations of these films depend on the tension between globalising forces – be it the ambitious, blood-thirsty and land-grabbing Chinese emperor in the 3rd century B.C. or the money-hungry transnational capitalist of the 21st century – and the individuals whose lives, values, community and identity are taken away from them against their will, and who have little power or capacity for self-determination in the processes of globalization, internationalization, or – less contentiously – economic market transition. These individuals are, nonetheless, hailed in these films as the inheritors of progress and as, bizarrely, collectively engaged in the move towards a new economy of the self.

Shower

In Shower, Daming, a businessman in a southern coastal city, returns home after mistaking his younger brother’s drawing on a postcard for the message of his father’s death. ‘Home’ is a time-honoured bathhouse run by Daming’s father, Lao Liu, with the help of Erming, Lao Liu’s younger son, a jolly, happy, albeit ‘retarded’ lad. The bathhouse is a meeting place for the neighbourhood. Regular patrons come here to have a bath in a traditionally communal way. More importantly, the bathhouse provides a convenient space for people to do something about everything, ranging from petty bickerings between retired pensioners, frustrations of sexual nature bothering the young, to the performance anxieties of aspiring artists. Life is simple and satisfying in the bathhouse, until everyone is told that a multi-storey complex is going to be built on the site and the bathhouse must close down. This puts Daming in a difficult position. His wife in the south hangs up on him when he suggests bringing his father and younger brother home. Lao Liu in any case would rather die than leave the bathhouse. Towards the end of the film, Lao Liu does die – literally – in the bathtub. The death of the father and the imminent closure of the bathhouse – the only safe place for him – proves too much to comprehend for Erming. Instead of returning to his life in the south, Daming postpones his trip and joins Erming in continuing the business of running the bathhouse, despite the prospect of inevitable demolition. Daming’s decision is similar to the schoolteacher’s decision to help his Mother organize a slow road home for his father’s memory. Both men are part of the new economy – and of the disjunctive structure of feeling that buoy up its logic. Both must perform the remembered attitudes of filial devotion in an older world, whilst knowing for sure that they will not be staying long.

The film begins with a businessman having a shower – much like a car having an automated wash – in a cubicle at the centre of an urban space. The sequence is a pastiche of advertisements for advanced ‘luxury’ technology, and plays with the fantastic expectations associated with accelerated modernization. The idea of converting the bathhouse into a number of automated shower cubicles is put to Lao Liu by one such fantasist as a business proposal. Lao Liu turns down the idea. A fragment of an old economy, Lao Liu is also alive to the financial strictures of any market. The shower is purely fantasy, as opposed to entrepreneurial pizzazz, because it is a concept that does not account...
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for the demands of the immediate local market. Washing for Lao Liu, and for his clientele, is not just about cleaning; it is a way of life, an act to purify the soul, a ritual which marks the rites of passage. And the bathhouse is not just any other business; it is his home, his neighborhood, and his community. He cannot travel in any of the ways that his elder son must travel, and – like the father in The Road Home – dies at the end of his era.

Mobility
The most palpable social reality in China in the era of economic reforms is the increasing degree of mobility. Peasants go to the city (jini cheng), northerners go to the coast in the south (nanxian), and city folks dwell on the pros and cons of going overseas (chuguo). Chinese cinema in the 1990s is crucial in re-working the spatial imagination of the Chinese in an age of increasing mobility. Both Road Home and Shower tell the story of a return from one space to another: the son in Road Home returns from the city to the village, and the son in Shower returns from the south – hotbed of global capitalism – to the more time-bound traditional space of the North. These journeys change both the travellrs and the places to which they return. When people meet, tensions occur and negotiations ensue. Such negotiations, when happening among people who love each other, can be particularly painful. Perhaps it is this difficulty in making identificatory decisions that keeps the spectators enthralled: Should we identify with Luo Yusheng in Road Home, who prefers a simple, modern funeral for his father, or should we empathise with 'my mother' who insists on honouring her husband with an elaborate and difficult funeral? Similarly in Shower, is Daming's sense of place and space – urban, memoryless, and transnational – more appealing, or does our spatial imagination resonate with that of Lao Liu, which is time-bound and location-specific? This ambiguity, or perhaps indeterminacy, is crucial in understanding the relationship between cinema, place and the formation of spectators' transnational subjectivities.

Chinese cinema in the late 1990s also points to the unevenness and contradiction of mobility. While some forms of mobility are voluntary, as in Daming's leaving home to go south, others have mobility thrust upon them – Daming does not want to move but does not really have a choice. Furthermore, while some kinds of travel are marked with privilege, others are driven by poverty and disadvantage. Increasing stratification, along the lines of gender, geography, and education, all account for such unevenness. For this reason, the narrative of return of the two men becomes more meaningful when juxtaposed with that of departure, and men's mobility juxtaposed with that of women. We have in mind examples such as Ermo (Zhou Xiaowen, 1994) and Not One Less (Zhang Yimou, 1999), and tens of thousands of working girls (dagongmei) who have left their villages to become maids and bar-girls in the city. It is not just the Chinese cinema, though, that is concerned with the tension between the past and present, the local and global. Stories of little people fighting a faceless, invisible but omnipresent power called global capitalism, embodied in transnational corporations, are proliferating. These little people are everywhere, in the 'first world' and the 'third'. They are the people who Erin Brockovich tries to save; they are the Kerigans, an ordinary Australian family who think that their home is their castle and refuse to move to make way for airport expansion; and of course, they are Lao Liu and his son. How the story ends depends on the respective national contexts in which these stories are told, but the David and Goliath narrative is universal, and most certainly here to stay.

Shower is a tale of reluctant modernity. It shows what is at stake when people are forced out of their habitat – their relationships, their sense of self and community.

The film's surface argument is familiar: modernity is inevitable and is usually thrust upon us, against our will, and people have to deal with its arrival, like it or not. At first, however, it seems that the story is pointing to the possibility of striking a balance between the modern and traditional: the elderly father, Lao Liu, wants a neon light, and the retarded son, Erming, is given a walkman which works as a medium to express himself. Both of them seem to enjoy the electronic foot massager bought for them by the elder son, Daming. Even the water hose, which this 'retarded' young man uses to express his likes and dislikes, is, after all, a modern invention. Similarly, the story inside the story – of the bath which Lao Liu's mother had to have before she was married – seems to offer a gentle critique of the traditional way of life. Cinematically, the flashback sequence is also a direct evocation of the 1984 film, Yellow Earth, which set the standard for evocative re-appropriations of historical memories.
As the story unfolds, it turns out to be more of a tale against modernity. The cricket – who dies once they leave the ground – are a chilling metaphor for the residents of an old community facing imminent relocation to high-rise apartment buildings. There is a stubborn assertion that people who do not seem to be ‘ready’ for it can actually solve the problems associated with modernity far more effectively than those who are already ‘modern’. Lao Liu, who runs the bathhouse for the local community, is a chiropractor (fixing a neighbour’s dislocated shoulder), a sex therapist (helping another neighbour with his impotence problem), a community worker (soothing the frictions between people), and, above all, an anthropologist, who makes people around him understand the spiritual and emotional significance of ‘having a bath’.

In The Road Home and Shower, both sons come back because of the real or imagined ‘death’ of the father, and both confront a community of people coping with modernisation and urbanisation processes. The return of the sons to their original homes allows the movies to tell us a story about mobility, possibly the most significant and profound phenomenon of transition in China, without giving us ‘road movies’. Economic reforms have set the whole nation on the move, and new constructions of mobility are both worked through older understandings of sociability, and are themselves reworking the visual boundaries of social space in the civic, national, ethno-cultural and, we argue, the cinematic imaginaries. The sheer acceleration of the flow of both people and images in the increasingly global world renews the importance of nostalgia, as it is configured in a yearning for an impossible return, both to a warmer and fuzzier past and to one’s place of origin. Luo Yusheng in The Road Home and Daming in Shower have shed their past and reinvented themselves as cosmopolitan subjects in the south/city/coast. They eagerly embrace, participate and indeed create modernity. And yet, they realise upon coming home that memory still has a crucial claim on them; meeting the time-bound and location-specific expectations and desires of their parents is not as simple and linear as closing a business deal over a mobile phone. Luo Yusheng’s mother’s request to give her husband a time-honoured funeral involving the participation of the entire village and Lao Liu’s refusal to transform his communal, not so modern, bathhouse into a machine-controlled showering cubicle, are symptomatic of needs and desires incommensurable with modern living. Lao Liu dies rather than move into a high-rise apartment, reminding the audience that the road to modernity and globalization is tortuous, littered with cultural memories, broken, but not destroyed without trace.

The departure and return of the figure of the son questions the possibility of a return in the epistemological sense. The world ‘outside’, the south, the city, are real places. Real sons have migrated to those places. For the parents who stay at home, these are, however, imaginary locales, the meaning of which lies beyond the scope of their practical imaginations. The returned son is as if in exile, an international migrant coming home to wonder uncomfortably at his dislocation. Although the physical return is possible and is enacted in the films, he no longer understands, nor is understood by, the people and relatives he encounters in the home space. From the points of view of both the son and his father/mother, there is a sense of death in the air. As the nation mourns its ethnocultural specificity, it reveals in the confidence of modern anarchy and economic restlessness. As the parents drift into a mist on the long road home, the son is already turning back to his new collective identity in the modern Chinese marketplace. The son is dead, long live the son.

China in the Silk Screen season was both mournful and wildly optimistic. Despite the regional elisions implicit in the ‘Asian’ Cinema concept, the People’s Republic of China is visible on its own account as a cinema of socialist modernity in transition. There is much nostalgia for revolutionary socialist community, and for traditionalism remembered as ritual practices of both quotidian pleasures and lifetime events. That nostalgia is envisioned through locality, but is factored through an appeal to national collective memories rather than truly discrete local cultural specificity. It is also dependent, however, on a rhetoric of fantastic material modernization on the one hand, and the brutality of accelerated change on the other. The Chinese account of globalization in these films is finally only symptomatic. Whatever the international sources of the economic restructuring, the dialogue is internal to the Chinese national space, metaphorically conjugated through family relations and social relationships. In the epic Emperor, the extravagant sweep of the storytelling is belied by its claustrophobic road home to classical historiographic truisms of a united China against the world.

This article was refereed.

ENDNOTES
2 (Fung and Ma, 2001).