

Women reading Chinese films: between orientalism and silence

STEPHANIE DONALD

Silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with a means to gain a hearing. It is voice, a mode of uttering and a response in its own right. Without other silences, however, my silence goes unheard, unnoticed . . .¹

. . . today planned authenticity is rife: as a product of hegemony and a remarkable counterpart of hegemony and universal standardization, it constitutes an efficacious means of silencing the cry of racial oppression.²

¹ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 'Difference – a special third world women's issue', *Discourse*, vol. 8 (Fall/Winter 1986–7), pp. 15–16.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 23–4.

The reading of texts across cultures can deliver discoveries that throw time, habits of perception and memory into conceptual turmoil. The texts I am considering here are films made in mainland China during the 1980s, *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1984) and *Sacrifice of Youth* (Zhang Nuanxin, 1985). My discussion is inspired by the writings of two contemporary cultural critics, Rey Chow and Esther Yau, and of the filmmaker and theorist, Trinh Minh-ha. I turned to these writers for guidance in the bothered territories of cross-border feminism. They have authentic, and self-proclaimed, voices of 'Otherness'. I have nothing but an uneasiness with my supposed 'self', and a stubborn determination to investigate that which is not my Self, but which might possibly be my chosen – and constitutive – Other.

Their work led me first to the terrible twins, authenticity and narcissism. Or are they the other way round? As Trinh Minh-ha says, authenticity cuts both ways. It may allow legitimacy for the speaker, but also it may be a 'planned authenticity' born of another's narcissistic desire. In which case the authentic is silenced. But, as both

Yau and Chow exclaim, equally that which is inauthentic, neither Other nor narcissistic Self, is hardly heard. Once warned of the totalizing and exclusionary nature of this ideal and unhappy couple, however, the pairing proved very useful for my readings of *Sacrifice of Youth* and *Yellow Earth*. In fact it yielded more than I expected. The structure of *Sacrifice of Youth* is dependent on the narcissistic eye of the camera and the represented narcissism of the main character. In *Yellow Earth*, the narcissism of the Party is used ironically to reveal the inauthentic centre of its own history. In both films narcissism operates via discourses of the authentic, the authentic other as well as the authentic historical subject, to create a crisis in time. It is this crisis, this tension between the historical, the contemporary and the eternal which I want to elaborate here.

Marketing the crisis

The 1980s new wave in Chinese cinema moved away from socialist realism and unreflexive melodrama in order to confront the traumatic memories of the Cultural Revolution and of earlier struggles since Liberation in 1949. The move involved a reinvention of film language and a reinvestment in pre-Liberation history. This return to history, in such films as *Yellow Earth*, *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1989), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang Yimou, 1992), was more than an inventive and pragmatic avoidance of censorship³ (although it may have been that too). It was a sign of a new contemporaneity which located the present through claiming synchronicity – and therefore equivalence – with the past.

The need for this new contemporaneity was created by the ructions in Party policy after the death of Mao in 1976, and after the third plenum in 1978 when Deng Xiaoping announced the coming of reform. The push for economic reform in the 1980s was partly a bid for material success and relegitimation for the Party and partly a (connected) new guise for the competitive relationship between China and the West. It caused a diachronic crisis as modern development outpaced the reformation of a national memory. As Gordon White says:

the project of market orientated reform, while clearly a response to glaring deficiencies in the previous economic system, was given a particularly powerful impetus as a response to problems caused by China's previous *political* experience. In essence the economic reforms were an attempt to re-establish the hegemonic authority of the Communist party on a different basis: by abandoning the Maoist notion of development as a political struggle and attempting to accelerate economic development and increase the material welfare of the population more rapidly. Success in the latter, it was hoped, would provide a new form of legitimacy for the regime.⁴

³ Chris Berry, 'Neither one thing nor another – towards a study of the viewing subject and the Chinese cinema in the 1980s', in Browne, Pickowicz, Sobchack, Yau (eds), *New Chinese Cinemas* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 88–113.

⁴ Gordon White, *Riding The Tiger* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Books, 1993), p. 11.

The link between economic improvements and legitimacy was undermined on 4 June 1989, when thousands were massacred or imprisoned at Tiananmen Square and across China. Meanwhile, the State continued the Maoist policy of denying to different groups and ethnicities within the population access to their modern subjectivities – so necessary in order to articulate the pace and voice of reform and entry into a market-led economy.

Whilst concurring with the breakdown of ideology, Han⁵ filmmakers found it hard to address the present or past except through a very particular urban Han perspective. Critics, too, are in a quandary as they look at new Chinese films with the expectations of western postmodern academics and/or the nostalgic yearnings of diasporic Chinese. With ideology gone, there is space for the modern, but this requires an authentic Other – or premodern source – which is not easy to find when social and political history has been replayed and rewritten so often, and when filmmakers, writers and artists themselves are engaged in that task once again.

Interlude

The clean riverbed lies still in grey winter mists;
 Recollections from home recede.
 Drowsy memory jerks up its head,
 Men's everlasting myths have spread to the kingdom of swine.

And so another rebellious sail is raised,
 Soaked through with drunkenness, sticky with bloodstains.
 Drifting from the kingdom of swine to the kingdom of dogs.
 All around, mountain ranges and mighty rivers rise and fall,
 Stretching out endlessly.⁶

Fei Ye is a poet living in exile in the USA. He describes the exile's plight as that of a sailor who can no longer recognize himself in the peoples of the places whence he came or whither he must travel. He is cut off from the kingdom of men, which perhaps in any case only exists in the exiled imagination. The landscape of despair is forbidding and without a point of entry for any who do not recognize themselves as dogs or swine. The mountain ranges are a conspiracy of silencing, enclosing a space in which one can be seen but not heard over the roar of the river.

The contemporary, the historical and the silences in between

The films under discussion are chosen both for their historical and their contemporary relevance. I distinguish historicity and

5 The Han form the largest ethnic group in China, ninety-four per cent of the population.

6 From Fei Ye, 'The riverbed of exile', trans. Sauliey Wong, reproduced from a communication from the author, 1994. At time of writing Fei Ye is living in Berkeley. In 1979, in his hometown of Harbin, he edited the underground magazine *Lone Army*. Sauliey Wong is professor of Asian-American studies at UC Berkeley.

contemporaneity in both cases as these texts bear both the inscription of Chinese history as well as an ironic patina – a reflexive sense of belonging to the contemporary mode. These films show that the meaning of contemporary is not a chronological issue, but relies on the synchronicity of a popular consciousness at a particular time and in a particular place. Being contemporary is not a state that we can always assume to be our own, nor one that we necessarily share with those around us. To live in the present demands that we are aware of our present and our past as negotiable constructs of memory. This undermines the notion of a homogeneous society with an equalized, common mode of address between members. The present will be differently experienced and expressed by all those who know themselves to live within it.

There is still however the possibility of consensus, a social imagination which works through the contributions of the whole heterogeneous population, and which is bounded and defined by the sum of the scope of the present as it is known at any point. *Without* an alert consensus, the social imagination can drift into suspension, animated only by idealistic identifications and by the unspoken (and, if spoken, unheeded or imprisoned) recalcitrance of the unwilling individual or group. This dissidence is an appeal for the right to contemporaneity, a plea for possibility and for entry into the agency of the symbolic. Taking Lacanian-inspired accounts of the symbolic as a starting point, one of the conditions of contemporaneity may be described as the possibility of entry into a symbolic world in which one can function as a (speaking) agent within the externalized organization of a compatible social imagination. If a prevailing symbolic organization is antithetical to entry, then particular individuals cannot achieve voice or agency. If no one is listening, or is even able to listen, can one be sure that a voice is making any sound at all? If there is no former self nor any shared symbolic order, no social imagination in which and through which to frame one's speech, dissidence can seem like madness, and contemporary relevance is not easily sustained.

The silencing of the artist or the critic, through censorship, demonstrates the total control over the symbolic order demanded in a state socialist regime. Artist and critic are condemned as inauthentic. They are not the madmen of dissidence for they are quite obviously functioning as mediators, trying to prise their way into the social imaginary with aesthetic tricks and barbed wit. Therefore they must be silenced within a different nexus of exclusion. As *inauthentic*, they have neither the confidence of the narcissistic Self nor the doubtful honour of necessary Otherness. They hover between one subjectivity and another, seeing both and inhabiting neither.

And yet, in international political terms, they might be heard quite distinctly, and highly valued as voices of truth – to an outside ear with its own narcissistic agenda. They then lose the freedom, and near

madness, of the inauthentic, and are promoted as the authentic soul of a troubled regime. Thus psychic and actual silencing throws into the discussion questions of international readership and casts doubt on the legitimacy of a contemporaneity that exists only in the free imaginations of the outside observer, but which is stifled in terms of local production, distribution and exhibition. Banned films assume a moral authority and authenticity in the eyes of a select international spectatorship – and films are often banned in China.

A question that therefore hovers behind this discussion is whether the production and critical reception of such films may be seen as an international contemporary mode that is not shared with the large majority of potential domestic audiences. If that is so, the discovery and definition of the authentic becomes more prized, and probably more illusory.

The postmodern colonial rub

Rey Chow has argued that the reversion to a discourse of authenticity is a symptom of the reflex colonialism of the western critic. When trying to confront the internal problems of critical subjectivity, the critic is wont to give up and reflect instead on the authenticity that they perceive in others and wish for themselves. In particular she has cited Kristeva's *On Chinese Women* as an example of an internal argument being projected onto an international metaphor – here, China, the feminine, the oriental:

Even though Kristeva sees China in an interesting and, indeed, 'sympathetic' way, there is nothing in her arguments as such that cannot be said without 'China'. What she proposes is not so much learning a lesson from a different culture as a different method of reading from within the West.⁷

This reading of Kristeva's 'colonial discourse' is also commented upon by Homi Bhabha who quotes Kristeva's work on China as an example of

an inevitable sliding from the semiotic activity to the unproblematic reading of other cultural and discursive systems. There is in such readings a will to power and knowledge that, in failing to specify the limits of their own field of enunciation and effectivity, proceeds to individualize otherness as the discovery of their own assumptions.⁸

Chow and Bhabha differ in their conclusions however. They link the practice of the western critic to that of the colonial formation of the subject. Bhabha then embraces hybridity. Chow perceives that the authentication of the Other is meretricious. It is a way of dissolving the psychic link between the postcolonial subject – she cites herself,

7 Rey Chow, 'Seeing modern China', in *Women and Chinese Modernity – the Politics of Reading Between East and West* (Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 7.

8 Homi Bhabha, 'The other question', in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 70.

Hong Kong Chinese, as an example – and the imagined Authentic Other. The narcissistic need of the colonizer dismisses one as a modern travesty and uses the other as a fully determined projection of its missing entrails. In a world of hegemony and actual power, both groups are thus severely disadvantaged.

Chow further conceives of ‘the postmodernity of the colonized’,⁹ whereby it is only in the West that modernity and postmodernity can be conceptualized as chronological. She argues that for all people who have been colonized, postmodernity came before modernity, in so far as the fragmentation of an authentic self was necessitated by the narcissistic demands of the colonizer. The native had to be recognizably native and traditional in order to satisfy the westerners’ modernist self-justification of invasion. The colonizers had to believe themselves engaged in the Enlightenment project of spreading the light of rationality in the realms of darkness, and they had to show signs of the success of this civilizing project. The native therefore had to be seen to be educated in western habits of thought and belief. She/he could not however expect to form any part of the *structure* of that system except to remain as the reflective Other, which was perpetually in the place of a subaltern in need of further civilization.¹⁰ Chow claims, therefore, that the colonized develop a self-awareness necessary to exist within the dual environments of the invader’s culture and their own, which also contributes to the hybridity that forms between the two norms.¹¹

For someone with my educational background, which is British Colonial and American, the moralistic charge of my being ‘too Westernized’ is devastating; it signals an attempt on the part of those who are specialists in ‘my’ culture to demolish the only premises on which I can speak.¹²

Here Chow seems to both bewail and disavow her postmodern identity. For surely she has many premises on which she *must* speak? She is claiming that within the symbolic order of western academia she is silenced by her positioning as oriental woman with an inappropriately western voice. Yet she claims that her voice is specifically that of the postmodern postcolonial, and therefore speaks between the monolithic voices of imperial cultures. She risks constructing another monolith, as her account of colonial postmodernity suggests that these conditions of existence will always produce an ideal type which is always forced into silence or compliance. Moreover, despite Chow’s stated aversion to Bhabha’s notion of hybridity, his work is very useful in understanding in more positive terms her own expressions of the postmodern/colonial predicament. In his essay ‘Of mimicry and man’¹³ Bhabha explores

the comic turn from the high ideals of the colonial imagination to its low mimetic literary effects whereby mimicry emerges as one of

9 Chow’s argument can be traced throughout her collection of essays: Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), esp. pp. 51–4 and 546–7.

10 Much of Chow’s perspective is taken from her reading of Gayatri Chavrakorty Spivak, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’, in Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313.

11 Chow has criticized Homi Bhabha’s notion of hybridity as a get-out clause for colonial hegemonic voices: see, Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, p. 35. However I incorporate the idea here as I read many of her analyses as leading to a similar conclusion, whether or not she describes it as such.

12 Rey Chow, ‘Violence in the other country’, in Mohanty, Russo and Torres (eds), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 91.

13 Homi Bhabha, ‘Of mimicry and man’, in *The Location of Culture*.

the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge. . . . Within that conflictual economy of colonial discourse which Edward Said describes as the tension between the synchronic panoptical vision of domination . . . and the counter pressure of the diachrony of history . . . mimicry represents an ironic compromise.¹⁴

Bhabha constructs his 'mimic man' as a presence in the colonial and postcolonial worlds that comments on the identity of the colonizer through its imperfect reproduction of the behaviour and moral reactions of that party. The point is not that the mimicry creates a simplified stereotype of the invasive culture, nor that the exclusion from the underlying symbolic structure of colonial culture finally renders the mimic subject powerless within that structure. From the colonizer's perspective, the mimicry is induced so that the desire for difference may be contained in powerless signifiers. For the colonized, entry into a symbolic order that is only completed through the reduction of Other peoples to fixers of desire could only ever be harmful.

But what of Chinese film? Is it as fraught with complexity as one could guess by simply looking at a map of the enormous geographical range, and ethnic diversity that is called China?

Esther Yau engages with the arguments of Chow and Bhabha, but she reads China from without whilst engaging with a kind of 'colonial discourse' from within. In her work on Chinese film, she notes that unacknowledged narcissism is here too, at the point of production and reception. When a film concerns the non-Han peoples, the authorial voice is still unmistakably 'Chinese', as in Han/dominant culture, and the narrative turns on representations of minority peoples who must accommodate the desires and absences in the lives of the Han audience. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it is the feminine attributes of these peoples that are elaborated, exaggerated and exploited for the pleasure of a sexually confined spectator. *Sacrifice of Youth* tries to tackle the problems of crosscultural representation. In formalist terminology, the film has a story and plot in which most of the characters portrayed in the film, the Dai, are relevant only as tools of narration.

The story of *Sacrifice of Youth* concerns an urbling, Li Chun, a teenage girl sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. She goes to a Dai village, the Dai being one of the minority peoples living on the peripheries of Chinese territory. She is a Han, the dominant group in China, and the film traces her experience of living within a different culture that is still Chinese – in terms of geographical and political influence. The story from which the script is taken is called *Such a Beautiful Place*, and the film slips rather easily into voyeuristic meditations on the endearing beauty of the Other within, the Dai – who are apparently all kind and gentle (except for her adoptive Dai brother and admirer who is seen to get violent when

drunk and rejected, and who, her [Han] voiceover informs us, is more like a Min), work hard, sing and dance and never offer an opinion on their contemporary situation. Any commentary is given by Li Chun, the Han visitor, or by Ren Ju, her Han boyfriend who is posted in a neighbouring village. Effective comments from Dai characters are rare. Her Dai 'father' advises her in an early scene, 'You should make yourself pretty', and Yali (the prettiest of the Dai girls who is herself in love with Li Chun's Dai 'brother'), snaps at her after the two suitors have been fighting, 'You should go away, you don't know how to love him, you are not one of us' – but these remarks come from the same place or speak in the same voice. They are about an eternal Dai-ness from which Li Chun can come or go, but which is represented as internally immutable.

In some respects, the film is a valiant attempt to reform a particular genre of post Liberation Chinese cinema. A Han director, Zhang Nuanxin, who based her script on the semi-autobiographical novel of another Han woman, Zhang Manling, has produced a sympathetic and very beautiful portrait of the Dai people. As Esther Yau has recorded, some of the representational practices in the film are a direct attempt to undercut the ethnographic films of the years of Mao and socialist realism when Han, and especially Party, hegemony meant that minority people were always shown on a teleological journey towards Han-led liberation.¹⁵ In these films, non-Han characters were played by Han actors and actresses. There was little, if any, dialogue in the regional language, and the characters were valorized according to how completely they assimilated themselves into the Party project of national identity. The films tended, as have most Chinese films since the 1920s, towards melodrama and spectacle.¹⁶

Zhang Nuanxin's attempts to subvert the genre aligns her work with younger, contemporary 1980s filmmakers. Her attempt is marked with ambiguity as she struggles to divorce sexuality from its accepted signs in a puritanical Han culture. Dru Gladney has described the importance of minority women's bodies in Han culture as a visual displacement of sexual desire. He argues that they also provide a national style and metaphorical resource for cultural production that would otherwise struggle to represent the Han to themselves. One of the most common settings for this national resource is the nude bathing scene which has been repeated across China in many unlikely settings, including murals at the Beijing International Airport – which were removed after outraged complaints from minority representatives.¹⁷

The image of Dai (Thai) and other minority women bathing in the river has become a leitmotiv for ethnic sexuality and often appears in stylised images throughout China, particularly on large murals in restaurants and public spaces.¹⁸

Zhang's own bathing scene, of Dai girls slipping their dresses off and gliding out into the river, is transgressive in so far as a Han girl

- 15 Esther Yau, 'Is China the end of hermeneutics? Or, political and cultural usage of non-Han women in mainland Chinese films', *Discourse*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1989), pp. 115–36. See also her article, 'Cultural and economic dislocations: filmic phantasies of Chinese women in the 1980s', *Wide Angle*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1989), pp. 6–21.
- 16 See Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics Since 1949* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) for an overview of Chinese film. See also Paul Pickowicz, 'Melodramatic representation and the "May 4th" tradition of Chinese cinema', in David Der-wei Wang and Ellen Widmer (eds), *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth Century Literature* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 295–326; and E. Ann Kaplan, 'Melodrama, subjectivity, ideology: the relevance of western melodrama theories to recent Chinese cinema', *East West Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1991), pp. 6–27.
- 17 For a discussion of this and other debates around the visual arts see: Marie Claire Huot, *La Petite Révolution Culturelle* (Arles: Editions Philippe Picquier, 1994).
- 18 Dru C. Gladney, 'Representing nationality in China: refiguring majority/minority identities', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 1 (1994), pp. 92–123.

spectates onscreen, and regrets that she cannot participate in the swimming. Yet by the end of the scene her voiceover has informed us that she will soon learn to swim naked herself. Therefore, in this instance, the gaze of the Han spectator cannot indulge its desire without acknowledging the sexual potential of the Han girl. At the same time, sexual potential is still firmly located in the minority spectacle. Here a kind of mimicry in reverse is at work. The Han girl imitates the dress and habits of the Dai, but can finally only seek recuperation into her former social identity. She will leave her onscreen sexual potential back in the river.

Zhang's cinematography also veers away from established practices of socialist realism. Yau observes that:

She makes a number of experiments new for Chinese film practices, including shooting in sync sound, setting up elaborate long takes, filming in extremely low light situations, and handling in an unusually sensitive way what can be a monotonous green colour in that sub-tropical environment.¹⁹

Certainly the cinematographic style is painterly rather than paintbox. The marks of socialist realism have been rubbed hard, not quite erased, but blurred. There is no one looking into a socialist realist horizon, and there is no version of the future beyond the unravelling of the day-to-day. The Dai are played by Dai, both local 'found' amateurs as well as professional extras, and while the script is an adaptation of a written text, the spoken text does not dominate the visual narration.

Yet it might also be argued that this is not straightforward, and in a sense the voiceover does continue to operate as a hegemonic interpretative device which serves Han perceptions to the detriment of the power of the visual narrative. Yet, as Rey Chow has pointed out in another context, this appetite for reform is immediately problematic as the authenticity of tradition comes into conflict with the perceived reality of contemporary content.

The detail is used as a point of enquiry into the conflictual affective structures that underlie approaches to 'history' in modern Chinese narratives. These approaches often appear as the concerted but contradictory preoccupations with 'liberation' and with national or ethnic 'unity'. Details are here defined as the sensuous, trivial and superfluous textual practices that exist in an ambiguous relation with some larger 'vision' such as reform or revolution.²⁰

In the case of *Sacrifice of Youth* this conflict flares up in the text in quite a complicated way. The authenticity of the Dai is insisted upon – their purity, political transparency, natural decency – a collective consciousness inspired not by an external ideal but grounded in the details of daily life. Yet part of that daily life is the awarding of workpoints in the collective, and the acceptance of city youth into

¹⁹ Yau, 'Is China the end of hermeneutics', p. 129.

²⁰ Rey Chow, 'Modernity and narration – in feminine detail', in *Women and Chinese Modernity* p. 85.

their communities. Furthermore it is their real (if I dare say that) traditions that are held up for criticism within the text. When a child is dying of fever, the mother's prayers are represented as shrill, and worse than useless. Li Chun cures him with medical skills cribbed from a Party textbook for barefoot doctors.

Yau has quoted Zhang saying that the 'Dai civilization [is] that which is primitive, sincere, befitting to human nature whilst the Han [is] that [which is] modern, partly hypocritical, and distorting to human nature'.²¹ Zhang claims that this tension is what turns Li Chun's life into tragedy. What she does not acknowledge however, is that it is her Han reading of both Han and Dai essential characteristics that is also responsible for Li Chun's reading of her own situation, which is what enables the narration of the story of the Han girl to achieve its self-reflexive poignancy. Li Chun is from the dominant culture but she has no home. Her relationships with the other Han in the area are informed by political awareness and by the drive to return to the public arena of political life which lies in the urban heartlands. Any desire to remain in the seeming paradise of *Such a Beautiful Place* is tempered by her understanding of the difference between the present and the future – and of course the determinations of the past.

Told in flashback, the film bears the ironic touch of the contemporary as Li Chun knows already how her life will change. She becomes a teacher, goes to university, and returns to see a wrecked Dai village where her Han friend – who never managed to leave – has perished in a landslide. Despite the insistence on Dai continuity, we do not see her village again after the burial of Ya, her adoptive Dai grandmother, several scenes earlier. It is as though the reality of her own contemporaneity is too painful to exist beside the continued paradise of that beautiful place. Moreover, without her there, it might start speaking for itself and the paradise might well peel away into just another contemporary tale of post Cultural Revolution confusion and discontent.

Zhang taught at the Beijing Film Academy and it was her writing in the late 1970s that called for a new film language. Her article of 1979,²² written in collaboration with the film critic Li Tuo, asked that film language be modernized so that the most modern and precocious of art forms, film, could achieve its potential in aesthetic form as well as in ideologically dictated reality, *xianshi*. The vision of reform has, in Zhang and Tuo's article at least, settled on the contrast between Chinese reality and western form. For them reform is not to be found in the silent voices of the Dai women but in the absorption of more distant cultural others into the Han vocabulary. It is easier to exploit the writings and productions of western critics and filmmakers than it is to allow the irruption of another traumatized illiteracy into their home territories.

The narrative in the film which demonstrates this most clearly is not that of Li Chun, but that of the Dai grandmother, Ya. Ya's narrative

²¹ Yau, 'Is China the end of hermeneutics', p. 129.

²² Li Tuo and Zhang Nuanxin, 'The modernization of film language', *Beijing Film Art*, no. 3 (1979).

falls within the 'main' narrative but also holds the narration together. She signifies timelessness, in that she marks place rather than plot development. Yet, as she spins or clacks her prayer beads, or rolls rice with her ancient stick-like arms, she is also the signifier of the relentless motion of domestic time, the inexorable passage from youth to age and from nurture to death.

For Ya is the authentic centre of *Sacrifice of Youth*. She hardly speaks, and yet it is her presence in the Dai house that ensures the continuity of the Dai life, at least in this story. She functions as the grounding signifier of *ziran* – naturalness. Although reinvented in the teens and twenties of this century by the May Fourth Movement,²³ the revolutionary intellectual school that pushed for the introduction of *putonghua*, modern vernacular Chinese, as a way of rejuvenating the language and its accessibility and republican possibilities – *ziran* has in fact long been a dominant trope in Chinese literature.²⁴ Daoist poets sought to create works that provided the form in which nature and authenticity might lodge themselves without being forced into the script or into the consciousness of the reader. Scholar-painters were taught to observe nature with their mind's eye, and then take their *knowingness* back into the studio, not their sketch pad. All they needed to do was look and practise their brush strokes. Once the form was perfected, and once their human spirit had made room for nature, and their inner eye could see what the painter had looked at, then the true essence of the tree, the mountain, the passive water would appear. Nature had to arrive *naturally*.

So Ya has to appear in the text as though the director is innocent of her presence, as though her representation has not been as carefully constructed as that of the main Han protagonist. Li Chun's memories are a selective representation of the internal recollections of Zhang and the writer of the original story. In contrast, Ya is playing herself, but she must do so within the boundaries of this narrated selection. Her part is not to recount her own life but to focus the spectators' (intra- and extra-diegetic) attention on purity and completeness, which is here accounted as authenticity. Ya's youth is shown in the singing and lovemaking of the Dai girls, and her 'typically Dai' fondness for beauty is apparent in her pleasure at Li Chun's self-transformation into a Dai. The girl makes herself a skirt from a curtain and piles her hair up on her head to simulate the Dai look. Ya smiles and fetches a silver belt which she fastens around Li Chun's waist. It is a maternal movement and a rite of female transference, and it is an acknowledgement of her own age. Ya's own beauty is noticed in the film's first shot of her when the camera travels up her arms to her bare shoulders and fragile gaze – which sees nothing except those whom she is called upon to love. Here Zhang's film is reminiscent of earlier ethnographic films where the beauty and sexuality of minority women, even if played by Han actresses, was acceptable, whereas Han femininity would be squeezed into an asexual stereotype. The 'natural'

²³ See, for example, the discussion of evocation *xing* as an antidote to the prosaic tendencies of early *putonghua* writings (some readers may prefer the term '*baihua*') in Zhang Zao, 'Development and continuity of modernity in Chinese poetry since 1917', in Wendy Larson and Wedell Wedellsborg (eds), *Inside Out, Modernism and Postmodernism in Chinese Literary Culture* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1993), pp. 38–59.

²⁴ For a discussion of the traditions and tropes of Chinese poetry see James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), esp. Part II. See also Chow's remarks on Buddhist texts, where Daoist *wuwei* (doing nothing) seems to have been incorporated. The acolyte must achieve the transmission of truth/natural content through a renunciation of over-determined form. Rey Chow, 'Ethics after idealism', *diacritics* (Spring 1993), p. 19.

'native' non-Han women had therefore functioned as a small sop to the frustrated voyeurism of the male – and female – Han audience. So as Li Chun discovers her (pre)sexual self through the permissiveness of the Dai, she is legitimized by Ya's approval and the gift of the silver belt. Apart from this 'natural' reaction to beauty, the only movement in Ya's story is that dictated by the departure of the Han girl, when her grief drives her to leave the house to look for Chun. Her health is impaired by the excursion and she dies.

Ya is both *not* Chinese, and therefore watchable, and yet within the territory of the Empire, and so fairly appropriated. This hardly-disguised voyeurism works through a discourse of nature and authenticity to complete the narcissistic self image of dominant Chinese-ness. It is within this relationship between narcissism and authenticity that the discourse of time is constructed. Ya's time is, quite literally, not her own. As she fastens Li Chun's belt, or prays as Li Chun's Dai brother and Han boyfriend fight over her beloved adoptive daughter, it is Li Chun's experience that is marked and charted. Even at her cremation, Ya signifies a conflagration that is neither her own nor her people's.

Esther Yau's scepticism made me look again at *Sacrifice of Youth*. She has extended what begins as a problem of feminism – whose, and at whose Other's cost? – and proceeds into a painful understanding of racism within the Chinese territories. Yau herself, however, also denies difference to those 'from' non-Chinese cultures. This is despite the fact that Yau's own voice slips between Han and a neutral Other as – being educated in western discourse – she is unable to stabilize it between the tug of theoretical critique and ethnic identity.

. . . one's efforts to acquire more knowledge about the Chinese people must also be limited, by the unassimilability of many parts of Chinese experience to Western liberal agendas (or conservative, or radical ones, for that matter), by the narcissistic nature of this kind of exploration, by the slippery nature of inter-cultural articulations, and then also, by the cultural difference within that entity called Chinese that have always been represented by the dominant Han culture. . . .

Yet, the lessons of colonialism have taught (her) (this writer, a Han Chinese woman) to realize that there also exist similarities and differences between China and other nation states . . . that is, when, at the end of an exploration of the dominant and 'minority' cultures within China, one encounters topographical features akin to one's own nation as regards the hegemony of dominant cultures. In this way reading the Other turns into a confrontation with the Self.²⁵

Yau begins by insisting on the impenetrability of the 'Chinese experience'. There are four reasons given for this. Firstly, the language of the political structuration of western life cannot accommodate a fair articulation of that of China. Secondly, any

²⁵ Yau, 'Is China the end of hermeneutics?', pp. 116–17.

attempt to penetrate the Chinese experience will from the outset be flawed by its narcissistic intent. Thirdly, attempts to make analyses and present descriptions of one culture from the point of view of another are likely to founder on misapprehensions. Finally, the tendency for the group 'Chinese' to be defined through the tropes and culture of the dominant Han people will always limit scholarly interpretations.

Her second point underlies the pessimism of the other three. She assumes that all crosscultural investigation, at least in the direction West–East, is informed by narcissistic fantasy. The object of study will always be Other and represented by those that are not of itself, because its difference is being used to fix other selves in other places. Given the history of such investigation, at least in Britain, this is fair comment. I do not have space to elaborate the case here, but Craig Clunas's work on the classification and exhibition of 'Oriental Antiquities' gives an excellent account of the appropriation of Chinese art forms by the museums of British fantasy.²⁶ Of course one could argue that *film* has no form at all without exhibition and so the scholar *must* participate in exhibition, either as a programmer, reviewer or critic. And, given the nature of film finance and the importance of international acclaim, at least in commercial terms, to any filmmaker looking for wide distribution, there may be a symbiosis across cultures – between artist and spectator – which is positive for both parties. The one is enabled to develop her/his work, the other finds that their narcissism is tempered by a knowledge of the industrial conditions of its satisfaction.

A response to Yau's contention might be that 'efforts to acquire more knowledge' may come from many different positions within the West. The academic or other discourses in which critics, reviewers and scholars frame their questions and into which they translate their answers will be more or less reflexive to problems one, three and four in Yau's list. If an impenetrable difference is still claimed, does the argument not then seem to turn to a discourse of race and biology, ('this writer, a Han Chinese woman')? Exclusion from knowledge on the grounds of race casts anyone who is in a position that is not comfortable within the structures of domination into a stupor of silent respect.

As Yau continues, however, her position changes. She moves from an apparently neutral position, from where she has commented on the inherent problems of cross-cultural interrogation. Now her identity, her identity as Han Chinese rather than her identity as Han Chinese trained in methods of western analysis and writing in English, allows her to recognize China in a new guise. She sees the nation, her 'own nation', as a colonizer within its own territory, 'an exploration of the dominant and 'minority' cultures *within* China' (emphasis mine). At this point she accepts China's hegemony as territorially accurate whilst questioning its attributions of dominant or minority status. As she

26 Craig Clunas, 'Oriental antiquities/Far Eastern art', in *positions* vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 318–55.

writes, the Other has become the Self. Is this significantly more useful than the presumed narcissistic confirmation through the Other which is seen to define the insights of those who cannot claim Han nationality? In both/all cases there are contradictions within the identity of the enquirer. The information and tensions that are inherent within these identities will both illuminate and confuse the enquiry. In this case it would seem that the more enquirers the better.

No time but the present

I am arguing that in the Chinese cinema of the 1980s, time is up for grabs. Tradition is conflated with ideals of communist organization, such as the rural idylls of collective farming. Authenticity is prized as a way of fixing the past so that the narcissistic self can seize moments of history as its own. These moments are continually brought forward into the present to set up a contemporary mode. To live outside this is to be, at the least, different and, at the extreme, mad. The narcissist, or the narcissistic state, may move powerfully into the future on entirely its own terms.

In *Yellow Earth* this mechanism is turned against itself to devastating ironic effect. The film reclaims the contemporary moment on behalf of the fifth generation, the returned youth of the Cultural Revolution. In Chow's model of postcolonial time, *Yellow Earth* is a postmodern text. And it is a postmodern text constructed as a way of opening up an entry into the subjectivity of the modern. It is periodization rather than notions of time itself that has to be understood in a specifically non-western context. In China, modernity has only now caught up with itself after the hiatus of Liberation. In *Yellow Earth* the conflict between tradition, revolution and modernity, underlaid by the memory of resistance to external hostility and internal oppression, informs what is, on the surface, a simple narrative. It is 1938, the Communist forces are holed up in Yan'an, gathering strength four years after the Long March. A soldier, Gu Qing, has been sent North to gather songs from the peasants, much as the Emperor's emissaries went out to gather the *Songs of Ch'u* three thousand years before. Gu Qing stays with a small family, a widower and his two children, the girl Cuiqiao and the boy Hanhan. Gu Qing's optimism infects the children who both express their wish to join him and his revolution. However, Cuiqiao drowns in her attempt to escape across the Yellow River, and Hanhan cannot fight his way through a sea of praying peasants when the soldier returns after a fateful absence.

In one short scene, the girl peasant Cuiqiao is asking the Communist soldier Gu Qing to take her with him to join the army.²⁷ The soldier refuses, saying that he must first get permission from his superior officer, but that he will return for her in the Spring. Cuiqiao

27 The full script can be found in Bonnie MacDougall's account of the film. Her subtitles have unfortunately been removed from the current print of the film, but the original (which contains quite substantial differences) can be seen at the British Film Institute, London. Bonnie MacDougall, *The Yellow Earth: a Film by Chen Kaige with a Complete Translation of the Film Script* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1991).

sighs, knowing that she is to be married off in April and that the soldier is unlikely to return in time to save her from this traditional fate. The clip ends with the soldier looking into the heroic Communist future, signalling to the audience that this moment, 1938, is the cusp of history. If we look to him as the personification of the ideal future we will collaborate in this socialist realist gaze²⁸ and our identities will merge with the ungendered revolutionary present. All will be well. So Cuiqiao looks down and then up into the soldier's face, but as she moves away she sings a song bewailing her destiny in which she sees nothing but nostalgia for a future that never came to pass.

The soldier is the revolution, Cuiqiao is the victim of tradition: traditions which dictate village mores, and which constrain the soldier to go back and ask permission for her to join the movement. It is also, perhaps, tradition that confines her to articulating the misery of her condition through bitter songs (*kuger*) rather than through a direct heart to heart with the soldier himself. Added to this, the modern gaze will insert yet more conflict into this exemplary moment of history. For Chen Kaige knows that the audience of 1984 will not collude with the soldier's gaze into the horizon.²⁹ They have already lived through his horizon and are on their way, to another: 'Socialist Capitalism with Chinese characteristics'³⁰ as President Jiang Zemin has termed it.

Cuiqiao, the archetypal poor peasant, is the nostalgic backbone of the Chinese Communist Party's success, but here she is torn between faith and fatalism. Modernity – through the eye of Chen Kaige's direction and Zhang Yimou's camera – is casting a look of ironic disbelief on the soldier, a contemporary shrug which the audience imitate as they fail to follow his gaze offscreen. The soldier has come too early for Cuiqiao and too late for 1984. Yet Cuiqiao is not written into the present either. She is operating in the film as the authentic anchor of Chinese suffering. When she drowns she is singing the song the soldier has taught her. In one way, she has a heroic, revolutionary death, in another, a traditional end for the unconventional woman, singing new words to an old tune.

Yau has argued that *Yellow Earth's* aesthetic success is partly due to the use of Taoist discontinuity to disrupt the narrative flow, and presumably to thus allow the insertion of readership and modern reflexivity into the text.³¹ In this reading, Taoist silences are responsible for the subversive possibilities of the film and the breaks fracture the expected rendition of 1938 into a landscape of relentless natural harshness and tiny isolated human stories that cannot quite connect with each other. Chow, on the other hand, has made the counter-argument that Taoism has always been complicit in the patriarchy of Confucian traditions – acting as a spiritual excuse for feminine passivity – and that the Taoist silences in *Yellow Earth* actually preserve the patriarchal narration of the film in moments of intricacy and make it seem natural.³²

I would add that these perspectives are not contradictory, that the

²⁸ For a discussion of the socialist realist gaze see my article (then Stephanie Hemelryk), 'The Chinese horizon and the socialist realist gaze' in *diatribe* (Winter 94–5), published by the Centre for the Study of Language and Cultural Theory, University of Southampton.

²⁹ See Zheng Dongtian, 'Starting from the Loess Plateau', *China Screen*, vol. 1 (1985), pp. 12–13. The review, which was only published after the film had received acclaim at the Hong Kong Film Festival in October 1984, ignores any possibly subversive textual ironies, and markets the film as a paean to the national character and the Chinese sense of the Earth as its mentor.

³⁰ For an account of the move into a new economic philosophy see David Wen Wei-Chang, *China Under Deng Xiaoping: Political and Economic Reform* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Books, 1988). Jiang's inspiration may have come from Deng Xiaoping's speech to a Japanese delegation on 30 June 1984: 'Build socialism with Chinese characteristics', in *Speeches and Writings of Deng Xiaoping* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1987), pp. 95–8.

³¹ Esther Yau, 'Yellow Earth: western analysis and a non-western text', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 2 (1987–8), pp. 22–33.

³² Rey Chow, 'Silent is the ancient plain: music, film-making and the conception of reform in China's new cinema', *Discourse* vol. 12, no. 2 (1990), pp. 82–109. For a brief example of how the religions of China synthesized under certain circumstances see: Max Loehr, *The Great Painters of China* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1980), p. 228.

subversion in the film's silence is aimed not at patriarchy, but at the smaller target of socialist realism. The film ironizes the collective gaze into an ideal future, but sets up a new collective narcissism where history – and women as objects of fantasy within that history – are targeted for appropriation by the contemporary modern Chinese male. Cuiqiao has been the first of a string of suicidal women in Fifth Generation films.

Concluding in crisis

I began this article worrying that my lack of authenticity precluded me from comment. I feared charges of Orientalism, but I hated the prospect of silence. Having not been in the least bit silent, I conclude that a positive sense of the inauthentic is the necessary condition of both critic and artist. Fighting over one's own or someone else's authenticity is a fight to the last second of recorded time. It is the control of history; of the relationship between one moment and another, that determines a *planned authenticity* for the losers.

The crisis of Tiananmen and the resulting clampdowns on cultural production can be, then, partly understood as a crisis in time. The historical stasis arduously created and preserved since Liberation clashed with a sudden surge of contemporary reaction. This had surely happened before, but where political will had before been dominant in all possible spheres of shared experience – economic, social, domestic, – now the economy had acquired its own logic through the admission of market reforms. The synchronous time of perpetual revolution had not been replaced, or at least not in the minds and political will of the Chinese government, but it was now in competition with the forward thrusting of chronological modernity.

In the years after Liberation, the idealism of a perfected future was the nostalgic beam that created a kind of suspension of everyday contemporaneity. For, although nostalgia is represented as a yearning backwards glance, it in fact is a longing for a future perfect. When the narcissistic Self goes looking for the authentic, it is searching for something that has never existed, and it is hunting a memory of something it wished it could have been.

Authenticity as a need to rely on 'undisputed origin' is prey to an obsessive fear: that of losing a connection. Everything must hold together . . . a clear origin will give me a connection back through time, and I shall, by all means, search for that genuine layer of myself to which I can always cling.³³

This search for authenticity is acute in the Chinese context of post ideology. The identities forged to control various segments of the population are now being reappropriated; and, as I have argued, both Chinese and western modernity involve the invention of the authentic.

33 Minh-Ha, 'Difference', p. 27.