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Event Report

Culture, Communication and Cross-Media Arts Studies: Transnational Cinema Scholarship Perspectives

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On 22 June 2016 the Shanghai University School of Liberal Arts hosted the conference entitled 'Culture, Communication and Cross-Media Arts Studies' as part of the international Summer Short Term activities[i]. In the words of the organiser, Professor Zeng Jun: 'Art has the ability to inspire cross-media creativity and cross-cultural communication, and is hence becoming one of the approaches to address the cultural Babel that is the world today. Transnational cinema is central to these efforts. In this globalised age, contemporary art is also leading to the integration of different media, which should ideally promote consensus and sharing'.

Although the conference was not primarily concerned with the analysis of transnational films, audiences, or contexts of production or circulation, it was nonetheless about transnational cinema in a rather fundamental way, namely in that it involved the presentation of twenty five papers on visual culture from the perspectives of scholarship in either English or Chinese, drawing from a broad variety of paradigms and epistemologies. While these were not always translatable or compatible, the conference did provide an opportunity to connect heterogeneous contexts, exchanging ideas and building bridges between what has so far remained as two separate fields: Chinese film scholarship in Chinese (Chen) and Chinese film scholarship in English (Berry)[ii], bringing them in dialogue with other perspectives. It was hoped that these encounters would develop the field by taking into account more perspectives from other nations and/or scholarly traditions, loosening the Anglo-American hold.

This report focuses only on those contributions that were devoted to film and video in order to address itself to readers of *Transnational Cinemas*. Understanding the idea of 'Cultural China' as it negotiates internationalization and integrates into transnational market economies seemed to be a key concern among presenters. Wu Weiyi, Postdoctoral Fellow at Shanghai Jiaotong University, discussed 'barrage video', a recently emerging practice that involves viewers' insertions overlaying writing on video, thereby interrupting and modifying the viewing experience (see image 1). Through her study of barrage video, Wu's presentation showed how leisure spaces and communicative action are continuously reconstructed by technology. The spread of the practice in China, Korea and Japan is the subject of her project, which is not only concerned with the transnational and intermedial

dimensions of barrage video, but also with understanding the connection between digital media and identity-making practices by young people in Asia today.



Image 1. Screen shot of a barrage video.

Wu contended that digitization has democratized and immediatized art, involving the simultaneous production, interactive consumption, re-circulation and re-articulation of images, and sometimes images and text. Although theorists are not necessarily the makers of art, we have all become 'prodsumers'[iii] in one way or another (see Dockney and Tomaselli 2010; 2012).

Deng Jinming, Lecturer in Humanities at Shanghai University, discussed the possibilities of studying film using the concepts and criteria usually employed to analyse Chinese opera. He considered notions of historical erasure (and recovery) with film regarded as analogous to opera in terms of Walter Benjamin's notion of mechanical reproduction. His presentation broke with the positivist data-to-template format that tends to dominate orthodox scientific methods with its predictable, and sometimes self-evident, findings. Rather, it examined paradigms that have been periodized in terms of recent Chinese history, contemporary epistemological concerns and the subjective.

For his part, Keyan Tomaselli, having questioned in his own work on African cinema the universal relevance of psychoanalytic film theory with regard to multiple levels of dissociation between theory and ontological practices, remarked that the application of psychoanalytic theory and other theoretical frameworks to the Chinese context that were mentioned at the conference came across as unexpected. As he has written elsewhere (Tomaselli and Shepperson 2011) with regards to

African cinema, the ontological differences are stark: the Freudian nuclear family unit hardly exists anywhere in Africa; gender roles are multiple and ever-changing; marriage networks are clan-based, as are mirror phases; and family structures have often been seriously disrupted by colonialism and post-colonialism. Nevertheless, the ideology of communitarianism remains hegemonic. Cultural norms differ massively even within the continent of Africa, and differ sometimes totally from Western idealist norms. By comparison, the appropriations and adaptations of psychoanalytic film theory and other Western theoretical frameworks to the Chinese context can perhaps be regarded as evidence of a kind of transnational film criticism, where Western scholars are cited but their theories are only partly imported, according to relevance, and mixed eclectically.

Huang Wangli, Associate Professor in Shanghai University Film Academy, presented a paper entitled 'From Parody to Translation: the Chinese Musicals of Dan Duyu'. She contended that just as parodies in writing intentionally imitate ready-made texts that are familiar to their target readers, creating new words, sentences and paragraphs in the process according to the needs of expression, the early Chinese musicals of Dan Duyu can be considered film parodies of their Hollywood counterparts. In her words:

> Based on the narrative parodies of female symbols (words), song and dance scenes (sentences), the films (text) bring an enjoyable experience to Chinese audiences because these parodies provide familiar contexts and cater to their expectations, while stimulating their imagination. These films also introduced Chinese audiences to Western versions of modernity that they could relate to.

But from the perspective of linguistics, Huang added, translation goes further. It not only translates one language into another, but also conveys culture. Therefore, it implies intercultural dialogue and exchange. That is to say, translation is generative: it changes and updates information. As a result, it generates new meanings and forges a new subjectivity in the cross-border movement. To Huang, this represented Chinese film gradually 'maturing' in the process of imitation of Hollywood, localizing the films and ultimately forming their own language and style. Thus while *Kids* (Duyu 1934) is for Huang a clear example of a parody, *Peach Blossom Dream* (1935) can readily be considered a translation.[iv]

To conclude, and to continue with Huang's metaphor of translation, it seemed to us that the Shanghai Conference on 'Culture, Communication and Cross Media Art Studies' was itself an act of cultural translation of the kind that is so relevant to discussions on transnational cinema today. It not

only 'provided subtitles'. It also aroused engagement and exchange from Scholars of so many different backgrounds so as to make of it a kind of Esperanto event in transnational film studies.

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Notes

[i] The conference was jointly organised by the Centre for Critical Theory Studies of Shanghai University; the Chinese Language and Literature Plateau Discipline of Shanghai University; and the Editorial Department of the *Journal of Shanghai University* Social Science edition. It was endorsed by the Journal *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* (London: Routledge).

[ii] Chen summarises the main features of film scholarship in Chinese as having a focus on the region of its production (Taiwan, Hong Kong or the mainland), with only certain topics studied across regions

(such as the Fifth and Sixth generations), and variable importance ascribed to political, ideological, artistic, aesthetic or cultural aspects (pp.481-2). As for the main features of Chinese film scholarship in English, Berry quotes scholars who are 'bilingual, or at least reasonably proficient in both languages' writing for a monolingual readership comprised mainly of students, with a focus on textual exegesis using the vocabulary and tools of Film Studies in English (pp. 484-5).

[iii] User generated content, as in barrage video, has meant that the traditional analogue categories of television and cinema producers and consumers need to be reconfigured to include content which is generated and uploaded for consumption by audiences *themselves*. The synergistic evolution of digital technologies and audience activity may be the most telling portent for the future of television' (Lister *et al* 2003: 33).

[iv] For a discussion on film directors as cultural translators in the case of indigenous cinema, see De la Garza 2016: 412-418.