Western China on Screen: Cinema and Urban Exploration as Thirdspace

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Abstract

This thesis examines how films located in western China have represented cities since the 1980s by drawing on spatial theories first proposed by Henri Lefebvre and further developed in Edward Soja's Thirdspace theory. This thesis is the first comprehensive academic contribution to deal with the affinity between cinema and the cities of western China. By focusing on the cinematic representation of these cities, this thesis breaks the long-standing stereotypes of the region established in the ethnographic films of China's Fifth Generation directors. It illustrates how cinematic cities in the region appear as enclosed spaces of traditional cultural values, political inertia and capsules of socialist China. This then problematises the glamourised images of the post-socialist, technocratic metropolises of Beijing and Shanghai. Meanwhile, the cinematic cities of China's west demonstrate that the cities and their inhabitants are open to transformation under discourses of urbanisation and modernisation. This thesis provides insights into the ways that films set in western China reflect the political and ideological power imposed on urban development and the lives of the people in the region. Perceiving cinematic western China as Thirdspace illustrates how the uneven social and economic development of contemporary western China is spatially represented in films. It also shows how cinematic western China becomes a space of resistance in the binary opposition of China's developing west versus its developed east. Looking into the everyday city spaces inhabited by ordinary citizens and subaltern groups, this thesis adds an alternative urban image—the cinematic Thirdspace of contemporary western China.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

I have been granted the permission by the University to place an embargo on the digital version of my thesis for a period of 24 months.

Hongyan Zou

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Preface

This thesis is fundamentally qualitative and employs the text analysis method in a spatial perspective. The thesis has approached a number of secondary documents on geographical, historical and sociological subjects to investigate the spatial arrangement, population mobility and urban development in four Chinese western cities represented in films since the 1980s.

The Chinese tradition of putting family name before the first name has been followed when referring to directors and film characters. The translation of conversations between characters are the researcher's, and the English titles of films follow the IMDB (Internet Movie Database) translation. For films that are not recorded in the IMDB, the English translation of the film title follows the version provided by Douban (a Chinese film and book website). Some films mentioned in this thesis are titled by the name of the protagonist. The titles of these films, accordingly, are not translated: for example, *Ermo* (dir. Zhou Xiaowen, 1995). All translations from Chinese to English are my own unless stated otherwise. For the bibliography and filmography, this thesis uses the Harvard Referencing Style of the University of Adelaide.

Due to limitations on the length of the thesis, I do not examine many of the western provinces including Xinjiang, Qinghai, Tibet, Yunnan, Guizhou and Ningxia, even though they are increasingly represented on the big screen. In particular, cinematic Tibet and Xinjiang deserve independent in-depth research in view of the unique ethnic culture and mysterious religious practices in the regions. In addition, the cinematic representations of the above areas and the people are complicated when examining them under the lenses of multi-ethnic interaction—the Han-Tibet and Han-Uyghur (the Muslims inhabiting Xinjiang)—and Han dominated cultural, economic and political discourse.

Chapter One An Introduction to Cinematic Western China

Ever since the Lumière Brothers' first short film *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* was exhibited in Paris in 1896, film has been intimately related to the city. Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: The Symphony of a Great City* (1927) features a tour to the bustling modern city. Two decades later, Italian director Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieve*s (1948) depicts the brutal urban space of Rome after WWII; in contrast, *Roman Holiday* (dir. William Wyler, 1953) shows a different Rome characterised by romance and stylish architecture. Numerous films have contributed to multiple projections of great cityscapes such as New York, Paris and London. Such cinematic configurations touch the spirit of a city so precisely that they become city trademarks, such as *Taxi Driver* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 1976) for New York, *Amélie* (dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001) for Paris and *Sherlock Holmes* (dir. Guy Ritchie, 2009) for London. Some directors project their adoration and attachment towards a particular city intensively into their films, for instance, Woody Allen's New York, Jia Zhangke's Fenyang and Lou Ye's Shanghai.

This thesis will examine the dynamic relationship between cinema and the city, and will focus specifically on fictional mainland Chinese feature films set in the vast western area of China. I will investigate the following three perspectives:

1) how the city has been imagined and depicted across a selection of films made at different times in mainland China since the 1980s;
2) how specific economic and social contexts of different eras affect spatial practices, such as the socially produced space design and arrangement of a city; how the social relations of cinematic characters are consequently produced and impacted by those different spatial practices; and how

individuals negotiate with and strive for a balanced position between public and private spaces in the radically transforming circumstances brought by urbanisation;

3) how economic and political policies, Chinese film policies, the directors' personal experiences and their aesthetic styles intersect with each other to create diverse city images, which in turn influence people's understanding of their own identity, and their attachment to their hometown, region and state in a rapidly globalising world.

In this thesis, I will draw on Edward Soja's Thirdspace theory (1996) to investigate those under-represented cities of western China that have long been on the periphery as marginalised cinematic spaces. Overwhelmingly represented as a rural and ethnographical space, the western region is seldom represented in the rise of powerful modern China. However, as a result of a flourishing economy in western China in recent years, the area is attracting greater cinematic attention. To conceptualise China's western-based urban films as a Thirdspace, this thesis attempts to break the rigid "dialectics of centres and peripheries, the conceived and the lived, the material and the metaphorical", and "open up a new domain, a space of collective resistance" in the cinematic representations located in western China (Soja 1996, p. 35). Chinese cinema has a long tradition of identifying film with countryside subject and city subject, illustrated in terms such as Western films, Urban Cinema and New Urban Cinema since the 1980s in cinematic representation and critical discourses. China's Western films, represented by internationally acclaimed works such as *Yellow Earth* [*Huang tudi*] (dir. Chen Kaige, 1984) and *Red Sorghum* [*Hong gaoliang*] (dir. Zhang Yimou, 1987), are predominantly set in the countryside. The term Chinese Western was officially proposed

by Chinese film critic Zhong Dianfei at the Xi'an Film Studio Annual Conference in 1984 (Teo 2016, p. 90). Zhong made a speech entitled "Face the Grand West, Develop New Western Film", in which he advocated for filmmakers of the studio to explore the spiritual world of the people of the vast north-western area through the big screen (Zhou 2012, p. 49). The conceptualisation of Chinese Western has exerted long-standing influences on filmmaking, genre blending and the cultural consciousness of Chinese cinema since its proposition in the 1980s.

Chinese Western cinema

Chinese film scholar Wang Yichuan categorises Chinese films into four sections according to geographical distinction: the eastern section represented by Shanghai, the southern section by Hong Kong, the western section by Chengdu, Chongqing and Xi'an and the northern section by Beijing and Changchun (Wang 2009, p. 55). The provincial regions of Shaanxi at el. (Figure 1) are regarded as the geographical base of China's Westerns. As the frontier western area has been inhabited by many minority ethnic groups, such as Tibetan (*Zang zu*), Mongolian (*Menggu zu*) and Hui (*Hui zu*), as well as the majority ethnic group Han (*Han zu*), the Chinese Western also includes minority films (minority in the north-west) in the context of China's complicated ethnic situations. However, as the filmmakers and production units involved are predominantly Han people from the studios of Xi'an, Inner Mongolia, Tianshan (in Wulumuqi, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region) and Yunnan, cinematic representations of the region, despite the existence of ethnic minorities, are essentially "Han-centred" (Li 2012, p. 89).

Figure 1. Map of China's western area (in orange) (Go west, young Han 2000)

Zhong's proposition regarding Western film stirred up a fierce debate among domestic scholars concerning the term "Western". To clarify the concept, Zhong set out to explain the term "Western" in further two articles, pointing out that the purpose of making Chinese Westerns was to strive for originality in cinematic style and form, and promote the local agenda in cinematic themes (Zhong 1994, p. 599). In response to this, assenting voices argued that borrowing the American term to label the new trend of filmmaking based on north-western China was a means of initiating and exploring Western films with Chinese characteristics. As China was predominantly an agrarian country, there was a call for Chinese cinema to realistically show how people emancipate themselves from agrarian economic constraint, and how the harsh environment shapes people's personality (Zhong 1994, pp. 606-607). Conversely, some critics perceived the concept and practice of the "Western Film" in mainland China to show a tendency to imitate capitalist USA's western

cowboy films (Xiao 2009, p. 81). One of the most powerful critiques made by Yuan Wenshu claimed that the genre was "inappropriate" for China, because:

> in our political system, we need to construct a Chinese-style socialist nation…[T]his allows of no doubt. Of course, in advancing and developing our nation's socialist cinema, we need to borrow from foreign nations, but this borrowing can only be of their advanced experience and of their techniques that would be useful in expressing our own cinematic content (cited in Fried 2007, p. 1488).

This perception may remind readers of the far-reaching modernisation strategy promoted since the late Qing dynasty known by the saying "Chinese culture for essentials, Western culture for application", and the long-standing ideological and political concern in cultural practice since Chairman Mao's era from the late 1940s. However these critics disagree on the name of this newly found subject matter and aesthetics represented by *Yellow Earth* (emphasising the endless and timeless space of the Loess Plateau and its far-reaching influence on the traditional culture and conduct, way of production and history of the region), there was "no disagreement that national culture must remain unvitiated" (Fried 2007, p. 1490). The Chinese Western during its initial period, therefore, can be seen as national cinema accommodating the culture of the particular terrain and contemporary ideological concerns, and targeting no commercial or cinematic industrial purpose (Luo 2005; Zhang 2003). It is a concept proposed in the context of a rigid planned economy and system, where filmmaking concerns relate more to aesthetic and ideological values than commercial values (Xiao 2009).

Yellow Earth and *Life* [*Ren sheng*] (dir. Wu Tianming, 1984), both made in 1984, inspired Zhong to propose the concept and flagged a new cinematic aesthetic style and subject matter [*ti cai*, a certain type of character or situation presented in artistic works, a Maoist practice]. The following years saw a sprouting of Western films, such as the family drama *In the Wild Mountains* [*Yeshan*] (dir. Yan Xueshu, 1986) and the countryside education feature *King of the Children* [*Haizi wang*] (dir. Chen Kaige, 1987), where landscape—specifically, sky, mountains, rivers and barren lands—takes on attentive importance. These films focus on Han as well as other ethnic minorities and revolve around the relationship between humans and nature, tradition and reformation, everyday practice and individuals' spiritual struggling in the context of China's economic reformation. However, it is far from a mature film genre like the American Western. An array of the most noted Western films made after Zhong's proposition, such as *In the Wild Mountains* (1986), *Old Well* [*Lao Jing*] (dir. Wu Tianming, 1987) and *Red Sorghum* (1987), became illustrations of Zhong's configuration of the Chinese Western. Set in the rural north-west, these films extravagantly display the barren land, brutal mountainous landscape and timeless space that the local people inhabit (Figure 2). Emphasising particular cultural conducts of the western rural area (Figure 3 & 4), they become significant sites for cultural and historical reflection on the national identity and local specificity.

Figure 2. The mountainous landscape: in *Yellow Earth*

Figure 3. Fetching water from the Yellow River & wedding ritual: in *Yellow Earth*

Figure 4. Digging a well & fetching water: in *Old Well*

Horse Thief [*Dao ma zei*] (dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1986) is one of the most critically-acclaimed Chinese Westerns set in Tibet, and displays the primitive landscape of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the ethnic region and mysterious religious rituals—the sky burial and the sacrifice dedication ceremony of Tibet. Thematically, the film examines moral issues and religious redemption. Despite the minority subject, the film is a "Han centred" narrative, a curious gaze from the perspective of the majority Han at exotic rituals and dwelling places (Zhang 2002, p. 167). Such Han-centred cinematic depictions of western China become cultural and historical sites of "national allegory" (Jameson 1986, p. 69). They are the "New Chinese Cinema" (Browne 1994, p. 3), paralleling the "new wave" that emerged from Hong Kong and Taiwan roughly at the same time. The western frontier of China, with "images of the land, the village, the country people, and their seemingly unending sufferings conjure up not only a modern and politicised nation at a specific time and place but also a timeless

collective life that goes beyond the confines of communist history" (Chow 1995, p. 39). However, with the intrusion of the market driven modernisation, the "timeless space" has constantly been interrupted and stirred up by commercialism and massive urbanisation. In spite of the stubborn tenacity of the traditional rural culture, people from the enclosed mountain areas began to be inspired and stunned by the outside world through TV, radio and all sorts of mass media devices.

A new trend of Chinese Western in the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s was the increasing representation of small towns, the intermediate area of the countryside and the big city that provides country people with traces of economic and social reform. As Pickowicz contends, it was a period that contained the vestiges of late imperial culture, the remnants of the modern or bourgeois culture of the Republican era, the residue of traditional socialist culture, and elements of both modernism and postmodernism (Pickowicz 2012, p. 274). Films such as *Ermo* (dir. Zhou Xiaowen, 1994) and *Woman Sesame Oil Maker* [*Xiang hun nü*] (dir. Xie Fei, 1993) capture the shifting rural-urban boundary, and have "in varying degrees participated in reshaping cultural nationalism in contemporary China" (Zhang 2002, p. 203). When the representative Fifth Generation established their reputations through rural ethnographic narration, more similar films were made to cater to the foreign gaze on a mystifying oriental country. Hence, cinema became an instrument to discover, represent or to "reinvent" China, and "in effect help to 'other' China through images of the unfamiliar histories, identities and livelihoods that persist peripherally in space and time" (Chow 1995, p. 43). However, such ethnographical and allegorical representation of Chinese culture, history and society soon lost its status with the emerging market economy accompanied by mass consumerism. After the proliferation of western-based films between the end of the

1980s and the 1990s, the Chinese Western soon declined. Films that strove to show spectacles of traditional customs, cultural conduct and the uniqueness of the local life soon reached a standstill and were denounced as unrealistic by the Urban Generation directors.

The American Western has developed a sophisticated set of characterisations, narrations and aesthetics over half a century of popularity. In the words of André Bazin, "it is the only genre whose origins are almost identical with those of the cinema itself and which is as alive as ever after almost half a century of uninterrupted success" (Bazin 2005b, p. 142). In representative Westerns such as *Stagecoach* (dir. John Ford, 1939), *High Noon* (dir. Fred Zinnemann, 1952) and *Shane* (dir. George Stevens, 1953), the wild and awe-inspiring western landscape, galloping horses, fights and masculine men have become the defining elements of the genre. More significantly, the pioneer spirit of conquering unknown lands and "the conflict between the transcendence of social justice and the individual character of moral justice, between the categorical imperative of the law which guarantees the order of the future city, and the no less unshakeable order of the individual conscience" are the core of the genre (Bazin 2005b, p. 148). In decline after the late 1950s, the American Western is nevertheless the "ideal representation of American values, character, and exceptionalism, providing a modern mythology for a nation without an ancient past" (Creekmur 2011, p. 397). Therefore, the Western and war films became the narrative forms that modelled national identity during twentieth century United States.

Similarly, the Chinese Western in the 1980s has substantially contained Chinese reality, local characteristics and cultural connotations. Moreover, it has kept accord with and represented China's contemporary circumstances and transformations (Zhou 2012, p. 49). However, the Chinese Western is not constrained to isolated desert rural spaces. In Huang

Jianxin's two urban black humour features, *The Black Cannon Incident* [*Heipao shijian*] (1985) and *Dislocation* [*Cuowei*] (1986), urban spaces of the region are also depicted to show the collision of capitalist economy and socialist political institution. Accordingly, the idea of the Chinese Western is associated particularly with the geographical and topographical features of China's north-west. Whether they be rural or urban spaces, it was the development strategy chosen by a local studio (Xi'an Film Studio) in the face of the economic reform in the film industry in the latter years of the 1980s that reflect Chinese history and traditional culture (Ni & Xu 2012). Since the reform era, China's film studios have been designated as an enterprise under the economic reform implemented in the urban area. The previous state-financed cultural production unit has been transformed into a financially self-reliant enterprise regarding production and distribution. Consequently, local film studios across mainland China had to struggle for a living in the face of a sharp decline in cinema audiences in the 1980s subsequent to the emerging TV and DVD industry.

However, Hollywood's influence on Chinese cinema became more extensive due to further "opening up" from the 1990s. The Chinese Western started to borrow narration techniques and genre elements from American Westerns (Zhou 2012, p. 50), such as the desert town, over-emphasised hoof-beats and the hero who rides off into the sunset in He Ping's *The Swordsman in Double Flag Town* (1991) (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Genre elements: in *The Swordsman in Double Flag Town*

Yet the turn of the millennium saw Chinese Westerns becoming commercialised and approaching the American Western genre elements in films, including *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* [*Sanqiang pai'an jingqi*] (dir. Zhang Yimou, 2009) (a remake of the Coen Brothers' *Blood Simple* (1984)) and *Wind Blast* [*Xifeng lie*] (dir. Gao Qunshu, 2010), "which contain tributes and allusions to the Italian Western more than they do the American Western" (Teo 2014, p. 130), and *No Man's Land* [*Wu ren qu*] (dir. Ning Hao, 2013), which depicts an isolated dystopia pervaded with chaos, violence, criminality and death. In the context of globalisation, the previous scope of themes and geographical background of the Chinese Western has narrowed, but aesthetically, they are approaching the classic westerns produced by Hollywood. In films such as *Hero* [*Yingxiong*] (dir. Zhang Yimou, 2002) and *Seven Swords* [*Qi jian*] (dir. Tsui Hark, 2005), the western landscape, with its isolated border towns, mountain ranges and desert, becomes a blank background (Figure 6) where national epic glory can be played out by infusing elements from their Hollywood-western counterparts (Fried 2007, p. 1493). In the new millennium, especially after China joined the WTO, Chinese cinema has been undergoing an enormous development in the global cinema market. Significantly, Chinese Western films that emerged under the influence of the planned economic system and bore no commercial interest have declined. However, western elements, especially the geographical and topographical aspects, and the traditional Chinese martial art film produced blended genres in the above films.

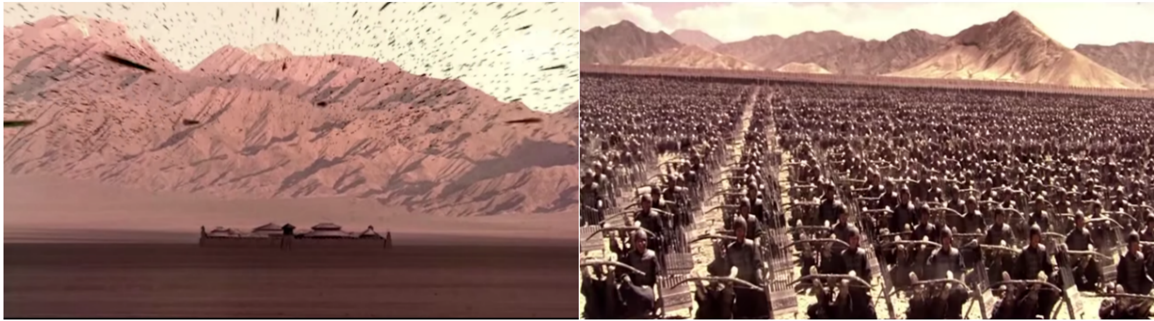

Figure 6. The town & the military phalanx: in *Hero*

The landscape in north-western China had been excessively portrayed and sometimes framed into spectacles and ethnographical images of the national image of China in these western films since the 1980s. Meanwhile, with the launching of economic reforms, the skylines of China’s new cities and their inhabitants also gained more exposure, with the state promoting a socialist modernity with Chinese characteristics. The idea of urban cinema and new urban cinema first appeared in 1986, and was defined by the journal *New Film* in 1988 under the title “Urban cinema has great prospects” (Tang et al. 1988). Urban cinema was introduced to counterbalance the Fifth Generation’s countryside ethnographic narration (Braester 2012, p. 352). The urban cinema comprises a wide range of films set in urban areas across China, realistically reflecting everyday city life commensurate with the latest social changes.

A brief history of Chinese urban cinema

Urban cinema is the cinematic response to China’s urbanisation in cities on various scales. The term “resonates with the long-standing ideological tension between city and countryside, as well as with China’s recent urbanisation on an unprecedented scale” (Braester 2012, p. 347). In the 1990s, under the influence of the Chinese Documentary Movement initiated by Wu Wenguang with his documentary *Bumming in Beijing* [*Liulang Beijing*] (1990) and the theories of André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer and Italian neo-realism,

some Chinese directors became vanguard observers and interpreters of the bewilderment and anxiety caused by the sweeping modernisation of contemporary China. *Bumming in Beijing* is recognised as China's "first independent documentary" characterised by hand-held on-location-shooting, unclear synch sound and no artificial light. The spontaneous style (Wu had no budget funding for the documentary and used borrowed equipment) came to be known as *jishi zhuyi*, or "on-the-spot realism" that diverges from *xianshi zhuyi* (orchestrated realism) (Berry, Lü & Rofel 2010, p. 5), and greatly influenced the Sixth Generation directors' aesthetic style and themes. Directors such as Zhang Yuan, Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye and Wang Xiaoshuai, as the representatives of the Six Generation, have made signature realistic features based on their hometowns: Jia Zhangke's Fenyang, Lou Ye's Shanghai, Ning Ying's Beijing and Wang Quan'an's Xi'an. Given the misleading and overgeneralising generational lineage in use in Chinese film studies (i.e. Fifth/Sixth Generation), the term "Urban Generation", which includes filmmakers who straddle generations, has been created and become a well-accepted rubric in Chinese cinema discourse (Zhang 2007). The term appreciates the directors' sense of social urgency and their cinematic engagement with the radical economic and social transformations underway in contemporary China.

Films that engage with urban themes and urban-rural relations have a long history in Chinese cinematic representation. The city and cinema affinity became more complex and intriguing in the reform era. The next section will examine the history of city-related narration and style in Chinese cinema from the beginning of the Chinese film industry to the present day economic and social transformation in the process of China's urbanisation and modernisation.

In China, the first screening of short films happened in Shanghai in 1896. A French showman displayed a series of short films at the *Xu Yuan* (the Xu Garden, an entertainment and recreation place) located in Shanghai (Leyda 1972, p. 1). These short celluloid clips were referred to as "*xiyang yingxi*" (lit. western (occidental) shadow play) by Chinese viewers. In 1902, a tea house called *Fu Shou Tang* (lit. *Bliss and Longevity Hall*) in Beijing screened several short films (Cheng, Li & Xing 1978, p. 10). From then on, film-watching gradually spread nationwide. *Yan Rui Sheng* (dir. Ren Pengnian, 1921), a highly acclaimed short feature, and *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* [*Gu'er jiu zu ji*] (dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1923), the first long feature made in mainland China, both were set in modern cities and laid the foundation for Chinese melodrama. From the 1930s to the 1940s, Shanghai was intensively depicted in films such as *Fate of Graduates* [*Tao li jie*] (dir. Ying Yunwei, 1934), *Street Angel* [*Malu tianshi*] (dir. Yuan Muzhi, 1937) and *Crossroads* [*Shizi jietou*] (dir. Shen Xiling, 1937). Cinematic Shanghai was depicted as a site of extravagance, materialism and extreme inequality in wealth and social status. Even though it was the most advanced and modern city in mainland China in the 1930s, the cinematic image of Shanghai was hardly that of a modern city in the Western sense, due to its social and economic limitations. Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Chinese cinema was often associated with Shanghai's theatre, studios and cityscape, as it was the centre of the Chinese film industry in the 1930s (Braester 2012, p. 347). Along with China's launch of reform in the 1980s, more cities came to be represented through films.

From the 1950s to the end of the 1970s, countryside-related topics—instead of those of the city—dominated film representation, as a result of a series of political campaigns in mainland China under the new Communist regime. Film studios were immediately

nationalised and film was used as an effective instrument for political propaganda. Thematically, the revolutionary war and class struggles were repeatedly represented with a style of "socialist realism" that conformed to the "ultra-leftist ideology" (Zhang 2004, p. 190). Only a few films were based on urban spaces. The Shanghai-based feature *Sentinels under the Neon Light* [*Nihongdeng xia de shaobing*] (dir. Wang Ping & Ge Xin, 1964) configured the city as a highly commercialised, class-stratified and morally corrupted space. The intriguing and dynamic urban spaces triggered innocent people to betray their previous values, as "Shanghai had been a city plagued by the reactionary propaganda of imperialism, feudalism and capitalism and a place influenced by bourgeois and petit-bourgeois ideas" (Zhang 2004, p. 199). Meanwhile, war films conveying strong patriotic emotions against Japanese invasion account for the most common cinematic theme during this period. Towards the end of the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, films withdrew from patriotic battle field and revolutionary themes and began to ponder the devastating social, cultural and economic consequences of the event. In the urban drama *Troubled Laughter* [*Ku nao ren de xiao*] (dir. Yang Yanjin & Deng Yimin, 1979), a sentimental and ironic atmosphere engulfs the urban spaces, as its characters' appropriation of urban areas is strictly confined in accordance with their political positions, showing the explicit affinity between power and space.

In the 1980s, city films became an effective and powerful instrument to record and reflect economic and social changes through new fads like rock and roll, pop music, fashion and entertainment. Films such as Zhang Liang's *Yamaha Fish Stall* [*Yamaha yudang*] (1984) are set in the emerging metropolitan Guangzhou and examine the thriving private businesses. Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Rock and Roll Kids* [*Yaogun qingnian*] (1988) and Mi Jiashan's *The*

Trouble Shooters [*Wan zhu*] (1988) are set in Beijing and reflect ambivalent social values and emerging occupations undertaken by young people. Meanwhile, the urban melodrama *My Memories of Old Beijing* [*Chengnan jiushi*] (dir. Wu Yigong 1983) and *Rickshaw Boy* [*Luotuo xiangzi*] (dir. Ling Zifeng, 1982), also based in Beijing, convey a strong sense of nostalgia for the traditional dwelling space—the courtyard house and its emphasis on traditional social order. Shanghai, on the other hand, as a port city, became the most significant and pioneering industrial site, singled out for industrialisation and modernisation. Cinematic Shanghai during the 1980s appeared in an open and progressive proletarian posture. This was precisely reflected in the films *A Corner in the City* [*Dushi li de cunzhuang*] (dir. Teng Wenji, 1982) and *Backlight* [*Ni guang*] (dir. Ding Yinnan, 1982).

The 1990's urban cinema was targeted more at vernacular everyday life in the urban area with "shots of protagonists roaming around the city—in POV [point-of-view], over-the-shoulder, and tracking shots" (Braester 2012, p. 349). Modern traffic, huge factories and gigantic industrial machines, working classes (urbanites) and their housing conditions, and commercial sites like extravagant shopping malls and stock exchanges were frequently presented in films. Ruins emerged as another significant cinematic trope for urban China. Rubble and debris from massive demolition and dislocation, and alienated young rebels roaming in the disoriented cities were represented extensively, owning to the Chinese state-driven modernisation. Almost all cities in mainland China involved in the urbanisation were characterised by the coexistence of construction and demolition (Braester 2007, p. 167). Old walls, streets and buildings were erased from the map of the city, while subways and new landmarks were built to adjust to the speed and efficiency of a modern city. The Urban Generation, rose to fame internationally and domestically through their cinematic

“trademark” featured by “the ubiquity of the bulldozer, the building crane, and the debris of urban ruins as carrying a poignant social indexicality” (Zhang 2007, p. 3). The close bonds between people who used to live in *si he yuan* (courtyard houses, common residential housing in Beijing) and *nong tang* (narrow lanes lined with low storey apartment buildings that can be commonly seen in Shanghai) have been broken down to be replaced by high-rises. Modern residents in the city have become isolated behind their apartment doors. Even residents in the same building find it hard to establish close relationships as they used to do in the old courtyard houses.

The conceptualisation of the city is different in the Western English world and the Chinese context. In English, the word “city” originally derives from the Latin “*civitas*”, meaning “city-state” and “citizens”. It suggests “an ideal of rational order”, the rights and privileges of the citizens, and refers “thus by extension to the mass of social principles that serve to organize a society and lend a specific quality to its life” (cited in Zhang 1996, p. 6). The “city” therefore not only suggests a physical construction but also a “moral order, or an ideal of rational order”, which is “invariably inscribed in the physical city, as well as in societies and institutions within the city” (Zhang 1996, p. 6). However, in Chinese, the equivalent expression *chengshi* connotes different meanings in comparison with its English counterpart:

> The term chengshi consists of two characters, cheng (meaning both “city” and “wall”) and shi (meaning both “city” and “market”). A cheng, which may be as large as the capital city or as small as a county administrative centre, is typically a walled city, highly organized, managed, and planned in detail. […] The city walls (chengqiang) might originally have been built for military defence, but over the centuries they have come to function primarily as ‘symbols of the state-imperial authority, designed to emphasize and glorify the city’s role as the seat

> of power and control, part of an overall imperial plan' (cited in Zhang 1996, pp. 6-7).

Therefore, the concept of "city" in Chinese, not only refers to a metropolis, such as New York, London, Beijing or Shanghai, but also includes medium-sized cities as well as small towns or counties. The form of China's traditional city has been influenced by prevailing political forces, hence Chinese cities have been "distinctly regulated by the administrative philosophy behind it, so much so that … [they] are very uniform in plan and outlook" (Hsueh 1995, p. 6). Transforming from a traditional agricultural China to a modern industrialised China, small towns serve as the transitional link between major cities and the countryside. In Chinese, the equivalent of town is *zhen*, referring to "control or administration". It is usually situated outside of the city walls and designated as a small market place (Zhang 1996, p. 6). As a transitional zone on the fringes of major cities, the town represents an underdeveloped space in the process of modernisation. Meanwhile, it retains direct communication with "the earth" and "agricultural practice", because it serves as the front locus for country people to experience the modern city and urban life. The social practices in the town bear both urban and rural characteristics; specifically, the traditional rural agricultural views and conduct can still be traced in the town.

The urban cinema investigated through this thesis will at times include films set in small towns or counties adjacent to the bigger cities. For example, Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan Province, is the most prominent urban area in the southwest that can be regarded as a significant representative place in this area economically, socially and culturally, yet other small cities around it inherently share its cultures, language and geographical characteristics. Therefore, I include these smaller cities in the western region as representative of Chengdu. Whilst the relationship between cinema and the city has been the

focus of much attention in Chinese film studies, the spatial and temporal scopes have been limited to megacities such as Beijing and Shanghai since the 1980s. The urban space of the vast western region remains barely investigated.

Research significance and objectives

This project focuses on China's western regions and their representative cities. Cities with important social, economic and cultural restructuring are imagined and re-imagined in contemporary Chinese cinema. The cinematic representation of certain places often runs parallel to the level of economic and political significance. It is difficult for the hinterland cities of China to compete with Beijing and Shanghai, the most favoured filmic cities in mainland China. Beijing has been the capital for over seven hundred years intermittently, and its cityscape has been carefully designed and planned as the political centre and a space of national power and identity. Its long imperial history leaves behind it an abundant cultural heritage, including splendid architecture and a complete set of cosmological theories of the city, power and the people, all of which have become emblematic signs of the city. Its political, cultural and economic privilege has meant that it has been filmed repeatedly by both domestic and foreign filmmakers, for instance, *The Last Emperor* [*Modai huangdi*] (dir. Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987) and *Farewell My Concubine* [*Bawang bie ji*] (dir. Chen Kaige, 1993). As the economic capital of China, Shanghai was the centre of Chinese cinema during the 1930s. Predominantly Shanghai-based melodramas, such as *Street Angel* (1937) and *Crossroads* (1937), have been intensively researched for their depictions of the earliest modernised Chinese metropolis and their profound explorations of gender, class and social transformation. The city witnessed cinema talents leaving for Chongqing, Hankou and Hong Kong and studios shut down during the tumultuous years of the 1930s (Clark 1987, p. 14).

It was one of the first places where major reform policies were implemented and massive constructions have been launched since the 1980s. Being the most advanced industrial site and the birth place of Chinese cinema, Shanghai remains the most filmed city in mainland China.

However, quite a few cities in the fast developing western part of China (such as Chengdu, Chongqing, Xi'an and Lanzhou) receive cinematic attention for their geographical (inland and poor traffic condition) and economic disadvantages (economic performance lags behind the eastern coastal cities). Despite their increasing populations (28 million in Chongqing, 14 million in Chengdu, 8.5 million in Xi'an and 3.6 million in Lanzhou) (Statistics 2011) and the expansion of urban areas in the four cities in recent years, there are far fewer films set in these cities than in Beijing and Shanghai.

The vast western areas in China have long been depicted as remote countryside in Chinese cinema, given their under-developed status and their position away from the centre of political discourse and economic privilege. In the 1980s, the image of the western areas was associated with a primitive pre-modern agrarian China. In particular, the northwest area became known for its yellow earth, barren land, poverty and exotic traditional rituals. China came to the threshold of modernisation when the distinctive boundary between countryside and city started to be challenged and rearranged in the 1980s. Accordingly, Chinese cinema received two critical new concepts—Chinese Western and urban cinema—as aesthetic and ideological discourse. In cinematic representation, the city-countryside boundary created by the timeless Loess Plateau was broken. In the new millennium, each provincial capital of the region has been undergoing industrialisation, and trying to keep up with southern counterpart cities like Guangzhou and Shenzhen. The significance of the four western cities lies in the

following aspects. They are each capital cities in their respective provinces now, while Chongqing was declared as the only municipality in the western area in 1997. Except for Lanzhou, the other three were established as capital cities during the dynastic period in ancient China, which gave them evident historical and cultural texture. These historical and cultural traditions have played a significant role in shaping the images of the cityscape and the character of each city in an increasingly assimilated globalised context. The four cities nowadays are the most developed hinterland cities in the reform era. Chongqing and Chengdu are geographically close and their citizens share similar dialects, so that they are often studied as a whole. With a population even surpassing Shanghai or Beijing, Chongqing is home to over 28 million people and has become the economic and cultural centre of the vast western terrain. As the only municipal city in western China, Chongqing enjoys direct economic and political support from the central government. Chengdu, Xi'an and Lanzhou, as the provincial cities of Sichuan Province, Shaanxi Province and Gansu Province respectively, also possess the political and economic vantage to realise rapid development. Thus, cinematic representations of these areas have been increasing steadily in recent years. This opens up alternative facets of China to the world, making known the peculiar landscape and hybridity of the current trend of localised culture in the context of globalisation.

Films about the four cities have become increasingly numerous, coinciding with these cities' economic boom period since the 1980s. The production of space in Chinese cinema "is a field of differentiation or uniqueness. Indeed, it is a method of locating distinctiveness" (Teo 2013, p. 133). Such cinematic distinctiveness resonates with the unique local characteristics of the urban spaces of the region that have been greatly affected by national projects carried out since the 1960s. National economic, social and cultural policies,

especially massive national construction projects, have affected the whole western area enormously. Cinematic representation of the western region has recorded and reflected the consequences of these projects carried out at different stages of the national plan. The earlier Third Front Project [*sanxian jianshe*], implemented between the 1960s and 1980s by the central government under Mao's regime, greatly impacted the urban designation of major western cities such as Chongqing, Chengdu and Lanzhou. A great number of socialist factories were established, along with accompanying compound residential spaces with Soviet Union style buildings. Cities were planned as production spaces rather than commercial centres. The Three Gorges Project, carried out in 1994, caused massive scale migration in the Southwest. Chongqing was the area most affected by the project. In more recent years, the Western Development Project shifted national attention from the eastern coastal Economic Special Zone to the Northwest, where the Silk Road, the cradle of Chinese civilisation, is located. Such enormous national projects fundamentally transformed the cityscape and created a set of everyday life spaces influencing social relationships and everyday practice.

Western urban cinema can be seen as the back stage of China's transforming urban image, as it displays a more critical stance than the established cities of the eastern coastal area in the reform era in terms of examining economic and social uneven development. It represents an enclosed and backward west resulting from geographical isolation and a series of national policies implemented before and after the reform era. Consequently, the cinematic representation of the west is frequently associated with wasteland (either natural or industrial), ruins, migrants, poverty, social tenacity, dislocation and uneven economic and social conditions at various scales. Political and economic policies carried out in the 1980s

divided mainland China into two distinctive spaces—an open and dynamic south-eastern China and an enclosed and inertial western China. National regional economic and resource distribution policies have shaped the built spaces of western cities, in addition to their geographical features. In cinematic form, these cities provide alternative images of China that diverge from cinematic Beijing and Shanghai. Through these diversified images, western urban cinema conveys and offers a vivid and convincing explanation of why there is such a contrast between east and west in contemporary China.

Scholarship on Chinese urban cinema inevitably corresponds with the limited cinematic representations of the region. The following paragraphs provide a brief summary of the existing academic research on the subject, outlining the most studied aspects of contemporary mainland Chinese urban films, and clearly illustrating the research gap that this thesis aims to fill.

Li Daoxin (2005) and Lu Chunyan (2010) set out from the perspective of cultural studies to examine Chinese urban cinema: specifically, how urban culture is cinematically reflected and how urban cinema in turn influences urban culture in areas such as fashion, entertainment and consumption. Nick Browne et.al' s collection (1994) and Adam Lam (2004) both explore Chinese films from recurring themes such as national cinema, identity and politics in the context of intensive economic and social reformation. Yomi Braester (2010), Robin Visser (2010) and Zhang Yingjin (1996, 2009) have to varying degrees examined political hegemony and cultural influence over changing cityscapes, architectural forms, spatial arrangement and the struggle of urban residents to adjust to spatial transformation. Paul Clark (2005) provides a historical account of Chinese film development from the very early 1920s to the new millennium, and contextualises Chinese cinema in

political campaigns and overall state control. Similarly, Chris Berry (2006) also underscores the political influence on the configuration of cities and cinematic characters, and attaches great importance to the impact of national historical scars on shaping the identity of Chinese people. Volumes contributed by Rey Chow (1995) and Dai Jinhua (2002, 2016) set out from a post-colonial and feminist perspective to interrogate films made by Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang, the most acknowledged and discussed members of the Fifth Generation (the first generation of directors to graduate from the Beijing Film Academy after the Cultural Revolution).

Zhang Zhen (2007) contributed the most important collection so far on city films made by the "Urban Generation" (who are often examined under the concept of "Sixth Generation"). Their works attach great importance to the migrants or those marginalised individuals who struggle with heavy economic burdens, managing to make a living by doing exhausting manual labour (Zhang 2007, p. 1). Michael Berry (2009) contributed a detailed and insightful study of Jia Zhangke's hometown trilogy that has been recognised as the most significant record and reflection on the ongoing urbanisation in towns of hinterland China. Unlike the gloomy and suffocating urban spaces shown in the city films studied in the above volumes, Jason McGrath (2008) looks into how the "New Year's Films" (New Year Comedy) by Feng Xiaogang provide a much brighter and complicated urban space and show modern social relations in metropolitan Beijing. New Year's Films originally referred to films modelled on Hong Kong Lunar New Year films and usually released during the Chinese Lunar New Year. They were introduced to mainland China in the mid-1990s and soon became popular thanks to Feng's localised Chinese colour, tongue-in-cheek dialogue and sentimental pathos. Feng also explores social issues, such as infidelity, reflected in Chinese

urban cinema by associating them with the changing social reality in mainland China from ideologically unified culture to a pluralised and fragmented one in the reform era.

This brief account of Chinese film studies shows the diversified perspectives of scholarship on Chinese films. Spatial analysis of the cinematic cities located in western China is lacking from existing film studies and it is necessary to add this to the landscape of Chinese cinematic cities hitherto dominated by Beijing and Shanghai. In this thesis, I ask, therefore, whether the western area is still represented in a similar way to the 1980s avant-garde rural narrative after three decades of implementing the open and reform policy? How have the overwhelming economic and social transformations affected people living in the region? And, finally, how does government oriented modernisation impact the cityscape and urban culture and population in the context of globalisation? These are all questions that need to be addressed, as the region has witnessed substantial transformations economically, socially and culturally since the 1980s. Films set in or depicting the region represent and participate in these ongoing transformations through their superior capability to configure, reflect and influence people's understanding and imagining of rural-urban relations and modern cities. Specifically, they "illustrate the intricate dialectic relationship between continuity and divergence, the local Self and foreign Other, past history and present response" (Wang 2013, p. 2). Therefore, many of the films discussed in this thesis contribute to reconfigure the collective consciousness of specific locations.

The location-specific concern of this thesis is aimed at discovering a sense of subjectivity and a space of resistance that develops on the ground of shared history and experiences tied to a specific place and its geopolitical relation to other regions. This tendency follows Zhang Yingjin's idea of the "polylocality and translocality" that challenges

the concept of "national" and reconfigures the relations between local, provincial, regional, national and global (Zhang 2010a).

Methodology

This thesis will adopt a theoretical framework based on Edward Soja's discussion of Thirdspace to examine selected films from the perspective of space. Relations between city and cinema will be investigated first and films will be analysed to address the following three lines of enquiry:

1) how the physical and material aspects of those cities in western China are depicted in an array of films produced in the period since the 1980s, and what is the overall and unique ambience and image of a specific city that is configured in cinematic works;
2) how the cinematic characters perceive their living circumstances, how they interact with the external spaces that are designed and determined by a myriad of values and political or patriarchal power, and, consequently, how they realise subjectivity and identity in the constant mobility and dislocation in the reform era;
3) how directors negotiate between personal aesthetics, film policies and the market (both domestic and international) to contribute to their diversified representation of cities, and why these cinematic cities in western China appear in certain images.

These images, in turn, motivate spectators to rethink their reasoning of identity, home, region and country in an increasingly globalised world. In these western-based films, Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, as the most represented and explored cities in Chinese media,

often serve as the reference of desired utopian imagination for these hinterland cities. Correspondingly, the cinematic characters in Chinese Westerns never stop yearning for the modern and dynamic south-eastern coastal region.

Thirdspace

Both city films and rural films can be perceived as emotive and contemplative vehicles for individual and collective existence; psycho-geographic journeys that map the changing of identity, place and conventions in the process of dramatic modernisation and globalisation. Space in cinematic representations is often perceived as the Secondspace, as it appears as "transcendental illusion", and belongs to:

> the visionary and creative arts among all those who see an immanent telos or 'design' waiting to be discovered. Everything, including spatial knowledge, is condensed in communicable representations and re-presentations of the real world to the point that the representations substitute for the real world itself, the 'incommunicable' having no existence beyond that of an ever-pursued residual (Soja 1996, p. 63).

Such imagined and represented cinematic space does not define the reality of social space. In other words, material spaces, no matter whether they are built or natural, are objective and measurable and cannot be narrowly perceived in a subjective and idealised way. However, the three dimensions of space, including:

> the physical, the mental, the social—[can] be seen as simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, material and metaphorical. No one mode of spatial thinking is inherently privileged or intrinsically 'better' than the other as long as each remains open to the re-combinations and simultaneities of the 'real and imagined' (Soja 1996, p. 65).

Therefore, this thesis takes films as Thirdspace, which, as conceived by Soja, "resounds so well with Lefebvre's fascination with concrete abstractions, his paradoxically materialist

idealism, and his adventurous explorations into the simultaneous worlds of the real-and-imagined" (Soja 1996, p. 54), and will examine both spatial representations and spatial realities of western China. The artistic representations of space on various scales—from cities, regions to countries—as Lefebvre and Soja confirmed, can be seen as a lived space or a Thirdspace. It "stretches across the images and symbols that accompany it, the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users', [and is also…] "inhabited and used by artists, writers, and philosophers" (Soja 1996, p. 65). Moreover, it is the:

> terrain for the generation of 'counterspaces', spaces of resistance to the dominant order arising precisely from their subordinate, peripheral or marginalised positioning. With its foregrounding of relations of dominance, subordination, and resistance; its subliminal mystery and limited knowability; its radical openness and teeming imagery, this third space of Lefebvre closely approximates what I am defining as Thirdspace (Soja 1996, p. 68).

In the context of China, western China has long been regarded as the frontier, a marginalised area characterised by agricultural and nomadic production and economically left behind in comparison with coastal and southern China in the reform era. To perceive western China represented in cinema as a Thirdspace will help illuminate how the uneven social and economic development has been spatially represented in films, how the oppressed and marginalised space represented in films shows the operation of power under socialist and post-socialist discourse, and how the cinematic western China becomes a space of resistance against the binary oppositions of the developing west versus the developed east, the rural west versus urban east, the culturally rooted west versus modern unrooted east. I will choose films set in the transforming spaces of the above-mentioned four cities since the 1980s. The focus on cinema since the 1980s is because this period signals the beginning of a new stage of a state-sponsored modernisation campaign that has resulted in rural-urban migration, the

rise of towns as a mediated space between the rural and the urban, and changing cityscapes on an unprecedented scale.

For each city, I have chosen at least two films that feature particular geopolitical contexts and historical periods. Specifically, in order to capture the multi-facets of the city, I will focus on the dominant natural and built environments with local characteristics represented in films, the spirit of the given cityscape, and characters who interact with, escape from, or return to particular social spaces. For each film, I will look at selected scenes about the cityscape and the way that the protagonist uses particular spaces, such as walking, running, driving, or getting lost in the urban area. In order to show diversified layers of Chinese reality, I will explore in detail the reasons why cinematic characters are dislocated and disorientated in the increasingly dynamic and sweeping modernisation in different cities.

Selection of films

Films selected for analysis in this thesis are characterised by realist and magical realist styles. Most of them tend to employ a Bazinian-favoured neorealism that favours unprofessional actors, on location shooting and natural light. Such style guarantees an authentic representation of the local ambience and characteristics, but through editing and various filmic languages, the city and places that emerge or are created through city films form a virtual space that "can only exist within the film itself but one that is based on what is potentially within actual urban space" (Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 34). In the virtual space:

> location shooting must capture different cities and have encounters with multiple communities: poor people living on the street, people engaged in harsh labour and the leisurely bourgeoisie. It must take into account new technologies and old rituals, urban spectacle and private spaces. Instead of drawing on location

> shooting to show the actual situation of particular urban spaces, the film is constructing a virtual space, one that seeks a vision of future possibilities but one that finds these possibilities by considering the current situation and extending it forward. Thus the actual activates the virtual and vice versa (Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 34).

The chosen films are listed in the table below, with the name of each cinematic city outlined in the first column. All of the films discussed in this thesis represent spatial transformations in the cities of western China. The previous dreary, highly politicised and enclaved spaces of cities have become, to varying degrees, commercialised and globalised. Rather than celebrating such a glamourous spatial reconfiguration, the urban films set in western China become a Thirdspace that bears witness to and investigates ruined public spaces and marginalised private space, and the social groups who are living on the periphery. They pose as a space of resistance against the meta-narrative of modernisation and globalisation, taking a critical stance to question the rationality underpining the miraculous spatial transformation under the grand ideology of social progress and modernisation.

City and its adjacent areas	**Films**	**Director**	**Year**
Wushan, Chongqing	*Rainclouds over Wushan*	Zhang Ming	1996
Chongqing	*Crazy Stone*	Ning Hao	2006
Fengjie, Chongqing	*Still Life*	Jia Zhangke	2006
Chengdu	*24 City*	Jia Zhangke	2008
Chengdu	*Buddha Mountain*	Li Yu	2010
Xi'an	*Back to Back, Face to Face*	Huang Jianxin	1994
Nearby Xi'an	*The Story of Ermei*	Wang Quan'an	2004
Xi'an	*Weaving Girl*	Wang Quan'an	2010
Jingtai, Lanzhou	*A Fool*	Chen Jianbin	2014
Hexi Corridor	*River Road*	Li Ruijun	2014

Film analysis

I will approach each film applying textual analysis by examining the visual configuration of particular spaces, visual storytelling sequences and sound deployed. In film, space is one of the critical media of visual communication. The way that characters are arranged in cinematic space (*mise-en-scène*) is illustrative of their social and psychological relationships (Giannetti 2008, p. 66). Selected scenes showing images of cityscapes and the way the protagonist uses the space (walking, running, driving, getting lost) will be closely examined, and sounds (traffic noise, sound track, etc.) and shots that establish the ambience of particular places through framing, *mise-en-scène* and other techniques such as lighting will be analysed to see how they engage with the state or process of China's urbanisation in the context of globalisation. As cinematic settings are not merely the background for the action, but also symbolic extensions of characterisation and cinematic theme (Giannetti 2008, p. 266), characters from varied social strata will be examined in detail, especially when they physically or metaphorically cross social borders (boundaries between class, gender, ethnicity etc.) or when their lived space is intruded upon and even demolished.

As a cinema study, as noted, I will also closely examine the *mise-en-scène:* the space between characters, the distance between character and camera and the depth planes within the frame. Furthermore, I will read shots of various length, or that are tightly or loosely framed to demonstrate the mental space of characters, namely, their symbolic meanings in psychological and social dimensions. The spatial arrangement of "virtually any kind of territory used by humans betrays a discernible concept of power and authority" (p. 67). Accordingly, the power and authority demonstrated through the space structure represented both within and outside of the films will be included and examined in this thesis.

By doing so, this thesis will achieve spatial understanding of the cities in western China. Chronologically investigating films made in and about each city will reveal the dynamic relationship between identity, gender, migration, class and place; it will create a collective "memory map" of a city. Such analysis will reveal how a city creates, maintains and mutates its image on the road to modernisation. A spatial perspective looking at the physical and mental spaces represented by films made in and about cities of western China (in the context of modernisation) will draw a map of inequality in social and economic development, and show the nuanced cultural differences within this region.

Research gap and organisation of the thesis

As Yomi Braester notes, "marginalised locations of a hybrid ethos—from the sweatshops of Shenzhen to the pidgin idioms of Kuala Lumpur—leaves it for further studies to address other meeting points between film and the city" (Braester 2010, p. 24). Zhang Zhen (2007), Yomi Braester (2010), Zhang Yingjin (2007, 2010) and Robin Visser (2010) all focus on seats of hegemonic power, cultural policies and film industry development in the interaction with the production, distribution and screening of urban cinema in China. Their investigations tend to concentrate mostly on megacities such as Beijing and Shanghai, with some of them including Hong Kong and Taiwan in the cinematic landscape of Chinese cinema. This thesis will instead look at those marginalised locations in western China represented in films since the 1980s to bridge the academic gap left as a result of the uneven spatial representations in existing scholarship.

The following chapter will establish the theoretical framework of this thesis and review related literature on Chinese film studies in a chronological order to show the discourse of Chinese film studies in the changing landscape of China's politics, economic

system, and cultural policies. I will apply the spatial theories proposed by Henri Lefebvre and developed by Edward Soja to configure a *macro* view, seeing the city as a whole, by providing a brief history of each city and general introduction to each city as represented in cinema, which inscribes certain images or stereotypes of the city. Such a *macro* view looking at the spatial activities and production is "associated with a modernist and masculinist hegemony of the visual, an authoritarian viewpoint that allegedly eradicates difference and heterogeneity, silences subaltern voices, obscures the immediacy and sensuality of urban life" (Soja 1996, p. 313). Therefore, I will also include a *micro* view to examine the cinematic city from a "view from below"—in Michel de Certeau's words "walking in the city"—by reading cinematic protagonists' use and interaction with different social spaces, and, in turn, considering how these spaces impact the characters' identity and subjectivity. Such a street view, according to Soja, provides "the intimate ethnography –geography of everyday life exemplified best in the individual voice of the intensely localised *flâneur*" (Soja 1996, p. 313). Another effective spatial practice, *dérive* [literally, drifting], will also be employed to investigate the relation between urban spaces and mental space. Combining both *macro* and *micro* modes of seeing the city and its cinematic representation, I will present a comprehensive understanding of the city and of how these city films contribute to configure, brand and even "third" the media representation of the region (Soja 1996, p. 313).

Chapter Three will discuss cinematic Chongqing and its adjacent areas represented in three films, and focus on how automotive power imposes spatial transformation on the cityscape and dislocates its original residents, their means of production, and way of living and social relations. In this chapter I will also discuss how local history, cultural heritage and collective memory ascribed to human-built environment has been destroyed due to

enormous national projects such as the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Chongqing, as the only municipality in hinterland China, witnesses an economic boom juxtaposed against its original poorly equipped industrial and dilapidated residential area in *Crazy Stone* [*Feng kuang de shitou*] (dir. Ning Hao, 2006). The construction of the Three Gorges Dam, represented in two films in sequence—*Rainclouds over Wushan* [*Wushan yunyu*] (dir. Zhang Ming, 1996) and *Still Life* [*Shanxia Haoren*] (dir. Jia Zhangke, 2006)—turns the city into a canvas for the central government to paint a dream of modernisation and national resurrection. The urban space undergoing transformation, on the one hand, becomes a space of the workings of power that are "tied to the relations of production and, especially, to the order or design that they impose" (Soja 1996, p. 67). On the other hand, it is a space complicated by multi-layered reality—premodern, socialist and post-socialist—as shown in the films.

Chapter Four will move to Chengdu, a city located close to Chongqing which shares the same language and culture as Chongqing and used to belong to the same jurisdiction under Sichuan province before 1997. I will concentrate on the spatialised history carried on by a socialist state-company represented in *24 City* [*Ershisi Cheng ji*] (dir. Jia Zhangke, 2008) and the traumatised domestic space in urban space in *Buddha Mountain* [*Guanyin shan*] (dir. Li Yu, 2011). *24 City* shows how socialist China is disappearing and being replaced spatially in the new millennium, and how the trauma and nostalgia of a whole social class involved in this spatial change engenders, individually and collectively, psychological and emotional tremors. In *Buddha Mountain*, ruins produced by natural disaster in both the urban and rural areas become direct material symbols of the interior wasteland of characters,

young or middle-aged, facing disintegrated families and instability in both working and dwelling spaces.

In Chapter Five, the Xi'an municipality and its adjacent area that is depicted in three films will be analysed in detail from the perspective of hierarchical power relations in Chinese governmental departments, rural-urban interactions and feminine spaces. The spaces and space exploration represented in cinema are "connected directly to the material dynamics of geo-historically uneven development and the political economy of contemporary capitalism [in the Chinese context, the economic system is capitalist market economy], bringing culture performatively into the realm of class politics" (cited in Soja 1996, p. 115). Xi'an in *Back to Back, Face to Face* [*Beikaobei, lianduilian*] (dir. Huang Jianxin, 1994) is shown as a space of hierarchical power conflict that is triggered by personal ambition and rural-urban differences. *The Story of Ermei* [*Jingzhe*] (dir. Wang Quan'an, 2004) displays the border space where rural and urban residents meet and man and woman, centre and periphery spaces are transgressed and inverted. *Weaving Girl* [*Fangzhi guniang*] (dir. Wang Quan'an, 2009) enlarges the spatial investigation scope, intertwining the space practices and relations in Xi'an and Beijing and showing two very different urban scenes of the two cities.

Cinematic towns of Lanzhou will be examined in Chapter Six by focusing on *A Fool* [*Yige shaozi*] (dir. Chen Jianbin, 2015) to exhibit a space of "the dominated – and hence passively experienced or subjected – space which the imagination (verbal but especially non-verbal) seeks to change and appropriate" (cited in Soja 1996, pp. 67-68). I will also examine two minority films *Tuya's Marriage* [*Tuya de hunshi*] (dir. Wang Quan'an, 2006) and *River Road* [*Jia zai shuicao fengmao de difang, lit. Home at the lush grassland*] (dir. Li Ruijun,

2015) to illustrate the cultural hybridity of the area, and the ethnic and environmental issues confronted by the area and its people in the intrusion of urbanisation and modernisation. *A Fool* displays an extreme rural-urban economic gap; more importantly, the gap of knowledge and power over the strange and complicated urban and rural spaces. The "cognitive maps" of characters from different social classes become disoriented and disturbed in crossing the rural-urban border (Soja 1996, p. 79). It is a representative illustration of the spatial practices and social relations of the area, and will be the primary focus of this chapter. *River Road*, which is set in the Hexi corridor and dominated by a rural landscape, will be a complimentary section to emphasise the looming urban power materialised through sprawling urban space and influence.

Having summarised this introductory section, with its investigation of Chinese Western cinema and Chinese urban cinema, this thesis addresses the unbalanced cinematic representation of Chinese cities. It argues that the western-based urban cinema actively encourages "spatial thinking", enhancing audiences' understanding of western China in the context of modernisation and promoting a critical view on cinematic cities, while also inspiring the formation of multi-temporal and multi-faceted cinematic cities based in the northwest and southwest. The subsequent chapters will provide a comprehensive examination of cinematic cities in western China through films set in Chongqing, Chengdu, Xi'an and Lanzhou. Each chapter focuses on one cinematic city. The films discussed are related to one another through the analysis of their cultural similarity, political influence on cityscapes, common environmental problems and shared social inertia due to geographical isolation. The next chapter establishes the theoretical framework by reviewing key literature

from Edward Soja, Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, Michel de Certeau, Zhang Yingjin and Yomi Braester.

Chapter Two Establishing a Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework in this thesis revolves around four key words—Thirdspace, walking, *flâneur* and *dérive*. The spatial turn initiated in the later twentieth century drew academic attention to theories contributed by Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Edward Soja and Michel de Certeau, who associated urban spaces with history and society, and connected the seemingly inhumane space with subjectivity, psychology and identity in the context of a modern/post-modern world. Cinematic cities, either filmed on location or in established studios, crystallise the real and unreal, subjective and objective. Cities are sites to record, imagine and even transform the urban reality along with its own development. Apart from the spaces in film, the global film industry, from its production to distribution and screening, has become an inevitable component of modern cities. Since its birth, film has impacted on urban space and people's everyday practice in terms of fashion, entertainment and ideology. Therefore, cinema and the city have created the Thirdspace that Edward Soja perceived as "the real-and-imagined" place, an inclusive and dynamic space aimed at presenting, analysing and eventually emancipating the marginalised, the peripheral and the under-represented space (Soja 1996, p. 54). In this perspective, the urban cinema of western China, which represents the long-ignored western region, overshadowed by the economically booming east, represents a journey to assure its significance, and move from the periphery to the centre, from the unknown to the known.

Exploration of urban Space

This thesis will look into cinematic cities of western China from a spatial perspective, supported by the modern and post-modern space theories of Edward Soja, Walter Benjamin and Michel de Certeau. Edward Soja's Thirdspace theory provides readers a *macro*-spatial

view to understand the modern/post-modern city through a trialectic relation of historicality-sociality-spatiality. De Certeau's *micro*-spatial perspective of everyday life provides a structuralist approach, where walking, reading and cooking can become a poetic and personalised journey to resist imposing forces from the institutional bodies. Benjamin's urban observer and interpreter's (*flâneur*) Paris is associated with the desire of "seeing" different facades of a commodified modern city. *Flâneur*, a term coined by the French poet Charles Baudelaire, became regarded as the symbol of modernity and a male-oriented observation of modern urban space. He observes and interprets the modernisation underway in Paris during the first decades of the twentieth century, yet also finds his way into contemporary films set in urban China in the reform era.

Thirdspace

Edward W. Soja (1996) introduced the concept of Thirdspace based on an epistemology that tends to unlock the rigid binary understanding of space as merely material and mental. His spatial theory is based on Henri Lefebvre's ground-breaking monograph *Production of Space* (1991), in which Lefebvre divided human spatial experience into the perceived, the conceived and the lived. Perceived space refers to the material and measurable space that is "directly sensible and open, within limits, to accurate measurement and description" (Soja 1996, p. 66), while conceived space, according to Lefebvre, is "the dominant space" and "the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent—all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived" (cited in Soja 1996, p. 67). Lived space, which is linked to "social space" by Lefebvre, refers to "the dominated – and hence passively experienced or subjected – space which the imagination (verbal but especially non-verbal)

seeks to change and appropriate" (cited in Soja 1996, pp. 67-68). Based on Lefebvre's spatial exposition, Soja further develops his "Thirdspace" theory. Briefly, Firstspace is confined to material and physical space that can be mapped and measured; Secondspace is the mental space that derives from conception, imagination and ideology; Thirdspace is where "everything comes together...subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history" (Soja 1996, p. 56). Soja notes that "there is no unspatialised social reality" (Soja 1996, p. 46). That is to say, from human body to constructed social spaces at varying scales (village, town, city, region, nation…), the spatial dimension of human existence is as essential as humans' historical and social attributes.

Thirdspace for Soja is an intellectual journey that orchestrates feminism, post-colonism, cultural studies and archaeology. By quoting extensively from established experts in the above scholarship, Soja melds different voices into his unified concept "Thirdspace" to display a world of "radical openness". It combines concrete material space and mental places and further extends beyond them. Accordingly, Thirdspace is forever open to additional otherness and a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge. The primary aim of exploiting the Thirdspace is to translate "knowledge into action in a conscious and consciously spatial effort to improve the world in some significant way" (p. 22), and to "guide our search for emancipatory change and freedom from domination" (p. 70). Thirdspace can be found at all scales, from the tangible body to the intangible mind, sexuality and subjectivity, individual and collective identities, and from the local to the global. Diversity, mobility and dynamism pervade the Thirdspace so that rationality and chaos,

transparency and opacity, centre and periphery are constantly in struggle. In the discourse of Thirdspace or “the othering”, “the binary choice is not dismissed entirely but is subjected to a creative process of restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives” (p. 5). The “new alternatives” here, in Soja’s exposition, can be seen in Edward Said’s fictional geography, Homi Bhabha’s Third Space and Foucault’s heterotopologies. Soja’s Thirdspace exploration was initiated in his first volume (1989), which attempted to assert the significance of putting spatiality in an equally important position as historicality and sociality in the epistemology of the post-modern world. In his latest addition to the Thirdspace (2000), he applies the theoretical arguments and “trialectical” strategy elaborated in the seminal spatial volume (1996) to examine the transitions underway in cities from “simultaneously spatial, social, and historical perspectives” (Soja 2000, p. xvi). Again, he chooses Los Angeles as a post-metropolitan sample to understand contemporary urban life and ongoing urban transitions.

The way we appropriate and imagine the urban space that Soja expounded resonates with the spatial exploration strategies and tactics elaborated by De Certeau in his seminal work “Walking in the City” (1984). Secondspace (Representations of space) echoes De Certeau’s panoramic view of New York City from the World Trade Centre. This tremendous emblem of capital, power and modernity—before it was destroyed in the September 11th attacks in 2001—offers its viewer the concept of a modern city that can be found in the discourse of utopia. The God’s view spectacle shows the architects, city planners and reformers’ configuration of the city as a rational, readable and governable space. It is essentially an idealistic perspective aiming at rendering the city transparent. In contrast to the panoptic representation of space, De Certeau offers a sympathetic account of a

representational urban space which people inhabit. This lived space, in Soja's words, can be seen as Thirdspace that is pervaded by personal memory and desire. De Certeau deploys a binary idea to map urban space—theory versus practice, strategy versus tactic, power versus resistance. This is a method that Soja tries to resist. But De Certeau's observations of pedestrians' poetic and tactical way of appropriating or re-appropriating the complicated urban space affirm both the *flâneur* and urban drifters' urban exploration experience, oscillating between "manipulating and enjoying, the fleeting and massive reality of a social activity at play with the order that contains it" (Certeau 1984, p. xxiv). The next section will focus on the two modes of walking as strategies of urban exploration, and then move to De Certeau's view on tactical walking in the city as a summary of varied ways of interacting, exploring or resisting the urban environment.

Walter Benjamin and the *flâneur*

Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades' Project* (1999) is composed of a collection of historical and literary sources. It can be approached as an account of how the capital city Paris moves from a rational city (planned and organised by planners and institutions) toward a Thirdspace characterised by commercialisation and modernisation, inevitably accompanied by unintended consequences of this historical process (labyrinthine and enigmatic city). What is more influential is that he offers a critical investigation of the *flâneur*, a figure who enjoys strolling in the streets of 19th century Paris and ultimately becomes an emblem of modernity.

The concept of the *flâneur* originated in nineteenth century Paris, where strolling was perceived as a way to observe the rapid and unprecedented urbanisation. In Charles

Baudelaire's essay "The Painter of Modern Life" the most original and comprehensive portrait of the *flâneur* is given. The *flâneur*, observed by Baudelaire is as follows:

> The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define (1978, p. 9).

Baudelaire perceived the *flâneur* as an enthusiastic spectator of urban life. He was observant and acute in inferring attributes such as the class, character and profession of passers-by. The *flâneur* was an urbanite who read the city consciously to decode its mythical meanings. He did not necessarily occupy a high social status. He might be an aristocrat, a planner, an administrator, an artist, a detective or even a bohemian, and Baudelaire himself therefore, could be regarded as a *flâneur*. The *flâneur* emerged onto the Parisian boulevard in the early nineteenth century all because of the genius city planner, Baron Haussmann. He designed a new Paris, and Napoleon III turned the design into reality. Thus, the narrow and ancient Parisian streets were replaced with broad, straight avenues. Apart from military and political convenience, those streets were built to reconstruct Paris to facilitate the developing capitalism and provide traffic and accommodation for the benefit of the working class. Meanwhile, electric lighting and parks were also introduced to the city, which further enlarged the spaces for thriving commercial activities and public entertainment. Behind the new modern city blueprint is rationalism, however, it turns out that chaos, disorder, and

shocking experience and irrationality ensue inevitably as the other facets of modernity. People from different social positions congregate in the city, walking in the streets, fulfilling obligations that society has imposed on them—working, attending business meetings, hanging out in the cafes and bars, shopping in the new department stores and arcades. Among them, the *flâneur* walks and keeps a distance from them, becoming the most valuable and insightful observer of the dramatic material and psychological change in the process of modernisation in Paris in the nineteenth century.

The purpose of strolling for the *flâneur* is to capture the transient newness of the urban spaces. Arcades, with passageways through neighbourhoods covered with glass roofs and braced by marble panels, create an interior-exterior for merchandising purposes. The blurring boundary between the public and the private, the exterior and the interior of the arcades echoes the *flâneur*'s ambiguous inner space. He reads the city as a text about history, while he himself exists entirely in the present. He walks along the Parisian streets with leisure, always alone, observing the crowd, roving into the arcades and gazing at glittering commodities on display. The masses:

> … stretch before the *flâneur* as a veil: they are the newest drug for the solitary.—Second, they efface all traces of individual: they are the newest asylum for the reprobate and the proscript.—Finally, within the labyrinth of the city, the masses are the newest and most inscrutable labyrinth of the city. Through them, previously unknown chthonic traits are imprinted on the image of the city (Benjamin 1999, p. 446).

Therefore, the primary aim of the *flâneur*, is to transform the chaos and indeterminacy of the urban space into a legible, accessible and non-threatening version of itself, to demonstrate that the urban crowds are not as politically threatening and illegible as they appear to be in

the bourgeois society (Brand 1991, p. 6). In a highly commercialised urban space, the experiences of the modern subject are often attended by anxiety and insecurity. He is entitled the authority and freedom to observe and interpret the wealth of the transient sights, sounds and smells of the urban space (particularly the arcades). However, when the spacious and well-lit department stores allow females to roam in a safe and pleasant environment, the glory days of the *flâneur* have passed. In the latter-day interpretation, *flâneur* is not only an actual individual who is a detached observer of urban life strolling in the street and reaping "aesthetic meaning and an individual kind of existential security from the spectacle of the teeming crowds" (Tester 1994, p. 2), but a literary and social archetype, or concept adopted by contemporary writers as a paradigm of modernity, urbanisation and public mobility.

***Dérive* and urban exploration**

The term *dérive* [literally, drifting] was coined by the Letterist International, established in Paris in the 1950s. It refers to "a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society; a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances" (Andreotti & Costa 1996, p. 69). The Situationist International (SI), founded in 1957, perceived *dérive* as an effective spatial practice that investigated the relation between urban spaces and mental space. Thus, as one of the modes of strolling in the streets in modern cities, *dérive* "entails [a] playful-constructive behaviour and [an] awareness of psychogeographical effect" (Debord 1996b, p. 22). Psychogeography, as defined by Guy Debord, one of the core figures of the Situationist movement, is the "study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographic environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals" (Debord 1996a, p. 18). Therefore, psychogeography is a means of exploring different ambience and areas in urban cities,

examining more closely the relationships between urban space and behaviour, and eventually diminishing the boundary between "extended and indistinct bordering regions" up to "the point of their complete suppression" (Debord 1996b, p. 26).

Deeply influenced by avant-garde movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism in the initial years of its foundation, the SI criticised the stifling functionalism and utilitarianism of the post-war urban space, and turned to the mental and psychological effects encapsulated in the urban spaces:

> …as seen especially in the autocratic housing schemes built around Paris and other cities, which they felt curbed the individual's creative capacities. Against the oppressive living conditions imposed through such technocratic city plans, the SI sought to develop new forms of collective action and methods of agitation that would promote a free use and transformation of the urban environment (Andreotti 1996, p. 7).

Functionalists hold the idea of standardisation and rationalism, believing that ideal and definitive forms of the different objects useful to people are possible. For them, spaces such as Haussmann's Paris were full of "sound and fury" and concerned initially with allowing the rapid circulation of military troops and "the use of artillery against insurrections", and the later post-war Paris developed to ensure an open space for the circulation of the increasing number of private automobiles (Debord 1996a, p. 18). The idea of utilitarianism conducted in the urban spaces in history—as shown in the above two examples—ensured the efficiency and operation of the modern city designed and developed under the discourse of rationalism and progress. However, the functionalists neglect the psychological effect of surroundings. The physical features of buildings and the appearance of objects that are used have a psychological and emotional influence that may have nothing

to do their practical use (Jorn 1996, p. 51). By drifting in the city to explore the urban space, the drifters set against the imposing utility and function.

As one of the exploratory modes of spatial practice and urban expression, the concept and practice of *dérive* is closely related to voyages of discovery and the acquiring of geographical knowledge. Furthermore, it is resistant to the power structures imposed by the definitive functionalist ideas of architecture and urbanism, celebrating the intangible but significant psychogeographical effect exerted by the physical space. The means of *dérive* and *détournement* (rerouting, hijacking) as manifestations of psychogeography, therefore, are strategies that can be deployed to critique and resist the rise of privatisation, commercialism and the decreasing pedestrian-friendly spaces in cities. Though the SI disbanded in 1972, the conception and practices of psychogeography have continued to reverberate in scholarship, urban planning and artistic fields, as it not only provides a form of spatial practice that aims at exploring the urban space, but it also outlines "a revolutionary project for overturning dominant social and spatial structures" (Pinder 2005a, p. 388).

Compared to *flânerie*, *dérive* distances it from the traditional notion of strolling, as it attends to the psychogeographical aspects mentioned above. It contains a more analytical consciousness, which involves investigating cities in the light of their emotional effect, their powerful influences and the chances they contain (Pinder 2005b, p. 152). For the *flâneur*, the aim of strolling in a city is to observe, to gaze at the transient commercial world and to read the city as a text by strolling in a leisurely fashion and staying at a distance from the crowd. This undertaking is clearly gendered as the conventional figure of *flânerie* is invariably male. However, both spatial practices are ways of refusing the urban rules imposed by rationalism and modernisation. The *flâneur*'s slow pace of crossing arcades

while observing the rapidly transforming urban spaces and the crowd is a protest against the "speeding-up of circulation and time discipline". Similarly, the drifter's exploration of ambience and construction of situations are played out as a refusal of the "categories and rhythms of capitalist urban life and its demands for discipline and utility as determined by structures of work" (p. 150). The *dérive* is a strategy for drifters to undermine the fixed categories of work and leisure, or public and private, to fight against the "dictates of a city governed by principles of utility and efficient circulation" (p. 151). Therefore, the *dérive* contains a politicised target that means to transform the social and spatial structure in modern cities, which can be turned into a terrain of "unitary urbansim"; in other words, a realm of freedom undergoing permanent transformation instead of a fixed and static space.

Flânerie and *dérive* as two modes of urban exploration provide a pedestrian-level perspective of observing, understanding and appropriating urban spaces in the context of rapid urbanisation and modernisation. As the emblem of modernity, the *flâneur* represents a white male-oriented observation of the city, which is attended by anxiety and insecurity, yet at the same time entails *authority* and a sense of freedom in the city. With the *flâneur*'s leisurely strolling taking place in the early years of modernisation, the urban space witnessed the mobility of the massed crowd and the rapid construction of separated commercial and residential spaces. *Dérive*, on the other hand, provides a less gendered vision of the urban spaces, and attends to the psychological and emotional influences of the urban spaces on people. Drifters are not just observant witnesses of the changing cityscapes and psychological-scapes of the city inhabitants, but doers who drift around consciously and construct situations to *détour* (tactics of hijacking, rerouting, or diversion), and loosen or transform the imposing rules of social space. Both spatial practices resonate with Michel de

Certeau's emphasis on walking, a low view of ordinary walkers' tactical use of urban spaces, which prizes the endless innovative use of urban spaces. *Flânerie* and *dérive*, as two archetypal modes of walking, can be situated historically in light of De Certeau's dichotomous reading of modern cities and will be important theoretical focal points for the films discussed in this thesis.

Michel de Certeau and "Walking in the City"

The previous investigation of different layers of spatial experience primarily displays a *macro* perspective, while De Certeau provides us with a *micro* and composed observation of the modern city. His influential work (1984) expounds the "ways of operating" that comprise the multiform of practices through which consumers/users appropriate or re-appropriate the space arranged by social-economical-cultural production. De Certeau deploys a dialectic way of viewing urban life—the "strategy" (the overarching arrangements of large institutions or power bodies) and the "tactic" (the individual or group who escapes the strategy imposed on them without leaving it and manages to reach their own end). He celebrates the creative tactics via which consumers/users deflect the function and disciplines carried out by those institutional bodies. According to him, many daily activities, such as reading, speaking, cooking and walking, are inherently tactical. With or without being conscious of their actions, individuals always deal with daily routine with some smart "tactics" rather than being completely controlled or determined by "strategies" imposed by institutional bodies. In the seminal chapter "Walking in the City", De Certeau juxtaposes two metropolitan experiences—looking down from the World Trade Centre to attain a panoramic view of the city and walking in streets to feel, to observe and to be reminded of the details and secret aspects of the city. Looking from the summit of the World Trade Centre

located in Manhattan, De Certeau is greeted by "a wave of verticals" and the "gigantic mass" that "is immobilised before the eyes" (Certeau 1984, p. 91). New York City, specifically Manhattan, as the international financial and capital centre, is a concrete forest continuously exploding. The city,

> unlike Rome, has never learnt the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future. A city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs……in it are inscribed the architectural figures of the *coincidatio oppositorum* formerly drawn in miniatures and mystical textures (p. 91).

The panoramic scenario of New York City can resemble that of any other metropolis across the world. In the battle between conserving the old and inventing the new, urbanisation is a compelling force that is capable of overthrowing the previous, the present and forever looking toward the future. When getting rid of the street and crowd and standing on the apex of the skyscraper, we are, according to De Certeau:

> lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic……His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him into distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was possessed into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye (p. 92).

In other words, the panoramic perspective of the city turns the viewer into a reader, and at the same time, turns the city into a text, a concept that can be mapped, measured and analysed. In addition, the masses and their activities appear so small and remote that their mobility is almost invisible. Therefore, the "voyeur" with a bird's eye view, can attain "the

concept of the city" (p. 93), which echoes to the blueprint designed by city planners or institutional bodies that arrange the urban space according to rationalism and transparency. The other spatial experience, walking in the street, according to De Certeau, contrasts with "the collective mode of administration" as it represents "an individual mode of reappropriation" (p. 96). The individual mode is equally important, for its "spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life," with its "multiform, resistance, tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised, and which should lead us to a theory of everyday practices, of lived space, of the disquieting familiarity of the city" (p. 96). De Certeau takes a structuralist approach where he locates the act of walking as the act of speaking. Even though people's use of language has to conform to certain syntactical and lexical rules prescribed by linguistics, they are still able to speak and write in a personalised style, and even break the rules of language to accomplish some unique effects. That is the same as the pedestrian's walking. Walking in the city is a process of appropriating the topographical system and, at the same time, it "acts out" the place spatially and links different positions together with "pragmatic contracts" (p. 98). For the reason that one's acting out of space is characterised as present, discrete and phatic, the person can enunciate various kinds of relations to particular paths. Therefore, the pedestrians' walking as a space of enunciation is inevitably full of infinite diversity. As an effective way of linking acts and footsteps, the names and symbols of a place provide meanings and directions to walkers. Besides, they would be changed or even vanish when spaces are emptied, or their original function is worn away. Despite the consistent changing or vanishing of particular places, memories about places may linger on. Thus, it is through memory that people connect to certain places and spaces.

Such connection remains personal, which in turn gives that place its character. It is a poetic journey to engage in walking through the same street time after time, pondering on the past and the present and moving forward to acquire a new self-knowledge and a new cognition of the city. Through the journey, one may be able to "repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood; it is, in a place, to be other and to move toward the other" (p. 110). Walking, as a pedestrians' speech act, is outside of the geometrical or geographical space of visual, panoptic or theoretical constructions. It is neither transparent nor rational enough to be concisely mapped or planned. However, it "forms one of these real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city" (p. 97).

Cinema and the city

Cinema, as a powerful medium that comes into being along with the modern city at the close of the 19th century, has played an important role in recording, imagining and examining history, society and human existence. By looking into the diversified social spaces represented in films, I will explore what the spaces of material construction look like under distinct political and economic systems, and how historical, political, ideological and collective memory channels individuals' everyday practice and psychological concerns, which, if investigating in a spatial perspective, can be seen from people's view of home, private space and social status.

The relation between cinema and city has been explored from two sides: film in space and space in film (Shiel 2001). "Film in space" focuses on the film industry system, which includes film production, promotion, distribution and screening, and how the movie theatre reshapes the urban space, and, more significantly, influences the audience. This domain sees film as an economic and technological body impacted by capital, censorship, talents and

technology. In particular, “the space of the cinema, which is no less of interest than the process of making the film, forges an overt link between film and city” (Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 29). Meanwhile, “space in film” looks into places and locality represented in particular films. It regards films as cultural and ideological products that are inevitably imprinted with authentic local cultural conduct, national identity and collective trauma and memory. The following passages will examine the existing studies on cinema and the city in this framework.

The mutual interactions between film, city and urban culture have been extensively explored. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (2001) demonstrate the multiple interactions between film, city and urban culture in a globalised background. Shiel and Fitzmaurice confirm the city as a lived social reality captured and expressed by cinema on the one hand, and advocate understanding the objective social conditions of film “production, distribution, exhibition, and reception on the other hand” (Shiel 2001, p. 4). “Film in space” means the national and transnational conditions of capital, resources, talents that are involved in film production, distribution and reception. For instance, Hollywood, as the centre of filmmaking, exerts a compelling force upon Los Angeles regarding political agenda, uneven economic development and everyday life in the city. While in the Third World, on one hand cinema is a battlefield on which to resist the invasion of globalisation (the situation in Vietnam), on the other hand, it can be a tool for officials to hide cultural, environmental and social weaknesses (the situation in Nigeria), and beautify official representations of the post-colonial city. The global perspective of this volume enlarges and complicates the connection between the city and cinema. In films, all the abstract concepts—“globalisation, nationalism, identity, inequality, social, economic and cultural power, domination, and resistance”—will

“play themselves out in particularly dramatic and illuminating ways in the relationship between cinema and urban societies” (Shiel 2001, p. 14).

James Donald (1999), likewise, touches upon both spaces, and provides an index of intellectual insights on the intricate relations between space, city, cinema, literature and modernity. In the 1920s and the early 1930s, cinema theatre carried out several functions for city inhabitants. It provided a haven for women from the suburbs who had finally been emancipated from suffocating domestic space with a means of entertainment. It also played a a role of civilising people from ghettos or slums (Donald 1999, p. 68). In addition, it offered men and women the space of consumption that “brings the experience of going out to a way of life primarily built around staying in, a way of life mediated increasingly through a privatised experience of telephone, radio, and television” (p. 64). By offering urbanites alternative spatial experiences, cinema in turn influenced people’s perception of the modern city. More prominently, it never failed to “teach its audience across the globe ways of seeing and so imagining the modern city, whether or not they live in one” (p. 68). Finally, it recorded the ever unquiet process of urbanisation and created a new public space that substantially shifted the domains between the private and the public sphere in regard to gender position and social conduct.

Apart from the novel urban experiences provided by the cinema theatre, cinematic space provides access to the complicated structure and enigmatic features of the urban space exemplified by film noir. With mysterious and crime-stricken urban spaces and alienated characters, film noir can be seen as the quintessential example of excavating the intriguing relation of the city to cinema. From early city-based films such as Walter Ruttman’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)

(both are framed by the theme of the one-day life in a great city) to *The Third Man* (dir. Carol Reed, 1949) and contemporary films such as *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982), *Candyman* (dir. Bernard Rose, 1992), and the *Batman* film series, metropolises become intriguing spaces full of controversies. They are a fusion of possibilities and problems, rationality and enigma. The protagonist, either an experienced detective or a superhero equipped with courage and knowledge of the city, can move through the city's ghettos and underworld freely, correcting the wrongs and bringing justice back to the city. Confronting the dark space of the city, only those talented detectives are able to move between the rational, transparent city and the irrational, mythical metropolitan labyrinth skilfully, rendering the bewildering and alien urban space a place of bonhomie.

Instead of restricting himself to the “noir” side of urban space, Walter Benjamin outlined the decoding and analytical capacity of the cinema in contemplating the complicated urban reality and experiences. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), he asserts that “the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (p. 230). It casts an analytic light on the labyrinth constraints of the ordinary, of common sense knowledge, and so expands the spectator’s possibilities and experiences, and the aesthetic of montage not only responds to, but self-consciously uses, the experience of fragmentation that characterised the modernity of the city. It entitles viewers to see, to hear, to feel and to imagine places in a structured and represented way. Cinema itself, as a concrete component of urban space and also a kaleidoscope of imagined spaces, resonates with the fragmented, stunning, and transient modern world, as “it corresponds to profound changes in the perspective apparatus—changes that are experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big city traffic” (p.

243). Benjamin's observation and comment on the sound and fury brought by cinema and the modern city resonate with the modernisation experience in China almost half a century later. His seminal reflection on cinema and the city singles out the deep psychological sense of modernity. He captures the opaqueness and labyrinths of the modern city, and celebrates the analytic and enlightening ability of cinema to rationalise and decode the complicated modern space. Cinema and the city work under the same scheme to stun and impact individuals' psychology and subjectivity. Together, they create a Thirdspace, a lived space that breaks the boundary between the subjective and the objective, the abstract and the concrete.

Similarly, David B. Clarke's (1997) stance on the psychological and sensual affinity between city and cinema mirrors Benjamin's. He confirms that "the development of the city is related to cinema as the development of cinema is related to the city" (Clarke 1997, p. 4). The city and the cinema spring up in parallel and, in this process, the cinema has played a central role in pushing the city to transform into a modernised space. The cinema itself is a modern space, representing the progress of technology and contributing to the increasing pace of urbanisation, and the "haptical quality of film", which is "sensorial immediacy", "unlike painting when it employs perspectival representation, founded in mechanical (re)production—that is, to the extent that it is simulacral rather than representational" (p. 9). From this perspective, cinema reproduces a virtual world and offers "proximity without presence" which enables the viewer to see and "even though from a distance, seems to touch you with a grasping contact" (p. 9). This kind of touch and contact by seeing is "consonant with the experiences offered by the flickering, virtual presence of the city" (p. 10). Therefore, the urbanised sensibility (hapticality) brought by cinema, which can expose and even

penetrate the reality with its optical power, changes the perception of film viewers, and thereby reframes the world. This "haptical quality" of cinema, in addition to the visual and audio effect, stirs people's sense of seeing, hearing and feeling (touching). Following on from Benjamin's comment on the analytic and decoding ability of cinema, film is more like a subject that actively participates in and shapes the modernisation/post-modernisation underway globally than a passive object.

More recently, Barbara Mennel (2008) adds to the interdisciplinary conversation between cinema study and urban theory. Compared to Shiel and Fitzmaurice, Mennel attaches more importance to "space in film", such as the history of the city-based film from Berlin to Los Angles and finally to Paris, and relates respective cities to specific themes—ruins and modernity in cinematic Berlin, film noir and Los Angeles, and the film industry and Hong Kong. Besides this, she also looks into the question of marginalised identity and place in the context of cinematic practice moving from national to transnational. As she asserts, cinema is an effective and powerful expression that depicts, assesses and increasingly impacts the social reality when its production and exhibition are moving from modern to postmodern, national to transnational, transitions which are thickly textured by history, tradition, national identity, marginalised groups and globalisation.

Geraldine Pratt and Rose Marie San Juan (2014) focus more specifically on the "critical possibilities" of films based on urban spaces. Film and the city share some characteristics. First, both of them possess "mobility and the capacity to create unexpected juxtapositions, and both film and the appearance of the urban within film can work on and with geographical imaginations in new and critical ways" (Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 5). Second, concrete materiality of cities and cinematic cities are more than just "context or narrative

support", they are "entirely interdependent and far-reaching in their effects" (pp. 5-6). Pratt and Juan propose the importance of "the political and ethical claims about film" in the relationship between film and the city, because film can be regarded as a "politically effective…inter-space" that is always "open to the challenges of actual urban space and yet is itself challenged by the disembodied possibilities made visible by the technology of film" (p. 4).

Previous studies on cinema and the city laid the foundation for exploring the dynamic relations, but also provided diversified approaches to examining history, politics, economic conditions and war in the shaping of the cityscape and city identity. In recent years, China as an emerging economic power has witnessed booming growth of cities. With a different cultural background, Chinese cities and urban cinema display an alternative appearance despite the sweeping homogenous power of globalisation. This thesis will engage with the Chinese western cities and urban cinema, but I will first review previous studies on Chinese cities and cinema.

Chinese cinema studies: an historical account

Chinese urban cinema studies started from non-systematic film commentary scattered in newspapers and magazines, showing an understanding of the ontology of the medium in comparison with the long-standing shadow play practiced in China in the earliest years. Research into Chinese films runs in parallel with China's shifting political and economic policies, manifesting accordingly a clear temporal characteristic before the 1980s. The 1930s melodrama, almost always based on Shanghai, has drawn enormous academic attention. In the 1950s–1970s, film studies were frequently carried out under a political and ideological hegemony discourse. In the reform era, an accumulating body of research set out

to explore the transient Chinese social, cultural and economic realities through varied perspectives.

Before 1949: Non-systematic Film Commentary

Film as a newly invented art form and the industry developed at a slow pace due to interruptions caused by wars (1937-1945 Japanese Invasion, 1945-1949 Civil War) and underdeveloped economy before 1949. Correspondingly, film studies were far from systematic. As noted by Chinese film scholar Chen Xihe, constant wars and pressing political campaigns meant that an integrated and in-depth film study had not yet emerged (2010, pp. 38-39). From the 1920s, some introductory volumes on film appeared, including Xu Henchi's *An Overview of Chinese Shadow-play* (1927) and Xu Zhuodai's *The Study of Shadowplay* (1924). Hou Yao's *On Film-script Writing* (1926) looks into the ontology of cinema. However, the authors followed a traditional Chinese view that film derived from drama. Monographs on the history of Chinese film began to appear in the 1930s, such as Gu Jianchen's *History of Chinese Film Development* (1934) and Zheng Junli's *A Brief History of Chinese Film* (1936). Meanwhile, Left Wing intellectuals were represented by Xia Yan, a film writer and critic who founded *Film Art*, one of the most significant academic journals on Chinese film. Xia Yan published multiple articles that encouraged the masses to participate in the anti-Japanese war. He perceived film as an educational and patriotic medium that imparts knowledge, enlightens the mass and promotes national solidarity and identity, which exerted great influence on the theme and aesthetics of Chinese filmmaking (Li 2007, p. 123).

1949-1976: Ideological and Political Perspective

From the founding of the new nation to the end of the Cultural Revolution, film and film studies in China were strongly influenced by ideological doctrines and political propaganda. Film is utilised to consolidate state power, promote ideological ideas, build agrarian communal society in the countryside and celebrate industrial progress in cities. As a result, film studies during this period developed a new aesthetic, the so-called "socialist realism", which foregrounds socialist/proletarian characters, glorifies the new economic system (planned economy) and criticises class enemies (landlord, capitalist and bourgeois) who oppress Chinese people, and reject the old economic system and its upper constructions (Chen 2012, p. 471). The historical narration by Cheng Jihua et al. (1963) follows the mainstream ideology and emphasises the political, social and cultural influences on cinema. It establishes a framework and a methodology for researching the history of Chinese film (Chen 2008, p. 101). These two substantial volumes expound the origin and initial development of film production and exhibition in China before 1949, and have been regarded as the "first monograph of the history of Chinese film" (Chen 1980, p. 54). Another remarkable historical "account" of Chinese film is contributed by Jay Leyda (1972), who provides a broader scope of looking at the development of Chinese film during the turbulent years by drawing on abundant documents (letters, newspapers, comments from western countries), however, the political and economic situation and foreign influence, from the perspective of a westerner, are examined with a relatively neutral stance.

Post-Mao Era: Turning to the Ontology of Cinema

At the end of the 1970s, film study in mainland China began to shift from the political-ideological view towards the exploration of the ontology of cinema. Bai Jingsheng (1979) challenged the traditional Chinese concept of equating film to drama and advocated

"throw[ing] away the stick of drama" (cited in Chen 2012, p. 474). His reconsideration of the relationship between film and drama triggered a fierce debate over the ontology of film among Chinese filmmakers and critics. As a result, the concept of "shadow-play" was questioned and eventually rejected. This led filmmakers to pay more attention to film language such as shot type, lighting, camera angles, sound, *mise-en-scène* and montage. In the same year, writer Li Tuo and director Zhang Nuanxin's seminal article (1979) reiterated the importance of employing modern film language and techniques in Chinese films, and introduced western film theories and practices such as André Bazin's "neo-realism" and "long shot" (Zhang & Li 1979). This offered Chinese filmmakers an access point from which to re-consider "what is cinema" and launched the "documentary-style" film in China. The deep-rooted political voice in films become subtle, anticipating new cinematic themes and aesthetic values of the Fifth Generation.

From the beginning of the 1980s, numerous western film theories, such as neo-realism and auteur theory, were introduced to China. Chinese filmmakers and scholars began to explore the aesthetic and narrative potential of film art. Moreover, as the central administration under Deng Xiaoping shifted the focus from political campaign to economic growth, filmmakers were allowed to:

> denounce the brutality of the Gang of Four during the Cultural Revolution and tested their new found freedom by exploring previously taboo or sensitive subjects and genres such as political persecution, female sexuality and martial arts. While humanism characterized the entire decade of New Chinese Cinema, from the mid-1980s onward the fifth generation succeeded in introducing the avant-garde as a distinctive feature of Chinese cinema, but the industry as a whole faced a severe challenge from a ferocious tide of commercialism in the late 1980s (Zhang 2004, p. 226).

In the reform era when auteur theory was introduced to China, the role of film directors, their aesthetic and narrative styles and auteur film language, instead of the political and ideological propaganda, attracted much more evaluation and analysis. The anthology *Explore Cinema* (1987) utilised western auteur theory to explore films produced by the key figures of the Fifth Generation. In this context, whether a particular work embodies unique aesthetic style or not becomes a standard of evaluating a film (Li 2007, p. 387). The 1980s also witnessed a debate on "entertainment film" (now more familiar as "commercial film"), a term proposed by *Contemporary Film,* one of the academic film journals in mainland China. The consequence of this debate looks quite obvious now after about three decades: commercial films have become the mainstream film in the contemporary Chinese cinema market.

Historical narrations of Chinese film continued in the 1980s. Chen Huangmei's *Contemporary Chinese Film* (1989) starts from 1949 and ends in 1984, neatly following the chronological writing of Cheng Jihua and Li Shaobai's volumes (1963). It inherited Chen and Li's chronological line by dividing the span into blocks marked through important social or political events, and included the most updated aspects of film development in China.

The 1990s and afterwards: Cultural Study Dominated Plural Perspectives

<u>The perspectives of post-colonialism and gender-sexuality</u>

Chinese film study reaped an abundant harvest both at home and overseas as it moved closer to a critical cultural studies approach in the 1990s. In a cross-cultural reading of the Fifth Generation, Rey Chow and Dai Jinhua share the post-colonial view that even though two cultures can sometimes reach mutual understanding and appreciation, they can also turn out to be mutually incomprehensible. Dai Jinhua, as one of the leading cinema and cultural

scholars in mainland China, contributes a series of volumes on Chinese film. Some of her articles have been translated and published in an anthology *Cinema and Desire* (2002). Dai (2016b) interrogates the cinema concept and practice of the Fourth Generation (filmmakers who graduated from Beijing Film Academy before the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and whose career were delayed by the political campaign until the 1980s. Representative filmmakers include Zheng Dongtian, Wu Yigong and Zhang Nuanxin), comparing it to that of the Sixth Generation with vivid metaphors and moving back and forth between the national and transnational, East and West perspective. The Fourth Generation is perceived by Dai as a group trapped in a traditional political, historical and aesthetic dilemma as they try to make films in the reform era. The urban and the rural are often set into a simple contrast in terms of material space and morality struggles. While for the early works of Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang, who are representatives of the Fifth Generation, Dai acclaims that they have created an "art of the sons" that contains an overtone of Oedipal Complex in the light of the previous generations. But these "sons" build a "wrecked bridge" with their allegorical and ethnological films. In other words, their works neither get rid of the Chinese traditional culture and history nor construct a bridge to take Chinese audiences to a new modern world. As for the Sixth Generation, Dai argues that they are caught in the "landscape in the mist" and depend on the "the refined and arrogant European festival circuit …and the conceited American film circles" to have their films screened, recognised and financed (Dai 2016, pp. 89-90). Dai straightforwardly points out that a conversation between two cultures (East and West) is promised by the fact that the less powerful culture should first accept the anticipation and even misreading of the powerful one. As Dai demonstrates, the Fifth Generation filmmakers, who hope to diverge from the established mainstream

narration mode and aesthetic styles and to represent Chinese traditional cultural values with oriental aesthetic styles, configured a refreshing space of an authentic old China. The choice of cinematic theme and form have received enormous recognition at various International Film Festivals. Consequently, Chinese culture descends to become the object of western gaze, which in turn becomes a discourse that is capable of influencing the cinematic representation of Chinese image and culture. Moreover, the western discourse and its impact extend to the younger Sixth Generation's filmmaking, a process which Dai observes as a form of cultural imperialism, a tendency that is also recognised by Chow in her discussion of East and West communication, culture and image in the contemporary Chinese film.

In Rey Chow's seminal volume (1995) she explores three key issues: the ethnographising of Chinese culture through visual apparatus, the dialectics of gazing in cross-cultural communication, and the unsymmetrical cultural translation between the western and the non-western. First, Chow emphasises the "visuality" of the contemporary world and privileges it over the other modes of epistemology, for the visual instead of the verbal has already become one of the essential characteristics of the modern contemporary world. However, the technologised visual image of China and the real China can never be an equation, because "the ethnicity of contemporary Chinese cinema—Chineseness—is already the sign of a cross-cultural commodity fetishism" (Chow 1995, p. 59). Films such as *Yellow Earth* and *Ju Dou* (dir. Zhang Yimou, 1990) depict China's "primitive" culture that is located vaguely both in time and in space. The uncanny ethnographic attempt, in other words, the attempt to display traditional and local cultural conduct such as praying for rain, wedding ceremony and drum dance, reflects "the older and more authentic treasures of the culture, in ways as yet uncorrupted by modernity" (p. 74). The primitive symbolises "China's

status as the other to the West and the status of the ‘other’ cultures of China’s past and unknown places to China’s ‘present self’” (p. 75). What is paradoxical is that when those directors turn inward to excavate the authentic Chinese culture from the primitive in order to confirm China’s self, they actually reveal China “as other-than-itself” in the western gaze (Chow 1995, p. 65). However, in the process of tracing the origin and primitive nature of Chinese authentic culture to re-configure China in front of the western audience, these filmmakers have “taken up the active task of ethnographising their own culture” (p. 180).

Meanwhile, those who are gazed at are not totally passive, because they can actively challenge and even displace the gaze. In other words, filmmakers from the third world can choose what can be or cannot be gazed upon according to the preference of the westerners. Therefore, “film—especially film from and about a third world culture—changes the traditional divide between observer and observed, analysis and phenomena, master discourse and native informant, and hence ‘first world’ and ‘third world’” (p. 28). Now that globalisation pushes more cultures to encounter and communicate with one another, contemporary Chinese cinema becomes cultural translation which not only exhibits “the other” culture but also functions as “a new form of cultural resistance against the Western hegemonic power in the age of cultural diaspora” (pp. 201-202). The relation between cinematic representation of the third-world and the imposing first-world discourse in terms of interpreting and appreciating those ethnographic and auto-ethnographic cultural products is intriguing and contingent. Here Chow’s view echoes Michel de Certeau’s dialectic view of the strategy (the first world discourse) and the tactic (third-world cultural products of representation). The first world and the third world are in a constant negotiation of identity, nationality and cultural image. What is more important is that in this negotiation, the

cinematic representation of the third world (in Chow's discussion, China) can be interpreted under Soja's Thirdspace as a space of resisting the imposing western force.

Chow's more recent addition to Chinese film study in the light of Western film and literature theories continues to explore how non-western culture is articulated in the face of imposing western discourses. In this volume (2007), Chow proposes a theme—sentimentalism—to address the dilemma that has caught Chinese cinema between the experience of loss and the self-ethnographic display as an "exotic" and "primitive" culture. Chow frames twelve films made during the 1990s within the domain of "identity politics" to figure out whether the local/national cultural products are capable of resolving profound human dilemmas. Sentimentalism, in Chinese the equivalent term is *wenqing zhuyi* (Chow 2007, p. 17), is a recurring theme in contemporary Chinese film. Specifically, it is "an inclination or a disposition toward making compromises and toward making do with even—and especially—that which is oppressive and unbearable" (p. 18). Some manifestations of sentimentalism like "filiality, domesticity, social harmony and reconciliation, togetherness and separation" are able to find a way of explaining and solving social and cultural and personal issues in contemporary China. The contemporary Chinese film is a "dramatisation…of human community formation in general" (p. 173), which, as a significant component of the global media, has become influential in social control and administration.

Cui Shuqin's contribution (2003) to the field represents the first scholarly enquiry of gender issues in Chinese cinema. Spanning from 1905 to 1999, the volume investigates images of women depicted by directors from different generations. Distinguishing herself from Rey Chow and Dai Jinhua's investigation of sexuality and oppressed women from a

post-colonial perspective in a context of cross-cultural communication, Cui locates her study of Chinese cinematic female characters in the light of nationalism. Cui ponders:

> how socialist cinema presents woman as either a victim of class oppression or a beneficiary of national liberation; how new cinema revives female sexuality and makes the female body a narrative site for the projection of national trauma and collective memory; how self-representation in search of a female identity and voice is vexed by various discourses of nationalism; and how woman-as-nation addresses international as well as domestic viewers (p. xi).

In other words, mainstream cinematic representations of female characters tend to reduce the woman to an allegory of the nation, and female images are often formulated to stand for the dynamic of the gender-political ideology of a particular period in Chinese history. Cui asserts that "women's liberation in China…is the outcome of socialist revolution rather than of feminist movement", and throughout the given period, woman has been portrayed either as a subordinate element of revolution or the oppressed who actually "masks an agonised search for the reassertion of masculinity" (pp. 174-176). Cui investigates female filmmakers such as Ning Ying, Li Shaohong, Zhang Nuanxin, Hu Mei and Huang Shuqin, and disappointedly concludes that the booming number of female directors fails to make the female voice be heard, let alone a feminist one.

The perspectives of cultural national identity in the context of globalisation

In recent years, both domestic and overseas scholars have expounded on the social heterogeneity and cultural tenacity in Chinese cinema. Jerome Silbergeld (1999) provides an art historian's perspective on the connection between Chinese traditional painting and philosophy and the Fifth Generation's new cinema. He contends that Chinese modernity cannot be equated with "Westernisation". Regarding films such as *Yellow Earth*, *Ju Dou* and *Red Sorghum*, he argues:

> even a Chinese avant-garde, can be built and perhaps can only be built on a Chinese past: the modern extends into the past and the past survives well into the modern. In these films and in their reference to the arts which surround them, past and present, [there is] a concern for rhetoric, its devices and traditions, their translation of text to image, couched in analogue, captured in allegory and melodrama, gendered and reflexive as to self and cultural identity, negotiated through film censorship (Silbergeld 1999, p. 11).

Silbergeld juxtaposes film frames with Chinese traditional paintings to illustrate the visual and stylistic influence of traditional art on filmmakers. Paintings that contain "visual signifiers of cultural modes" are able to "represent visual solutions to the presentation of pre-extant narrative texts" (p. 11). Chinese films, in particular works of the veteran directors of the Fifth Generation, operate by Chinese rules visually and allegorically despite the Hollywood influences.

Chris Berry (2006) tends to interrogate Chinese films from cultural and political perspectives—the relationship between cinema and its shaping force of national identity. Chinese films (including mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan), according to him, screen historical scars (specifically the Opium War), traditional values (Confucius code of conduct) and collective memory of the lost imperial past. No matter how different the political institutions in the three Chinas are, or how different the level of economic development is, Chinese people are closely linked culturally and historically. Therefore, their shared feudal history and cultural background have built a bond for "national formation and nation building" (Berry & Farquhar 2006, p. 17). While mainland China in recent years is experiencing mass construction and demolition, the younger generations' connection and emotional response to the collective trauma and memory have decreased starkly; so have the

influences of traditional values and sense of nostalgia in the highly mobilised background of modernisation and globalisation.

Zhang Yingjin contributes a very comprehensive and intensive investigation of Chinese cinema. His focused examination of Chinese films can be traced back to the work *Encyclopaedia of Chinese Film* (1998), which provides a comprehensive coverage of Chinese directors, film genre, studio and cinematic subjects and themes of Chinese films. His book *Screening China* (2002) emphasises the cooperation among the three Chinas in film production and distribution, and recognises the complicated heterogeneity of Chinese history and culture represented in Zhang Yimou's *Ju Dou* (1990) and *Raise the Red Lantern* [*Dahong denglong gaogaogua*] (1991) and Zhou Xiaowen's *Ermo* (1994). In *Chinese National Cinema* (2004), Zhang clarifies the "messy affair" revolving around the "national cinema" (Zhang 2004, p. 3) by considering the intricate cultural and economic relations between the three political territories—the PRC, Hong Kong and Taiwan. He introduces the term "Chinese-ness" (p. 7) to refer to films produced in the three regions in respect of their shared national traditions and culture.

Taking another view, Harry H. Kuoshu (2002), a scholar of Asian studies, offers an expansive account of mainland Chinese cinema from perspectives of women, ethnic minorities, Chinese Westerns and new city films by contextualising the changing roles of female characters and minority narratives of "internal others" (minority groups in mainland China). Kuoshu explores the proposition of the Chinese Western and its relation to the Xi'an Film Studio. He argues that the cultural and social background of the rise of the Chinese Western lies in the intellectual concern about China's bewildering present and future in the initial period of China's reform, as the ideology shifted from political campaigns and class

struggle to economic development. Chinese Westerns, according to him, become a "major cinematic version of root-searching" (Kuoshu 2002, p. 214). Consequently, *wenhua re* (lit. cultural heat), demonstrated through the intellectual trend of *xungen* (lit. root-searching, to search for the cultural root of China to assure the subjectivity and identity of the nation and its people), became a trope for exploring and reflecting Chinese history in the 1980s.

Ho, Wing Shan (2015) explores the subjugated cultural industry represented by cinema and TV and the controlling socialist government in an increasingly commercialised Chinese context. Despite the massive marketisation in mainland China since the 1980s, Ho observes that the state has yet to give the market unregulated freedom to produce cultural products. Meanwhile, the existence of state-banned or state-criticised films and TV dramas proves "there is room for resistance within the power of the state" (Ho 2015, p. 2). In the booming Chinese market, the state-driven *zhuxuanlü* productions (lit. main melody or leitmotif film), which represent socialist values and spirit embodied by party officials, common people and intellectuals, have "limited reach" to audiences (the market) according to Ho. The *zhuxuanlü* subjects usually take on "officially approved qualities such as self-sacrifice, loyalty to family and the state, and submission to state power", and the Communist party is often portrayed as "a defender of morality" and "consolidat[ing] a grand vision of stability" (p. 160). In contrast, artistic-driven works creatively find ways to expose undesirable social issues and the dark side of contemporary China. To pass censorship, typically they may beautify the state government in films, or include a moral example, or arrange for the evil characters to be caught and convicted. However, there are some underground filmmakers who ignore the censorship, making films without permission and circulating their works overseas. They strategically negotiate with the political and cultural

environment and "produce cultural products that serve their own agendas" (p. 2). It is a conspiracy from both sides, as the "glossy portrayals of the nation on the screen fulfil the state's desire to save face on the national level, while producers of these pleasant products gain personal benefits in the form of national awards and/or profitable operations" (p. 167).

The perspective of cinema and Chinese cities

Jason McGrath (2008) expounds on Chinese modernity through cultural practices and products such as Chinese contemporary literature and films on urban life. He notes that China's post-socialist modernisation is characterised by marketisation, pluralisation and individualisation (McGrath 2008, p. 7). In the process, people from diverse social strata lament the loss of humanist spirit and try to find a new perspective or ground for cultural critique. However, the effort to establish a collective value to guide social values and ease cultural anxiety seems doomed to fail in a rapidly changing and market-driven economic context. The loss of a "master ideological signifier", while society operates under "the central cultural logic of the Market", triggered a fierce debate on "humanist spirit" among Chinese intellectuals in the 1990s (p. 24). What is even worse is a persistent and strong sense of inferiority in comparison with the more developed capitalist cultures of the western countries (p. 18). Literature and films under the circumstances capture and reflect the crumbling of traditional value systems and ideological reference through themes including infidelity and the fetishisation of money and commodities. Such fetishisation of material possessions is explicitly shown in films such as *Woman Sesame Oil Maker* (1993), *Ermo* (1994) and *Cell Phone* [*Shouji*] (dir. Feng Xiaogang, 2003). Having become accustomed to "stasis and naiveté represented by the vestiges of communism in the rural village" (p. 120),

people from rural areas are plagued and surrounded by vacuity and a sense of nihilism in pursuing modern commercial and industrial products.

By representing the raw reality with their "on-the-spot realism" and aesthetic long takes (p. 160), McGrath contends that the Urban Generation directors rose to fame in looking "behind both political orthodoxy and entertaining fantasies to show an obdurate reality that belies the comforting portraits painted by the ideology" (p. 160). Their films record and examine the raw reality and social and moral issues that problematise the mainstream representation of the social problems occurring in the massive social and spatial transformation. In contrast, Feng Xiaogang's "*he sui pian*" (lit. New Year's Film—comedies that screen during the Chinese New Year) are made to entertain the audience. Feng and his comedies used to be criticised as "fast-food" films that have no social and cultural concerns. Unlike those harsh reality and "main melody" films, Feng's comedies are a "highly self-aware and multifaceted engagement with the conditions of commodified cultural production in contemporary China" (p. 166). By juxtaposing Jia Zhangke's hometown trilogy and Feng Xiaogang's New Year's Films, McGrath offers an alternative scenario of Chinese cinematic aestheticism and narration of the commercialised and profit-driven society.

Zhang Yingjin (2010) remaps Beijing and Shanghai represented in films in the context of globalisation. Zhang uses "space of polylocality" to expand upon how "Chinese cinema has participated in various projects of remapping the city, of producing urban imaginaries that articulate new urban visions, negotiate changing urban values, and critique problematic urban transformation" (p. 73). Adopting "mode of drifting" (p. 90) and "ruins" (p. 94) as two tropes to examine the shifting city images of Beijing, Zhang delineates the city from a historical imperialist capital city to the modern metropolitan municipality

appearing in feature films such as Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle* [*Shiqisui de danche*] (2001), Feng Xiaogang's *Big Shot's Funeral* [*Dawan*] (2001), Ning Ying's *I Love Beijing* [*Xiari nuan yangyang*] (2001) and Jia Zhangke's *The World* [*Shijie*] (2004). The major traffic tools represented (bicycle, motorbike, taxi and plane, respectively) in the four films facilitate the protagonists' "drifting" in the city. However, even though the traffic facilities promise greater mobility and efficiency, echoing the feature of "flow" of globalisation, their users' economic and social conditions do not improved as promised by modernisation with Chinese characteristics. Instead, "drifting implies a sense of abandonment, indulgence, and excess" (p. 84). "Ruins", as a reoccurring image, serves as the manifestation of the cultural and social rupture in contemporary China in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* [*Sanxia Haoren*] (2006) and his hometown trilogy (*The Pickpocket* [*Xiao Wu*] (1998), *Platform* [*Zhantai*] (2000) and *Unknown Pleasures* [*Ren xiao yao*] (2002)). In respect of "confront[ing] social realities as well as individual memories" (p. 181), those directors, together with some newly emerged "women with cameras", are constantly challenging the mainstream, and promulgating and configuring alternative visions of those places.

In wrestling against globalisation, Chinese independent film articulates the "weak voice" of the minor groups and underrepresented places that have been left behind in the process of urbanisation. The "weak voice" from the "space of marginality and alternative film culture" opens new space that "represents some of the most interesting works, ones that broaden the scope of social concerns and artistic expressions at the local and global scales" (p. 15). The locality does not passively wait to be assimilated; rather, it still holds a certain degree of autonomy to articulate its own identity and features against the globalisation. Cinematic cities in commercial films, independent films and documentaries represent not

only the massive material change, but investigate mental uneasiness, sense of deprivation, disillusion and nostalgia when people are confronted with mobility and disparity in the process of urbanisation and globalisation.

Yomi Braester (2010), similarly, considers the compelling influence of China's politics and economy on contemporary films. He claims that the "political, economic and ideological forces channel cinematic production and predispose the audience" (p. 5). Focusing on three cities, Beijing, Shanghai and Taipei, Braester uses the term "urban contract" to emphasise the power structure hidden behind the Chinese film industry and urbanisation. According to Braester, the aims and means of the state administration have changed from 1949 onwards: from facilitating state power to establishing sustainable communities, from channelling industrial growth to creating viable financial centres, from promoting ideological strongholds to preserving cultural assets (p. 7). Accordingly, cinematic theme and function run in parallel with the ideological and political ends of the state:

> it is not the city that gives rise to movies; the cinema is not even merely the constitution of the city by other means…it is rather films—in direct interaction with political decisions and architectural blueprints—that forge an urban contract and create the material city and its ideological constructs (p. 13).

Thus, the influence of the cinema on the city cannot be exclusively limited within theatres or the materiality of the urban space, as cinematic effects are potentially effective in political, psychological and ideological consciousness. Ideological surveillance and political constraints do affect Chinese filmmaking in a certain way. However, as de Certeau has pointed out, individuals are able to tactically deal with "strategy" and film spectators can also interpret cinematic works "tactically" to their own ends, rather than passively accept or

be manipulated by the intention of both the filmmakers and administrative ideology. Policy preferred themes and style, and, correspondingly, identical or uniform ways of seeing and interpretating will encounter much more resistance, especially in the context of capital and information freely flowing across the world through the internet and new media.

Chinese scholars have also contributed to the interdisciplinary studies of cinema and the city. Lu Chunyan (2010a) connects the urban films set in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong with their respective urban cultures in a chronological account. The unique cultural and historical background of each of the three cities shaped their distinctive cityscapes before the 1980s. For instance, Beijing as the imperial and political hub of China for hundreds of years, possesses the most monumental spaces. The urban arrangement has been power-oriented, with the Forbidden City at the central point and ring roads built one after another, pushing the urban boundary further and further into the rural area. Meanwhile Shanghai, located at the Yangtze River Delta, was the most developed modern city before the 1980s. The city has been commercially-oriented since the end of the nineteenth century with its traffic and trade significance. Hong Kong, as an ideologically isolated island before its handover to mainland China in 1997, has been a financial and cultural hub in Asia. It developed a complete system of film aesthetic and film genre. In the reform era, according to Lu, the urban space appeared in a unified fashion and the whole society prevailed with egalitarianism under the planned economic system in the initial period of market economy (Lu 2010a, p. 292). The 1990s and 2000s witnessed an astonishing transformation of cityscape in Beijing and Shanghai, and motion pictures and movie theatres have exerted stronger influence on the urban culture. As social stratification and inequality became more

acute, the discourse of modernisation and globalisation started to be questioned and challenged by directors such as Jia Zhangke and Zhang Ming through their films.

Conclusion

This brief overview shows that the 1980s served as a political, economic and social boundary. The cityscape, urban culture, Chinese film industry and film studies have all been taken to refreshing levels of development. In the light of cinema and city, to a large degree the modernisation of the city dominates filmic representation in mainland China. The twenty-first century saw economically and socially unbalanced growth in mainland China under Deng's administration that "encouraged some regions and some people to become affluent at first" (Deng 2000). Western China, therefore, in reality and in cinema, gradually took off economically and socially. In order to fill a gap in the research, this thesis will focus on four major cities of western China (Chongqing, Chengdu, Xi'an and Lanzhou) represented in films since the 1980s. It will explore both the past and the present situations of the region and show the alternative image of China created and re-created by films based in these four urban centres. In addition, western city-based films, representing the "weak voice", "the othering", and the "Thirdspace" of the cinematic map of China, will open new spaces for scholarly and social concern and artistic expression.

The next chapter will move to cinematic Chongqing, which is characterised by its hilly topography, national projects and ruins. By investigating the history and particular cityscape of Chongqing and two adjacent towns of the municipal city represented in three films, this section engages with the changing images of Chongqing in cinematic representation, and shows how national projects influence the city and the people.

Chapter Three Cinematic Chongqing

This chapter will investigate cinematic Chongqing to explore how the municipal city has been spatially represented and imagined, and how its cinematic characters are depicted and contextualised amidst a time of massive economic, cultural and social change, by drawing on Edward Soja's *macro* "Thirdspace" theory of "real and imagined place" and Michel de Certeau's *micro* perspective of observing the practice of everyday life in the street. Soja points out that the "political choice, the impetus of an explicit political project" will give "special attention and particular contemporary relevance to the spaces of representation, to lived space as a strategic location from which to encompass, understand, and potentially transform all spaces simultaneously (Soja 1996, p. 68). My exploration will, therefore, start with a comic and vulgar Chongqing in Ning Hao's 2006 *Crazy Stone*.

Crazy Stone illustrates the stark economic, social and cultural contrast in one single city in contemporary China. In addition to its metropolitan appearance, which shares homogeneous characteristics with any other metropolis in China, the local tradition, character and vulgarity of Chongqing are preserved and portrayed in the film. From a different view, this chapter will also show how Zhang Ming's 1996 *Rainclouds over Wushan* and Jia Zhangke's 2006 *Still Life* enable us to see how the material and cognitive spaces are demolished and shaped by governmental policy and national projects. In these films, both the *macro* spatial view of rationalising and modernising the urban space, represented by the enormous modernisation plan carried out by the central government, and the *micro* spatial view of the dwelling spaces and ruins brought by pending inundation and people's mental space are represented in detail. The filmic representations of the city resonate with the immensity and complication of the trend of urbanisation and modernisation, and reflect the

uneven economic and social development across regions and classes.

Chongqing: the frontier and the "interior other" in China

The city Chongqing and Sichuan province used to be regarded as frontier areas in the long history of imperial China by the Han-dominated central government. The contemporary jurisdictions of the municipal Chongqing and Sichuan province were referred to as *Ba* and *Shu* in ancient times. *Ba* refers that portion lying along the Yangtze and tributary streams in eastern Sichuan, roughly the area of the present Chongqing municipality, while *Shu* includes the present provincial capital of Chengdu, its surrounding plains and adjacent territories in western Sichuan (Sage 1992, pp. 2-3). The *Ba-Shu* civilisation has been well-known for its magnificent natural landscape and distinguished historical and cultural heritage of the Three Kingdoms (221 B.C—263 B.C). The two southern states were subjugated by the state of Qin, the first united empire in China, in the fourth century BCE (Marks 2012, p. 146). The *Ba-Shu* area had been cultivated and inhabited by various Non-Chinese people (non-Han people) such as Dian, Lao and Yi before the Han Chinese migrated to the area in the fourth century BCE. The agreeable environment and abundant resources (iron and salt) of the frontier area drew attention from the Han government; firstly the Tang dynasty and then later dynasties established an administrative net to "capture, claim and rule the frontier" so that the region was assimilated by the agricultural Han Chinese (Marks 2012, p. 149). During the anti-Japanese war (1937-1945), because of its remote and advantageous geographical conditions—the confluence of the Yangtze and Jialing River—it was designated as the temporary capital of the Nationalist government (alternatively, Kuomintang, KMT in short).

However, the city was far from a modern city that could provide sufficient infrastructural, industrial and material support for the Nationalist party to establish a national

government at that time. To turn the city into a sufficiently modern national capital, thousands of tons of raw materials, numerous pieces of industrial machinery and professional workers were transferred to Chongqing during the early years of the war. Consequently, more than two hundred factories including heavy machine productions, textile mills, steel plants and publication organisations were moved to the city from industrial hubs in central and eastern China by the middle of 1940 (McIsaac 2000, p. 185). This period saw a large-scale transformation of the cityscape with the government's determination to modernise the city. But only limited places had been transformed to showcase modern facets of the city (most of the changes occurred in the Upper City, the Yuzhong peninsula), and there were fewer attempts to construct lasting structures or monuments lest the wartime capitals come to symbolize more than a temporary retreat from Japanese-occupied Nanjing and the coast (Esherick 2000, p. 4) as Chongqing was designed as a "temporary capital".

In the 1960s the central government carried out the "Third Front" project, which unfolded with large scale construction of infrastructure and industrial sections and turned Chongqing into the largest industrial site in the western area (Han & Wang 2001, p. 116). This national project increased the level of modernisation in the city, and its cityscape was accordingly shaped by the establishment of different industrial sections. In the context of the sweeping urbanisation in China, the city is frequently linked with explosive economic growth. On 14 March, 1997, Chongqing was designated as a municipality, the only municipal city in hinterland China and the fourth municipality after Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin. Before this, it had been the commercial capital of Sichuan province. The administrative area of Chongqing sprawled significantly by including the adjacent rural areas into its jurisdiction. Chongqing became the "biggest municipality in terms of area and

population” in China—“2.4 times larger than Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai” (Han & Wang 2001, p. 117), with a population of over 28 million according to the 2010 census. Unfortunately, the newly included area did not necessarily strengthen the economic competence of Chongqing. On the contrary, it made Chongqing a complicated combination of a metropolitan area (mainly referring to the Yuzhong peninsula’s shiny skyscrapers centred on the Central Business District of Jiefang Bei), countryside (the rural areas absorbed as it ascended to be the only hinterland municipality in 1997), mountainous areas and the dam area (the Three Gorges Dam). This complex combination wrought a series of social and economic problems because of the extremely uneven economic and social development across the newly incorporated regions. The massive physical transformation accelerated the construction of a modern metropolis, while gradually demolishing the old living and working spaces of this inner-land city. As a result, the city now stands in between the premodern and the modern, as can be seen from the juxtaposition of old and new spatial layout. *Shibati*, (literally, eighteen steps), the traditional Chongqing stair-street, stands for an old and disappearing Chongqing cityscape and its accompanying street culture. Just one block away, an array of skyscrapers located downtown overlook the narrow and crowded stair-street. During the night, the old and narrow stair-street, lined with stalls, peddlers and small restaurants, lights up and welcomes patrons from all walks of life: white collar professionals, businessmen and itinerant workers (represented by *bangbang*—street porters). It is a place where “the true hardy, resilient, unsentimental, stoical and superstitious Chinese character is to be found away from the coastal cities”, and at the same time, it is an “open and dynamic place because of its long history of trade and exchange” (Lemos 2012, p. 16).

In imperial history, the *Ba-Shu* area was perceived by the Han-administration as the "other" or the "barbarian" frontier, which should be cultivated and assimilated. By the end of the nineteenth century, when local militarists reigned in the area, modernisation began to take steps in the city. The modernisation project carried out by the KMT administration during the anti-Japanese war presented the "alternative" "temporary" capital city with widened streets, better hygiene and sanitation infrastructure. Leaving a large area to remain in poverty and dilapidation, the modernisation project was "window-dressing" aimed at creating a sense of order and prosperity to display a decent national image and draw foreign support (McIsaac 2000, p. 183). The city was still perceived as "other", stricken by poverty and backwardness in the eyes of the downriver refugees of the KMT government. The contemporary history sees the city and the adjacent area as a site to secure the national industry and engine for economic development thanks to its geographical isolation and natural resources. The image of the city was associated with "national rejuvenation" during the anti-Japanese war and with "western development" nowadays.

The following section will now look at the diversified images and facets of Chongqing created by Chinese cinema.

Cinematic Chongqing

During the anti-Japanese war (1937-1945), the Nationalist government moved its capital from Nanjing up the Yangtze River to Chongqing. The state-owned Central Film Studio [Zhongdian] and the China Motion Picture Studio [Zhongzhi] also moved to the city in 1938 (Zhang 2004, p. 92). A great number of filmmakers, scriptwriters and actors migrated to the city and continued to make films. The Nationalist government sponsored the making of patriotic films, and Chongqing arguably became the film centre from 1937 to

1946. For instance, director Shi Dongshan's anti-Japanese tetralogy *Defend Our Land* [*Baowei wo men de tudi*] (1938), *Good Husband* [*Hao zhangfu*] (1939), *March of Victory* [*Shengli jinxingqu*] (1940) and *My Homeland* [*Huan wo guxiang*] (1945) stimulated numerous young people to join the anti-Japanese war for the sake of national defence and solidarity. *Storm on the Border* [*Saishang fengyun*] (dir. Ying Yunwei, 1940) featured a love triangle story and advocated solidarity between the Meng minority and the Han majority in joint struggle against the Japanese invasion. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chongqing-based studios made a number of films to reflect the class conflicts of the Civil War, including the war drama *Living Forever in Burning Flames* [*Liehuo zhong yongsheng*] (dir. Shui Hua, 1965) and the musical *Sister Jiang* [*Jiang jie*] (dir. Huang Zumo & Fan Lai, 1978). These two representative cinematic works were based on true revolutionary stories of Communist soldiers. Places such as Bai Mansion (residence of a warlord named Bai Jü, transformed by KMT into a prison to jail Communists during the Civil War), Refuse Pit (Zhazidong) and the Red Crag (Hongyancun) not only became the settings of the above revolutionary stories, but also symbols of the Red Spirit (bravery and perseverance of the Communists warriors). All the above places have been transformed into popular tourist spots dedicated to the memory of the soldiers and their sacrifices.

In the 1980s, urban films set in Guangzhou, Beijing and Shanghai began to display the progress and processes of industrialisation, the thriving market and people who were involved in private businesses. In contrast, Chongqing and its adjacent area were represented as natural beauty resorts and a place for exiled victims of the Cultural Revolution in films such as *Evening Rain* [*Bashan yeyu*] (dir. Wu Yonggang & Wu Yigong, 1980) and *Time until the Mountain Leaves* [*Dengdao manshan hongye shi*] (dir. Tang Huada & Yu

Benzheng, 1980). In the opening sequences of *Evening Rain*, a little girl runs across numerous stairs (Figure 7) leading to the dock where a ferry is leaving for Shanghai. A long tracking shot follows the little girl's hurried steps from the city all the way to the dock, showing an old and scarcely populated stair street that runs up and down the hilly topology.

Figure 7. The stair-street in the opening sequences: in *Evening Rain*

In *Time until the Mountain Leaves*, picturesque landscapes along the Yangtze River, especially the natural spectacle of the Three Gorges, and some local legends become the essential contextualisation that inspires its characters' passion for dreams and the pursuit of true love. The Three Gorges area had drawn nation-wide attention since the National People's Congress approved the enormous national project of constructing the world's largest hydroelectric dam, the Three Gorges Dam, in 1992. From this period on, the hinterland area has been a constant focus of the country and foreign observers. The years 2000 to 2002 became the heyday of the area in history—the demolition, migration and transformation of the region caught extensive media attention, engendering voluminous news coverage across the whole country (Lu 2010b, p. 101). Filmic representation of the area also increased, keeping spectators updated about the great transformation occurring in the area. More importantly, films provided an alternative perspective from which to perceive the radical modernisation underway in mainland China. The traumatic individual

experiences and agitated collective memory of the local immigrants represented in some features contrasted with the upbeat tone conveyed by mainstream coverage. Films such as *Rainclouds over Wushan*, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* [*Ba'erzhake yu xiaocaifeng*] (dir. Dai Sijie, 2002), a Franco-Chinese romance feature, and *Still Life* contained a strong sense of agitation and sentimentality and became an acute critique of the discourse of modernisation.

After the Three Gorges Dam project was launched in 1994 and the designation of the fourth municipality, which took place in 1997, Chongqing began to attain increasing exposure in cinema. In 2000, the "Great Western Development" [Xibu dakaifa] project was launched, targeted at solving the problems of regional inequality (the enormous economic gap between the coastal area, middle area and western area) and rural poverty. Overall, the plan aimed to improve the nation's economic strength by including the relatively underdeveloped western and central China in the march towards an integrated modernisation (Lai 2002, p. 436). Culturally, the other major cities in the west, such as Chengdu, Xi'an and Lanzhou, also benefited from the project, capturing more opportunities for filmic representation. From the year 2000 up till the present, at least ten major films have been shot on location in Chongqing (including the urban area and the nearby countryside). Urban dramas *Chongqing Blues* [*Rizhao Chongqing*] (dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 2010) and *Chongqing Hot Pot* [*Huoguo yingxiong*] (dir. Yang Qing, 2016) are named directly after the city and feature the city's aura and representative cuisine. In *Life Show* [*Shenghuo xiu*] (dir. Huo Jianqi, 2002) *Curiosity Kills the Cat* [*Haoqi haisi mao*] (dir. Zhang Yibai, 2006) and *Deadly Delicious* [*Shuang shi ji*] (dir. Zhao Tianyu, 2008), the city appears as an anonymous urban space entrapping the characters. The box office hit comedy *Crazy Stone* stands out for its

employment of the local dialect and black humour. Long features such as *Lost, Indulgence* [*Mi'an*] (dir. Zhang Yibai, 2008), *Distant Thunder* [*Mi cheng*] (dir. Zhang Jiarui, 2010) and *Forgetting to Know You* [*Wangle qu dongni*] (dir. Quan Ling, 2014) alternate between the urban space and the adjacent industrial or town areas, showing the increasing mobility and instability of the city, and the danger and predicament induced by urbanisation. The diversified representations of this city not only add alternative cityscapes but also manifest the local colour of this transforming place. Filmmakers such as Huo Jianqi, Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke made it clear that Chongqing distinguishes itself from Beijing, Shanghai and the coastal developed cities in terms of its unique urban space and preservation of vernacular culture. Huo Jianqi chose Chongqing as the setting for his film *Life Show*. He described the situation as follows:

> It is located on rocky mountain ranges within which flows the great Yangtze River. The geographical condition provides many angles and perspectives for cinematography. The cityscape offers an interesting amalgam of the newly built urban space and the long existing old space. Such a cityscape reflects the interdependence between the people and the environment, whether it is natural or built, and also shows the stress brought by constant changes in the city and in people's lives (Huo 2002b, p. 40).

He frames his story on Houci Street, an old street lined with numerous stalls and restaurants, located in between blocks occupied by high-rise apartment buildings and shiny commercial complexes on the downtown peninsula of Chongqing. Revolving around the old street, which is designated to be demolished, *Life Show* showcases a disappearing living space, and represents common people's stress and agony brought about by urbanisation. The mountain city is closely associated with dark private spaces, a jail and a bustling night market, creating an unstable and beguiling cinematic city. Similarly, Wang Xiaoshuai's

Chongqing Blues captures a spatially fractured Chongqing (Figure 8) where the modern high-rises engulf the dilapidated low structures. Specifically, the film shows a multi-faceted cityscape. On the one hand, the city is characterised by night clubs, fancy shops and streets patronised by adolescents; on the other hand, it is the parental generation's socialist working unit characterised by old dilapidated houses. The distinctive spaces used by the young and the old generations symbolise their terrible relations and misunderstandings.

Figure 8. The Chongqing cityscape in the opening shot: in *Chongqing Blues*

Wang, in an interview, explained why he selected Chongqing as the filmic setting:

> In the process of urbanisation, Beijing turns from an interesting, humanist and passionate city into a concrete forest metropolis…what used to be intriguing about the city has been utterly destroyed, and the situation in Shanghai is even worse. However, Chongqing is quite unique. It is identical to any other metropolis concerning the same cold and hard urban spaces, while in terms of the fabric of the daily life and its inhabitants, the city holds onto its local tradition and a vulgarity that survives the sweeping force of modernisation (Liu 2010, p. 96).

While the massive urbanisation and modernisation was designed to tailor cities in a homogeneous manner across China, it was a practice that became increasingly compromised. Just as filmmakers kept discovering and representing alternative facets of the city, it may be the juxtaposition of the traditional and newly accomplished modern cityscape, and the run-

down urban villages that conserved the old way of living. Such testimonies of a transitional era were characterised by heterogeneity. Jia Zhangke deploys ruins as the trope of the transitional period by focusing on the disappearing cityscape of Fengjie (a nearby county of Chongqing) and those would-be exiled residents in *Still Life*, an internationally critically-acclaimed work. Ning Hao, the director of the low-budget box-office hit comedy *Crazy Stone*, sheds light on people from all walks of life in Chongqing and celebrates the vulgar daily life and common people's triumph over the power of authority and modern technology. The disappearing dwelling spaces, the ruins of demolition and the monumental structures springing up all over the place compose a magical space that is defined by tradition, modernity, vulgarity and globalisation. Chongqing has been regarded as a distinguished place for filmmakers to record and reflect the contemporary hinterland of China.

The following section will elaborate on the representation of Chongqing in *Crazy Stone*, followed by *Rainclouds over Wushan* and *Still Life* and will illustrate its unique geographical condition, its tenacious hold on tradition, its dynamism, and its dramatic modernisation in an increasingly globalised context.

Crazy Stone—stratification of the high and low spaces

Crazy Stone, a low-budget comedy by a young "unknown" director, obtained great critical and box-office success. It was made with an estimated investment of CNY three million and eventually grossed CNY twenty-three million in China. Set in Chongqing, it revolves around a precious jade stone that attracts the attention of three groups of people: the factory manager and workers from a would-be bankrupt state-owned handcraft factory intending to sell the jade to resurrect the factory's fortunes; three crooks seeking wealth; and a shrewd real estate developer who desires the inner-city land owned by the factory and his

hired international hustler who will help him to snatch the jade and deprive the factory of its last possibility of survival. In the film, Chongqing municipality is presented both through a panoramic view and a view from below, namely, the street scenes. It depicts a city pervaded with sensual stimuli, confronting viewers with a cluster of sounds (both diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, including the Peking Opera in chase sequences) and images of the intricate urban spaces experienced by people from all walks of life. Human bodies, especially half-naked male bodies, are frequently represented and associated with violence, desire and conspiracy, configuring the dynamic and vulgar ambience of the city. As a result, the characters' explorations of the urban space are no longer those of an intellectual's leisurely *flanerie* into the city or a response to modernisation. Rather, they are accelerated and violent individual experiences that lead to a sense of nihilism and absurdity.

With a panoramic view of the city in the early sequences of *Crazy Stone*, the camera spans over rows of black and grey low buildings engulfed by a circle of skyscrapers. Xie Xiaomeng (Peng Bo), the son of factory manager Xie (Chen Zhenghua), is trying to pick up a pretty woman (Figure 9) as they travel in a cable car. Self-styled as an artist who is concerned with the beauty of the city and the people, he likens the city to a mother, whose womb is a habitat for humanity.

Figure 9. The cable car scene & the overview of the cityscape: in *Crazy Stone*

As Xie Xiaomeng continues to press the girl, flirting and praising her with pretentious high-brow expressions, his suggestive words and behaviours fail to draw any interest from her. Instead, they only stir up annoyance in two middle-aged women who roll their eyes and curse him as a "hooligan". The girl then stamps high heels on his feet, making Xie drop his Coca Cola can down from the cable car, screaming with pain. The can tumbles down, turning into the name of the film in Chinese characters. The can, falling from a space high above, smashes the windshield of the mini-van driven by Bao Shihong (Guo Tao) and becomes the first Domino that turns the rest of the characters' lives upside down and triggers a series of misunderstandings and highly comedic incidents. The space displayed in this sequence is more than "a medium, a milieu, an intermediary", as its role can hardly be perceived as "neutral", but is rather "active, both as instrument and as goal, as means and as end" (Lefebvre 1991, pp. 410-411). The spatial arrangement in the sequence exhibits the attribute of the material space of the city per se, and actively creates the encounters of strangers and generates ensuing incidents. As one of the few cities in contemporary China that still utilises the cable car as a traffic shuttle in everyday life, the culture and history behind such a transport device is the result of the geographical conditions of the city, and now it has become the trademark of the city, carrying the cultural memory and collective identity of the city. The cinematic space inside and outside of the cable car in the sequences is "culturally positive"; that is, it realistically illustrates a city of anxiety, desire, craziness, possibilities and vulgarity (Teo 2013, p. 134).

In *Crazy Stone*, desires for sex or affluence drive characters into extreme situations, but there are people who stay out of the wealth race, remaining upright and loyal to the socialist unit. Belonging to the same state-owned handcraft factory, Bao Shihong and

manager Xie show a disparity in dealing with individual desire and public benefits when facing material temptation. Such personal disparity and social differences are ubiquitous in contemporary Chinese society where:

> an exuberant commercial and mass culture, enhanced by the popularisation of personal computers and the World Wide Web, has yielded an avalanche of images—big and small, still or moving. They literally engulf the city inside out: from building facades to the interiors, from the subway to the highways, from KTV rooms to Internet cafes. Meanwhile, this startling new and fast image culture is surreally contrasted with the uneven, often scarred, urban geography dotted with architectural and life ruins or traces from different epochs including the pre-communist and the socialist times (Zhang 2010b, p. 97).

Such kinds of multiple temporality unfold with the varied appropriation of urban spaces by different social groups. The first group is represented by Bao, the head of the security department in the factory, who holds onto the socialist production and social practices. When the central governmental policy shifted to the market economy in the 1980s, a great number of state-owned enterprises across mainland China lost financial and administrative support from the central state. They were thrown into the market to await their destiny—either thrive or die in highly competitive commercial circumstances. In the film, the handcraft factory is one of those marginalised by the market economy. Workers have nothing to do but go routinely to the factory, receiving no payment for months, in hope that some property tycoons will purchase the land (the only property left) to attain financial compensation.

The discovery of the valuable gemstone provides a good opportunity to resurrect the factory, however, people hatch a plot to use the jade for their own benefits. In Bao's perspective, the stone is the last hope to save the factory, or at least bring economic benefits for the two hundred employees who have not been paid for eight months. For Xie Xiaomeng,

the value of that stone is to pursue a girl. Manager Xie calmly holds on to his land and the gemstone, bargaining with the property developer for the best compensation for his old employees and himself. Echoing his son's comment, "my father is an old bureaucrat", manager Xie eventually ends up using the stone to acquire a large sum of compensation and a decent retirement. The liberal market not only encourages a commercial and mass culture, but also emancipates people from the previous socialist oppression of desires for wealth, sex and power.

Manager Xie puts up an exhibition in *Luohansi* (lit. Arhat Buddhism Temple) to auction the stone (Figure 10), as a means to force the greedy property developer Feng Hai (Xu Zheng) to offer a higher price for the land. However, putting the precious exhibit in a poorly equipped temple that doesn't even have a safe door is outrageously dangerous.

Figure 10. The temple and its surroundings: in *Crazy Stone*

Why is it not on display in an exhibition centre? Why isn't it kept in an insurance company for safekeeping? The following exchange takes place when Bao, as the head of security, complains about the poor security conditions of the temple:

Bao: The high mobility of the crowd engenders potential danger in such a tourist attraction area.

> Female worker: We are asking you to keep an eye on a piece of stone. Don't tell me your detective nonsense. We are aiming at a tourist attraction so that we can even save money from promotion. If we could have it exhibited in the Great Hall of the People [located in Beijing, the space of the highest political power in China], what are you doing here?

In manager Xie's words, the exhibition centre and insurance company charge too much, and the saved amount will make more compensation for the would-be laid-off workers. The modern practices of using insurance companies and exhibition centres for storage and display are perceived as worthless and unpractical. Rather, a temporary security team led by Bao and some handmade easy protection facilities are good enough. This rather anti-modern and anti-technology conduct reflects not only the embarrassing financial situation of this old state-owned factory, but also the old-fashioned way of management, which conflicts with the rational division of labour, profession and social spaces under the discourse of modernity. The state-owned unit and the temple stand for an outdated ideology and conduct. As material spaces, they used to be maintained for production and spiritual support. They are shared urban spaces that "can provide the means of developing and living—in concrete, material, mundane, routinised ways—shared collective memories" (cited in Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 105). Under the shifting focus of political and economic concerns, the function of particular material spaces also undergoes change accordingly, leaving the people struggling in between the old and the new systems.

When the factory in the film is facing disrepair and demolition and the temple functions as a temporary exhibition centre for commercial purposes, conflicts arise between the old users of the space and the new consumers of the space: consumed and possessed by property developers represented by Feng. The real estate developer, who has gained

tremendous benefits under the market economy, represents another group that is fuelled by capital and is able to manipulate resources and even the lives of people in the emerging market. It is a transitional period when the old is still gasping and the new system is not yet fully established. In the film, it is the poorly decorated temple and dilapidated factory, in contrast with the high-rise building that is designed to be erected on the land of the factory.

Urban village and its inhabitants

The other typical space related to Bao and his co-worker Sanbao (Liu Gang) is the urban village. Among the skyscrapers and glassy complexes, there are dark, crowded and narrow "villages" scattered at the bottom of the concrete forest. These urban villages (Figure 11) provide dwelling spaces for people like Bao and his co-worker Sanbao. In one sequence, when Bao misunderstands that Sanbao intends to take the jade in exchange for money, he walks through a dark zigzagging lane lined with rooms. The shaking shots over the shoulder track Bao's furious steps into Sanbao's home where Sanbao's grandmother takes care of his bed-ridden mother.

Figure 11. The lane and household of Sanbao: in *Crazy Stone*

The street scene and the unpleasant living spaces displayed in the sequences explain Sanbao's obsession with buying lottery tickets and his gullibility for falling into scams. Meanwhile, the grandmother asks Bao to keep Sanbao at work, as the factory exhibition

needs him. The old temple, disintegrating factory, labyrinthine lanes and crowded small domestic spaces configure a city inhabited by the would-be laid-off state factory workers and their families. Later in this thesis, I will continue to explore the socialist space and its far-reaching impact on urban space and social relations in Jia Zhangke's 2006 docufiction *24 City*, set in one of the largest state owned factories in Chengdu.

Another social group that inhabits such noir-like spaces are the *bangbang*. As a traditional port city along the Yangtze River for centuries, Chongqing needs large numbers of workers to make up the labour force needed to undertake the loading work around the harbour. During the era when loading relied on manual labour, *bangbang* became an essential part of the economic and traffic flux. In *Crazy Stone*, Heipi dresses like a *bangbang* (Figure 12) to scam passengers, but fails.

Figure 12. Heipi (the middle one) pretends to be a *bangbang*: in *Crazy Stone*

In addition, *bangbang* appear in two more sequences: one occurs when Bao shouts at a group of *bangbang* standing near the temple, demanding that they keep away from the temple. Although they have barely done anything wrong, they get yelled at with little respect, indicating their low social status and the harsh situation they face trying to make a living in the city. Then, after the theft incidents, Bao assumes they are accomplices to the abortive jade robbery. On both occasions, *bangbang* are perceived as potential criminals. Ironically,

the group of *bangbang* is not aware that they are suspected of being accomplices. Therefore, when Bao treats this group of people with cheap alcohol and cigarettes (Figure 13), requesting them to stay away from the jade, they look confused at each other, whispering:

> *Bangbang* 1: must have something to do with the urban management!
>
> *Bangbang* 2: must be undercover cops conducting civil law enforcement!

Figure 13. *Bangbang* who usually gather in front of the Temple: in *Crazy Stone*

How could such a seemingly "friendly" treat be regarded as civil law enforcement? The *bangbang* are represented as a group of people who are neither able to figure out their roles in the unfolding situation, nor understand the concept of "civil law enforcement". They are objects of contempt by urbanites and the first suspects when crimes are committed. They are everywhere in the city, but belong nowhere.

It is estimated that the total number of *bangbang* ranged from 200 to 300 thousand in 2000 (Zhang 2008, p. 72). Those who choose to work as *bangbang* celebrate the "freedom" they enjoy in this humble job, because they are liberated from the constraint of staying in a fixed place and being supervised by employers; they are free to choose when, where and for whom they work. In addition, they are exempt from "state regulation", as they genuinely believe that nobody can govern them, not even the Emperor of Heaven (*tianwang laozi*) (Zhang 2008, p. 76). Nevertheless, in their cinematic representation, their freedom is

quite vulnerable. In other films, such as *Chongqing Blues* and *Distant Thunder*, the group is represented as middle-aged, thin, dirty and unkempt, standing in tunnels for customers. In *Crazy Stone*, they can be driven away from the locations at any time, and their identity is often borrowed by criminals to cover sins.

To a certain degree, *bangbang* are a group of people who benefit from the country's grand blueprint of reformation in terms of attaining access to the big city. However, their social status, even though gradually freed from the household registration constraint, still remains at the lowest level. In present days, they are inefficient compared to the fast-developing modern traffic devices. Their working conditions and gathering places are characterised by darkness and chaos. In summary, the majority of characters in *Crazy Stone* are down in the street, even lower in the drain system, following the different and segregated horizontal spaces, walking, as dictated by market capitalism, without predictability and stability. Human bodies and the urban space are represented "as a politics of difference, as segregation and separation" (Soja 1996, p. 115). By juxtaposing their circumstances with real estate tycoons and an international thief, *Crazy Stone* reveals the huge material and cultural gap between the different social groups in the city under the force of market stratification. The urban space they can appropriate, identifying with their low social status, is usually dark, secret, low and invisible.

City and the human body

Similar to Hong Kong, the Chongqing cityscape is also characterised by a vertical view instead of horizontal, as it sits high above the rivers and mountains below. Bridges, high-rise buildings and especially the crisscrossed rail transit system built high above the ground push the whole city upwards. Such a vertical point of view overlooking the cityscape

can be seen from the sequences showing a monorail leaping through a tunnel, racing alongside the river and breaking into the concrete forest, producing a strong sense of speed and instability (Figure 14). In such diverse circumstances, characters are plagued with physical pain, anxiety and craziness.

Figure 14. The crisscrossed light rail transit system in Chongqing: in *Crazy Stone*

In the opening sequences, Bao's twisted face appears in close-up, screaming with great pain when the doctor checks his prostatitis. The anxiety produced by the bankruptcy of the factory echoes his suffering from disease, so that he body…"becomes more than just a product of culture or the creation of biology", and is perhaps "the most critical site to watch the production and reproduction of power" (Soja 1996, p. 114). Men with twisted faces recur throughout the narrative. Such expression of physical pain can be read as an emblem of individual anxiety, and the intensity is also a metaphor of the agitated social transformation experienced by all walks of life. The body, disease and city become intertwined and reflect on each other in the film. As Hooper observes:

> body and city are the persistent subjects of a social/civic discourse, of an imaginary obsessed with the fear of unruly and dangerous elements and the equally obsessive desire to bring them under control: fears of pollution, contagions, disease, things out of place [for the ancient Greeks, the definition of 'pollution']; desires for controlling and mastering that [become] the spatial

> practice of enclosing unruly elements within carefully guarded spaces (cited in Soja 1996, pp. 114-115).

In the film, Bao's disease-ridden body symbolises the dilapidated state factory. Correspondingly, his prolonged recovery from the disease runs in parallel with the long and difficult journey of resurrecting the factory by protecting the priceless jade stone. His desire to retain the state-owned factory and retain his position is projected through the carefully guarded temple, designated as the temporary exhibition space. In contrast, the other two groups, the group of three crooks and Mike, the international thief from Hong Kong, become the "unruly and dangerous" elements that threaten Bao's guard job and the city's stability. They intrude into Bao's carefully guarded space three times attempting to steal the jade, triggering massive chaos each time. Finally, the repeated theft irritates Bao, who furiously curses in a hoarse voice: [What is this?] "Public toilet? Come and go as you wish?"

This comparison of the temple with a public toilet emphasises the easy accessibility of the jade due to the poor facilities of the exhibition hall. The next sequences cut to a toilet, and zoom in for a close-up of Bao's profile. He is sweating and hitting his head against the wall. Zooming out, he appears in a sequence of fast cuts, losing his temper and randomly kicking and smashing toilet facilities. The grim face and violent actions show both his extreme physical pain caused by prostatitis and his unbearable mental torment triggered by the repeated thefts. The space of the "public toilet" appears many times in the film. As the space related to human defecation, it is often associated with filth and disgust, and, metaphorically, indicates the morbid father-son relationship in the case of Xie Xiaomeng, who constantly swindles money from his father. For Bao, the dilapidated and filthy interior of the toilet resonates with his physical pain, mental uneasiness and stressful guard job. Such mutual-projection between space and human body intensifies the characterisation, and shows

the physical features of buildings in such a way as to have a psychological and emotional influence that may have nothing to do their practical use (Jorn 1996, p. 51). In the case of Brother Dao (Liu Ye) and his two fellow crooks Heipi (Huang Bo) and Xiaojun (Yue Xiaojun), the bodies and spaces they appropriate not only represent one another, but also demonstrate the flux of transnational capital and talents, and the blurred boundary between the real and the imagined.

The three crooks in *Crazy Stone* are represented in a lack of refinement and physical filth and violence, which directly indicate their low-brow taste and subaltern identity. They are frequently framed in public bathrooms and toilets, with partially naked bodies and shampoo foam all over their faces or in defecation. When Brother Dao discovers that Xie Xiaomeng sleeps with his girlfriend, the crooks beat Xie Xiaomeng ruthlessly and lock him in a suitcase. The physical torture triggered by sex becomes even more violent after the crooks find that Xie presents the jade as a gift to the girl. Under their torment, Xie gives random answers to appease Dao and stop the torment. To a certain degree, “the liberation of latent human drives and the commodified style become substitutes for the loss of significant value systems, while the randomly induced bodily destruction and interpersonal violence bespeak the ultimate absurdity and irrationality of contemporary urban life” (Liu 2018, p. 166). Afterwards, their focus shifts to stealing the real jade. A shabby motel, public bathroom and even toilet become their venues for making plans. They often wear serious faces, discussing their grand plan of stealing, in particular, how to conduct their “business” professionally and in a good manner. Namely, they attempt to conduct stealing missions without means of violence. Theft is perceived as a craft that should be conducted with calm and elegance. The group’s attempt at verbally beautifying their illicit conduct creates a strong

sense of humour, at the same time as manifesting "cultural degradation" and "subversively express[ing] the experience of the subaltern" (Liu 2018, p. 163). The amateur theft group makes a counterpart to the well-trained professional thief, and their respective methods of conducting theft contribute the most humorous part in the film.

In the scene where the three slip into the Temple where the jade is on display, Heipi assumes that the glass showcase containing the jade must have been protected by infrared rays that would automatically activate the alarm system as soon as any accident occurs. Brother Dao refutes Heipi's assumption: "How could high-tech possibly be installed here? You must have watched too many films." Heipi may have watched similar foreign films imported in the early 1990s, like Hong Kong's *Once a Thief* [*Zongheng sihai*] (dir. John Woo, 1991) or Hollywood blockbusters such as *Mission Impossible* (dir. Brian De Palma, 1996) and *Ocean's Eleven* (dir. Steven Soderbergh, 2001), in which hustlers possess practical skills and handy high-tech tools to facilitate theft. Nevertheless, neither of them truly believes that they need any high-tech tools to "do their business" in this developing city. This coincides with the opinion of the owner of the jade, as manager Xie and some of his colleagues believe that money spent on promotion and insurance fees would be a waste.

While the crooks' desire to be "professional" remains in words, the international hustler from Hong Kong demonstrates "professionality" in action. In a sequence in *Crazy Stone*, Mike (Lian Jin) suspends from the ceiling to steal the jade, recalling the scenes from *Mission Impossible* (1996) when Tom Cruise adopts the same strategy and accomplishes his mission. However, Mike's "mission" is jeopardised as the rope is not long enough to reach his target (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Mike tries to reach the jade: in *Crazy Stone*

He then realises that he must have been short-changed by the dishonest rope seller. Cursing helplessly, he can only watch Xiaojun taking the jade away and being ruthlessly ridiculed. Mike's suffering reveals the chaos and loss of integrity and honesty in the market economy era. Mike's professional skills, outfits and instruments are identical with those employed by the internationally famed actors in Hollywood blockbusters. For him, the scenes from the fictional Hollywood story is his real life, and all the advanced and handy tools and techniques make him efficient and win him the reputation of "Master Hand". Meanwhile, when Xiaojun, the clumsy small thief, witnesses the high-end technocratic method of stealing, he is reminded of the franchises of *Spider Man*. The above scenes from Hollywood franchises that are usually "re-exported" and flow into the mainland Chinese market through Hong Kong show Hong Kong as a "transhipment point" in cultural exchange between China and the outside international world (Marchetti 2007, p. 165). Mike, as a professional thief, is one of the characterisations essential in gangster genre films. In contrast to the "unprofessional" crooks and the cunning rope sellers, Mike reiterates his established reputation as "honest" and "professional", as a "Master Hand" in the field: precisely the qualities that the crooks

lack. The comparison emerges as a metaphor of the "amateur" level of China's market economy, and also the chaotic and dishonest conduct that pervades the market.

In *Crazy Stone*, the hinterland city imagines metropolises like Hong Kong and Hong Kong people through Mike, as the representative of the highly developed capitalist city. Similar to Hong Kong, "a profoundly vertical city", Chongqing is also built "layer upon layer" in order to "defy the limits of space" (Chow & Kloet 2013, p. 140). The horizontal space of Hong Kong is characterised by claustrophobia due to the dense population and narrow urban spaces. The vertical space, specifically the rooftops of high-rises, provides a temporary space of relief and sanctuary for people who have been regulated and supervised by the carefully planned and strictly divided street spaces. In Marchetti's words, the rooftops provide spaces that are "separate from the quotidian workings of the city, above the business being conducted on the floors below, as well as privileged vantage points for surveying the Hong Kong cityscape" (Marchetti 2007, p. 44). In *Crazy Stone*, Mike often appears from a high position moving toward a lower place to conduct his "business". In the temple, he hangs down from the ceiling to reach the jade, which resembles a high-tech technocratic movement. After the first attempt fails, he quickly comes up with another plan and accomplishes the "mission". In his second attempt (Figure 16), he slides down from the top of the high-rise where Feng Hai, the shrewd real estate developer, runs his business. Mike locates Feng's office, and sneaks into the office swiftly. He quickly opens the steel safe, calmly turns around when Feng suddenly shows up, and flings a dagger towards Feng with considerable agility. The vertical spaces and high positions he appropriates in the film show the city in a panoramic view. The inaccessible height of the high-rise is like Mike's playground to present his individual show of magic and skills. As a well-trained thief, Mike

is a confident decipherer of the city, taking the vantage position to look and walk in the city. This resembles the image of the *flâneur*, where he “puts the city on hold…[and] pauses as to interrupt the global city-as-machine” when he locates himself high up in the street (Chow & Kloet 2013, p. 144).

Figure 16. The vertical view of the city through Mike’s view: in *Crazy Stone*

In contrast, the crooks are frequently related to street scenes and occasionally go deep down into the drain system to carry out their plan. Without professional tools to carry out their plan, they deploy stockings as bandit caps, Heipi keeps a hammer at hand at all times, and Xiaojun hides in a dustbin for good timing. The down to earth position of the crooks indicates their lack of skills and low social strata (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Spaces the crooks inhabit and utilise: in *Crazy Stone*

Such an image is further enhanced by their unrefined clothes, behaviour, and abuse of human bodies. As immigrants in the city, the three live on the periphery, physically and metaphorically. Identical with the other subaltern social groups, represented by *bangbang*, the itinerant porter carries a length of bamboo with rope tied to both ends to carry goods for

customers for petty income. They occupy the horizontal space of the city, mainly the street and the urban village.

Although *Crazy Stone* has been perceived by many Chinese film critics as a black comedy for its satire on the morbidity, weakness, and suffering of the subaltern group in a comic way, it is rather a realistic representation of the city and its residents more than a fictional one in terms of the mutual projection between urban spaces and their users. *Crazy Stone* exposes social issues such as fake products, dishonest conduct and degradation of mass culture that pervade the post-socialist market. More ironically, the film itself is self-consciously learning from the gangster genre epitomised by British director Guy Ritchie and Hollywood auteur Quentin Tarantino. As Liu Hui notes: “Ning’s films’ self-reflexive vision of their own status as imitation commodities raises the question of artistic originality and innovation” (Liu 2018, p. 169). The film per se, the replicated jade and the imitation of the Thousand-hand Bodhisattva dance in the film demonstrate the “fake plastic feature” of contemporary Chinese commercialisation. The lack of cultural originality and moral values, together with the thieves, professional or unprofessional, are emblematic of the city’s ability of creating disorientation, anxiety, social discontent owing to an increasingly complicated technocratic society where great changes of identity, subjectivity and social class are underway.

Rainclouds over Wushan—lived space matters

Zhang Ming’s 1996 debut *Rainclouds over Wushan* was highly acclaimed at various international film festivals. However, just like those works that are critically acclaimed overseas but either banned or a failure in the box-office at home, *Rainclouds over Wushan* was banned in China without an explicit reason until it was eventually released in 2003. The

film expresses “individual subjectivity” realistically (Zhang 2010a, p. 104) through the characters’ subjective experiences. Also, the slowness of the characters’ actions and unfolding plot illustrates Zhang’s resistance to the mainstream conceptualisation of the national project—the Three Gorges Dam. The idiom “rainclouds over Wushan” refers to an ancient legend that the Goddess of Wu Mountain used to descend from the celestial palace to the area and assist the Great Yu (one of the three most ancient Emperors in Chinese legend) to dredge the watercourse and overcome floods. After the flood was tamed, the goddess and her sisters chose to stay on earth to direct passing ferries and ships and protect people from danger by “sitting on the mist-shrouded peaks of Mount Wu” (Mi 2009, p. 29). She remained on the mountain so long that she finally “transformed herself into a spectacular peak”, becoming the famed Goddess Peak (Shennü feng). Thus, “rainclouds over Wushan” first connotates the mysterious beauty of the landscape shrouded in mist and praises the Goddess’ beauty and sacrifice. Later during ancient times, there was a King who had a fleeting sexual encounter with the alluring Goddess from Mount Wu. As a result, the expression carries another layer of meaning—sexual desire and encounter (Mi 2009, p. 29). The suggestive Chinese title of the film led to an unexpected circulation of a pirate DVD of the film with the cover illustrated with semi- pornographic pictures (Figure 18). However, people attracted to the DVD cover will be disappointed when they find how plain and slow the film is. It is a story about a lonely man and a distressed woman who lead a dull and hopeless life. The pair are finally brought together by a rape case investigated by Wu Gang, the local police officer.

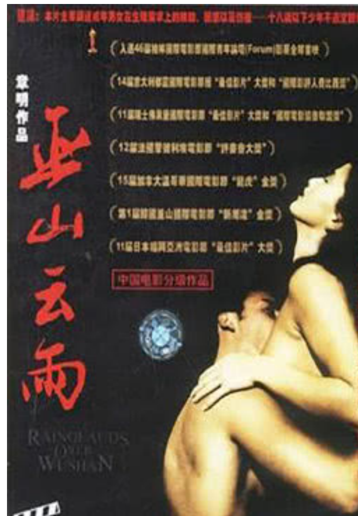

Figure 18. DVD cover of *Rainclouds over Wushan*

The film unfolds via a tripartite structure. It begins with Mai Qiang (Zhang Xianming), a signalman working at a river station called Qiu Shizi, whose life is punctuated by phone calls informing him of the navigation of ships on the Yangtze River and by changing signals on the station tower. The second section shows Chen Qing (Zhong Ping), a hotel receptionist anticipating her second marriage while stuck in an affair with Lao Mo (Xiu Zongdi)—the hotel manager. The third part focuses on Wu Gang (Wang Wenqiang), who is preoccupied by his coming wedding, but is constantly distracted by Lao Mo who reports a rape case that links the two characters in the previous narration together. The characters' complicated relations surface in the process of the interrogation of the case, and end with Mai and Chen getting together. In the film, Wushan town is about to be flooded due to the construction of the world's largest hydropower dam—the Three Gorges Dam. It used to be an enchanting place that inspired poets and painters to create beautiful poems and fine arts. The film, set in this disappearing space, displays the mundane daily practices of ordinary people and their silence or inertia in the shadow of the impending flooding.

Commercialisation and desire

The two protagonists, Mai Qiang and Chen Qing, represent those who have been left behind by the rising commercialisation. The film begins with a sequence showing Mai's routines (Figure 19 & 20)—he pulls the rope attached to an arrow shaped navigation signal, fastens it to a wooden pillar and then walks back into the room.

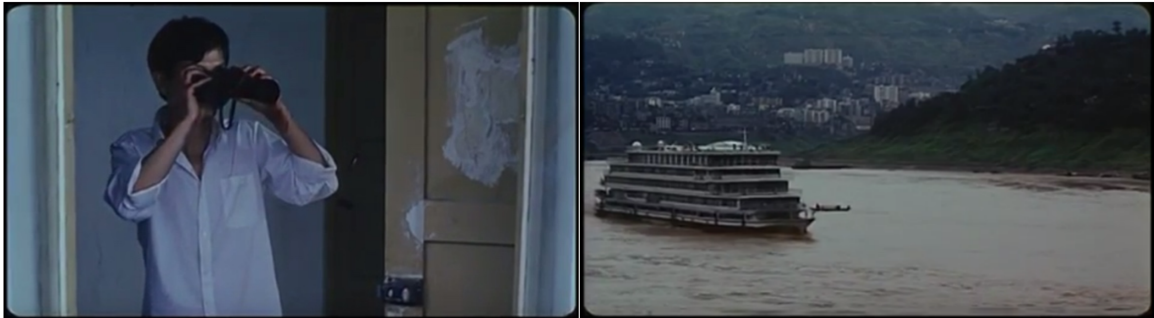

Figure 19. Mai Qiang looks out of the river: in *Rainclouds over Wushan*

Figure 20. Mai Qiang's working and dwelling place: in *Rainclouds over Wushan*

From a medium long shot, spectators can see part of the two-story building with a red balcony and a platform where the signal facilities are located. Following this, a black screen appears on which appear lines of white Chinese characters listing protagonist Mai Qiang's personal information: "Mai Qiang, aged thirty, a signal operator at Qiu Shizi station. Ma Bing comes to visit with Lili in the afternoon". The signal tower is located on a hill cliff overlooking a muddy river. It is alienated from the surrounding houses and buildings. Mai's personality, in contrast to his friend Ma Bing's (Li Bing), is very conservative, introverted and indifferent to commercial allure. He works and dwells in the signal station that belongs

to the public infrastructure operated by the local river bureau. Mai is a member of the working class who has been doing this job as long ago as the planned economy era, as testified by Ma Bing when he introduces Mai Qiang to Lili (Yang Liu, a sex worker) stating that Mai was “my master”.

Master and apprentice relations used to be commonly practiced among the working class in the planned economy system, but they have gradually dissolved in the reform era with an increasing number of people dropping out of the working unit. Ma Bing is one such example. Among the social changes stirred up by the omnipresent market of 1990s China, one of the most outstanding changes was “the wrenching psychological disruption caused when the working class rapidly fell from being Chinese society’s leading class to being at the very bottom of all social, economic, cultural strata” (Dai 2002, p. 228). Apparently, Mai Qiang has become accustomed or insensitive to social changes. Despite having fallen from being a privileged and proud member of the working class to an alienated and lonely worker living at the bottom of society, he does not show dissatisfaction toward his low social status, nor does he have ambition to obtain a respectable social position by joining in self-employed private business that is embraced wholeheartedly by some flexible minds, represented by Ma Bing.

Compared to his master Mai, Ma Bing is too worldly and practical to work at this place of solitude. He actively joins in the trend of commercialisation, putting a price on everything, including Mai’s calligraphy painting and set. Even when he is under interrogation concerning the alleged sexual harassment committed by Mai, he grasps the opportunity to promote a refrigerator to Wu Gang, the police officer who is investigating the case. He has actively joined the commercial world, seizing every opportunity to chase after

profit. In the previous planned economy system, Mai was Ma Bing's master, but their roles become switched when Ma Bing brings a sex worker, Lili, to Mai's place in an attempt to show Mai how to enjoy life. Ma Bing becomes the master in this case, while Mai Qiang is an unqualified apprentice who is passive and slow. Being teased and locked in the room with Lili, Mai sits nervously on a broken chair as they face each other in an awkward silence. Later they leave the room, coming to the river bank under the moon. Mai Qiang watches Lili calling out to moving ships and tries to prevent her from swimming in the cold river. The night that should have been a night of "rainclouds of Wushan" ends with the two sitting by the river until the sunrise. Nothing has happened or changed. Mai resumes his mundane daily routine in the quotidian residential and working space the next day. Mai's residence, which is also his workplace, exterior and interior, can be seen as a personification of his personality. The isolated location resonates with Mai's solitude, as he lives out of the town totally alone. The simple interior decoration indicates a simple formulated way of living. His job, navigating the passing ships, has to be done manually. His presence is frequently associated with nature such as the river, wind, moon, sunrise, etc. His TV set often loses signals and he is virtually disconnected from any commercial exchange, except in the alleged rape case, which turns out rather to be a consensual act.

Mai is arguably a socialist son accustomed to the planned economy system, mirroring Chairman Mao's famous phrase that the individual is a "screw" (*luosiding*) that should work for the operation of the gigantic machine: metaphorically, the nation. He stays content with his current condition and refuses to change even though confronted with commercial and sexual allure. He never questions, refutes or explains anything, nor does he show any

emotion. He appears as an emotionless man, but not the only one in this film. As seen by Lai:

> the protagonists of *In Expectation* [*Rainclouds over Wushan*] are permanently trapped in inertia. …They are taciturn, indecisive, their minds constantly drifting. Not much happens. Nothing moves forward, but rather everything goes around in circles forever "in expectation"—of change, breakthrough, or even the stirring of a simple verbal utterance or minor emotional outburst (Lai 2007, p. 221).

They are like the fish in a red bucket, waiting passively in expectation of something. The image of fish in a red bucket appears in each of the three character's narration. Stuck in the small space, these fish are caught, observed, selected and killed. Fish in Chinese conveys rich meaning. It is the most common food served on average people's dinner tables, just as for the protagonists. It can also be a small gift for friends as in Wang Gang's case. When Mai Qiang overhears Ma Bing and Lili flirting, two fish on a cooking board are shown in close-up, which indicates an ongoing intercourse. Fish, thus, means sexual desire. What is intriguing is that the way Mai Qiang chooses and kills the fish is repeated by Chen Qing and Wu Gang, the police officer (Figure 21, 22 & 23). Therefore, fish can also be regarded as a symbol of special bonds between people who may have further overlapped in their lives. In the film, Mai Qiang eventually swims across the river to meet Chen Qing, the only initiative taken by Mai, which finally puts an end to the gossip triggered by the rape scandal. Moreover, fish can also be read as a sacrifice that is helplessly manoeuvred, mirroring the characters in the film who are forced to leave their hometown and migrate to new places.

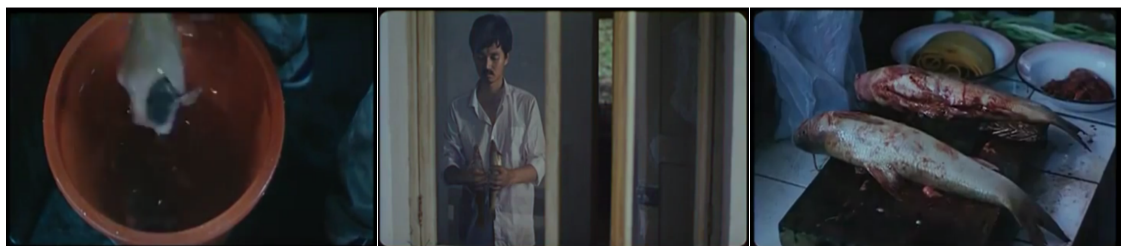

Figure 21. Mai Qiang catches, selects and kills fish: in *Rainclouds over Wushan*

Figure 22. Chen Qing catches, selects and kills fish: in *Rainclouds over Wushan*

Figure 23. Wu Gang catches and watches fish: in *Rainclouds over Wushan*

Living in a place where the flood is looming, and home and hometown are about to become abstract concepts and historical records, the local people could only be "in expectation". Expecting a beautiful new house, a new relation, even a new life can be every person's dream. But just like the ever-changing rain and clouds, there is no guarantee of a beautiful new life in a new place. The deep uncertainty about the future concerns everyone in the small town. Change is happening, while nobody knows for sure whether their expectation will be realised or not.

Why small town, why nobody?

In the 1990s, Chinese cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, finally emerged from various power discourses after a long, long delay (Dai 2002, p. 93). Directors of the urban generation found an alternative cinematic style to articulate their understanding of Chinese identity and culture. They turned back to the spectacles of the historical and endless yellow earth, and began to look at the transforming cities and their inhabitants. As Zhang Yingjin has observed:

> to a great extent, they consciously distinguish themselves from their fifth generation predecessors. Whereas the latter are associated with rural landscape, traditional culture, ethnic spectacle, grand epic, historical reflection, allegorical framework, communal focus, and depths of emotion, the former are sided with a urban milieu, modern sensitivity, a narcissistic tendency, initiation tales, documentary effects, uncertain situation, individualistic perception, and precarious moods. For the new generation, their films are definitely more truthful to reality than the fifth generation's glamorisation of ethnicity, sexuality and history (2004, p. 290).

In this way, rock and roll singers and newly-released prisoners are represented as impulsive "new" people especially in some early works such as *Beijing Bastard* [*Beijing zazhong*] (dir. Zhang Yuan, 1993), *Weekend Sweetheart* [*Zhoumo qingren*] (dir. Lou Ye, 1995) and *Black Snow* [*Benming nian*] (dir. Xie Fei, 1990). These filmic characters roam around the dilapidated back alleys of the metropolis, existing in the grey area between the legal and the illegal, seeking and roaming, vulnerable and ruthless (Dai 2002, p. 94). Both Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaoshuai confirmed a personalised autobiographical perspective of exploring the urban spaces and psychological concerns of characters. Their works are like diaries or monologues that truthfully represent what has happened immediately around them (Chen 2005; Ni 1995). Nevertheless, the cinematic depiction of the desire and disillusionment of ruthless youth, especially young artists in big cities in the context of urbanisation, can hardly identify with those from small hinterland towns, where modernisation may have changed the physical appearance partially while leaving the residents' spiritual world intact. Moreover, directors such as Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Yuan, who tend to configure their personal diaries in films, can hardly be said to represent the majority of the common Chinese.

In *Rainclouds over Wushan*, Zhang Ming leaves personal experiences behind and returns to investigate his birthplace Wushan, a small town near Chongqing, and the lives its

people. Echoing Jia Zhangke's hometown trilogy on a small northern town, Zhang Ming made a Wushan trilogy *Rainclouds over Wushan*, *The Bride* [*Xinniang*] (2009) and *China Affair* [*Tamen de mingzi jiao hong* lit. *They are called Hong*] (2013). The three films made an equally valuable and insightful reflection on the southern town. Born and raised there, he develops a deep understanding and a wealth of experience about the peculiar ambience, the living conditions of the local people and their desires and values. In *Rainclouds over Wushan*, he explores how people's behaviour and perspectives are influenced by the small city characterised by impressive natural beauty and the pending inundation, and how the local dwellers deal with the loss of home in the face of the national project.

Filming *Rainclouds over Wushan*, according to Zhang Ming, was meant to fill the blank of cinematic representation of the ordinary Chinese people's everyday life. The mass is the majority of Chinese. What they wish to do, and what they look for and hope for are the most urgent questions to address (Cheng & Xu 1996, p. 287), as the mundane everyday life, which is perceived by Lefebvre as a "lived space", can be "marked out materially and metaphorically in spatial praxis, the transformation of (spatial) knowledge into (spatial) action in a field of unevenly developed (spatial) power" (cited in Soja 1996, p. 31). Like Jia Zhangke's small town trilogy *The Pickpocket*, *Platform* and *Unknown Pleasures*, Zhang Ming's *Rainclouds over Wushan* engages with an alternative intersection of space (the city per se and the natural landscape) and power (the national project of building the Three Gorges Dam) and knowledge (people's awareness and response to the impending inundation).

Subjective time

As witnesses to one of the most significant national construction projects in the reform era, the local population living near the Three Gorges are unexpectedly unenthusiastic towards the project. During the 1990s, the construction of Three Gorges Dam was one of the most monumental projects in the reform era, and it had been estimated that the project would fuel the economic growth in the Yangtze River region. It became an emblem of realising modernisation, while for those ordinary individuals, it was a symbol of national power, a future which related only remotely to their immediate daily concerns. As the looming backdrop of the story, the flooding and the consequent migration guarantee no promising future and stability for the common people. On the contrary, the lack of certainty traps the characters in inertia. When national news reports spread across the whole country, emphasising how this enormous project will benefit the region economically, the local people's living circumstances remained mysterious to the outside. *Rainclouds over Wushan* becomes a window for the outside world to look in. The slow-rhythmed narration and on-the-scene style of the film represent people who appear quite indifferent and passive toward the grand project, and it "brings a personal, human dimension to a grand, impersonal process of dam building and national building" (Lu 2012, p. 246). Some of the subjective and mysterious scenes are highly intriguing, making viewers wonder whether it is the protagonist's dream or reality.

Resonating with the humid, foggy and mysterious local landscape, the narrative often unfolds with ambivalence. Time is presented from a very subjective point of view. This subjective temporal sense created by the film makes heterotopias that are:

> formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found in the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and

> inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality (cited in Soja 1996, p. 157).

In one sequence, Chen notices a Daoist-dressing man standing in front of the hotel and staring at her attentively (Figure 24). She is stunned, looking away immediately. When she raises her eyes cautiously after a while, she only finds an empty street.

Figure 24. Chen Qing and the Daoist-dressing man: in *Rainclouds over Wushan*

Another equally odd scene (Figure 25) appears when Chen Qing sits behind the service desk, looking outside absent-mindedly. A man walks out of the lobby, looking to the corner on his left where four men are playing cards. When the man disappears around the corner while two workers walk back to their work site with tools. The camera continues to follow Chen Qing's subjective view, spinning rightward, revealing the barber and her customer across the street, and a man in a white T-shirt walking into the hotel lobby to make a phone call, while finally the four men in the background, who were playing cards moments ago, have now fallen asleep.

Figure 25. Chen Qing's subjective time: in *Rainclouds over Wushan*

The entire sequence lasts for nearly 90 seconds. In the diegetic world, it is a short period of time for Chen Qing to conduct her duty as a receptionist. How could they fall asleep in such a short time? The two sequences entail a strong sense of illusion that breaks the mundane and still surface of the daily routine, stunning and bewildering Chen Qing. Compared with the tourists flooding into the small town with a clear purpose—paying the last visit to this disappearing natural spectacle of the Three Gorges—the local people do not show much sense of nostalgia for their disappearing home, nor bother to envisage the possible future. The street and hotel lobby sequences under Chen Qing's gaze create a sense of locality. Despite the pending inundation and flows of tourists who are summoned by the media promotion to "catch a last glimpse of the natural beauty of the Three Gorges", the local populaces retain their stable and slow pace of daily routines.

To further slow down the sense of time, various street scenes are repeatedly represented. For example, as police officer Wu is walking for the first time through the block of the hotel where Chen Qing works, a wedding ceremony is on and a swarm of people are gathered. But the next scene shows officer Wu walking the same path, which is now empty, quiet and messy. The juxtaposition of the two scenes creates a strong sense of the unreal and estrangement. Another example is the repeated showing of the poster for a film entitled *In Expectation* in a corner. The poster indicates that the film is coming soon, but no exact date

of release is provided. “In Expectation” is also the alternative English title of *Rainclouds over Wushan*. This conveys an intricate intertextuality between Zhang Ming’s debut, made and screened in real life, and the virtual film promoted through the posters within the film. The filmic characters have been clearly informed that they will be dislocated and their home will be inundated, as the government has all the migration population and the water level (175 metres) information published on a white board on the busy street (Figure 26).

Figure 26. The white board: in *Rainclouds over Wushan*

It takes a little effort for the local administration to calculate these numbers and schedule the migration, while it is difficult to forecast the prospect of the migrants and the ecological consequences of the project on the local area. The alternative history of common people’s psychological and material concerns are marginalised by the mainstream news coverage. Residents are in expectation of new homes and a new life, but with little passion and dynamism. Audiences who watch the film may expect some drama between characters and stark contrasts between old and new landscapes, and the changing urban environment evoked by the enormous national project of modernisation. However, all our expectations remain “in expectation” and the appearance of streets and hotels are contingent on the characters’ subjective sense of time. For better or for worse, the local people do not show an explicit stance or preference. With the trivial daily practices represented, the film casts a

negative view on the project. The silence and passivity of the people represent silent resistance to the project. Grand pictures of an advanced modern state propagated by the mainstream media are too remote to relate to their immediate everyday concerns. The mundane, slow but serene stable life matters.

In the film, both Chen Qing and Mai Qiang are keen to look outside. Mai looks at the river and the other bank, and Chen Qing often sits silently, looking outside of the hotel laden with anxiety. Now and then, she hears someone calling her name, but when she turns to her son Liang'er for confirmation, she is merely given negative answers. Meanwhile, Mai Qiang tells his friend that he dreams of a woman, and when the policeman Wu Gang interrogates him about the rape case, he responds that "I might have met her before". Is this woman the same woman in his dream? For the alleged rape case, Lao Mo perceives it as an unforgivable crime. Meanwhile, Mai's statement is, "I slept with her", and he leaves almost all his salary for that month to Chen Qing. For Chen Qing, no matter how Wu Gang persuades her to state her opinion on the case, she does not perceive herself as a victim and refuses to provide any information. Without evidence and a "victim", the case is soon closed and Mai Qiang gets released after several days of being locked up. It is difficult to confirm who the real sinister one is. Lao Mao has been having an affair with Chen Qing, while Mai Qiang's "rape" case appears to be rather a consensual relationship. In the film, "moral boundaries are blurred", and "what one notices is daily necessity and acts of contingency in the ordinary lives of citizens along the Yangtze River" (Lu 2012, p. 251).

Working at a quite run-down police station in a small town, Wu Gang appears more interested in preparing for his wedding than solving cases. He is constantly distracted by irrelevant things during interrogation, and he never condescends to his interrogees by sitting

bare-chested and smoking with these potential criminals. The interrogation of Mai Qiang is rather a casual meeting with old acquaintances than a serious case investigation. What is even interesting is that when the suspect is about to leave the police station, Wu Gang takes out hair clippers from a drawer and helps to cut the suspect's hair. The above sequences show that the relationship between average people and "the police as an instrument of state control" has shifted to a humanist view in the reform era (Shi 2007, p. 316). Distinguished from the police depicted in films of the 1950s, which conveyed strong socialist ideological messages—"only socialism can save China" (Zhiyou shehuizhuyi cai neng jiu zhongguo)—in films such as *This Life of Mine* [*Wo zhe yibeizi*] (dir. Shi Hui, 1950), the post-1990s period witnessed a growth of post-socialist "documentary realism" representation that "no longer odes to socialist utopia, the new tales of the People's Police bring to the fore the potential conflict between ordinary people and the police as agents of the states rather than their harmonious coexistence" (Shi 2007, p. 323). In police-centred features such as *On the Beat* [*Minjing gushi*] (dir. Ning Ying, 1995) and *Seventeen Years* [*Guonian huijia*] (dir. Zhang Yuan, 1999), the police are demystified and occasionally find themselves impotent when dealing with new social problems and coping with suspects' questions and challenges. All the films listed above unfold in big cities where modernisation has transformed the urban spaces and people's way of life, but the accompanying problems brought by urbanisation cannot be solved by the existing regulations and rules; therefore, the police are caught in the dilemma of the state's high expectation for them to maintain justice and solve criminal cases, and the masses' questioning and challenging of their authority. However, *Rainclouds over Wushan,* filmed in a southwest small town where local residents relate to one another

economically or socially, shows quite an alternative relation between the people and the police.

The town of Wushan is a place of legend, of marvellous natural landscape and great cultural legacy, but all of this will disappear underwater. In the beginning of the 1990s when the market economy had not yet utterly overthrown the planned economy, many places, in particular, the remote western region of China, still had one leg deep in the state-owned economic system and the other leg just dipping into the market. However, the ambience and people in the eastern coastal area was quite different. They actively joined in the market, becoming private business owners as seen in Mi Jiashan's 1988 *The Trouble Shooters,* or managed to go abroad in *After Separation* [*Da sa ba*] (dir. Xia Gang, 1992), or plunged into the stock market in *Shanghai Fever* [*Gu Feng*] (dir. Li Guoli, 1994), or expected a new apartment in the urban area in *A Beautiful New World* [*Meili xin shijie*] (dir. Shi Runjiu, 1999). While the nouveau riche and pioneers of the commercial world from eastern cities embraced the new economic system and explored business opportunities, the majority of people from the western region remained in the same way of living as previous generations under the planned economy. The national project pushes the Three Gorges area into nation-wide focus, and features, news reports and tourism promotion of the area relate the building of the Three Gorges Dam to national resurrection and modernisation. Zhang Ming's alternative representation of the event, the city and its people withdraws from Soja's *macro* view of spatial contemplation, which believes that:

> City and State participate together in the more invisible processes or 'normalisation' that pervade and sustain patriotic allegiance and representative (as opposed to participatory) democracy. The power of the citadel is not just

> expressed in face-to-face sociality but also in the more abstract, less visible, psychogeographical realm of the authoritative social 'system' (Soja 1996, p. 235).

Zhang Ming chooses a *micro*-view to examine the inertia and subjective dimension of the city, creating a heterotopia and Thirdspace by showing the street view of the urban space and everyday life related to emerging commercialism, and oppressed desire in a claustrophobic space. In the next section, I will examine the more invisible but substantial influence of the authoritative power imposed on the social space and relations.

Still Life—expectation becomes stillness from Wushan to Fengjie

Fengjie, another small town under the jurisdiction of the municipality of Chongqing, is the setting of *Still Life*. Similar to Wushan, the small town is also involved in the Three Gorges Dam project. The film pushes the construction of the Three Gorges Dam into the background, but foregrounds the ruins of Fengjie and those who make the ruins, live in the ruins, are buried by ruins and exiled by the ruins. Released ten years after *Rainclouds over Wushan* (1996), *Still Life* juxtaposes the would-be completed Dam and the accompanying construction of infrastructure with the ubiquitous ruins. According to Lefebvre, "the spaces of representation", defined by Soja as "Thirdspace", are:

> vitally filled with politics and ideology, with the real and the imagined intertwined, and with capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and other material spatial practices that concretise the social relations of production, reproduction, exploitation, domination, and subjection (Soja 1996, p. 68).

If *Rainclouds over Wushan* offers a subjective view of time and a space of apolitical everyday life of the local people confronted with an uncertain future, displaying the inertia of the place and its residents before the impending inundation, *Still Life* shows the spatial and social consequence of building the tremendous landmark of modernisation and the

ensuing large-scale migration. To represent the submerging of a town with valuable cultural and historical heritage, Jia adopts the style of magical realism to convey the dramatic changes underway in the physical space and the consequent traumatic experiences in the mental space of characters. If the dream-like sequences in *Rainclouds over Wushan* reflect the protagonists' subjective point of view, showing their desire for intimate relations and a better future, in *Still Life* the two outsiders' calm observation casts a strong impression of reality, which can be seen as the director's expectation of recording and contemplating the absurdity and "unrealism" of the intensive transformation taking place. The film works as a space of resistance by focusing on those marginalised people, and their perseverance and dignity in the lived space.

Still Life reflects, according to Jia Zhangke, the material items and everyday concerns of the common people, some of whom can be regarded as subaltern due to their unprivileged economic situations and low social status. In the context of China in the reform era, deprived people, floating populations and migrant workers "have taken on the role of representing social disorder and pathology" (cited in Soja 1996, p. 115). When Jia first arrived at Fengjie with contemporary Chinese painter Liu Xiaodong, for whom he had planned to make a documentary titled *East* [*Dong*] (2006), he was astonished by the poorly furnished interior spaces and the lack of material possessions in households of common people (Li et al. 2007, p. 12). The town is in anticipation of flooding due to the construction of Three Gorges Dam, and the local people who remain at home are waiting for compensation for enforced migration. Such a historical time and space inspired Jia to record and reflect on the enormous changes underway, which resulted in the making of the feature *Still Life*. The film begins with a long take spanning from left to right, showing people entertaining or sitting in silence

on a ferry. Along with the deep bass soundtrack of a piece of Sichuanese opera—*Lin Chong's final fight* [*Lin Chong yeben*]—the spanning shot unfolds like a landscape scroll, revealing characters one by one.

The protagonist Han Sanming, a coal mine worker from Shanxi Province, distances himself from the ragged or bare-chested men, sitting at the end of the ferry with a tired and confused face. He travels from Shanxi Province—a place well-known for its rich coal mines—to Fengjie, in search of his spouse and daughter who left home sixteen years ago. The other storyline follows Shen Hong, also from Shanxi Province, a nurse who wishes to settle marital problems with her husband who left for Chongqing two years earlier. The two outsiders roam around the ruins, trying to resume or bid farewell to their previous marriages. The two people cross the border of provincial territory and also cross the boundaries around cultural practices and everyday conduct. According to Soja, when "borders are crossed, disturbed, contested, and so become a threat to order, hegemonic power acts to reinforce them: the boundaries around territory, nation, ethnicity, race, gender, sex, class, erotic practice, are trotted out and vigorously disciplined" (cited in Soja 1996, p. 115). As a result, the cinematic spaces of *Still Life* teem with ruins—ruins and death brought by the hegemonic power. As people from the marginalised group represented by Han Sanming and outsiders represented by Shen Hong, their spatial experiences are characterised by uncertainty, fragmentation and dislocation. The construction of the Three Gorges Dam cannot be seen as merely reflecting the general anxiety of a society eager to realise modernisation and establish a distinct identity in the world. It speeds up the spatial transformation and mobility of the society where:

> centres and peripheries will not hold—collective and individual anxiety rise and the politics of difference become especially significant. … In these periods, bodies, cities, and texts become key sites of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic contestations (cited in Soja 1996, p. 115).

The plenitude of representations of ruins and dislocated populations, and the still life left in the abandoned households become Jia's "counter-hegemonic contestation" of the process of modernisation. To show such a large scale of construction and demolition under the hegemonic political power and the mixed responses of the people involved in this great transformation, Jia employs magical realism to illustrate the sense of real-and-imagined of the happenings in the area.

Magical realism

Realism is a slippery concept used to describe aesthetic works which "truly" reflect the social and natural reality. André Bazin's famous statement that "realism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice" (2005a, p. 26) shows that no absolute reality exists in artistic works. The traditional Chinese aesthetic concept *zhen* (真) could be an equivalent term for realism, which "would imply more a sense of authenticity or sincerity in art rather than a strictly mimetic relationship between representation and reality" (McGrath 2016, p. 20). These interpretations of realism resonate with Jia Zhangke's point of view on how he represents the complex Chinese reality through films:

> I have the impression that a surrealist atmosphere prevails in China today, because the entire society faces an enormous pressure to speed up. As a result, many strange and unimaginable events have occurred in reality. As they say: "reality is more exceptional than fiction". The surrealistic elements sound unbelievable to most of us, but they are part of reality. It is precisely because I tried to catch such an allegedly surrealistic atmosphere that I have decided to direct this film (cited in Lu 2006, p. 126).

Bazin's perspective on realism, which for him means shooting on location, using non-professional actors and deploying long takes, is to reflect his subjective experience of reality, which mirrors Jia's "unimaginable", "surrealistic" and "magic" sense of reality. Such a magic perspective "has to be set in order to catch the complexity of the real when the materialist depiction of things proves be to inadequate if conducted without a sharper attention to the spiritual undertones" (Bertozzi 2012, p. 165). In *Still Life*, Jia represents the huge material disparity between the rich and the poor, and the ruins in an apocalyptic space through magical realism. As Jia explains in an interview:

> when taking the ferry through the Three Gorges, I had a strong sense that I was walking the same path that the ancient people walked, because the landscape remains the same as depicted in old brush and ink paintings, which made me feel so close to history, as if I had entered a different spatial-temporal. However, No sooner do I get to the shore than I was overwhelmed by the noisy and vulgar reality of the county, which made me bewildered and dislocated (Jia et al. 2007, p. 20).

Due to the multi-facets of Chinese reality—the contrast between the countryside and city, the disparity between the west and the east—China now is facing a highly heterogenetic post-socialist reality. Despite the fact that contemporary Chinese post-socialism is often seen as the equivalent of postmodernism, it has its own specificity, which according to Sheldon Lu, "consists of multiple temporalities superimposed on one another; that is, the pre-modern, modern, post-modern coexist at the same place and at the same time" (Lu 2001, p. 13).

To represent the transformations occurring in contemporary China, magical realism is highly effective in showing the complexity of the contrast between the ambition of the state and the struggling subaltern. The hydropower construction project is a significant step toward modernity, a "dream of a powerful state" and the "ambition of the social elites" (Jia

et al. 2007, p. 22). However, its construction drives a large population out of their hometown, erasing their community and emotional bond with the land, leaving them struggling to survive. Both the national modernisation project and individual's material and emotional concerns are matters of social urgency. Despite the access to modern media (radio and TV) and technology (mobile phones), people like Han Sanming are still far from living a modern life. At the end of the film, the other protagonist Shen Hong (Zhao Tao) boards a ferry setting out for Shanghai, and the radio broadcasts that construction of the Three Gorges Dam has been a dream of the central leaders for several generations. The people of this area have sacrificed greatly for the project. The mainstream message recognises the local people's contribution to the enormous project, but where have the migrants gone? What problems have they encountered in the process of migration? Why are there violent turmoil and how do they end? These problems, which are immediately relevant to each of the local individuals, are left unanswered by the mainstream news coverage. The voices of the ordinary, and the specific sacrifice made by them are hidden from the public.

Filmic representation of magical realism

Jia has been classified as a "Bazinian director" by critics as he frequently adopts cinematic techniques and ideas on neo-realism praised by André Bazin. His hometown trilogy and Beijing-based *The World* [*Shijie*] (2005) take up Italian neorealism by representing people who have never had an opportunity to articulate their dreams and aspirations and letting them speak in their own dialect:

> while placing them within the conditions of their fraught existence. And just as neorealism explored a devastated Europe, where uprooted, impoverished humans wandered with little agency, so he explores a China whose ambitious young people find themselves channelled into what are literal or figurative construction

> zones, where they live not only with diminished agency, but with diminished dreams (Andrew 2018).

But in *Still Life,* Jia deploys computer-generated images of a flying UFO and the launching of something resembling a space-ship, which "problematises his early classification as a 'Bazinian director'" (Ramos Monteiro, Gaudreault & Martin 2015, p. 107). The on location shooting and these unusual supernatural images create an innovative style that embodies the individual's subjective experience amid the catastrophic atmosphere enveloping the entire region.

In one sequence, Han Sanming roams around and sees a flying saucer moving across the sky and disappearing. At the same time, Shen Hong looks out at the foggy landscape, becoming the other witness of the unusual phenomenon. However, the two witnesses handle the rare phenomenon calmly and the UFO serves as the only link between the two protagonists. The two never know each other, although both of them are from Shanxi Province and both come to this disappearing town for reconciliation with their spouses. Both have gone through a prolonged journey to find their spouses, as most addresses have either changed or been submerged under the water. Jia has explained the reason why he utilised surreal phenomena in such a realistic work:

> One day, during the shooting, I was walking along the river when suddenly it started thundering and raining and nature itself became absolutely mysterious. I raised my head and wondered whether it would be possible for a UFO to cross the sky and see me. Because after the enormous changes we are witnessing, a lot of things that go beyond reality could happen, and they could change a part of this reality as well (Wu & Wang 2007).

The UFO symbolises the complicated and transient changes happening in contemporary China. The country is going through large scale construction and demolition, destruction and

creation. It may be unrealistic, magical and unbelievable for viewers to see a UFO, but the unrealistically huge dam, the unbelievable scale of migration, the magical lights that brighten the newly completed suspension bridge are occurring in real life.

In another surreal scene, a tower fashioned in the shape of the traditional character for China (*hua*, 華) launches into space at dawn (Figure 27). In reality, the tower, called "Monument to the Three Gorges Migrants" [Sanxia yimin jinianbei], was built in 2003 by the local government to pay attribute to the grand project, but was demolished in November 2009 due to a shortage of funding (*Monument to the Three Gorges Migrants (Sanxia yimin jinianbei)* 2010). In the film, however, the tower disappears in a sublime and romantic manner. The launching of the structure "could be interpreted as representing the uprooting of Chinese traditional culture in the process of China's modernisation" since the character *hua* (華) symbolises Chinese civilisation (Luo 2015, p. 163). Distinguished from this interpretation, Schultz perceives it as "a space of the intangible future, and not the concrete present. …the futuristic replacement is not only a sense of estrangement from place but also from time as well" (Schultz 2016, p. 455). However, both interpretations fail to recognise the practical function of this structure—whether it is a symbol of Chinese civilisation or a futuristic space, it was constructed by the local government to "show off" its achievement in overcoming all kinds of difficulties, in particular, the migration problem, to contribute to the building of the Three Gorges Dam.

Figure 27. The tower *hua* (華) and its quiet launching: in *Still Life*

As a monument, its symbolic meaning remarkably outweighs its practical function of being inhabited or lived. However, when it disappears into space in filmic representation, or is demolished due to the lack of funds in reality, it becomes an allegory revealing the problems that are hidden from the public in completing the hydropower project, such as the migrant problems and the local government's abuse of compensation funding distributed by the central government. Thus, the launching of the structure can also be interpreted as "the dream of modernisation" that is irrelevant to the local people. The local population's indifference toward its existence and disappearance indicates that the dream remains out of the reach of the ordinary, especially the subaltern class whose immediate concern is to survive. The political and social elites' ambition has little positive impact on the migrants' wellbeing and affluence. They can travel around the country to undertake certain types of job, making a living and wishing for a better future for their next generation. However, just like Han Sanming's daughter and the girl called Chunyu who wishes to be a nanny in the big city, they have to set out on the same path their parents have taken. This group of people, including their descendants, are closely associated with ruins, no matter whether it is a coal mine, a construction site, or a waste plant.

Ten years ago, when those tourists flooded into Wushan in *Rainclouds over Wushan* to catch the final glimpse of the natural spectacular landscape of Three Gorges, the local people appear in a state of emotionlessness, but they are still expecting love, marriage and a new beginning. Ten years later, there are no tourists anymore; rather, both the local residents and outsiders are leaving. It seems that they are able to move freely across the country; however, those who belong to the subaltern class or the bottom of society can only realise that their lives have come to stagnation. The state of being still does not mean they cannot

travel from place to place; rather, it means that they are permanently stuck as the subaltern in a highly mobile society no matter where they are. As the ending of the film shows, in a long shot where Han Sanming and his colleagues set out to Shanxi Province to become coal miners, there is a man standing high above on a thin suspended rope, cautiously moving forward (Figure 28).

Figure 28. The funambulist and Han Sanming: in *Still Life*

Calmly and silently, Sanming looks at the high-risk walking of the man who appears in silhouette. As audience to the spectacle, he shows no enthusiasm nor claps the performance. Instead, he walks away, back towards the camera, and disappears in the background. The sequence reveals a brutal truth by juxtaposing the group of manual labourers and a man who risks his life for the performance. The aerial walking is associated with danger, uncertainty, non-protection and life-risking, resonating with the group of lower class workers whose survival is built on danger and life-risking coal mining. The performance contains no surprise for them, for they were, are and will be undertaking the same sort of work. The only difference is that they don't have any audience.

Ruins in Still Life

Ruins play an important role in many of Jia Zhangke's works. In his debut *Pickpocket*, set in Fenyang, Shanxi Province, the Chinese character *chai* (拆), which means demolition, appears ubiquitous on walls. *Chai* (拆) "the act of tearing down…points not only to the physical demolition of the old cityscape but also, more profoundly, to the symbolic and psychological destruction of the social fabric of families and neibourhoods" (Lu 2007b, p. 138). In *Unknown Pleasures*, the city Datong, also located at Shanxi Province, is depicted as a wasteland. Characters live with ruins, turning a blind eye to the ruins across the city. In *Still Life*, ruins are represented by means of long takes and characters are dwarfed and even buried by ruins (in Xiaoma's case). For instance, in one scene where Han Sanming and his long-lost-contact wife share a sweet moment in a half demolished building (Figure 29). They are squatting on the ground, turning back to the ruined side, persuading the other to have the only toffee. Suddenly, they are stunned by the explosion of a high-rise building not far away. They get up and turn around to watch the crashing down of the building. In this long shot, the two characters are put in the corner of the half-ruined building and the rare sweet reunion is ruthlessly interrupted by the demolition.

Figure 29. Han Sanming and his wife: in *Still Life*

Ruins could be represented as witness of personal or collective trauma, or serve as a metaphor of redemption in a number of films on wars or terror, as Mennel points out:

> Ruins can have two different functions, which are rooted in distinct traditions: on the one hand, they mark precise historical moments, for example in the rubble films of the immediate German post-war moment. In these films from 1946-48, Berlin in ruins becomes the site for negotiating guilt, redemption, and rebuilding in regard to the Holocaust and the Second World War. On the other hand, ruins as a postmodern cipher (code) invoke historical moments and iconic images but empty them of their historical geographical specificity in what I call the retro-rubble film (Mennel 2008, pp. 103-104).

Cinematic Berlin in ruins either as a site of redemption and rebuilding immediately after the WWII or a space of "empty" historical remembrance in the postmodern era reflects the affinity between ruins and traumatic experiences. In the context of China, ruins in different historical periods register different meanings. During the Maoist era, the ruin symbolises socialist progress as the old streets, architectures and walls should make way for new socialist monuments and spaces. In the reform era, however, such representational meaning of the ruin has been replaced by "history, memory, trauma and social crisis" (Schultz 2016, p. 442). The shifting representation of ruins in Chinese films is a result of urban redevelopment under the discourse of modernity and urbanisation, which arouses multiple social issues relating to social stratification, regional uneven resource distribution and economic development. In the film, the lower social class including migrant workers and the urban poor make ruins, live with ruins and make a living in ruins (Figure 30).

Figure 30. Ruins, death and workers: in *Still Life*

Thus, *Chai* (拆) and construction ruins are arguably themes of many urban films in contemporary Chin since the 1980s (Lu 2007b, p. 137). In an interview, Jia revealed that he had to race with the demolition speed to catch the disappearing cityscape in Fengjie. He captures in long shots images of manual labourers striking walls and the dust spreading out as the walls collapses. Following Sanming's spanning view, spectators sense the apocalyptic atmosphere generated by ruins and misty weather. In addition, traces of private life and memory remain in the ruins, such as pieces of calligraphy, posters of a pop singer, and certificates. These items occupy the domestic space of the previous residents, bearing witness and memorialising its inhabitants. These personal belongings are preserved by Jia's film; they are "resisting the force of *chai*" (Mello 2015, p. 145). Echoing the English name of this film *Still Life*, these small items bear "the secret of life" as Jia has confirmed:

> Once I walked into someone's room by accident and saw dust-covered articles on the desk. Suddenly it seemed the secrets of still life fell upon me. The old furniture, the stationary on the desk, the bottles on the window sills and the decorations on the walls all took on an air of poetic sorrow. Still life presents a reality that has been overlooked by us. Although time has left deep marks on it, it still remains silent and holds the secrets of life (Mello 2015, pp. 145-146).

While the former residents move out of their homes, some migrant workers turn the unliveable place into their temporary home. They sleep there, cook there, entertain themselves there and even make a living there—several prostitutes work in a half-demolished room. Ruins in *Still Life* appear as a "live space" that registers as "a non-space that is neither public nor private, and caters to the basic physical and social need of the lower class" (Luo 2015, p. 165). Ultimately, the social practice of the lowest class relates closely to ruins—they have been hired to tear down existing constructions, therefore they make

ruins, they take shelter in ruins, and make a living out of ruins. Ruins bear clear and indivisible class marks.

Conclusion

As the frontier area of the Han-centred Chinese government in the long imperial history, Chongqing has been perceived as the “interior other” in history. The short period of being the “capital” of the KMT government drew the city to national and international attention and greatly accelerated the modernisation of the cityscape. Cinematic Chongqing before the 1980s was dominated by revolutionary stories and patriotic Communist characters, although the city per se was not involved in these cinematic narrative. The launch of the construction of Three Gorges Dam in the middle of the 1990s made the city a media focus. Wushan and Fengjie, the two towns adjacent to Chongqing involved in the national project, were partially demolished, which brought large-scale forced migration. In films, the enormous social and environmental transformation bewilders and traumatises the local people and outsiders who break into the disappearing space. The ruined space brought by the monumental project, the huge gap between the lower and higher social classes, the natural beauty of the local space and the exiled population become critiques of the national dream of modernisation. The image of the city associated with the national modernisation dream, however, becomes a cinematic Thirdspace configured as a ruined space lived by common people, related to their immediate daily concerns and practices.

The next chapter will examine cinematic Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan province and the neighbour of Chongqing, which shares dialectic and cultural similarities with Chongqing. The close geographical location also renders Chengdu a remote “other” that was of particular importance during the Cold War. National plans such as the Third

Front have shaped the cityscape and influenced the local culture; correspondingly, cinematic Chengdu reflects and critiques the consequences of various social and political events. The devastating Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008 destroyed a number of cities, and the cityscape of Chengdu was also partially damaged. The city thus becomes a site marked by trauma and instability in the films set there, but also a space that offers a potential new start for its characters.

Chapter Four Cinematic Chengdu

This chapter will examine cinematic Chengdu through two films, Jia Zhangke's 2008 *24 City* and Li Yu's 2011 *Buddha Mountain*. I will explore the relationship between city and history, and city and political reorientation in the reform era by looking into details about the spatial transformation in Chengdu reflected in *24 City*. The "docufiction" made by Jia Zhangke represents a disappearing utopia with its fifty years of socialist history. The generational gap in consuming and appropriating social spaces, and the transition of the urban space from production space into consumption space is unfolded in the narrative of different generations living in the city. According to Soja, "history defines the power of place" and "by recovering and preserving the history of places and spaces, we can recover and preserve our collective selves much better than if we forget the past and repeat our mistakes and injustices" (Soja 1996, p. 192). The highly-concentrated socialist history of a state factory, and the dense social, cultural and historical narrative are presented in a corresponding spatial form. On the other hand, *Buddha Mountain* sets out to explore the disintegration of the traditional family unit in contemporary Chinese urban space. Loss of home in the city resonates with the loss of faith and life due to the devastating earthquake that occurred in 2008 in the province. Characters in the film are shown as drifters, driven from place to place because of the trend of demolition and construction, and impacted by accidents, mobility and imposed spatial oppression associated with the urban space. I will explore the different ambience and areas utilised by characters, and examine more closely the relationships between urban space and behaviour, and conclude that the physical features of the buildings and the appearance of objects that are used have a psychological and emotional influence that may have nothing to do with their practical use (Jorn 1996, p. 51).

An overview of the city Chengdu

Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan Province, has a long history and is a well-known tourism site. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the contemporary administrative area of Sichuan province used to be named *Shu*. This area includes the present provincial capital of Chengdu, its surrounding plains and adjacent territories in western Sichuan (Sage 1992, pp. 2-3). Encircled by the Daba-Wushan mountain ridges to the north-east and Chuanxi Plateau to the south-west, the area was unable to establish a connection to the outside world except through the Yangtze River in ancient times. Li Bai (701-762 A.D), the romantic poet of the Tang dynasty, composed the following poem describing the difficulty of accessing the *Shu* area:

> the road to *Shu* is more difficult than ascending to heaven [*Shudao nan, nan yu shang qingtian*].

Chengdu is located in the Chengdu basin in south-western China and has been described as the "country of heaven" [*Tianfu zhiguo*] for its pleasant climate and abundant resources. The city has maintained its name since Imperial times, and is well-known as *Rong Cheng* (lit. Cottonrose Hibiscus City) and *Jinguan Cheng* (lit. Brocade Official City). *Jinguan*, literally *Jin* means a type of brocade, *guan* refers to the government officials who manage the brocade trade, and *Cheng* is the word for city. During the West Han dynasty (206 BC–8 AD), the brocade manufactured in Chengdu was so resplendent and popular that the emperor appointed an official to manage its production and trade. Since then, Chengdu has been known nationwide as *Jinguan* and has gained increasing popularity through poems and literary works. In the film *24 City*, to be examined in the following section of this chapter, this nickname appears as a reminder of the heyday of the city and the state-owned

company. During the Three-Kingdom era (220–65), Chengdu was the capital city of *Shu*, and the region achieved significant progress in agriculture and brocade manufacture. When it came to the Tang dynasty (618–907), the city grew to be one of the most prosperous and populous in China. Brocade was regarded as the most valued product dedicated to the emperor of the Tang Dynasty.

During the Qing dynasty, the last imperial dynasty in China, Chengdu became the economic, cultural and political centre of the upper Yangtze River. It was noted that:

> Sichuan overlooks China, and Chengdu is the centre of Sichuan, with fertile lands, rich natural resources, high population density, well-developed production of silk, many historical sites, and beautiful scenery. It is the hub of transportation coming from or going to Shaanxi, Gansu, Hunan, Hubei, Yunnan, Guizhou, Qinghai, and Tibet (cited in Wang 1998a, p. 36).

Large numbers of foreign visitors to the city agreed that the province was "one of the fairest and richest corners of the Chinese Empire" (cited in Adshead 1984, p. 3). By the end of the nineteenth century, the city remained a conventional imperial city with little Western impact and maintained its traditional life style and culture more visibly than cities such as Shanghai and Beijing (cited in Wang 1998a, p. 36).

Today, inhabitants of Chengdu can still access the history of the Three-Kingdom Era through a number of well-preserved historical relics, architecture, poetry, Sichuanese operas and various kinds of artistic works. Some historical sites have become popular tourist and religious destinations, and also essential trademarks of contemporary Chengdu, for example, The Wuhou Shrine (in memory of the prime minister of the *Shu* state during the Three-Kingdom Era), Du Fu Thatched Cottage (in memory of the most acclaimed realist poet of the Tang Dynasty) and Wenshu Monastery (initially built in the Sui Dynasty (581 AD – 618

AD) and rebuilt in the Qing Dynasty (1679)). These examples of classic architecture have remained in the centre of Chengdu for hundreds of years, witnessing the transformation of the city under different regimes.

In 2008, the magnitude 8.0 Wenchuan earthquake struck the province, devastating the city and causing heavy loss of life. The seriously earthquake-stricken areas of Sichuan Province drew nationwide attention in the ensuing reconstruction. Documentaries, feature films and a myriad of reports followed, and Chengdu and adjacent areas received significant media exposure and exploration.

Chengdu in film

Cinematic space is a constructed space created by filmmakers who make aesthetic and thematic choices. It is an ideological and cultural space, and "a storehouse of epistemological power", and the "conceived space" (in Lefebvre's definition) or the "Secondspace" (Soja's term) that contains "utopian thought and vision, of the semiotician or decoder, and of the purely creative imagination of some artists and poets" (Soja 1996, p. 67). Filmmaking starts with the perceived space or the "Firstspace", which refers to the "materialised, socially produced, empirical space" and provides the material and geographical and spatial ground for inhabitants, scientists and artists to conceive and imagine" (Soja 1996, p. 66). To represent and configure such real-and-imagined space, filmmakers may employ long takes or montage editing to expose "melodramatic emotion through spatial *mise-en-scène* (space being as much directed and stylised, and therefore, produced, with the help of lighting and cutting)" (Teo 2013, p. 149). Hence, cinematic cities create a social and cultural space for spectators to contextualise and decode western China. What is more important is that this cinematic conceived space is also:

> tied to the relations of production and, especially, to the order or design that they impose. Such order is constituted via control over knowledge, signs, and codes: over the means of deciphering spatial practice and hence over the production of spatial knowledge (Soja 1996, p. 67).

In the context of China, "the relations of production" before the reform era followed a Socialist institution, under which the urban spatial design and city function were ascribed to a series of particular spatial practices and productions of space. Cinematic representation about the particular spatial arrangements and relationships between the space and people help us to reflect and recognise the invisible power of space on the human body, mind and interpersonal relations.

Urban development of most Chinese cities followed Chairman Mao's configuration to build "a system of cities whose size was determined not by free market forces but by the ratio of the productive working population to the total population; an urban economy focused on production rather than consumption" (McGee et al. 2007, p. 34). Consequently, urban space in mainland China was arranged by "the principles of uniformity, standardisation and classlessness" (McGee et al. 2007, p. 34). This was most clearly demonstrated where:

> housing was arranged and built in a standardised manner. There was no central business district, and the city centre was a ceremonial public space for political gatherings such as those found in Beijing's Tiananmen Square during the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s (McGee et al. 2007, p. 34).

The urban spaces, designed and built according to socialist ideals of uniformity and collectivism, are "representations of power and ideology, of control and surveillance" (Soja 1996, p. 67). Such arrangements are fully exhibited in Jia Zhangke's Chengdu-based feature *24 City* (2008), exemplifying that the concrete space is a result of "political choice, the

impetus of an explicit political project, that gives special attention and particular contemporary relevance to the spaces of representation" (Soja 1996, p. 68).

Chengdu's city planning was politically oriented, and industrial production units spread across the urban area. Administratively, a sophisticated bureaucratic system was developed to allocate jobs and residences for urbanites, and population mobility was monitored and controlled by the *hukou* system (McGee et al. 2007, p. 34). Working units for industrial and military production, usually with attached dwelling and entertainment spaces, were established across China in the pre-reform era. For instance, the Beijing-based military compound shown in *In the Heat of the Sun* [*Yangguang can lan de rizi*] (dir. Jiang Wen, 1994) contains a teenage boy's fantasy of romance, heroism and his final disillusionment in the 1970s. In *Eleven Flowers* [*Wo shiyi*] (dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 2012), a community attached to a state-owned factory located in south-western China is depicted, showing a group of dislocated Shanghai workers' cautious conduct in a lingering revolutionary atmosphere. Similarly, in Teng Wenji's 1982 *A Corner in the City* set in Shanghai, a well-organised industrial site is juxtaposed with an urban village where the workers of the industrial unit dwell. Whether a compound community or an urban village, all the industrial units are built to ensure:

> neighbourhood familiarity, conformity and citizen involvement in public affairs, minimal differentiation in income, consumption patterns, religious customs and lifestyles, and rigid taboos on alternative forms of dress, expression, ritual life and communication that did not conform to the socialist convention (cited in McGee et al. 2007, p. 34).

This strategy of city planning transforms the urban space into a series of subordinate centripetal spaces where those who are able to settle down are regarded as having an "iron

bowl" that guarantees a position with high security and stability. Centripetal space in this case means that, in spatial terms, such kinds of state-owned enterprises with attached staff dormitory, school and even hospital confine people to self-reliant and inclusive realms. Here, people undertake similar jobs, receive similar salaries, live in identical households and have the same group of people as colleagues, neighbours and friends. They all have one purpose—to play their trivial part in constructing an industrialised and powerful country. Temporally, insiders of this space are provided with a lifelong "iron bowl", and usually the next generation are allowed to take over the "bowl" from the retired parents. Given the adherent stability and decent social position, the socialist space is regarded as a desirable utopia for the insiders and outsiders in the socialist era, becoming a centripetal space that attracts people, resources and capital from outside. However, with the introduction of the reform policy in 1978, it became a space where inhabitants "search for emancipatory change and freedom from domination" (Soja 1996, p. 70).

With the massive economic and social reformation that began in the early 1980s, such state-owned enterprises in many cities were demolished to make way for a consumer-oriented society. Entertainment and residential complexes sprang up across the urban space, and people, either from the city or the countryside, gained far more mobility than in the pre-reform era. Correspondingly, the uniform and collectivist arrangements and social relations rooted in socialist institutions began to be discarded and were replaced by commercialism and individualism. The 1980s becomes a watershed that breaks the centripetal space under the socialist economic system, and witnesses the formation of a centrifugal space created by a socialist market and facilitated by the interprovincial highways and railways. A similar phenomenon occurred in the 1950s US where the end of the Second World War and the

growth of highways stimulated the transformation of urban representation and the role of space (Dimendberg 2004, p. 178). The tremendous force of the Chinese socialist market in dispersing capital, resources, technology and labour on various scales ranged from the local, provincial, regional, national to transnational in the post-socialist era. The commercial and consumer-dominated spaces constructed after the 1980s expanded the cityscape far beyond the original urban fringes and constantly redefined the skyline.

Cinematic representations of Chengdu and its nearby cities have two competing styles—either primitive or modern. Action thriller *Mysterious Grand Buddha* [*Shenmi de dafo*] (dir. Zhang Huaxun, 1980), melodrama *The King of Masks* [*Bian lian*] (dir. Wu Tianming, 1997) and black humour allegory *Design of Death* [*Sha sheng*] (dir. Guan Hu, 2012) show distinctive natural beauty and primitive cultural landscapes of the area. Urban drama *A Narrow Lane Celebrity* [*Xiaoxiang mingliu*] (dir. Cong Lianwen, 1985) is set in a small Sichuanese town and alternates between a series of flashbacks of a neighbourhood's traumatic experiences during the Cultural Revolution and the lingering influence of devastating sufferings on characters' present situations. *Ripples across Stagnant Water* [*Kuang*, lit. *The Unrestrained*] (dir. Ling Zifeng, 1992) focuses on consecutive conflicts between the commoners, the local secret societies (called *paoge*, brother gangster) and missionaries in the late nineteenth century (1894-1901). *Paoge*, also known as Sworn Brothers, are gangsters identified with rough appearance and strange clothes, who "established their turfs in the teahouses or other places and took responsibility for maintaining peace, resolving conflicts and protecting economic interests in the area" (Wang 1998a, p. 57). Ling employs a panoramic view to show the flourishing domestic industrial and commercial culture in the context of the invasion of Western capitalism at the end of the

nineteenth century. In addition, the film reflects the majority of Chinese people's suspicion of western medicine and hostility towards Christian churches and missionaries. However, as the title of the film indicates, the isolated hinterland area is like "stagnant water" and the Western influence can only stir up slight ripples.

Mysterious Grand Buddha (Figure 31) is the first action film made after the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Set in Leshan, a small city two hours' drive from Chengdu, the film unfolds with a journey in search of and to protect buried treasure raised for the maintenance of the Grand Buddha. The film was a box-office hit with its dramatic plot and kinetic action sequences, and was regarded as the first commercial film in mainland China after the Cultural Revolution (Wang 1998b; Zhang 2004).

Figure 31. The Grant Buddha & boat tracker: in *Mysterious Grand Buddha*

The King of Masks, also based in Leshan, depicts an aged "face-changing" performer's difficult journey to secure a proper successor to pass down his techniques and talents. The film realistically showcases local street scenes and ordinary people's limited means of entertainment in the impoverished city, plagued by extreme sexism and corrupt local government during the 1920s. Face-changing is an essential magic trick in Sichuan opera, which also appears in *Mysterious Grand Buddha* as a startling addition to the plot. Both Leshan-based films deploy local legends, native arts (face-changing and fire-breathing) and the riverside Grant Buddha to depict an alternative cultural and natural landscape.

Design of Death (2012) is an allegorical story based in a Qiang community, an ethnic minority living south of Chengdu. It presents an enclosed living space under an autonomous administration (Figure 32). As a remote isolated kingdom, old traditions and practices remain influential in the small town. For instance, a widow must be drowned as funeral sacrifice for her dead husband, and impoverished people save every penny for a grand funeral ceremony. Yet one man stands against all these morbid practices, and, as a result, he becomes a thorn in the side of the entire town. Meanwhile, the town is frequently struck by earthquakes, which symbolise the pressing and enormous exterior influence on the small kingdom. The exotic built space and allegorical narrative explicitly indicate certain obsolete traditions and practices that remain in China. The earthquake, a clear reminder of the catastrophic earthquake that occurred in Sichuan province in 2008, combined with these odd social practices, become devastating forces that threaten the existence of the small town.

Figure 32. The village & the widow as funeral sacrifice: in *Design of Death*

On the other hand, the depiction of Chengdu presents a highly modernised city characterised by local cuisine, the adorable panda, Mah-jongg, tea houses and a leisurely life style. In 2003, Zhang Yimou made a short promotional video about contemporary Chengdu, a city he described, "once you have been there, you won't want to leave". In this video, Chengdu is presented as both modern and traditional, peaceful and dynamic. The extensive urbanisation does not destroy the leisurely atmosphere of the city. On the contrary,

modernity and tradition co-exist harmoniously. Five years later, when the city was hit by the Wenchuan Earthquake, the video was rediscovered online and satirised as "a city once you have been there, you cannot escape from". Despite the joke, the short video received more public attention from areas outside Chengdu. The third person point of view of the narration served more persuasively than official tourism promotion to attract tourists and investors, domestic and from abroad, to this dynamic city.

After 2008, the distinctive natural landscape and cultural heritages of Chengdu and its nearby cities, especially the disaster-stricken area, drew greater attention from filmmakers. Documentaries such as *China's Unnatural Disaster: The Tears of Sichuan Province* [*Jiehou Tianfu zongheng lei*] (dir. Jon Alpert & Matthew O'Neill, 2009), *Buried* [*Yanmai*] (dir. Wang Libo, 2009) and *People First* [*Renmin zhishang*] (dir. Chen Zhen, 2009) were made immediately after the earthquake. In the following years, more documentaries and films were released, exploring the ruins, heavy loss of life and local survivors' troubled situations wrought by the disaster. The above films foreground the positive roles of the local and central government in the process of reconstruction, and expose and interrogate a series of problems such as corrupt officials and low quality building construction. Overall, these cinematic representations tend to anticipate a fresh start for the affected towns and cities. *Fallen City* [*Shang Cheng*] (dir. Zhao Qi, 2011) focuses on three earthquake survivors' journey in search of identity and hope, while another documentary, *The Next Life* [*Huozhe*] (dir. Fan Jian, 2011), features a couple who have lost their daughter in the earthquake and try to conceive another baby to redeem themselves.

There are also feature films made on the disaster theme, such as *Aftershock* [*Tangshan da dizhen*] (dir. Feng Xiaogang, 2010), which intertwines the two most

devastating earthquakes in contemporary China—Tangshan in 1976 and Wenchuan in 2008. It shows how natural disasters traumatise individuals and families, and how common people facing such disasters struggle with moral dilemmas. *Frightening Moment* [*Jingtian dongdi*] (dir. Wang Jia & Shen Dong, 2009) and *The Melody of Qiang Flute* [*Qiangdi youyou*] (dir. Miao Yue, 2011) concentrate more on the rebuilding of the affected areas with assistance from all over China and paying respect for the local survivors' endeavour and optimism.

Apart from films engaging with the disaster directly, post-earthquake cinematic Chengdu becomes an optimal space for emotional remedy and contemplation on existence. There are a number of works that treat themes such as fate and faith, suffering and redemption: for example, romance *A Good Rain Knows* [*Haoyu shijie*] (dir. Hur Jin-ho, 2009), science fiction film *Chengdu, I Love You* [*Guoqu weilai*] (dir. Cui Jian & Fruit Chan, 2009), TV film *A Love Story in Chengdu* [*Qingyu Chengdu*] (dir. You Xiaojin & Lü Gengxin, 2011) and *Buddha Mountain*. In most of these films, the earthquake of unprecedented magnitude becomes a lingering nightmare for the local people. It drives people to reflect on their own personal sufferings and the meaning of existence. More significantly, faith, the long-absent subject in contemporary China since the Cultural Revolution, begins to be touched upon, questioned and contested. An alternative representation of Chengdu is contributed by Jia Zhangke in *24 City*. Made and released before the earthquake, it seeks to preserve a disappearing socialist utopia built half a century ago in this hinterland city. It records an industrial Chengdu that is planned and designed in the service of national security under an enormous project—The Third Front (or The Third Line).

Apart from Chengdu, adjacent areas of the city have also been increasingly presented on screen since 2008. Just like those people from the rural areas of Chongqing municipality who are determined to leave their hometown for a better future, the rural Sichuanese are also eager to seek new opportunities in the eastern coastal region and are devoted to bringing a decent life to their next generation and rural families. *Last Train Home* [*Guitu lieche*] (dir. Fan Lixin, 2009) is a documentary that includes three different spaces used by the protagonists: a roaring factory, a crowded train station, and their scenic rural hometown. The modern city Guangzhou is reduced to a busy plant where the migrant couple work, and a railway station where they have to queue up for days for tickets home for a family reunion during the spring festival. They are like migrant birds who travel between the major city and the remote home, working hard to provide a better material life for the next generation, but find to their disappointment that the coming-of-age daughter wishes to join them to work in the megacity. For the girl, living in the megacity would be a part of a "playful-constructive behaviour", however, such expectation of the city is completely different from her parents' experience characterised by the "oppressive living conditions imposed through…technocratic city plans" (Andreotti 1996, p. 7). The documentary asks potent questions. When modernisation draws a great number of migrant workers to the eastern coastal cities to demolish, to construct, produce and maintain the glistening urban spaces, what happens to their rural families? Will they eventually bring a bright future for their next generation? Ironically, a better life does not necessarily come along with an exhausting job, and the next generation eventually takes the same path as they do.

Cinematic Chengdu, to a certain degree, is defined by unique Sichuanese elements such as hot pot cuisine, pandas, tea houses, mah-jongg and Sichuan operas as they are

immediately identifiable and distinguishable for Chinese people. However, for many years, its hinterland location and impoverished rural areas also made it an inaccessible and unpresentable site. Unlike contemporary filmic representations of Beijing and Shanghai that were recognised as models of modernisation as long ago as the 1980s, films set in Chengdu appear more like the dilapidated backyard of the highly urbanised eastern coastal region. After the Earthquake, it became a place to lament the devouring disasters, and to contemplate the fast-pace of urbanisation and the ultimate meaning of life. Meanwhile, it has always been a place for romance and leisure.

The next section will examine Chengdu as it is represented in *24 City* and *Buddha Mountain*. In both films, municipal Chengdu is both home and not home for its characters, who are troubled by a sense of loss. It encapsulates multiple temporalities and stands for a young and dynamic space characterised by a crisis of faith, possibility and hope.

***24 City*: making way for a modern space**

24 City recounts the rise and fall of a state-owned enterprise by orchestrating stories of nine interviewees from across three different generations. The account of the past history of the enterprise alternates with the rapid demolition of the previous working spaces, creating a strong sense of melancholy and loss. The corporation, known as *Chengfa Jituan* (lit. Chengdu Engine Group), is usually referred to as Factory 420 by the workers (hereafter Factory 420), and used to employ nearly 30,000 workers and support around 100,000 dependent family members. The factory was built to produce and repair engines for military aircraft in 1958, but in the film, it undergoes a deconstruction and is juxtaposed with a rising commercial complex named 24 City. The name “24 City” derives from an old poem about

Chengdu, which is fully written in white Chinese characters on the screen in the opening sequences of the film:

> The twenty-four city is brightened by hibiscus flowers, Jinguan has always been thriving [*Ershisi cheng furonghua, jinguan zixi cheng fanhua*].

The poem forms a picture of a prosperous and historical city. However, accompanied by an elegiac soundtrack, the film is inflected with melancholy.

Following the old poem about Chengdu is a long take tracing a running truck that carries a set of machines painted green, passing down a grey-laden street. Bicycles, motorcycles, buses and sedans occupy the street, and identical buildings line one side, appearing dirty and ashy under the gloomy sky. Along with the melancholic sound track, two Chinese characters, Chengdu (成都), emerge in black on the misty grey background (Figure 33).

Figure 33. Street view of Chengdu & an abandoned room: in *24 City*

The camera then moves inside Factory 420, zooming in for a close-up of a floor lamp and a meter that stand still in the steamy and empty factory. The spaces captured in the opening sequences include the front gate, the major entrance of the corporation, the interior, heavy machinery, the gathering hall, the dim grey stairs, and the empty abandoned rooms (Figure 34), which will all be wiped out soon. Both the city and the state-owned factory are

enveloped in a grimy and misty atmosphere. Contrasted with the dynamic and prosperous scenario conveyed by the poem, the city and its important production unit—the state-owned enterprise—appear bleak and mournful. Demolishing the material space may take only a couple of months, but the wrenching psychological disruption and vacuum can linger for generations.

Figure 34. The opening sequences of *24 City*

24 City weaves nine interviewees' personal experiences into a complete narrative of the rise and fall of Factory 420 with a history of over half a century. Jia Zhangke selects five non-professional actors and four professional actors and combines the style of documentary and fictional narrative creating a "docufiction" (Deppman 2014). Jia wishes "to project over hundreds of people's memory onto several characters" and claims that "history is always made by fiction and fact" (Liu 2008, p. 42). This "docufictional" style is experimented with to represent or synthesise the hundreds of real-life stories told by workers from different

generations. Utilising such a compound style with the strong impulse of the documentary form, Jia explains:

> There have been changes in China in the past one or two years that have come so swiftly that if I don't film as fast as I can I will never be able to catch up. I feel the need to use documentary to record the changes we are experiencing right now … I must use documentary to tell my stories and prevent not only the disappearance of memories but also the disappearance of the architecture, the buildings, the disappearance of the whole generation of people after 1949 (Nochimson 2009, pp. 421-413).

The reiterated word "disappearance" in this interview emphasises the trademark process that is occurring in contemporary Chinese cities. The disappearance of material spaces and the generation of people who lived through the socialist era triggers a mournful nostalgia. The first generation, who were uprooted from their north-eastern hometowns to come to Chengdu, hold a strong collective view towards the state and individual life. They followed the central government's orders unconditionally and devoted their entire lives to constructing an industrial and military base for the country during the 1950s and 1960s. As one retired worker states, they had to work extra hours because of the ongoing Korean War. The next generation followed in their footsteps, becoming workers in the same factory after high school, attaining various allocations from the government as their parents did. The third generation, however, either refuses to wear the factory uniform that used to symbolise a decent social status and stable income, or has never entered the factory, not to mention working in it.

A socialist spatial design for working and living

24 City opens with a crowd of people riding bicycles and flooding into the factory. It is the most common routine that could be seen across cities of China during the 1980s and

1990s. The bird's-eye view shows four Chinese characters in red, *Chengfa Jituan* (lit. Chengdu Engine Group, 成发集团), that stand high on the top of the front gate. Workers riding bicycles look as small as ants. The small spot-like figures suggest negated or exploited individual interest and compliance in the institutional, political, economic concerns of the state. The camera then cuts to workers in navy-blue uniforms moving into a lobby, making their way up to a meeting hall. There, the chorus "Ode to the motherland" is performed with solemn faces by the workers. This scene is then followed by an overview of the empty stairs of another building, where the first interviewee is captured walking upstairs slowly and then standing still in front of a broken window. His name is He Xikun, a worker of Factory 420. He plays himself in the feature, representing the majority of the workers like himself, who are silent, serious and laden with anxiety. Jia frames him in a spacious room, with pieces of broken glass on the window sill and dust-covered light bulbs. It is raining outside, and raindrops hit the windows regularly. All the spatial details are evidence of an abandoned space and a sad man who is forced to leave the working space. In contrast to this gloomy scenario, the auditorium interview with Guan Fengjiu, the deputy secretary of the party committee of Factory 420, shows an upbeat picture of the factory. The backdrop of the auditorium stage shows a huge picture (Figure 35), with the Great Wall foregrounded and an array of missiles set symmetrically on each side creating an arch down which rows of tanks ride deep in the background.

Figure 35. The stage backdrop of the auditorium of Factory 420: in *24 City*

The picture testifies "not only to the military's strength and its weaponry, but also to its role as the aforementioned 'Great Iron Wall'" (Schultz 2015, p. 53). Guan recalls the initiation of the state-owned enterprise. It was hastily built with the assistance of the well-established state-owned Factory 111 located in Shengyang, Liaoning Province (in the north-east). A large number of workers along with heavy machinery were moved to Chengdu, Sichuan Province (in the south-west) in 1958 as a result of Chairman Mao's concern with national security during the Cold War. It is one of thousands of industrial units built under a massive project—the Third Front.

The Third Front was an enormous political and economic project carried out by the central government between the 1960s and 1980s, and the "Great Iron Wall" was built to confront the complicated international situation where the Sino-Soviet Union relationship deteriorated and the USA increased military involvement in Vietnam during the 1960s (Naughton 1988, p. 353). The PRC central government decided to move the existing industries, especially armament factories that were originally located in Beijing, Shanghai and the north-east to the north-west and south-west to create "a huge self-sufficient industrial base area to serve as a strategic reserve in the event of China being drawn into war"

(Naughton 1988, p. 351). Geographically, provinces located in the remote hinterland have mountain ridges as natural barriers against military threats from the US and the Soviet Union. As a result, a significant number of industrial factories and armament units were transferred. The western region received unprecedented political and economic support under the Third Front Development Project.

The massive project exerted far-reaching economic and social influence on western China. In particular, it brought clear changes to the spatial arrangement of the urban space where:

> residential segregation was unacceptable to the socialist regime and a neighbourhood concept was introduced to arrange the city into self-contained units (*danwei*) in which the workers lived and worked. These were often housing compounds attached to factories in which workers from the work unit lived (Buck 1984, pp. 5-26).

Neighbourhoods and communities were organised with factories side by side; hence, the urban space was divided into a number of industrial centres with attached dwelling and recreational spaces. Factory 420 was one example of such urban spatial arrangement at the time. It was hastily built on the outskirts of Chengdu in 1958. The workers, most of whom had migrated from the north-east, brought their lifestyle and customs to this hinterland city. Working and dwelling in the enclosed space created by Factory 420, they barely communicated with the city until the beginning of the reform era. In the film, as Song Weidong (Chen Jianbin) confirms in his narration, "Factory 420 is an independent and self-reliant world." He finishes primary and middle education in the factory-run school, and takes over his father's position immediately after graduating from high school. He consumes beverages produced by an auxiliary factory and entertains himself in the factory-owned

cinema, playground and swimming pool. As Jia comments, “birth, sickness, old age and death can all be done within the realm” (Jia 2009, p. 4). For Song, the only connection was fighting with the local kids from nearby suburbs. Recalling the fighting, he says that the *danwei* kids always beat the local kids as he and his peers often outweighed their opponents in terms of the number of participants. The collective power of the state-owned enterprise separated the *danwei* kids from the local ones. *Danwei* people spoke their own dialect, cooked in a hometown style, refused to learn the Sichuan dialect and despised those who spoke that dialect.

However, after the market economy became fully established in the 1980s, although state interference persisted, private businesses began to spring up across the country and most of the state-owned enterprises were soon confronted with the prospect of being dismantled. Consequently, the working class, the most advanced and lauded group in the pre-reform era, gradually slipped from the top of the social ladder to the bottom of the social, economic and cultural strata in the reform era. The laid-off workers, represented by Hou Lijun (Jia Zhangke’s third interviewee who was dismissed in 1994), became the new poor in the urban area. However, the suffering of the urban “new poor” in the eighties and nineties was “officially described as ‘temporary pain’ during economic reform, ‘historic sacrifice’, part of the ‘process of progresses’” (Dai 2002, p. 228). In *24 City*, this group of people correspond to Bao Shihong and his colleagues represented in *Crazy Stone* based in Chongqing. Both films reflect spatial transformations that result in the rise of commercialism. The state-owned factory undergoes demolition, and real estate developers take over the land, tear down the socialist factory, designated principally for production, and turn it into a residential and commercial complex in the service of consumption.

A long take spanning over fifteen seconds shows workers dismantling the four red Chinese characters *Chengfa jituan* (成发集团) (Figure 36). It takes place quietly and is followed by sequences where another group of workers are disposing of industrial appliances and transporting heavy machinery. The process proceeds slowly and solemnly, in contrast with the rapid installation of the new name, *Huarun Ershisi Cheng* (lit. Huarun Twenty-four City, 华润二十四城), on the top of the gate.

Figure 36. Factory 420 becomes Huarun Twenty-four City: in *24 City*

Next to the gate is a cluster of half-completed high rises under construction, accompanied by a faint sound of construction (Figure 37).

Figure 37. Construction sites next to the Factory 420: in *24 City*

The scene "situates precisely between the deterioration of the past and the incompleteness of the future, and thus offers the possibility of conceiving of both temporal directions simultaneously" (Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 46). In reality, the estate developer *Huarun*, one of

the sub-branches of the China Resources Corporation, is one of the influential real estate companies in China. It invests one third of the funding for making and naming the film (Li 2009). The Corporation represents the power of capital that incorporates and demolishes the old urban space meant for production and establishes new urban spaces of consumption under the logic of market and capitalism. Jia displays the process of deconstruction at an intentionally slow pace, in contrast to the construction accompanied with sound and fury. He foregrounds the individuals' memory, the reflection of a utopian space that existed for over half a century, and the effects of the space that has been consciously organised on the emotions and behaviour of individuals (Debord 1996a, p. 18). Jia draws a psycho-geographical map for his characters by interviewing and organising their stories in a lineated way, exposing explicit generational gaps between characters.

The vanishing socialist utopia in Chengdu

In *24 City*, just before Hou Lijun's interview, a dozen men walk across the street at night, heading to a bus station and carrying bags on their shoulders. They stop at the station, and one of them looks at the metro information, while Hou Lijun's bus is driving away. It is an interesting moment, when the old economic and social system represented by Hou—the proud working class of the pre-reform era, whose stable and decent social status has just been destroyed by economic reformation—is juxtaposed against the new economic system, which has brought its commercial/capital orientated labour force (the migrant workers with their bags) from the countryside to the urban areas. Such appropriation of spaces by social groups from both the rural and the urban areas shows the changing social conditions, especially the evolution of the long-established household registration system, the invisible wall between the rural and urban spaces before the implementation of reform and open

policies. In the Chinese context, the spatial relations become increasingly complicated in the reform era. As observed by Soja:

> spatial relations are seen to be no less complex and contradictory than historical processes, and space itself [is] refigured as inhabited and heterogeneous, as a moving cluster of points of intersection for manifold axes of power which cannot be reduced to a unified plane or organised into a single narrative (cited in Soja 1996, p. 164).

The previous simplified division between the rural and the urban space declines. In the film, the central government's loosening of its control over the "household registration system" (*hukou* system) can be seen from the relaxation on the control over population mobility, in particular, the rural-urban migrant workers. The *hukou* system, introduced in 1958, is a legacy of Mao's socialist regime and has been undergoing rectification since the reform era. It classified Chinese people as either agricultural or non-agricultural (Cheng & Selden 1994, p. 662). The agricultural population, registered in local communes as "the rural" [*nongmin*], earn their basic living from land but are excluded from state welfare benefits. On the contrary, the non-agricultural population are recognised as "the urban" [*shimin*] and are "entitled to state provision of rationed food grain, cooking oils, employment, housing, education, medical care and other welfare benefits" (McGee et al. 2007, p. 35). Characters in *24 City* represent "the urban", as seen in the previous analysis, as those who live in allocated houses, usually constructed in a plain Soviet Union style. In the pre-reform era:

> hukou had functioned as an invisible yet effective "wall" separating the urban from the rural society and prohibiting rural-urban migration because any unauthorized migrants in the city could hardly survive without the supply of food, jobs, housing, health care and other urban services that are all firmly controlled by the state (cited in McGee et al. 2007, p. 35).

The invisible “wall” separating the agricultural and non-agricultural population works highly effectively in two aspects: first, it strictly controls population mobility, especially rural-urban migration; second, it guarantees the entitlement of the non-agricultural population to access to social and economic benefits. Consequently, the agricultural population was excluded from the state welfare system that made it impossible for migrant workers to survive in the urban area in the pre-reform era. It is therefore a significant mechanism to control population mobility and distribute state welfare. It not only marks citizens’ social status but also places different social groups in different spatial organisations.

The working unit, in addition to the *hukou* system, functioned effectively to maintain social and economic order in the urban area. Employees from any state-owned enterprise such as Factory 420 were part of a privileged leading class in mainland China. Factory 420 was even superior to common state-owned factories as it related to military production during the Cold War. Even during the severely widespread famine period in the beginning of the 1960s, workers of Factory 420 were generously provided with all kinds of food supplies due to their significant role in military and political sections, as Hao Dali (Lü Liping), a model worker of Factory 420 confirmed. In its heyday, she could subsidise her relatives back in north-eastern China. The intertwined systems provided people with a clear vision of their future: what school they can enter, what job they will be undertaking and even what kind of spouse they will marry. Every turning point of life from birth to death was determined by this gigantic and omnipotent factory.

However, with the state retreating from political campaigns and military movements, from the 1980s it began to focus on economic growth, and the military related industry was no longer a priority for the central government. Consequently, the state-owned factory lost

its political and economic advantage in the reform era, and struggled to adjust to the socialist market by producing household appliances. Working class people fell from their privileged position, economically and socially. They became the subsidised ones, receiving help from relatives involved in private business who had become well-off. As Hao Dali says sentimentally in her interview, her niece sends her 500 RMB to help her out. The switched roles of subsidiser and subsidised highlights the falling of the old system and break down of social classes, and engenders a strong sense of delusion with regard to Dali's current hand-to-mouth existence.

Having retired, Hao Dali lives alone in the apartment allocated by the company. Her little son went missing during the journey from the north-east to Chengdu. The ferry, which was carrying industrial crew and heavy machinery, had to resume the journey after a short recess, and Hao Dali suddenly found to her astonishment that her son was lost. She recalls that "as the company was managed in a military fashion, workers were obliged to return to the ferry as soon as the bugle rang". She never had an opportunity to search for her son afterwards. People like her and her husband who were involved in a military related state-owned company had to leave familial and personal issues behind and devote themselves to the national unit. As noted by Chris Berry, characters in Chinese classical films love the Party, the nation, the People's Liberation Army, the workers, the peasants, Chairman Mao and the people, but rarely love their own family nor do they value romantic love, "even where love for family and romantic love do occur, they are subordinate to the larger didactic concerns" (2004, p. 100). The classical films in Berry's analysis typically refer to those made during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and featured larger than life characters, clear-cut class struggle, revolutionary stories and ideological propaganda. Hao Dali in *24 City*

partially resonates with such a character type, but Jia discloses her hidden side by situating her in a door frame and slowly panning across the interior space that preserves furniture and domestic decorations that pertain to a typical socialist style. She is alone, in bad health, poor and still mentally living in the socialist heydays. The sequences produce a sense of nostalgia through the outdated domestic furniture and the way Hao's face lights up when recalling her days of being a privileged model worker in the socialist era. It is a period that "has conveniently come to signify values and ideals that are putatively absent today—idealism, egalitarianism, self-sacrifice, and innocence" (Lu 2007a, p. 131). In an examination of China's socialist era (1949-1978) represented in cultural products in the post-socialist (1978–present) era, both Jason McGrath and Sheldon Lu perceive that they convey a "reflective" type of nostalgia rather than a "restorative" type in the context of China (Lu 2007a; McGrath 2008). The filmic representation of the socialist past and the characters' recalling of or "longing for" the period "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (cited in Lu 2007a, p. 132). This group of people, now in their fifties or sixties, cannot integrate their past experience with the emerging new reality. For example, Hao Dali still dresses in a plain and socialist style outfit, wearing no makeup and with her hair carefully tied up. Yet when she waits for someone in an office, realising that the girl sitting in the opposite seat is wearing makeup, she questions:

> Hao: You're allowed to put makeup at work nowadays?
>
> Girl: Yes, of course. If working in a company with foreign investments, you have to wear makeup. Otherwise, you are violating the office etiquette.
>
> Hao: Foreign company? Isn't this a state-owned company?

The girl then silently takes out a tissue and cleans her lipstick. Dress code at work and office etiquette have changed over time, but Hao Dali still sticks to the old conventions. Hao's paranoid insistence on the socialist conventions shows how the affinity of memory and space varied from a city to a factory or even an office. Such place-based behaviour codes and heritage are often marketed as nostalgia (Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 116). In the context of contemporary China, "it is a nostalgia of the past as duration rather than as a simple, quickly recognised snapshot", and reflects the "multiple temporal frames of reference that actually coexist at any particular historical moment" (McGrath 2008, p. 152). The starkly contrasting situations that confront Hao before and after the reform era are displayed through her solitude in domestic space and conflicts with the new generation. When the camera pans slowly over Hao's home interior, a melancholy tone and a strong sense of nostalgia arise. The fixed and slow motion of the camera invites viewers to reflect and recall the socialist history, at the same time to ponder the present with a critical view on the socialist and post-socialist history, personal memories and the future.

The transition from the socialist utopia space of production to post-socialist space of consumption illustrates the power and ideological reorientation in mainland China in the reform era. As the discourse of urbanisation and modernisation in the reform era are the "'dominating' spaces of regulatory and 'ruly' discourse, these mental spaces, are thus the representations of power and ideology, of control and surveillance" (Soja 1996, p. 67). When state-owned working units transformed into self-dependent enterprises, they functioned no longer as units that shouldered the responsibilities of supplying employees and their families with schooling, work, housing and medical care. Rather, they became highly commercially-oriented and provided only professional positions. Divesting themselves of redundant

employees and maximising each employee's value became common practice, and hiring cheaper labour and introducing more advanced machines became essential for a self-reliant company. Hence, the pressing contradiction between the demand for a cheap labour force in a modern market economy and the political limitations of population mobility stimulated the state to revise the household registration system (*hukou*) to facilitate economic development. The 1980s and 1990s saw gradual relaxation in population mobility, and a large portion of the rural population moved to towns and cities and came to compose the major labour force in the socialist market.

Though the classifications of agricultural to non-agricultural status still persist in contemporary China, the *hukou* system has been undergoing constant amendments along with the changing economic and social landscape. For instance, significant progress has been made towards eliminating the gap between agricultural and non-agricultural *hukou*; the central state has "abolished the *hukou* requirement in its hiring of new civil servants; presumably the positions are now open to all citizens, including rural residents, regardless of *hukou* status" in recent years (Wing Chan & Buckingham 2008, p. 601). The invisible wall has been "lowered and the gates are opened more and wider. But to many, the dividing wall remains, so do the gates and locks" (Chan & Zhang 1999, p. 848).

According to *24 City*, as urban *hukou* holders, all workers from Factory 420 were granted state welfare benefits. Moreover, the proliferated factory provided more material bonuses in its heyday than that of an urban *hukou* in the pre-reform era. Interviewees, including Hao Dali, Hou Lijun and Gu Minhua (Joan Chen), were the privileged ones in the previous era, whose lives were fundamentally influenced by the peaks and troughs of the *danwei* in the reform era. They don't have to struggle with the barrier created by the

"invisible wall", but they do lose their advantages and pride coming along with their urban status, especially after they are dismissed. They have to compete with an influx of agricultural people coming to the urban area for employment opportunities. In Hou Lijun's case, she encounters great difficulties finding a new job after being laid off. She has been an itinerant vendor, tailor and peddler. Some of them like Hao Dali still live in their allocated dormitory. The dormitory buildings are usually four or five stories high, with a dark grey façade and an identical style. Such plain buildings can be found all across cities at different scales, from megacities like Beijing and Shanghai to small towns located deep in the remote hinterland. They are homogeneous socialist structures, representing the idealism of equality and uniformity. They reduce the individual workers to the role of a cog in the machine of national industrialisation and modernisation. Therefore, cinematic Chengdu is configured as a site dominantly shaped by national policies and political choices of the state at different historical periods. When reading the *Battleship Potemkin* (dir. Sergei Eisenstein, 1925), Seremetakis concludes that the cinema screen not only enables audiences to see the protagonists and events, but "(through eidetic reduction) to 'see' the idea of the unity of the revolutionary people, the collective sovereignty of the masses, the idea of international solidarity, the idea of revolution itself" (1996, p. 52). Hence, as Seremetakis continues, "if the Soviet screen provided a prosthetic experience of collective power, the Hollywood screen provided a prosthetic experience of collective desire" (1996, p. 53). Here, the Cinematic Chengdu provides a "prosthetic experience" of collective sense of loss and disillusion.

The first generation, as presented by Jia, includes Liu Xikun's master, Guan Fengjiu and Hao Dali, who were among those who established the company. Despite years of living in Chengdu, they still distinguish themselves from the local Chengdu by speaking their own

dialect and retaining their hometown cultural practices. Even the next generation represented by Gu Minhua (nickname Xiao Hua, played by Joan Chen), Hou Lijun and Song Weidong still hold firm to their respective customs. For example, Gu Minhua manages a Yue opera club that enables her and her friends to practice and perform the popular art form that originates in Yangtze River Delta. Gu was born and brought up in Shanghai where the Yue opera is appreciated and well-received. This remaining cultural practice singles out Gu, as Chengdu has its own traditional Sichuan opera. People like Gu are floating between the local and the outsider. Like a drifter, her life trajectory has been a journey that is "against the functionalist's idea of standardisation and rationalism" (Jorn 1996, p. 51). The next generation, born and brought up during the transitional period when the state-owned factory starts to decline, seek opportunities outside the all-inclusive space and assimilate in the city. They become buyers or journalists, and lead a totally different life from their parents. Due to globalisation, Chengdu has transformed into a pluralist modern city that encourages difference and creativity. Uniformity and collectivism advocated in the socialist era have been discarded by the young generation. The factory is relocated to a nearby town, and workers in the newly built factory are recruited from across China. Major cities like Chengdu become spaces dominated by commercialism and consumption.

Perceiving Chengdu as hometown

The opening sequences show Chengdu in a depressing and grimy tone. It is neither modern nor primitive; rather, it appears as an in-between state that resonates with the current situation of Factory 420 that has lost economic and political advantages along with the bygone planned economy. At the end of the film, Su Na (Zhao Tao) stands on the Panda TV

Tower, overlooking the city that appears as a highly modernised urban area amidst hazy air. It is followed by a contemporary poem by Wan Xia:

“Chengdu even your faded face could brighten my whole life” [*Chengdu, jin ni xiaoshi de yimian, yi zuyi rang wo rongyao yisheng*].

It is both a summary and a retrospective of the interviews in which different generations’ memories sit alongside the ongoing projects of demolition and construction, personal suffering and national policies, lingering with delusion, sorrow and more importantly, hope and pride.

Looking at a city from up high is like reading the city as a text lying before one’s eyes. As Michel de Certeau describes: “looking down like a god” when he stands on the summit of the World Trade Centre, casting a “solar Eye” towards New York City (Certeau 1984, p. 92). In *24 City*, Su Na takes the same perspective in observing Chengdu. She is a representative of Factory 420’s third generation, who escapes from the confined space of the state-owned factory and expands her walking terrain far beyond the small realm. In the final scene, there is no trace of Factory 420 and only a panoramic view of Chengdu stretching to the horizon. It is a concrete forest, identical to De Certeau’s New York, where urbanisation as a compelling force overthrows the previous and the present, forever looking at the future. For the walkers who are taking an eye-level view of the city, it turns into a subject understood and appreciated through personal preference, memory and association. Walking in the city is not merely a physical action in a concrete space; rather, it “acts out” the place spatially and links different positions together with “pragmatic contracts”, for the reason that one’s acting out of space is characterised as “present”, “discrete” and “phatic”, the person could

enunciate various kinds of relations to particular spaces (Certeau 1984, p. 98). The two distinct manners of using space or "acting out" the concrete space can be seen in *24 City*.

In *24 City*, the use of space carries explicit generational characteristics that indicate different ideological and value systems. In other words, the space materialises the "mode of existence of social relationships", as "the social relations of production have a social existence to the extent that they had a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing the space itself" (cited in Soja 1996, p. 46). In *24 City*, the first generation is summoned by national policy to migrate to Chengdu. They value collectivism and the state interest comes before the personal, and "when they had chosen to work in the system, it was often a very idealistic choice, a very pure and human choice, because they wanted to change China, to remake the human being, to bring individuals happiness" (cited in Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 123). They are more conservative, cautious and passive in mobility than the third generation represented by Su Na and Zhao Gang (Zhao Gang), who, on the contrary, tend to be more open, self-centred and positive than their parents' generation. Su Na is a private buyer travelling between Hong Kong and Chengdu to purchase goods for her rich clients. The travelling experience exposes her to different cultures, people and business opportunities. For example, she is invited by a Malaysian friend to manage a luxury restaurant on the Chengdu Panda TV Tower, despite knowing little about running a restaurant. Zhao Gang was disillusioned by his apprenticeship experience in a similar state-owned factory in Jilin Province in north-eastern China during college, and now he works at Chengdu TV as a news reporter. When he started an internship in the 1990s, the uniform started to lose its "magic" in the eyes of the younger generation. Zhao's parents view the uniform as a symbol of belonging to a well-established state-owned

enterprise, a respectable social status and stable career, but for Zhao Gang, it is seen as showing a lack of subjectivity and creativity.

Individualism has probed the understanding of the dialectic relation between state and individual, collectivism and self-value. Su Na weeps that the uniform makes her mother unrecognisable in a crowd of workers in the same grey-blue overalls. Zhao Gang equates the uniform to a boring and formulaic life. Both of them are descendants of the working class; however, compared with their parents who have been constrained within the all-inclusive factory, they are free to appropriate a much larger terrain, which can be out of Chengdu, maybe out of China. When Su Na stands at the summit of the TV Tower, director Jia puts her "into distance" from the factory and from the city (Figure 38). This view "transforms the bewitching world by which one was possessed into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it" (Certeau 1984, p. 92). The city appears as "a wave of verticals" amidst grey fog, stretching in front of both Su Na's and our eyes (Certeau 1984, p. 91). As the camera pans slowly to the left, the city unfolds like a landscape scroll, revealing itself inch by inch in front of Su Na and us, with sounds of bustling traffic and fragmented spatial appearance. The complexity and opaqueness of Chengdu is rendered as a "transparent text" in spite of the fog, in which districts, streets, and individual architecture stand out in planned areas with certain designated functions. The young generation, represented by Su Na and Zhao Gang, appear confident to understand and appropriate the different functional areas of the city.

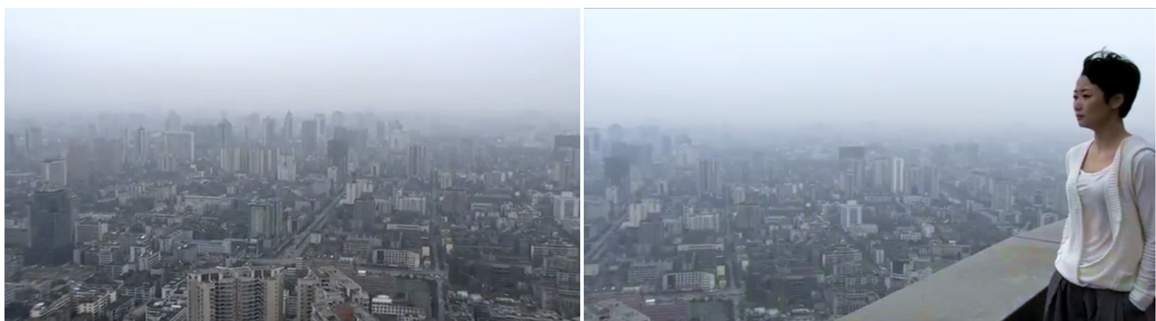

Figure 38. Panoramic view of Chengdu: in *24 City*

24 City frames the two interviewees outside the factory, with Su Na in a variety of venues, such as a moving car, a field, a rundown classroom and on the top of the TV Tower, and Zhang Gang in a well-decorated anonymous place. Their career paths and daily routines connect more to the city instead of the factory alone. Interviews with the first and second generations are juxtaposed with ruins and abandoned rooms with utilitarian half-green and half-whitewashed walls. Such walls are commonly seen in public spaces such as hospitals, schools, and government offices in socialist and post-socialist China. They are present in most of Jia's films, such as in *Still Life* (2006) and the hometown trilogy. Dilapidated rooms with half-green walls are "related to the director's own childhood memories of looking at green walls and connecting them with the idea of 'the system'. Thus, the green wall…is at once a personal memory and a collective memory" (Mello 2015, p. 145). Such personal and collective memories of green walls and uniforms belongs to the generations before Su Na and Zhao Gang. Socialist spaces with the greenish tinge are disappearing, yet the bright glamourous modern structures have not entirely claimed the space. The two things stand for uniformity, exclusiveness and a recognition of the state's power and order. Yet such ideological consensus has disappeared in Su Na and Zhang Gang's perspectives.

Both Su and Zhao are able to choose a job they desire, live in a city that feels like home, and purchase an apartment in the city for themselves and their parents. They identify with the city Chengdu, not merely with Factory 420 as their parents do, for power of capital emancipates them from the confined small world created by the state-owned company. Their home (*guxiang*) is urban Chengdu, while for their parents, it is the Factory that makes them feel at home. Their parents' "structure of feeling", "particular quality of social experience

and relationship, historically distant from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period" (Williams 1977, p. 131), has been formulated and nurtured by the factory. The first generation is uprooted from their hometown and relocated to Chengdu; thus, the north-east hometown dialect and hometown flavour become their home. They have a more complicated "structure of feeling" towards Chengdu, for home is "more than a physical location" (Wu 2011, p. 16). Those in the second generation who have gone through the company's transition from military to household appliances production and unemployment are stuck in "a sense of forever being in transition" and this "involves a nostalgic longing for home, which in this case is a community of space and time" (p. 16). For the third generation represented by Su Na and Zhao Gang, they can either speak standard Mandarin or Chengdu dialect, and both have long discarded their sense of attachment to the home that lingers in their parents or grandparents' dreams. Instead, they have found their "structure of feeling" in Chengdu and identified it as home.

Disconnection between the present and the past

24 City employs a series of old songs and film clips to create a socialist ambience and engage spectators with past space and time. Some songs and films become intertextual references to the characters' situations. As Cui reminds us, "soundtracks work in conjunction with the visual realm to create a multifaceted aura that exemplifies not only a social-historical moment but also the trajectory of popular culture itself" (Cui 2006, p. 118). Hao Dali keeps an attentive eye on a film about the Korean War, *Power Fighter in Vast Sky* [*Changkong xiongying*] (dir. Wang Feng & Wang Yabiao, 1976), while having dinner alone at home. Gu Minhua watches *Little Flower* [*Xiaohua*] (dir. Zhang Zheng & Huang Jianzhong, 1979) at the end of her interview. She has the nickname Xiaohua, identical with

the female lead in the feature, due to her attractive appearance. In fact, Joan Chen is cast in both roles—Xiaohua in the eponymous film and Gu Minhua in *24 City*. But the young and passionate Xiaohua in *Little Flower*, made over two decades earlier, has aged and become frustrated in *24 City* by her impulsive choice of moving from Shanghai to Chengdu and a series of unsuccessful relationships. For Gu Minhua, she recalls her bittersweet experience in Factory 420, and her current situation is as wretched as that of Factory 420. Song Weidong's narration is accompanied by the theme music of a Japanese soap opera *Red Suspicion* [Japanese: *Akai giwaku, Chinese: Xue Yi*] (dir. Segawa Masaharu, 1975) and Zhao Gang's youthful curiosity towards the outside world is illustrated through the pop song "The World Outside" (1987) by Chyi Chin, a Taiwanese singer. The army bugle sound in the opening sequences has been a daily routine for the militarily managed factory and community; so has the man who rides a bicycle, holding a flashlight and conducting security checks every day. With advanced construction technology, the physical space of Factory 420 can be demolished and soon replaced by luxury high-rise offices and an apartment complex. However, by making a documentary, and even pushing the boundary between documentary and fictional representation, Jia achieves his goal of recording and reflecting a disappearing space and its users:

> If this group of workers and former workers is marginalised…then their faces, their language, their food, their living conditions, their homes, their expressions—all of that—is erased from the screen…anything I can do to hold on to them and make people see them onscreen is the most important thing I can do! Otherwise, they are silenced (cited in Austin 2014, p. 265)!

Pop music, films and factory memos are carefully orchestrated into the narrative to proliferate the sense of reality. In Jia Zhangke's previous films:

> the media, particularly television news coverage, deliver the world into the living rooms of local Chinese. Yet access to and reception of the world news do not create engagement with the world: the gap between the world news and the local audience in terms of image and sound indicates the disconnection between the global and the local (Cui 2006, p. 123).

However, news coverage on national and international current affairs are excluded from *24 City*; the only news broadcast in the film is related to the rising of the real estate named 24 City—a modern entertainment and residence complex—reported by Zhao Gang. All the music, films and news coverage and factory memos constitute the history of the factory; more importantly, all of them have been ascribed to individuals' memories and experiences. Together, the familiar spaces they use and consume form these characters' "cognitive maps" that describe the "mental images of space that … [they] carry with [them in their] daily lives" (Soja 1996, p. 79). In such mental images of space, Soja interprets:

> the Firstspace collapses entirely into Secondspace. The difference between them disappears. Even more importantly, also lost in the transparency of space are its fundamental historicality and sociality, any real sense of how these cognitive imageries are themselves socially produced and implicated in the relations between space, power and knowledge (1996, p. 80).

As a result, Jia produces a space that preserves a detailed and micro history enriched by personal memories and sense of nostalgia.

Time passes slowly in the film, and at times it comes to stagnancy. Interviews are interrupted by still photographs and intermittent blackouts. People, men and women, aged and young are screened in photo poses (Figure 39).

Figure 39. Still photographs of anonymous people: in *24 City*

They are not identified with names nor do they fit into the narrative With or without uniforms, they represent "the independence, individuality and subjectivity…they are seen as self-contained, free from the delimiting screen time that controls the audience's viewing experience, and from the clock time that regulates workers' cycle of life" (Deppman 2014, p. 201). The photos secure a cinematic space for those anonymous people, whose stories cannot be included in the film. They are the silent majority, whose experiences and voices can hardly be heard through mainstream media. However, it is their stories that structure an alternative history of the special time and space. By documenting ordinary workers' individual stories and orchestrating collective memories through fictional characters, Jia "depoliticises and humanises socialism, and brings down grand ideologies to the level of the lives of ordinary people. It is the everyday, the quotidian, that structures the existence and aspirations of hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens in decades of socialist nation

building” (Lu 2007a, p. 133). This film captures and preserves a memory for them, and adds a minor discourse to the grand history of reformation since the 1980s.

The generational gap in using the industrial space and the urban space in *24 City* illustrates that there is more than one city called Chengdu. As Iain Chambers concludes:

> the city exists as a series of doubles; it has official and hidden cultures, it is a real place and a site of imagination. Its elaborate network of streets, housing, public buildings, transport systems, parks, and shops is paralleled by a complex of attitudes, habits, customs, expectancies, and hopes that reside in us as urban subjects. We discover that urban ‘reality’ is not single but multiple, that inside the city there is always another city (cited in Soja 1996, p. 186).

The disappearing socialist city represented by the state-owned enterprise Factory 420 is juxtaposed with the rising glistening modern structures. Correspondingly, as *24 City* has shown, the majority of people who used to belong to the space have declined in social status and are left disillusioned or impoverished. The next section will examine the urban Chengdu where its inhabitants face a traumatised spiritual world and a broken domestic space.

Buddha Mountain: railway station, the nature and home

Buddha Mountain tracks the urban *dérive* (drifting) of three disillusioned youths and a traumatised middle-aged woman and their attempt to reconcile with family and themselves. By drifting in the city to explore the urban space, the three young people are set against the imposing utility and function. Having failed the college entrance examination and suffered from family issues, Nan Feng (Fan Bingbing), Ding Bo (Chen Bolin) and Feizao (Fei Long) escape from their respective families and settle down in a small dilapidated room, undertaking some itinerant jobs and leading a seemingly freewheeling life in the city. They work in a pub, stroll in the streets in Chengdu, and wander along crisscrossed railways and in the nearby mountains. Their *dérive* “entails [a] playful-constructive behaviour and [an]

awareness of psychogeographical effect" (Debord 1996b, p. 22). Consciously or unconsciously, they escape from the urban space time after time, wandering around Buddha Mountain, sneaking into train carriages, and letting the train take them to unknown places. Meanwhile, Chang Yueqin (Zhang Aijia), who lost her son in a car crash a year ago, confines herself at home, struggling to adapt to the domestic space without her son. After the three are driven out of their previous room due to impending demolition, they rent Chang's apartment and start to share the domestic space with Chang, whom they believe to be highly irritated, sensitive and defensive.

Buddha Mountain opens with a long take showing Nan Feng putting on makeup and wearing a flamboyant pink wig in a narrow fitting room. With strong beat music and a poster of Elvis Presley, the most influential pop icon of the 20th century, attached to the door, the beginning sequences are imbued with a restless and disaffected atmosphere. The tension is enhanced by an accident caused by Nan Feng. She is singing in a bar, while playing with an amplifier that hits a customer unexpectedly. The male-customer seems badly hurt and reiterates that there will be consequences. Ding Bo rushes to the scene, breaking beer bottles and bluffing, only making the situation more chaotic. Immediately after the disorder, the three sit down calmly, drinking beer and making fun of the accident and the injured man. Such a composed manner in facing the disturbingly violent scene indicates their sophistication in dealing with instability and insecurity in the urban space. The opening sequences establish an urban space that is "unstable, shifting, multiplicitous, situational, refractory, hybridisable, always being negotiated and contested, never static or fixed" (Soja 1996, p. 113). In the following narration, I will examine the characters' spatial exploration

as they frequently travel between Buddha Mountain and the city, searching for faith and the meaning of existence.

***Buddha Mountain*: nature, a railway station and religious redemption**

The name of the film refers to two specific spaces: a railway station and a mountain near Chengdu (Figure 40).

Figure 40. The railway station & the Buddha Mountain: in *Buddha Mountain*

As a railway station, it conjures up encounters and farewells; metaphorically, it is a station of life that brings people at different life stages together and enables them to encounter love, affection and rediscover their lost selves (Ni 2011). Nevertheless, railway stations usually function as a transitional, temporal space that is associated with impermanence and instability. The contrasting emotional and psychological meanings associated with railway stations are represented and explored fully in the film. Parents and spiritual models (such as Feizao's idol Michael Jackson) in the film are either traumatised or dead. As a result, the youths find nowhere home, but rather exile themselves in the city and nature for consolation.

With its lush, green, natural location, Buddha Mountain provides a sense of serenity in contrast to the sound and fury of the urban space. For the youths, it is a sanctuary that allows them to escape from urban routines and anxiety, while for Chang Yueqing, it offers the potential opportunity for reconciling with herself. During one of their trips to Buddha

Mountain, they stop at a ruined area that was destroyed by the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake (Figure 41). The images of destroyed blocks are crosscut with scenes of violent shaking, screaming, and collapsing buildings and injured people in the devastating earthquake. The three youths arrive at the mountain, only to find that the Buddha Temple and the statues of Buddha have also been destroyed in the earthquake. Human built spaces have become ruins while the mountain is still in shape and still provides beautiful views and comfort for visitors. Nature here provides a sanctuary space that is healing, comforting and immortal. In contrast to the railway station, it stands for permanence and stability, which are rare in the transient modern world but desired by the characters in *Buddha Mountain*.

Figure 41. The earthquake affected area: in *Buddha Mountain*

In their last trip to the mountain, Chang makes a donation and devotes to the rebuilding work with the youths and monks. She also becomes involved in painting the religious statues. To rebuild the Buddha Temple and re-establish the statues of Buddha that were destroyed in the Earthquake symbolises the reestablishment of faith in the ruined and transient world (Chen 2011; Tu 2011). The destroyed Temple and statues can be rebuilt within a short time, but Chang is unable to re-establish her shattered faith in life, nor can the religious conversation about life and death with the monk stop her from self-blaming and being depressed. Accidents, natural disaster and broken families are like a black hole that

devours her maternal bond, physical spaces and social relations. Even though the religious resort is supposed to provide consolation or spiritual comfort for characters who are stuck in broken and dysfunctional families, Chang chooses to end her life in the mountain to reconcile with herself. The earthquake relics and collapsed Buddhas on the mountain represent the unsavoury Sichuan realities, and show the heightened need for family and national peace and harmony.

The shared name between the mountain, temple and train station symbolises the journey that must be taken or the price that must be paid for the search for faith and the loss of it. During their journey of searching, the three youths are frequently shown in fleeting trains. This is their particular way of investigating the city and its adjacent areas. The powerful healing effects of the spaces and the chances they contained (Pinder 2005b, p. 152) enable the youths to reflect on faith, relationship, family issues and even life and death. Meanwhile, Chang turns from being a passive urban drifter to a questioner of the ultimate meaning of existence and suffering in the profane world in her conversation with a monk in the temple.

Dysfunctional and broken families in the urban landscape

Buddha Mountain displays four dysfunctional families in a transforming urban space. Family, as the basic fabric of society, has played an important role in maintaining a stable and harmonious social order. In both the Occidental world and the Oriental world, home has been recognised as “a site of resistance” (Soja 1996, p. 103). It is a space for assuring and defending one’s identity, and for resisting oppression and discrimination imposed by the outside world. In the long imperial history, Confucianism exerted far-reaching influences on the ideal and conduct of the Chinese family. Ideals such as filial piety, parental

responsibility, loyalty, cohesion and harmony are valued and promoted; all help to form a communitarian and inclusive space (Teo 2013, pp. 174-175). However, with the intrusion of modernisation and urbanisation, such values have become increasingly challenged and questioned. In *Buddha Mountain*, Chang's family is disintegrated by a car accident, and the three youths also are confronted with collapsing families.

Chang lived alone before the three young adults moved in. She is a former Peking Opera performer. She still keeps her deceased son's residence registration (*hukou*—usually, after a man dies, his situation should be reported to the local police and his residence registration should be removed), psychologically denying the unacceptable and sudden death. She also preserves the wrecked car, strewn with holes and cracks on the windshield, in the garage to which she pays regular visits. The car space is highly compartmentalised and private. In one sequence, the camera looks through the broken windshield. Her face and upper body appear behind, full of scars and injuries (Figure 42).

Figure 42. The wrecked car in the garage: in *Buddha Mountain*

The holes and breakages on the car reflect on her body, just like the psychological injuries she has suffered from the accident. The car is a secret and private space for her where she can open up and let out suppressed emotions that she has to hide from others. The modern vehicle in Chang's eyes is associated with danger, accident and death, whilst it was freedom

and dynamism for her son and his girlfriend. For the three young tenants, the car, though it is wrecked, is a useful tool to take a mountain trip.

She maintains the habit of practicing Peking Opera in the early morning, and practices calligraphy as a daily routine. The interior space looks crowded and packed with furniture and everyday appliances. There are pictures and tapestry on the walls, and newspapers and various kinds of items piled on the table, making the domestic space messy and cramped. She has confined herself within the domestic space since the collapse of her family with her son's death, and the role of father and husband is absent. It seems that she does not establish "independent circles of friends and contacts, nor establish a spatially separate sphere of existence" (Massey 1994, p. 209). After the three tenants move in, the room looks even more crowded and suffocating. Especially in the first few days, Chang and the three young tenants are in constant conflict due to different living habits.

Chang's routine Peking Opera rehearsal at six o'clock in the morning wakes the youths, who stay up late, hanging out and drinking. The three ridicule Chang's boring, mundane and strange routines; they steal her savings to pay for the medical expense of the man who is accidentally hurt by Nan Feng; and they secretly drive Chang's broken car to Buddha Mountain. Nan Feng, who comes from a town near to Chengdu, is a cool and tough woman who single-handedly challenges a group of young gangsters to get Feizao's robbed money back. She is dismissed soon after the bar accident and required to pay 20,000 RMB worth of medical expenses for the victim. Her father is an alcoholic and abuser, who eventually drinks himself into hospital. Ding Bo earns a living by transporting goods or passengers with a motorcycle. He blames his mother's death on his father's infidelity and irresponsibility. Their friend Feizao, a huge fan of Michael Jackson, is optimistic but

cowardly. He turns to Nan Feng for help after being bullied by gangsters. Feizao's father, a gambler, beats him without cause every time he loses at gambling.

Despite the brawling between Chang and the three youths, the apartment offers both sides an opportunity to discover and establish a caring family bond. By saving Chang from suicide and taking care of her, the three come to understand her suffering and agitation. A mutual understanding and care replace the previous hostility and indifference. They attain a temporary home, comprising a caring mother and three rebellious but self-reliant children. However, this home collapses soon with Chang's death. The sense of transience and impermanence, which materialises through the car accident, bar incidents, earthquake and suicide, overwhelm and disturb the characters in the film. These enemies of permanence and stability find their most brutal battle field in the urban area which is essentially packed with instability and uncertainty because of the large population, mobility and urbanisation. The final sequences of *Buddha Mountain* capture the three youths sitting in a train carriage sobbing, with the train roaring through a series of tunnels and heading to a destination somewhere in the urban space. Yet this time the camera no longer gazes in the direction the train is travelling as on their previous upbeat train-rides. Instead, it focuses in the opposite direction, like a forced farewell to the briefly-found familial bond and the bright prospects of life engendered from the quasi parent-children relationship. They are again thrown into the outside world without a stable and caring domestic shelter. Not only are the deep rooted traditional Chinese culture and values challenged and breached, but family members are traumatised and finally dead (in Chang Yueqin's case), addicted to alcohol (Nan Feng's father), or addicted to gambling and family abuse (Feizao's father). The family should have been the site of "resistance to the homogenising forces of globalisation and modernisation"

(Nie 2009, p. 212). In *Buddha Mountain*, however, the home as the "locale of groundedness and integrity is shaken, commercialised, and dismantled, subjects are thrown into the outer world, the abstract and commercialised spaces dominated by political, ideological, and capitalist discourses" (Nie 2009, p. 212).

Home in *Buddha Mountain* is presented as an example that challenges Rey Chow's view of home: a place of "refuge from a tyrannical world. Because it functions as a refuge, this inside also tends to take on the import of a timeless, undifferentiated, and infinitely adaptable (interpersonal) time and space whereby conflicts ought to be resolved and opposites ought to be reconciled" (Chow 2007, p. 19). It is a material space for basic shelter and an "imagined inside" which could be intensified by sentiment (Chow 2007, p. 19). In the film, the original homes of the four protagonists are fragile, oppressive and unbearable. Ding Bo argues with his father in each of their meetings. The first time he damages the wedding decorations in the room prepared for his father's upcoming second marriage, and insists on keeping the photo of his deceased mother in the room. Nan Feng persuades her mother to divorce her alcoholic father. Home as a concrete space does not appear in Nan Feng and Feizao's cases. For Nan Feng, the family reunites in a hospital where Nan Feng tries to stop her father from drinking by pouring alcohol into herself in a self-destroying manner. Feizao mentions his chaotic family when chatting with Chang, without any resentment or agony. The only place that they can find peace is Chang's apartment, where the four act as "a loving mother" and "rebellious but good-willed children".

Meanwhile, the role of father in *Buddha Mountain* is either absent or disappointing. Ding Bo is verbally and physically aggressive at his father's wedding ceremony, Nan Feng persuades her mother to divorce, Feizao avoids meeting with his father as every time they

meet he is beaten without cause. The father, as the core of Chinese families, is supposed to be the "absolute authority to preserve order and maintain structure" (Zhou 2007, p. 63). Besides, the Confucian familial codes such as "respect seniority" (*zun lao*) and "filial piety" (*xiao*) require that "a son should completely obey his father. The position of a child within the domestic space was low, even his marriage was arranged by the elders of the family" (p. 63). Moreover, such an ethical and moral requirement as filial piety "by modern standards", is "synonymous with 'absolute subordination' on both domestic and social levels" (p. 63). However, in *Buddha Mountain*, such traditional family values have been abandoned by characters and their parents. Family as a cohesive sanctuary declines. The young generation plunges into the complicated urban space at a young age without parental care, and the parents are too busy putting their own business together to consider the young adults

Failure of searching for a home in an anonymous modern city

The urban Chengdu is presented as an anonymous city infiltrated by humid, hot and gloomy weather. *Buddha Mountain* traces the drifting of the characters on a restless "bar street" (the street is lined with bars) where the three work and hang out, a flyover where Ding Bo works as an itinerant transporter, and crisscrossing railways where the three often roam. Although 90% of the scenes are shot in Chengdu (Du 2011), its outstanding landmarks are eliminated, and characters appear in close-ups and medium shots and unstable handheld follow shots that emphasise the characters' emotional and spiritual dimensions.

The foreground of emotional space of characters encourages audiences to reflect on the dilemma the characters are stuck in. The intrusion of modernity and population mobility provide alternative ways for the young generation, who are exiled from family, to survive in a commercialised urban sphere. However, it also disconnects individuals and weakens the

familial bond. The one-child policy that has been widely enforced since 1970 begot modern nuclear families in mainland China. Family size began to shrink, and traditional family values were discarded gradually. The basic social unit became quite fragile confronted with accidents and disasters. Moreover, with the intrusion of modernity, notions of individualism and independence intruded into Chinese family space, and rendered the family a more "dialectical and contested space" (Teo 2013, p. 174). In *Buddha Mountain*, the dysfunctional families as a universal phenomenon in modern China by no means undercut Chengdu's local imperatives in terms of the hovering melancholy and uncertainty enhanced by the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake. The national disaster corresponds with the car crash that breaks the family bond and disturbs the domestic space. The natural disaster brought heavy loss of life and ruined space. Psychologically, it is the almighty and unescapable natural force that devours lives, material spaces and affectivity. It traumatises characters' emotional space, and influences their perspective on life and death.

Nation, metaphorically, is seen as the extension of family. There is an old Chinese idiom says that prosperous and thriving circumstances are the result of a harmonious family. However, there are four disintegrating families depicted in *Buddha Mountain*. It is an overall collapse of the most basic social blocks in modern society. Furthermore, "citizens of the nation are generally given to parroting their adherence of traditional values, but the national space, as well as the more interiorised domestic space of the family, is confronted with inner and outer intrusions and assaults" (Teo 2013, p. 178).

Since her success with *Lost in Beijing*, Li Yu has begun to investigate more universal problems confronting the urban population from the perspective of female roles. Whether it is Beijing or Chengdu represented in her films, the stable and slow tempo of life has gone

with urbanisation in recent decades. In investigating contemporary Beijing, Li contextualises the tragic story of rape and baby-trade in a mundane setting where average people are "boarding trains, selling pop-cultural posters of Mao, a grandmother wiping her grandson's face, pedestrians against the ice and snow", and reflecting "a very personal look at the citizens" of the city (Pugsley 2013, pp. 103-104). In *Buddha Mountain*, it is about people shopping in markets and struggling with the urban management police for their confiscated motorcycles. Compared with more developed metropolitan Beijing, Chengdu's modernisation is much slower due to geographical barriers and economic backwardness. But it is no longer an enclosed world as depicted in Li Bai's poem or Li Yu's early film *Dam Street*, in which the 1980s and 1990s saw a relatively estranged and isolated Sichuanese town.

Conclusion

Chengdu and its adjacent area are increasingly represented in contemporary Chinese films with diversified facets and distinctive cultural traditions. Its geographical circumstances isolated it from communication with the outside world in history, but also protected it from being affected by Western influence in the late Qing dynasty. Consequently, its unique cultural and social conventions and legacy have been well-preserved and passed on for generations. Due to its geographical characteristics in the socialist era, it was included in a national project, the Third Front, which exerted far-reaching influence on the spatial design and construction of the cityscape. In *24 City*, the socialist spaces disappear and the previous leading social class declines. In *Buddha Mountain*, the adherent stability and reliability of family and domestic space are absent. A strong sense of loss and failure are prevalent in both films.

This thesis now moves to Chapter Five on Cinematic Xi'an and its depictions of political allegory and strong women. Through a detailed analysis of three films set in the municipality of Xi'an and its adjacent area, the section will discuss how the traditional space of power—the guild hall—might affect the perspective and behaviour of modern government officials, through its enigmatic and influential ambience and spatial arrangement, and how female space has been affected by family burdens, rural-urban division and western-eastern imbalanced economic and social development.

Chapter Five Cinematic Xi'an

This chapter will analyse the capital city of Shaanxi province, Xi'an, and how it is represented in three films in more detail. The three films are Huang Jianxin's 1994 *Back to Back, Face to Face*, Wang Quan'an's 2003 *The Story of Ermei* and his 2009 *Weaving Girl*.

Cinematic representations of Xi'an configure an alternative image of urban China contrasting with that of megacities like Beijing and Shanghai, and showing an uneven set of post-socialist conditions in the reform era. This chapter will argue that the voices and images of this north-western city have long been marginalised by the more developed eastern coastal areas due to its geographical isolation, economic backwardness and prevailing socialist inheritance. The first section will introduce Xi'an and the Xi'an Film Studio, and demonstrate how two directors have rejected traditional themes and aesthetics deployed by previous Chinese Westerns to better contextualise realistic representations of the city. It will then examine the cinematic city as an enclosed space of political inertia and a capsule of socialist China, which problematises the glamourised images of technocratic metropolises designed to stimulate tourism and national power found in cinematic Beijing and Shanghai. By drawing on Edward Soja's view of how hegemonic power is spatialised, and how "material geographies and spatial practices shape and affect subjectivity, consciousness, rationality" (Soja 1996, p. 77) across class, gender, rural-urban relations and regional unevenness, this chapter will show how Xi'an, an ancient city, has been transformed into a modern space, and, at the same time, how the past socialist-era rural traditions linger in the city.

An overview of the city Xi'an

Xi'an, also known as Chang'an (lit. eternal peace) in China's long imperial history, was designated as the capital city as long ago as the Han dynasty (206 BC—9 AD). The jurisdictional area of Chang'an was located about six miles north-west of modern Xi'an, and its abundant historical, archaeological and cultural heritage can be traced back to Western Zhou dynasty (Zuo 1991, p. 69). During the Sui (581—618) and Tang dynasties (618—907), Chang'an grew to be one of the most flourishing cities in the world, but it was destroyed at the end of the Tang dynasty. The subsequent years saw the city renamed several times and, during the Ming dynasty (1368—1644), it became known as Xi'an (Zuo 1991, p. 71), the name it has gone by ever since. For over a millennium, "the capital of China [Chang'an] was established here… and it has the oldest and longest history of any metropolitan area in China" (Zuo 1991, p. 14). Moreover, due to its strategical geographical location, the city was one of the most important sites on the Silk Road, which linked Xinjiang in western China to central, south and east Asia, and joined with roads connecting to Europe since the Han dynasty (Zuo 1991, p. 135). However, the last three imperial dynasties in succession, the Yuan (1271-1368), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912), reserved Beijing as the capital city. As a result, the political, economic and military significance of Xi'an greatly declined with the loss of central administration status since the Yuan dynasty. In 1936, the outbreak of the Xi'an Incident drew national attention to the city. On December 12, Jiang Jieshi, the leader of the Nationalist government was arrested at Xi'an by his own generals Zhang Xueliang and Yang Hucheng, who forced Jiang to suspend the civil war between Communists and Nationalists and establish a united front against the Japanese. The incident ends with the release of Jiang and the formation of a military alliance between the

Communists and the Nationalists against the Japanese invasion. During the war, Northwest Film Company and Yan'an Film Group were established in the border region to carry out propaganda work. Nowadays Xi'an is the capital city of Shaanxi Province, and "still retains many aspects of its Ming past and is the most intact fortified city structure still existing in China" (Zuo 1991, p. 71). As one of the most developed and populous cities in the north-west, Xi'an has acquired enormous financial and economic support from the central government via the "Great Western Development" project that has been carried out since 2000.

Xi'an on screen

When discussing cinematic Xi'an, it is essential to include the Xi'an Film Studio. Founded in 1956, it is well-known as one of the principal studios in mainland China. Before Wu Tianming, the "godfather of the Fifth Generation", was appointed as the head of the Studio, it was just a "medium-sized facility" that had a poor record in filmmaking in western China (Thompson 2003, p. 651). Over a third of the Fifth Generation films were made at Xi'an during the 1980s (p. 650), and most of them represented rural landscapes, ambiguous themes and complex narratives. They became known as Chinese Westerns, as discussed in the introduction of this thesis. The term "Chinese Western" refers to a wider spatial and social terrain by including the cinematic representation of urban space in western China, which can be seen from Huang Jianxin's two urban trilogies. The first trilogy includes *The Black Cannon Incident* (1986), *Dislocation* (1986) and *Samsara* [*Lunhui*] (1988); and the second trilogy includes *Stand Straight, Don't Bend Over* [*Zhanzhile, biepaxia*] (1993), *Back to Back, Face to Face* and *Signal Left, Turn Right* [*Hongdengting, lüdengxing*] (1996). Huang takes an eye-level view of contemporary urban space and acutely observes the subtle

and trivial daily practices of common people in the urban area. He acts as a *flâneur* who strolls and observes the transforming urban space of Xi'an, and who:

> takes on a kind of typographical dissection of the city that looks at the horizontal network of relations instead. Huang is self-assured in his role as a reflective critic (of his city), a close analyst (of its architecture), an archivist (of events, scenes, and images), interpreter (of impressions into texts), and all-encompassing observer and reader-decipherer (Lai 2007, p. 217).

Huang's films reflect the modern urban image of China in the reform era. He rejects emotional and melodramatic narration, rather tending to analyse Chinese modernity "with an icy detachment that allows little room for sentiment" (Pickowicz 2012, p. 296). His observation of contemporary urban China stands for an alternative modernity that differentiates it from American and European concepts of modernity. Pickowicz perceives it as the "post-socialist" reality (p. 296). During the 1980s and 1990s, Huang became one of the few who projected attentive observation of the take-off of industrialisation and urbanisation in major cities of China. His second urban trilogy carries more local characteristics of Xi'an, instead of criticising the conflicts between political conduct and economic development in an anonymous urban space. Wang Quan'an, born in Yan'an, also made features such as *The Story of Ermei* and *Weaving Girl* based on Xi'an and its adjacent regions.

***Back to Back, Face to Face*: the *flâneur* walking in an enclosed space**

The Parisian *flâneur* configured by Benjamin in the nineteenth-century was "the passionate spectator, [and for him], it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite" (Benjamin 1999, p. 443). The *flâneur*'s street-level walking and observing transformed Paris

from a well-planed rational city to a lived space of commercialisation, dynamism and labyrinth. On the one hand, the city was planned and organised by institutional bodies with the idea of rationality. On the other hand, it became a labyrinthine and enigmatic space created by extensive urban constructions (Benjamin 1999). When the Chinese government launched its economic and social reform in the 1980s, Chinese *flâneurs* began to appear in streets that were subject to transformation and rebuilding for the realisation of the "Four-Modernity". They became observers of the dramatic architectural and psychological changes occurring across contemporary mainland China.

Back to Back, Face to Face (hereafter, *Back to Back*) portrays over ten characters. Each of them keeps "walking" within their small world craving maximum interest for themselves, during which, however, they stumble into awkward situations. The protagonist, Wang Shuangli (Niu Zhenhua), is a middle-aged mid-level bureaucrat working at the Culture Centre of a city. Niu Zhenhua has starred in every one of Huang Jianxin's second urban trilogy, and won the Best Actor award at the 1994 Tokyo International Film Festival for his powerful performance in *Back to Back*. The film also won the Golden Rooster Awards for Best Director and the Best Co-produced Film in 1995. *Back to Back* unfolds with two storylines: the first is Wang Shuangli's failure to be promoted to the positon of director of the local Culture Centre (a bureaucratic unit of the government); the other revolves around Wang's father's yearning for a grandson to carry on the family name. Having already had a granddaughter, Wang's father spares no effort to negotiate over the one-child policy implemented in mainland China. The two lines eventually intertwine when Wang Shuangli and his father collaborate to fulfil their respective goals. Wang bribes a doctor who fabricates a document to prove that Wang's daughter has an incurable disease, which convinces the

authority to allow the family to have another baby. Wang's father, in the meantime, schemes against Xiao Yan (Li Qiang), the newly appointed director, and ruins his reputation. Consequently, Xiao Yan is suspended from the position, and the director's position becomes vacant again. Wang is summoned at the end of the film, but will he finally be appointed?

With the principal scenes set in the Shanshaan Guild (located in Sheqi, Henan Province) (Figure 43) and the thick surrounding walls of Xi'an, the film encloses its characters in a small space that overlooks them, dwarfs them, and constrains their vision, perspective and behaviour.

Figure 43. The guild hall: in *Back to Back*

Guild halls, a distinctive architectural form that resembles Chinese traditional temple architecture in style and form, were established either by wealthy merchants or by government officials (Burgess 1930, p. 76). It is estimated that 70% of guild halls were founded by government officials, and some of them were co-founded by powerful merchants and officials to provide accommodation and protection for their native townspeople (Wang 1996). Guilds are highly exclusive and regional, as eligibility for membership of such guild halls is often “conferred by common geographical origin”, which was the “major bond—whether it was that of the same county, same group of counties, or same province” (Liu 1988, p. 9). They have existed for centuries since the Ming Dynasty and are not only found in Beijing, but in many provincial capital cities, minor cities and country counties.

As public, economic and social edifices, guild halls were usually built with delicate and refined decorations and on an extraordinary scale. Merchants, officials and intellectuals from the same place of origin travelling to other places would find “buildings erected by guilds for headquarters—places of meeting, theatrical representations, and as lodging-houses for high officials when travelling, and for scholars en route to metropolitan examinations” (cited in Braester & Chen 2011, p. 20). Therefore, the guild hall, in any ways, stands for power, either political, commercial or religious. Power, as Soja perceives, and “the specifically cultural politics that arise from its workings—is contextualised and made concrete, like all social relations, in the (social) production of (social) space” (Soja 1996, pp. 86-87). These enormous buildings and refined courtyards have become time capsules of imperial China. Today, the traditional, political and commercial influence borne by the architecture hundreds years ago seems obliterated by the assimilating force of globalisation. However, they can still exert powerful cultural and political control over people in modern

society. In the film, characters are affected and manipulated by such cultural and political powers spatialised by the enclosed hegemonic spaces.

Guild hall: the edifice of tradition and power

In the opening sequences, the Culture Centre is shrouded in morning mist like a solemn and enormous shadow (Figure 44). A parade of stylish and rising eaves and layered decorations on the roof soaring up to the sky mark the traditional building as a politically hierarchical and economically powerful space.

Figure 44. The Guild Hall (the locus of the Culture Centre): in *Back to Back*

As Huang Jianxin states, "when looking from the top of the building, there are all roofs, no people! Merchant guild and temple share one attribute—that they sanctify the power" (Jia & Song 2011, p. 25).

In *Back to Back*, the guild hall serves as the workplace of the Culture Centre that is affiliated with the local Bureau of Culture. It functions no longer as a commercial nor a religious space in the modern era, but a cultural and political space in a given urbanised city. On the one hand, the Culture Centre is responsible for organising cultural activities such as photographic exhibitions and writing workshops and managing film screenings; on the other hand, it is a space of power conflict for Wang Shuangli and his competitors. The guild hall

is an emblem of the imperial power structure that was rooted in China for thousands of years. Chinese city planning and architectural structure during ancient times bore strong administrative and political imprints, as they were:

> conceived as part of a unitary hierarchy of country, department, prefectural, and provincial capitals all oriented toward the Son of Heaven in the imperial centre. This hierarchy was represented in bureaucratic chains of command, official rituals, and the successive levels of examination system. At every level, uniform systems of architectural, behavioural, and visual symbolism expressed the unity of the imperial system (Esherick 2000, p. 6).

Such bureaucratic and official rituals and strict hierarchy not only orient the spatial arrangement of the city and architectural forms, but also affect the value and behaviour of people using such spaces. According to Soja, those who are:

> territorially subjugated by the workings of hegemonic power have two inherent choices: either accept their imposed differentiation and division, making the best of it; or mobilise to resist, drawing upon their putative positioning, their assigned 'otherness,' to struggle against this power-filled imposition. These choices are inherently spatial responses, individual and collective reactions to the ordered workings of power in perceived, conceived, and lived spaces (1996, p. 87).

In the case of Wang Shuangli, he has been stuck at the deputy position for around three years. He is capable, qualified and sophisticated enough to keep everything in the Culture Centre operating smoothly, and has established a solid network with some colleagues. Even though he accepts the imposed power structure, at the same time he struggles against the "power-filled imposition" (Soja 1996, p. 87) by tactically dealing with the superior official and his competitors assigned by the superior official.

Wang, as a sophisticated government official involved in the complicated hierarchical power relations in the culture department, employs a contingent and cunning

way of negotiating with his superior, his peers and his competitors. To cater to the superior, he always says yes to the superior's demands. Meanwhile, he devotes himself to creating his image as an upright and capable leader who will not take bribes nor pander to authority. Accordingly, when Leng (Ge Zhijun), the head of the local Cultural Bureau and Wang's immediate superior, requires Wang to arrange a proper position for his daughter, Leng Bingbing (Yu Nannan), at the Culture Centre, he insists that Leng Bingbing should go through the official procedure—public recruitment. Even though the public recruitment procedure is designated as a cover for taking Leng Bingbing into the position officially and decently, Leng (the father) feels he is being challenged and turns down Wang's promotion repeatedly despite his skills and qualification. By making the superior's goal come true in this "open" and "democratic" way, Wang establishes an image of decency and uprightness among his colleagues. His acceptance and familiarity with the structure and exercise of political power equips him with wiliness and techniques to survive in the game of power.

Back to Back opens with a poll conducted in the Culture Centre. The guild hall has lost its commercial functions in contemporary society, but it remains a space of power that operates within hierarchical political order and as a battlefield of the exercise and abuse power. Moreover, the disparity between the countryside and the city further problematise the operation of power in this space. In the film, a serious-looking man announces,

> "With the central government advocating democratic administration, a poll will be carried out to select the director of the Culture Centre as a case of such proposition".

Wang hesitates for a while then puts his name down. He then hands in the paper with his name on it, walking out of the hall with confidence. Outside the hall, in a medium shot, an

iron fence with sharp ends blocks the way out, while the overlapping eaves and pillars overwhelmingly occupy the exterior space (Figure 45). They resemble layered fences that block Wang's way to promotion. In addition, the man who inspects the poll stares at Wang with disdain and suspicion when he receives Wang's vote. He then stands with his back to the camera, watching Wang walking away.

Figure 45. Wang Shuangli and the superior official: in *Back to Back*

Obviously, the superior's democratic conduct does not stretch to self-volunteered promotion, rather, it encourages a more traditional value—staying humble. Critiques about Wang's "shameless" volunteering soon ensue, and the deputy-director of the local Cultural Department states, "You are too young." Here, young does not necessarily refer to Wang's age; instead, it is his naïve understanding of "democratic administration". The authority system favours those who are not "young". Working in such an "old" space that has borne witness to extensive social changes since the Ming dynasty, Wang should have known how tenacious the traditional ways can be and how difficult the alternation of power can be in a non-transparent power system. The centuries-old architecture, with its grand scale and distinguished style, is well-preserved and retains the strong sense of authority. Traditional ways of administration have been equally preserved along with the architecture and the sophisticated "old" officials tend to act accordingly. By choosing such a traditional space as

the main setting for his characters, Huang juxtaposes tradition with modernity, setback with progress, people belonging to the past with those belonging to the contemporary world. They are not two divided groups; rather, they co-exist and affect one another.

The lobby of the guild complex is not only used to conduct the poll but also to interview candidates who apply for the position at the Culture Centre. In the film, an establishing shot of the public interview shows two plaques hanging up in the central area, respectively saying “Fair and Square” and “Awe-inspiring Righteousness”. Ironically, the public recruitment is designated for Leng Bingbing, the daughter of the Head of the Cultural Department (Figure 46). No matter how qualified the rest of the candidates are, they will be excluded. From the poll to the public recruitment, democratic ways of administration have turned out to be formulated shows. Resonating with the regional and clan exclusiveness practised at guilds during imperial times, the contemporary Culture Centre is also highly exclusive concerning personnel appointments. Only those who have powerful connections can join.

Figure 46. The two plaques and the public recruitment: in *Back to Back*

Compared with the Western modern cities that initially developed in Europe, most cities in 1990s China, according to Huang Jianxin, cannot account as modern, especially his hometown Xi’an:

> I grew up in Xi'an, a typical Chinese city. It looks more like a town with clear imprints of agricultural civilisation. Many of those who have been to Xi'an tend to perceive it as an 'urban village' since it retains traditional and ethical interpersonal relationships that are different from industrialised cities (Jia & Song 2011, p. 23).

The social networks nurtured by agricultural civilisation distinguish Chinese cities from their western counterparts. Agricultural civilisation developed and became rooted in China over the long course of imperial history. The guild hall represents a typical architectural form of the power and social relations that originated in imperial China and which have been inherited by the modern Culture Centre. According to Lefebvre:

> Power is everywhere; it is omnipresent, assigned to Being. It is everywhere in space. It is in everyday discourse and commonplace notions, as well as in police batons and armoured cars. It is in *objets d'art* as well as in missiles. It is in the diffuse preponderance of the 'visual,' as well as in institutions such as school or parliament. It is in things as well as in signs (the signs of objects and object-signs) (cited in Soja 1996, p. 31).

As a space of power from ancient times until now, the Culture Centre set in this guild hall is the edifice of power and the space of the struggles of hierarchical power. In real life, it functions no longer as a clubhouse for merchants or government officials in contemporary urban spaces; instead, it increasingly serves as a cultural and temporal capsule of the grand traditional Chinese architectural achievement and symbolises the "sprouts of capitalism" (cited in Moll Murata 2008; Ying 2006). In *Back to Back*, the guild hall repeatedly appears as a space adhered to solemnness, grandness and feudal values, which displace the modern value of professionalism and frustrate the characters in the film.

From the rural to the urban—a zigzagging path to settling in

Wang's desired position is first taken by Lao Ma (Lei Kesheng) and then by Xiao Yan. Both of them are appointed by Leng, the Head of the Cultural Bureau. Lao Ma was the head of a village before being promoted to the director of the Culture Centre, while Xiao Yan was Leng's secretary before taking over the position. Wang's different ways of dealing with the two reflect his cunning and sophisticated practices dealing with different social relations.

When dealing with Lao Ma, Wang embarrasses him in public, schemes against him and finally drives him away from the position. Not only Wang but also clients working in the Culture Centre despise Lao Ma due to his previous humble position and rural origin. The first day Lao Ma comes to the Culture Centre, he should have been the focus of a welcome meeting. However, the camera projects this meeting from the back of the gathering hall at a low angle, showing rows of people's backs, which prevent spectators from seeing Lao Ma, the core-figure of this meeting. When the camera finally concentrates on Lao Ma and pans around from his point of view, it shows people busy knitting, reading newspapers and whispering (Figure 47).

Figure 47. The welcome meeting for Lao Ma: in *Back to Back*

Only a few people who have had conflicts with Wang enthusiastically applaud Lao Ma's entrance to the office. Wang's introduction of Lao Ma makes the awkward situation even worse: "Lao Ma used to deal with peasants. He was skilful and capable of handling cremation and birth control, and supervising fertility and taxing grain were also his strengths. Now he is about to deal with you intellectuals, which I believe he will be good at too". Wang's words trigger a burst of sneering laughter among colleagues.

Lao Ma's following inauguration speech is greeted with constant interruptions and one of his photographic works draws immediate critique. A clear gap between the rural and the urban emerges. Lao Ma's difficult road to settling into the position and urban life has just begun. His power and authority suffer from constant challenge and even neglect. He is appointed to manage finance and personnel. However, financial documents signed by him are invalid, simply because "this is an urban bureaucratic unit, which operates differently from your village administration". When he tries to persuade workers to clean up a construction site for the upcoming inspection of superior officials, he is again rebuked and refused. Being desperate and helpless, he loses his temper and threatens: "If you don't clean it up now, I will withdraw the construction contract and transfer the project to another company!" Yet the threatening words fail to have the desired effect, only arousing further

scorn from the construction workers. "In this law-rule society, you will have to pay a high price for cancelling a signed contract." Facing the "law-rule" lecture, Lao Ma has no rational thinking nor relevant knowledge about law, but determinedly insists on his goal. Concepts like law, legislation or jurisdiction are simply abstract and strange words for him. In the immediate daily practice of his humble power, he resorts to simple rules to conduct administration, and one of them is the hierarchical political power that he believes can top everything else, including the law. That is why he can exclaim, "If blamed by the higher official, there will be serious consequences." Just like his previous decisions and deeds that have been despised and denied, his threat only makes him more pathetic and is followed by more instruction on urban conduct. The urban spaces that he appropriates and tries to access are like glass walls that only enable him to see the other side, but offer no entrance for him to get in.

Xiao Yan is different from Lao Ma. He has complicated and powerful connections in the urban bureaucratic unit, which protect him from Wang's schemes. Consequently, Wang realises that all the tricks and schemes that he utilised against Lao Ma have been employed by Xiao Yan to humiliate and frame him. Competing with Xiao Yan, who has a more powerful political background, Wang becomes the object of bullying. Wang as the deputy, despite his rural origins, has settled down in the urban area long enough to be exempt from being despised by urbanites and intellectuals. While Lao Ma is a gullible rural man to be disdained, bullied and tricked. Xiao Yan has been working with Leng for several years, which provides security to him in the power conflict. The amount of social recourse, power and space that the three characters can appropriate is parallel with their origin, position and connections. Correspondingly, Wang has at least two spaces that he can comfortably use and

inhabit. Compared with Wang, Lao Ma's apartment is intentionally damaged before he moves in, and he does not have proper furniture to decorate the domestic space. Xiao Yan's home, even though not shown in the film, is said to be located in the provincial capital city, testifying to his powerful connections.

Wang Shuangli and his father inhabit a hybrid space that includes modern and premodern constructions. However, mentally and spiritually, they belong to a socialist or even feudal space. The guild hall and cityscape enclosed by thick walls (Figure 48) and Wang Shuangli's households contextualise the characters' everyday practices, and have powerful influences on them. They stand for the complication of the time and the people, as "the space enclosed by these architectures exert an invisible force upon people" (Jia & Song 2011). Moreover, characters are "enclosed in these buildings just as their worldviews are set within the given cultural boundaries" (Kuoshu 2010, p. 61). Traditions motivate people to move around the law to fetch political, economic and personal benefits at the price of sacrificing those who are incapable of rebelling.

Figure 48. Thick walls and forts that enclose the city: in *Back to Back*

The last sequences (Figure 49) see Wang briskly walking across the spacious courtyard that links an array of guildhalls. Wang is summoned to attend a conference summoned by the newly appointed Head of the Cultural Department. With the camera zooming out, Wang's figure keeps shrinking in a long shot of him walking. He appears dwarfed by the surrounding solemn constructions with their grand scale and refined design. Wang's insignificance and his impotence in fighting with the space of tradition and power can be seen from the contrasted scenes. His long walk resembles the long journey through a frustrating and prolonged application for promotion. At last, he disappears from the corner of the frame, and the camera pans slowly up, revealing a parade of stylised roofs of the guild complex, leaving spectators to wonder if he will finally get the position.

Figure 49. Wang Shuangli walking through the guild yard: from *Back to Back*

In *Back to Back*, there is no one who can see the whole picture of either the society or their current situation. That is to say, none of them possesses an omniscient perspective on the whole story, instead, they are in a bustling city characterised by "an opaque and blind mobility", and every day "has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible" (Certeau 1984, p. 93). Characters in *Back to Back* are enclosed in a traditional space surrounded by layers and layers of heavy gates and thick walls, and those who attempt to break out will find themselves being constrained by traditional and bureaucratic conduct. The guild hall manifests such persistent values and conduct, becoming a barrier that prevents those capable "volunteers" from moving forward. The film clearly illustrates how agricultural tradition and values persist and affect the practice of everyday life in the reform era; and how people holding onto such values tactically transgress moral and social rules and keep personal interests intact, as is reflected in the cases of both Wang Shuangli and his father. Wang drives his competitors away through cunning schemes, while his father tries to disable his granddaughter to get permission to have a grandson. The inertia and drawbacks of time-honoured values, customs and behaviour consequently impede the spread of new values and ways.

In his critically acclaimed work *Black Cannon*, Huang demonstrates the clash between China's economic ambition to modernise by adopting capitalist market efficiencies and its Leninist-Maoist political mode that is "historically rooted in class struggle and a paranoic fear of class enemies forever lurking in one's midst" (Silbergeld 1999, p. 239). *Back to Back* shifts to another clash between China's tendency of employing the democratic mode of administration and opaque rigid power hierarchy that are historically imprinted in power struggles and rural-urban imbalances. Although characters like Wang Shuangli are

social elites, they also struggle with the dilemma between personal ambitions and hierarchical social orders, prevailing consumerism and traditional thriftiness. Huang does not take a dialectic view of the centre and the periphery, the rural and the urban; rather, he captures the coexistence and hybridity of urban and rural conduct and values. His characters are often framed in multi-layered social realities, and in various circumstances take an ambivalent stance, which appears as an "otherness", a "thirding", a presentation of the city as a "possibilities machine" (Soja 1996, p. 81).

The next section will move to rural areas, the town and the city represented in the cinematic world depicted by Wang Quan'an. Wang includes the village, the sprawling town and industrial district in Xi'an and its adjacent areas, and outlines the contours and progress of modernisation in the north-west. It is a progress of declining but still persistent agricultural values, enlarging economic and social gaps and disappearing socialist inheritance and spaces. In Wang's films, female bodies become an important site of accepting, voiding and resisting all the changes and conflicts brought by the progress.

***The Story of Ermei*: female space in the rural and the urban**

The Story of Ermei features Guan Ermei (Yu Nan) who escapes from her rural home to a nearby city to avoid an arranged marriage, but eventually returns home and accepts the marriage. The Chinese title of the film is *Jingzhe*, which means the third of the twenty-four solar terms in the traditional Chinese calendar. In agriculture-dominated time, Chinese people believed that the hibernating insects would be woken by a crash of thunder in spring, and this would be the sign of a new beginning or enlightenment. In the context of the film, *Jingzhe* signals the coming of the spring, and symbolises the female protagonist's awakening subjectivity and her act of walking out from the enclosed rural home. Escaping from the

countryside, Ermei seems finally unchained from the roles and life arranged by parents and imposed by the rural social order. However, can she establish her identity and subjectivity in the urban space, which is characterised by fragmentation, instability, mobility, social stratification and gender oppression?

Feminist critic bell hooks, due to her identity as an African-American, locates herself in the margin as the departure point from which to criticise the oppressive gender, class and racial orders in America. She elaborates:

> living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the centre as well as the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and centre. … A mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity (cited in Soja 1996, p. 100).

Such a mode of seeing from both sides, “from the outside in and from the inside out” (cited in Soja 1996, p. 100), provides bell hooks a vintage point from which to observe the complexities of the post-modern Occidental world. In the Chinese context, specifically in *The Story of Ermei*, for rural females represented by Ermei, such a mode of seeing and experiencing both the rural and the urban, the public and private spaces, provides her with a comprehensive view from which to examine both social spaces and relations, and to develop her sense of self and solidarity. The film opens with three men breaking into a sealed cave where a coffin has been preserved for years. Wang places his camera deep in the cave, showing the men checking the coffin and talking in local dialect in the shadows (Figure 50). The decayed coffin, made many years ago, is for Ermei’s grandfather who has been

bedridden for a long time. At this moment, her grandfather is dying and a group of people gather to discuss and prepare for the coming funeral. Given that the coffin is damaged, the poor family now has to raise money for a new one. Meanwhile, Ermei is occupied by a variety of housework: fetching water from the well, feeding livestock and cooking. The coffin, impending death, shadow-like male figures and their ambiguous conversation cast a shadow on Ermei's life trajectory.

Figure 50. Sealed cave, coffin and men in the shadows: in *The Story of Ermei*

The Chinese title of the film and the opening sequences suggest a strong attachment to agrarian rituals and customs in rural China. The day of *Jingzhe* signifies the beginning of the spring cultivation, which is the most important event for people involved in agrarian work. The practice of preserving a good coffin for the dying has been perpetuated in rural areas, as it is widely regarded as a representation of filial piety and family decency. In the living room where the grandfather is lying on a *Kang* (a particular bed made of mud and heated by burning coal or dry grass commonly seen in northern China), a group of people, mostly old ladies and males, are sitting or standing and talking. Ermei is excluded from the scene as she is preoccupied with all sorts of household duties. The living room as a private space is the most public space in the household, while a young woman such as Ermei, despite the flesh

and blood bond between grandfather and grandchild, is not allowed to stay in the male dominated space at home. Yet Ermei does not perceive herself as being excluded or ignored by the family. Rather, she takes it as natural and accepts the rituals, such as staying in her own space (a bedroom and kitchen) and eating after everyone else in the room, as she has to cook. As Liu, a Chinese film critic, has observed:

> China's age-old agrarian civilisation remains rooted to land-based habitats to date. They have lived in proximity with primal elements and tailored human rituals and life-sustaining skills in close affinity with ecological wellness; all this has retained such an ever-renewing hold on their cultural memory, e.g. how local communities would till their land, stay in tune with the ecosystem, revere their ancestral rituals, and social-environmental changes generation after generation (Liu 2009, p. 219).

Staying in accordance with the traditional agrarian calendar and revering the ancestral rituals have been inscribed in the genes of the rural populace. Ermei and her family take all these values and conducts for granted, seldom judging or contemplating them, not to mention rejecting or fighting against them. However, with the intrusion of modern items (chocolate and music cards) and a life of her own choice (Ermei's friend Mao Nü introduces her to an alternative modern space characterised by marriage and economic freedom), Ermei grasps an opportunity to cross the rural-urban border, entering the nearby town to pursue a different life in the modern world. In the spaces of the borderlands, even though in Ermei's case it is only several hours distance by bus, there are:

> physically present … two or more cultures [that] edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks within intimacy" (cited in Soja 1996, p. 127).

Such cultural contrasts—predominantly characterised by commercialism, rural and urban populations, class differences, and gender and sexual relations—all become a "cultural shock" for Ermei. The urban area appears as a larger village with no fancy modern structures or busy traffic. However, it is commercialised enough to shock the rural and illiterate Ermei when she is asked to pay for the use of a toilet (Figure 51).

Figure 51. Toilet scene & Ermei asking for directions: in *The Story of Ermei*

Without knowing the exact address of her close friend Mao Nü's (Shi Xiaoxia) hair salon, she has to ask numerous passers-by how to get to Mao Nü (Figure 52).

Figure 52. Lost in the city & the meeting in hair salon: in *The Story of Ermei*

When she finally finds Mao Nü, an amplifier repeats words spoken by Mao Nü, with whom Ermei had a conversation on urban life before the family-arranged marriage:

> Welcome to Dream Paris.
>
> You will have an extravagant experience here.
>
> We will make you confident, fashionable and younger.

Do not hesitate,

Dream Paris is waiting for you.

The repeated word “Paris” represents their imagination of the exotic foreign world, and shows their dream of escaping from the small claustrophobic rural spaces. The hair salon is the only place Ermei knows in the city, and it is a place for her to let out the sorrow and tears held back all the way from her rural home to the town. When Mao Nü asks her why she didn’t call her in the first place, Ermei looks quite innocent and ignorant, bursting into tears. Coming from the rural area, Ermei appears rough and stiff due to her illiteracy, and the ambiance of inertia in rural communities.

Ermei’s urban experience is intensively related to her body and sensuality, where “the body as the most intimate of personal-and-political spaces, [becomes] an affective microcosm for all other spatialities” (Soja 1996, p. 112), the female body and sexuality is shown as a site manipulated by masculine power that permeates urban spaces. Attempting to settle down in the city, Ermei starts to work at Boss Yu (Ma Zheng)’s restaurant. She is also convinced by Mao Nü to develop a relationship with a man to ensure her stay in the city. In the restaurant, a young adult colleague continuously harasses Ermei (Figure 53), and Boss Yu occasionally requires her to serve at the tables, even though she was originally hired to make buns.

Figure 53. Ermei encounters harassment: in *The Story of Ermei*

Beyond this, she has to deal with Boss Yu's unexpected visits at night. For the relationship, Mao Nü and her boyfriend Sanwa (Feng Jinlong) introduce her to Qiao Liansheng (Liu Yanbing) who works at the radio station of a temple. The relationship lends her courage to fight back against the harassment. When teased again by the colleague, she yells at him for the first time, "You're looking for trouble?" He then swiftly replies, "You've got a boyfriend?"

Both genders in the circumstance recognise the protective role of a male in the urban space. It makes a silent and marginalised woman fearless and provocative, and it protects her from being taken advantage of. As Chris Berry notes, "even after over forty years of liberation, it is still commonly felt that a respectable woman should not be alone with any man other than a member of her family, a party representative, or a responsible government official" (Berry 1999, p. 210). As the time approaches the millennium, there are small steps of progress in female space and security: family members are no longer the only people who count, but a relationship can still protect a woman from harassment. However, the courage and happiness derived from the relationship are soon broken, with Ermei unexpectedly finding a set of female underwear in Qiao's bed. Distressed and disillusioned, she bursts into tears, striding out of the temple court to an open-air market. A two-minute long take tracks her struggling with Qiao who tries to stop Ermei and explain the situation. Ermei's wrestling with Qiao resembles her long tough journey in search of a position in the urban area, and shows that the relationship cannot ensure a stable and decent living in the town. The tangled relationships between Ermei and different men in the town unmask what might have happened to Mao Nü when she tried to settle into the urban space. Mao Nü had concealed the unpleasant side in her exciting account of city life when Ermei was still at her rural home.

At the end of the film, Sanwa stands on a truck in handcuffs, wearing a page sign that says “murderer” in Chinese. The scene catches Ermei’s attention. Astonished, she hurries to the hair salon, but only finds that a different couple has taken over. The amplifier still cries the same slogan as when she first came there, and the radio is broadcasting the same song that they sang together. Ermei learns that Mao Nü had long ago gone to Guangzhou (the South) by train, the most desirable place for youth in hinterland China who want to realise gold-digger dreams, or to start a new life. The new owners also tell Ermei that Sanwa has been sentenced to death for killing Lao Wang (Bai Mang), the corrupt police commissioner. It turns out that Mao Nü and Sanwa were involved in a twisted relationship—Mao Nü worked as a prostitute to cater to Lao Wang, to whom Sanwa was connected through some shady deals. They may have been involved in a conflict of interest that somehow led to Sanwa’s desperate action. The film suspends the reasons why Sanwa murders Lao Wang, foregrounding the heterogeneous and labyrinthine characteristics of urban spaces and the complicated relations between urban residents.

As a privileged person, Lao Wang takes advantage of Mao Nü, Sanwa, Qiao Liansheng and Boss Yu. He abuses his power by using these people and forcing them to act in accordance with his own personal preferences. These unprivileged ones either rely on Lao Wang for business reasons, like Mao Nü and Sanwa, or simply cater to his every whim to avoid trouble, like Qiao Liansheng and Boss Yu. Ermei realises that all the men who seemed strong and powerful before her behave in a cringing and ingratiating manner in Lao Wang’s presence. This unbalanced and indecent situation reaches a climax when Lao Wang forces Qiao Liansheng to drink. After Qiao reluctantly finishes a whole glass of a mixture of beer and spirits (which Lao Mao calls a submarine), he is forced to drink another one. Lao Wang

teases those who stop him and punishes them by forcing them to drink the same thing. Ermei ends this chaotic game by throwing a whole package of dead fish on the table and violently chopping them up. People are startled and Lao Wang stands up, puts on his overcoat and refuses to pay the bill. Ermei's marginalised social position and uncertain prospect of settling down in the city free her from Lao Wang's space of power, an example of how she "relocates us not in the past or in the tacitly built environment of the city, but in the marginality and overlapping psychological, social, and cultural borderlands of contemporary lived spaces" (Soja 1996, p. 111). Ermei's rural origin serves as a sanctuary that protects her from being manipulated by Lao Wang, who represents the dark and complicated side of the urban area.

In the last sequences, Ermei holds her son in her arms, riding on an electric train and wishing the boy could be able to go abroad one day. However, the everlasting circling of the train indicates the cruel reality that she will repeat the life trajectory of other females in the countryside. The blissful moment, however, is accompanied by the sound of *Qinqiang*, the representative Chinese opera popular in Shaanxi Province. The extreme high pitch and prolonged enchantment of *Qinqiang* singing is in contrast to the loving mother-son moment, which brings a sense of intensity and dislocation.

Female body as the medium of social representations

Human bodies as spatial existence register a physical occupation of certain spaces, yet more importantly, they embody the political, economic and cultural features of a given society. Soja confirms the human body as:

> a concrete physical space of flesh and bone, of chemistries and electricities; it is a highly mediated space, a space transformed by cultural interpretations and representations; it is a lived space, a volatile space of conscious and unconscious desires and motivations—a body/self, a subject, an identity: it is, in sum, a social

> space, a complexity involving the workings of power and knowledge and the workings of the body's lived unpredictabilities (cited in Soja 1996, p. 114).

The human body, either female or male, is a "highly mediated" social space that bears cultural representations (Soja 1996, p. 114). In the Chinese context, female bodies, feminine beauty and sexuality were under the strict restrictions of "Confucian patriarchy and Communist puritanism" before the 1980s (Zhou 2001, p. 11). Confucian tradition details requirements regarding females' attitude and manner, and sets strict limitations on female roles and conduct in domestic space and the public sphere. One tradition that is still commonly practiced is arranged marriage, which is the case for Ermei in *The Story of Ermei*. After the imperial regime was overthrown, the women's emancipation movement arose along with the social and cultural revolution during the Republican era (1919-1949). The establishment of the People's Republic of China furthered this movement due to Chairman Mao's official confirmation that "women were upholders of half the sky" (cited in Zhou 2001, p. 5). The socialist government propagated that it "empowered women by promoting and institutionalising their political, social, and economic roles; nevertheless, it demanded women's self-sacrifice and identification with an implicitly masculine model" (Cui 2011, p. 17). In films such as Xie Jin's 1961 *The Red Detachment of Women*, women often appear with genderless uniforms and undertake the same revolutionary tasks as men. Such asexual female images were reinforced in model plays during the Cultural Revolution, when the cinematic images of female characters were "reduced to anonymous and faceless members of a large collective group identity—sisters of the proletarian class" (Zhou 2001, pp. 7-8). Such genderless politicisation of the female body has been challenged since the 1980s, especially in urban areas where "young urbanites had adopted a more liberal and tolerant attitude towards love and marriage, and gender and sexuality" (Zhou 2001, pp. 9-10).

However, females' situations in rural areas remain unchanged. Two decades had passed since the women's emancipation of the 1980s, but the rural community to which Ermei belongs retains the Confucian values and practices. Meanwhile, with the cultural and economic reorientation of the state, objectification, commodification and fetishisation of women replaced the previous asexual, politicised representation (Chow 2013). Ermei's suffering in both her rural home and the urban area reflects such a representational transition, and shows the bleak prospects of women coming from rural communities.

Before running away, Ermei lives in the crowded room of a *Yaodong* (house cave, a particular dwelling structure excavated along hillside, common on the Loess Plateau). It is her bedroom and kitchen, which consumes her with all sorts of housework (Figure 54). In these sequences, Wang frequently frames Ermei in long or medium shots and seldom represents her in close-ups. In addition, she covers her hair with a scarf, often bends down, and hurries around for various errands. The viewers cannot see her face clearly.

Figure 54. The interior space of the Yaodong: in *The Story of Ermei*

Her private time and space are squeezed by household chores, and when her little brother tells her that a marriage has been arranged for her in exchange for the cost of a new coffin (Figure 55), she escapes from home to the urban area.

Figure 55. Ermei and her brother & grandfather's funeral: in *The Story of Ermei*

Her friend Mao Nü may have suffered from the same arrangement and she finds an alternative route for life in the urban area. During her brief home visit, Mao Nü meets Ermei at home and introduces Ermei to some rare products from the urban world—a piece of chocolate and a musical card. Apart from these material items from the outside world, Mao Nü represents an independent and free woman in the eyes of Ermei. The urban space that provides Mao Nü with such a rosy life appeals to Ermei. Mao Nü claims that her mother can be harsh to her, but cannot control her anymore, as she pays for everything in the household. It seems that the parent-child relationship has been reduced to a purely economic relationship. Mao Nü buys herself freedom of marriage by covering all the expenditures of the family. Her freedom is based on economic independence, which motivates Ermei to leave for the city and realise her economic independence by staying away from her suffocating rural home.

When Ermei crosses the border between rural and urban, she comes to this strange society where her status fluctuates along with the space that she is free to appropriate. In her countryside home, she is a marginalised, instrumental-oriented person, who has no privacy or agency. In the city, she has to cautiously deal with different men who purposefully approach her. The restaurant owner pays unexpected visits at night and her colleague keeps

harassing her. If the domestic space back in the countryside deprives her of privacy and subjectivity, the urban space makes her insecure and anxious. She soon realises that gender alone may not be what leads to the sense of insecurity and instability, as both her ex-boyfriend and boss Yu behave in a servile manner, despite being teased and rebuked by Lao Wang. Men connected with her, either through a relationship or through employment, appear vulnerable and helpless in front of the powerful privileged class represented by Lao Wang. As Soja points out:

> the subject of feminism is…constituted not by sexual difference alone, but rather across languages and cultural representations; a subject en-gendered in the experiencing of race and class, as well as sexual, relations; a subject, therefore, not unified but rather multiple, and not so much divided as contradicted (1996, p. 111).

The urban space teems with the exercising of power, not only limited to gender, but over social class and rural-urban difference. Her return to the countryside and marriage with Zhang Suo (Yan Li) are the compromises she makes after being frustrated by her urban experiences. To address existential problems and avoid being pressed by her parents, she has to marry someone. Consequently, marriage takes on practical reasons rather than a romantic aura. As in another film by Wang, *Tuya's Marriage*:

> economic modernisation and urbanisation make rural women long for greater contact with the outside world and strive to pursue a new way of life, so they venture to the city, but urban life often brings them more frustration and disappointment than opportunities for personal growth and economic betterment. They eventually have to return to the countryside to marry for purely practical reasons (Li 2013, p. 133).

Marrying Zhang Suo and becoming the mother of a boy, she ascends to a higher, respected status in the domestic space, especially when the male-female roles are inverted in both

domestic space and the public sphere, Ermei acquires autonomy in her body and authority in the family. As Zhang Suo is an alcoholic, physically weak and emotionally dependent on his parents, his masculinity and patriarchal authority face constant challenges. The first day of their marriage sees the couple fighting, as Ermei refuses to have sex with him. When the lunar New Year arrives, Zhang Suo dresses as a female to perform in the local entertainment corps. His flamboyant dress and exaggerated feminine make-up arouses a sneer from the audience, making Ermei embarrassed and restless. This transformation in apparel seems a signal of Zhang Suo's final decline in authority and masculinity. The New Year's celebration offers a great opportunity for Zhang Suo to fill his glass and get drunk, but his son somehow becomes ill in the night. Living in a remote area, a long way from the clinic in the town, Ermei painstakingly tries to start up a tractor to take the child to the hospital. Meanwhile, Zhang Suo remains unconscious from drinking and is dragged out from bed by family members and settled on the tractor to hold the child. Ermei drives the tractor all night and arrives at the town, where the child is checked and diagnosed. In this family incident, the husband remains unconscious and passive, while Ermei takes on the role of a patriarchal charge. At the end of the film, while Ermei is taking the child for a walk around a commercial square, Zhang Suo encounters a drinking mate in the street and "reluctantly" joins him. Zhang's impotence in shouldering paternal responsibility and his dependence on his parents cause him to lose his patriarchal authority in the domestic space, and Ermei accordingly asserts her autonomy.

The changing status to a certain degree reflects the uneven relationships between the rural and the urban. Away from the urban space infiltrated with power dynamics and social mobility and "differences that are ascribed to gender, sexual practice…class, region etc., and

their expression in social space and geohistorically uneven development" (Soja 1996, p. 88), Ermei again crosses the rural-urban border, and enters the rural social space and relations, in particular, the domestic space for her to assure her subjectivity by being a caring mother, a hard-working wife and a responsible daughter-in-law. The domestic space becomes "the catalyst and the contested space for both hegemonic (conservative, order-maintaining) and counter-hegemonic (resistant, order-transforming) cultural and identity politics" (Soja 1996, p. 87). Ermei's father, Boss Yu, Qiao Liansheng and Zhang Suo become the persistent shadows that affect her life trajectory. She is a passive recipient of all sorts of suffering in the beginning, but can be strong-minded and rebellious in the face of unbearable and outrageous situations. She finally secures a stable life in the arranged marriage, which comes with the price of the inversion of her gender role and exhausting household chores.

The train: trope of an alternative life

The train is a repeatedly mentioned but never visualised in *The Story of Ermei*, apart from a toy train in the closing sequences. With excessive mobility and the crystallisation of technology, the train is the symbol of modern life, conveying a romantic and utopian aura for young people from the hinterland of China. Throughout the history of film, the parallel train tracks have always been a fascinating image. According to Kirby, "the train is a mechanical double for the cinema and for the transport of the spectator into fiction, fantasy, and dream", as it is "a machine of vision and an instrument for conquering space and time" (Kirby 1997, p. 2). In The *Story of Ermei*, neither Ermei nor Qiao has a chance to board a train. At a rare romantic moment in their relationship, the train, as a metaphor of hope and access to an alternative life, adds a layer of romance to their trivial immediate daily routines. Even though Qiao just pictures a blurred vision of joining the navy, the accessibility of the

train convinces him that his dream is realisable. In other films such as Jia Zhangke's 2000 *Platform*, the train functions as an important trope, in which a troupe of singers and performers in Shanxi Province, as young as Ermei and Qiao, cheer and shout at the sight of a train thundering from a distance. Like Ermei and Qiao, they have never had a chance to take a train, but yearn to go beyond of their hometown to see the world and experience a different way of life. In both Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces (located in the north-western hinterland area) young people have dreams and ambitions of crossing provincial boundaries to the faraway south and east. However, when the camera pans down to Qiao saying Sanwa is "an idiot", Sanwa is revealed standing on his hands upside down on lower ground, with Mao Nü next to him wearing a red dress that is in contrast to the inhospitable landscape (Figure 56). The disturbing red dress and the inverted position generate a warning about Qiao's inaccessible dream of joining the navy and are a premonition of the unsettling consequences of both relationships.

Figure 56. Ermei and Qiao & Mao Mü and San Wa: in *The Story of Ermei*

The train, as a "transitional dynamic space" and the mechanism that marks the urban space and keeps the urban space constantly under transformation, has frequently been associated with the production of "a fragmented and alienated social sphere" (Pratt & Juan 2014, pp. 49-54). In films such as Dziga Vertov's 1929 *Man with a Movie Camera* and Lumière

brothers' short film *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (1896), the train represents "limitless possibilities" and imparts shocking experiences. They are spaces that retain "a history of industrialisation" and propose "an urban space moving towards an uncertain future" (Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 54). The above examples show the affinity between the train and urban space, mechanisation and sense of time, speeding movement and modernity. In the context of Chinese urbanisation, the train has facilitated the rural-urban mobility of Chinese population since the 1980s. However, young people from the hinterland area, especially the western regions, seem to be excluded from access to the train and the brave new world at the other end of the track. Modernisation is too abstract for people like Ermei and Qiao to understand. For them, it symbolises a device that receives radio and TV signals, programs and pop music broadcast on TV. As explained by Wang:

> the world has been unfolded in front of those people. It is a colourful world, but it has nothing to do with them. They can tell what modern life looks like, as the TV programs have exhibited it to them. Just as Ermei can talk about places such as Germany, France and the US where she has never been, but she can only imagine and talk about them (Zhu & Tu 2004, pp. 21-22).

Disillusioned and frustrated by her own urban experiences, Ermei still expects a bright and promising future for her son in different places overseas. Even though she has become aware that modern life represented on TV may never come true in her circumstances, the distant modernisation remains desirable and appealing. As the film approaches the end, Ermei learns that Mao Mü has gone to Guangzhou, the most developed and commercialised area in southern China, by train. "By train", Ermei murmurs and repeats the words, holding her crying baby boy and trying to calm him down. Ermei reveals little concern about the probable adversities facing Mao Mü in a distant and strange place. Rather, she seems more interested

in the different life Mao Mü can have. In the following sequences, she takes the boy to a toy train (Figure 57), picturing a grand blueprint for her son to travel as far as to Germany, France and America. It seems that in Ermei's perception, life outside of the rural hometown must promise a better future.

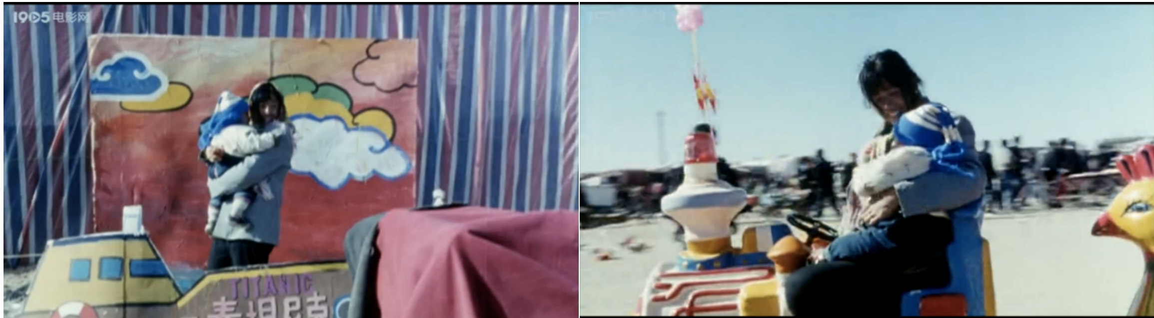

Figure 57. Ermei and her child playing with a toy train: in *The Story of Ermei*

Ermei's escape and final return to the rural area is a compromise between individual freedom and a stable life. She grows up from being a country girl with ambivalent will and voice into a strong woman who takes charge of the family. Crossing the boundary between the rural and the urban, she experiences the fluctuation in social status and realises the power structure behind gender and social class. Even though she returns to the countryside eventually, the city and foreign states still claim her imagination and expectation for the next generation. A stark contrast to this is found in *Weaving Girl* where the city is associated with disease and death, which comes to symbolise the end of a socialist utopia.

Weaving Girl: state-owned enterprise and the female worker

Weaving Girl (2009) features Li Li (Yu Nan) who works in a state-owned textile plant and struggles with poor wages, disease and suffocating daily routines. The plant is on the verge of bankruptcy, and has hundreds of weaving girls like Li Li facing financial difficulties and bleak prospects. They wear uniforms, working between rows of textile

machines roaring day and night. The factory and the workers in uniform are reminiscent of Jia Zhangke's 2008 *24 City* analysed in the previous chapter. The state-owned factory in *24 City* is located in Chengdu and functions as a well-designed kingdom that provides all the infrastructure needed to satisfy the personal and public needs of the people working and dwelling in the space. Related to military production and maintenance, the factory has thrived as an independent and all-inclusive utopia since establishment. In contrast, the textile factory in *Weaving Girl* is far less influential in terms of its scale and production. It represents an unpleasant working space for Li Li and her colleagues and a company in disrepair that provides meagre wages. Sometimes workers' wages are withheld according to unreasonable "rules", causing Li Li to lose her temper in the beginning of the film.

The film unfolds spatially by following the protagonist traveling between two different places. The first part is set in Xi'an, showing the tedious daily routines in Li Li's working and living spaces. She often appears absent-minded, upset and annoyed. The following part traces her trip to Beijing for a long-yearned-for answer from her first love who was assigned to another state-owned enterprise in Beijing ten years before. Li Li's mundane life in Xi'an and her trip to Beijing cast a realistic comparison between the two cities, showing their uneven economic situations and the different prospects of the two regions. After she returns from Beijing to Xi'an, Li Li finally becomes affectionate towards her husband before dying from leukaemia. *The Weaving Girl* portrays a wayward girl who marries for revenge on her parents rather than for love, a mother who fails to establish intimate relations with her son, a weaving girl who has only a few months of life left, and a group of weaving girls struggling to survive after being laid-off.

Xi'an: a time capsule of socialist China

Weaving Girl opens with disturbing mechanical noises made by hundreds of textile machines in an enormous factory space (Figure 58). With her back to the camera, the protagonist Li Li walks quickly across rows of machines, complaining and cursing. A man is chasing after her with an envelope with her wages in his hand, but he is confronted by Li Li's furious question: "Why the hell withhold my salary?" She had fallen foul of the regulations of the enterprise by eating a meal in the working area. The conflict ends with her returning to her position. A colleague comes over to enquire about the situation, telling Li Li that her salary is also withheld for the same reason. The different reaction towards the same issue reveals Li Li's strong personality. Employees perceive the irrational rule as an excuse by the company to exploit workers. In the following sequences set in a public bathroom, another of Li Li's colleagues, who had encountered the same situation, complains, "Don't you know our factory? Whenever they raise our pay, they will find excuses to cut it short." The sequences reveal the tangled relations between the company and the employees. The rule "No food in the working space" is not highly demanding, but why do workers keep breaching it? Maybe there is no proper place provided for lunch; maybe there is, but workers find it difficult to squeeze in time for eating and relaxation as well as completing their workload. The contradiction between company rules and workers' preferred dining space exposes the lack or dislocation of infrastructural and spatial supplements in this industrial complex.

Figure 58. Li Li working in the textile plant: in *Weaving Girl*

The following sequences boldly display naked female bodies in a shower-room. This is neither the socialist depiction of female as genderless subject, nor the commercialised fetishism of female bodies. According to Jay Chow, in socialist Chinese cinema female images and bodies show a tendency to downplay the "gendered or sexualised specifics of women's agency". Since the 1980s, the female body has become a site of exhibition devoted to rediscovering "the conventions of fetishism that had been evident in early Chinese filmmaking" (Chow 2013, pp. 493-495). However, the public bathroom scene in *Weaving Girl* is represented in such a plain way that it avoids the spectacle of female bodies shown in an ethnographic perspective like that of the Fifth Generation veterans, as represented in Zhang Yimou's 1991 *Raise the Red Lantern*. Li Li even takes her toddler son into the bathroom. He is accustomed to being there and calmly plays with Li Li's colleagues. In this highly gendered space, Wang Quan'an filters the fetishism of the female body, showing it not as particularly beautiful or appealing; in fact, most of them are at middle age. It is a secure space for them to take off their social masks, exchange true feelings and complain about the inhumane rules and regulations. It is a dreamlike space, enclosed, safe and free, indicating that "there is no room for women in society apart from this dreamlike, enclosed space. The world outside the bathhouse is violent and unsafe, and women are powerless to change this" (Rashkin 1993, p. 114).

The image of the municipality of Xi'an depicted in *Weaving Girl* is deprived of the thick historical and cultural sense associated with this old capital city of more than a thousand years of history. Instead, the city appears as a grim anonymous industrial area, with rundown factories and alienated streets and neighbourhoods. When Li Li and her friends are taking a

break outside the main building, the camera draws the audience's attention to the redbrick wall of the structure. The wall, including window frames and windowsills, is covered by clumps of grey floc that have accumulated through years (Figure 59). Sitting down under the windows, Li Li's friend Wujie (Shi Xiaoping) talks about her breast cancer and how it becomes a heavy blow to her family, and wonders why Li Li becomes so silent and conservative. Wujie despises a newly recruited young girl who is attracted to an accordionist, while Li Li takes a glimpse of the giggling girl without giving any comment. The understated romance between the girl and the accordionist resonates with the romance between Li Li and Zhao Luhan (Zhao Luhan), who was Li Li's first love and used to work in the same factory long before the city was reduced to a silent and grey industrial site inhabited and appropriated by groups of laid-off workers.

Figure 59. Walls and window frames: in *Weaving Girl*

The working space and bathroom have remained the same for decades, carrying on the socialist way of production and management. In addition, workers' entertainment activities have also passed down from generation to generation. On a snowy day, a group of female workers rehearse a chorus of a Soviet song "Weaving Girl" on an outdoor stage. Li Li stands in the centre of the choir, but suddenly faints. There are red curtains hanging in the background of the stage and a five-star logo attached to the top of it, reminding of past glories

and socialist decorations and routines of public life (Figure 60). The Soviet song was composed over half a century ago and the film illustrates how it is still practiced and appreciated by the working class in the western hinterland area, while in Beijing, as shown in Zhao Luhan's case, such forms of amusement have long vanished. When the increasingly commercialised outside world filters into the domestic space through newspapers, magazines, TV and films, people who have been entrapped in the small kingdom grow increasingly dissatisfied but immobilised in a strong sense of impotence.

Figure 60. The Soviet style outdoor stage: in *Weaving Girl*

Li Li's home is located next to the industrial district with colossal chimneys emitting smoke day and night. Intertwined cables crisscross the neighbourhood, creating a typical scene of an industrial dwelling space and an unsettling sense of living. The harsh and freezing environment encapsulates this group of people in an old and slow-paced space where people sing the old songs, work on obsolete machines and live in rundown socialist-style buildings. The space is more like somebody's pale memory of an unpleasant past. Meanwhile, Beijing has already erased the old industrial traces imprinted by socialist China.

Both Jia Zhangke and Wang Quan'an record the disappearing state-owned socialist companies and the struggling workers emotionally trapped in the past and confronted with their miserable lives. The "local items of the present and the here-and-now can be made to

express and to designate the absent, unrepresentable totality" (Jameson 1992, p. 10). In *24 City*, the state-owned company is relocated to a nearby county, while in *Weaving Girl*, the factory is shut down on a grim snowy day (Figure 61). Its gate is shut tight, the yard is empty and a dark grey tone infiltrates the scene.

Figure 61. The bankrupt factory and its exterior scene: in *Weaving Girl*

Outside the gate, a peddler passes the factory slowly, followed by a motorised tricycle driving from the opposite direction and then disappearing (Figure 62). The scenario indicates the possible occupations that the workers may take after being dismissed. The gate and the factory yard were the means of access to a long-term stable career and an affluent life, but it has turned into a wasteland packed with stagnant and abandoned buildings. The camera gazes at the beige structure of the main entrance from a distance in long shots, which:

> seem to edit nothing out but also to select nothing in particular. The street appears to emerge untouched by filmic procedures, literally pulled from raw matter into an uncertain visibility achieved against the odds. This indecipherability works to keep a sense of becoming or incompleteness that gives the street its lifelike appearance but it also makes it strange, ominously dangerous and filled with uncertainty. This is the jarring coexistence of the ordinary and the extraordinary, of the irreversible events of history and the repetitive small movements of everyday life (Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 42).

Figure 62. A peddler passing by and a motorised tricycle: in *Weaving Girl*

For the workers, the space is used to exhibit a decent and respectable social status; however, the rundown factory and plain buildings that still stand in the reform era become undesired alternatives, since they neither represent the traditional and imagination-evocative agricultural China, nor stand for a strong and affluent modern China. The stagnant and abandoned industrial sites, present as a ruined space, embody the contradictions between political and economic power and the uncertain future of ordinary individuals (Figure 63).

Figure 63. Abandoned socialist factories: in *Weaving Girl*

Weaving Girl shows that the urban dissolution and rearrangement driven by the market are irresistible, leaving disappointed and debilitated a group of people who have become accustomed to the previous spatial arrangement and social relations. The freezing and silent industrial city and the disease-ridden female characters become an intertextual signification. Li Li's leukaemia and Wujie's breast cancer are both severe and incurable

diseases that threaten the well-being of themselves and their respective families. Family as the basic unit of society moves alongside the rise and fall of the enterprise. In Li Li's case, her disease impoverishes the family. Her husband sells their house before the New Year in order to raise enough money for Li Li's treatment, which annoys their son so much that he feels reluctant to visit Li Li in hospital. In Wujie's case, she is abandoned by her husband and child as the breast cancer exhausts the family. Living alone, she occupies herself with dancing in nightclubs. Neither of them reacts violently, but rather attempts to deal with the rest of their life no matter how short or bad it is. Soja elaborated on the relation between body and city by quoting from Barbara Hooper:

> body and city are the persistent subjects of a social/civic discourse, of an imaginary obsessed with the fear of unruly and dangerous elements and the equally obsessive desire to bring them under control: fears of pollution, contagions, disease, things out of place; desires for controlling and mastering that [become] the spatial practice of enclosing unruly elements within carefully guarded spaces. These acts of differentiation, separation, and enclosure involve material, symbolic, and lived spaces…bodies and cities and texts…and are practiced as a politics of difference, as segregation and separation (cited in Soja 1996, p. 114).

The fateful diseases suffered by the characters resonate with the collapse of the state-owned enterprise. Like the incurable diseases, the bankrupt factory cannot be restored. Both of them stand for the "fear of the unruly" that the family and the state respectively try to "bring under control". The disease-ridden body and disintegrating company will soon disappear from the terrain that massive and dynamic urbanisation claims. While the reform era bears witness to the fast pace of urbanisation and privitalisation, it also drags the previous privileged working-class down to a lower social position. Correspondingly, their working and dwelling places are erased from the map of an advancing modern cityscape. Moreover, the social

relations that were established around the previous social spaces gradually melt away in a market-oriented context.

Beijing: a stark contrast to Xi'an

Li Li perceives Beidaihe (a coastal holiday resort near Beijing) and Beijing as an alternative way of living, and more significantly, they are spaces of romance and hope. Li Li still treasures the memory of her time with Zhao Luhan, who used to be an accordionist and passionately envisaged the beauty of Beidaihe when they were in a relationship a decade ago. Both places are far away from hinterland Xi'an, and set as a contrast in terms of physical appearance and emotional attachment. When Li Li first arrives in Beijing, she appears surprised and engaged by the stylish skyscrapers and the bustling traffic of the metropolitan space (Figure 64). She sees that the CCTV Headquarters is under construction (which indicates that the story is probably set around 2009). The monumental complex is an "official site for remembering official history and simultaneously forgetting or erasing counterclaims to space; they are often dead zones that close off the possibilities for urban politics and contestation" (Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 105). As the political and propaganda centre of the state government, the tremendous CCTV structure signals the miraculous economic development of China and the official rhetoric overwhelmingly deafens the voices of individuals.

Figure 64. The cityscape of Beijing: in *Weaving Girl*

Ten years ago, Zhao Luhan left the textile factory in Xi'an and was reassigned to a dye factory in Beijing. The narration does not provide a specific reason why Zhao had to leave, but the state-owned enterprise, as representative of an enormous organisation, often appears as a space of power that can exercise operations across regions. Zhao's reassigned job can therefore be seen as a result of the omnipotent invisible hand of power that conducts its redistribution of resources and labour.

The modern street scene of Beijing is soon followed by a massive site of ruins as Li Li comes to the old address of Zhao Luhan's working unit. The ruins, corresponding with the construction works that she saw on her way, show Beijing as a dynamic and estranged place. Beijing is on the path of a "reconstructing urban space" (Lu 2007b) and the ruins are perceived by critics as "the city's scars" (Braester 2007, p. 161). The character *Chai* (拆) means "to demolish" or "to tear down", which is perceived by Sheldon Lu as the "proper name for contemporary 'China' as all Chinese cities have witnessed the destruction of old buildings and the construction of new structures" (Lu 2007b, p. 137). The ruins and the character *Chai*, as noted in previous chapters in relation to *Still Life*, *24 City* and *Buddha Mountain*, display a transforming China where destruction is juxtaposed with construction, tradition with modernisation, optimism with trauma. In *Weaving Girl*, such colossal changes in the cityscape (Beijing) disturb the local residents and delay Li Li's searching for Zhao Luhan. When Li Li asks a passer-by about the dye factory, he replies briefly that he is not a native of Beijing. Li Li then turns to an old man who wanders around the ruins and tells her that the factory had been relocated ten years ago (Figure 65).

Figure 65. The character Chai (拆) & the ruins: in *Weaving Girl*

The time neatly coincides with the time when Zhao moved to Beijing. From their conversation, we can visualise a dynamic Beijing that has constantly been in the process of deconstruction and reconstruction since the 1990s. The industrial area is first replaced by an accommodation area and now another round of urban transformation is underway. It is a space characterised by mobility, transience and dynamism. The presence of the ruin in the narrative of Beijing, "with all of its implications of past, present and future, both situates the street within the narrative and detaches it by revealing the uncertainties that surround it. It is the ruins that open up unexpected possibilities, evoking the complexities revealed through time" (Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 43). Beijing is like a melting pot that encourages outsiders to undergo adventures and participate in multiple transformations, and allows the natives to wander around their old dwelling space with a sense of nostalgia.

Construction and demolition, mobility and nostalgia are juxtaposed in everyday life. Landmarks are erected, modern constructions and skyscrapers push the urban space further horizontally and vertically. In this extensive transformation, Beijing, as a highly integrated political, cultural, social and economic centre, has overwhelmed the individual under the grand narrative of national progress and economic miracles. The extraordinary process of urbanisation and modernisation silences and overshadows the voices and preferences of

individuals. Zhao Luhan, the romanticised accordionist, has put away his instrument since he arrived in Beijing. When Li Li finds him, he is sitting beside a large machine, leaning to one side with an exhausted expression on his face. After ten years, he appears more embarrassed than surprised at the sight of Li Li's unexpected arrival. When Li Li asks him why he has not replied to her letters over the past years, he pauses for a while, murmuring that he did not receive any letters from her. The hundreds of letters that have mysteriously evaporated symbolise a barrier that prevents Li Li from establishing a solid relationship with other men and even her own child. On the other hand, those trivial letters signify the insignificant existence of the individual in the face of an overarching national discourse. Mysteriously, their private life is strongly affected by a grander narrative. The national political power, "wielded by those in positions of authority, does not merely manipulate naively given differences between individuals and social groups", but it "actively produces and reproduces difference as a key strategy to create and maintain modes of social and spatial division that are advantageous to its continued empowerment and authority" (Soja 1996, p. 87). In this film, such spatial and social division is imposed on scales from personal life to regional disparities.

At the end of the film, Zhao takes out the dust-covered accordion, playing the song he once sang and appreciated with Li Li. The melancholy tone fits with Li Li's current situation. She is lying unconscious in a hospital in Xi'an before the medical equipment beside her emits subtle sounds that indicate that Li Li has died. The cityscape of Xi'an appears static and stagnant, while Beijing appears dynamic and advancing. In Beijing, large scale demolition erases the neighbourhood and community, and produces debris and rubble, but the space promises a new life characterised by modernity and a promising future. There

is a Maoist saying that "*Bu po bu li*" [there is no construction without destruction] (cited in Schultz 2016, p. 440). However, Xi'an's representation in *Weaving Girl* shows a scene of no destruction, therefore no construction.

Conclusion

In the 1980s when social, political and economic reform was implemented across the country, writers and filmmakers turned back to the Loess Plateau—the cradle of Chinese civilisation—to search for the nationality and identity of the state. In the accumulating north-western-based films since the 1980s, as shown in the above three films, the north-west appears in a sense of enclosure and stagnancy. Such spatial characteristics not only register physically, but also spiritually. In Huang Jianxin's representations, layers of thick walls and complicated ancient structures surround and divide the city, block characters' vision and constrain their prospects of going out or up. The hegemonic power carried by the guild hall that can be seen as the "representations of Secondspace" is "the dominant space, surveying and controlling both spatial practices and the lived spaces of representation" (1996, p. 80).

Wang has configured a silent and left-behind Xi'an in terms of economy, society and culture. In *The Story of Ermei*, Wang partially retains the symbols and cultural rituals of the area exhibited in relevant films by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. He targets a town adjacent to Xi'an that serves as a conjuncture of the rural and urban areas, and focuses on the shifting boundary between rural and urban by juxtaposing the intrusion of commercial values into hinterland households with the intact arranged marriage and parental powers. In addition, he explores how females in the area justify their positions and roles in different social spaces, and shows their vulnerability and strength in domestic and urban spaces. In *Weaving Girl*, Wang configures an industrial Xi'an where the industrial district is half-abandoned and

lifeless, leaving the once respected proletariat in poverty or even death. In contrast to the on-screen Beijing, the metropolitan hub, always appearing with dynamic and bustling comings and goings, the Xi'an municipality is represented in film as a self-enclosed place, remaining in the past and with bleak prospects for the future.

The next chapter will move to Lanzhou, the last destination of this cinematic journey of western cities. Cinematic Lanzhou, to a certain degree, shares a similar ambience with Xi'an due to their shared cultural habits and adjoining geographical locations. Yet Lanzhou and its adjacent areas have been frequently related to environmental pollution, fragile ecosystems and deteriorating land. Urbanisation and modernisation have exacerbated the inherently fragile environment of the area, and films about the region, directly or indirectly, reflect such social and geographical changes. I will look closely at Chen Jianbin's 2014 *A Fool* and use Wang Quan'an's 2006 *Tuya's Marriage* and Li Ruijun's 2014 *River Road* to illustrate the increasing extension of the urban influence on the rural space in Gansu province.

Chapter Six Cinematic Lanzhou

This chapter will focus on cinematic Lanzhou and its adjacent areas. Compared to the other three cinematic cities in western China, Lanzhou has the least exposure on the big screen. The capital city makes an "absent presence" in films about the area, as it often appears as the reference to modernity and a future destination in the eyes of filmic characters from the adjacent areas. The frontier landscape outside Lanzhou municipality provides a similar setting to the American Western, and has attracted many Chinese filmmakers to utilise the vast wild canvas to visualise their contemplation of the contemporary Chinese western reality and national modernity. I will mainly focus on *A Fool* to show the "absent presence" of the provincial capital city by introducing the in-between space of the small town located between the megacity and the rural area. The cinematic town creates a space that provides "the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Soja 1996, p. 143). This film can be seen as a Thirdspace that breaks the mainstream representation of the area, either as the Chinese Western genre featuring vast expanses of desert, galloping horses and thrilling gun-fighting, or minority films characterised by exotic costumes and mysterious religious rituals of ethnic minorities. I will then extend this idea of "thirding" the representation of the region by introducing minority films *Tuya's Marriage* and *River Road* to enhance the awareness of an evolving and fluid image of the area and the people.

Overview of the city Lanzhou

Lanzhou, also known as *Jincheng* (lit. Gold City), is the capital city of Gansu Province. It has a sprawling urban area, making it the most populous city in Gansu province

with a population of over 3.6 million (*Data Report* 2012). Located on the upper Yellow River, the city connects the eastern end of the Hexi corridor (alternatively, Gansu corridor), an essential part of the intercontinental Silk Road, where "trade routes from Tibet to the west, Mongolia to the north, and Gansu and Xinjiang to the northwest converged" in ancient times (cited in Juliano & Lerner 2001, p. 55). It is the only megacity that has developed along the two sides of the Yellow River. Gansu province was "virtually unknown" to the Chinese until the beginning of the Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD) when the Gansu corridor was "broad and the people were few; water and grass favour animal husbandry, so the cattle of [the Gansu corridor] are the most plentiful in the world" (cited in Juliano & Lerner 2001, p. 55). The area was first inhabited by Xiongnu and other nomadic peoples who "intermittently launched attacks on Chinese agricultural settlements to the east and even threatened the imperial capital of Chang'an [Xi'an]" (Juliano & Lerner 2001, p. 28). By the first century AD, the Han military force defeated Xiongnu and established five command points, beginning from the far west with Dunhuang (88-87 BC) and moving eastward to Jiuquan (108 BC), Zhangye (102-101 BC), Wuwei (68 BC) and Jincheng (81 BC) (cited in Juliano & Lerner 2001, p. 58). The military and political control by the Han administration enhanced the Han "cultural presence" on the western frontier and guaranteed "relative safety and security to merchant caravans bringing exotic goods from the West to the Han nobility, as well as to proselytising monks seeking converts" (Juliano & Lerner 2001, p. 29). Consequently, Buddhism reached China along with the growing commercial activities on the Silk Road during the Han dynasty and gained enormous popularity during the Tang dynasty. With voluminous religious documents, murals and images produced by woodblock

printing, the Dunhuang Mogao grottoes are concrete evidence of such religious, commercial and cultural exchanges.

As one of the key Han fortress cities in the northwest, Lanzhou became the political centre of Gansu province from the Qing dynasty (Zang 2007, p. 7). In the contemporary era, it has been designated as a significant industrial and traffic hub due to its strategic geographic position in western China. Along with Chongqing and Chengdu, it was one of the industrial centres under the Third Front project between the 1960s and 1980s (as discussed in the previous chapters). The landscape of the area has experienced dramatic transformations due to large-scale urbanisation and economic development with little concern for the vulnerable environment since the 1980s. Oases are disappearing and deserts are devouring villages and towns, driving residents to migrate to other places.

Just like Chongqing, Chengdu and Xi'an, Lanzhou was designed as a critical industrial and military site in the Third Front project that commenced in the 1960s (Naughton 1988). As a grand project advocated by Chairman Mao Zedong, it was soon carried out by the central government in 1964 when China split with the Soviet Union and the USA became increasingly involved in the Vietnam War. To ensure a sustained development of the state economy, the communist government devoted energy to:

> create an entire industrial system within this naturally remote and strategically secure region. The area of the 'big third front' (da san xian) or 'big rear area' (da houfang) includes all of the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Gansu, Qinghai and Ningxia. … The Third Front was designed as a large-scale industrial network, linking this entire 'rear area' through major transport and industrial facilities (Naughton 1988, p. 354).

Cities of the "rear area" acquired tremendous economic wealth, principally through heavy industry development with political support. Resources and talents were distributed to the

frontier to construct a powerful nation. However, the enormous industrial production and hastily implemented plan brought Lanzhou serious environmental problems. As the city is located on the long narrow valley basin along the Yellow River, combined with special meteorological conditions, the locally generated pollutant emissions cannot effectively disperse. Therefore, Lanzhou has become recognised as one of the most polluted municipal cities in mainland China (Chambers et al. 2015; Chu et al. 2008). Anecdotally it was said that the air pollution was so serious that US satellites could not find the city at some moments, which caused intense military and political concern abroad (*China-Lanzhou/Climate Award* 2015). The unique topographical and meteorological situation of the city restricted it from becoming a megacity like Chengdu and Chongqing, and made it even more difficult to settle the dilemma between economic growth and pollution control. Despite these difficulties, the city was awarded "Today Reform Progress Prize" (also Today's Transformative Step) at the Paris Climate Change Conference held by the UN in 2015, recognising the effort and progress achieved by the city. Compared to Xi'an, the city of Lanzhou does not possess abundant historical and cultural heritage, and for the degree of modernisation and urbanisation, it cannot compete with Chongqing and Chengdu. However, like the other three western counterparts, the area has gained increasing cinematic representation since the 2000s. What should be noted is that filmic Lanzhou remains mostly focused on the countryside and the vast barren desert.

The city as an absent presence

In the following cinematic representations of the region, Lanzhou municipality appears either in contrast to the rural area or as a space of banal everyday life. *The Red Awn* [*Hongse kangbaiyin*] (dir. Cai Shangjun, 2007), set in the Hexi corridor area, represents a

broken family and a troubled father-son relationship. Lanzhou appears as a controversial space for rural people: on the one hand, it appeals to innocent countrymen with plenty of opportunities for work, proper education and a promise of a better life; on the other hand, it devours their health and exploits them economically and diminishes them socially. *Up to the Mountain, Overlooking the Running River* [*Shangqu gaoshan wang pingchuan*] (dir. Wang Fanqin, 2013) intertwines voluntary teaching, immigration and the construction of Lanzhou New Area, a state-level special economic zone to the north of Lanzhou established in 2012 (*China approves new state-level SEZ in Gansu* 2012). It shows the deteriorating rural environment and complicated rural immigration issues, and praises the new life in the newly developed area, which, as one of the enormous economic projects included in the Silk Road economic belt, was approved by the central government in 2012. Mountains and hundreds of villages have been bulldozed to make way for the building of the New Area, the fifth state-level special free trade zone after Shanghai's Pudong, Tianjin's Binhai, Chongqing's Liangjiang and Zhejiang's Zhoushan. However, the designated area undergoing construction is perceived as a "ghost city" by the locals of Lanzhou and visitors from outside the province, as it is empty and lacks vitality (Phillips 2017).

Another film *The Missing Sheep* [*Diu yang*] (dir. Wang Xiaoping, 2016), based in a subsidiary town of Lanzhou, features a shepherd who loses four sheep and eventually receives compensation for his loss from superior administration executives. The film's straightforward, almost banal premise exposes the local government officials' misconduct and corruption, and reflects the difficulties a common shepherd can encounter at different levels of administration in the process of acquiring justice. However, the ending shows that government misconduct can be corrected and justice will prevail with the arrival of an

upright superior official. *Hearing Implant* [*Erwo*] (dir. Fang Junliang, 2015) is one of the few films set in the Lanzhou municipality and is based on a true story about a common family's twisted journey in search of a lost cochlear implant that cost 280,000 RMB. Unfolding like newsreels, the film displays the cityscape in detail by following the family members walking through bustling city streets that are occupied by peddlers, imposters, trash pickers and pedestrians, in search of the expensive hearing implant. The family has already been impoverished by the cochlear implant, and suffers even more strikes as the grandmother becomes the victim of fraud and the grandfather's health condition deteriorates. In the film, Lanzhou municipality appears with warm-hearted citizens and responsible media workers who provide assistance in the process. In the above films, the city itself does not necessarily present an advanced and glassy metropolitan appearance. Instead, it is frequently referred to as "the provincial capital" without being specifically named. Even though *Hearing Implant* is shot on location, the street scenes of Lanzhou do not stand out from that of any of the nearby towns in Gansu province. Rather, the city and its adjacent areas are frequently associated with desert, barren land, drought and environmental issues.

Cinematically, the barren land around Lanzhou serves as a background landscape, and also provides material for the construction of walls and houses. Apart from this, the geographical and meteorological conditions of the land nurture a nomadic way of living. Sheep, horse, camel or cattle herding become one of the overt images of the area, with protagonists in films often accompanied or symbolised by these animals. One of the examples is *A Fool*, in which the desert is represented as not only a place of challenging natural conditions, but also a space of isolation, disorder, poverty and backwardness. Moreover, the isolated and wild desert acts as a sanctuary for criminals and a battle field

between order and disorder, the official and the non-official, as can be seen in Gao Qunshu's 2010 *Wind Blast*. The brutal natural conditions of the area yield poverty and misery, and the education, traffic and business infrastructure is correspondingly quite limited. Cinematic works such as *Pretty Big Feet* [*Meili de dajiao*] (dir. Yang Yazhou, 2002), set in the barren desert, show the lack of staff and basic facilities for teaching and learning in an elementary school. Similarly, *The Call of Maji Mountain* [*Maji shan de huhuan*] (dir. Li Jialun, 2011) features two university graduates who voluntarily join a primary school in rural Tianshui, located three-hour away from Lanzhou, imparting knowledge and enlightening the students of the countryside by introducing new technology and new musical instruments. As one of the most remote regions in contemporary China, different levels of administration of the north-west face a shortage of education resources such as school facilities, campus infrastructure and educational talent. Scenes of barren lands and poorly-equipped country schools dominate the above films, while the provincial capital Lanzhou appears to have numerous education and job opportunities, and its "developed" economy signifies utopian space for the confined countryside populace.

Such fascination with utopian urban space is absent in Li Ruijun's cinematic representation of his hometown rural Gaotai, one of the small cities located in the Hexi corridor. Similar to Jia Zhangke, who represented his hometown Fenyang in a trilogy, Li Ruijun films Gaotai and the adjacent places in an array of works including *The Old Donkey* [*Lao lü tou*] (2010), *Fly with the Crane* [*Gaosu tamen, wo cheng baihe qule*. lit. *Tell them, I flew away with the crane*] (2012) and *River Road* [*Jia zai shuicao fengmao de difang*. lit. *Home located in a lush green place*] (2015). Using a realistic style, Li touches the most concerning problems triggered by urbanisation and environmental deterioration in the north-

west Gansu province. *The Old Donkey* revolves around a 73-year-old man who fights to preserve his farmland and ancestral graves on the edge of the desert. Serious desertification drives farmers and herdsmen away from home to urban areas or distant fertile lands, leaving behind children and the old at home. The small village becomes an aging and abandoned land. In *Fly with the Crane*, again, the 73-year-old protagonist stubbornly resists cremation advocated by the local government, as he and his generation cannot accept the concept and practice of being burned to ashes after death. Stubbornly and romantically, he asks his grandson to bury him alive on the bank of a river, and asks the boy to tell his family that he flew away with the crane. Flying with the crane is a figurative expression indicating death, in particular, an elegant and decent death. Traditionally, the old generation prefers to be buried in a red coffin with painted cranes, clouds and pine trees, since they superstitiously believe in an after-life and reincarnation. To be buried instead of being burned means a decent passing away and a possible after-life. The direct conflicts between village people and the government units in enforcing the new funeral policy reflect a tangled situation between individuals and state economic and social concerns. *River Road* emphasises the environmental problems by representing two young brothers' long desert journey on camelback. Drought and desertification wipe out the necessary resources for living, driving the nomadic people from one place to another. Home becomes a mobilised, unstable and separated space in such circumstances.

Countryside dominates the cinematic representations, and protagonists in the above films often have various kinds of disease, such as a father who suffers sever lumbar vertebrae damage in *The Red Awn*, a deaf girl and her grandfather with Alzheimer's disease in *Hearing Implant* and a disease-ridden grandfather and mother in *River Road*. The human suffering

resonates with the barren land. The lush green lands that nurtured herds of healthy sheep and camels in ancient times no longer provide the necessary conditions for grazing and living. When the tide of urbanisation assimilates the appearance of cities across China, the north-western cities are often overshadowed by their southern and eastern coastal counterparts, since the vulnerable ecosystem and remote geographical location of the former restrict the potential for economic development. The unique landscape of deserts and plateaus, and the qualities such as honesty and frankness of the local people are presented as preserved due to geographical isolation. In recent years, the region's increasing cinematic representations differentiate the region from the other assimilated metropolitan cities.

The next section of this chapter will closely examine one film set near Lanzhou, *A Fool*, to show the economic and cultural conditions of this long-ignored land, and also compare it with *The Story of Qiu Ju*, another film dealing with similar themes, to show the physical and psychological transformations of the place and the people over a decade, and how the geographical isolation of the area has resulted in a stagnant and abandoned social space. In terms of the development predicament of minorities, environmental issues and realistic style, the film *River Road* resonates with another ethnic-centred work, *Tuya's Marriage* (2006), by Wang Quan'an, which is set in the steppes of Inner Mongolia. *River Road* and *Tuya's Marriage* will be briefly mentioned in this chapter to show the cultural variety of the region, and the similar economic and cultural plight that confronts ethnic minority groups in north-western China.

A Fool, the rural victim of urban manipulative domination

A Fool was Chen Jianbin's directorial debut and he was awarded both the Best New Director and Best Actor at the 2014 Golden Horse Awards in Taipei. Chen Jianbin is a

veteran actor in Chinese TV shows, and he is both the director and the male lead in *A Fool*. The Chinese title of the film, *Yige shaozi*, literally means “one spoon”, which figuratively refers to a fool or someone insane in Xinjiang and Gansu dialects. It features Latiaozi (the nickname of Chen’s character, whose real name is Ma Ji), a shepherd in a small town near Lanzhou who bumps into Shaozi (the fool, Jin Shijia), and is then followed by the fool and becomes a fool himself at the end. From the opening sequences, the audience can see that Latiaozi and his family are located in “dominated spaces”: from his way of living as a sheep farmer, from being a father who has an imprisoned son, and from the fact that he often appears under stages and sheep sheds. He is associated with:

> the spaces of the peripheries, the margins and the marginalised, the ‘Thirdworld Worlds’ that can be found at all scales, in the corpo-reality of the body and mind, in sexuality and subjectivity, in individual and collective identities from the most local to the most global (Soja 1996, p. 68).

Even his name, the first and maybe the most important sign and reference of a person in film, connotes a sense of subaltern. His nickname—Latiaozi—literally refers to a type of noodle popular in north-western China. The vernacularism conveyed in his name enhances the locality of the film, and also creates a strong sense of the mundaneness and insignificance of the character. Latiaozi and his wife Jinzhizi (Jiang Qinqin) live in the small village of Caowotan, and their son is sentenced to six-year’s imprisonment (no specific reasons or crimes given in the film). They borrow a large sum of money and consign it to Li Datou (Wang Xuebing) in expectation of having their imprisoned son’s sentence commuted. Datou, literally means “Big Head”, but Li’s head in the film appears not particularly big, so the name conveys the sarcastic meaning of Li’s cunning in dealing with social relations and accumulating wealth. As a wealthy businessman, Li has connections to local officials and

promises to help Latiaozi by bribing relevant institutional bodies. Latiaozi addresses Li Datou as Brother Datou throughout the film, even though he may not necessarily be younger than Li. He does so only because Li is socially and economically superior to him. Having handed over the sum of money, Latiaozi finds that his son's sentence remains the same. Li claims he has done what he can, but the case has been stalled beyond his control. Latiaozi sets out on a prolonged and frustrating journey of tracing the money back, travelling between the village and the nearby city to negotiate with Li. During one of his fruitless trips to the city, he kindly offers some food to a homeless man, but the filthy mentally-handicapped man recognised by Latiaozi as Shaozi begins to follow him everywhere. In order to help Shaozi to find his family, Latiaozi spreads posters around the town in the hope of appealing for Shaozi's family members to contact him, but this triggers series of absurdities and frauds.

The major characters of *A Fool* come from a wall-enclosed village separated by a vast expanse of barren land and a nearby small city (Figure 66).

Figure 66. Latiaozi's hometown and surroundings: in *A Fool*

Growing up in a similar north-western circumstance before being taken to a megacity at the age of seven, Chen sets the story in an adjacent town near Lanzhou to recall and represent the locality and characters of the place (Chen, Wang & Zhou 2015, p. 63). To achieve "a real touch of the local reality", he rents a shepherd's house in the village and borrows clothes from the local people to reproduce a realistic scene of an ignored and poverty-ridden

countryside without any beautification of the setting (Chen, Wang & Zhou 2015, p. 64). The on-location shooting invariably captures the material ambience of the place, and also "reveals what remains invisible" for human eyes in the urban space (Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 47). Chen keeps everything as it is and encloses these images into his filmic representation to show an authentic north-western rural space that has long lived in his childhood memory. Chen uses contrasts and vibrant colour, local accents and the rough mannerisms of the characters to enhance the local-colour of the narration, which is reminiscent of Zhang Yimou's acclaimed realist work *The Story of Qiu Ju*.

Both Chen and Zhang's films feature frumpy farmers with red cheeks travelling between the countryside and city, attempting to solve confusion and pursue justice, but finding themselves disappointed and frustrated time after time in their confrontations with the urban social space. Both films contain images of mud-constructed houses and narrow lanes in the rural area, which cast a stark contrast to the bustling urban streets. However, the countryside in *The Story of Qiu Ju* appears more than a freezing and underprivileged place, it shows an idyllic and picturesque side. Strings of dried chilli hung from eaves and walls not only brighten the plain yard, but explain the source of the family income (Figure 67).

Figure 67. Strings of dried chilli and Qiu Ju in red outfit: in *The Story of Qiu Ju*

The passionate redness of the chilli and Qiu Ju's red clothes also show her unshakeable determination for pursuing justice. Despite getting involved in disputes, people maintain humane relationships with each other, displaying simple, close and warm-hearted social relations in the countryside. However, the warm-hearted assistance between commoners, the idyllic country life and upright bureaucrats in the urban area are gone in *A Fool*. The realistic techniques, such as shooting on location and using unprofessional actors and hidden cameras, employed by Zhang Yimou in filming *The Story of Qiu Ju* "helped to set a new standard for realist techniques in Chinese fiction filmmaking" and contributed to realistic criticism of social issues, as it depicted "the life struggles of the marginal and powerless" (McGrath 2008, p. 135). *A Fool* inherits the cinematic technical devices and the "critical realism" spirit set by Zhang's work, and creates a space of indirect resistance to the intrusion of commercialism and urbanisation. By saying "indirect resistance", I mean that ordinary people in such films do not have access to directly expressing their complaints and difficulties in public. Accordingly, such films do not serve as direct critiques of mainstream ideology or social injustices, but are tactically "exposing rather than opposing", which "rests on the belief that social contradictions are apparent in everyday life but elided in mainstream representation" (McGrath 2008, p. 136). The rural space represented in both films provides the characters' dwelling space and the basic ground for their simple social relationships, and in the interaction with the urban space, their backward rural homes and marginalised social status (in comparison with people in the urban area) work as "a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives…marginality as position and place of resistance" (Soja 1996, p. 98). This can be seen when Qiu Ju acquires her justice at the end of the film, though in a way

she does not expect; and, in Latiaozi’s case, when he finally gets his money back after a prolonged journey of negotiation with Li, he becomes regarded as a fool.

The tiny village in *A Fool*, enclosed by a wall and towered fortress, is Latiaozi’s hometown. It is in an isolated and sparsely populated space, which bears witness to his struggle between agrarian moralities and sophisticated urban conduct. The enormous height and magnitude of the thick walls that enclose the half-abandoned village dwarf the human beings. Outside the wall is a vast expanse of desert inhabited by scattered drought-tolerant plants and broken stones, reminiscent of the landscape in Chen Kaige’ 1984 *Yellow Earth*, in which the same inhospitable landscape becomes a permanent and stagnant space that blocks the characters’ way out. While in *A Fool*, the village is isolated by the desert but connected to the modern urban area by a tunnel and a busy highway (Figure 68).

Figure 68. A street scene in the town and the tunnel: in *A Fool*

The tunnel is the boundary that divides the urban area and the countryside, and, at the same time, it is a boundary of social conduct between the urban and the rural. In reality, the small village was built in 1608 in the Ming Dynasty for military purposes. However, it has been eroded by cruel environmental degradation over four hundred years. The shortage of drinkable water and the desertification in recent years drive the residents away to nearby cities, leaving the broken village to decay in harsh conditions (Song 2010).

The contrast between the urban and the rural in terms of physical space

A Fool opens with a live show in a bustling street in the city. Sounds of traffic and music create a lively and dynamic sense of the place. A local show is on, and the stage is surrounded by a group of light-hearted people who show a slight interest in the ongoing performance (Figure 69).

Figure 69. The stage and the audience in a bustling street: in *A Fool*

Chen Jianbin manages to capture lively and flamboyant scenes that convey a real sense of the place by videotaping the real life scene of the street (Chen, Tan & Ma 2016, p. 50). The street scene, which is taken on location, "with its diversity, unpredictability and transience … [not only shows the] physicality of urban space, [but displays] the uncertainties of modern urban life" (Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 19). In the film, the uncertainties soon appear with Shaozi's unexpected presence as he stalks Latiaozi.

Under the stage, Latiaozi squats on the ground, sharing a piece of pancake with a baby lamb kept in his satchel (Figure 70). The space under the stage is neatly covered with blue-red-white plastic tents. Shaozi walks to the back of Latiaozi, reaching out his hand from the outside of the tent for food. Contrary to the on-stage bustling scenario, the under-stage space appears lonely and grimy. The usually concealed under-stage space is represented, and

the announcement from the stage creates a contradictory sense: “This is a new age when farmers don’t have to plough with bulls, people don’t have to light their house with oil and the internet reaches every household.” The words praising the material progress achieved in the urban area contrast with the under-stage scene where the homeless man is wandering around begging for food.

Figure 70. The space under the stage & Latiaozi encounters Shaozi: in *A Fool*

The representation of the man huddled under the stage and his encounter with the homeless man shows the alternative side of China’s great economic miracle and glamorous social progress. The mainstream representation of contemporary China can be regarded as the on-stage show, whether it is the developed eastern region or the developing west, dominated by massive transformation of its cityscapes. *A Fool* peeps into the concealed and under-represented off-stage to reveal an alternative happening in China. Latiaozi, as a shepherd in a drought-ridden area, is left behind by society. His position and appropriated social space indicate the disparity between the city and the countryside. For Latiaozi, the countryside provides a harmonious family, a submissive wife and a herd of sheep that provides the source of the family income. It is a stable and safe place for him to relax and rule, whereas the city, with its appealing and abundant commodities, generates fraud, scams and indifference. In the interaction with Li and three groups of imposters, Latiaozi is like hapless prey that is

hunted and exploited by vultures. From the 1930s when Shanghai, as the economic centre of mainland China, was frequently represented from the critical perspective of prostitutes' daily practice and bourgeois extravagant life, the urban space became the equivalent of moral decadence and social inequality where:

> although configurations of the city—and the country in consequence—took various forms throughout the century, a fundamental suspicion of the moral implications of the modern city—in particular its power of penetrating, eroding, and subverting the foundations of Chinese tradition—is firmly rooted in a wide range of cultural configurations of the city (Zhang 1996, p. 5).

In leftist films of the 1930s, metropolitan cities and various urban spaces of industry, commercial exchange and residency were set as the opposite of the tranquil and innocent countryside in cinema. The urban space represented moral decadence, chaos and adversities for rural people, while the rural space, despite its poverty and backwardness, was a sanctuary of human merit and virtues. This division can also be seen in works of the Fourth Generation, who often framed the urban and the rural into a clear-cut contrast to deal with characters' spiritual and moral dilemmas (Dai 2016). However, cinematic representation of the rural-urban relationship has been undergoing transformation since the 1980s. The countryside gradually fades into the background of a rapidly modernising China. The moral condemnation of metropolises is gradually being replaced by the celebration of the thriving market and transforming cityscape. Anxiety and disillusion wrought by economic and social inequality and class stratification replace the moral merits and idyllic life-styles of the rural space. Meanwhile, urbanisation and modernisation intrude into the countryside, breaking the stability, conventional values and conduct preserved by the isolated rural population. In an increasingly globalised context, "as local stabilities break down, it is as if, no longer fixed

by a circumscribed community, tactics wander out of orbit, making consumers into immigrants in a system too vast to be their own, too tightly woven for them to escape from it" (Certeau 1984, p. xx). With modern traffic and technology, the impact of the urban area can easily reach the remote regions. Therefore, the simple-minded and straightforward countrymen are confused, fooled and scammed. The compelling urban influence is displayed through Latiaozi's interaction with Li and the three groups of fraudsters. Such kinds of intrusion and destabilisation can be seen in *A Fool*, from every aspect of the protagonist's surroundings and his social connections.

Rear-view mirror and visual doorbell—the twisted gaze from the urban

In *A Fool*, Lanzhou municipality makes an absent presence. It claims its influence through the license plate of Li who owns an automobile shop and a lamb shop in the city. He never shows up without his luxurious car when dealing with Latiaozi. All conversations between them occur in the car, and Latiaozi is taken to wherever it heads to without being given a chance to name his destination. In contrast, as a poor shepherd, Latiaozi has to walk between the countryside and the nearby city. The disparate mobility between a vehicle and a walker indicates the different paces of life in the urban area and the rural area. Director Chen employs various cinematic techniques to illustrate Latiaozi's isolation in the urban space.

Their communication always ends in deadlock as Li claims that he can do nothing about the current situation and there is no chance to have the money back. By claiming that "I make a living by connections", Li frankly admits that he will not disturb his superior connections with Latiaozi's case. Latiaozi does not know the opaque connections that Li respects and depends on, just as he does not understand why three groups of imposters break

into his home, claiming that the useless fool is their relative. Latiaozi is ousted from Li's car four times, left helplessly and confused on the street. In the reflection of Li's rear-view mirror, Latiaozi stands on the side of the street, staring in the direction of the car, getting smaller with the car driving away (Figure 71).

Figure 71. The rear-view mirror scenes: in *A Fool*

Moreover, when Latiaozi visits the well-guarded community where Li and his wife live, he is often dismissed by Li's wife through a visual doorbell (Figure 72). She arrogantly looks down upon Latiaozi's twisted face on the doorbell screen and impatiently sends him away with random excuses. It highlights the economic gap between two social classes—Latiaozi represents the underprivileged who are left behind by the economic leap in the reform era, while Li stands for those who attempt to catch up with the booming economy. Latiaozi's image, either a small point in Li's rear-view mirror, or a twisted face projected in

the visual doorbell, reflects his low social status and passive reaction towards bullies and pressures from the privileged social class.

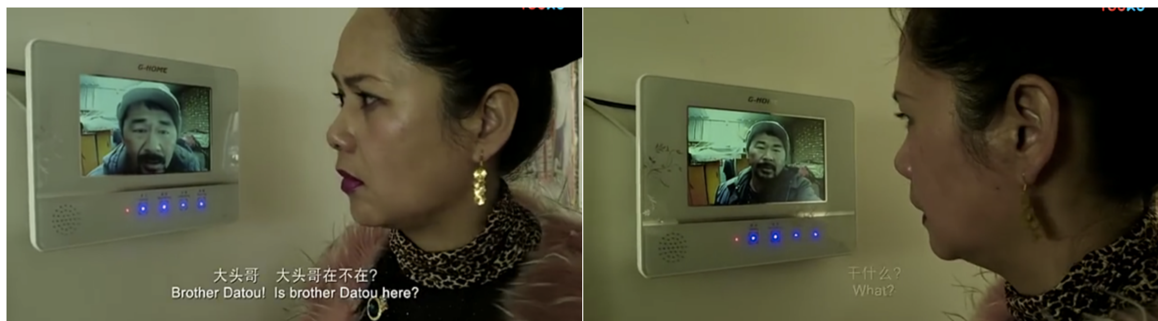

Figure 72. Latiaozi's twisted face on the doorbell screen: in *A Fool*

Li appears frequently in profile and with sun-glasses throughout the film, and his appearance, domestic space, shops and connections remain a mystery for Latiaozi and the audience. In contrast, Latiaozi and his wife are framed frequently in close-ups that emphasise their confusion, anger and anxiety in dealing with Li and the imposters. Latiaozi's household and his way of making a living are frankly represented, just like the barren land that can hardly hide anything. Although living near to the city, he knows little about the people and events happening in the urban space. The uneven knowledge and power is embedded in the interactions between Latiaozi and Li. Consciously or unconsciously, the two enter into a space where "power has extended its domain right into the interior of each individual, to the roots of consciousness, to the 'topias' hidden in the folds of subjectivity" (cited in Soja 1996, p. 32). Despite Li's arrogance and scorn, Latiaozi trusts him and regards him as an omnipotent person in the urban space. As a result, he turns to Li whenever he encounters problems and confusion. Their interactions, therefore, enhance their uneven social status and further define their respective subjectivity—the ignorant subaltern and the cunning rich.

The contrast between the urban and the rural in terms of mental and social space

In Latiaozi's interactions with Li (the representative of the urbanite) and the fraudsters (representatives of mysterious modern strangers and danger) we can see moments of "transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction" (Soja 1996, p. 142). The status of being the rich, the poor, the marginalised and the centred can be transient. These people's cognition of the same space and events can be wildly different, because "the poor have highly localised mental maps in contrast to the wealthy, whose mental maps come close to reproducing a good road map from the gas station" (Soja 1996, p. 79). Even though this statement may generalise the fragmented, diversified and pluralised mental images of space or "cognitive maps" (Soja 1996, p. 79) of those in similar circumstances, it is fairly true in the case of Latiaozi and his encounters in travelling between the rural and urban spaces.

There are three groups of people who come into Latiaozi's house claiming that they are relatives of Shaozi. The first group comes in an evening with Li. Wearing a bitter-sweet face, a man states that he is the elder brother of Shaozi and leaves some money with Latiaozi as a reward for taking care of his brother. Without even asking for any evidence of the bond of flesh and blood, Latiaozi stands aside dimly, watching Shaozi being taken away. The second group of imposters (they appear as a couple) arrive a few weeks later. With their faces covered with masks, they question Latiaozi about the location of the fool. When learning that Latiaozi took money (the reward money) from the previous group of people, the couple interprets it as an act of human trafficking. No matter how Latiaozi tries to defend himself against the slander, the couple insists that Latiaozi is involved in human trafficking, threatening him with consequences if he fails to bring Shaozi back. During the interaction,

Latiaozi stands in the middle of the room, confused and frustrated, while the couple sit with their backs to the camera, hiding their appearances and identity from Latiaozi and the audience.

Some time later, the village official misunderstands Latiaozi as a pretentious and malicious hypocrite who made money by selling Shaozi, because police officer Yang tells him about Latiaozi's case. The narration does not show how and what the officer Yang tells the village officer about the case reported by Latiaozi. However, the village official catches Latiaozi in Latiaozi's sheep shed and blames him for abusing his trust and being involved in human trafficking. The sheep shed confrontation between the village officer and Latiaozi is a turning point in Latiaozi's journey to find Shaozi a proper shelter—searching for Shaozi's relatives, losing Shaozi to fraudsters and giving out flyers for Shaozi's whereabouts, after being questioned and threatened by the aforementioned two groups of fraudsters. He also proposed to the village officer to send Shaozi to a welfare house and asked police officer Yang on behalf of Shaozi for a place to stay. When the village officer shows up at the threshold of the sheep shed, Latiaozi, who is dreaming of killing himself, bursts out crying in sounds like a sheep. The space shown in this scene is, as Soja points out: "simultaneously objective and subjective, material and metaphorical, a medium and outcome of social life; actively both an immediate milieu and an originating presupposition, empirical and theorisable, instrumental, strategic, essential" (1996, p. 45). Materially, Latiaozi uses the sheep shed as a temporary shelter to spend the night, because he was shut out by Jinzhizi due to the unending struggle triggered by Shaozi's presence and absence the previous day. The sheep shed becomes a metaphor for his suffering and his final ending. Just like the dumb and submissive sheep, Latiaozi's visit to the urban space to negotiate with Li and the police

officer shows him as a helpless sheep that is treated condescendingly and made to run around in circles. The opening sequences showing him carrying a little sheep also illustrate the equation between his sufferings in the city and the innocent animal. His dream of killing himself in the sheep shed indicates his change of identity, showing his ending in which he dons the outfit belonging to Shaozi and, looking through the broken sunshade hat, sees a group of children hit him with snowballs. The director uses this specific space to configure a sheep-like man's suffering and transformation after leaving the familiar sheep shed in the rural space and breaking into the strange urban space.

From the village official, who refuses to help Latiaozi find a proper shelter for Shaozi, to the police officer of the town, who refuses to take on the case because "he is only a fool", Latiaozi is confronted with successive refusals from the officials who could have provided a solution for Shaozi, an outsider of society. Latiaozi's experience "reveals that the daily disposition of civil law remains much as it always has: opaque, bureaucratically ensnarled, and ever-tilted in favour of the state and its functionaries" (Silbergeld 1999, p. 90). Latiaozi is left alone to take care of Shaozi, and what he does is purely out of humanity. On the one hand, he is afraid of Shaozi being frozen to death, on the other hand, he has been tortured by the fact that his son is imprisoned so he cannot afford to be put into prison if Shaozi accidently freezes to death in his yard. Taken in by fraudsters, he and his wife blame themselves for giving Shaozi into the wrong hands. They decide to borrow some money to compensate the couple who claim they will come back again for Shaozi. However, there is no way to prove that he is innocent, and nobody believes his good intentions, as the compensation makes Latiaozi appear more suspicious and further deepens the misunderstanding. When the third group of imposters breaks in, Latiaozi and his wife still

take their words seriously, rather than perceiving them as fraudsters. Despite being threatened and blackmailed, they tend to consider "what a fool can be used for" instead of reporting the case to the police. The three groups of fraudsters come one by one to this rural isolated village, speaking wildly different dialects to fool the gullible couple.

Theoretically, Jinzhizi has been aware of the possible endings of people like Shaozi as there are TV programs concerning such subjects. It is reported that mentally handicapped people will be targets for organ harvesting and free labour in illegal coal mines. Malicious scammers may capture people like Shaozi, make them handicapped and throw them in the streets to beg. Any of these scenarios will put Shaozi's life at risk. Tortured by guilt, Latiaozi eventually sets out to report to the police, and turns to Li for an explanation of why people keep coming for a fool. The peripheral people represented by Latiaozi, who have been invisible in mainstream representations, appear on the big screen with humility and gullibility. The three groups show up either at night or equip themselves with masks to conceal their identity and real purpose. The silent small village witnesses these outsiders come and go in a swirl of dust, leaving the honest couple bewildered. The urban area in this film is more accessible than the bustling urban regions represented in *The Story of Qiu Ju*, set in a similar rural space a decade earlier, but it is a place of more chaos, confusion and controversy for those from rural areas. When problems arise, both Qiu Ju and Latiaozi are caught in the predicament of solving the problem by negotiating with government inaction and enduring grievances and frustrations of their own. Just as Zhang Yimou pointed out:

> this is a very ordinary story [referring to Qiu Ju's case] that happens all the time in China. One never knows who to talk to, what to do, where to go. Most problems are not so bad to start with, they only become so because of the working of the bureaucratic system and the ordeals you have to go through. In China, you

> have to try twenty times, spend years in order to solve the most minor problems. Officials don't make any mistakes really, but in the end, there's never any answer (cited in Silbergeld 1999, p. 129).

Two decades after Qiu Ju's case, Latiaozi is going through the exact same frustration and confusion. The modern urban world shown in *A Fool* appears as an opaque space that operates in a complicated way. It is pervaded by vehicles, carefully locked doors and cautiously covered faces. A clear boundary between the countryside and the urban area is established by the huge gap of living environment, material possessions and disparate behaviour and manners. The difference, first of all, is reflected in the physical spaces of the respective areas. Latiaozi as a sheep farmer lives in an enclosed rundown village, while Li has several households and is involved in the businesses of livestock and automobiles in the urban area. In the interaction with Li, Latiaozi is always on foot, whereas Li appears in his car and ditches Latiaozi wherever and whenever he prefers. The first meeting between Latiaozi and Li in the film is a near miss car accident. Latiaozi squats down in front of Li's luxurious car, scrubbing the bumper, while Li starts the car, almost running him over. The extremely low angle from which Li looks down from his car in search of Latiaozi indicates the unequal social positions between the two. The urban street, "as a likely site of the fragmentary and the unexpected … reveal what is otherwise veiled or opaque in everyday life" (Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 55). Latiaozi's ill-equipped knowledge about urban conduct and weak social connections is amplified in the urban space. Due to the fragmented and labyrinthine urban space, Latiaozi is able to disorient Shaozi and get rid of him. In addition, the sense of unexpectedness and unpredictability of urban space ushers groups of fraudsters to Latiaozi's house and leaves him bewildered and lost. He is unconsciously involved in the "myth" and "demon" side of urban space, walking through all the frauds, lies, blame, sneers

and misunderstandings by holding a simple and straightforward question that is imposed upon him: “Why do people come for a useless fool?” Mentally, Latiaozi and his wife still hold on to traditional social conduct and manners, which can be seen from the different manners when receiving guests. They have the household opened wide to welcome anyone who visits. Whether they know the people or not, the wife will hurry out to buy bottles of wine, cigarettes and snacks to offer hospitality to visitors. Lacking sufficient cash, she has to depend on credit to make the purchase. On the contrary, Li’s wife cautiously communicates with visitors through a screen and never lets Latiaozi into the house.

Latiaozi’s particular way of receiving visitors is inherited from the agrarian norm similarly represented in *The Story of Qiu Ju*. In that film, even though there is conflict between Qiu Ju and the village officer—she even sues the officer for his misconduct—she still visits the village officer and receives kind salutations from the family. In an enclosed small village, where everyone is related to everyone else socially and economically in one way or another, the social network is relatively simple and warm-hearted. However, the straightforward and innocent social relations make these people gullible in sophisticated commercialised surroundings. Compared to Qiu Ju, who twenty years earlier retained her countryside innocence and happiness after interacting with the urban surroundings, Latiaozi is overwhelmed, bewildered and transformed into a fool in his interaction with urban society, and in the end becomes identified as an outsider to modern society.

In the prolonged and frustrating process of negotiating with Li and the fraudsters, Latiaozi never doubts their statements. He trusts the urbanites unconditionally and indiscriminately. The inequality in economic terms, social status, and inadequate knowledge and information in the rural area results in a gullible and fallible group of people. Spatially,

this group of people reside in a rather small and backward social space that isolates them from the outside world and leaves them behind in time. It is a time when frauds are ubiquitous in the urban area and a time when urban people keep a suspicious eye on things they see and listen for overtones. The tiny villages, enclosed by thick walls and the vast barren land outside, are in contrast to the divided and fragmented urban spaces—one requires no effort to know and understand, while the other is too dynamic and opaque to see through.

At the end of the film, Latiaozi puts on the broken red sunshade hat left by Shaozi (Figure 73), and looks through it, seeing a group of local folk dancers walking towards him (Figure 74). The group of people in flamboyant coloured costumes drag their instruments, appearing fatigued and bored. Yet in the previous sequences, the same group of people staged their lively performance. In the mainstream representation, most people see what is on the stage and what is on performance. *A Fool* directs spectators to see what is under the stage and what it looks like after the performance.

Figure 73. Latiaozi (left) and Shaozi (right) & Latiaozi becomes Shaozi: in *A Fool*

At the end, a group of children corner Latiaozi who appears in the exact same outfit as Shaozi and hit him with snowballs, shouting "hit the fool, hit the fool…" at the top of their lungs…(Figure 74), just as they had done to Shaozi in a previous scene. Yet on that occasion Latiaozi was there to protect Shaozi and drove these children away. This time, now that

Latiaozi himself has become a fool, he does not fight back. He remains silent and stands still, dumbly waiting for numerous snowballs to hit him.

Figure 74. Latiaozi looks through the broken red sunshade: in *A Fool*

With his identity transformed, he might finally find the answer to his enquiry about the value of a fool. However, as Jinzhizi has explained, he might also risk his life in the journey of figuring out the answer. He then loses not only his identity, but his life. The negotiation between Latiaozi and all those from the urban area is the interaction between the remote and enclosed small village and the dynamic urban space. In the prolonged and agitated process, Chen portrays how a simple-minded and good-natured individual is deceived, scammed and exiled by the commercialised and mercenary urban world.

Latiaozi represents the group of people in contemporary China called "the grassroots", through his low, rough and bewildering form of existence, where:

> the life stories of these grassroots people, discovered or constructed, constitute the rare picture of another type of the so-called "original eco-state of life" that lies locally beneath and beyond the glaring glamour of globalisation in China today, and which, therefore, is viewed with much nostalgia to be fast disappearing from our globalised view (Zhang 2009, p. 144).

With the fast marching urbanisation, Chinese rural areas have seen unprecedented intrusion and infiltration of urban influence. The shortened distance between the rural and urban areas

in *A Fool* indicates the fast speed and overwhelming urban impact on rural traditions and ways of living. Villages are decaying, with villagers confronted with frauds and bewilderment brought by the high mobility of urbanisation. Chen's carefully designed on-location shooting anchors the "filmic experience in the real world, sustain[s] documentary claims to truthfulness, and position[s] the viewer as witness to (and not simply passive spectator of) events" (Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 55) so that the "making of a fool" reflects the sprawling urban influence and the power of capital and knowledge that transforms rural life and squeezes the rural living space. In another film, *River Road*, such transforming power appears more dramatic, with the inhabitants deprived of health, traditional ways of production and home.

Modernisation and environmental concerns

River Road, based in the Hexi corridor where towns and villages have been devoured by the encroaching desert, provides the perspective of two little boys left behind by their parents, who strive for a better life in a distant place. It exposes the disappearance of home and community, mode of production, ethnic cultural heritage and diversity of culture, caused by environmental degradation and ecological destruction. It is the "myopic ideology of modernisation" that is responsible for environmental damage, and this leads to an "ambient *unheimlich*" condition characterised by "displacement, anomie, estrangement, dysfunctionality, malaise and homelessness" (Mi 2009, p. 19). The disappearing spaces are archived and preserved by films as a virtual space that becomes a "Thirdspace", "which is differentiated and estranged from both the traditional space and the modern space, and projects a resistant space on screen to recollect the past while questioning and challenging the present and the future" (Nie 2009, p. 203). Exoticised and eroticised religious rituals in

previous representative minority films disappear in *River Road*, and people in traditional costumes are only present at the end of the school semester when parents come to pick up their children and at Grandfather's funeral (Figure 75).

Figure 75. Yugur's costumes & funeral ritual: in *River Road*

Similarly, *Tuya's Marriage*, set in the Inner Mongolian steppe grassland, tells the story of a female and familial predicament in the face of desertification and water shortage. The film "makes a direct and severe questioning and critique, if not an indictment, of the nation's political, cultural and economic policies, by presenting the devastation afflicted upon the Mongolians resulting from overheated economic development and its ensuing problems in contemporary China" (Li 2013, p. 134). Minority religious rituals and spectacles of ethnic singing and dancing, as the most recognisable features of minority group, are also absent in both films. Stripped of all these traditionally reserved characteristics of the minority subject, Li Ruijun portrays a disappearing nomadic minority. On the one hand, they have been assimilated into the Han-centred culture, while still preserving their own particular economic, social and cultural practices in the long course of history; on the other hand, an increasingly similar way of production and living is engendered under the pressing urbanisation and vanishing steppe. As Soja concludes:

> In these postmodern recontextualisations of contemporary life, the great modernist narratives that connected 'fixed' community (whether identified by class, race-ethnicity, gender, or mere propinquity) with emancipation (if not revolution) are shattered. Another spatiality is recognised, one which cannot be so neatly categorised and mapped, where the very distinction between mind and body, private and public space, and between who is inside or outside the boundaries of community, is obliterated and diffracted in a new and different cultural politics of real-and-imagined everyday life (1996, p. 116).

The extended barren land in both *Tuya's Marriage* and *River Road* become a serious threat for personal existence, and on a macro view, the land turns into a demonised space that devours the ethnic people's native culture and future development. In the new millennium, the protagonists of minority films become females and little children, instead of male adults as in films of the previous decades. Female characters, such as Tuya and her sister-in-law in *Tuya's Marriage* have to carry out all sorts of manual labour normally seen as masculine activities in minority communities after their male partner is handicapped or dies. Such inversion of gender roles in domestic space and workplace becomes an unavoidable choice for female characters. In *River Road*, little children are forced to be mature at a young age, as the deteriorating environment educates them to survive. They are left at home and put into boarding school, and have to deal with a family members' death alone and take a long journey to reach "home". The tight economic situation of the family makes them accept unpleasant situations and even death. The masculine and paternal roles in both films are either injured or absent, which can be seen as the loosening of the central administrative power on minority subjects. The political and ideological urge of the state to maintain an image of ethnic minority solidarity and national harmony has been replaced by the economic and ecological concerns wrought by urbanisation.

Conclusion

Cinematic Lanzhou, more precisely, cinematic Gansu does not provide a rich reservoir of urban images. Instead, deserts and small towns play an important role in branding the area. In many films, people undertake sheep or camel herding jobs, facing threats from the mobility, misunderstanding and environmental damage engendered by urbanisation. They are economically, emotionally and spiritually attached to the land, which offers food and shelter, and symbolically, it is home, with a sense of belonging and identity. *A Fool* dramatises the devastating and predatory force of urbanisation, which turns a good man into a fool. *River Road* elegizes the loss of home in an ecologically fragile environment in the face of urbanisation. Thirty years after embarking on the reform policy, under a deep-rooted discourse in which "the city represented constant reformation, openness, science, education, and civilisation; the countryside stood for the inertia of history, closure, ignorance, and antihuman attitude and decay" (Kuoshu 2010, p. 3), rural China is decaying and disappearing. *River Road* clearly represents that the previous nomadic life of the ethnic minority Yugur have also increasingly been influenced and even assimilated into a settled urban life in this unprecedented scale of urbanisation. *A Fool* reinforces the view that human dignity and cultural identity are disappearing along with the vanishing physical space.

Chapter Seven Conclusion

This thesis has concentrated on the spatial dimension found in cinematic representations of Chinese western areas, in particular, the urban spaces represented in four western cities of contemporary China. While other scholars have written on China, discussion on contemporary cinema from China's western region has been overlooked, either because of the power of Beijing and Shanghai cinema, or because of the authors' focus on Chinese national cinema which sometimes touches on China's west, but rarely moves beyond the praising of particular filmmakers. Spatiality is not just an innocent dimension of contemporary society and how we exist and conceive the material and mental world; it is closely associated with history and society. As Soja puts it, "we are first and always historical-social-spatial beings, actively participating individually and collectively in the construction/production—the 'becoming'—of histories, geographies, societies" (Soja 1996, p. 73). The operation and workings of power have always materialised through complicated interactions between the spatial-temporal-social.

While cinematic western China is recognisable as a Secondspace, it can importantly be read also as a Thirdspace. As a Secondspace:

> the imagined geography tends to become the 'real' geography, with the image or representation coming to define and order the reality. Actual material forms recede into the distance as fixed, dead signifiers emitting signals that are processed, and thus understood and explained when deemed necessary, through the rational (and at times irrational) workings of the human mind (Soja 1996, p. 79).

Furthermore, by showing a space of demolition and construction and a disappearing space of living and production, it conveys important social and cultural meaning. As Soja

sees it, it is a space that allows the subaltern to speak (Soja 1996, p. 126). The cinematic subaltern, as well as the ordinary citizens in the films analysed in this thesis, can be seen to use and consume various spaces in their daily lives, forming their "space of enunciation" by walking in the city (Certeau 1984, p. 98). As either *flâneur* or drifter, these cinematic characters are voluntarily or being compelled to explore, negotiate or *détour* (tactics of hijacking, rerouting, or diversion) the transient urban spaces of the four cities in western China. Through all the different modes of spatial exploration, the cinematic characters' emotional and mental space are presented, as these cinematic spaces become "fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolisations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body" (Certeau 1984, p. 108).

The overall modernisation project carried out since the 1980s wiped out old spaces such as the traditional extended household, hometown and socialist unit, and wrought large-scale transformations on the cityscape. In films such as *Crazy Stone*, *24 City* and *Weaving Girl*, the socialist unit, the representation of a socialist China, disappears and is being or will be replaced by modern commercial complexes. In this modernisation process, with the demolition of the socialist urban space characterised by soviet-style grey low buildings and enormous factory spaces, the cityscape, the skyline of the city, is being redefined by emerging high-rises. Meanwhile, in *Rainclouds over Wushan*, *Still Life* and *River Road*, the hometown disappears, the former two due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam launched by the central government in 1992, and the latter one due to urbanisation and desertification. The construction of the world's largest hydro-power station for the political elites represents the level and scale of Chinese modernisation, while for people whose

hometown will be flooded, themselves being dislocated and dispersed to various areas, the value of this enormous modernisation project seems questionable. *River Road*, ironically, shows a place devastated by drought and expanding desert due to the sprawling urban spaces in the process of urbanisation.

On a smaller scale, the domestic space in modern cities also faces crisis. In *Buddha Mountain*, modern Chinese families are confronted with disintegration, as the mobility and instability in the urban space destabilise the family, and the previous family values and conduct become incompatible with the transforming family structure. The disappearing spaces of the socialist unit, hometown and individual household, correspond with the disease-ridden and dying characters shown in these films; and they in turn correspond with Soja's recognition of "the body as the most intimate of personal-and-political spaces, an affective microcosm for all other spatialities" (Soja 1996, p. 112). Modernisation and urbanisation appear in monstrous and devastating form when dealing with human existence in such a revolutionarily changing era. Those who struggle and survive in the process, especially those from the countryside who are eager to enter the urbanised spaces, as exemplified in *A Fool*, *Crazy Stone* and *Still Life*, find a hostile urban space that refuses to communicate with them. They are the spectators of the urban spectacle, maybe subaltern workers who painstakingly undertake jobs to construct the modern facets of the urban space, while they themselves are excluded from the carnival of urbanisation. When they finally turn back to the city and return to their rural homes years after losing health and youth, they find their homes have also been transformed and appear strange to them. The key words for these filmic representations of western China are disappearance, exile and death. The ways of

disappearance can be natural disasters, such as earthquakes, or the artificial building and expanding of urban spaces that squeeze the countryside.

The rural-urban relationship has been transformed over the decades from a clear boundary between the two spaces to the urban space overlapping the rural area and intruding with a powerful and sweeping force, as represented in films such as *A Fool* and *Story of Ermei*. In *Back to Back, Face to Face*, characters who have been living in the urban area for years find it hard to deal with the conflict between the rural and the urban. This is further complicated by the political power struggle for those who strive to attain power. Films set in the urban areas of western China are limited; we can anticipate an increase in both number and quality with the area's economic leap forward. The ten films analysed in detail in this thesis focus on subaltern groups of people and their social spaces in a realistic style.

These films, importantly, configure a "Thirdspace" space of resistance that ultimately breaks the dichotomies of modernity-tradition, urban-rural, rich-poor, submission-domination, and establishes a space to observe and interpret the modernisation process of contemporary China in a globalising context. Cinematic western China creates an outlet to "prioritise the voices of the weak who are straining to be heard over the voices of globalism that erase both people and places" (Zhang 2010a, p. 6). The people who are left behind by state controlled economic and social reform do not appear in the dichotomy-type representation that is overwhelmingly observed in mainstream media—poor, sentimental and in agony. They are aware of all the ongoing changes, but, with powerful traditional inertia and persistence of existence, they choose to live in the marginalised and peripheral zone of society—just as bell hooks did. Their mode of seeing society is like bell hooks': seeing outside from inside, and inside from the outside. It empowers them as they know both

sides of living, and they choose to stay there, as a space of reflection and a space of home. More significantly, it is a Thirdspace of resistance that can be used "as a strategic location for exploring postmodern culture and seeking political community among all those oppressively peripherised by their race, class, gender, erotic preference, age, nation, region, and colonial status (Soja 1996, p. 106). Directors look into the space and create a text that enables mainstream audiences to peep into the lives and the mental spaces of the subaltern groups that dwell in the disappearing space, reflect on modernity in China, and recognise the films' critique of the current situations of Chinese urbanisation and modernisation.

In recent years, western China has become an increasingly popular setting for the genres of thrillers, action comedies and martial arts films. How do the exotic legends and history of western China blend with these different genre films and mirror the social concerns and intellectual reflection of contemporary China? The minority groups that are represented in these films inhabit the area and are in constant negotiation with the majority Han and the influence of expanding urbanisation, negative or positive. Will their cultural and ethnic identities disappear, or will they be assimilated and transformed? Such enquiries are quite beyond the scope of this thesis, but these two questions should be flagged for future examinations on the cinematic representation of western China. Perceiving the cinematic western China as Thirdspace, this thesis configures an alternative image of contemporary China, which is full of traditional inertia and economic dynamism, destruction and construction, and sense of nostalgia and loss. By focusing on the urban spaces of the region represented in films, the long-standing ethnographical stereotypes of western China have been reconfigured. Whether it is an agrarian ethnographical representation or an urban subaltern configuration, the western China on screen can be seen as a "radically open"

Thirdspace that contains a "limitlessly expandable scope of…spatial imagination" (Soja 1996, p. 65).

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