Inhabiting the City: Tropes of “Home” in Contemporary Chinese Cinema

Haiping Yan*

Abstract

Urbanization has been fueling massive migrations across various regions in China, redrawing its physiognomy as much as patterns of relations among all its inhabitants. Amid such redrawing in the life-world, “home” (jia 家), a term referring to the material place and related objects used in family life and a trope evoking a “psychic” sense of belonging, has been gaining ascendancy in and across all the artistic and public media, including contemporary Chinese cinema. By bringing three Chinese films produced in the 2010s into a constellation, this essay traces the distinct ways in which a cinematic aesthetic

Haiping YAN, formerly full professor at Cornell University in theatre and film, comparative literature, and East Asian literatures, is university professor of cross-cultural studies at Shanghai Jiaotong University. Her major publications include Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1905–1948; Other Transnationals, and Theatre and Society: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Drama.

* I would like to thank Lucia Nagib and Andrew Tudor for inviting me to present part of my initial material on this topic with a differential thematic and analytical focus at the Mixed Cinema Network meeting in the United Kingdom. My special thanks to David Bathrich of Cornell University for his generous suggestions and patient support that led me to look beyond the realm of the literary and into the domain of cinema and the media in general, from cross-cultural perspectives.
transpires to significantly reconfigure some of the familiar logics of representation. More specifically, this essay examines how such reconfiguration turns into a critical telescope that variably mobilizes tropes of “home” as differential imaginaries of an “urban China,” involving important implications for studies of the arts and their social efficacy, in China and beyond.

Urbanization has been fueling massive migrations across various regions in China, redrawing its physiognomy as much as patterns of relations among all its inhabitants. With the rooted lives and regions moving to make way for the demands of an urbanizing China, questions of how the citizens of such times inhabit the drastically shifting conditions in a world of displacement and fluidity arise and find their ways into various cultural articulations. Precipitated by and/or charged with such questions, “home” (jia 家), a term referring to the material place and related objects used in family life and a trope evoking a “psychic” sense of belonging, has been gaining ascendancy in and across all the artistic and public media, including, as this essay addresses, contemporary Chinese cinema. By bringing three Chinese films produced in the 2010s into a constellation, this essay traces the specific ways in which a cinematic aesthetic transpires to significantly reconfigure some of the familiar logics of representation including bildungsroman literature, dialectic drama, and live performance. This essay further examines how such reconfiguration turns into a critical telescope that variably mobilizes tropes of “home” as differential imaginaries of an “urban China,” involving important implications for studies of the arts and their social efficacy, in China and beyond.

1. Shanghai Women: The “Home Question” and City Openings

Emblematic of urban China and China’s urbanization, Shanghai has long constituted a primary site of formative dynamics in Chinese arts and literature. Filmmakers since the 1990s in particular have enlisted the city as a fertile, ambiguous, and volatile field against which competing tropes of urban life display their ingenuities and complexities. Distinct from some of the spectacles of exotic sound and fury in a range of films by “the fifth generation film directors,” women directors such as Peng Xiaolian 彭小蓮 和 others have reminded us of a dimension of contemporary Chinese arts that has been much ignored in our present criticism and