



Ran Ma

Independent Filmmaking across Borders in Contemporary Asia



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For my parents
Shen Lijuan (1954-1984) and Ma Cunming (1951-1991)

and

my grandparents
Wang Suxian (1928-2010) and Ma Shouyou (1930-2019)

Rest in Peace

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	13
Author's Note	17
Introduction	19
Beyond the Homeland and Diaspora	
1 The Art of the Dissensual	27
Independent Border-Crossing Cinema in Asia	
Inter-Asia Transnational Cultural Productions	28
Towards the Art of the Dissensual	30
A Cinema of Translocalism	33
Theorizing Border-Crossing Authorship	39
Accented Cinema Reconsidered	39
Minor Transnationalism	41
Debating the Minor	45
Realigning Independent Border-Crossing Cinema	48
<i>Asia is One</i> (1973): A Prehistory of Border-Crossing Asia	53
Circulating and Exhibiting Border-Crossing Films	58
2 A Landscape Over There	69
Rethinking Translocality in Zhang Lu's Border-Crossing Films	
Reframing Translocality	71
Departing from Yanbian: Zhang Lu as a Translocal Auteur	73
Three Takes of Border-Crossing	79
<i>Desert Dream</i>	80
<i>Dooman River</i>	82
<i>Scenery</i>	85
Between Chinese Independent Cinema and Korean Diaspora Film	89
Re-envisioning the Chinese Indie	89
A Korean-Chinese Diaspora Film?	93
3 Fading Hometown and Lost Paradise	99
Kuzoku's Politics of (Dis)location	
Kuzoku as an Independent Film Collective	101

<i>Saudade: Beyond the Landscape</i>	105
Rethinking Fūkei	105
The Long Takes	108
'Saudade': An Affective Critique	112
<i>Bangkok Nites: Hidden Journey of a Thousand Miles</i>	116
Almost a Road Movie	116
Into the Jungle	122
Coda	125
4 Li Ying's Films of Displacement	129
Towards an Im/Possible Chinese-in-Japan Cinema	
Reconsidering 'Chinese-in-Japan'	133
Cinema of Displacement	140
<i>2H: Becoming Chinese-in-Japan Toward the Fin-de-Siècle</i>	143
'A Certain Kind of Community' in Post-1989 China	143
Accented Style and Haptic Images	146
Fin-de-Siècle Metaphor	150
<i>Aji: Tastes Like Home</i>	152
Towards a Chinese-in-Japan Cinema	155
5 Okinawan Dream Show	163
Approaching Okinawa in Moving Image Works into the New Millennium	
Prologue: Okinawa, Rage, and Tears...	164
Okinawa-on-Screen: Beyond Representation	167
Movement-Image, Time-Image, and National Identity	167
Narrating Okinawa/Japan: Genealogies	169
Okinawan Dream Show	173
Island Voyages: Travelling in Time	178
Loops of <i>Rensageki</i> (Chain Play): Toward a Stratigraphic Image	181
Art of Fabulation	185
How to Remember the Battle of Okinawa?	188
Secrets of Time	191
6 Homecoming Myanmar	199
Midi Z's Migration Machine and a Cinema of Precarity	
Points of Departure	199
Reframing Precarity	203
Homecoming Trilogy	206

Midi Z's 'Migration Machine'	206
The State of Precarity: Chinese Diaspora on the Move	210
Between Lashio and Hpakant: A Family Portrait	214
Road to Jade City	216
Affective-Authorial Risk-Taking	216
At the Edges of Jade and Drug: Men at Work	218
Coda: In the Name of a Visual Record	224
Postscript	229
The Promise of Subversive Art	
'From a High Vantage Point'	233
Gendering Border-Crossing Cinema	236
<i>Identity: A Document of Minor Objects</i>	237
<i>ARAGANE: Wo/Men at Work</i>	241
Filmography	247
Bibliography	253
Index	271

List of Illustrations

1.1	Group photo of Waseda University's Camera Reportage Research Society (<i>Kamera ruporutāju kenkyūkai</i>), the predecessor of NDU. Photo was taken at a training camp in Hiroshima (August 1966). Middle row: second to the left (Nunokawa Tetsurō); fifth to the left (Inoue Osamu, also a NDU member)	54
1.2	A Tayal lady from a Piexau tribal village, Yilan County, Nan'ao Township (May 1972); from <i>Asia is One</i>	56
1.3	A Tayal lady from a Piexau tribal village (May 1972)	56
2.1	Chang-ho lying on the frozen river	83
2.2	Jeong-ji (left) is welcomed by Chang-ho and his mute sister (right)	84
2.3	Jeong-ji is playing football with Chang-ho and other friends from the village	85
2.4	A wedding ceremony in <i>Scenery</i>	86
2.5	Foreign migrant worker in a light truck in <i>Scenery</i>	87

3.1	Seiji and Hosaka at the top of a building, overseeing the city of Kofu in <i>Saudade</i>	106
3.2	Shooting Takeru (played by rapper Dengaryū) walking through the shopping street	111
3.3	Mahiru (right) and Pinky (left) visiting the senior day care center, listening to the old lady's story	115
3.4	Installation project 'Hidden Journey of a Thousand Miles' by Kuzoku + Studio Ishi + YCAM	117
3.5	A map illustrating the trip that <i>Bangkok Nites</i> took in Southeast Asia, from the brochure of 'Hidden Journey of a Thousand Miles'	118
3.6	Luck on Ozawa's motorcycle at the edge of the jungle in <i>Bangkok Nites</i>	121
4.1	Poster of Li Ying's <i>Yasukuni</i>	130
4.2	Protagonists in <i>2H</i> : Ma Jinsan (upper left and right) and Xiong Bingwen (bottom left)	144
4.3	Li Ying's Director's Note on <i>2H</i> , with a low-angle shot of Ma on the train	147
4.4	From the Japanese promotion brochure of <i>2H</i> , where Ma sees through the camera eye; Li is also introduced here as a 'China-born, Tokyo-based' filmmaker	149
5.1	8-mm image of an old lady and kids in <i>Okinawan Dream Show</i>	175
5.2	8-mm image of the street view in <i>Okinawan Dream Show</i>	175
5.3	A black American soldier in <i>Okinawan Dream Show</i> , the footage of which is later being 'treated' by Papajō in <i>Hengyoro</i>	177
5.4	Tarugani's installation apparatus in <i>Hengyoro</i> , onto which images from Takamine's family album are projected	182
5.5	The projected images from the Takamine family album in <i>Hengyoro</i>	183
5.6	The image of the survivor's face is projected onto Yamashiro's face in <i>Your Voice Came Out Through My Throat</i>	190
5.7	The mud men and women, trapped in the tunnel, are showered in the light and sound of the moving images of the Battle of Okinawa	193
5.8	The field of <i>himeyuri</i> toward the end of <i>Mud Man</i>	194

6.1	Hpakant's barren landscape of mining pits dotted with almost unrecognizable human figures	202
6.2	Male labourers at work in Midi's Hpakant documentaries	219
6.3	De-chin on the way to Hpakant in <i>City of Jade</i>	220
6.4	Miners posing for the camera in Midi's installation work 'My Folks in Jade City' for the 2016 International Film Festival Rotterdam	225
7.1	Rusty machine at the coal mine in <i>ARAGANE</i>	242
7.2	Following the miners to the underground world in <i>ARAGANE</i>	244
7.3	Observing the dark universe in <i>ARAGANE</i>	244

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Finally, I hope my parents and my grandparents like this book as a belated gift. Without their unconditional love, I would not have felt strong enough to pursue what I really enjoy doing. I hope they feel my love, too, and that they rest in peace.

Author's Note

A modified Hepburn system of romanization is used to romanize Japanese as well as Okinawa's *uchinā-guchi* words, except for well-known variants for place names (Tokyo instead of Tōkyō). Japanese names are written with the surname preceding the given name, with the exception of Japanese who have published their works in an Anglophone setting with known forms of name-spelling. Their given names come first (e.g. Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano). For *zainichi* Korean names, I have followed the individual's preferred rendering (e.g. Yang Yong-hi; Sai Yōichi). The standard pinyin system has been adopted for romanizing Chinese names, with surnames preceding given names, too. For Sinophone (and ethnic minority) individuals whose names are known internationally in Westernized forms or alternate non-standard systems of romanization, I have used the spelling and sequence of names preferred by the respective individuals (e.g. Tan Chuimui; Royston Tan; Pema Tseden). Regarding the romanization of Korean terms, the practices outlined by the Ministry of Culture in 2000 are followed, and Korean names are spelt with surnames preceding given names. For the convenience of the readers, all film and artist video titles are given in English unless otherwise explained, wherein the official English title is used if it exists, or a translation if not. The original title is given in brackets following the first citation in each chapter, as well as in the filmography and index, both of which are ordered by the English titles.

Introduction

Beyond the Homeland and Diaspora

Abstract

Departing from the omnibus film project ‘Homeland and Diaspora’ (*Yuanxiang yu lisan*), this introduction outlines important questions to be explored throughout the book regarding what I have proposed as ‘independent border-crossing filmmaking’. I focus on a specific strand of auteurist independent cinema (and of image-making) emerging mainly since the late 1990s and early 2000s that project and articulate the experience of being mobile and displaced, being minority and diasporic, and/or journeying within and across various Southeast Asian and East Asian places. Detailed chapter summaries are also proffered.

Keywords: contemporary Asia, border-crossing filmmaking, independent cinema, film auteur

In 2013, Hong Kong-based Phoenix Television (*Fenghuang weishi*), in collaboration with Kuala Lumpur-based independent film collective DaHuang Pictures (*Dahuang dianying*, est. 2005),¹ invited six Asian filmmakers based in Malaysia (Tan Chuimui), Thailand (Aditya Assarat), Taiwan (Tsai Ming-liang, Midi Z/Zhao Deyin), and Singapore (Sun Koh, Royston Tan) to participate in an omnibus film (microfilm) project with the theme ‘Homeland and Diaspora’ (*Yuanxiang yu lisan*). The accomplished works that came out of this project – all shot in digital format – were broadcast on the satellite TV channel and streamed online on Phoenix TV’s official

1 Since 2004, Tan Chuimui and other Malaysian (Chinese) filmmakers such as James Lee, Liew Seng-tat and Amir Muhammad, who were based in Kuala Lumpur at that time, leveraged the entity of DaHuang Pictures to carve out an independent space for like-minded independent filmmakers, regardless of their ethnicities, to work together on digital film projects in a collaborative manner. Also refer to Hee Wei-Siam’s chapter (in Chinese) on DaHuang Pictures (see Hee 2018: 211-237; also see ‘DaHuang Pictures’).

site. Its afterlife, a self-curated programme entitled *Letters from the South* (*Nanfang laixin*), had its global film festival tour between 2013 and 2014.²

Whereas in Royston Tan's *Popiah* (*Baobing*), the transgenerational bonds between members of a big ethnic Chinese family are repaired through food and the practice of tradition, Sun Koh has taken a more parodical take in *Singapore Panda* (*Xinxin xiongmao*) to re-examine the history of Chinese Singaporean immigrants, also addressing the flow of capital from the People's Republic of China (PRC) into the city-state and the potential anxiety triggered by China's threatening economic power worldwide. With *Walking on Water* (*Xingzai shuishang*), Tsai Ming-liang films his long-term collaborator Lee Kang-sheng's slow walks through the city of Kuching, where Tsai spent his childhood, in order to explore a disparate sense of time. In *A Night in Malacca* (*Maliujia yehua*), Tan Chuimui reenacts an uncanny encounter in the historic city of Malacca between 'herself' (impersonated by an actress) and a mysterious friend, evoking the impressionist writing of diasporic Chinese novelist Yu Dafu (1896-1945) about the 'South Seas'/ *Nanyang* during the time of Malaya's occupation by the Japanese.³

Even though not every filmmaker in the omnibus project has thematized her/his short film with the actual geopolitical border zones or transborder movement, the anthology has nonetheless leveraged the narrative tropes of mobility and identity, in tandem with multilingualism, in making visible the interrelations between people and places across East Asia and particularly Southeast Asia. Places such as the city-state of Singapore (Royston Tan, Sun Koh); Kuching (Tsai Ming-liang) and Malacca (Tan Chuimui) in Malaysia; Bangkok (Aditya Assarat) in Thailand; and Lashio (Midi Z/Zhao Deyin) in Myanmar are foregrounded as liminal sites for the filmmakers and their characters to reflect upon and negotiate with the localized, fragmented experiences of modernity and social transformations as well as the multiple possibilities of belonging. Although 'Homeland and Diaspora' was originally launched by Phoenix TV under the leitmotif of celebrating the commonalities and cultural bonds that have been passed down and shared by generations of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia across the Southern Seas/*Nanyang* (hence the 'South' in the title *Letters from the South*), I would contend that

2 Unlike its television and online versions, when exhibited on the festival circuit, 'Letters from the South' adopted the style of 'epistolary' or 'letter-film', so that every short film comprised a letter addressed to someone (including the audience), each closing with a message from the filmmaker (also see C.-T. Chen 2014).

3 Generally speaking, *Nanyang* in Mandarin Chinese is used by Chinese émigrés and their descendants to refer to the region of Southeast Asia. For more works on *Nanyang* literature and cultural productions, read Bernards (2012, 2016) and Groppe (2013).

these shorts have actually engaged the performativity of 'Chineseness' to canvass the interlacing yet uneven transnational movement of persons, commodities, cultures, and ideas as well as the sensibilities and feelings across Southeast Asian societies and communities. To put it differently, the omnibus is not simply one that narrowly concerns the Sinophone diaspora in Asia, if we can for the moment understand the Sinophone in terms of what was originally outlined by Shu-mei Shih as 'Sinitic-language communities and their expressions (cultural, political, social, etc.) on the margins of nations and nationalness in the internal colonies and other minority communities in China as well as outside it' (Shih 2011: 716; also see Chapter Four in this volume). As Aihwa Ong forcibly illustrates, 'the contemporary practices and values of diasporan Chinese are characteristic of larger questions of displacement, travel, capital accumulation, and other transnational processes that affect large numbers of late-twentieth-century subjects (who are geographically "in place" and *displaced*)' (Ong 1999: 86; emphasis in original).

Moreover, as much as 'Homeland and Diaspora' was advertised as a showcase of transnational collaboration among the diasporic Chinese filmmakers (as well as among film professionals such as actors and actresses from diverse backgrounds and locales), it has indeed highlighted the existing transnational nexus and creative momentum intersecting East Asian and Southeast Asian independent film movements and film auteurs since the early 2000s in the new waves of digital filmmaking. Having based their filmmaking in urban centres in this region, filmmakers who participated in the omnibus are at the same time closely connected with the global visual regime through variously scaled networks of film production, circulation, and exhibition, such as those of the international film festivals.

The anthology of 'Homeland and Diaspora' spotlights a group of filmmakers and a body of film works that will be mapped out in *Independent Filmmaking across Borders in Contemporary Asia*. This book focuses on a specific strand of auteurist independent cinema (and image-making) that has emerged mainly since the late 1990s and early 2000s that projects and articulates the experience of being mobile and displaced, being minority and diasporic, and/or journeying within and across various Southeast Asian and East Asian places, which correlate with the filmmaker's negotiation with her/his layered identities and/or the trajectories of travelling and migrating across Asian locales. Whereas I place my survey within the geopolitical space of Southeast Asia and East Asia, I also pay specific attention to inter-Asia culture and media flows in the post-Cold War period and particularly in the era of globalization, into the new millennium.

Importantly, I borrow the concept of dissensus from philosopher Jacques Rancière to consider how this study – which features a specific breed of border-crossing auteurs and image-makers together with their independently produced border-crossing projects – can be enframed within, and thus contribute to, a new understanding of the aesthetics and politics of contemporary cinema. In particular, as far as the ‘independent border-crossing cinema’ is concerned, I argue that for the independent filmmakers and image-makers canvassed here, their practices are political not simply because they have transgressed identities and/or borders of various scales (not unlike their characters in the diegetic world). The politics also concerns how the cinema works contribute to envisioning ‘Asia’ as a cultural text/imaginary of disjuncture, multiplicities, and unevenness wherein the connectivity between the previously marginalized and peripheral subjects, places, and feelings can be realigned, reconnected, and made perceptible.

Independent border-crossing cinema, which here includes both fiction film and documentary, is closely analyzed in the first chapter, and I have specifically situated it at the conjuncture of inter-Asian culture and media productions and the new waves of independent film movements across Asia since the late 1980s and early 1990s. Leveraging the concept of translocality/translocalism, I suggest that this border-crossing filmmaking comprises political acts in promoting and visualizing a new way of envisioning and reconfiguring the interconnections between (Asian) places, the (im)mobile subjects, and their layered identities. To better understand the dissensual potentiality of this border-crossing cinema, I zoom in on the issue of film authorship, which is understood in this project as the ‘ways of doing and making’ around which independent filmmakers and artists coordinate their authorial positionings and aesthetic preferences. Inspired by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih’s framing of ‘minor transnationalism’ (Lionnet & Shih 2005) while also discussing ethnic, diasporic, and postcolonial filmmaking in critical parameters such as ‘accented cinema’ (Naficy 2001), ‘intercultural cinema’ (Marks 2000), and a ‘cinema of transvergence’ (Higbee 2007), I demonstrate how a ‘minor’ authorship connects with the dissensual in modifying the ‘policed’ articulations and representations of the minority and marginalized identities and groups. Also, the dissensuality of such an authorship concerns how it is institutionally situated and performed within the space of the international film festival network.

The five chapters that follow Chapter One I have envisioned as an inter-Asia translocal trip that goes from North to South. The second chapter, ‘A Landscape Over There – Positioning Zhang Lu’s Border-Crossing Cinema’, examines three border-crossing films by the Korean-Chinese filmmaker

Zhang Lu, namely *Desert Dreams* (2008), *Dooman River* (2010), and *Scenery* (2013). Using the conceptual framework of translocality, this study first explores how Zhang, as a translocal auteur, leveraged his multi-layered identities to engage the global film festival network. The cinematic trope of border crossing is emphasized: not only has Zhang reinvented the border as a new scale to scrutinize the translocal movement of deterritorialized subjects and diasporic peoples, he also sheds light on the significance of place in identity formation and further interrogates the power geometry of globalization. As such, Zhang's translocal filmmaking intersects and challenges us to rethink both Chinese independent cinema and Korean diasporic films.

Titled 'Fading Hometown and Lost Paradise – Kuzoku's Politics of (Dis)location', the third chapter sets out to examine Kuzoku, a Japan-based independent film collective of multiple members founded in 2004 by self-trained filmmakers Tomita Katsuya and Aizawa Toranosuke.⁴ Set in the generic 'regional city' of Kofu in post-economic crisis Japan, Kuzoku's feature film *Saudade* (2011) looks at a group of marginalized labourers, part-timers, and rappers who find their lives and desires inextricably intersecting with the foreign immigrants in town. In *Bangkok Nites* (2016), Ozawa, an ex-soldier of the Self-Defense Force, travels to Isan (northeastern Thailand) and feels trapped in between his home country and the Southeast Asian 'paradise' of sex and escape. This chapter first examines Kuzoku's location shooting by reconceptualizing *fūkeiron* (theory of landscape), which was famously explicated by Japanese leftist critic Matsuda Masao in the 1970s. Importantly, I look at how both *Saudade* and *Bangkok Nites*, in tandem with other media projects by Kuzoku, have reconfigured the mode of appearance in making visible previously marginalized subjectivities and locales and have interrelated with disparate temporalities and modes of affect as a gesture of resistance.

In Chapter Four, 'Li Ying's Films of Displacement: Toward an Im/Possible Chinese-in-Japan Cinema', I turn to a long-term Chinese resident in Japan, Li Ying, who has been mostly known for his controversial feature film *Yasukuni* (2007) which reflects upon the socio-political significance of Yasukuni Shrine, where Japan's war dead are commemorated. This study nevertheless frames two of Li's earlier documentaries – *2H* (1999) and *Dream Cuisine* (*Aji*, 2003) – as 'films of displacement'. I situate Li Ying's independent filmmaking at the conjuncture of diasporic filmmaking and Sinophone

4 Throughout this book of mine, I use 'Kuzoku' instead of 'Kūzoku' to refer to the collective members and their works, given that the former spelling is preferred by the film collective.

cinema and consider how these documentaries have not only interlinked Li's becoming 'Chinese-in-Japan' subjectivity with other displaced subjects who have difficulty articulating any singular sense of national or cultural belonging. Also, these documentaries examine and archive transhistorical and transnational affective connections traversing various Sinophone and diasporic communities within Japan and beyond. We could, therefore, envision a Chinese-in-Japan cinema which, loosely assembling contemporary film and media works by Chinese-in-Japan filmmakers who have arrived in Japan since the mid-1980s, challenges us to question its unwritten historiography and to rethink Sino/PRC-Japanese transnational cinema.

Chapter Five, entitled 'Okinawan Dream Show: Approaching Okinawa in Moving Image Works into the New Millennium', deals with the oeuvre of Okinawan filmmaker Takamine Gō and video artist Yamashiro Chikako, with an emphasis on the former's fiction feature film *Queer Fish Lane* (*Henggyoro*, 2016). Taking as a point of departure Gilles Deleuze's framework of time-image, which underpins his explication of modern political cinema, this chapter examines how Takamine has experimented with textual strategies and forms of expression in configuring the 'stratigraphic image' apropos of Okinawa, wherein the boundaries between the actual and the virtual as well as the real and the imagined are blurred. The teleological narrative of any essentialized national identity is thus disturbed. Accordingly, spectators are challenged to read the film texts in their heterogeneous layers. Meanwhile, I also turn to Yamashiro Chikako's recent narrative-oriented video works that have been intricately connected to the legacies of the Battle of Okinawa and current waves of protests against the US military bases on the islands. I argue that from a stance not too dissimilar from Takamine's, Yamashiro grasps the political image of Okinawa less in terms of a truthful representation 'in' or 'as' reality but relates the work of memory, or remembering, to a series of operation *on* images.

Our meandering journey comes to an end with Chapter Six, 'Homecoming Myanmar: Midi Z's Migration Machine and a Cinema of Precarity', where I look at Taipei-based, Chinese-Burmese filmmaker Midi Z, whose 'homecoming' oeuvre includes three fictional films (also known as the 'Homecoming Trilogy') and two documentaries shot at Myanmar's most (in)famous high-quality jade deposit, Hpakant in northern Myanmar. Reframing precarity from its theoretical framings in sociology and biopolitical theories, I first argue that Midi has explored how, when ensnared within the precarious, impossible conditions of mere biological existence, the disenfranchised diasporic Chinese subjects – both female and male – still gamble on gaining access to other possibilities in life. My focus then shifts to *City of Jade* (*Feicui*

zhicheng, 2016), one of his Hpakant documentaries. Leveraging the notion of 'risk-taking' at both the textual and inter-textual levels, with an emphasis on the gendered perspective, I examine how Midi has leveraged a personal, subjective point of view to interweave the struggles of the Zhao family (particularly his brother's) with those of the male labourers on location.

In my postscript, in lieu of a comprehensive summary of the theoretical framings, I propose possible directions for future studies. I re-examine the Rancièrian thesis of politics and aesthetics apropos of border-crossing filmmaking by looking at, for instance, *Human Flow* (2017) by Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei, an English-language documentary addressing the current global refugee crisis and illegal immigration. More importantly, I leverage the perspective of gender in emphasizing the gendered body and sexuality as crucial issues underlying border-crossing filmmaking. To this end, I briefly turn to a documentary-cum-pornography video *Identity* (2004) by third-generation *zainichi* Korean filmmaker Matsue Tetsuaki and Oda Kaori's documentary *ARAGANE* (2015), which was shot by the filmmaker single-handedly in a coal mine in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The journey has just begun.

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