BETWEEN HOME AND WORLD
a reader in hong kong cinema

Edited by Esther M. K. Cheung and Chu Yiu-wai

OXFORD
CROSSING BORDERS: TIME, MEMORY, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN SONG OF THE EXILE

Patricia Brett Erens

'The past is another country.'

Most Westerners familiar with Hong Kong cinema are conversant with the action films of John Woo, Ringo Lam, Tsui Hark, or the postmodernist works of Wong Kar-wai. There is another Hong Kong cinema, however, referred to as the Hong Kong New Wave, which emerged in the late 1970s. One of the most prolific and significant filmmakers in this group is Ann Hui, whose first feature film, The Secret, was released in 1979.

Hui's work can be divided into three categories, although the boundaries are never as distinct as I am suggesting: genre films, typical of the Hong Kong film industry; political dramas; and personal works. Among the genre films are The Secret, which combines a ghost story with a psychological thriller; The Spooky Bunch (1980), a more traditional ghost story with comedic overtones; The Story of Woo Viet (1981), a gangster movie; Romance in a Fallen City (1984), a love story set in Shanghai and Hong Kong; the two-part swordplay drama Romance of the Book and the Sword (1987); Zodiac Killers (1991), a yakuza movie; and Eighteen Springs (1997), a melodrama set in Shanghai. Although I have classified each of these works as genre films, each creates a twist on the genre formula and several have strong political overtones.

I would like to thank Eliza Walsh at the University of Hong Kong for her help in translating the Chinese materials.

Hui’s political films include *Boat People* (1982), about post-revolutionary Vietnam, which remains her best-known work internationally. This is one of a trilogy on Vietnamese refugees that includes *The Story of Woo Viet* and *The Boy from Vietnam* (1978), made for Radio/Television Hong Kong. *Romance of the Book and the Sword*, an epic about the Han Chinese under the Manchu rulers, and the seriocomedy *My American Grandson* (1991), which highlights cultural differences between the United States and China, also generate political readings.

*Song of the Exile* (1990), which is highly autobiographical, is one of Hui’s personal films. Others in this group include *Starry Is the Night* (1988), set at Hong Kong University, where Hui studied, and the domestic comedy-drama *Summer Snow* (1994), an homage to the middle-aged working housewife, which won both popular and critical success. Also in this category are *Ah Kam* (1996), about the Hong Kong film industry, and *As Time Goes By* (1997), a documentary account of Hui’s feelings on the eve of Hong Kong’s return to China. Finally, *Ordinary Heroes* (1997) examines political activism in the 1980s and returns Hui to some of the subject matter of her days in television, where she was trained.

This article focuses on *Song of the Exile* primarily because it is among Hui’s strongest works and because it combines a personal and a political message in a particularly significant way. The film sheds light on how the events surrounding the 1997 return of Hong Kong to mainland China served as a structuring subtext in a good deal of Hong Kong cinema. Manifesting themselves as a generalized sense of anxiety and ambivalence, these events pervaded Hong Kong films, playing themselves out indirectly around issues of personal and cultural identity, beginning in the late 1980s.

Hui has a long track record of combining the personal and the political. This tendency also typifies a great deal of contemporary art by women. I therefore plan to situate *Song of the Exile* in a larger context that includes women’s autobiography and exile literature. It was not without cause that the American women’s movement maintained that ‘the personal is political.’

My approach to *Song of the Exile* assumes that it is a personal quest, on the one hand, and, to a lesser degree, political allegory, on the other. Esther Yau states, ‘In addressing the “1997 consciousness” of its spectators, [Hong Kong]
films participate in the public contemplation of Hong Kong's changing "identity." I would also suggest that central to both a personal identity and a political identity is the need to return to the past so as to find answers to the present and to effectuate healing (or a resignation to the fact that loss is a permanent condition). In both explorations, memory serves as the means for recapturing and reevaluating the past.

On one level, Song of the Exile is an investigation into various forms of identity: national, cultural, and personal. Part of the heroine's narrative is intrinsically intertwined with her mother's history, as well as an investigation into her own past. Ultimately, the outcome of both searches effects a change in both women.

On another level, the film is an investigation into what it means to be Chinese and the relationship between various Chinese communities around the world and the so-called homeland in mainland China. Hui has dealt with these questions in other works—namely, The Story of Woo Viet and Zodiac Killers, which foreground the issues of exile, diaspora, and refugees.

The experience of exile

In his landmark essay 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' Stuart Hall discusses two definitions of cultural identity: 'The first position defines "cultural identity" in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self," hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves," which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common.' The second definition focuses on difference, which constitutes 'what we really are,' or rather—since history has intervened—'what we have become.'

Hall's comments were made as part of a larger discussion of the emerging Caribbean cinema, a cinema defined by the diaspora experience, a sense of exile and displacement, and a search for roots. Like Caribbean literature, the new

---


Caribbean cinema excavates the past in an effort to forge a viable identity. Hall cautions readers about this enterprise, preferring 'the re-telling of the past' and 'imaginative rediscovery'—what he calls the 'production of identity'—as opposed to the 'archaeology of identity.' Although he is certainly sensitive to the appeal, Hall warns against trying to impose a coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation in an effort to heal the rift of separation from Africa, often figured as the 'motherland': 'Such texts restore an imaginary fullness or plentitude to set against the broken rubric of our past.' Likewise, *Song of the Exile* explores Chinese roots and the multiple meanings of Chinese identity through the experience of one family.

Hall speaks of identity, or identities, as belonging to the future as well as to the past: 'Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. . . . Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.' In this way, Hall links personal history with social and political history in the production of narratives that endeavor to explore Caribbean identity and its historical relationship to Africa. There are strong parallels *vis-à-vis* Hong Kong cinema and its relationship with mainland China, especially as developed in a group of personal, independent films, among which *Song of the Exile* is representative.

Hall is well aware that the past continues to speak to us but points out that 'it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual "past."' Hall frames his discussion of the construction of Caribbean identity along two vectors: the axis of similarity and continuity and the axis of difference and rupture. Caribbean identity is formed by the dialogical relationship between these two vectors. These same issues are also the deep structure of *Song of the Exile*, in which they are played out in terms of mother/daughter, past/present, Chinese/Japanese, and Hong Kong/mainland China.

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 394.
6. Ibid.
7. See Yau, 'Border Crossings'.
Hui’s construction of doubleness is not a simple binary opposition, however, for the boundaries keep being resituated. In the first half of the film, the primary oppositions are between Aiko (Luk Siu-fan) and her daughter, Hueyin (Maggie Cheung). These antinomies are played out not simply as a struggle between mother and daughter but as a tension between Japanese and Chinese culture, an anxiety exacerbated by the problematic relationship between the two nations after the barbarities of World War II. By rejecting her mother’s values, Hueyin simultaneously rejects Japanese culture, including any recognition of her own biological inheritance.

Hueyin also valorizes the past over the present, especially with respect to her family. As a child she prefers her paternal grandparents over her own parents (seeing her grandparents as strong and effective and her mother as weak and ineffectual) and chooses to stay in Macau rather than follow her parents to Hong Kong. Although the nuclear home has been reconstituted by her adolescence, Hueyin continues to identify with the traditional Chinese life of the Portuguese colony of Macau (returned to China in 1999) rather than with the modernized society of Hong Kong.

These binary oppositions reverse and blur in the second part of the film as Hueyin experiences feelings of isolation, prompted by British discrimination against Asians and cultural misunderstandings in Japan. These experiences help her empathize with her mother and break down old hostilities. As her understanding of her family and the wider world broaden, the gap between past and present begins to collapse. Although her love for her grandparents never diminishes, seeing them old and living in poverty in Guangzhou (modern-day Canton) reverses Hueyin’s attitudes towards both them and her mother and alters her beliefs about China. In short, as Hueyin reaches maturity, her feelings shift from a simplistic view of right and wrong to a more nuanced, ambiguous view of life and relationships.

Most important in this regard is Hall’s discussion of the diaspora experience as one of heterogeneity and diversity and Caribbean identity as one defined by difference and hybridity: ‘Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.’ It is this construction of identity that gives rise to a ‘diaspora

---

9. Ibid.
aesthetic, which, like identity itself, both produces and is produced by a specific cultural environment.

Song of the Exile

Song of the Exile's complex and metaphoric treatment of Hong Kongers' ambivalence concerning the handover makes it an ideal exemplar for an analysis of the emergence of the sort of cultural identity that Hall proposed. In brief, the story follows twenty-five-year-old filmmaker Hueyin (a play on the director's name, Hui) when she returns to Hong Kong from London for her sister's wedding. During this period, she and her widowed mother, Aiko, visit Japan, where her mother was born, which precipitates a new relationship between mother and daughter. At the end of the film, Hueyin decides to stay in Hong Kong to work for a local television station and visits her aging grandparents in mainland China. Hueyin narrates the story through a series of flashbacks with voice-over.

The film begins in 1973, in London, where Hueyin is living the seemingly carefree life of a student. Because of the dissimilarities between her and her English schoolmates, Hueyin is defined, both positively and negatively, by her otherness. She is an exile in a foreign land, yet, despite various instances of discrimination, she deals with her sense of alienation in silence.

In Hong Kong, Hueyin is more vocal in defending the differences between her and her mother and sister and the lifestyles they have chosen. However, even there she allows herself to be defined by others. Neither wholly Western nor wholly Hong Kong Chinese, she is still searching for a comfortable identity. As such, she acquiesces to her mother's wishes that she cut and curl her hair and wear a red dress to her sister's wedding.

Complicating these identity issues, Hueyin is half Japanese, a part of her identity she has repressed up to now. In addition, for a decade or more of her childhood, she lived in Macau in her grandparents' traditional Chinese household. Finally, part of her identity is being shaped by events occurring on mainland China, its Communist future, not its prerevolutionary past. This identity emerges with her visit to her grandparents, who live in Guangzhou. The film's thinly disguised autobiographical references were hardly a secret to knowledgeable local viewers. The protagonist's mainland Chinese origins, Japanese mother, film school education in London, and television career all mirror Ann Hui's life.
Hueyin sorts out her hybrid identities by confronting her past, or, rather, by engaging in a dialogue with her past, that enables her to bring the past into focus as part of the present. Through memory, Hueyin is able to actually relive experiences that took place in former times and places.

From the manifest storyline, the film seems to be about mother-daughter relationships, and it is. However, Hong Kong cinema, especially from the late 1980s and 1990s, is often not quite what it seems. Thus, *Song of the Exile* can also be read as a commentary on what came to be known as "the China factor."¹⁰ Yau has noted the tendency of Hong Kong audiences to bring to the cinema a "1997 consciousness" and to read between the lines. Yau elucidates the ways in which both mainstream entertainment and more personal dramas from 1983 onwards (following British prime minister Margaret Thatcher's visit to Beijing in 1982 and the signing of the *Joint Declaration* in 1984, which formalized preparations for the 1997 handover) begin to address questions of loyalty to the motherland, political identification, and differentiation and feelings of exile.¹¹ Yau discusses these issues with reference to *Starry Is the Night* (1988). Likewise, according to Li Cheuk-to, as a film about the oppressiveness of the Communist regime in Vietnam, *Boat People* (1982) was readily appropriated by Hong Kong audiences who were fearful of sovereignty and who read the work as a national allegory.¹²

Yau provides other examples of allegorical readings of Yim Ho's *Homecoming* (Hong Kong, 1984) and Zhang Nuanxin's *Sacrificed Youth* (China, 1986). She approaches both works as textual sites of contradiction and negotiation. In *Homecoming*, one of the two female protagonists actually revisits mainland China. As Yau points out, "History in *Homecoming* is couched mainly in terms of personal experience rather than political incidents."¹³ The same holds for *Song of the Exile*. The two films share much in common. Both focus on a

---


¹³ Yau, "Border Crossings", p. 192.
woman's experience, both concern a visit to the 'homeland,' both merge past and present through memory, and both are dialogues on 'cross-cultural' difference. Referring to Homecoming and Sacrificed Youth, Yau states, 'In both films, a crisis of self-definition (both partly based on the authors' past) precedes a nourishing “cross-cultural” encounter which is, strictly speaking, an internal experience found inside a mythic “China” that encompasses racial and political differences and transcends arbitrary boundaries.'14 This quotation could easily describe Hui's Song of the Exile.

Revisiting the past

The search for answers requires returning to the past, both geographically and mentally. For Hueyin, it means recalling her years in Macau, where she lived as a child, and visiting Guangzhou, where her grandparents now reside. For her mother, it means returning to Japan after twenty years. Although these physical journeys are crucial, it is through the agency of memory that a new identity is constructed.

One of the reasons that memory plays such a crucial part in Song of the Exile is that both Hueyin and her mother experience a sense of alienation. Each is a split subject, cut off from one part of her self. Each suffers neurotic symptoms brought about by past traumas that have been repressed. For Hueyin, the trauma is rooted in her denial of her emotional attachment to her mother, her repression of her mother’s national origins, and her attachment to Hong Kong. For Aiko, the trauma is rooted in her cultural past in Japan, as well as her illusions about her homeland. For Hong Kongers, the trauma stems from ambivalence about its common heritage and future alliance with mainland China.

The film’s frequent use of mirror shots emphasizes this splitting, as well as highlights the illusion of a unified identity. In a beauty salon, Hueyin sits in front of a mirror as she submits to a haircut. The implication is that short, permed hair is more suitable for a young Chinese woman than the long, straight hair that Hueyin wore when she returned from London. The event prompts a recollection of a similar event in her childhood when she was forcibly subjected to her

In both films, an internal and political conflict with mainland China is graphically and emotionally explored. For Hueyin, who lived as an heiress, her physical and mental identity is in Song of the Exile, with a strong sense of alienation. Her neurotic neuroses are rooted in her mother's identity, which is the subject of Hui's film, Aiko: Japanese identity. In this instance, Hui pans to a mirror, capturing the reflection of her father and daughter. At this moment, Hueyin is forced to reevaluate her identity, taking into account that she is half Japanese. Thus, the 'border crossings' in the title of this article refer to more than the crossing of geographical/political borders; they also refer to the temporal borders between present and past.

It is important to distinguish here between Hui's past and her memories of her past. Thus, I am going to refer to the scenes in Macau and the years before her third birthday as memories or recollections rather than flashbacks because I feel that Hui has consciously constructed a subject in the present (Hueyin as narrator who addresses us in the first person). Despite the so-called ever 'present tense' of cinema, we never literally return to the past in Song of the Exile. Rather, Hueyin, in the present, tells us her memories of various stages of her life.

In his work on cinema, Gilles Deleuze discusses the frequency with which memory is invoked in Third World films such as Youssef Chahine's Memory (1982), Michael Khleifi's Fertile Memory (1980), and Pierre Perrault's Pour la suite du monde (1963). He points out how these films are not psychological memories in the usual sense, meaning recollections of past events, or even collective memories, but rather 'a strange faculty which puts into immediate contact the outside and the inside, the people's business and the private business, the people who are missing and the I who is absent, a membrane, a double becoming.'

Deleuze quotes Franz Kafka, who commented on the particular use of memory by writers who reside in small countries like Czechoslovakia (or, for that matter, Hong Kong). For Kafka, such authors merge both memories of the world and people outside themselves with their interior, personal memories. Deleuze emphasizes that Kafka is not, however, speaking of a collective memory.

---

but 'communication of the world and the I in a fragmented world and in a fragmented I which are constantly being exchanged.' It is this use of the past that typifies many artists, including filmmakers like Hui.

Deleuze devotes several chapters of his book *Cinema: The Time-Image* to discussing the past and memory. In discussing Henri Bergson's theories, he writes:

> Between the past as pro-existence in general and the present as infinitely contracted past there are, therefore, all the circles of the past constituting so many stretched or shrunk regions, strata, and sheets. . . . Depending on the nature of the recollection that we are looking for we have to jump into the particular circle. It is true that these regions (my childhood, my adolescence, my adult life, etc.), appear to succeed each other. But they succeed each other only from the point of view of former presents which marked the limit of each of them. They co-exist, in contrast, from the point of view of the actual present which each time represents their common limit or the most constructed of them. 17

Deleuze avers that cinema is well suited to capture this sense of past and memory. Hui approaches the past in just this manner. The past is seen only in terms of its relevance to the present. A present consciousness pervades the representation of the past.

In *Song of the Exile*, all memories are triggered by 'a Proustian madeleine': getting a haircut, Aiko's tears, seeing a papaya, or a verbal cue. Although some of the scenes from the past seem to be from Aiko's point of view (her mother's early married life in Macau and later life in Manchuria), they are actually Hueyin's thoughts about what her mother must have seen and felt. These are not oversights on Hui's part or even an exercise of her authorial prerogative as enunciator. Rather, these are cinematic representations of Hueyin's creative fantasies, which grow more empathetic as the film progresses, and serve as a prelude to a new relationship between her and her mother.

There are seven memory/recollections in the film that vary in length and complexity. Some scenes are repeated twice with a change in viewpoint. The most extended sequence is the third recollection. The scene begins in the evening, following Hueyin's sister's wedding. Hueyin and her mother have argued; Aiko

---


17. Ibid., p. 99.
world and in a use of the past

Time-Image to cries, he writes:

is infinitely con-
tituting so many
; on the nature of
to the particular
scence, my adult
other only from
of each of them.
ial present which

ted of them.  

past and memory.
en only in terms
ervades the re-

Christian madeleine":

. Although some
iew (her mother's
ctually Hueyin's
ese are not over-
gative as enuncia-
creative fantasies,
ve as a prelude to a

vary in length and
viewpoint. The
ins in the evening,
have argued; Aiko
then runs downstairs to call Japan. Aiko is on the verge of tears. We have a high-
angle shot of her in the street below from Hueyin's point of view. The high angle
not only makes Aiko appear emotionally vulnerable, but ultimately links to an-
other high-angle shot that closes the scene. The recollection begins with Aiko in
tears as her mother-in-law accuses her of theft many years before. Her mother-
in-law shouts, 'We don't belong to the same family!' The family argument re-
results in Hueyin's parents deciding to move to Hong Kong, leaving young Hueyin
(Young Ting Yin) in Macau with her grandparents. The grandmother's senti-
ment reverberates throughout the film, however, and has political as well as
personal implications: mainland Chinese, Japanese, and Hong Kong Chinese—
they are not one family.

Next, we see Aiko and her husband, Ah Reng, on a boat to Hong Kong (a
scene Hueyin could not have witnessed but that she could reenvision). A shot of
the water is used as a bridge connecting this journey with a similar voyage that
Hueyin made in 1963. Not only does the director seamlessly suture two scenes
but she also moves us from Aiko's past to Hueyin's, although I maintain that
both actually emanate from Hueyin's subjectivity. Here she recalls what her
mother may be remembering as she stands in front of the telephone booth on the
evening of her other daughter's wedding.

The sequence continues, now showing Hueyin as an adolescent. In addi-
tion to family tensions, Hueyin is alienated in her new school. A lovely touch
occurs when Hueyin passes a fruit stall and the sight of a papaya suddenly
provokes a flashback to her childhood self and her grandfather, suffused in sun-
light, recalling all the warmth and affection that she is now missing. This image
appears as a memory within a memory, perhaps akin to Bergson's circles of
memory, mentioned earlier.

This sequence is especially important because it is at this juncture that
Hueyin's father reveals to her that her mother is Japanese. This comes as a tra-
umatic and unwelcome revelation, although one senses that on some level Hueyin
always possessed this knowledge. This seems a valid interpretation, given that
her younger sister seems fully aware of her mother's national origins. Although
Hueyin's father speaks of her mother's loneliness as an outsider in a Chinese
family, Hueyin, an adolescent, is still not prepared to acknowledge her mother's
difficulties or to accept her love.
The split between Hueyin and her mother is activated by Hueyin’s decision to leave for boarding school. The scene ends with another high-angle shot of mother and younger daughter watching from the window as Hueyin walks off with her suitcase. This rhymes with the opening shot of the sequence, which motivated the initial recollection. This time, however, the high-angle shot reflects Hueyin’s emotional despair. Despite the fact that we see the two females watching Hueyin depart, ultimately the point of view is Hueyin’s, who is recollecting the scene in her memory, possibly even recalling her earlier childhood experience.

This complicated sequence also signals a shift in Hueyin’s understanding of her mother and herself. This recollection, plus the two that follow, help Hueyin reconcile the mother she experiences in the present of 1973 with the mother she remembers from the early 1950s.

I would like to turn back to the topic of the construction of memory as it relates to the past. In his discussion of Song of the Exile, Ackbar Abbas claims that the originality of Ann Hui’s use of the flashback is that she does not just present to us a past that can elucidate the present through a chronological reshuffling. Rather, we are given a structure that is more spatial than chronological: the flashback technique shows us a past and a present that do not quite mesh, that seem initially to contradict each other; but it is these discrepancies that force a reevaluation of both memory and experience.18

As with any thinking subject, Hueyin never devolves into a past subject. There is always an awareness of the present. This is crucial because so much of Song of the Exile is about difference: different eras, different locales, different races, different nationalities, different homelands, different cultures, and different lifestyles. (In addition to the multiple cinematic circles of time and space, Song of the Exile is a polyglot verbal text that utilizes Cantonese, English, Japanese, and Mandarin dialogue.) The film’s strength is that Hui incorporates these differences into one film in which they are constantly renegotiated to construct an ever-changing identity.

Towards the end of the film, Hueyin forges a bond with her mother that helps to suture the split; this also serves as a form of healing. After experiencing her mother in her own environment, being 'the Other' in Japan (just as her mother had been 'the Other' in Macau and Hong Kong), Hueyin is able to relate to her mother in a new way. This experience also leads to a transformation in her own sense of identity.

Like other narrative moments in the film, the recollection is prepared for through the agency of memory. In the first of two recollection scenes, we see Hueyin's grandmother complaining about Aiko's cooking; the Japanese food looks appealing but is cold and tasteless. We have witnessed this scene before; what is different this time is that previously we saw only Aiko. With a slight shift in camera position, we now see the small Hueyin sitting on the floor, watching her grandmother verbally abuse her mother. Having experienced her own cultural alienation, Hueyin now appreciates the helplessness of not being able to speak the native language and the ways in which food preferences play into national and personal identities.

The episode ends with a high-angle shot of Hueyin at a window watching her mother in the street below, much as she will do years later, after her sister's wedding, with a great deal more sympathy. Through the use of these formal devices, Hui collapses together several time periods, replicating the ways memory enables us to experience different time periods all in the same moment.

The next recollection begins as Hueyin and her mother sit together on a sea wall while Aiko recounts her years in Manchuria, including how she met Hueyin's father. In this sequence, Aiko is the narrator and the scenes she describes precede the time of Hueyin's birth. However, what we see on the screen is the visualization of the events from the mind (or mind screen) of Hueyin, as her mother talks, and it is this ability to live/relive her mother's life that prepares her for a new relationship. Aiko chronicles her courageous act in finding a doctor for a sick infant after the Chinese invasion and her meeting with Hueyin's father, who was serving as a translator. She ends her story with the words, 'Really, the ones dearest to us are the ones furthest away.'

It is psychologically significant that the reconciliation scene takes place in the warm waters of a Japanese bathhouse. From the evidence presented in the film, Hueyin's disaffection from her mother and attachment to her grandparents
began somewhere in the Oedipal period. For Hueyin, the only emotionally nurturing mother she has had is the pro-Oedipal Mother, whom she has repressed. So it is appropriate that Hueyin returns symbolically to the amniotic fluids of the mother's body, to her beginnings, and to that infantile attachment before separation. It is also relevant and ironic that the bath is an emblematic part of Japanese (not Chinese) culture, which derives from ancient Shinto religious practices of purification.19

The bath scene also serves as an epiphany for Aiko. For twenty years she believed that Japan was her homeland and that she could be happy only in Japan. Her visit confirms her roots, but, at the same time, it brings her to the realization that she has become Chinese. Her yearning for a hot bowl of Cantonese soup enables her to come to terms with her Chinese identity, which she has so often denied.

Women's autobiographies

Contextualizing Hui's Song of the Exile within the framework of contemporary autobiographical writings by women sheds further light on the work. To do this, it is necessary, first, to sketch briefly some of the issues pertaining to contemporary autobiography, especially exile literature. I shall then situate Hui's work within that context. As Sidonic Smith and Julia Watson have pointed out, 'Autobiographic processes are set in motion when this subject struggles towards voice, history, and a future.'20 Much of the recent autobiographical literature has been written by women, and quite frequently the authors are writing in exile. However, unlike more traditional autobiographies by men who chronicle the master narrative of 'enshrining the "individual" and "his" uniqueness,' all of which are rational, agentive, and unitary, women authors use autobiography


to find a voice or to forge an identity. Quite often these works 'play with forms that challenge the reader/viewer to recognize their experiments in subjectivity.' Female authors seem highly predisposed to cross generic boundaries and to utilize a fluid style. Smith and Watson see this as an expression of the deformation/reformation of identity.

More specifically, Smith and Watson claim that in the process of trying to claim an identity, women autobiographers tend to 'struggle against [the] coercive calls to a "universal humanity."' For the marginalized woman, autobiographical language can serve as a coinage that purchases entry into the social and discursive economy.

Such autobiographies often provide alternative ways of knowing based on observations from the margins: 'Attention to the politics of identity can also become a source of hybrid forms, what Kaplan calls, "out-law" genres.' This is especially true of women writing in exile, such as Asian American writer Maxine Hong Kingston or Caribbean writer Michelle Cliff, whose identities are formed by two cultures and who, like Hui, possess polyglot subjectivities.

Likewise, women not invested in the ubiquitous male master narrative structure have felt freer to experiment with form, by crossing not only borders between genres but boundaries between autobiography and fiction as well. Maxine Hong Kingston's book *The Woman Warrior* is one example. A brief comparison between it and *Song of the Exile* will prove productive.

In a fine essay on *Woman Warrior*, Lee Quinby attempts to 'illuminate the ways the text constructs a new form of subjectivity,' what she calls 'ideographic selfhood.' She builds her argument on the distinction that Kingston herself made in her essay 'Cultural Misreadings by American Reviewers,' in which she

---

21. Ibid., p. xviii.
22. Ibid., p. xix.
23. Ibid., p. xxi.
emphasized that she was 'not writing history or sociology, but a "memoir" like Proust.'26 As Quinby states:

Whereas autobiography promotes an 'I' that shares with confessional discourse an assumed interiority and an ethical mandate to examine the interiority, memoirs promote an 'I' that is explicitly constituted in the reports of the utterances and proceedings of others. The 'I' or subjectivity produced in memoirs is externalized and, in the Bakhtinian sense overtly dialogical. Unlike the subjectivity of autobiography, which is presumed to be unitary and continuous over time, memoirs (particularly in their collective form) construct a subjectivity that is multiple and discontinuous.27

Quinby proposes that memoirs are a kind of countermemory. I would like to stake out this territory for Song of the Exile. Quinby sees autobiography as promoting 'totalized individuality' (usually male), whereas memoirs, because of their dialogical format, 'destabilize unified selfhood.'28 Quinby points out not just the feminine origin of the word memoir but also its tendency towards inclusive, disparate, and generic discourses. For Kingston, this includes fiction, folktale, family history, autobiography, first-person address, and third-person narrative.

Quinby also notes that memoirs often include invisible presences. She quotes Virginia Woolf, who averred that memoirs confront what other forms of life writing too often ignore—the pervasive 'invisible presences' that are the most profound determinants of subjectivity.29 For Woolf, this presence was her mother; for Kingston, it was her aunt, her mother, and unknown relatives in mainland China, plus ghosts who inhabited the United States; for Hui, it was the mother of her childhood.

Quinby sees Woman Warrior as a 'discourse of resistance to the subjectification of the daughter within this family dynamic.'30 This is also true

26. Ibid.
27. Lee Quinby, p. 299.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., p. 300.
30. Ibid., p. 302.
for Hui’s alterego, Hueyin. Like Kingston, Hui is comfortable with the multiple voices and identities that bear on her formative identity or identities; also like Kingston, she must return to the past, revisualize, hear stories, and imagine herself elsewhere in both time and place.

Finally, it is important to note the genre of Chinese writing known as xungen, or ‘searching for roots.’ These have been authored by both men and women in mainland China and others living elsewhere. Whether fictional or based on real experiences, these works tend to be written in the first person and thus take on the character of an autobiography. This literature was especially vibrant during the mid-1980s, a period that coincided with the height of the Hong Kong New Wave. In the post-Mao period, many Chinese artists seemed compelled to define what Leo Lee (Ou-fan) calls ‘the source of their cultural origins—and hence their creativity... But the spiritual process of discovering their roots is nothing less than an Epiphany, which they seek to capture artistically in their reinvented fictional landscape.’

Lee points out the ways in which these artists used modernist structures and sensibilities to uncover the ancient past and to come to terms with their psychological makeups and identities. Like Yau, he sees these works as dialogic, drawing upon the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, because of the ways they dialogue with the past.

As Lee points out, in searching for their ‘roots’ and ‘the true voice of China,’ these mainland writers went to rural areas that were quite foreign, exotic, and unfamiliar: ‘Herein lies their paradox: like exiles returning home after a long absence, they find the homeland of their own culture foreign, and the journey to their roots becomes one of increasing “defamiliarization.” This easily summarizes Aiko’s experience in Japan and Hueyin’s in China. What is thus foregrounded is the imaginary boundary between the unfamiliar real world of the present and the other world they imagine. Aiko discovers that with the passing of years, she no longer recognizes the Japan of her imagination.


32. Ibid., p. 4.
Likewise, Hueyin must come to terms with the fact that the sunny days of her childhood no longer exist. Her grandparents are now old and feeble, and their world has become poor and grim. For both mother and daughter, only the past is familiar.

Despite a strong tendency among exile writers to establish and recover a homeland and culture that is stable and unified, the conclusion of most Chinese exile writing, like exile writing from other parts of the world, is that safe and simple refuges do not exist. In an article on *Song of the Exile* that appeared at the time of the film’s release, Hui expressed her ‘deep distrust of nationalistic sentiment,’ especially anything smacking of pride of blood. For her, ‘nationalism is a product of education,’ and ‘“homeland” is a “suspect abstraction.”’ She added, ‘Hong Kong Chinese are merely confused when they look to China for their sense of belonging.’ She could have added, like the reviewer, ‘The past is another country.’

The end of the film brings together many of the issues discussed earlier in this article. In the last scene, Hueyin goes to Guangzhou to visit her grandfather, who has just suffered a stroke. We see the reduced conditions under which her beloved ‘Ye Ye’ now lives and hear how he was interrogated by the Red Guards when he tried to send Hueyin a book of Sung poetry. Here all culture that does not further the Communist cause is banned as reactionary and corruptive. This emotional stress has led to Ye Ye’s collapse. Yet he urges Hueyin ‘not to give up on China.’

In another scene, cautioning Hueyin about the Chinese, her grandmother is bitten by a retarded child, whom she cared for. This small detail seems overdetermined, especially since the camera lingers on the boy’s bloody mouth, seemingly encouraging us to read the event symbolically as a message about the insanity of the Cultural Revolution, a warning not to trust the Chinese, or a perversion of the adage ‘Beware the hand that feeds you.’ One need not posit an exact analogy, but the action and the image are vicious and disturbing.

Hueyin looks at her old and frail Ye Ye and thinks that he is too weak to hold his granddaughter. This links back to Hueyin’s first recollection of sitting on her grandfather’s stomach while a popular southern Chinese folksong played—

The days of her childhood have ended, and their only the past is
and recover a most Chinese sense that safe and
ing of nationalistic mood. For her, they look to the past, to the reviewer,
usset abstractions. They look to the past, to the reviewer,
discussed earlier in this article. Her grandmother still lives under which
flames, lit by the Red, to the reviewer.
Here all culture is sanctioned and
he urges Hueyin to remember earlier, happier days. With strains of the folksong on the soundtrack, we see her grandfather young and vital, a tiny, carefree Hueyin, and a lush Chinese garden filled with sunshine and greenery. The contrast between past and present speaks for itself. Like all memories of childhood, neither Hueyin, nor any of us, can go home again, a lesson Aiko has already learned. Tears roll down Hueyin’s face. We see a superimposition of Hueyin’s face over a shot of a street and a bridge in Guangzhou as the image fades to black. Here the film ends.

Is the bridge just a bridge, or does it represent a possible connection between China and Hong Kong, in contrast to the film’s opening shot of London’s Westminster Bridge, which can be viewed as a symbolic representation of the UK/Hong Kong connection? Unlike the smooth reconciliation between mother and daughter, the reabsorption of Hong Kong into the Chinese orbit may not come about so easily. There is only possibility.

I will end as I began, with a quotation from Stuart Hall, because I believe it resonates with Hui’s *Song of the Exile*. In his essay ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora,’ Hall writes: ‘It is because this New World is constituted for us as place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to “lost origins,” to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning.’ This is the journey that Hueyin has taken. But Hall then cautions: ‘We have been trying to theorize identity as constituted, not outside but within representation; and hence of cinema, not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects’. It seems to me this is the journey that Ann Hui has taken.

---