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PART ONE

Territories, Trajectories, Historiographies

1 Transnational Chinese Cinema Studies

Chris Berry

This chapter examines a doubled object. The term, 'transnational Chinese cinema studies', designates both a type of cinema and a field of study. The watershed moment in the emergence of the field was the publication in 1997 of Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu's anthology, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*.¹ Almost overnight, it went from being relatively rarely used to becoming perhaps the most commonly used term in Chinese cinema studies as a whole. Despite this wide usage, there has been limited discussion of what 'transnational Chinese cinema' means. As a result, it has been used not only widely but also loosely and sometimes in ways that are contradictory. In these circumstances, some have even called for the abandonment of the term altogether.

This chapter traces some of the main usages and key intellectual debates about 'transnational Chinese cinema'. Those debates include not only questions about what the 'transnational' actually means but also whether it represents capitulation to Hollywood or a new form of nationalistic triumphalism in the world of global trade. The chapter will argue that the term has greatest use when more closely defined against alternative terms like 'international' and 'global'. However, this is not because such a definition is straightforward. Rather, it is because, in attempting to counter conceptual sloppiness, such an effort opens the way to a more focused and critical debate that will further develop our understanding of what is at stake when we talk about the transnational in relation to Chinese cinema. In this sense, the 'transnational' becomes a method, as Yiman Wang has advocated.²

It is not only in relation to Chinese cinema that the idea of 'transnational cinema' remains woolly and ill-defined. In the first issue of *Transnational Cinemas*, Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim call for a 'critical transnationalism', as opposed to the established tendency to deploy the term loosely. Analysing existing usage, they point to three main patterns. The first rejects 'national cinema' as a theoretical model that cannot accommodate the movement of films across borders, reception of foreign films and so forth. The second focuses on cultural formations that sustain cinemas that exceed the borders of individual nation-states or operate at a more local level within them; for example, Arab-language cinemas, Chinese-language cinemas, Telugu-language cinema in South India and so on. The third is the focus on diasporic, exilic and other cinemas that challenge ideas of stable national cultural identity.³

Although Higbee and Lim's article examines transnational cinema studies in general, it is their analysis of the discourse surrounding transnational Chinese cinema in particular that leads them to express a concern. Referring to films like Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002), they write, 'one of the potential weaknesses of the conceptual term "transnational cinema" ... [is that] it risks celebrating the supranational flow or transnational exchange of peoples, images and cultures at the expense of the specific cultural, historical or ideological context in which these exchanges take place'.⁴ In the Chinese case, this would refer to those popular (and some academic) writers who see every global box-office record for a Chinese blockbuster as a nationalistic triumph.

When scholarship has gone beyond unreflexive usage, this has not necessarily narrowed down the range of uses. Indeed, in some cases the opposite has happened. For example, a special issue of the



Hero

Journal of Chinese Cinemas was devoted to the topic of the transnational in 2008. The call for papers asked authors to interrogate the term, and the essays were chosen precisely because they not only did that but also pushed the boundaries of what 'transnational' could mean.⁵ One essay belongs to Higbee and Lim's first pattern of practices that do not fit into a national cinema model by examining the archive records on censorship by the British authorities of foreign films imported into Hong Kong during the Cold War era (1950–70).⁶ Also within that first pattern is Yiman Wang's aforementioned essay that proclaims the transnational as a method and traces how a Lubitsch film gets remade in Shanghai, and then the remake gets remade in Hong Kong.⁷ Zakir Hussein Raju's essay fits both the second and third patterns discerned by Higbee and Lim by positioning recent Malaysian Chinese films as part of a larger transnational Chinese festival cinema shaped by other transnational Chinese films and addressed to transnational audiences.⁸

However, two essays in the same issue push the envelope even further. Rossella Ferrari proliferates the 'trans' by examining how works by Hong Kong art collective Zuni Icosahedron not only cross state borders but also the borders between media to produce transmedial and transtextual lineages.⁹ Finally, Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis articulate a vision of the transnational as 'hyper-national' by looking at the activities of the government-owned China Film Group, which they interpret as engaged in national consolidation and transnational reach.¹⁰

As well as referring to an array of different types of film and film-making, the essays in the special issue of *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* are historically wide-ranging. Others have gone right back to the very beginnings of the cinema. In the introductory essay to his seminal anthology, Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu writes that 'We begin in 1896 because that was the year of the beginning of film consumption and distribution of an essentially transnational nature in China.'¹¹ Here a certain ambiguity can be discerned. For he also notes, 'The

occasion for [*Transnational Chinese Cinemas*] is the globalization of Chinese cinemas in the international film market.¹² In the first quotation, Lu takes the scope of the book and the 'transnational' back to the beginnings of Chinese cinema. In the second, he notes a connection between transnational cinema and the more recent phenomenon of globalisation, but with globalisation only classified as a kind of trigger ("The occasion ...") for thinking about the transnational.

From this account, it is clear that the potential meanings of 'transnational cinema' are many and various. It can be traced back to the beginnings of cinema itself. Or it can be dated from the impact of globalisation in the cinema. It can refer to big-budget blockbuster cinema associated with the operations of global corporate capital. Or it can refer to small-budget diasporic and exilic cinema. It can refer to films that challenge national identity, or it can refer to the consumption of foreign films as part of the process of a discourse about what national identity is. Does this upsurge in talking about transnational cinema exist because there has really been an increase in the amount of activity in recent years, making it command our attention? Given that statistics continue to be collected largely on the basis of the territorial nation-state, this is hard to measure. Or does the surge in use of the term mean that the transnational is a conceptual framework, and now that it has been widely adopted many hitherto invisible and neglected phenomena have come into view? For an individual scholar who wishes to use the concept of 'transnational cinema' as a research tool these are urgent questions, because the existing unexamined proliferation of the transnational puts it in danger of becoming too contradictory and too similar to many other terms to be useful.

Yingjin Zhang is one of the few scholars to have interrogated the term 'transnational' more thoroughly. Facing the proliferation of sometimes conflicting meanings described above, he goes on to question whether it is useful at all:

The term 'transnational' remains unsettled primarily because of multiple interpretations of the national in transnationalism. What is emphasized in the term 'transnational'? If it is the national, then what does this 'national' encompass – national culture, language, economy, politics, ethnicity, religion, and/or regionalism? If the emphasis falls on the prefix 'trans' (i.e., on cinema's ability to cross and bring

together, if not transcend, different nations, cultures, and languages), then this aspect of transnational film studies is already subsumed by comparative film studies.¹³

Zhang's argument rightly throws down the gauntlet to transnational cinema studies. No doubt, different scholars will continue to use the term 'transnational' in a variety of different and even contradictory ways, often without even bothering to define it. But if he is correct that 'transnational' is just a fashionable word with no distinct meaning of its own – no critical leverage as a concept – then there is no reason to hang on to it.

However, can transnational film studies really be subsumed by comparative film studies? The idea of comparative film studies suggests bounded entities that can be held separate from one another for the purposes of comparison. This could take us back all too easily to the idea of cinemas distinguished according to territorial politics – nation-states – with films flowing back and forth as exports and imports. Even understood beyond the nation-state, the comparative does not easily make space for the phenomena that not only cross but straddle and defy borders analysed in the essays mentioned above. For example, how can we make sense of the film festival circuit that is the cultural field supporting Malaysian Chinese cinema within a comparative perspective? How can it accommodate Chinese blockbuster films that put together their cast and crew from different countries, shoot on location, outsource parts of their production such as music and computer-generated effects, and then go on to aim at multiplex audiences around the world?

Yet, Zhang's argument does alert us to the need to try and develop the transnational as a concept. Although the term 'transnational' has been used to refer to many different and sometimes conflicting things in film studies, these different usages all have one thing in common – they originated around the same time as the discourse on globalisation was becoming widespread towards the end of the last century. This is different from the situation in economic studies, where globalisation as a deeper level of integration follows 'internationalization (as in the increasing interwovenness of national economies through international trade) and transnationalization (as in the increasing organization of production on a

cross-border basis by multi-national organizations)'.¹⁴ But in the case of film studies, the 'transnational' tracks or even comes after 'globalisation' as a popular discourse.

Of course, the debates about what exactly the term 'globalisation' means are at least as complicated as those concerning the 'transnational'. However, it is generally thought of as a recent 'epochal transformation' characterised by a rollback in the functions and powers of the state, especially concerning the economy, both in what goes on inside its borders and over what crosses those borders. Saskia Sassen calls these changes 'processes of denationalization'.¹⁵ Within many nation-states, as part of this rollback, state-owned enterprises have been sold to private enterprises. Those states that operate command economies have often stepped back to allow citizens and companies to take the initiative more. Regulations that block or inhibit trade between nation-states are being lowered, enabling those who wish to operate across national borders more straightforwardly and with less need for state approval, as, for example, in various free trade zones and agreements like the European Union, the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Closer Economic Partnership Agreement between Hong Kong and the mainland People's Republic. Although arguments proliferate about the reasons for and forms of change in China, the recent history of the post-Mao 'Reform' (*gaige*) era in the People's Republic can be seen a classic example of these developments.¹⁶ On the cinematic front, the decreased role of direct state ownership in both Taiwan and the People's Republic are examples of the rollback of the state, and restrictions on imports and exports, as well as flows of investment capital, have all been considerably relaxed.

Taking all these factors into account, we can see that both the terms 'globalisation' and 'transnational' (as used in film studies) refer to a larger structural shift in the world order away from the old order of nation-states. For the purposes of this chapter, that organisation of the world order around nation-states can be called the 'international order'. According to the principles and presumptions that organise this system, the nation-state is understood to have complete sovereignty over the territory that it rules, and the world order is organised as transactions of various kinds between and regulated by these states. It is literally an international order. In the transnational

order, the nation-state does not disappear. Indeed, in recent years we have seen the emergence of a large number of new nation-states. But with the rollback in the absolute power of the nation-state described above, a new order emerges in which citizens and – at least as important – corporations have greater relative autonomy from the state in regard to at least the economy and can operate economically across state borders more easily. The nation-state as the ultimate power regulating the world order is no longer taken for granted.

However, we must recognise that the *conceptual* distinction between the transnational and the international does not enable a simple sorting out of phenomena into two piles of *objects* neatly labelled 'national cinema' (circulating in an international order) and 'transnational cinema'. Rather it constitutes a problematic that animates the analysis of various practices and objects. The change from an international to a transnational order is not something that happened suddenly on a particular date. Despite the fact that we can say consciousness of the phenomenon came to a head in the late 1990s, it remains difficult to draw a clear historical line that would distinguish an era of the international from the transnational.

This difficulty of distinguishing the national/international and the transnational as objects stems from the fact that the transnational develops out of rather than against the international order of nation-states. When companies were founded within the borders of individual nation-states, those territorially bounded polities provided suitable spaces for their protection and development. Yet these same companies were also able to call upon the administrative and military resources of the nation-states they were located in to support their interests beyond the borders of the individual nation-state. An example of this process would be the Opium Wars, conducted against the Qing Empire and to protect the interests of British merchants. As a result of this, some scholars have referred to the era of colonialism and imperialism as 'proto-globalisation'.¹⁷ Viewed through this lens, Kenny Ng's analysis of the censorship activities of the British administrators of Hong Kong during the postwar era sits as an example where the international order is already stretched towards the transnational.¹⁸ The British administration in Hong Kong cannot be seen as a national government exercising sovereignty over imports. Yet, at the same time, its insistence on

monitoring what comes into the 'free port' of Hong Kong manifests a resistance to free transborder movement of cinema and the continued dominance of the national model, for it behaves *as though* it is a national government, because that it is the only political form with legitimacy.

The same drive for profit maximisation and accumulation that established the international order as the playing field – level or not – on which corporations conducted their business has now led away from the concentrated and regulated model of Fordist mass production to the post-Fordist model of flexible production and distribution. Post-Fordism seeks out the cheapest sources of labour, parts and supplies, crossing national borders and driving what we know as globalisation. Hollywood once followed a more or less Fordist model, gathering all the elements of the industry into Los Angeles to create maximum economies of scale.¹⁹ Today, Hollywood is a hub in a network and globalised industry that operates what Toby Miller and his colleagues have called the New International Division of Cultural Labour (NICL) to seek out the cheapest locations, post-production facilities and so forth to further maximise profits.²⁰

It is this process where one order grows out of the other that makes distinguishing the two historically difficult. Just when did Hollywood cease to be a nationally based industry that exported as part of an international order and become a hub in a global network that operates in a transnational order? Similarly, when did the mainland Chinese film industry cease to be a state-funded national industry producing films to educate the public within the People's Republic and become focused on producing blockbusters aimed at global markets? The predominance of globalisation means that such a move will inevitably be seen through the framework of the transnational. But Emilie Yeh and Darrell Davis's analysis of the China Film Group, referred to earlier, challenges us to consider whether this might be an enhancement of the power of the Chinese state within that transnational order, or, as they put it, a hyper-nationalism.²¹

If distinguishing the concepts of the transnational, the international and the national and the actual practices they might refer to makes visible an intellectual problematic within which to examine transnational Chinese cinema, the question of the conceptual relationship of the transnational to globalisation still requires further attention. If we

accept the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist mode of production as underpinning the logic of the move from an international to a transnational order, does this mean using the concept of the transnational runs the risk of subscribing to the values of globalising neo-liberalism? As already mentioned, Higbee and Lim see this as a particular problem in the kind of work on Chinese transnational cinema that unreflectively celebrates blockbuster culture as a nationalist triumph, a critique that runs parallel to Yeh and Davis's analysis of the China Film Group.²²

Higbee and Lim are quite right to raise this issue. However, while the forces of capitalist accumulation may be among the primary forces driving the establishment of the international order, it would be a mistake to suggest that this order was uncontested. The same is true of the transnational order. Just because this order is driven in many cases by the fantasy of achieving what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have written about as the smooth space of Empire,²³ it does not mean that fantasy either has been or inevitably will be realised. In fact, the very existence of their book, written against that order, is evidence of resistance. Nor does it mean that all film-makers operating in the space opened up by the transnational order are operating according to the principles of profit maximisation and accumulation.

Anna Tsing's work on the conceptual distinction between globalisation as an ideology and the transnational as a practice (or a multiplicity of practices) is useful for grasping this distinction. Many people use the terms 'global' and 'transnational' interchangeably, and that has been the practice of this chapter so far. However, Anna Tsing has argued for a distinction between the two terms. She suggests we should use 'globalisation' as part of the ideological rhetoric of globalism, whereas we should use 'transnational' to refer to the specific 'transborder projects' that actually constitute the growth of the transnational on the ground, so to speak.²⁴ At first, this idea of a myriad of transborder projects can sound like Sassen's idea that 'globalization consists of an enormous variety of micro-processes that begin to denationalize'.²⁵ However, not only do Tsing's 'transnational projects' constitute a multiplicity of different and often micro-level practices, but also they are not necessarily unified in their promotion of globalisation, even if they operate within it. Tsing argues that the rhetoric of globalisation driven by neo-liberal

transnational capitalism seeks to present it as a force of nature, a 'flow', limited by the 'barriers' put in place by the nation-state. However, she points out that, at the same time, forces opposed to neo-liberal global capitalism also operate as transnational networks, organisations and projects within the same transnational order, as do various alternative NGOs and other organisations and formations driven by values that have nothing to do with profit maximisation.

Tsing's account helps us to understand the transnational as an order that the fantasy of total globalised capitalism both helps to constitute and operates within, but which at the same time exceeds that fantasy and includes other forces antithetical to it or simply different from it. This approach is crucial if we are to avoid the dangers that Higbee and Lim have pointed to. It enables an understanding of the transnational that includes all the activities and forces that are unleashed by globalisation, including those that do not subscribe to the logic of capitalist accumulation driving it. Once the 'barriers' set up by the nation-state are 'removed' or 'lowered', or, to put it another way, once nation-states and other agents encourage transborder production practice, there is little evidence yet of any 'flow' that simply and naturally spreads out evenly across the idealised 'smooth' space of the globe. Instead, as the examples of transborder Chinese film-making indicate, flow occurs in particular channels, in particular directions and in particular ways as part of Tsing's 'transnational projects'. Plenty of Chinese film-makers are working outside the territorial states they were born in. Some have gone to Hollywood. But not many are working, say, in the Mexican film industry, or in Europe. There are reasons why they gravitate to certain places and not to others. Perhaps not surprisingly, the greatest flows of personnel and investment appear to have been among people situated in different Chinese-speaking territories.

But here again, the risk of emphasising language would be to see simply another 'natural force' at work, along with the market – cultural and ethnic affinity. Therefore, it is equally important to observe that these flows have not occurred smoothly and evenly across Chinese-speaking territories, but rather between particular networked cities, with Taipei, Hong Kong and Beijing featuring especially strongly. While there might be significant numbers of Taiwan film industry personnel leaving Taipei for the mainland, not many

are headed to rural Gansu, or even to Shanghai. Shanghai's once-strong film production industry has been in decline for some time as the move away from a command economy that distributed film production across the territory of the People's Republic has given way to a market economy where production companies have tended to gather in creative clusters in one city. In the case of the Chinese film industry, that city is Beijing, where the all-important government censors are based as well as the state-owned China Film Group discussed by Emilie Yeh and Darrell Davis and which continues to dominate distribution and exhibition. This is an instance of how the forces shaping the transnational operate *below* the national level. One set of perhaps counterintuitive questions for research on transnational cinema to undertake is precisely what the new patterns are that emerge below the transnational order, and how to account for them.

But to return to Tsing's idea of a multitude of transnational projects constituting *transborder* cinema practices, these cannot all be reduced to and accounted for wholly in terms of the logic of the market, its so-called 'imperatives', and the even larger forces such as cultural affinity that shape it in certain ways. An example would be the well-known independent film-maker Jia Zhangke, whose *Still Life* (*Sanxia Haoren*) won the Golden Lion at Venice in 2006. Until 2004, he was working as an unofficial film-maker within the People's Republic. Being unofficial meant that his films could not be released commercially in China. Of course, being unofficial did not mean he operated outside of the logic of the market altogether. His films were marketed outside China, and people invested in them. Nonetheless, the decision to start making films in a manner that excluded him from access to his own domestic market suggests a practice motivated and shaped by other concerns, as is also indicated by his continued tendency not to prioritise the box office so far.

Jia Zhangke is not alone in this experience. Similar patterns operate for those engaged in experimental film, documentary film and many more areas of cinema, and this is true not only in the mainland People's Republic but also in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Although their budgets and also their resources are very limited, the reduced cost of international communication thanks to the internet and the reduced cost of circulating and screening films that are digitised



Still Life

rather than celluloid have made such activities more and more common. All these activities or transborder projects, as Tsing would call them, are at least alternative to if not actually opposed to the ideology of neo-liberal globalisation. Yet, paradoxically, they are enabled by and even dependent upon the changes that neo-liberal globalisation has been so crucial in driving forward. Jia's early films could not have been made at all, never mind shown in international film festivals, if the command economy and tight control of the border were still in place. Here, again, we see the logic of a transnational world order at work in the shaping of even those transborder projects that do not support it or prioritise accumulation.

It is precisely because the transnational is a world order that it plays a role in shaping all Chinese film-making activities today. And because the forces producing it grow out of those that produced the international order of nation-states before it, once discovered it is not surprising that we can see its roots going back to the very beginning of Chinese cinema, as Sheldon Lu suggests in the introduction to his anthology.²⁶ In these circumstances, the very widespread usage of the term in the last decade and

more is completely understandable, and cannot be dismissed simply as fashion. However, by producing a more defined understanding of the transnational as a world order and as various practices under that world order, perhaps we can move from an unexamined and loose usage of the term towards the 'critical transnationalism' in transnational Chinese cinema studies that Higbee and Lim have advocated.

Notes

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2. Yiman Wang, 'The "Transnational" as Methodology: Transnationalizing Chinese Film Studies Through the Example of *The Love Parade* and its Chinese Remakes', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* vol. 2 no. 1 (2008), pp. 9–21.
3. Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, 'Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies', *Transnational Cinemas* vol. 1 no. 1 (2010), pp. 7–21.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.
5. As one of the co-editors of the issue along with Laikwan Pang, here I am speaking from experience.

6. Kenny K. K. Ng, 'Inhibition vs Exhibition: Political Censorship of Chinese and Foreign Cinemas in Postwar Hong Kong', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* vol. 2 no. 1 (2008), pp. 23–35.
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 9. Rossella Ferrari, 'Transnation/Transmedia/Transtext: Border-Crossing from Screen to Stage in Greater China', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* vol. 2 no. 1 (2008), pp. 53–65.
 10. Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis, 'Re-nationalizing China's Film Industry: Case Study on the China Film Group and Film Marketization', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* vol. 2 no. 1 (2008), pp. 37–51.
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 12. Lu, 'Historical Introduction', p. 1.
 13. Yingjin Zhang, 'Comparative Film Studies, Transnational Film Studies: Interdisciplinarity, Crossmediality, and Transcultural Visuality in Chinese Cinema', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* vol. 1 no. 1 (2007), pp. 27–40 (37).
 14. Ankie Hoogvelt, *Globalization and the Postcolonial World Economy: The New Political Economy of Development* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press: 1997), p. 114.
 15. Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 1.
 16. See, for example, Yasheng Huang, *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
 17. Tony Ballantyne, 'Empire, Knowledge, and Culture: From Proto-Globalization to Modern Globalization', in A. G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (New York: Norton, 2002), pp. 116–40.
 18. Ng, 'Inhibition vs Exhibition'.
 19. Hoogvelt, *Globalization and the Postcolonial World Economy*, pp. 90–113.
 20. Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria and Richard Maxwell, *Global Hollywood* (London: BFI, 2001), pp. 44–82.
 21. Yeh and Davis, 'Re-nationalizing China's Film Industry'.
 22. Higbee and Lim, 'Concepts of Transnational Cinema', pp. 11–12.
 23. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 333.
 24. Anna Tsing, 'The Global Situation', *Cultural Anthropology* vol. 15 no. 3 (2000), pp. 327–60.
 25. Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights*, p. 1.
 26. Lu, 'Historical Introduction', p. 2.
- Further Reading in *Chinese Films In Focus II***
 On Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, see Chapter 17, 'Hero: The Return of a Traditional Masculine Ideal in China' by Kam Louie.

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