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CHRONOTOPE AND REGIONAL CHINESE INDEPENDENT FILMS

by
LIU Jingya

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy in Cultural Studies

Lingnan University

2010

ABSTRACT

Chronotope and Regional Chinese Independent Films

by

LIU Jingya

Master of Philosophy

This thesis aims to re-categorize Chinese independent films from a region-based perspective as a critical response to existing literature on Chinese independent films. This thesis analyzes three independent films made in three different regions of China in order to investigate regional Chinese independent cinema as a recently rising phenomenon: respectively, Jia Zhangke's *Xiaowu* (1997) made in Shanxi Province, Ying Liang's *Taking Father Home* (Bei yazi de nanhai, 2006) in Sichuan Province, and Robin Weng's *Fujian Blue* (Jinbi huihuang, 2007) in Fujian Province.

By using Bakhtin's concept of chronotope (literally time-space) as the fundamental framework and exploring the many aspects of it, I will develop three major theoretical points to study selected regional Chinese independent films: first, chronotope enables the evaluation of texts of Chinese independent films; second, the documentary impulses prevailing Chinese independent films serve as the chronotopic linkage between the world in the film text and the world the film text represents; three, the mediation function as one aspect of chronotope is characterized by the negotiation between regional Chinese independent films and many social relations, for example, filmmakers, casting, audiences.

This thesis also explores many issues related to Chinese independent films, for example: How do we value the unique film practice of Chinese independent filmmakers instead of viewing them as a unified whole? How do we relate Chinese independent films as aesthetic practices to the region-specific reality they are embedded in? How can Chinese independent cinema as a social practice play an effective role in society? The exploration of these questions does not only enlighten new research perspectives on Chinese independent films, but also provide reflections on the geographical, cultural and social diversity of Chinese regions.

DECLARATION

I declare that this is an original work based primarily on my own research, and I warrant that all citations of previous research, published or unpublished, have been duly acknowledged.

LIU JINGYA
October 14, 2010

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Chapter 1 Naming Regional Chinese Independent Films

In the early 1990s, Chinese independent filmmakers emerged to document the dramatic socio-economic changes that were occurring in China in the marketization era. These films, as Chinese film scholar Zhang Zhen (2007: 2) observes, anchor the immeasurable “socioeconomic unevenness, psychological anxiety, and moral confusion” experienced by ordinary Chinese people during the 1990s – a time when China was getting increasingly involved in the world economy. The massive generation of wealth has led to drastic social, cultural and economic changes.

Chinese independent cinema has drawn the critical attention of scholars who approach the social upheavals in China’s reform era through the cinematic form. In the book *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, the definition of “independent” (Zhang Yingjin & Paul Pickowicz, 2006: 3, preface) in the context of Chinese cinema “means a cinematic project’s independence from the state system of production, distribution, and exhibition”. It is a term preferred by a majority of Chinese independent filmmakers in opposition to another term “underground” which embodies the “expectations of the subversive function of this alternative film culture in contemporary China”. While the book uses “underground” and “independent” to describe and negotiate the identity of Chinese independent cinema, both terms essentially define this cinema from a perspective that highlights the state-filmmaker opposition.

This understanding of Chinese independent cinema is problematic, as it legitimizes the perspective that conceives and celebrates this cinema as politically subversive in

its relationship to the state. For example, US-based scholar Paul Pickowicz views Chinese independent filmmaking as a wrestling between the filmmakers and the state and asserts that most of these Chinese independent works are “apolitical” (Paul Pickowicz, 2006: 4) in terms of content. Here, Pickowicz’s argument reveals the problems underlying his assumption that Chinese independent films *must be* a political practice against the state and must constitute a demand for free speech. It also raises the question as to whom Chinese independent films are *political* and why they are presumed to be *political*?

Domestically, works by independent filmmakers such as Jia Zhangke are often interpreted as exposing the backwardness of China and catering to the taste of westerners¹. There are two main forces behind this phenomenon: on one hand, as Zhang Yingjin (2006: 26) points out, Chinese independent films are “initially defined in counterpoint to official ideology and the mainstream discourses of nationalism and heroism”. This might provoke hostility from supporters of the state’s official ideology. On the other hand, the fact that “independent” filmmakers gain fame on the international film festival circuit and in Western media through their individual filmmaking mode as an alternative to the state-run filmmaking system (Dai Jinhua, 2002: 89) might provoke the defense of Chinese nationalists who subsequently assert that Chinese independent filmmakers gain the attention of the West by selling China.

As Dai Jinhua (2002: 75) points out, the popularity of Chinese independent films on the international film festival circuit and in Western media perfectly responds to “certain post-Cold War projects regarding Western cultural needs”. Through the lens of this post-Cold War politics, Chinese independent films are automatically

understood on the following assumptions: a film is apolitical because it is catering to the state ideology; or, a film is political because it is catering to Orientalist needs. In other words, the meaning of Chinese independent cinema is confined to simplified categories which highlight it as either *Chinese* independent cinema or Chinese *independent* cinema. In both categories, “film” as the major component of Chinese independent cinema is easily neglected. Focusing on film texts is not the only way to study Chinese independent films, however it is important to do so in a context in which the “Chineseness” and “independentness” of these films are over-emphasized. The neglect of the film texts themselves easily leads us to a situation that Jonathan Noble describes in another context: “the underground is discovered and cannibalized almost before it exists” (2003: 37). With the many ideological forces listed above in play, should Chinese independent cinema be solely interpreted as a political gesture in opposition to the state? And is it possible to find a new perspective to interpret Chinese independent films under these circumstances?

In the following chapter, I use the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his concept of chronotope to explore Chinese independent cinema. Chronotope (literally meaning “time-space”), as Bakhtin (1981: 250) points out, is the “the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel” and “the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied”. Bakhtin’s embrace of text leads us to reconsider many issues in the research of Chinese independent cinema: for example, the relationship between the realist themes prevalent in Chinese independent films and the world these films represent, and the relationship between Chinese independent films and their audiences. While exploring these questions, I will also draw on aspects of the work of the British feminist geographer Doreen Massey in order to justify the

emphasis on “region” in my research on regional Chinese independent films. To Doreen Massey (1994: 153-155), the identity of a place is defined by its interaction with other places and many social relations, which means the identity of a place is usually mobile. Massey’s argument enables a substantial understanding of my categorization of regional Chinese independent cinema as an ongoing process: the identity of a region is usually associated with its negotiation with other regions as well as with filmmakers’ aesthetic practice which is deeply embedded in the region.

First of all, however, I will review some of the existing literature on Chinese independent films as a basis for analyzing the topic. By questioning the validity of the major terms used in naming Chinese independent films, for example, “underground” and “urban generation”, I aim to point out the limits of each term and to re-categorize certain Chinese independent films as regional Chinese independent films.

Questioning “Independent”

In many cases, Chinese independent films were made in collaboration with the state in terms of production, circulation and exhibition; for example, Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life* (Sanxia haoren, 2006) is co-produced by the Hong Kong-based Xstream Pictures and state-sanctioned Shanghai Film Studio. This leads us to question whether it is still adequate to explore the independent identity of Chinese independent cinema from the outer forces that presumably shape them. The inaccuracy in the discourse of Zhang Yingjin and Paul Pickowicz, on the one hand, is a result of Zhang and Pickowicz’s binary and reductive differentiation between “legal and illegal film production, official sanction versus official censure, and market availability versus

proscribed access”, as Jonathan Noble (2003: 35) points out and criticizes. As a matter of fact, Chinese independent films have a hybrid identity that combines all of the above. On the other hand, the inaccuracy of Zhang and Pickowicz’s definition lies in the simple focus on context without looking at the links between film texts, which might hamper our ability to evaluate the subjectivity of Chinese independent filmmakers and their innovativeness in making films.

In a 2009 report by fanhall.comⁱⁱ on the audience perception of Chinese independent cinema, an interviewee made the humorous remark that Chinese independent films are all about “cops, prostitutes and gangsters”. Here I will briefly list some works by Chinese independent filmmakers who use similar marginalized characters in their films. Policemen appear in both Zhang Yuan’s *East Palace, West Palace* (Donggong xigong, 1996) and Zhang Ming’s *In Expectation* (Wushan yunyu, 1995); sex workers show up in Zhu Wen’s *Seafood* (Haixian, 2001) and Fu Xinhua’s *Strangers’ Street* (Kecun jie, 2001); disillusioned gangsters feature in Wang Xiaoshuai’s *So Close to Paradise* (Biandan guniang, 1997) and Wang Chao’s *The Orphan of Anyang* (Anyang yinger, 2001); and illegal mine labor is central to both Li Yang’s *Blind Shaft* (Mangjin, 2003) and Han Jie’s *Walking on the Wild Side* (Laixiaozi, 2006). While the narratives of these films show freshness in varying degrees, their thematic similarity sometimes provides an easy mould for independent filmmakers, and their generic elements might shape stereotypical routines of Chinese independent films. About this situation, Beijing-based film critic Shelly Kraicer (2009) even commented without mercy that Chinese independent films can be put on shelves with labels such as “DV CAM” and “prostitute”.

In some sense, these facts reveal the crisis of creativity that independent filmmakers face today. However, they also remind us of the importance of paying attention to independent filmmakers' creativity. The fact is, while there are high quality Chinese independent films that creatively project the social status of China, there are also clichéd works that copy and paste this view of China from earlier films. We should be cautious for easy definitions of “independent”, as Chinese independent cinema is a complex phenomenon that encompasses a constant transformation and negotiation which shapes its un-fixed identity. Progressive research on Chinese independent films should resist a homogenized perspective that treats Chinese independent films as a unitary and unified group, since this erases the differences within independent cinema and ignores the uneven quality of independent films. Under such circumstances, it is more meaningful to ask questions such as: in what sense is a Chinese independent film really “independent”? Should a close focus on individual film texts be integrated in the study of this “independence”? Furthermore, since there exists a popular stereotype of Chinese independent cinema as pointed out above, is it necessary for us to ask to whom and how this “independence” matters? These are the questions I would like to explore in the following chapters.

Questioning “Urban Generation”

In the early 1980s, the central government under Deng Xiaoping established several Special Economic Zones (*jingji tequ*) in coastal provinces such as Guangdong (Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Shantou), Fujian (Xiamen), and Hainan in order to attract foreign investment and boost local economies. By the early 1990s, marketization had spread from these Special Economic Zones to the whole country. However, this “reform and opening up” process also created a dramatic gap between coastal cities

enjoying the fruits of economic development, and inner provinces lacking resources and privileges in terms of state policy. While the so-called “free” market economy manipulated by the state (Wang Hui, 1997: 27) created new class divisions and social inequality, it also caused a massive displacement of population from small, economically uncompetitive counties/towns to bigger, economically privileged cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, which further widened the economic gap between the big cities and the provincial towns.

Chinese filmmakers in general have exhibited a shared preoccupation with the “economic-social-class-political-ideological differentiations, contradictions, polarization, and fragmentation of Chinese society” (Zhang Yingjin, 2007: 52) resulting from this rapid urbanization. Not only independent filmmakers but also people working within the system engage in the projection of the changes, sufferings and conflicts of a changing China into their aesthetic practice. The term “Urban Generation” is created by and used in the book *Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, and is based precisely on this phenomenon. Influential films that engage this type of subject matter include: Ning Ying’s Beijing trilogy (*For Fun* (Zhaole, 1992), *On the Beat* (Mingjing gushi, 1995) and *I Love Beijing* (Xiari nuan yangyang, 2001)), Tang Dalian’s *City Paradise* (Chengshi tiantang, 1999), Shi Runjiu’s *Beautiful New World* (Meili xin shijie, 1998), Zhang Yuan’s *Beijing Bastards* (Beijing zazhong, 1992), Wang Xiaoshuai’s *So Close to Paradise* (Biandai guniang, 1997) and *Beijing Bicycle* (Shiqisui de danche, 2001), and Lou Ye’s *Weekend Lover* (Zhoumo qingren, 1994) and *Suzhou River* (Suzhou he, 2001).

Placing together official-sanctioned and independent filmmakers as representing an “Urban Generation”, the book actually only covers films dealing with issues of urbanization in major Chinese cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. This is explicitly shown in the titles of films such as *Beijing Bastards*, *Beijing Bicycle* and *I Love Beijing* (mentioned above), and also Andrew Chan’s *Shanghai Panic* (Women haipa, 2001) and *Destination Shanghai* (Mudidi Shanghai, 2003). While Dai Jinhua (2002: 93) celebrates the common theme of the city “finally emerging from various discourses after a long, long delay” in influential independent films such as Zhang Yuan’s *Beijing Bastards* and Lou Ye’s *Weekend Lover*, and praises the depiction of “young people of the nineties as urban roamers, various kinds of marginal urban figures, with fading childhood memories of the city in transformation”, several discursive gaps nevertheless emerge. First of all, how do we interpret Chinese independent films that depict urban roamers who are not from the city, and their experiences after leaving the city? Secondly, how do we posit Chinese independent films made in places other than Beijing or Shanghai and which receive less recognition compared with the films from these politically and culturally dominant cities? Thirdly, although Chinese independent filmmakers express different views regarding the marginality of their fictional charactersⁱⁱⁱ, is it more meaningful for us to turn our attention from marginalized subject matter to the issue of the marginalization of small Chinese cities?

The films of Jia Zhangke, the leading figure of Chinese independent filmmaking today, are a perfect example in this context. Jia Zhangke’s debut short film *Xiaoshan Going Home* (Xiaoshan huijia, 1995) tells the story of a young migrant worker Xiaoshan who just lost his job as a cook and wanders around in Beijing trying to find

a friend who would like to go back home with him to Anyang, Henan Province during the Spring Festival. Ironically, as Jason McGrath (2007: 86) points out, Xiaoshan never actually goes home, but just wanders around Beijing as a migrant worker (*mingong*) as well as a Beijing outsider (*waidi ren*). Xiaoshan suffers from his life in Beijing not only because of his low social status in the new order of society, but also because of his identity as a non-local. As this floating population (*liudong renkou*) is usually not from Chinese metropolises like Beijing or Shanghai, the cinematic link between these Chinese power centers and other Chinese regions as the native places of these migrants is worthy of contemplation. Commenting on this phenomenon, Michael Berry (2009: 21) raises an interesting question: “what was the fate of all those small towns left behind for the big cities?”

In an interview with Michael Berry (2005: 191), Jia describes Shanxi Province, his birthplace, as located in a “relatively backwater province in China”. A small county-level city such as Fenyang^{iv} in Shanxi Province faces many difficulties: on one hand, it has to face the pressure of staying at the medium-to-bottom level of the city class division, which means it is offered limited political, economic, social and cultural capital by the central government; on the other hand, as the development of Fenyang is also affected by the socio-historical process taking place in China during the era of globalization, the city has to face both the pressure of its underprivileged status domestically and the threat of global forces. In other words, there is a double marginalization of small Chinese cities in the new structure shaped by the socio-economic transformation of China. Jia, highly conscious of these phenomena, declares that the reason for him to shoot his “Hometown Trilogy” – *Xiaowu* (Xiaowu, 1997), *Platform* (Zhantai, 1998), *Unknown Pleasures* (Renxiaoyao, 2001) – in a

small place such as Fenyang is to “make people aware of the realities of small towns” since in China today there does not only exist a class division between the rich and the poor, but also “between the big cities and small towns, between the coastal area and inner land” (Lu Tonglin, 2006: 126).

Jia’s films provide a new space for us to reconsider Chinese independent cinema within the context of the spatial stratification of Chinese cities. While it is easy to point out that urbanization is not a process that takes place only in big Chinese cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, but also occurs in other regions across the country, it is invisibly problematic to categorize Chinese independent filmmakers as an “Urban Generation” whose sample films examined are all made in or based on major Chinese cities. This presupposes the temporal-spatial conditions of dominant Chinese cities as representative of the whole of China and assumes that the underprivileged regions share the same temporal-spatial conditions as the dominant ones. However, different regions have their own particularities since they constantly interact with many other social relations as Doreen Massey (2004: 155) points out. Furthermore, if there is a temporal-spatial stratification and this uniqueness of Chinese regions, then the temporal-spatial distinctiveness of each region in the cinematic form also deserves critical attention. For example, the city landscapes in Jia Zhangke’s *Xiaowu* and *Still Life*, which respectively take place in Shanxi and Sichuan, are very different: while the former appears perpetually dusty as a result of the local economy being centered around heavy industries such as coal and chemical production, the latter takes place by the Yangtze River and shows poetic sceneries accompanied by the constant noise from the centrally-planned Three Gorges Dam project. Here, the identity of two different Chinese regions combines unique local experiences and an

external force rooted in a broader socio-historical process of China.

At the same time, if different layers and levels of urbanization in different Chinese regions give rise to variable social forms and relations, it is important for us to explore how these forms and relations are complexly immersed in Chinese independent cinema, and in reverse, how the new cinematic identities of these regions are formed by Chinese independent cinema made in different Chinese regions filled with unique social forms and relations. For example, Jia Zhangke's "unconscious urge" (Stephen Teo, 2001) to shoot films in Fenyang is connected to his deep emotional affinity with his hometown^v. Here, Jia's filmmaking practice is shaped not only by his idiosyncrasy or filmmaking interests, but also by his own past in Fenyang. This yearning for home, or this attempt at "auto-ethnography" as Linda Lai (2007: 230) calls it, urges him to engage and explore Fenyang through the cinematic form. In his first feature film *Xiaowu*, Fenyang appears as a place where "relationships, moral codes, ways of life and even physical structures are dissembled and destabilised" (Michael Berry, 2009: 16). In other words, the making of *Xiaowu* is deeply embedded in the experiences of a place that suffers from constant demolition and reconstruction, and in the way Fenyang residents, not only Jia himself, undergo everyday life there.

Regional Chinese Independent Films

After Jia Zhangke's rise to prominence, many Chinese independent filmmakers chose to go to underprivileged regions (rather than Beijing and Shanghai) for filmmaking. This trend, supported by the spread of digital video technology since the late 1990s^{vi}, indicates the tendency of Chinese independent filmmakers to explore

the diverse socio-economic, geographical and cultural conditions of different regions in China in their particularity. Here I will briefly list some Chinese independent films by the region they are shot in:

Central China: In Shanxi Province, apart from Jia Zhangke who made his “Hometown Trilogy” in Fenyang, Han Jie also made *Walking on the Wide Side* (Laixiaozi, 2006) in Xiaoyi City, about the road trip of three youngsters after they accidentally kill someone. In Henan Province, Li Yang made *Blind Shaft* (Mangjing, 2003) in Kaifeng City. The tension of the narrative lies in two professional con artists who make a living by murdering strangers they hire to work in illegal coal mines in order to get compensation money from the mine owners, and an innocent teenager who gradually awakens the conscience of one con artist. In Hebei Province, Zhu Wen made *Seafood* (Haixian, 2001) in Qinhuangdao City. The story of the film is centered around a sex worker who comes to the city to commit suicide but unexpectedly encounters a police man who tries to stop her.

Northern China: In Inner Mongolia, Zhao Ye made *Jalainur* (Zhalainuo'er, 2008) in Manzhouli City, the narrative of which is based on a young apprentice who takes a long trip to see off his steam locomotive driver mentor who is retiring. In Liaoning Province, Gao Wendong made *Food Village* (Meishicun, 2008) in Dalian City, which tells a love story of a sex worker and a hoodlum who both live in the soon to be demolished Food Village.

Southern China: In Hunan Province, Yang Heng made *Betelnut* (Binglang, 2006) in Pushi Town, about a teenage boy's coming of age story. In Fujian Province, Robin

Weng made *Fujian Blue* (Jinbi huihuang, 2007) about the life of local youths in an illegal immigration zone which consists of Fuqing City, Changle City and Pingtan Island. In Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, Tang Xiaobai shot *Perfect Life* (Wanmei shenghuo, 2008), with an intertwined story of two women who both travel between the two cities for love and life.

Western China: In Sichuan Province, Ying Liang made his three recent feature films *Taking Father Home* (Bei yazi de nanhai, 2004), *The Other Half* (Ling yiban, 2007) and *Good Cats* (Hao mao, 2008) in Zigong City. *Taking Father Home* tells the story of a teenager who travels from a rural town to the city looking for his father who has not returned home in six years. *The Other Half* is about a woman who works in a local law firm and her observation of other people's lives through the divorce cases she has to deal with. *Good Cats* examines the disillusion of a thirty-year-old man experiences in a city that suffers from the overwhelming real estate bubble. In Yunan Province, Zhu Wen made *South of the Clouds* (Yun de nanfang, 2004) in Kunming City, about a retired man's trip to the city to fulfill his childhood dreams.

In this thesis, I have selected three Chinese independent films as case studies to explore the rising scene of regional Chinese independent cinema: Jia Zhangke's *Xiaowu* made in Fenyang (Shanxi Province); Ying Liang's *Taking Father Home* made in Zigong (Sichuan Province); and Robin Weng's *Fujian Blue* made in Fuqing City, Changle City and Pingtan Island (Fujian Province). These films are either made in the home region of the filmmaker (Jia Zhangke comes from Shanxi and Robin Weng comes from Fujian) or places the filmmakers have stayed at for a long time and are familiar with (Ying Liang was born in Shanghai, however he has been based

in Sichuan since getting his degree in Directing at Chongqing University's School of Film). The three films, although they have different narrative concerns, aesthetics and production modes (all examined in detail in the following chapters), share common features. They each use non-professional local residents who speak local dialects, and on-location shooting as a basic filming skill. These strategies have contributed much to the filmmakers' engagement with their respective region to expose its rich temporal-spatial diversity. Therefore, in the following chapters, I aim to explore how the aesthetic practices of the selected independent filmmakers are embedded in each region and shape the cinematic image of the region.

Another consideration while selecting these three films is the distinct economic, social, cultural and geographical conditions of each of the three regions, as these conditions are embedded in the narrative as well as cinematic space of the films. If the two major challenges facing Chinese independent filmmakers today are "to resist the tyranny of mainstream culture" and "to resist the distortion and misinterpretation of their work by Western cultural imperialists" (Chen Mo and Xiao Zhiwei, 2006: 151), independent films made in remote regions might have to confront the challenge of being marginalized and exoticized by Chinese mainstream culture (since the major cultural-economic capital lies in politically dominant cities like Beijing and Shanghai), while at the same time, they might encounter the ignorance of the Western gaze (since the different dialects spoken in different regions of China may seem pointless or unrecognizable to non-Chinese speakers when they are translated and typed on the screen, as Liu Jin (2006: 178) points out). Therefore, the central focus of my research is on how the critical insights of selected Chinese independent filmmakers on specific regional issues are embedded in their films, which therefore

highlight the specificity of each region.

Shanxi Province, located in central China, has the leading coal industry in China because of the rich coal deposits there. The coal mine business has greatly boosted the local economy of places such as Fenyang and attracted many migrant workers^{vii}, but at the same time private mines have taken the lives of many due to lax safety measures^{viii}, while they also are at the root of various environmental issues. Although the coal mine issue is not explicitly involved in the narrative^{ix}, the film raises many critical issues that accompany the development of the local economy and directly influence local residents. In Chapter Three, I focus on Jia Zhangke's *Xiaowu*, a film made in Fenyang and in which the story of pickpocket Xiaowu's changing relationships with his friend Xiaoyong, lover Meimei and family are taking place against the background of this upheaval.

Sichuan Province, located in western China, has been historically known as the "Province of Abundance" which today indicates its flourishing agriculture, heavy industry and tourism. However, the subtropical monsoon climate in the Sichuan Basin makes especially the eastern part of the province (where Zigong City is located) a frequent victim of flooding. The Three Gorges Dam Project was partly launched by the central government to solve the flood issue, but has been rather controversial and unsuccessful. In Chapter Four, I explore how Ying Liang's *Taking Father Home* explicitly examines a flood occurred in Zigong City on June 27, 1997^x in the cinematic form, during which the "the fate of the character and the fate of the city" are intertwined (Cui Chen, 2005).

Fujian Province, located on the southeast coast of China, experienced rapid economic development by receiving significant global investment since China's reform and opening up. However, illegal emigration is prevalent in rural areas of Fujian such as Fuqing City and Changle City, since the low educated farmers and fishermen gradually have lost their competitiveness in the economic reform and also suffer from frequent typhoon disasters (Liu Aying and Wu Yinghong, 2008). In Chapter Five, I examine how *Fujian Blue* thoroughly explores the multiple issues caused by illegal emigration in Fujian Province.

My justification for categorizing "regional Chinese independent film" lies in the depiction by the films of the conditions of these regions. This approach distinguishes regional Chinese independent films from the term "Chinese dialect films" used by Chinese mass media, which could also be considered a region-related categorization^{xi}. This categorization considers the increasing use of dialects in Chinese films as a great challenge to the dominant employment of Putonghua in earlier Chinese films. At the same time, the use of dialects as a resistance against the standardization of the Chinese language might also give regional audiences a feeling of familiarity^{xii}.

Compared with the term "Chinese dialect films", my categorization of regional Chinese independent cinema is broader and more complex. It encompasses many diverse experiences of regions, and filmmakers' use of dialect is only one feature of their region-related aesthetic practices. In the next chapter, by using Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, I will explore the features of regional independent cinema, through which particular regional issues are thoroughly articulated.

NOTES:

ⁱ (My translation) See “*Xiaowu* is a Shitty Movie No Matter How Many Awards it Wins Abroad!” 電影《小武》：國外頻頻獲獎，仍是一部臭片！ on: http://movie.163.com/edit/001214/001214_67245.html The thread represents a mainstream perception towards independent films like Jia Zhangke’s, that they are self-Orientalist work catering to westerners’ taste.

ⁱⁱ www.fanhall.com (*xianxiang wang*) is a website specifically focusing on Chinese independent films. In 2009 it publicized a report on Chinese independent films which included interviews with audience members. Audiences were asked to use three key words to describe their impression of Chinese independent films.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, Zhang Yuan states that “marginal families and individuals are in conflict with society; through them you can see how society is changing.” (Berenice Reynaud 2007: 268). However, Jia Zhangke opposes the term “marginal”. During an event to celebrate the tenth anniversary of *Xiaowu*, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the fact that his films are labeled as “marginal” or “grass-roots”: according to Jia, the stories told in his films are the burning reality in China, and the protagonists he portrays represent the majority of the population. Viewing these protagonists as people from *diceng* (the bottom of society) is precisely based on a position that the viewers/critics are not. See Xu Baike’s interview with Jia Zhangke on the 10th Anniversary of *Xiaowu*: “What’s Wrong with Chinese Films?” 中國電影毛病在哪 on <http://www.jintian.net/today/?action-viewnews-itemid-2586>

^{iv} Fenyang turned from a town to a county-level city in 1996. See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fenyang>

^v See Stephen Teo’s interview with Jia Zhangke “Cinema with An Accent” on: http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/15/zhangke_interview.html. In the interview, Jia points out his reasons for going back to his native Fenyang after his graduation from the Beijing Film Academy: “I went to live in Beijing when I was 23, and even then, I began to feel homesick for my place of birth. Some homesickness engenders a feeling of insecurity and anxiety. When I came to make movies – my first movie, *Xiaowu* and now *Platform* – I had an unconscious urge to return to my birthplace to make these movies. I think that this feeling of home is something basic in my work – it’s a motif.”

^{vii} <http://www.unescap.org/esid/psis/population/database/chinadata/shanxi.htm>

^{viii} See “Death toll in Shanxi coal mine blast rises to 105” on http://www2.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-12/06/content_6303854.htm. After this severe case happened in 2007, similar cases repeatedly occurred, for example, in 2009, when a methane blast in a coal mine killed 79 workers. See “The Shanxi Coal Mine Blast and the Failure of Safety Governance in China” on: [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=34991](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=34991)

^{ix} Jia’s third feature film *Unknown Pleasures* is set in Datong City, Shanxi Province, the economy of which largely relies on the coal industry.

^x Five severe floods took place in Zigong's history, respectively in 1959, 1974, 1983, 1997 and 2002, See: <http://www.zgfz.gov.cn:8080/history/fanghong.html>

^{xi} “Chinese dialect film” as a rough categorization is based on the phenomenon of the increasing use of dialect in Chinese films, such as in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* which tells a story of two people who come from Shanxi Province to Chongqing City to look for their spouses, and Ning Hao's *Crazy Stone* (Fengkuang de shitou, 2006) in which three groups of people from different regions of China try to find a precious jade stone in Chongqing. While *Still Life* and *Crazy Stone* are both shot in Chongqing, the former used both Chongqing and Shanxi dialects to support Jia's realist aesthetic practice, while the latter, in order to make dramatic effects, used at least four different dialects including Chongqing dialect, Qingdao dialect, Cantonese, and Baoding dialect.

^{xii} See “The Rapid Growth of (Chinese) Dialect Films and Their Difficulty in Becoming Mainstream” 方言電影成長迅速 成主流很難 on: <http://ent.worker.cn/contentfile/2009/07/16/18250842921047.html>

Chapter 2 Chronotope and Regional Chinese Independent Films

In this chapter, I will briefly introduce Bakhtin's concept of chronotope and explain its use as a method to study regional Chinese independent films. I interpret the notion of chronotope that Bakhtin proposes in his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" on three levels: chronotope as a generic form, chronotope as a motif, and chronotope as a mediation. By using chronotope in a way that combines the first two aspects above, I aim to explore the temporal-spatial features of film texts of regional Chinese independent cinema. The third aspect of chronotope, chronotope as mediation, addresses the relationship between a film and the context it is situated in. In the process, I argue that the localized documentary impulses used in my selected regional Chinese independent films link the region *inside* the film and the region *outside* the film. At the same time, it is also through this crucial mediation (the third aspect of chronotope that I emphasize) that these regional films effectively build up multiple relations with other parts of the society. Regional films are closely linked with regional filmmakers, regional casting and regional audiences; furthermore, these filmmaking practices perform social functions for small Chinese regions, such as facilitating the promotion of regional image.

Bakhtin's Chronotope

In his famous essay, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", Bakhtin proposes the term chronotope (literally, "time-space") as a means to explore the temporal-spatial interrelations in literature. This exploration may be considered the core value of the chronotope concept: "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the

movements of time, plot and history” (Bakhtin, 1981: 84). While exploring the temporal and spatial features in works of literature, Bakhtin (1981: 250) also values chronotopes as providing “the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel” and “the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied”. The crucial role of chronotope in narrative, as Martin Flanagan (2009: 58) points out, is that “without chronotopes there would presumably be no narrative” since it is chronotopic organization that supports the generation of the whole narrative.

Bakhtin’s examination of chronotopes in his original essay is based on literature instead of film. However, chronotope as a device has proven to be particularly useful for research on films. As Robert Stam (2003: 37) suggests, film as an art form is intrinsically “multichronotopic”, as it “concretely crosses a screen with specific dimensions and unfolding in literal time (usually 24 frames per second)”. Film as a comprehensive art form is the site where “space [is] temporalized and time [is] spatialized” and “time takes place and place takes time”. In other words, time and space in film are fused together, which makes film art a form that renders visibility to narrative events. The complexity and distinctiveness of filmic chronotope in the context of regional Chinese independent films lies in that, compared with literature or a film script, the “space” of these films is more concretely supported by on-location shooting, while “time” is more visibly reserved for and characterized by the long takes that enable the overlapping of diegetic time and projection time.

In Bakhtin’s essay, chronotope operates on three basic levels. Since chronotope for Bakhtin (1981: 84) “defines genre and genre distinctions”, on the first level chronotope refers to generic forms of literature in which methods of representing

time and space have certain shared features. For example, in the narratives of Greek romance novels, a basic type of novel developed in ancient times, as Sue Vice (1997: 208) points out, “events occur ‘suddenly’, out of the blue; non-human forces intervene to cause change; one thing follows after another, but without logic” in order to enable the “plot-line of abduction, parting, pursuit, escape, the actions” to happen. The temporal-spatial features in narratives like this, according to Bakhtin (1981: 100), are characterized by the “*reversibility* of moments in a temporal sequence”, and the “*interchangeability* in space”. Similar chronotopes defining generic features of literature in Bakhtin’s essay also include the idyllic chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981: 224-236). I will use these chronotopes to develop a detailed analysis of selected regional Chinese independent films in the next three chapters. In existing scholarship which uses the concept of chronotope to develop a method to study films, this particular type of Greek adventure novel has been used to discuss genre films, for example, film noir (see Sue Vice, 1997: 208), Hollywood action films and western films (see Martin Flanagan, 2009: 53-126). In this thesis, however, analysing generic features of regional Chinese independent films does not serve as the only or the dominant method I aim to use, a point to which I will return.

The second dimension of chronotope refers to chronotopic motifs, which Bakhtin creates to explore the artistic values of literature; for example, “chronotope of the *road*”, is a particular chronotope characterized by “random encounters” (Bakhtin, 1981: 243) and is particularly appropriate for departures and denouement of events in a narrative. However, chronotope of the *road* does not necessarily mean that the narrative itself is generated literally around the road; rather, this term can be used metaphorically to describe “the course of a life” (Bakhtin, 1981: 244). Similar

chronotopic motifs also include the chronotope of *threshold* that is characterized by *crisis* and *break* in the life of the character (Bakhtin, 1981: 248). Chronotopic motifs, such as the chronotope of the *road*, have been studied by Sue Vice (1997: 210-213), who points out overlooked gender issues involved in the very term “chronotope of the *road*” by using the case of *Thelma and Louise*, a film that has a typical road narrative about a trip two women take because of domestic boredom. Vice’s method focuses more on revisiting the notion of chronotope by studying particular films – as when she points out that the Bakhtinian chronotope of the road “depends on the traveler along the road being a (heterosexual, white) male” (Sue Vice, 1997: 212). However, in this thesis my approach is rather to address regional Chinese independent films by using Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope, a choice which I will consider further in the following section.

The third aspect of chronotope refers to its function of mediation, which may be understood through two aspects. First, the chronotope is a “bridge between the two worlds” (Clark and Holquist, 1984: 279) which connects the real and the represented and enables the constant interaction and mutual enrichment between work that represents the real world and the real world the work represents. In other words, the text can be, on a technical level, connected with the actual world outside the text. And in the following chapters, I will point out that it is documentary impulses of Chinese independent films that connect the two worlds. The second way of looking at the mediation function of chronotope lies in that chronotope connects the author, performer, listeners and readers (Bakhtin, 1981: 252) who equally participate in the “recreation of the presented world in the text”. As the exchange between chronotope of the actual world – which includes “the reality reflected in the text, the authors

creating the text, the performers of the text (if they exist) and finally the listeners or readers who recreate and in so doing renew the text” (Bakhtin, 1981: 253) – and its textual equivalent goes on constantly, there arises the “*creative* chronotope” (Bakhtin, 1981: 254) which ensures that the life of the work remains vibrant. In other words, Bakhtin values the space created by not only the author who creates the text, but also the chronotopic elements involved in the process of reading or performing. In the later part of this chapter, I will relate this point in more detail to the study of regional Chinese independent films and their audiences.

Chronotope as Method

In this thesis, I will explore three selected regional Chinese independent films from a perspective that combines the three overlapping functions of chronotope I identified above: chronotope as a generic form, as a motif, and as mediation. This perspective is adopted first to explore the textuality and aesthetic of these films, and secondly to propose a new approach to explore Chinese independent films in response to the gaps in existing academic research. In what follows, I will elaborate the value of the concept of chronotope for developing this perspective.

First, the distinctive conditions of the regions in which the films I have chosen are set have a significant influence on the text of each film, so the distinguishing chronotope of each film is unique. It is crucial to scrutinize how each film text is generated differently around each chronotope and how chronotope works differently and complexly in each film. Since these films are *not* “genre films” in the commercial sense, it would be questionable to use a method to examine them cross-textually in the same way as Hamid Naficy (2001: 153) does when he describes the generic

temporal-spatial features common to what he calls “exilic” and “diasporic” films. In his book *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Naficy proposes three different types of chronotope: open, closed and thirdspace. The open chronotope is characterized by external locations and long take filming to highlight a feeling of boundlessness and timelessness. The closed chronotope is characterized by the filmmakers’ choice of shooting in confining spaces such as prison cells to convey the feeling of imprisonment and claustrophobia. The “thirdspace” chronotope combines the previous two types of chronotopes. As I will show, in the context of regional Chinese independent films, it is more meaningful to look for the distinctive characteristics of each individual film.

A chronotope, as Bakhtin (1981: 252) suggests, can co-exist with “an unlimited number of minor chronotopes” in the same text, within which one chronotope might possibly “envelop or dominate the others”. While being “mutually inclusive”, chronotopes can also be “interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships”. Although Bakhtin does not give an explicit example of how this *dialogical* interrelation among different chronotopes operates in a specific text, recognizing their co-existence enables a better understanding of the complexity of texts. Exploring this co-existence of multiple chronotopes in the same text also means looking for the dominant chronotope that fundamentally enables the occurrence of the narrative. For example, in the narrative of *Xiaowu*, which is generated around the main character Xiaowu’s relationship in sequence with his friends, his lover and his family, the three parts are interchangeable. This potential “*reversibility* of moments” (Bakhtin, 1981: 100) resonates with the temporal features in Greek romance novels. In other words, if we

change the sequencing of each part the narrative is still valid because of the temporal interchangeability of its components. However, if we situate *Xiaowu* in relation to Jia Zhangke's personal experience in Fenyang, an argument can be made that it is Jia's homecoming filmmaking practice that serves as the "essential ground" of *Xiaowu*, since without this practice, this text would not have come into being.

Second, using chronotope as a device helps us to explore the essential function of regional issues appeared in Chinese independent films. For example, the narrative of *Getting Home* (Luoye guigen, 2007), a film I will study in comparison with *Taking Father Home* later in this thesis, is generated around the road trip of the main character, Old Zhao, from Shenzhen to Chongqing, where the Three Gorges Dam Project is launched. He finds out in the end, however, that his destination has been demolished because of that project. The road narrative of this film, at first sight, could be categorized within the Bakhtinian term chronotope of the *road*; however, as a more detailed textual analysis helps us to discover, the narrative in this case is actually dominated by the chronotope of the Greek romance novel, in which time and space are interchangeable and the character's personality rarely changes in response to narrative events. In this example the Three Gorges project as a critical regional issue is used to provoke narrative excitement, which to a large extent reduces the link between the region in its cinematic form and the region in the actual world we live in. By contrast, in selected regional Chinese independent films that are generated around critical regional issues (the sub-provincial disparity in *Xiaowu*, environmental flood issues in *Taking Father Home* and illegal emigration in *Fujian Blue*), each regional issue has concrete functions in each narrative.

Third, using chronotope as a method to analyze Chinese independent films creates a perspective for exploring textuality and linking it to external context by exploring the mediation function of chronotope. It is in this sense that chronotope has defined the relationship between “a literary work’s artistic unity” and “an actual reality” (Bakhtin, 1981: 243). This mediation function of chronotope could be understood in two aspects. The first is the significance of using chronotope as a device to examine the film text and film aesthetics of Chinese independent films, which is largely neglected in recent academic research. As I pointed out in the first chapter, existing literature presupposes that these films are products precisely corresponding to the political-historical stage of China. This excessive emphasis on context leads to a situation in which the significance of Chinese independent cinema can only be explored in terms of its deviance from state ideology or its marketing value. As Linda Lai (2007: 212) puts it, “the casual link between the political/economic (the context) and the cultural (both textual production and the conduction of everyday life)...is based on a kind of permeation model reminiscent of the classical Marxian notion of economic determinism, which has been extended metaphorically into more generic models of determinism via base-superstructure analysis”.

While the perspective of “economic determinism” to read Chinese independent films presupposes that the content of Chinese independent films (or most of them) is determined by external factors, it actually denies the subjectivity of filmmakers and overlooks Chinese independent filmmaking as a complex, profound and distinctive set of practices. While many ways of naming Chinese independent films rely on terms signifying this contextual change – for example, “postsocialist” (see Zhang Yingjin: 2007: 50) or the term “post-1989” (see Berenice Reynaud, 2007: 266) in

which “post” subtly indicates a new state after a political-historical era ends – it is also necessary and meaningful now to shift towards exploring the internal textual space of Chinese independent films with a perspective that is capable of raising questions that the purely contextual approach overlooks. These questions include: how do these filmmakers present in their films their personal emotional affinity with the regions where the films are shot; how do their filmmaking preferences work in such a way as to expose the regional issues not only in cinematic texts but also by raising audiences’ recognition of them in the actual world; how do other films made by these filmmakers about the other regions form a deep relation to those regions where the films are shot, which expands the temporal-spatial dimension of all these films; and, how can these regional films have a social function and effectively be used to promote these regions in the actual world?

As these research questions are all related to the notion of region, I suggest the second aspect of significance of using chronotope to analyse Chinese independent films, which values the linkage between the represented world in the text and the actual world outside the text. This aspect is essentially different from existing research on Chinese independent films that similarly uses chronotope as a method but rather views films as a *reflection* of the urbanization conditions of Chinese cities. For example, in his book on Chinese films *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*, Yomi Braester creates a particular preservational chronotope to examine Chinese films made since mid-1980s that have “cinematic treatment of demolition-and-relocation” (Yomi Braester, 2010: 22). He points out that both the insistence of urban demolition-and-relocation scenes as a frequent content of these films and the documentary impulses in these films that address the

“ephemerality” (Yomi Braester, 2010: 226) of the cityscape mark a preservational chronotope in which time and space are “acknowledging a sense of loss and recognizing the need for keeping a record of the expired architecture” (Yomi Braester, 2010: 22).

Braester’s perspective, while focusing on the film aesthetic shared by urban filmmakers, neglects the fact that the documentary impulses in these films are only part of their aesthetic practices, and that documenting the vanishing urban landscape is only one of the filmmakers’ concerns. At the same time, by emphasizing Chinese films that are made in major Chinese cities such as Beijing and Shanghai (for example, Ning Ying’s *I Love Beijing* and Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* both shot in Beijing, Lou Ye’s *Suzhou River* shot in Shanghai). Braester’s textual analyses not only narrows down the geographical diversity of China but also restricts his perspective to film texts while making limited linkages between them and the real complexity and diversity of Chinese society.

By contrast, while examining the textuality and aesthetics in regional Chinese independent cinema, I also highly value its capacity to link film to other social sites in a way which allows the research implications to go beyond film texts. Embracing textuality and aesthetics does not equate with saying that context is unimportant to Chinese independent films; rather, it is the way we are examining the context that matters. Chronotope in my thesis on regional Chinese independent films is used to explore “region” as the linkage between a text and the context it is situated in; or, to be more precise, how regions in the real world interact and connect with their cinematic equivalents, not only in the sense that issues from the actual world we live

in are represented in the film texts, but how these issues and texts are, in their distinctiveness, mutually embedded in each other.

This approach differs from that of the existing literature that uses the study of the aesthetics of Chinese independent films to explore other issues. For example, Zhang Yingjin (2007: 30) points out that the documentary skills frequently used in Chinese independent films – such as improvisation, non-dramatic plot, fragmented narrative and images – function as “*alternative stylistic choices*” for filmmakers. While the ongoing argument about the documentary impulses in Chinese independent films, exemplified here by Zhang Yingjin, usually leads to the issue of the truthfulness of those films, a conclusion can only be drawn in the limited skeptical sense of *whether Chinese independent films are truthful* to the external realities they portray. The argument of Bakhtin (1981: 256) precisely responds to this problem when he points out that the represented world in the film text and the real world the film text represents are never in a mirroring interrelationship: “the represented world, however realistic and truthful, can never be chronotopically identical with the real world it represents, where the author and creator of the literary work is to be found”. Robert Stam (1989: 11) further points out that in the context of film, the film text is always “not equitable” with the external reality but mediated by the subjectivity of filmmakers.

This mutual interconnectedness is supported by the documentary impulses that are prevalent in my selected films, and I argue that it is the documentary impulses used in these films that serve as creative ways for filmmakers to engage in regional places and effectively link the region *inside* the film and region *outside* the film. Here, I will

draw a concrete example from Jia Zhangke's widely acclaimed ending of *Xiaowu* (see Jason McGrath, 1997: 94-95 and Tony Rayns, 1997). In this ending, Jia combines non-diegetic, bystander local people into his diegetic mise-en-scene by using an improvisational take. The documentary filming skills used by Jia in a fiction film like *Xiaowu* are thus not confined to an aesthetic practice, but rather provide a medium through which the world represented in the text and the real world the text represents are seamlessly connected.

The mutual embedding between region inside the text and region outside the text is also marked by the negotiation between regional Chinese independent cinema and many social relations, for example, filmmakers, casting, audiences. While these filmmakers are usually born in the regions that they feature or have been based in the regions for a long time, as I pointed out in the first chapter, the influence of regions to this type of regional filmmaking are enormous: as these filmmakers' films are deeply influenced by their personal experiences in these regions, the regional films they make are thoroughly marked by the distinctive cultural, geographical and social features. For example, Ying Liang, the second filmmaker I study in this thesis who is originally from Shanghai but has been based in Zigong City, Sichuan Province, describes the immense shock he had the first time he saw a flood in Zigong in 2002. The flood served as one of the main reasons he shot *Taking Father Home* (Cui Chen, 2007), in which the historical flood footage made in 1997 is integrated with and follows the whole road trip taken by the main character. The chronotopic elements created in Ying Liang's case are abundant: it is precisely by Ying's experience of moving from one place to another that a particular chronotope of flood is, in part, created. In the narrative, the historical flood footage used (with past temporal-spatial

elements involved) has interrupted the linear plot-line portraying the time and space we live in. The close to one hundred and eighty local people (Cui Chen, 2007) cast in the film (for example, the main character Xu Yun whose screen name is his real name as a non-professional actor) greatly mixes the chronotopes in the text and outside the text. The local Zigong dialect used in the film also has attracted an immense identification and recognition with the location among the audience¹.

Chronotope and Selected Regional Chinese Independent Films

In the next three chapters, I will propose three chronotopes based on my three selected Chinese independent films and the regions in which the films are made: respectively, Jia Zhangke's *Xiaowu* made in Fenyang City, Shanxi Province as chronotope of homecoming; Ying Liang's *Taking Father Home* made in Zigong City, Sichuan Province as chronotope of disillusioned road; and Robin Weng's *Fujian Blue*, made in Fuqing City, Changle City and Pingtan Island in Fujian Province, as chronotope of Fujian itself. This way of organizing the material in this thesis is based on my aim of creating a progressive argument. This does not suggest, however, that I believe one specific filmmaker or film is confined to or by one specific mode of analysis. Instead, I want to articulate the most distinguishing features of one specific filmmaker or his film. Therefore, the first case is based on Jia Zhangke's "homecoming" filmmaking experience with *Xiaowu* in relation to the Fenyang region, since he is a filmmaker who has made three feature films in Fenyang, his native place, and has also filmed in other places such as Beijing and Chongqing. The second case is based on film text of Ying Liang's *Taking Father Home* in relation to the Zigong region, since in this film Ying has distinctively used the historical footage of the flood that actually happened in Zigong in 1997, a choice which could be

considered as a rare practice of regional engagement. The third case is based on Robin Weng's profound representation of illegal emigration in his *Fujian Blue* in relation to the region of Fujian Province, through which the film has extensively attracted the attention of audiences who are from the same region to this very issue.

In the case of Jia Zhangke's *Xiaowu*, a chronotope of homecoming is proposed to analyse how Jia's personal experience relating to Fenyang participates in the production of *Xiaowu* and has inevitably shaped its film text, in a way which exceeds any simple similarity between the chronotopic configuration of *Xiaowu* and what Bakhtin calls the "idyllic" chronotope. At the same time, given that Jia's affinity with his native place Fenyang and his critical insight on the class division of Chinese regions are thoroughly immersed in the cinematic space of *Xiaowu* and also in his later films such as *The World*, made in Beijing. I argue that Fenyang as a small region not only suffers from regional disparity in China in many aspects, but also from the isolation from the local power structure and state ideology.

While the first case is based on examining the filmmaking practice of Chinese independent filmmakers in relation to the region, in the second case of Ying Liang's *Taking Father Home* a chronotope of the disillusioned road is proposed in relation to the Bakhtinian term, "chronotope of the road", in order to explore the relationship between the textual space of the film and the region. I will do a textual analysis of *Taking Father Home* in comparison with Zhang Yang's *Getting Home*, in an attempt to analyze how critical regional issues operate differently in different films and function to differentiate films; while in the latter film geographical accuracy is used as a stunt, in the former the flood issue is immersed in the whole narrative could be

seen as a minor chronotope of the film. With the historical flood footage Ying Liang uses in the film, the chronotope of flood contributes much to the representation of Zigong City as a disillusioned space with the constant threats of local environmental issues.

The focus on film text in the second chapter leads to the third case study of Robin Weng's *Fujian Blue*, in which I aim to question the concrete functions of regional film texts and how they can be linked to other sites of social relations. I propose "chronotope of Fujian" to argue that, with the profound representation of illegal emigration crucial to the Fujian region, *Fujian Blue* subsequently impacts its audiences who experience the region in other places rather than being simply based there. At the same time, Robin Weng's other films about lives of Fujianese but made in other places such as Japan, have redefined regionality: it is not confined to one specific place, but can be produced and experienced in many ways.

NOTES:

ⁱ In this thread titled "Zigong and Fushun Dialect Film" 自貢富順方言電影 that introduces *Taking Father Home*, internet users convey their identification with the dialect used in the film, or simply express their nostalgia towards their native place, Zigong City, where the film is shot. See: <http://www.fushun520.com/thread-11367-1-1.html>

Chapter 3 The Chronotope of Homecoming: Fenyang and Jia Zhangke's *Xiaowu*

In this chapter, I use Bakhtin's concept of chronotope in order to argue that homecoming serves as the major chronotope in Jia Zhangke's first feature film, *Xiaowu*. This chronotope is crucial to the narrative, aesthetic and production features of the film rather than having any simple similarity to the Bakhtinian notion of the "destruction of the idyllic chronotope" (Bakhtin, 1981: 233) that might otherwise seem to fit the film's setting. Jia's upbringing in his hometown, Fenyang, has provided him with a local perspective to interact with the place in cinematic form, during which interactions the suppressed identity of a small Chinese region like Fenyang is articulated. Jia's focus on Fenyang has gone beyond the scope of the "Hometown Trilogy" – *Xiaowu*, *Platform* and *Unknown Pleasures*, all made in Shanxi Province – and has extended to his later and more recent films such as *The World* and *Still Life* made in other diverse Chinese regions, Beijing and Chongqing, Sichuan Province, respectively. I will also analyze these films to indicate the complex forces giving rise to the many challenges, such as regional disparity, that Fenyang faces.

Destruction of the Idyllic Chronotope and *Xiaowu*

In "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel", Bakhtin (1981: 225) proposes the term "idyllic chronotope" to describe an important type of novel that is characterized by the *unity of place* as its fundamental temporal-spatial feature. The *unity of place* refers to "the age-old rooting of the life of generations to a single place, from which this life, in all its events, is inseparable". In novels dominated by idyllic chronotopic

elements, the limited spatial change and the blurred “temporal boundaries between individual lives and between various phases of one and the same life” are shared by people who are born in the same town and possibly experience similar events in their lives.

The idyllic chronotope in novels towards the end of the eighteenth century in Europe underwent a significant transformation. According to Bakhtin (1981: 234), novels at this time commonly shared the feature he characterizes as “the destruction of the idyllic” within the “new capitalist world”:

Here the issue is primarily one of overturning and demolishing the world view and psychology of the idyll, which proved increasingly inadequate to the new capitalist world...We get a picture of the breakdown of provincial idealism under forces emanating from the capitalist center. We see the breakdown, the heroes’ provincial romanticism, which is in no way idealized; the capitalist world is also not idealized, its inhumanity is laid bare, the destruction within it of all ethical systems (which had been formed at earlier stages of development), the disintegration of all previous human relationship (under the influence of money), love, the family, friendship, the deforming of the scholar’s the artist’s creative work and so forth – all of these are emphasized. (Bakhtin, 1981: 234-235)

The narrative of *Xiaowu* consists of three major parts that respectively deal with the relationship between Xiaowu and his friend, his lover and his family. In the first part, Xiaoyong, who used to be Xiaowu’s good friend also made a living by being a

pickpocket, is now a rich businessman in Fenyang. Xiaoyong refuses to invite Xiaowu to his wedding banquet and even refuses to receive Xiaowu's wedding gift because he is ashamed of his criminal past. Later, in the second part of the film, Xiaowu meets a karaoke bar girl, Meimei, and develops a short relationship with her. Xiaowu buys Meimei a ring; however, he never gets the chance to give it to her since later in the film Meimei leaves him for a businessman and moves to Taiyuan, the capital city of Shanxi Province. In the third part, Xiaowu goes back home and gives the ring to his mother, which leads to an argument between Xiaowu and his parents because Xiaowu misunderstands that his mother has given the ring to his brother's wife who comes from a more developed city while they are visiting Fenyang. After the argument, Xiaowu leaves home and wanders around in the streets stealing as usual; however this time he is caught and taken to the local police station. The film ends with a scene in which Xiaowu is handcuffed to a utility pole in the street with bystanders staring relentlessly at him.

As I pointed out above, the narrative of the film is generated around the losses experienced by Xiaowu that are caused by the changing nature of human relationships in Fenyang, a small city caught up in the marketization era of China. As Jia Zhangke suggests in an interview with Michael Berry (2009: 130), "the most fundamental and devastating change is in interpersonal relationships" among all the radical changes that Chinese people confront today; for example, the eternity of love has been replaced by commodity logic when Meimei leaves Xiaowu for a wealthier man. At this level, the narrative of *Xiaowu* to a large extent corresponds to the Bakhtinian model of "the destruction of the idyllic", in which the character who remains true to the old moral values suffers from his own "provincial romanticism".

Xiaowu as a pickpocket retains his idealized old morality when he sends Xiaoyong a wedding gift of cash since they used to be good friends; however, his money is returned by Xiaoyong since Xiaoyong is now a rich businessman who no longer thinks of the pickpocket Xiaowu as his friend. Being a thief in the new era puts Xiaowu into an “inferior moral position” (Michael Berry, 2009: 131) relative to his friend Xiaoyong – who is nonetheless doing illegal business such as importing contraband cigarettes. This changing human relationships as Michael Berry (2009: 39) points out: “Xiaowu’s own value system is punctuated by the sequence of each relationship, screen time devoted to each and degree of emotional devastation felt by Xiaowu after each relationship falls apart”.

In the film, as human relationships face the constant challenge of change, the *unity of place* in Fenyang is also interrupted by the rising class division that gives different social group immensely different spatial experiences. For example, towards the beginning of the film, in a casual chat between Xiaowu and Gengsheng, the mutual friend that he shares with Xiaoyong, Gengsheng mentions that Xiaoyong has taken a trip to Korea recently. By contrast, Xiaowu the pickpocket can only wander around in the shady physical space of Fenyang as established by Jia Zhangke’s on-location-shooting; for example, when it comes to the scene in which Xiaowu is wandering around with Meimei in the streets of Fenyang, Xiaowu walks up to a half-demolished building and passes a barbershop named Vienna (*weiyena*, with the Chinese character “na” wrongly spelled).

As I pointed out above, Xiaowu and Xiaoyong, who come from different classes, are both experiencing different degrees of mobility and time-space changeability. This,

apart from the changing human relationships, also marks the destruction of the idyllic chronotope. In another context, Doreen Massey (1994: 149) has proposed the notion of “power-geometry of time-space compression” to account for this process: “Some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don’t; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it.” In her argument Massey indicates that the understanding of time-space compression is only meaningful when people’s social backgrounds are taken into account. Similarly, the meaning of a region as shown in films like *Xiaowu* can be contrasting for different people. Even though both are Fenyang locals, Xiaoyong benefits from the new social order, although for powerless people like Xiaowu Fenyang is a region that prohibits him from engaging with its possibilities. In other words, because the spatial distribution in a region is highly related to power, it will subsequently distinguish social groups.

This power structure does not only lie in the cinematic text of *Xiaowu*, but can be traced concretely to the pro-filmic reality in Fenyang. For example, the prototype of the fictional character Xiaowu is someone nicknamed “Donkey”, who is a good friend of Jia’s in Fenyang. At the same time, in order to enhance the feeling of the characters as ordinary people, Jia invited two other good friends from Fenyang to play two roles in *Xiaowu*; respectively, a real-life prison guard, Hao Hongjian, plays a policeman, and a bank employee, An Qunyan, acts as the drug store owner (for these details see Gu Zheng, 2003: 180). Jia’s employment of non-professional local casting has on a technical level facilitated their natural acting and preserved their “natural confidence and ‘at home’ feeling” (Michael Berry, 2009: 136), as Fenyang locals, as Jia suggests in an interview. By contrast the actress Zuo Baitao, who plays

Meimei, is a professional who graduated from Beijing Normal University and who insisted on speaking standard Putonghua instead of the northeastern Chinese dialect (Gu Zheng, 2003: 181) during the shooting.

Fenyang serves as the locus generating first-hand experiences for Jia and his local friends, all of which have subsequently been projected into the narrative of *Xiaowu*. At the same time, through Jia's employment of the neo-realist film aesthetic in the film, for example, on-location shooting as well as casting non-professional locals, a special proximity is enabled between the region represented in the text and the region that the text represents. In this sense, making *Xiaowu* is a practice for Jia to reconnect with the regional culture in Fenyang which has shaped who he is today and then to present it in cinematic form.

The Chronotope of Homecoming and *Xiaowu*

To Chinese film scholar Zhang Zhen (2007: 15), Jia Zhangke's personal background of being born into an ordinary Chinese familyⁱ in an unprepossessing place, Fenyang, a small town in Shanxi Province, "one of the poorest provinces in central China" as Zhang suggests, is an alternative to the elite background of other students studying in the Beijing Film Academyⁱⁱ. Before entering the Academy, Jia used to study as an art student in Shanxi University (Michael Berry, 2009: 11). During that time, he watched Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*. Set in 1939, this film tells a story of a young girl, Cui Qiao, who keeps her traditional rural lifestyle beside the Yellow River till she meets a soldier from the Communist Party. In an interview with Wang Zun (2008: 90), Jia Zhangke mentions that he cried instantly the first time he saw the scene in which the main character uses a shoulder-pole to get water from the Yellow River

and walks on the yellow earth in the film. Jia explains that his identification with this film is derived from his own experience of being born and growing up in Shanxi Province, a province adjacent to and having a great geographical similarity with Shaanxi Province, where *Yellow Earth* was shot. It is precisely this film that prompted his determination to be a director and urged him to apply to the Beijing Film Academy.

Interestingly, Jia Zhangke's perception of Fenyang when he was staying there greatly differs from his opinion when he returned to Fenyang from Beijing after beginning his studies in the Beijing Film Academy. In his interview with Michael Berry (2009: 128-130), Jia states that there are two reasons behind his choice of returning Fenyang and make *Xiaowu* there. First of all, the rapid changes taking place in Fenyang provided Jia with aesthetic inspiration. Before making *Xiaowu*, he had not been home for a year. During his return home, he was shocked by the incredible changes in Fenyang. Geographically, Shanxi Province is located on the bank of the Yellow River, central China. And Fenyang, as Jia puts it, is "a rather remote place even in Shanxi". However, with the rapid modernization and economic growth, Fenyang at the time of Jia's return already had the emergence of numerous karaoke bars and karaoke girls while the old streets and buildings were facing constant demolition. This discovery of the changing social space and physical space in Fenyang led Jia to change the original script he had already written in Beijing, which told a story of a man and a woman who spend their first night in a room together. In Fenyang he began to write and shoot the film we now know as *Xiaowu* — in which the karaoke bar scene at the local place is integrated into the narrative and the demolition sites are documented by the camera. For example, in the film when Xiaowu goes to visit

his friend Gengsheng's drug store, the outer wall of the latter is painted with a big Chinese character "To Demolish (*chai*)".

The second reason Jia lists for his homecoming filmmaking is the lack of films specifically focusing on contemporary life in underprivileged Chinese regions. Jia conveyed his great dissatisfaction with the films he watched during his time studying at the Beijing Film Academy, which is characterized by the disconnection between these films and the reality of contemporary China we are living in. Strongly opposing perspectives in those films, in *Xiaowu* Jia instead expresses a strong sense of "here and now" (*dangxia xing*) in terms of both the narrative and the film aesthetic. The film begins with a roughly documented scene in which a couple of random local men in over-sized suits are waiting for a bus in the street in Fenyang. Then, Jia uses a close-up shot to portray the Chinese characters "Shanxi" that are printed on the match-box in someone's hand; it is Xiaowu, smoking. Here, Jia subtly indicates contemporary Shanxi is the place that the narrative takes place. It is in this sense that *Xiaowu* is significantly different from the earlier Fifth Generation films such as *Raise the Red Lantern* (Dahong denglong gaogao gua, 1991) a film which was shot in Pingyao City in the Shanxi Province which is also an underprivileged region. This film takes place in 1920s China and tells a story of a university girl, Songlian, who is forced to marry fifty-year-old Lord Chen Zuoqian, who already has three wives. She then goes insane after many conflicts with the feudal family. Unlike Jia Zhangke's accentuation of "here and now" in *Xiaowu*, the region's geographical specificity is never acknowledged in *Raise the Red Lantern* unless we can access further information externally about the film.

The above comparison shows how Jia's perception of his hometown has changed: at the time he watched *Yellow Earth*, he had a simple identification of places such as Shaanxi Province that are geographically similar with Fenyang. And at the time he made *Xiaowu*, he had a serious exploration of Fenyang by negotiating between his old perception of the place and the actual changed conditions there. Here, the homecoming involved in the filmmaking practice itself navigates Jia's private memories as well as experiences shared by the Fenyang public. Moreover, it organizes the filmmaker's differing perceptions of the past and the now. Therefore, it is simplistic to understand Jia's homecoming filmmaking as a nostalgic practice, although he has stated that homesicknessⁱⁱⁱ was a motivation for him to make *Xiaowu* and his second feature film *Platform* in an interview with Stephen Teo (2001). It is change – the change of his hometown of Fenyang and the change of Jia's perceptions of Fenyang are profoundly projected into his films – that co-shaped his homecoming filmmaking and was crucial to the making of *Xiaowu*.

Therefore, I propose that the chronotope of homecoming rather than “the destruction of the idyllic chronotope” is dominant in *Xiaowu*, since it is homecoming that enables Jia's more emotional and concrete perception of his hometown and his discovery of the destruction of its idyllic life. Significantly, after making *Xiaowu*, Jia Zhangke shot *Platform*, also in Fenyang, and *Unknown Pleasures* in Datong, a city in Shanxi Province famous for coal mining. These three films constitute his “Hometown Trilogy”. *Platform* spans the whole of the 1980s in China and witnesses the country's social upheaval from socialism to capitalism, during which youths of a traveling troupe experience a collective loss of idealism after traveling around the country for ten years. Taking place at the time of China's entrance into the World

Trade Organization, *Unknown Pleasures* tells the life story of two teenagers whose favorite films include Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, who turn into bank-robbers and later get caught.

While the narratives of the three films take place at different socio-historical eras in which the temporal-spatial features differ greatly, they share a common feature, which is the destruction of *unity of place* (Bakhtin, 1981: 225). Fenyang is left behind by the characters in *Platform* who yearn for the outside world^{iv}, while the two Datong teenagers in *Unknown Pleasures* are dreaming of the lifestyle depicted in an American film. The destruction of *unity of place* that recurrently appears in Jia's films, has not only revealed the conditions shared by Fenyang and Datong across different times and spaces, but has also "taken an essentially unknown backwater like Fenyang and transformed it into a site emblematic of all China" (Michael Berry, 2009: 17). It is also in this sense that more regions like Datong can be understood as Jia's "home" and the reason why, therefore, his first three films can be categorized as a "Hometown Trilogy".

The chronotope of homecoming is also proposed here because Jia's upbringing in Fenyang has provided him with a distinct vision of underprivileged Chinese regions and the living conditions of people in such areas in contrast with those in metropolitan China. In an interview with Xu Baike (2010), Jia points out that at the time he made *Xiaowu*, he read that eight hundred million Chinese people were living in rural areas, while around two to three hundred million people were living in small to medium sized cities. By contrast, only one to two hundred million Chinese were living in large cities. To Jia, the living conditions in small Chinese regions, like the

Fenyang he represents in *Xiaowu*, actually represent the most common status of Chinese people who mostly live in the non-dominant areas. This is not to say that films made in metropolitan areas are unimportant, but rather that it is important to value the way in which a filmmaking practice such as Jia's has significantly visualized the diversity of socio-geographic-cultural conditions in Chinese underprivileged regions like Fenyang. It is in this sense that Jia's films are distinguished from the work of some Sixth Generation filmmakers who have also made films in their native places; for example, Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* shot in Shanghai. In this film, the urban landscape of Shanghai (including not only the Suzhou River but also the Oriental Pearl Tower as the most iconic local architecture) has been thoroughly represented via the wandering practices of the main characters in the city.

Fenyang in Fenyang and Fenyang in Beijing

In a talk celebrating the tenth anniversary of *Xiaowu*, Jia Zhangke conveyed his dissatisfaction with the fake quality of the state-sanctioned realist films he watched during the time he was studying in the Beijing Film Academy:

(In these films), all the life, emotion and even eating customs are different from ours. In 70 or 80 films produced by the state, more than a third of them are about a young college graduate going to the rural country side to help the poor community (*fupin*), and gradually falling in love with that place while he lives there and finally decides to stay on there to be a local teacher.^v

A good example of this would be *Pretty Big Foot* (Meili de dajiao, 2003), a film which tells a story of a young female teacher, Xia Yu, who comes from Beijing to an anonymous rural region located in western China as a teacher. Xia Yu has a lot of conflicts with locals because of the backwardness there. However, during her interaction with a local teacher, Zhang Meili, Xia Yu is gradually touched by the teacher's innocence and selflessness and falls in love with life in the rural region. Later, Xia Yu has to return to Beijing because of a pregnancy. Unexpectedly, Zhang Meili sees Xia again, since the latter had come back to the region after her abortion in Beijing because of her deep love for the place. At the end of the film, Zhang Meili passes away because of an accident, and Xia Yu finally decides to stay in the rural area teaching.

Jia's talk has two levels. First, the films Jia criticizes collectively convey an idea that small Chinese regions are *essentially unattractive* places which require a non-local visitor to *fall in love* with them through the films. Second, the films as such largely hide suppressed aspects of the social identity of small Chinese regions by representing the vitality and innocence of people living in such places despite the shortage of geographic, social and cultural capital there. Meanwhile the reality is, according to Hans Hendrichke (1999: 5), that the development priorities have been given to coastal regions by the central government since the beginning of the reforms in the 1980s; for example, coastal regions are allowed to set up special economic zones and have special policies in order to attract foreign investment. By setting up this policy, the central government hoped that interior regions that are rich in raw materials can ultimately benefit from coastal cities by exchanging these natural resources with them for their technology and capital. However, the results of this

policy have been proven unsuccessful. According to Hans Hendrichke (1999: 5), while “the coastal region prospered in overall terms, the inland and western regions suffered a relative decline in income, living standards and economic growth”. Then the key questions here become: to whom do such films that represent small Chinese regions as an accessible haven matter? And what are the real conditions of local people’s everyday lives there?

In this sense, *Xiaowu* is a radical work oppositional to films made from a top-down perspective on underprivileged Chinese regions, since it indicates the possibility of articulating a small Chinese region like Fenyang from the local’s perspective. In *Xiaowu*, Jia offers an ironic comment on his native place: the word “Fenyang” is either mentioned in media, (as demonstrated by the scene in which the host from the Fenyang television station interviews Xiaowu’s friend Xiaoyong), or in the regional government announcements, as shown in the scene when Xiaowu is wandering around in the street, he hears an announcement from the loudspeaker: “an announcement by Public Security of Fenyang, Justice Department of Fenyang, People’s Court of Fenyang, concerning the denunciation of criminals...” By contrast, local Fenyang people can only experience their native place in a silent way; for example, in the beginning of the film, Xiaowu is standing in a street and takes out a matchbox that is printed with Chinese characters “Shanxi” for smoking, and in the close-up shot of the matchbox, only the surrounding sound of the street is provided.

The internal conflicts in Fenyang revealed by *Xiaowu* give a footnote to Jia’s critical thoughts on the many challenges a small Chinese region like Fenyang faces today. As Jia points out in an interview with Xu Baike (2008), the socio-economic disparity

among Chinese regions exists not only between Chinese eastern coastal regions and interior areas or between urban and rural areas, but there is also disparity combining the two aspects; for example, the strong contrast between an urban area located in an economically privileged region, and a rural area located in an economically underprivileged region. In other words, the gap between rural and urban areas might be more severe if the region disparity is also taken into account.

After “Hometown Trilogy”, Jia made *The World* and *Still Life* (respectively shot in Beijing and Sichuan Province) in regions that are neither in Fenyang nor Shanxi. *The World* is generated around a couple, Zhao Xiaotao and Cheng Taisheng, who both work in the world park that opened in 1993 in Beijing with the ambition of China’s “marching into the world (*zouxiang shijie*)”, while *Still Life* tells a story of two people, nurse Shen Hong and coal mine worker Han Sanming, who visit Three Gorges in search of their spouses just as Three Gorges is on the edge of vanishing. Both films have intertextual links with Fenyang: for example, in *The World*, Cheng Taisheng’s friends from Shanxi come to Beijing to find jobs and meet him in the Beijing World Park, while in *Still Life*, Han Sanming (whose screen name is his real name and who is actually a real coal mine worker in Shanxi), travels from Shanxi to find his wife who has ran away from home. In the end of the film, the new friends Han makes at Three Gorges decide to quit their construction worker job and join him in working in illegal coal mines in Shanxi.

The frequent accentuation of Fenyang or Shanxi in Jia’s cinema does not only reveal the burning reality of migrant workers who move from underprivileged regions to major Chinese cities, but also presents a “linkage” (Doreen Massey, 1994: 156)

between the local and the wider world. Significantly, these regions are part of China's social processes, as shown in Jia's films made in different regions where demolition similarly prevails (for example, in both *Xiaowu* and *Still Life* we see demolition). At the same time, however, such regions have to face more challenges compared with the dominant cities; for example, rural people have to leave their hometowns for other Chinese dominant cities serving the urbanization process as migrant workers. This process, as Cui Shuqin (2010: 180) argues in another context, might shape "another form of marginality".

Here I draw on *The World* as an example to explain these issues in more detail. In the film, Cheng Taisheng meets his acquaintance Er Guniang, who also comes from Shanxi Province, in the park. Later, Er Guniang starts working in a construction site outside the park in Beijing and dies from an accident while he is working. In the ensuing plot, the relatives of Er Guniang come to Beijing to get their compensation. In the scene in which Er Guniang's relatives go to the construction site office to receive the compensation money for Er Guniang's death, Jia Zhangke uses two static shots in which the characters move at an extremely slow pace. This mise-en-scene pulls off the spectacular scene of the life inside the world park and creates a sense of trauma for the characters who have come from Fenyang to Beijing but retain their low class social status in spite of their migration.

This part of the film is titled *The Boys from Fenyang* (Fenyang lai de ren), which has an intertextual reference to Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *The Boys from Fenggui* (Fenggui lai de ren, 1983), a film which tells a sorrowful story of a group of youths come from a village named Fenggui, rural Taiwan, to Taipei. In the narrative, one of the youths,

Ah-Ching, meets a stranger in the street who promises to take him to watch porn films; later, however, he finds out that he is been brought to a worn high-rise building with nothing in it. The intertextual link that Jia consciously integrates in *The World* is not only indicated in the title but also through the shared experiences of outsiders in the metropolis; it is in this sense that what the youths encounter in Taipei in *The Boys from Fenggui* parallels what Er Guniang experiences in Beijing in *The World*.

Jia Zhangke's cinema represents not only local people's living conditions in his hometown, but also their status after they have left their rural home. It is these concerns that enable him to show his focus on powerless small Chinese regions. In *The World*, Cheng Taisheng who comes from Taiyuan, Shanxi Province is designated to take a trip to his hometown and accompanies a businesswoman, Huang Yiqun who comes from Wenzhou City, Zhejiang Province. On the bus to Taiyuan, the two strangers have a casual conversation about their respective hometowns; while in Huang's perception Shanxi Province is famous for coal mines; in Cheng's mind Zhejiang Province is famous for its coast. While the answers of Cheng and Huang reveal that they are strangers, the scene also reveals that the identity of infamous regions like those in the film are usually understood from the level of physical geography, during which process the conflicts derived from these regions' interactions with other political, social, and cultural relations, are hidden. This gives rise to new questions which I will explore in the next chapter: what specific issues does an unprepossessing Chinese region experience? And do how Chinese independent filmmakers respond to this in concrete cinematic forms?

NOTES:

ⁱ Michael Berry (2009: 11) points out Jia's father is a Chinese-language teacher and mother is a sales clerk in Fenyang.

ⁱⁱ For example, other influential Sixth Generation filmmakers who studied at the Beijing Film Academy around the same time as Jia were mostly born into artist families. For example, Lou Ye's father used to be the chairman of Shanghai Youth Theatre Troupe and Wang Xiaoshuai's father also works for local Theatre Troupe.

ⁱⁱⁱ Original quote from Stephen Teo's interview with Jia Zhangke. Jia states that the home is the motif for his films, not only *Xiaowu* but his second feature film *Platform*: "I went to live in Beijing when I was 23, and even then, I began to feel homesick for my place of birth. Such homesickness engenders a feeling of insecurity and anxiety. When I came to make movies -- my first movie, *Xiao Wu* and now *Platform* -- I had an unconscious urge to return to my birthplace to make these movies. I think that this feeling of home is something basic in my work -- it's a motif."

^{iv} *Waimian de Shijie* is a song sung by a Taiwanese singer Qi Qin published in 1987 after which quickly became popular in mainland China. Literally the title means "the world outside", and the lyrics of song conveys one's strong crave for going on adventures in places other than his/her hometown. Jia Zhangke used this song to echo the emotions of characters in *Platform*.

^v See the talk between Jia Zhangke and Chen Danqing on Tenth Anniversary of *Xiaowu* on <http://ent.enorth.com.cn/system/2008/11/24/003796765.shtml>

Chapter 4: The Chronotope of the Disillusioned Road and Ying Liang's *Taking Father Home*

In the last chapter, I argued that Jia Zhangke's homecoming filmmaking practices enable his accentuation of his native place, Fenyang. The second case, which I study in this chapter, will be Ying Liang's *Taking Father Home* in which Ying shows great concern for regional flood issues in Zigong City, Sichuan Province. This film tells the story of a teenager, Xu Yun, who travels from the rural areas to Zigong city in order to find his father who has not come home for six years. In the film, Ying does not simply integrate the flood issue into the road narrative, but he also makes it progressively echo Xu Yun's road trip, so that the fate of the character and the fate of the city are seamlessly connected, as Ying points out (Cui Chen, 2007).

In this chapter, I will use the Bakhtinian term the chronotope of the *road* to closely examine the text of *Taking Father Home*. The chronotope of the *road* is possibly the most clarified chronotope in Bakhtin's essay, in which *road* could be understood either as a metaphoric motif (for example, "the high road" which indicates endless possibilities of encountering) or a physical locus that supports the narrative generation. By analyzing the many features of chronotope of the *road* existing in *Taking Father Home* and comparing it with another film, *Getting Home*, that also has a road narrative, I aim to point out that Zigong City matters to the narrative construction of the former while in the latter, the geographical precision of the regions only serves as a device to support the breathtaking plot. At the same time, as the flood plot recurrently appears in the film, I will also propose another term, the chronotope of the flood, to designate the supporting chronotope in the film.

Furthermore, I will argue that in *Taking Father Home*, Ying's integration of the historical flood footage that occurred in 1997 into the road narrative has highlighted the disillusioned image of Zigong City.

Getting Home and Taking Father Home

Ying Liang's independent filmmaking practice seems the opposite of Jia Zhangke's homecoming experiences. Born in a middle-class family in Shanghai, he decided to go to other Chinese regions to study film and practice filmmaking, rather than staying in Shanghai. After his graduation from the Department of Art, Beijing Normal University and then the Department of Directing, Chongqing Film Academy, Ying Liang chose Zigong City, in Sichuan Province, in the western part of China, as the base of his filmmaking. Zigong City is also his girlfriend/producer Peng Shan's native place. Based there for ten years, he has made his recent three features films in the city: *Taking Father Home*, *The Other Half*, and *Good Cat*. All three films have strong documentary impulses characterized by on-location shooting and non-professional Zigong local casting.

Zigong City, as Ying Liang describes, has a low cost of living (about one third of that in Shanghai), which has greatly cut down the budget of his independent filmmaking (Cui Chen, 2007). At the same time, by using his producer Peng Shan's local network and inviting about 180 local people as cast members in his first feature film *Taking Father Home*, eventually Ying only spent a minimal budget of RMB 30,000 in making the film (Cui Chen, 2007).

However, Ying's choice of filmmaking practice in Zigong City has not only facilitated his own independent filmmaking, but has a broader significance to regional films with respect to two contexts. First, Chinese western regions have been historically popular sites for the traditional state-run studio-based filmmakingⁱ. However, the representations of these western regions in mainstream films are mostly problematic: they either play the subordinating role as a substitute for the dominant regions, exemplified by the dramatic binary contrast between urban and rural exaggeratedly highlighted in a film like *Pretty Big Foot* (with, for example, Beijing as the representative of the urban and the western region as the representative of the rural), as I briefly pointed out in the first chapter, or else are set up in a timeless past so that the contemporary issues that take place in these regions are avoided, as exemplified in the film *A Woman from North Shaanxi* (Shanbei dasao, 1991). This film portrays a story which takes place during the Chinese Liberation War. In the film, a woman from rural north Shaanxi where the People's Liberation Army is based, saves an injured soldier even though he works for the Kuomintang army.

Ying Liang's films made in Zigong City, by contrast, are associated with his great concern for the conditions of the city in the reform era. Zigong, the third largest city in Sichuan Province, is famous for its salt industry and has a salt history museum to promote and preserve its salt-related culture since 1736. However, Zigong local people do not have confidence in their city since Zigong lost its competitiveness in the reform era, as Ying Liang points out in an interview with He Zhong (2010). It is in this sense that Ying Liang's films are significant as they deal with the critical loss of local people in Zigong intertwined with the economic, social, cultural and

environmental conditions there. In *Taking Father Home*, he focuses on the floods that usually threaten Zigong Cityⁱⁱ and local people. In *The Other Half*, he focuses on the fact that many talented locals are leaving Zigong to make a better living in other places. In *Good Cat*, he focuses on the overwhelming real estate industry that is out of ordinary people's reach and its subsequent negative influences on them.

The other context is related to the popularity of the realist touch on region-specific socio-geographical issues in Sichuan Province in Chinese independent films, especially since the Three Gorges Dam Project has been launched. The critical issues of transforming China urge independent filmmakers who are not native to Western China to go there for filmmaking; for example, Li Yifan, who made a documentary *Before the Flood* (Yanmo, 2007) about Three Gorges Dam Project. There are several independent films made in or about the area; for example, Zhang Ming's *In Expectation* (Wushan yunyu, 1996) and Jia Zhangke's recent film *Still Life* (Sanxia haoren, 2006) both take place in Three Gorges and the surrounding areas. So does Zhang Yang's *Getting Home* (Luoye guigen, 2007) which integrates region-specific issues into the narrative, for example, the relocation of residents and environmental damage caused by Three Gorges.

As I mentioned above, in his films Ying Liang has a distinctive focus on flooding as a regional issue specific to Zigong City. This emphasis does not only minimize the possible exotic representations of Western China as the geographical other, but also provides a contemporary critical insight into localized issues in China's remote areas, which is rare in previous Chinese films. Rather than a flashing glance, Ying Liang has a deep gaze into these issues and embeds them into the narrative. Although the

film has a road narrative similar to Zhang Yang's *Getting Home*, the tactics the two directors used in the films are highly different. It is interesting to examine how the two films are constructed on different chronotopes so that the regional issues are interconnected with the narrative on different levels. In the following part, I will use Ying Liang's *Taking Father Home* and Zhang Yang's *Getting Home* to do a comparative case study of the different roles regional issues in the real world play in the diegetic road narrative in each film.

According to Bakhtin, the chronotope of the *road* as a motif stands for the road as a physical locus in which the narrative is structured around experiences of the characters "on the road" (Bakhtin, 1981: 243). The passage of characters in the chronotope of the *road* also gives rise to the "rich metaphorical expansion on the image of the road as a course" during which "road is turned into a metaphor" (Bakhtin, 1981: 244). However, while Bakhtin points out that almost all literature contains the features of road chronotope on varied levels (Bakhtin, 1981: 98) and that chronotopes co-exist in a single text with diverse interrelations (Bakhtin, 1981: 252), he does not clarify how the road chronotope might be subordinating to, conflicting with, or interweaving with other chronotopes. In the following part I will argue that the overlapping of chronotopes in the same text might change the concrete functions of a location to the narrative, or the relationship between the characters and the locations they encounter in the road narrative.

Here I am drawing on *Getting Home* as an example to explore how different chronotopes work in one text. *Getting Home* tells a story of a construction worker, Old Zhao, who transports the corpse of his dead friend to the friend's home in order

to keep the promise to his friend which he made while the friend was still alive. One part of the plot is Old Zhao's road trip from Shenzhen, southern China, to Chongqing, in Western China. On the road with a mission to safely bring his friend's dead body home, Old Zhao encounters a lot of difficulties hiding the fact the body he carries on his back is actually a corpse, which makes the plot breath-taking. For example, first Old Zhao encounters robbery on a long-distance bus from Shenzhen to a destination without a clearly indicated name (in the long shot when the bus stops at a place, the signpost which indicates the name of the destination is obscure). In the end of this scene, Old Zhao is finally kicked out of the bus because the passengers have discovered his friend's corpse after the robbery. Later, when it comes to the scene in which he meets a barber-shop girl and a policeman, Old Zhao faces the danger of getting caught if the policeman finds he carries the corpse. Later in the film, it is the policeman's crush on the barber-shop girl that helps Old Zhao to hide the fact that he carries a corpse.

Although the narrative of *Getting Home* is "structured around the road and road encounters" (Bakhtin, 1981: 245), it actually has the underlying "*interchangeability* in space" (Bakhtin, 1981: 100) as the chronotopic feature that belongs to the Greek romance novels. For example, the narrative still makes sense if the robbery scene happens in the location where Old Zhao escapes from the scrutinizing policeman, since in the narrative director Zhang Yang has not given information about concrete locations, which has restricted the concrete functions of the locations to the narrative. In the film, the large number of different locations used as settings is designed to "*enforce movement through space* (escape, persecution, quests); that is, to a change in spatial location" (Bakhtin, 1981: 105). In other words, what the regions actually

are does not really matter; what matters is whether they can serve the breathtaking and adventurous narrative.

At the end of *Getting Home*, when Old Zhao finally arrives in his friend's home after overcoming multiple obstacles, he only finds a note saying that the friend's home in Chongqing has been relocated because of the Three Georges Dam Project. However, I would argue that in this scene the destination Chongqing is replaceable even though the scene is shot on-location there. While "getting home" is the real theme of the film, the road narrative serves as a physical locus for the occurrences of events in it, rather than as a motif itself. The disappointment of Old Zhao in the end of the film is reinforced by the fictional fact that, after all the obstacles he has overcome on the way, his destination, home, no longer exists. It is the disappearance of "home" in an abstract sense, rather than the reality of home relocation for the local people in Chongqing caused by Three Gorges Dam Project, that matters to *Getting Home*. Old Zhao's obstacle-conquering action constitutes a snowball plot that makes the destination of Chongqing a cinematic stunt that is easy to access: the film is ultimately highlighting Old Zhao's failure in "getting home" rather than his loss because of the disappearance of "home". As Bakhtin points out, in Greek romance novels an individual's movement through space is "merely a mannered enchainment of coordinates both spatial (near/far) and temporal (at the *same* time/at *different* times)" (1981: 121); in *Getting Home*, the affinity between the main character Old Zhao and the locations he passes by on the road (not only Chongqing as the destination of his road trip), becomes highly limited. The home of Old Zhao's dead friend could be easily replaced by any other Chinese region with debatable issues taking place, as long as it facilitates the ending that Old Zhao finds his friend's home no longer exists.

Chongqing, as the place where the Three Gorges Dam Project happens, does not participate in the narrative, but merely serves as a handy mask for a lack of geographical precision. The possible suffering that socio-political issues bring to the regions have thus been simplified.

The issue of two interwoven chronotopes (the road chronotope as the form and the chronotope of Greek romance as the content) in Zhang Yang's *Getting Home* resonates with Bakhtin's argument about the complex *dialogical* interrelationships possibly existing between different chronotopes in the same text (Bakhtin, 1981: 252). The tension between the at-first-glance chronotope and the actual dominating chronotope in *Getting Home* raises a question about how the regional issues that are drawn from the real world are used in the filmic text. In *Getting Home*, it is real world local issues, like the Three Gorges Dam Project in that region, entering into the textual space of the film that situates the narrative in a realist realm. The contradiction lies in the way that these outside-the-text regional issues do not actually have visible relations with the characters in the textual world. The subsequent questions could be raised: first, do region-related issues in a film such as *Getting Home* serve as the easy option for director's narrative constructionⁱⁱⁱ? Second, are *regions* used in the films because of the crucial *regional issues* there and do these *regions/regional issues* really matter to the narrative?

Taking Father Home, in this sense, is a very interesting case to explore these questions. *Taking Father Home* tells a story of a teenager, Xu Yun, who travels a long way from his native rural areas to Zigong city to look for his father who has been doing construction in the city and has a mistress there. On the way, Xu Yun

meets, in order, a local hooligan and a local policeman: the hooligan has cheated him and left him in a local house, which leads to his encounter with the policeman who patiently accompanies him to look for his father in the city. Xu Yun wanders in Zigong City trying to find his father, and in the end, he finally finds him in a house when he and his mistress are about to move away because of the rising flood. Towards the end of the story, in a crumbling building Xu Yun kills his father since his father, who has been away from him for six years, does not recognize him. In the end of the film, Xu Yun returns to his native place in a rural area, however the place is about to be relocated to facilitate the establishment of a new industrial district there.

The theme of *Taking Father Home* is how the main character Xu Yun goes to the city in order to find his father and take him back to the rural home. However, director Ying Liang does not highlight the urban/rural binary contrast, but shifts his focus to the experiences of the main character, Xu Yun, on the road from his home to the city. In the film, Zigong as the fundamental locus where the narrative takes place has been recurrently and concretely accentuated by director Ying Liang. For example, in the narrative when Xu Yun is taking the bus from his home to Zigong, the bus radio is broadcasting a commercial to promote real estate located in Ziliujing District, Zigong City. Later in the film when Xu Yun is passing by a grocery store, the television in the store is broadcasting news of a local's murder, during which Zigong repeatedly appears.

The places that the main character Xu Yun passes resonates with the Bakhtinian term the “chronotope of threshold” which is highly charged with the values of *crisis* and

break (Bakhtin, 1981: 248). While Xu Yun is wandering around looking for his father, he moves from one place to another in Zigong City, including the local bus, several local streets, local people's apartments, and the local police station and hospital. Significantly, these places appear as the sites for Xu Yun to encounter strangers (for example, on the local bus, Xu Yun is sitting beside the hooligan, and this is how they meet each other), and the spots that witness the narrative's turning points (for example, Xu Yun is sent to a police station in Zigong because he is falsely accused of burglary after staying alone at a local apartment the hooligan led him to, and the police station is precisely where he meets the local policeman). These locations in the narrative thus have concrete meanings that are "filled with real, living meaning, and forms a crucial relationship with the hero and his fate" (Bakhtin, 1981: 120). In other words, these locations have concrete functions regarding the fate of the main character Xu Yun and thus in the context of the narrative.

Zigong City as the Road in Taking Father Home

The road chronotope as the base of *Taking Father Home* has been precisely indicated by the title of the film. Xu Yun has a prescribed destination since he has a decided goal: to find his father. Ying Liang points out that he has written several different endings for *Taking Father Home*, for example, one in which the main character reunites with his father (Cui Chen, 2007). Here, it is easy to see that the search for the father defines the scale of the narrative, which is ultimately motivated by the ending point when Xu Yun finds his father rather than Xu Yun's open-ended, wandering road trip. However, this narrative construction also opens up a large space for the interaction between Xu Yun and Zigong City. In order to search for his father Xu Yun has to explore different places of the city, during which he has actualized

Zigong City. Xu Yun's pursuit of his father enables the maximum representation of Zigong cityspace – it is precisely these locations where he has visited and passed by that have articulated the unique features of Zigong City. In other words, Zigong in *Taking Father Home* is not only the fundamental locus that allows the narrative to happen – it is the physical *road* rather than a simple motif – but also a locus with many details provided.

Bakhtin points out the critical role of chance in the chronotope of the road: “The road is especially (but not exclusively) appropriate for portraying events governed by chance.” (Bakhtin, 1981: 244) It is chance that enables all the departures and encounters in the chronotope of the road. On the road, Xu Yun encounters a policeman and a hooligan who both give him a father-esque education. They are not people from different classes, as in what Bakhtin (1981: 245) calls “*sociohistorical heterogeneity*” or the “social exotic”, but people who are from opposing groups. However both explicitly engage with the order of the city, the policeman as the official and the hooligan as the un-official. Later in the narrative, the hooligan is killed and the policeman is injured. The decreasing force of people who represent the power of the city gives rise to Xu Yun's disillusionment and irritation. Eventually he murders his father because his father cannot recognize him after he has come all the way to the city looking for him. The city, at the same time, has lost control and turns into a devastated realm that does not allow anybody's existence: Xu Yun, Xu Yun's father who fails in the construction business, the hooligan who kills someone in Zigong City, and the local policeman who is severely injured in a revenge incident. In this sense, Xu Yun's disillusionment is not only evoked by the simple

disappointment that his father fails to recognize him, but also shaped by the disillusioned experiences of people he meets in Zigong City.

The limited number of people Xu Yun encounters in the film also gives rise to more narrative space for his exploration of Zigong through his road trip. When Xu arrives in the city he is standing in front of a giant map of Zigong; later, after Xu has met the policeman and started searching for his father with him in the city, they walk a long way in the city and pass a lot of sites, for example, local streets, the local police station, and other local buildings. It is through these random sites that the landscape of the city is thoroughly articulated. All these scenes are shot on-location so that the diegetic locations in the narrative and the locations in the real world are seamlessly connected.

At the same time, Ying has also used unique film language to further characterize Zigong City, for example the bird's eye view shots. In the film, when Xu Yun takes the local bus to Zigong City, the radio on the bus is playing local real estate commercials. What follows this bus scene is the bird's eye view shot that observes the bus as it keeps going. In this shot, the diegetic sound of the real estate commercials still continues. However, there is no indication of who hears this diegetic sound - the character is not present at all. Here, Ying's use of the bird's eye view shot has suggested that Zigong City itself seems to have become the undercurrent force that pushes Xu Yun forward. When it comes to the scene in which the local policeman and Xu Yun come to a local building trying to find Xu's father, they only find an un-related old lady. There is then a cut to the second bird's eye view shot in the film, in which Xu Yun and the policeman leave the building in

sequence. Here the city seems to emerge as an omnipresent power – it observes Xu Yun from an anonymous place and follows his road trip in its realm.

Taking Father Home attempts to challenge the simplistic binary urban/rural opposition. As Ying Liang points out in an interview with Zhou Yaowu (2010), Zigong City is a place that has the constant interaction between the city and the countryside. This point of view has been reflected in his films where we see that the city and the countryside are facing the same difficulties of overwhelming urbanization. In the beginning of the film, Xu Yun's rural home is about to be relocated, facilitating the establishment of a new industrial zone; at the same time, the urban area of Zigong City is facing no better situation with the overwhelming process of urbanization characterized by the numerous construction sites and real estate commercials Xu Yun encounters. In Zigong City Xu Yun takes a road trip that drastically changes his life path: he kills his father after his long search for the latter in the city and when he returns home with drastically-changed characteristics, he finds out his home has changed as well because of the relocation. It is in this sense that the disillusionment of the main character Xu Yun has been reinforced.

The Chronotope of the Flood and the Chronotope of the Disillusioned Road

With a remarkably minimal budget of 30,000 RMB, Ying Liang collaborated with his producer Peng Shan and invited Peng's local connections (family members, friends) to join the production of *Taking Father Home* in non-professional casting. For example, the actor playing the main character Xu Yun is the son of her father's best friend, the actor cast as the local hooligan is her uncle, and the actor playing the local policeman is her brother-in-law^{iv}. The on-location shooting in Zigong City also

contributes to the distinguishing aesthetic of the film. All these could be considered ways for Ying Liang to engage with Zigong as I also demonstrated in the case of Jia Zhangke. However, in the next section, I will argue that the most special part of *Taking Father Home*'s narrative lies in that director Ying Liang has progressively juxtaposed floods that threaten Zigong City with the road trip of the main character Xu Yun, which expands the linkage between the world in the film text and the world outside the text.

In the film, apart from the main plotline of Xu Yun's looking-for-father passage, there is also a subplot of flood in Zigong City, which follows Xu Yun's whole journey in Zigong City. When it comes to the scene in which Xu Yun is taking the bus from his home in the countryside to Zigong City, Ying Liang includes some radio clips describing how the local government has prepared to ensure that floods do not happen like last year. While the audio goes on, the camera focuses on Xu Yun and the local hooligan who is sitting beside him. The audio dominates the sound space in the bus scene, until a theft happens on the bus. This scene not only highlights the disconnect between the state news distribution and the regional space, but also highlights Xu Yun's identity as a stranger in the city. Later, when it comes to the scene when Xu Yun and the policeman are having breakfast, an old soldier friend of the policeman comes in and the two start talking about their lives. In the talk, it comes out that the soldier came to Zigong City to get materials for flood-control. In the end, when it comes to the scene where Xu Yun is in the hospital visiting the injured policeman, the loudspeaker repeats an announcement which suggests people to leave Zigong City since a flood is rising. There in the hospital, unexpectedly, Xu Yun encounters his father's new wife and daughter. Then he

follows them to his father's house in Zigong City. While the flood keeps rising in the city, Xu Yun's agitation is also growing. Towards the end of the film, Xu Yun finally kills his father. This scene is followed by the black and white footage of the 1997 flood that occurred in Zigong City, which continues till Xu Yun goes back to his hometown. In this footage, made by a Zigong television station, an enormous flood is shown attacking Zigong. The flood that eventually occurs in the city superbly echoes Xu Yun's violent eruption and emotional breakdown.

The flood constitutes a particular chronotope that grows altogether with the construction of the road narrative. Zigong City in the film is represented as a space with the constant threat of flood. It is in this sense that Zigong City as the physical road conveys the feeling of disillusionment. The flood could be seen as the biggest crisis to the city as well as the main character Xu Yun. In the film there are announcements about the previous flood, preparations to prevent another flood, the warning of the rising flood and the finally the attack of the flood itself. The flood as part of the real world experience of Zigong City has dual relations to Xu Yun: it is the part of Zigong that allows Xu Yun's encounters with strangers (for example, the hooligan and the policeman), but at the same time Xu Yun also encounters the flood in different ways at different points of his road trip as I demonstrated in the subplot-line of flood above. The flood that invades Zigong City explicitly engages in Xu Yun's life path in the road narrative. While the flood follows, accompanies and indicates Xu Yun's journey in Zigong City, we can even argue that the flood is the most important connection between Xu Yun and Zigong City and defines his whole journey.

In *Taking Father Home*, apart from resonating with the main character Xu Yun's road trip, the flood chronotope has also interrupted the temporal-spatial linearity of the road chronotope. Significantly, the flood at first appears as the representational tool in the narrative. For example, it is mostly represented through the diegetic sound and the conversations of the characters. However later Ying Liang uses the real world flood footage as the climax of the flood chronotope, during which the past event from the real world is connected with the fictional world in the film. At this time, the temporal-spatial continuity of the flood chronotope has enabled the previous representational flood scenes to enter into the non-fictional past. On one hand, this tactic has made *Taking Father Home* highly different from a normal type of road narrative in which a linear form of time and space predominates: as the road narrative unfolds, time and space also proceed. On the other hand, Ying Liang's aesthetic practice that integrates the real world flood into the fictional road narrative has also situated the film in the non-fictional time and space that recognizes and respects the historical truth.

Towards the end of the film, after he has killed his father and takes a one hundred renminbi note from him, Xu Yun is taking a bus home. The black and white cinematography continues from the bus scene to the point when Xu Yun arrives. In the final scene of the film, Xu Yun stands under a tree in his hometown, burying the cash with his father's blood on it. At this time, the screen gradually changes from black and white to colorful. In this scene, it seems that Xu Yun has been dragged from the past of Zigong City with massive environmental destruction to the here-and-now reality: the flood occurs again in 2010 there. If in this chapter, I have explored the region-specific environmental issue in Zigong City in relation to Ying

Liang's aesthetic practice, in the next chapter I will explore the following questions: how do audiences, especially audiences from the same region respond to regional Chinese independent films that deal with critical regional issues?

NOTES:

ⁱ See *The Western China Film Festival Catalogue*. The typical Western China films have shared features in depicting “the historic and cultural heritage of the Chinese civilization” and projecting “the racial characteristics of the Chinese people”. Most of the films selected in the catalogue are made by Xi'an Film Studio, the biggest film studio in Western China, for example, *Pretty Big Foot* and Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*.

ⁱⁱ Apart from the flood that occurred in 1997, a flood has threatened Zigong City recently in 2010. See news article “Policemen in Zigong City, Sichuan Province Relocate 2, 600 People Trapped by Flood” 四川自貢警方及時轉移 2600 餘名被洪水圍困群眾 on: <http://news.163.com/10/0823/11/6EP3HU4P000146BD.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ See Cui Weiping's paper “The Walking Characters and the Issues of Modernity in Chinese Films” 行走的主人公——兼論中國電影中的現代性議題 on: <http://www.chinavalue.net/Blog/345475.aspx>. In the paper, Cui analyzes several films that share a road narrative in which characters encounter different people and events. A few of the films Cui analyzes are *The Story of Qiu Ju*, *Taking Father Home*, *Walking on the Wild Side* and *Getting Home*. Cui specifically points out that the Old Zhao's encounters with strangers on his road trip portrayed in *Getting Home* lacks innovation in terms of narrative construction and in-depth exploration of sociological issues.

^{iv} See Q & A after screening of *Taking Father Home* with Ying Liang and Peng Shan on: <http://i.mtime.com/guanwen/blog/1274692/>. Producer Peng Shan talked about her local connection has allowed her to cast locals, who are non-professional actors, which greatly cut down the budget of the film.

Chapter 5: The Chronotope of Fujian and Robin Weng's *Fujian Blue*

In this chapter, I will focus on Robin Weng's *Fujian Blue* as the key text. This film portrays the social disorder in Fujian, including crime, moral degeneracy, and drug use, derived from issues related to illegal emigration popular in the region. Relating this film to Bakhtin's statement that chronotopes are the "organizing centers" (Bakhtin, 1981: 250) of the narrative, I propose the term "chronotope of Fujian" as the dominant chronotope used to explore the film. I argue that Fujian Province as the location where the film is shot is an irreplaceable substance of the film since it is represented as a region with full geographical concretization. The Fujian region, as Robin Weng portrays it, is a place suffering from both an overwhelming process of urbanization and the illegal emigration issue. At the same time, Robin Weng's thorough representation of illegal emigration as the most critical regional issue in Fujian enables a connection between the region, the filmmaker and audiences.

Illegal Emigration in Fujian and *Fujian Blue*

According to Bakhtin (1981: 250), the most crucial significance of chronotopes is their capacity to organize and also undo the narrative: chronotopes are "the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel" as well as "the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied". He further points out that chronotope "provides the ground essential for the showing forth, the representability of events" (Bakhtin, 1981: 250). Chronotopes are irreplaceable since they do not only enable the occurrence of narrative, but also function on a more precise level to concretize the events in the narrative. At the same time, Bakhtin also states that the text and the context that the text is situated in have an ongoing "mutual interaction"

and are “interrelated and indissolubly tied up with each other” (Bakhtin, 1981: 255). The interrelationship lies in that “the work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation” (Bakhtin, 1981: 255). In other words, the two worlds would have overlapping parts that support their mutual interaction.

Here I link Bakhtin’s insight to *Fujian Blue* to explore the linkage between the represented world of “Fujian” in the film to Fujian Province in the real world. The represented world of *Fujian Blue* includes two parts. The first part, *Neon Knights*, which mostly takes place in Gangtou Village, Fuqing City, tells the story of several Fujian youngsters blackmailing local women whom they call “remittance widows” in the film. They first send somebody in their group to seduce these lonely housewives, and then use digital video to record their affairs involving the women. At the same time, one of the heroes, named Amerika, who has constant conflicts with his mother, blackmails her in the end of the first part. The second part of *Fujian Blue*, entitled *At Home, At Sea*, focuses on one of the blackmailers, Dragon, who returns to his rural home of Fenwei Village, Pingtan Island, after his fight with a local hooligan in Fuqing City. In order to pay for the debt that the family owes because of the expense to illegally send Dragon’s brother overseas, Dragon has to raise funds for his own illegal emigration to the UK. Meanwhile, Amerika and other friends visit him in Pingtan Island, while trying to hide the money they gained from blackmail in Fuqing City. After several twists and turns, Dragon finally steps on the ferry to the UK. However in the end, he ends up being deported from the UK and is sent back to his hometown.

As the social disorders evoked by the illegal emigration prospering in Fujian Province (mainly Fuqing City, Changle City and Pingtan Island, as director Robin Weng suggests in the subtitles of the very beginning of the film) are portrayed in the cinematic form, the illegal emigration itself prevails in Fujian in the actual world. Liu Aying and Wu Yinghong (2008) explain the multiple reasons behind this phenomenon. For example, the scarce farmland in rural Fujian creates a lot of disadvantages for locals to survive. At the same time, the generally low level of education among farmers is a large disadvantage for them in the reform era of China. These factors lead to situations where these people can only make very limited money – which subsequently drives them to emigrate to developed countries such as the USA and UK to make more money.

Illegal emigration is concentrated in east coast of Fujian Province (mostly Fuqing City, Changle City and hilly coastal areas opposite Taiwan) where the economy is weak. Illegal emigration prevails in such areas since ninety percent of illegal emigrants will send the salaries earned abroad back home, so that the family members at home believe that they will benefit from illegal emigration financially and spirituallyⁱ. However, illegal emigrants have to take great risks, not only because they have a high chance of being deported from the host countries, which means the large amount of deposit money they paid to the snakeheads, or human smugglers, would be wasted, but they might also suffer physical injury or even lose their lives as in the tragic case in 2000 when fifty-eight illegal emigrants died from suffocation on a ferry to the UKⁱⁱ.

The many convergences between Fujian Province in the actual world and that depicted in a fictional film like *Fujian Blue* are firstly derived from director Robin Weng's personal background as a Fujianese. Born in Fuqing City, Fujian Province, Robin Weng got his Bachelor's degree from the Beijing Film Academy. Before his first feature film *Fujian Blue*, Weng made several short films in Fujian while he was still studying in the Academy, including a twenty minute film titled *Jasmine Bay* (Molihua haiwan, 2003), shot in his hometown of Fuqing Cityⁱⁱⁱ. *Jasmine Bay* tells a story of a teenager who returns home to visit his sick grandfather. The whole narrative space of *Jasmine Bay* revolves around the sorrow experienced by a teenager who returns home and finds that nothing at home remained the same. In the film, Robin Weng uses several long takes to document the local lifestyle by the seaside, which is greatly charged with unique geographical features of Fujian as a coastal region.

Jasmine Bay to a large extent resonates with Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* (Tongnian wangshi, 1986), a film about the life of a family after they have moved to Taiwan because of the Chinese Civil War. The similarities of these two films lie in both directors' shared longings for home. However, the narrative of *Jasmine Bay* can actually take place in other regions (for example, Hou's film I mentioned above), since Robin Weng's on-location shooting in Fujian is subordinate to the coming-of-passage and home-returning motif of the film. The multiple shots of landscape in Fujian are therefore highlighted from a nostalgic perspective established by director Robin Weng towards his native place Fujian.

What distinguishes *Fujian Blue* from *Jasmine Bay* is that the narrative of the latter is presented in a way that highlights the personal experience of director Robin Weng himself, while the former has a specific focus on illegal emigration in which the specific temporal-spatial elements of the Fujian region are articulated. *Fujian Blue* portrays the life of a large group of characters in Fujian that are related to illegal emigration: the lonely wives whose husbands have gone abroad in this way, the blackmailing youngsters who take advantage of them, the snakeheads who are in charge of the illegal emigration, and the people who stay in rural Fujian with the hope that their illegal emigrant family members will return home wealthy.

Fujian Blue brilliantly tackles all the parties that constitute the illegal emigration chain. In the film, Fujian Province as the major locus of the narrative is represented in such a way that it matters to all the people who live in Fujian. The large number of Fujian locals involved in the illegal emigration narrative contributes much to the geographical precision of the place. As illegal emigration is represented as a collective experience shared by most of the Fujianese, the distance between the characters and the diegetic region is greatly shortened. At the same time, while the illegal emigration stories of these characters have a reference in the real world, the region therefore exceeds the diegetic world and is also deeply embedded into the narrative.

Another point that needs to be emphasized is the large span of narrative focusing on illegal emigration that is so crucial to Fujian Province has essentially highlighted the experience of the region rather than that of the individual characters. In the second part of the film, when Dragon loses the money he was asked to take care of by other

youngsters, Robin Weng edits in three shots of geographical scenes of Pingtan Island to echo the psychological path of Dragon, in sequence: black clouds over the ocean, wind that shakes the trees and a rainbow over the ocean. Here, the portrayal of the region is not confined to the level of physical geography shown through several shots of the landscape in Fujian, but is deeply related to human geography which constitutes the sorrowful ballads of the place.

Multichronotope of Fujian and Cinematic Space in *Fujian Blue*

Chronotope is a concept that is particularly constructive in relation to film understood as a comprehensive medium. Mise-en-scene, script, sound, music might all have their own chronotopic worlds in the intertextual sense. Film considered as what Robert Stam (1989: 37) calls a “multichronotopic” medium is not confined in the limited sense that film is the “site [where] time takes place and place takes time” but rather has a significance that the multichronotopes expand the temporality and spatiality of narratives. For example, as several Taiwanese songs are used in a mainland film like *Fujian Blue*^{iv}, the temporal-spatial elements in the film are abundant: it links the textual worlds in these songs which have their specific temporal-spatial features to his film, creating a new temporal-spatial world.

In the context of recent Chinese independent films, it is interesting to see that mise-en-scene, script, sound and music, all have explicit relationships to and are resourced in the actual world. The employment of on-location shooting, synchronized sound, non-professional casting and songs popular in the real world unites the textual world and the world outside the text, since the location, sound, casting and music all stand in-between the two worlds and appear in both. It is significant to explore how these

filming skills function not only on an aesthetic level but serve as a bridge between the textual world and the actual world.

A brief textual analysis of the cinematic space in *Fujian Blue* leads us to a closer look at this issue. The film starts when the young blackmailers are driving in Gangtuo village, Fuqing City and recording the local landscape with the digital video camera that they use for blackmailing. As the youngsters' minibus proceeds, the city landscape of Fujian Province simultaneously appears. Through the edited shaky digital video footage, lots of government signs are revealed in a maximum way. The signs read as follows: "Illegal emigration is a dead end." "Stowaways end up in Prison." "Report human trafficking: Get a reward!" "Wanted poster for snakeheads". Here by creating this plot, Robin Weng subtly and smoothly integrates the local illegal emigration scenes into the narrative. Using digital video is part of everyday life for the youngsters in the narrative, however it is also part of Robin Weng's aesthetic negotiation between two worlds, the cinematic Fujian and the profilmic Fujian. Weng's remarkable use of digital video on one hand reduces the technical risks and difficulties of using a huge 16 mm camera in shooting the politically sensitive subject like illegal emigration, on the other hand helps to shape the temporal-spatial tone of Fuqing City in the first episode *Neon Knights*; it is speedy and transient, representing the chaos evoked by illegal emigration at the home country.

By contrast, when it comes to the second part, *At Home, At Sea*, in which one of the main characters, Dragon, returns to his rural home in Fenwei Village, Fujian Province. Robin Weng uses a long take which lasts for one minute and twelve

seconds to articulate the extremely slow pace of life in rural areas of Fujian. The shot starts from the site where Dragon's father is sitting sorting seafood. Then Dragon's younger sister enters the frame. The camera follows her as she passes by a stone house and gradually pans to the site where Dragon's mother sits and works. In the end, the camera pans to a bank by the ocean front where Dragon is sorrowfully sitting and gazing at the ocean. Highly oppositional to the temporality and spatiality in *Neon Knights*, the rural life in *At Home, At Sea* is stagnant and unchangeable, echoing the sorrow of Fujianese when their transnational dreams fail.

The first half of the film mostly takes place in urban Fujian, which has an overwhelming consumerism scene. In this part of the film, karaoke bars appear a couple of times. Karaoke is such a popular entertainment – both the youngsters and their parents frequent the bars. In the film, for example, Amerika go to karaoke bars in order to dance and take drugs, and Amerika's mother also goes there to hang out with her friends as a way of releasing her stress and loneliness.

The second half of the film portrays the sorrowful stories of the Fujianese under the shadow of illegal emigration. In the end of this part, when it comes to the moment when Dragon finally steps up to the ferry to the UK, Robin Weng changes his realist film aesthetic approach into a half-imaginary and half-realist one. For example, the shot of Dragon is standing on the ferry deck is followed by a scene divided into two parts: above is the graphically-designed Tower Bridge as a symbolic sign of the UK, and below is the on-location shooting ocean scene that represents Fujian. Here, Robin Weng brilliantly captures the ironic condition of Fujian, existing between the empty promise of transnational dream and the actual trauma experienced by locals.

The regionality in Fujian Province is conveyed through the highly oppositional cinematic space in different parts of *Fujian Blue*. Inescapably Fujian is part of the overall urbanization process of China, as demonstrated by the Karaoke scenes in the film. At the same time, Fujian is also a place that maintains un-resolved local issues such as illegal emigration. This uniqueness of regionality and the geographic differentiation of particular regions precisely as Doreen Massey (1994: 127) points out, “meant that the potential, the problems, and even the style of political response and organization would be different in distinct parts of the country”. The mixed cinematic spaces of Fujian in *Fujian Blue* call for the re-consideration of the regionality. If, as pointed out earlier, illegal emigration is partly caused by China’s reform policy, then, the results and levels of urbanization in different regions in China should not be considered as the same entity. Rather, it is necessary for us to take the complexity of regional conditions into account.

The Articulation of Region and Regional Audiences

To Bakhtin (1981: 256), the narrating practice and the narrated text are interwoven fundamentally via the practice of an author’s personal engagement with the narrative, either from “the point-of-view of a narrator”, or from that of “an assumed author”. Similarly, as he also emphasizes, the listener and reader can create new chronotopic worlds through their own engagement with the narrative. Bakhtin, while extending the meaning of chronotope from the author to the listener-reader and emphasizing the dialogical relationship among these chronotopes, however, does not clearly explain how the interaction between different chronotopes works on a technical level, for

example, the world between the author and the readership or, as with film, the audience.

Here I will link Bakhtin's concept of chronotope above to explore the relationship between *Fujian Blue* and its audiences. *Fujian Blue* received the Dragons and Tigers Award in the 26th Vancouver Film Festival in 2007, was selected by the Pusan Film Festival in A Window on Asian Cinema category and distributed by Spier Film, a film company based in London^v. The circulation/reception of *Fujian Blue*, is mostly international film festivals and foreign countries^{vi}. However the audience of the film is not limited at all. For example, on douban.com, a website that provides platforms for on-line communication about film, music and books, one commenter born in Pingtan Island^{vii}, one of the shooting locations in the film, implicitly writes about experiences of his/her local friends who have left Pingtan and are currently in Japan and the UK through illegal emigration. This commenter also points out that s/he is the acquaintance of one of the Chinese hostages involved in the Chinese hostage incident in Iraq in 2005 in which eight Chinese workers from Pingtan Island were kidnapped by Iraqi locals^{viii}. Another commenter who watched the film at the Sydney Film Festival writes about his/her experience living in Fujian before leaving^{ix} and his/her point-of-view on the illegal emigration epidemic there. Another fact is that on a lot of online forums^x, users who introduce *Fujian Blue* in their thread titles frequently highlight the Fujian local dialects used in the film.

Scholar Robert Stam (2003: 37) points out the hybridity of cinema: "the cinema mingles diverse times and spaces; it is produced in one constellation of times and spaces, it represents still another (diegetic) constellation of times and places, and is

received in still another time and space (theatre, home, classroom)”. If Stam’s argument on multichronotopicity conveys an idea that cinema connects different time and space, here, through these responses from audiences of *Fujian Blue*, regional cinema lies in the core of the spatial organization that connects the regional space in both text and the actual world, regional dialect culture, filmmakers, and other social groups such as audiences. In an interesting case like *Fujian Blue*, we see the attention of almost all the audiences is centralized around Fujian Province, for example, the local dialect used in the film and local illegal emigration issue prominent in the region. The audiences, who are not exclusively based in the Fujian region, are linked to the film because they identify with the critical regional issues, or simply because they have a similar language background as the filmmaker.

I propose the chronotope of Fujian because Fujian Province serves as the main substance of *Fujian Blue* – it is not only the place that the film is shot, but the place that the film is about. Interestingly, after *Fujian Blue*, Robin Weng has been making *Red Spider Lily* (Manshushahua, in production), a sequel to *Fujian Blue* and the second film of his “Fujian Trilogy”. This film is being shot in Japan and portrays the life of many Fujianese since they have illegally emigrated to Japan^{xi}. This spatial switch has freed out the notion of region and manifests a new extensive definition, the *continuance of region*. Regionality revealed by regional cinema is not confined to a singular location or multiple locations where the films are shot. Rather, it should be understood on the level that regionality is produced and circulated during a constant interaction among the cinematic space of the region, the regional people and the region that shapes them.

NOTES:

ⁱ In the paper “Hidden Driving Forces of Fujian Illegal Immigration to the UK and its Economic and Social Impacts”, Liu Aying and Wu Yinghong point out that the huge gap between high salaries in the UK (even as an illegal emigrant) and low income in the rural coastal regions of the Fujian Province is the incentive for illegal emigration although many of the emigrants have failed in their attempt to stay in the UK. The illegal emigrants usually send large amount of money back home, which gives their family members at home a better quality of life. All of these factors shape the prosperous illegal emigration scene in Fujian.

ⁱⁱ See news article “Ten Charged in Holland and UK for deaths of 58 Chinese Immigrants” on: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/jun2000/immi-j30.shtml>

ⁱⁱⁱ See <http://bbs.fqlook.com/redirect.php?tid=20128&goto=lastpost>

^{iv} In *Fujian Blue*, Robin Weng uses several Taiwanese popular songs, for example, *A Thousand Years Later* (Yiqiannian yihou) by Taiwanese singer Lin Junjie and *Relief* (Jietuo) by Taiwanese singer Zhang Huimei.

^v See Spier Film website: http://www.spierfilms.com/sales_titles.htm

^{vi} *Fujian Blue* has been screened in many international film festivals including the Vancouver International Film Festival (VIFF), the Sydney Film Festival (SFF), and the Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF). Domestically, it has very limited public screenings because the film tackles issues sensitive to the central government, such as illegal emigration and the China-Taiwan relationship. See Beijing Film Academy Professor Zhang Xianmin’s blog: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_474b3e2a01008yre.html

^{vii} See thread of a commenter named “Growing up by Seaside” on <http://movie.douban.com/review/3284089/>.

^{viii} See China Daily news article “Eight Chinese Nationals Kidnapped in Iraq” on: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-01/19/content_410289.htm

^{ix} See thread by an audience of *Fujian Blue*, Tanya “Watching Fujian Blue in Sydney Film Festival” on: <http://movie.douban.com/subject/discussion/1277281/>

^x See on-line forums for Fujian locals: <http://bbs.fqlook.com/redirect.php?tid=20128&goto=lastpost> and <http://www.fq99.cn/read.php?tid-3542-ordertype-desc.html> that introduce *Jasmine Bay*, <http://bbs.fqlook.cn/viewthread.php?tid=20117> that introduces *Fujian Blue*.

^{xi} See the webpage of *Red Spider Lilies* on the Hong Kong Asian Film Financing Forum (HAF) that is under the Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF): <http://www.haf.org.hk/haf/pdf/project08/se15.pdf>. The information was provided

when Robin Weng attended HAF for a fund-raising event for *Red Spider Lilies* in 2008.

Chapter 6 Conclusion: Rethinking Regional Chinese Independent Films

Through the three case studies in this thesis, I have aimed to map regional Chinese independent cinema and the region-related issues related with it. In the first case study of Jia Zhangke's *Xiaowu*, I focused on the relationship between filmmaker and region, and traced the trajectory of Jia's filmmaking practice in Fenyang and other regions of China such as Beijing. I proposed the term "the chronotope of homecoming" to explore how conditions in a small Chinese region like Fenyang are articulated through Jia's homecoming. At the same time, I argued that it is Jia's upbringing in Fenyang which has provided him with a local perspective to interact with the city through cinematic form. As Jia's filmmaking experience ranges from Fenyang to Beijing, the cinematic relationship between underprivileged Chinese regions (for example, the Shanxi Province where Jia's "Hometown Trilogy" was shot) and dominant Chinese cities (like the Beijing depicted in *The World*) is deeply embedded into his films, and as a result a cinematic criticism of Chinese regional disparity is efficiently articulated.

The second case study involved a close textual analysis of *Taking Father Home* and focused on the relationship between a particular region and the local issues unique to it. In this case study, I adapted the term "the chronotope of the road" originally proposed by Bakhtin and suggested a new term, "the chronotope of the disillusioned road", since, in the film, Zigong City as the fundamental locus for the occurrence of the road narrative shapes the disillusioned feelings for both the characters and the region. Exploring one of the many functions of the chronotope in defining textual generic features in the Bakhtinian sense, I have compared another state-sanctioned

film, *Getting Home*, with *Taking Father Home*, to highlight how the regional socio-environmental issues prevalent in current Chinese independent films matter to the region in the real world as much as to the text itself. Because the flood in Zigong City is intertwined with the road trip of the main character and becomes an inseparable part of the road narrative, I proposed the term “the chronotope of the flood” to explore how the textual world and the real world are constantly interacting and how they enrich one another, especially through Ying Liang’s integration of historical footage of previous floods. At the same time, it is precisely Ying’s cinematic engagement with flood problems in the real world that calls for a re-consideration of regional issues: it is insufficient to simply focus on the issues in one small region, instead it is more important to look at the specific issues of that region that might not exist, or take the same form, elsewhere.

In the third case study, focused on Robin Weng’s *Fujian Blue*, I explored the relationship between regional films and other social relations, for example, their audience. I proposed the term “the chronotope of Fujian” to explore how Fujian Province where *Fujian Blue* is shot, is articulated by the narrative, which revolves around the illegal emigration prevalent in the region. In the film, Fujian is represented through the multichronotopic film language as a mixed cinematic space with highly diverse temporal-spatial features that linger between past and present, speed and stagnancy. This spatial mixture reaffirms the complexity and urgency of considering regionality in the global context: for small regions, global forces might shape new spatial unevenness when they are mixed with specific local conditions. At the same time, illegal emigration as the most critical issue in Fujian evokes the connection between Fujian and its regional audiences who are not exclusively based

in the province but in various foreign countries. Since Robin Weng is, at the time of this writing, making a film called *Red Spider Lilies*, which is a sequel to *Fujian Blue* and set in Japan, the definition of region is expanded, and regionality appears as a negotiation between the region and its people, as well as with the regional culture shaped by this region.

Rethinking Chinese Independent Films

Through these three case studies, I have aimed to provide an alternative perspective on Chinese independent films. This perspective is capable of embracing each filmmaker's specific film practice as well as the unique film text each of them produces. This is quite necessary in a context in which studies of Chinese independent films frequently adopt an undifferentiated national cinema approach, leading to a situation in which "Chineseness" is seemingly what matters most in Chinese independent films (as in Pickowicz and Zhang's *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*), or are based on a presupposition that all these films represent same social symptoms derived from urbanization process in China during an era of transformation (as in Zhang Zhen's use of the term "the urban generation").

Through these case studies, I have argued that it is inappropriate to adopt a universalizing perspective in the study of Chinese independent films since each filmmaker has his/her own unique practice, based on personal experience, aesthetic creativity and individual concerns. As I demonstrated in my selected cases, it is crucial to embrace and examine the differences of Chinese independent filmmakers with respect to the context in which a number of them are crudely copying Jia

Zhangke's style, as Zhang Yaxuan points out (2004). To a filmmaker like Jia Zhangke, "independence" is of the utmost importance in a situation in which the filmmaker is exposed to the flux of global capital and ideological manipulation by the state (Yu Ying, 2010). Independence to Jia, in other words, means an independent voice of one's own against the singular and dominant utterance, whether in relation to the mainstream system, or within the field of independent filmmaking itself. The fact that more and more of them are working with the state-sanctioned system (for example, apart from Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* I listed before, Zhang Yuan's *Dada's Dance* (Dada, 2009) was also distributed in domestic theatres in September, 2009) reveals the inadequacy of defining "independent" cinema as independence from the state system of production, circulation and reception, then the independent thoughts of filmmakers become an important component of Chinese independent cinema, since this is the factor that will ultimately matter to its growth and diversity. It is in this context that the redefinition of independence is necessary and not confined to the simple exploration of each filmmaker's filmmaking practice as well as every individual film text.

Revisiting Bakhtin's Chronotope Concept

In frameworks that attempt to analyze Chinese independent films by using terms such as "urban generation" or "Chinese ecocinema"ⁱ (Sheldon H. Lu, 2009: 1), research is usually restricted to a text-based model which examines the social reality *inside* independent films, and independent cinema is used as an apparatus to analyze the *constructed* social reality. In other words, this perspective views Chinese independent film as a medium that *reflects* social conditions. Cinematic space is certainly crucial to a film and defines the creativity of any filmmaker, but this *film-*

to-society paradigm is nevertheless problematic as it neglects the fact that film and society evolve simultaneously, thus rendering possible the mutual enrichment between film and its social context.

Instead, this thesis aims to provide a critical response to the dominant academic approach to Chinese independent films, in which there is usually a gap between the film texts studied and the social contexts the films are situated in. I intended to find a method capable of linking textual analysis to the existing social context. Herein lies the relevance of Bakhtin's chronotope to my thesis.

First of all, the "chronotope" establishes a rich theoretical site where the film text and context matter equally since it fundamentally enables a negotiation between the world "inside" the text and the world "outside" the text. In the independent films studied in this thesis, this negotiation is situated in the physical connection between the textual region and the real-life region enabled by the use of on-location shooting so common in Chinese independent fiction films. In other words, in these films, the regions in the narrative and the regions in which these films are made in the real world are mutually embedded in each other.

The second level of text-context interrelation lies in the mutual enrichment between the film texts and society. As James Hay (1997: 217) suggests, the chronotope is "produced/consumed from a context that itself is organized by and, in turn, organizes the textual production/consumption of space". If the influences that social contexts exert on film texts can be found explicitly in the socialist realist narratives prevalent in Chinese independent films, the influences in the reverse sense from text to context

are more complexly constituted. In this thesis, I argued that, on-location shooting as a frequent aesthetic practice in regional Chinese independent cinema makes a cinematic documentation as well as preservation of the regional city-space. However, during my research on Chinese independent films, I also discovered several avenues for future research. Topics deserving more attention are, for example, how Chinese independent cinema are able to influence the everyday life of their audiences; the ways audiences of Chinese independent films are assembled both domestically and abroad; the identity construction of these audiences.

Film as Mediation

Probably the most constructive theoretical framework for answering these questions, a paper by James Hay (1997: 216), “Piecing Together What Remains of the Cinematic City”, proposes to view film as the agent of social relations. Hay views film as a way of “maintaining and modifying social relations”, and social relations as the sites to define the “meanings, uses and places of ‘the cinematic’”. The most interesting part of Hay’s argument is not how film is *internally* associated with society or *externally* influenced by society, but rather how film as one site of the social sphere is interconnected and interacts with other sites lying in the same temporal-spatial spectrum. To Hay (1997: 211), it is meaningful to discuss film “as a social practice that begins by considering how social relations are spatially organized – through sites of production and consumption – and how film is practiced from and across particular sites and always in relation to other sites”.

In the context of regional Chinese independent cinema, in which small Chinese regions are at the core of the whole spatial system, we see a visible progressive

influence of independent films to different social sites they are linked to. First of all, independent filmmakers go to underprivileged regions for filmmaking, which enables the revelation of these regions in the cinematic form, as pointed out in the three case studies. Next, these cinematic representations effectively assist the filmmakers with the promotion of these regions, especially when they are consciously creating events that aim to cultivate public consciousness about these regions. For example, after Jia Zhangke won the Gold Lion Award in Venice Film Festival with *Still Life* in 2006, he created the Fenyang Youth Filmgoer Carnival (*Fenyang dianying qingnian kuanghuanjie*) in 2006. The events of the festival included seminars on *Still Life*, film music concerts by the composer of *Still Life*, screening of films shot in Fenyang, for example, *Our Youngsters* (Women cunli de nianqing ren) made in the 1960s.

The Fenyang Youth Filmgoer Carnival is a good example on the basis of which to argue that regional Chinese independent cinema is a socially organized practice – it included not only filmmaking but also filmgoing, which both took place in an underprivileged region like Fenyang. At the same time, this festival is listed on the official government website of the Fenyang Bureau of Heritage and Tourism to improve the image of Fenyang and attract investmentⁱⁱ, to boost the media industry, and increase local tourism. Jia's name is also listed as the most influential symbol of Fenyangⁱⁱⁱ, which indicates how regional Chinese independent cinema can navigate, affect and empower society in not only its social or cultural but also economic aspects.

Rethinking Regionality in the Context of Regional Chinese Independent Films

Doreen Massey's (1994: 125-143) "The Political Place of Locality Studies" specifically points out that "local" places have different levels of operation in their own political, cultural and economic aspects. Therefore, it is insufficient to understand any place universally from the national level. Instead, she suggests a perspective that recognizes the variation of different regions and the specific problems, traditions and circumstances of these regions. To Massey, the study of locality does not equal an essentialist perspective but a focus on particularity of place. The creation process of the particularity of a place, as Massey (1994: 156) points out: "There is the specificity of place which derives from the fact that each place is the focus of a distinct *mixture* of wider and more local social relations. There is the fact that this very mixture together in one place may produce effects which would not happened otherwise. And finally, all these relations interact with and take a further element of specificity from the accumulated history of a place, with that history itself imagined as the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world."

In the three case studies, different issues about regions are articulated from varied perspectives: in Jia Zhangke's case, the regionality of Fenyang is situated in the domestic inequality of Chinese regions; in Ying Liang's case, the regionality of Zigong City is related to the specific environmental issues that are unique to the region; in Robin Weng's case, the regionality of Fujian is influenced by the mixture of global forces and regional specificity. These raised issues not only show concerns about the specificity of a region, but also consider regionality as a result of interaction between the specific conditions in one region with other regions or social relations.

The issues raised by three selected films provide a cinematic reflection on conditions in different Chinese regions under the wave of urbanization and globalization: first of all, the urbanization process takes place in different regions with different forms and paces; secondly, it will have new forms and paces when it is interacting with other forces. At the same time, cinematic regionality is a mobile and changing process that is part of an ongoing negotiation with differing modes of cinematic expression.

Also, it is important to emphasize that regionality is not confined to the three case studies chosen for this thesis. Rather, I have used these three cases to propose a different perspective for the further study of Chinese independent films, since China, Chinese regions, and Chinese independent films all have their own complexity and dynamics requiring specific perspectives. The three case studies call for a better recognition of the highly visible temporal-spatial diversity of Chinese regions. This is particularly meaningful not only because it is this diversity that constitutes the difference of regional Chinese independent cinema, but because China is subject to severe centralization and homogenization in the political, cultural and economical aspects of life. I created this new category of regional cinema based on Chinese geography precisely because I want to explore the varied aspects of reality of Chinese regions under the geographical surface.

Towards the Regional Audience

To Yomi Braester (2010: 12), audiences are “regulated subjects” who are easily manipulated by a film practice that is closely tied to the hegemonic structure: “The urban citizen does not discover identity through cinematic experience; on the

contrary, films actively promote an ideological mold that forms the citizen". Braester's argument is questionable in the sense that he underestimates the creativity and subjectivity of audiences, and assumes that the individual film practice of every audience is a unified whole.

By contrast, to James Hay (1997: 216) it is more meaningful to shift the emphasis "from the formation of consciousness, identity, and ideology to how individuals or social groups have access to and move to and from the place(s) where they engage films in their everyday lives." As I argued in the fifth chapter, in Robin Weng's case, there exists a big, unexplored and complexly-constituted audience for Chinese independent films. Moreover, in the context of regional Chinese independent films, the audience is not confined to people who are from that region, but also includes people like me who are not from that region but can find strong identification with that region for multiple reasons, such as an interest in regional diversity. Indeed, it is more constructive for us to shift the question from "how do we evaluate Chinese independent films if they have such a small and scattered audience?" to questions like: "How do we understand various small audience groups in relation to Chinese independent films and the regions they portray? What are the differences of filmgoing experiences between someone who watch a regional Chinese independent film online and someone who watch it abroad at an international film festival? How do Chinese independent cinema navigate in the everyday life of audiences?" By raising these preliminary questions, I aim to open up new space for research on Chinese independent films.

Prospect: Chinese Regions and Regional Chinese Independent Films

In this chapter, I have considered the usefulness of studying regional Chinese independent films and how such a study enables research of many new aspects of these films. While focusing on the individual film text, film practice and filmmaker, and how they are related to other sites in the social processes of China, I also want to address the rise of regional independent film festivals and their role in engaging with regions and distributing messages related to the regions on the institutional level.

One of the filmmakers studied in this thesis, Ying Liang, has since 2007 been organizing the Chongqing Independent Film & Video Festival (CIFVF)^{iv} in Chongqing, Sichuan Province. At the CIFVF, there is a specific session devoted to Chongqing-based films and filmmakers. Interestingly then, the film festival's emphasis is on regional specificity and on support for the local Chongqing film scene. The CIFVF clearly links the region to the regional film practice, and is visited by film entrepreneurs who are passionate about investigating regional culture in visual form, and film audiences (both locals and visitors from other places). The establishment of a festival like this indicates a promising future for both Chinese regions and regional Chinese independent films about diversity, specificity and openness.

NOTES:

ⁱ Original quote from the Introduction Chapter of *Chinese Ecocinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge*: "The purpose of this volume is to investigate how Chinese films engage environmental and ecological issues in the active re-imagination of locale, place, and space". The book is based on a perspective that investigates through film the social conditions of China as it faces big environmental challenges.

ii See: <http://218.26.196.22/dahanbx/sites/fyzf/20060721/article/2010-01/2422.htm>
On this website, the Fenyang Youth Filmgoer Carnival and the public screening of Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* are listed as part of the honorable property of Fenyang. This post was created by the Fenyang Bureau of Heritage and Tourism in order to promote Fenyang and attract investments to build a film studio there.

iii See: <http://www.sx.xinhuanet.com/dfzx/jrfy/index.htm>

iv See official website of CIFVF: <http://www.cifvf.org/main.php>

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Note: The following Chinese film titles are cited in the thesis and are arranged chronologically under the alphabetic listings of directors' names in bold. All films are features films or fiction films unless specifically identified. The title listed in the bracket is the pinyin spelling of the film title in Chinese.

Chen Kaige *Yellow Earth* (Huangtudi, 1985)

Chen Yusu *Destination Shanghai* (Mudidi shanghai, 2001)
Shanghai Panic (Women haipa, 2003)

Gao Wendong *Food Village* (Meishicun, 2008)

Han Jie *Walking on the Wide Side* (Laixiaozi, 2001)

Hou Hsiao-Hsien *Boys from Fenggui* (Fenggui lai de ren, 1983)
A Time to Live, A Time to Die (Tongnian wangshi, 1986)

Jia Zhangke Short film *Xiaoshan Going Home* (Xiaoshan huijia, 1995)
Xiaowu (Xiaowu, 1997)
Platform (Zhantai, 1998)
Unknown Pleasures (Renxiaoyao, 2001)

Li Yang *Blind Shaft* (Mangjin, 2001)

Li Yifan Documentary *Before the Flood* (Yanmo, 2007)

Li Yu *Dam Street* (Hongyan, 2005)

Lou Ye *Weekend Lover* (Zhoumo qingren, 1994)
Suzhou River (Suzhou he, 2001)

Ning Ying *For Fun* (Zhaole, 1992)
On the Beat (Mingjing gushi, 1995)
I Love Beijing (Xiari nuan yangyang, 2001)

Ning Hao *Crazy Stone* (Fengkuang de shitou, 2006)

Shi Runjiu *Beautiful New World* (Meili xin shijie, 1998)

Su Li *Our Youngsters* (Women cunli de nianqingren, 1963)

Tian Zhuangzhuang *Horse Thief* (Daomazei, 1986)

Tang Danian *City Paradise* (Chengshi tiantang, 1999)

Tang Xiaobai *Perfect Life* (Wanmei shenghuo, 2008)

Wang Xiaoshuai *So Close to Paradise* (Biandai guniang, 1997)

Beijing Bicycle (shiqisui de danche, 2001)

Weng Shoumin (Robin Weng) Short film *Jasmine Bay* (Molihua haiwan, 2003)
Fujian Blue (Jinbi huihuang, 2007)
Red Spider Lilies (Manshu shahua, in production)

Yang Heng *Betelnut* (Binglang, 2003)

Yang Fengliang/Zhou Youchao *A Woman from North Shaanxi* (Shanbei dasao, 1991)

Yang Yazhou *Pretty Big Foot* (Meili de dajiao, 1994)

Ying Liang *Taking Father Home* (Beiyazi de nanhai, 2006)
The Other Half (Ling yiban, 2007)
Good Cat (Hao mao, 2008)

Zhang Ming *In Expectation* (Wushan yunyu, 1996)

Zhang Yang *Getting Home* (Luoye guigen, 2007)

Zhang Yimou *Raise the Red Lantern* (Dahong denglong gaogao gua, 1991)

Zhang Yuan *Beijing Bastard* (Beijing zazhong, 1992)
Dada's Dance (Dada, 2009)

Zhao Ye *Jalainur* (Zhalainuo'er, 2008)

Zhu Wen *Seafood* (Haixian, 2001)
South of the Clouds (Yun de nanfang, 2004)