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## China on the move : travel, exile, and migration in Chinese literature and film of the 20th century

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## China on the Move: Travel, Exile, and Migration in Chinese Literature and Film of the 20th Century

DURING NO PREVIOUS century in China's long history has society experienced more profound and far-reaching changes than during that nation's long twentieth century. The contact with Western modernity and institutional change during the late Qing dynasty, the end of dynastic rule and the birth of the Republic, the Pacific War and the Civil War, the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan's gradual democratization and finally the era of opening and reform in China under Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 (1904–97) and the ensuing economic rise are only some of the key historical events that have profoundly transformed Chinese society and culture. What these events have in common is that they all gave rise to various forms of displacement, both voluntary and involuntary, and both internally within China proper as well as from China to the outside world. This special issue intends to explore the degree to which displacement in the form of travel, migration, and exile has given rise to modern literary and cinematic works and how intellectuals, writers, and filmmakers have responded to the various forms of displacement in their works. The theme of this special issue is deliberately broad in scope. The editors believe that only if studied over the entire span of the twentieth century and in all its various facets can the impact of displacement on the creative imagination of Chinese writers and filmmakers be adequately explored.

Travel, exile, and migration as forms of displacement all proliferated during the twentieth century. As a result of China's encounter with West-

ern modernity and the gradual realization among Chinese elites that some degree of reform was inevitable, Chinese intellectuals embarked in ever greater numbers on journeys or extended study-abroad trips to Europe, America, and Japan. Incidentally, San Francisco, the home of the three guest editors of this special issue, played an important role as an early destination for such travels in search of Western learning, as Huang Zunxian's 黃遵憲 (1848–1905) poetry and diary entries from the late nineteenth century amply attest. At the same time, travel within China to regions that were affected to varying degrees by the encounter with the West gave rise to highly original experiments in fiction, such as the works by Li Baojia 李寶嘉 (1867–1906) or Wu Jianren 吳趸人 (1866–1910) that attempted to record and to critique China's early efforts toward modernization. Travel or study-abroad also had a marked impact on many Republican-period writers and intellectuals and profoundly influenced the literature of the period. China's new poetry and fiction that flourished in the wake of the May Fourth Movement stood in dialogue with modern literary movements in Europe, America, and Japan, and Shanghai's cosmopolitan journals, especially those edited by Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895–1976), were filled with travel essays or fiction that was inspired by foreign encounters. Travel abroad continued to inspire works of reportage or fiction in the post-war period, as San Mao's 三毛 (1943–91) popularity in Taiwan and later in Mainland China attests, and more recently has given rise to cinematic explorations of travel abroad, such as Xu Zheng's 徐崢 (1972–) 2012 comedy *Lost in Thailand* 人再囧途之泰囧.

Like voluntary travel, the experience of exile has had a profound impact on Chinese writers in the twentieth century. Liang Qichao's 梁啟超 (1873–1929) exile in Japan led him to formulate his famous call for a new form of fiction, the birth of which he had witnessed in Japan, while those writers who left China in the wake of the civil war between the KMT and the CCP gave expression to the yearning for a lost homeland shared by hundreds of thousands of Chinese who were displaced as a result of polit-

ical upheavals. More recently, Chinese intellectuals who left China in the wake of the Tiananmen Massacre have shaped not only Western readers' views of China, but also attempted to come to terms with the turmoil and excesses of the Mao era. Gao Xingjian 高行健 (1940–), the Paris-based Chinese winner of the 2000 Nobel Prize in literature, is only one such example.

Finally, migration between the industrial and commercial centers of Central and Southern China or from China's coastal provinces to the Americas, California in particular, is a phenomenon that has occurred almost uninterrupted throughout the twentieth century, reaching new heights in the wake of Deng Xiaoping's opening and reform era. While the scale of these migrations is truly unprecedented, the mobility of populations due to economic necessity, environmental change, or social or political upheavals is not. The earliest literary responses to this form of migration might be the poems etched into the walls of the immigration station at Angel Island of Old Gold Mountain (San Francisco). In the early postwar period, writers and filmmakers in Hong Kong paid much attention to the plight of migrants, but it is arguably the proliferation of both documentary and fictional filmmaking in China in recent years, especially those by Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯 (1970–) and his fellow Sixth Generation filmmakers, that has produced the richest and most diversified artistic treatment of the phenomenon of economic migration. In addition, young poets and novelists such as the acclaimed migrant writer Sheng Keyi 盛可以 (1973–) have produced authentic portraits of the socioeconomic and cultural impacts of migration since the 1990s.

This special issue brings together eight papers by international scholars of modern Chinese literature and culture who offer multiple expressions of displacement that are typically not spoken of in the same breath. Classical poetry by late-Qing exiled literati on the one hand, and commercial or documentary films about the gritty factories of Shenzhen or air pollution of Beijing on the other, are separated by significant histori-

cal, linguistic, class, and ideological divides, and siloed academic specialists have often unwittingly reinforced these divisions. However, as the compilation of papers in this special issue clearly illustrates, the experiences of exile, migration, and travel, in fact, share overlapping, multiple linkages, and dialog or cross-fertilization among these different registers and genres has been a common thread up to the present day. The broad conceptualization of the volume's theme is a reflection of the expertise and research interests of the eight scholars who contributed essays to this special issue. Temporally, the topics covered span the period from the mid- to late-Qing period to the early twenty-first century; spatially, they range from China proper, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang, to Chinese diaspora communities scattered all across the globe. Fiction, poetry, and film are all covered by these papers, each of which treats some aspect of physical displacement as a topos for the literary or broader cultural imagination.

The issue opens with a prehistory of sorts of the themes of exile and other forms of displacement that are treated in subsequent contributions. Stephen Roddy's study of *zhuzhici* 竹枝詞 by mid- to late-Qing officials who were banished to Xinjiang examines how this mode of ethnographically-oriented lyricism provided a vehicle for these poets to affectively engage with the cultures and inhabitants of this region. He argues that even though most poets' service there was far from voluntary, and beset by discomfort or loneliness which they vented in other poetic or prose forms, through *zhuzhici* they attempted to convey knowledge of and a degree of sympathetic kinship with these unfamiliar peoples to their readerships in China proper. In periods of upheaval, when interethnic and intercommunal violence ravaged much of Xinjiang and elsewhere across the northwest, *zhuzhici* testified to an apparently heartfelt desire to express human solidarity and empathy, which Roddy argues is vaguely akin to lyrical styles of ethnography advocated in recent theoretical writings. These poems also anticipate the *zhuzhici* written about Japan, North America and Europe in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, where their authors ex-

plored similar themes of the “interconnectedness” of the multiple branches of the human family.

In his article “Too Intimate to Speak: Regional Cinemas and Literatures,” Victor Fan continues to discuss the connections between language, politics, and local practices by examining the role of regional dialects in film and literary criticism in the 1930s and 1940s. Breaking down the now institutionalized equation between “mother language” and “national language,” Fan brings in alternative historical evidence to debunk the apparent coherence and consistency of national language, literature, and cinema. Delving into the bipolar attitudes toward regional dialects as either a threat or an asset, Fan argues that both critical positions were politically prompted; accordingly, readers or moviegoers as cultural consumers were not treated as autonomous political individuals but rather as unenlightened subjects who either required state management or could be mobilized to practice political violence or establish a new political order. While the article focuses on Republican China, it nonetheless contributes to our understanding of how regional speech is perceived and defined in political and public realms in contemporary times – for example, in mainland China and Hong Kong, Cantonese and other regional languages are increasingly subjugated by Mandarin, and language policies are vigorously enforced in the name of “national unity.”

In his paper entitled “The Torment of Exile and the Aesthetics of Nostalgia: Transnational Chinese Neo-Romanticism in Xu Xu’s Post-War Fiction” Frederik H. Green focuses on the experience of exile and explores the degree to which post-war nostalgia in the work of Xu Xu 徐許 (1908–80) and other writers who left China in the wake of the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949 becomes the trope through which authors gave expression not only to their physical exile in Hong Kong or Taiwan, but more importantly to a yearning for a metaphysical sanctuary. This yearning, Green argues, is, in essence, a neo-romantic gesture that Xu Xu shared with a number of twentieth-century romantic or neo-romantic

Western writers, such as Hermann Hesse and André Breton. Xu Xu had left Shanghai for Hong Kong in 1949, never to return to China, and nostalgia became the defining feature of his post-war oeuvre. Green argues that Xu Xu's quasi-romantic aesthetics not only gave voice to the pain of exile experienced by countless Chinese displaced as the result of war and revolution, but also represents a creative, highly diverse, and lasting engagement with a global literary modernity.

Exile is also the topic of Sebastian Veg's article "Endless Escape and Impossible Exile: Gao Xingjian's Novel *One Man's Bible*." *One Man's Bible* 一個人的聖經, which was written in France in the late 1990s, may be read as a novel of exile in the two ways implied by the notion: it both returns to China thematically, using the narrator's memories of the Cultural Revolution, and purports to break with "nostalgia" and the "China complex" by favoring a detached position, situated outside any particular culture. The conception of exile developed by Gao is defined by "forgetting" (of collective memory) and "escape" (from cultural identity): it is an assertion of individual pleasure and marginality. Exile for Gao is therefore neither the position of the political dissident, nor the recreation of a desired "cultural China" 文化中國. Veg suggests that a close reading of *One Man's Bible* reveals that Gao intentionally undermines his own stated literary paradigm of the exile as positioned outside any culture or national history. Veg places the question of exile into a larger theoretical framework by engaging with the work of both Edward Said and Theodor Adorno and shows that for Gao, radical "escape" from history and place ultimately is untenable, for the past inevitably returns to haunt the present and the individual cannot entirely detach him- or herself from the ethical and political questions raised by writing: in this sense, although the process of "escaping" may be endless, it can never find a "solution" in a stabilized "exile," synonymous with total detachment from history and ethics.

As with its counternotions of exile, travel, or migration, the concept of home has been enriched, if not thoroughly re-written, and its under-

standing has evolved in contemporary Chinese cinema. Proceeding from this premise, Wei Menkus's article "Lost at Home: The Journey toward Modernity in Three Films by Jia Zhangke" explores the political significance of home in relation to place, movement, identity, and nation. Menkus observes how the increasingly limited and uncertain social exposure and prospects faced by Jia's protagonists in *Still Life* 三峽好人 (2006), *24 City* 24 城記 (2008), and *A Touch of Sin* 天註定 (2013) highlights the protagonists' common alienation from their (rural) roots and vulnerability to the outside world. She further demonstrates how the collapse of family and community ties has made it increasingly impossible for them to rise above the socio-economic categories to which they have been assigned. Menkus argues that the notion of home or hometown as envisioned by the filmmaker spatializes a unique moment in Chinese modernity when past, present, and future exist side-by-side and are entangled in a radical asymmetry, thus calling into question the linear notion of social progress and telos.

In "A Cultural Poetics of Re-membling: Diaspora and Displacement in the Works of Taiwan Director Lai Shengchuan," Jon von Kowallis offers a close reading of three of Stan Lai's 賴聲川 (1954–) plays and movies in the context of cultural identity and competing historical discourses in Taiwan. By focusing first on the theatrical and cinematic versions of Lai's *Secret Love: the Peach Blossom Land* 暗戀桃花源 and then on the feature film *The Red Lotus Society* 飛俠阿達, Kowallis shows us how Lai reconstructs a collective past, a past which embodies not his own personal Taiwan nor his own autobiographical experiences, but rather one which speaks for the nation as a whole and situates it squarely within the diaspora, not just as a subset of the Chinese diaspora, but rather as a capsule central to the diasporic experience. Kowallis argues that through a mythic re-telling of the exodus to Taiwan, both by mainlanders and by Taiwanese in *Secret Love: The Peach Blossom Land*, and the re-membling of the era of martial law by a generation so young that the importance of the challenge becomes all the

more paramount in terms of time in *The Red Lotus Society*, Lai establishes a discourse of the past and the present wholly unique to Taiwan and squarely centered within the paradigms of diaspora and displacement.

Working from the context of transnational filmmaking and the cultural institution of global tourism, Shr-tzung Shie's article entitled "Transnational Film Production and the Tourist Gaze: On Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière* and *Flight of the Red Balloon*" offers a nuanced and thorough close reading of two Hou Hsiao-hsien 侯孝賢 (1947–) films with non-Taiwanese settings: *Café Lumière* 珈琲時光 (2003), which takes place in Japan, and *Flight of the Red Balloon* 紅氣球 (2007), which is set in France. Shie argues that Hou skillfully and successfully employs surrogate characters to assert his own auteurist identity while introducing a Taiwanese, Chinese, or Oriental perspective in his non-Chinese-language films. The flip side of Hou's "tourist gaze," however, is that such treatment of these films results in a flattened, impressionistic, and picturesque representation of the foreign landscapes.

Finally, Chia-ju Chang's essay takes us out of the literary and filmic pathways that document human migration per se, to track the inanimate "migratory creatures" like PM2.5 particles that penetrate nearly all barriers to their circulation. Moving freely across the oceans, atmosphere, and landmasses of the globe, these "migrants" come to inhabit the interior spaces of human and other bodies, exacting a heavy toll on all. Chang examines the visualization of this migration and transmigration through two acclaimed films, Chai Jing's 柴靜 (1976–) *Under the Dome* 穹頂之下 (2015) and Ko Chin-yuan's 柯金源 *Formosa vs. Formosa* 福爾摩沙對福爾摩沙 (2010). While the former highlights the human body's enmeshment in economic, political, cultural, and ecological forces that severely compromise its autonomy, the latter film indicts the consumption of transmigrated bodies (as fossil fuels) that is sickening schoolchildren in Taiwan and everywhere. Through the fetishization of products made by conglomerates like Taiwan Plastics, we share complicity in their creation of these monsters, and Chang

urges her readers-cum-consumers to take these films' lessons to heart, to address the "existential questions of humanity" in the Anthropocene.

By considering such diverse manifestations of geographic displacement across the twentieth century, the editors hope to spur the formulation of new interpretive frameworks that can be brought to bear in the respective disciplines of everyone contributing to this special issue. The topic of displacement, broadly conceived, is rich with possibilities for constructive theorizing about the sorts of cultural diversifications and conflicts that marked China's previous century and promise to continue to do so in this one.

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