

Book Review

Between Diaspora and Against Diaspora

A review of *Post-Malaysian Chinese-language Film: Accented Style, Sinophone and Auteur Theory*

By HEE Wai Siam, Published by Linking Publishing
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ZHOU Ziheng
Film Studies, University of Edinburgh

The book *Post-Malaysian Chinese-language Film: Accented Style, Sinophone and Auteur Theory* (hereinafter referred to as *Chinese-language Film*) purposely chooses a currently debatable and controversial topic. In the context of the modernization and capitalization of film production, how should people redefine and even reconstruct the cultural cognition of Malaysian Chinese-language films? People have long debated on the definition of the concept of “Chinese-language films.” They have not only discussed whether these films should adopt the same language, but also whether they should involve national identity, cultural trace, spiritual heritage, religious studies, ethnic minorities, ethnography, and other comprehensive aspects related to ethnic Chinese from all over the world. This makes Chinese-language films a cross-regional, interdisciplinary research topic that needs a long time span to discuss.

The author avoids discourse seriously affected by political background and ideology, both in terms of the perspective on Orientalism and post-colonialism and in terms of Chinese film research modes dominated by China-centered ideology and America-oriented theory. He does not make a conclusion through this book, nor does he add brilliance to the current point-of-view.

From the perspective of geography, *Chinese-language Film* avoids relevant hot issues, but chooses an equidistant position between traditional Chinese cultural regions and Chinese communities in the Western world, regardless of regional location and cultural references, namely Malaysian Chinese in Southeast Asia.

Malaysia is headed towards becoming a typical country of “East meets West,” so as its native culture has a considerable degree of compatibility and diversity. As the author emphasizes in the preface, “Malaysian Chinese-language film” has modern values and aesthetic pursuits, while also conveying ideas of anti-imperialism and feudalism. From Hee’s perspective, the discussion on the environment of Malaysian native film and

television not only remains at a simple level of the culture's binary opposition, namely the scope of the definition and the discussion of "Malaysian Chinese-language film," but also involves internal connections and intertextuality between each other. At the same time, the author makes classifications according to the simple type and sub-type theories, but strives to then cover a wider range by considering how typical a selected film is. Under the title "author films," there are still some commercial films with high commercial and artistic value within the scope of this discussion, which is one of the highlights of the book.

Additionally, the book's introduction explains several common concepts mentioned in the thesis. From the perspective of film history and sociology, the author discusses the origin of the debate on the classification methods of Chinese-language films. At the same time, this thesis systematically explains the local "accented cinema" in Malaysia. The background of the study is described in great detail.

The first chapter of *Chinese-language Film*, called *Coming out in the Mirror: Reexploring the Auteur Theory and Embodied of Tsai Mingliang's Films*, focuses on the "divinity" and "human nature" of Tsai Mingliang's works. The two are the products of symbiosis. The divinity of Director Tsai's films transplants itself from the art theory of European "author film" to the creative context of "Chinese-language film," achieving good results. In terms of the theme, Tsai selects stories of marginalized groups and minorities, such as the gaze of the LGBT community. In the first and third sections, the author discusses the most common narrative group in Tsai's movies, "the family of XiaoKang", and talks about the social attributes of this group and the images in the film. The work's "human nature" is reflected in his underlying narrative. The author attempts to understand alienation in human nature, both in his early film prose with a little play-rereading and in his underdrawings. In the fourth section, the author expresses the essence of Director Tsai's concepts, seeking the commonness between the marginalized and under classes to better express the LGBT community, forming his own unique image style.

In this chapter, Tsai gives up the mainstay of Taiwan's new-wave films, and acts as a stranger who has just returned to Malaysia. From the perspective of this cultural background, Tsai's works reveals the calmness and rationality from the perspective of others. This results in Tsai telling "Malaysia stories in the eyes of a stranger," with a sharp story style.

The second chapter, *Space-off---On the National Allegory, Sinophone and Transgender of Yasmin Ahmad's Films*, discusses the narration of Yasmin Ahmad's films on realistic time and space in Malaysia's local culture. For example, the expression "One Malaysian" introduces the overturn of identity construction, from the perspective of both Malaysian indigenous people, Chinese people, and Chinese culture. Yasmin's focus is "Malay centrism." Her film faithfully portrays how other Chinese cultures adapt and construct themselves, nourished by Malaysia's natural environment and climate, and finally then adapt to the development of local society. The social significance of her works is far greater than that of a particular ethnic group. The author believes that her work is a "Malaysian film," and that the film is only for a certain language, as she examines her

own nation and records the change of the Malaysia at a higher status under the influence of cosmopolitanism. As an outstanding female director, she conveys rich sociology, particularly in terms of gender studies, the sociological perspective of women, the dialectical relationship between women and art, and the political nature of female artists themselves. Therefore, in the second section, the author further discusses the political topic lists in Yasmin's films and systematically answers these questions. Uniquely, the author directly discusses whether Yasmin is an intersex, and demonstrates Yasmin's influence and comments on the Malaysian film circle, providing a new perspective for the study of female Malaysian directors.

The author makes an intensive reading of *Chinese Eyes* and *Mukhsin* and divides the film's deep meaning into two parts. The first is the contradiction between modern ideas and religion, culture, morality as well as politics. The second is the eternal issue of gender. These two parts mix together two kinds of complicated contradictions, and finally constitute the "real situation" which is different from the stereotype in Yasmin's works. Her works mainly depict tragedy, striking an emotional resonance and reflecting on narrow nationalism and conservative nationalism. Ultimately, the works call for a negotiable compromise. Yasmin consistently focuses on the integration of cosmopolitanism and the nation, advocating for understanding of and adaptation to this irreversible trend.

The third chapter, *The Borders of the Diaspora: Diaspora Discourse, Accented Cinema and Ice Kacang Puppy Love*, focuses on the young generation of diaspora Chinese groups depicted in the romantic comedy *Ice Kacang Puppy Love*, directed by Tan Kheng Seong. Due to the self-identity of traditional Han nationality culture, Chinese groups in Malaysia form a concept different from other Chinese in regions that have experienced colonial rule, so a variety of cultures have high compatibility. This chapter has some anthropological significance. The first section of this chapter gives a detailed definition of the concept of "Chinese diaspora," and performs a systematic analysis of the historical background and political choice. The second section describes the extended adaptation and assimilation process of Malaysia's native nations and colonial culture from the perspective of the Melayu people, briefly describing the formation process of "Melayu" from the perspective of cultural research. The author's excellent expression of "hegemony" is a good summary of the stubbornness of indigenous people's nationalism.

The author uses the scene, colour, narrative, dialogue and other aspects of *Ice Kacang Puppy Love*, and deeply digs out differences in the lifestyles and life attitudes of the third-generation Malaysian Chinese behind the love theme. This shows the complex reconstruction of self-identity for Malaysian Chinese and the change in their cognition of being "diaspora ethnic Chinese." The author sharply sums up the abnormal state of changes and looks for similarities, including life compromises or contentedness with the current situation of older generations of "Malaysian Chinese" and the more promising and modern vision of the younger generation. However, their identity as "Malaysian Chinese" remains the same. With the change of the generation, people's vision becomes wider, and the so-called "deterritorialized" will eventually appear.

The fourth chapter *The Local Practice of Against Diaspora: Focusing on Tan Chui-Mui and Liew Seng-Tat's Da Huang Pictures*, discusses how the Da Huang Pictures discusses localization and identity at the boundaries of diaspora. Hee states that the social significance of Da Huang Pictures is more important, in that the films produced by the company are full of subjective views on the livelihoods, class problems, and national identities of people in Malaysia. That Da Huang Pictures has achieved great success in the arts, social influence, and the operations of the industry is a rare success. This chapter also focuses on Tan Chui-Mui and Liew Seng-Tat's works, both of whom have the dual roles of actor and director. The films and short films Tan and Liew have starred in cry out the pain and injustice of people at the bottom, giving their films a strong "authorship" and contemporary values orientation. This "authorship" results from the reflexivity of the discussed object itself, transcending the original class and national differences.

The author believes that Seng-Tat's films portray an attitude that "there is no construction without destruction" towards everything conservative. In his works, each character takes the lead in breaking down old norms, and thus continuing the detached reflection. This clears up doubt on the traditional concepts of Melayu people's privileged class. The author believes that Chui-Mui's films convey the willingness of Chinese people and the Melayu to actively develop a new relationship. The idea of a "combination of China and Melayu" is more obviously expressed in Tan Chui-Mui's film system. Her works always reveal concerns. As the author states, "However, against diaspora does not mean that the film is full of admiration and vision for Malaysian nationalism. Actually, the reflection and query of the Malaysian government's incompetence and absurdity have become the often-repeated theme of the films." She displays mourning for the unfortunate and anger for the cowardly. The author also records the absurd experience of people at the bottom of society, reflecting on the inherent and deep-rooted bad habits of conservative thoughts. Further, Mingliang and Seng-Tat's films do not carry out mechanical separation of the analyzed objects, but conduct self-denial and innovation through Derrida's deconstructivism, bringing the work itself into the context of the analyzed object.

The fifth chapter, *Accented Style: A Case Study on Namewee's Rap Music and Accented Cinema*, places the analyzed object as Namewee, a rapper and director of low-budget films, and explores the influence of local Malaysian Chinese-language films. Namewee is a representative of the rebellious subculture of the Greater China Region in South Asia. He adopts a coarse expression their national identity, which is full of personality. As the author describes, Namewee pretends to obey the rules, but achieves an "imaginative reconciliation" in a playful and sarcastic manner. In the era of rising popular culture and populism, the sharp rise in popularity of Wee's works are both accidental and inevitable. Based on Wee's life experience and creative motivations, the author makes an appropriate evaluation of the style of his works. Through intensive reading of his self-directed films and rap songs, the author accurately analyzes Wee's own "accented" creation style. This section has a unique perspective that rationally and objectively discusses the rebellious artist, giving up the stereotyped critical perspective of so-called post-modern culture and the trend of vulgarization, which is quite constructive.

Namewee pushes the accented phenomenon to a new height by integrating the dialect with the hip-hop culture, achieving re-innovation of some so-called Western cultural phenomenon. The hip-hop culture in the European and American areas originated from grievances against immigration policies and the dissatisfaction with the political system of people at the bottom of society. It can also be said that complaints against extremalization, violence, crimes and other negative elements cannot be separated from hip-hop culture. It can only be relatively “pure” after the “accented discourse.” For example, in his work “*Jay Chou’s Strength*,” Malaysian youths rush to imitate Jay Chou’s concerts, which leads to much of Wee’s personal dissatisfaction. First, this can be seen from the song name. Second, the lyrics are also full of strong protest against Malaysian youth’s discrimination against local culture.

Throughout Namewee’s creation through the use of all forms of media, he shows the construction of his unique self-identity. He seems to have been searching for an identity balance point for a long time, and strives to integrate Western culture and Chinese native culture. He not only holds the hip-hop culture slightly aloof but also keeps a close eye on the local culture. It can be said that Namewee’s creations adopt a Western shape to wrap around the spirit of Malaysian culture, making them very interesting.

In this book, the author is not eager for qualitative and quantitative measures of the research field of Malaysia’s Chinese-language film, but takes the lead in future in-depth studies performed from a multi-faceted research perspective. The books start with the diaspora films, against diaspora films as well as accented cinema, and selects the most representative filmmakers and works with international or regional influence for inductive research. From shallow to deep, the author analyzes Malaysian Chinese’s image of “Chinese-language films” from a film and cultural studies perspective. Second, when analyzing the film text, the *Chinese-language Film* not only focuses on basic aspects such as image style, narrative style and characters’ viewpoint, but also investigates sound elements that few people pay attention to, broadening the view of Chinese-language films based on visual and listening perspectives.

Chinese-language Film uses a combination of film scenes and text analysis. Furthermore, many interview records with film directors or producers related to the authors are included in the last section to provide a deeper understanding of the accented directors, of Chinese-language films in post-Malaysian contexts, and of the relationship between diaspora and local culture. Film interpretation includes two basic aspects, text analysis and discussion of theoretical concepts. For text analysis, the author selects several directors and their works, and then reads between the lines of these. The films’ aesthetic styles, accented elements, character images and other settings are analyzed in detail. Second, the author introduces a diversified evaluation of accented styles and of Malaysian Chinese-language films. Based on this, the author focuses on how diaspora directors, diaspora boundary-deprived directors, and local directors construct a noisy picture through film of confusion over ethnic, national, and cultural identity formed by the indistinct distance between

“Chinese” and Malaysian people, as well as between diaspora and against diaspora in the context of post-Malaysia.

When choosing native Malaysian films for various interpretations, *Chinese-language Film* clarifies how Chinese-language films in the post-Malaysian context exist and develop between diaspora and against diaspora. While this book does not separate the discussion of diaspora and against diaspora as well as it does Sinicization and Malayanization, it includes films and directors into the framework that combine accented styles, cross-ethnics, and auteur theory. As the author states, it is expected that by analysing these accented films, diaspora films, and national films, people can correct or enhance their diversified understanding of Chinese-language films, diaspora films, and against diaspora films. At another level, the book also reflects on the image orientation of Malaysia’s diaspora Chinese to some extent, hoping to achieve reconciliation of diaspora Chinese people’s national identity and identity among accented images.