Living for the city¹: cinematic imaginary of the cityscape in China’s transnational films

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Abstract

This essay focuses on urban-set transnational films – films that employ transnational or trans-regional capital and creative talents, and are shown to both domestic and international audiences. The films in question are also culturally important for their depiction of contemporary Chinese society and their exploration of social and spatial transformations in the era of globalisation. The three films selected are set in the city of Shanghai: Shanghai story (Peng Xiaolian 2004), The postmodern life of my aunt (Ann Hui 2006), and The longest night in Shanghai (Zhang Yibai 2007). Through a close analysis, the article examines how these films engage with issues related to Shanghai’s urban transformation, such as the relationships between the local and the global, the traditional/communal and the postmodern/monumental spaces, as well as the position of women in the changing cityscape.

Keywords: cityscape, gendered space, globalisation, identity, transnational

Introduction

The cinematic place is not, therefore, limited to the world represented on the screen (a geography in film), but the meanings constructed through the experience of film (a geography of film).

(Hopkins 1994: 50)
In an article on Chinese postmodern culture, film scholar Sheldon H. Lu argues that ‘spatial coextension’, rather than ‘temporal succession’, is the defining feature of non-Western postmodernity (S. Lu 2001: 13). Although ‘postmodern’ is a highly contested concept in the Chinese context, Lu rightly suggests that spatial transformation is the most evident – if not the most essential – feature of China’s urbanisation and globalisation since the mid-1990s. The city, its promises and problems, and its inhabitants’ adjustment to and struggles with changing spatial structures have been major thematic concerns in Chinese films of the last 15 years, including both the sixth-generation films and the ‘new urban’ films. The former, represented by Wang Xiaoshuai’s *So close to paradise* (1998) and *Beijing bicycle* (2001), and Jia Zhangke’s *Unknown pleasures* (2002) and *The world* (2004), focus on marginalised people in confined and claustrophobic spaces. The latter, represented by *Spicy love soup* (Zhang Yang 1997), *Shower* (Zhang Yang 1999), and *Spring subway* (Zhang Yibai 2002), are more entertainment-oriented and present the city as a showcase of China’s economic boom and glamorous urban lifestyle (Zhang 2007). Scholars of Chinese cinema have extensively studied the sixth-generation films for their critical depth and subversive messages (e.g. Berry 2009; Pickowicz & Zhang 2006; Xu 2005). This article is attentive to the more popular and commercial urban films. Although these films commonly exploit star appeal to attract an audience, they also engage creatively and even critically with the social and cultural transformations brought about in the era of globalisation, and raise important questions about the relationships between the local and the global, traditional/communal and postmodern/monumental spaces, as well as the position of women in the changing cityscape.

To narrow the scope of discussion, this article focuses on three films set in contemporary Shanghai: *The longest night in Shanghai* (Zhang Yibai 2007), *Shanghai story* (Peng Xiaolian 2004), and *The postmodern life of my aunt* (Ann Hui 2006). In contrast to earlier new urban films, these films employed transnational or trans-regional capital and creative talents and have been shown to both domestic and international audiences. In categorising them as transnational urban films, I will first explain the term ‘transnational’, since the term has been used so frequently within the discipline of film studies and been ‘taken as a given’, to the extent that it has become a ‘potentially empty, floating signifier’ (Higbee & Lim 2010: 10). The concept of transnational cinema was first proposed as a new way to ‘read national cinema against the local/global interface’ (Kinder 1993: 7). *Transnational Chinese cinemas* (S. Lu 1997), a collection of essays on films made in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, was the first serious application of this concept to Chinese film studies. Rather than defining ‘transnational Chinese cinemas’ as collectively producing a new type of film, the authors in Lu’s collection used transnationalism as a theoretical frame, that is, as a context within which to study a large body of Chinese-language films, from the early years of Chinese cinema to the late 1990s,
when the book was compiled. In the present article, I use ‘transnational’ to refer to modes of production and distribution that go beyond the geographical boundaries of one country (in this case, Mainland China), and also to the products that have emerged from these new production and distribution relationships – cinematic narratives that engage questions of identity, gender and space, in new ways shaped by national/global and national/local contestations.

Of the three films under study, *The longest night in Shanghai* is the most transnational in terms of the scope of its production, with a director from the mainland; stars from the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan; investment from both China and Japan; and screening in both domestic and international theatrical venues. *The postmodern life of my aunt* and *Shanghai story* were directed by two acclaimed female directors; featured stars from the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan; and have been screened in China and at various international film festivals. While using similar production strategies, these transnational urban films provide different (sometimes even contradictory) representations of the spatial transformation of Shanghai and its impact on the city’s residents. By exploring these differences, contradictions and ambivalences, I want to suggest that the competing narratives participate in defining and constructing the cultural meanings of the city, its identity and gender politics in a new era.

I chose Shanghai as the case study for two reasons: Shanghai is the most cosmopolitan city in China and has seen further tremendous, almost phantasmagoric, changes in the past two decades – over 1 000 new skyscrapers have been built; new subway lines, tunnels and overpasses have been constructed; and the Pudong area has been turned from farmland into a new financial hub – a symbol of China’s economic development and globalisation (Bergere 2004). The city’s transforming landscape has provided the setting for a number of films – in addition to the three films under study, examples include *Shanghai fever* (Lee Gwok Man 1994), *A beautiful new world* (Shi Runjiu 1999) and *Perhaps love* (Peter Chan 2005) – which makes Shanghai an appropriate choice for the study of cultural responses to China’s urban transformation. The other reason why Shanghai makes a good case study is the city’s persistently eroticised depiction in films and literature. While conventional models of urban space tend to use the feminine to symbolise the pleasure and danger of the cityscape (Grosz 1995; Mahoney 1997), Shanghai has been particularly, even excessively, sexualised. Women represent the exciting part of ‘Shanghai modern’ (Lee 1999). This article asks: If, in films and literature about old Shanghai, woman ‘constitutes the erotic drive that transformed Shanghai from a fishing village to a modern metropolis’ (Zhang 1996: 258), can the same imagination be carried into the contemporary scene? How do transnational films redefine the relationship between the female body and the cityscape in the era of globalisation?
The longest night in Shanghai: the national in the transnational

Zhang Yibai’s film tells the story of a one-night romantic encounter between a Chinese taxi driver and a Japanese hairstylist in the city of Shanghai. The female cabbie, Lin Xi, runs into Mizushima, who has been invited to Shanghai for the Asian Music Festival. Lost in a city whose language he does not speak, Mizushima insists on staying with Lin Xi until she helps him find his hotel. After many quarrels and lots of drama, as is typical in the romantic comedy genre, the pair gradually finds ways to bridge the language gap and communicate with and appreciate each other, and by the end of their journey both have found solutions to their own emotional struggles.

In The longest night in Shanghai, Shanghai is presented as a glamorous global metropolis, both narratively and visually. The city is host to the Asian Music Festival which draws artists from other Asian countries, including Mizushima and his professional team. In addition to the main plotline, centered around Lin Xi and Mizushima, there are parallel love stories and other interesting encounters among characters from Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Shanghai. The city is depicted as a trans-linguistic and trans-cultural space welcoming and accessible to anyone, regardless of cultural origin or social status. Most of the scenes between the main characters take place in Lin Xi’s taxi, conveniently giving the filmmaker occasions to showcase the glittering metropolis, with the landmark European architecture of the Bund, high-rises in the newly developed Pudong, the advanced design of intersecting freeways, and the city’s glamorous fashion districts. The visual montages of the cityscape reinforce an enigmatic image of a sleepless city, an international financial center and a consumer’s paradise. The stunning cinematography offers a visual metaphor, the city as a sparkling jewel-box, an extravagant metropolis constructed and packaged as China’s great achievement of globalisation and urbanisation.

Transnational in its production and exhibition scope, The longest night in Shanghai is not ‘transnational’ in its message. Its portrait of Shanghai is compatible with an official perspective that affirms and glorifies China’s economic development and embraces a modernised city space, high technology, advanced transportation and consumerism (H. Lu 2008; S. Lu 2007) (this is true of most new urban films). Transnational films have been celebrated for challenging the one-way flow of cinema product from the West to the East and thus resisting cultural imperialism in the era of globalisation (Lau 2007; Shim 2005; Wu & Chan 2007). Nevertheless, this celebratory tone should not be allowed to obscure the aesthetic and ideological implications of these films. We need to ask whether transnational productions challenge nationalist and hegemonic discourses, or are complicit with them. I agree with Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim’s proposal for a more critical reading of transnational cinema:

It would, of course, be naïve to assume that the transnational model does not bring with it boundaries, hegemonies, ideologies, limitations and marginalizations of its own
kind, or replicate those of the national model. Hence, it is imperative not to theorize transnational cinema only in the conceptual-abstract but also to examine its deployment in the concrete-specific so that the power dynamic in each case can be fully explored and exposed. (Higbee & Lim 2010: 10)

In *The longest night in Shanghai*, the ‘power dynamic’ intriguingly underlies the film’s discursive configuration of Shanghai’s present in relation to its past. Japan’s invasion and occupation of China in the 1930s and 1940s is a historical trauma that has been kept alive in Chinese culture by official discourses and popular media. The large number of films and television dramas on the Nanking Massacre provide ample evidence of that event’s ongoing resonance. A romantic story between a Chinese woman and a Japanese man is thus quite unusual, and could easily evoke the memory of Japan’s atrocities in China and more specifically Shanghai’s history under Japanese occupation between 1941 and 1945. However, *The longest night in Shanghai* makes this part of Chinese history less painful to remember (or easier to forget), by constructing a power relationship between Japan and Shanghai that inverts the hierarchy of the occupation years. Mizushima is an invited artist attending the Asian Music Festival hosted by Shanghai, as well as a desperately lost tourist who has to depend on Lin Xi’s help. Thus, he is at the mercy of the city and the local people. The film emphasises Mizushima’s respect for Chinese traditional culture and art. In a scene of him wandering the streets, he is fascinated first by a group of middle-aged women dancing *yange*, a northern-Chinese-style folk dance, and then by a man playing the *erhu* (a two-stringed Chinese fiddle). Although *yange* and *erhu* may seem to be obscure choices as they do not represent traditional Shanghai art, the message is clear: Mizushima is captivated by the beauty and power of Chinese art and culture. The montage of the cityscape and the narrative of the Japanese–Chinese romance emphasise Shanghai’s identity within a new context: the colonialist structure has been replaced by the victory of China’s newly acquired economic power under the communist government. This film reworks Shanghai’s past into its present ‘reappearance’ as a world metropolis that can claim ‘cosmopolitanism without colonialism, economic growth without imperialism, cultural development without acculturation’ (Bergere 2004: 47).

Nevertheless, the power structure underlying the narrative is not a simplistic one, in which China is now seen as the dominating power and Japan as the dominated – a scenario that would be discomforting to a Japanese audience (and as a co-production between China and Japan the film targets both markets). *The longest night in Shanghai* works out a balanced narrative through its presentation of the female body. Although Mizushima relies on Lin Xi’s help, he is, in the end, the creator of a new Lin Xi. He transforms her from an invisible, ordinary-looking woman into a stylish beauty.

Lin Xi is first introduced as an unfeminine woman, someone who not only dresses ‘improperly’ as a city woman, but also performs a conventionally male job – driving
a taxi. Since the mid-1990s, China’s job market has become increasingly gender-divided. In this gendered market, ‘youth and beauty are the foremost, if not the only, prerequisites to obtaining lucrative positions, in which the new “professionals” often function as advertising fixtures with sex appeal’ (Zhang 2000: 93). Lin Xi’s job – and her looks – deny her access to the ‘sex-appeal’ category of modern employment. The film at first seems to challenge the stereotypical representation of the eroticised city woman long prevalent in films and literature about Shanghai. However, the narrative ultimately turns out to be simply a Cinderella story, a Chinese version of Pretty woman – the working woman with a heart of gold will be transformed into a beauty.

Lin Xi’s transformation by Mizushima takes place at the end of the film, the climax of the story. Having accompanied Lin Xi to her apartment, Mizushima chooses a red dress for her and quickly re-cuts the conservative dress into a short and sexy one; he then styles Lin Xi’s hair. Like magic, she becomes a stunning beauty. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, Lin Xi, for the first time smiling confidently, asks in Japanese, ‘Do you love me?’ This line can be interpreted as addressed to her (absent) former love or to Mizushima. Significantly and symbolically, the film’s last shot shows Mizushima looking at her from behind. The Chinese woman remains an eroticised object in the former coloniser’s eyes. The city and its former coloniser find a balance of power through the writing of the female body, through the assertion that the more legitimate symbol of a global city is a woman of fashion and consumption.

Within this power dynamic, the woman’s agency is subsumed by and lost to transnational capitalism: Lin Xi contentedly accepts conventional femininity and enjoys being an ‘object of vision: a sight’ (Berger 1972: 47). The longest night in Shanghai continues the old patriarchal narrative and ideology. The female body and the city narrative intersect once again in this tale about Shanghai’s present. The only difference is that the woman who formerly would have seduced the city adventurer in old Shanghai is now replaced by the woman who is transformed by the city adventurer, to fit into the model of consumerism and transnational capitalism that defines Shanghai’s present and future as a global city.

The postmodern life of my aunt: the lived space of the global city

Zhao Wei, the Shanghai-born actress who played Lin Xi in The longest night in Shanghai, described her impression of the cityscape created in that film as ‘cartoonish’: ‘Maybe I exaggerated a bit, but my experience of Shanghai [during the shooting] isn’t shared by ordinary Shanghai people. Looking from the overpasses, I felt I was on another planet’ (Du 2007). Zhao Wei’s words point to the gap between the city façade romanticised in the film and the real concrete space accessible to ordinary people in their daily lives. Not many people have the luxury of enjoying this sleepless ‘other planet’. Zhao Wei’s comment, unintentionally, leads to an important
question: How does the transnational urban film negotiate the relationship between the local and the global? Or to what degree does the transnational film reflect the local experience? The postmodern life of my aunt provides a much different perspective on the local/global relationship by focusing on the non-spectacular everyday living space, instead of the monumental cityscape presented in The longest night in Shanghai.

Postmodern life’s central character is Ye Rutang, a middle-aged woman who left her husband and daughter 20 years earlier in Anshan, a less-developed northeastern city, and came to Shanghai to pursue her dreams. The film follows Ye’s life in contemporary Shanghai – she is now retired – and ends with her disillusionment and return to Anshan. In line with director Ann Hui’s typically realist and non-sentimental style, the film focuses on Ye’s daily routine, such as doing morning exercises in a park, bargaining with vendors in a bustling market, and performing household chores in her small apartment in a rundown residential building. Ye’s living space, however, does not exist independently from Shanghai’s new socioeconomic domain. On the contrary, the latter forces its presence and influence into the domestic space, and the confrontation between these two spaces leads to Ye’s doomed tenure in the city.

The film first uses a lie to suggest the connection between the city’s global project and its inhabitants’ aspirations. Ye tells a neighbour that her daughter lives in Los Angeles. Actually, her daughter (also played by actress Zhao Wei) is a chef working in a small restaurant in Anshan. Even when Ye gets injured and is hospitalised, she repeats the same lie to her nurses. Ironically, Ye’s lie seems to gain her the respect and admiration of the staff. When her daughter comes to visit her in hospital, the nurses greet her enthusiastically, but their attitude changes after they learn the truth. This motif of Ye’s lie satirises the impact that China’s integration into the global economy has had on the mentality of the Chinese people, including ordinary people like Ye. To be global, to be able to travel worldwide, to participate in the transnational flow – these are the promises held out by globalisation, and they are absorbed into individuals’ aspirations. Not wanting to admit her failure, within the present context of ‘global’ success, Ye chooses to live with a lie.

Two other incidents demonstrate the stratified urban space that characterises Shanghai’s ‘postmodern’ condition and defines Ye’s ‘postmodern life’. The first is her encounter with Jin Yonghua, a migrant whom Ye, out of sympathy, hires as her housemaid. Ye finds out, however, that Jin secretly makes money by working a dangerous scam on the streets. Carrying two fake antique vases, Jin runs toward an approaching car, and then pretends to be hit so she can ask the driver to pay for the broken vases, which she claims are expensive antiques. Ye is shocked and disgusted to witness this scam, and fires Jin. Later in the film, Ye finds out that Jin had been doing this in order to get money to pay her daughter’s hospital bills. Tragically, Jin is eventually arrested for trying to kill her daughter. She confesses to Ye that she was
trying to end her daughter’s suffering and her own. Jin’s story provides a powerful commentary on Shanghai’s class-divided urban space, the spatial unevenness and conflicted coexistence of the low and the high. For the rich, the city is a place of fashion, consumption and pleasure, while for a migrant it is an arena of survival.

The film’s other crucial incident involves Ye’s failed investment in burial tombs. Ye has a short romance with Pan Zhi-chang (played by Chow Yun-fat), a Peking opera fan. They meet at a park where Pan occasionally performs Peking opera with other fans. A shared passion for the traditional art draws them together. But the romance soon ends when they are grasped by another kind of passion – the money craze. Pan persuades her to co-invest in tombs, a strange new business invented for the market economy, so that they can profit from selling the burial tombs later, at a higher price. It turns out to be a scam and both lose all their money. Caught up in the impulses of the global city, Ye wants to make money and be successful, but she is not equipped with the skills needed to identify risk, danger and corruption in the new economy. After years of trying to adjust to the city, she finally gives up, claiming: ‘I cannot survive in Shanghai.’ Commenting on Shanghai’s globalisation, Huang observes that ‘[o]ne of the effects of the capitalist space of globalisation is to make everyone believe that this space is his or her own, regardless of the fact that the city was restructured based on the assumed needs of a small group of multinational service-class people, the human agents of global capital’ (2004: 110). Ye’s tragedy is that she believed this space was ‘her own’ and she has tried to adjust to the new slogan: to be global, to be successful and to be rich.

While focusing on ordinary people’s daily living space, The postmodern life of my aunt does include one long montage of mesmerising postcard images of the city. This montage takes place as Ye is leaving Shanghai. The camera pulls away from Ye, sitting silent and expressionless in a taxi, and presents an aerial view of grandiose high-rises, landmark buildings along the Bund, busy freeways and dazzlingly beautiful city lights. Ye’s taxi disappears into the endless flow of cars. In this scene, Ye never turns to look at the beautiful city, the place for which she abandoned her family. For the first time Ye sees herself as an outsider in the city and she does not care, or she is too tired to care anymore. Shanghai’s monumental cityscape is a fascinating spectacle that does not interlock or converge with her lived space. It is a captivating mirage, one that ordinary people struggle to embrace, only to grow frustrated and recognise that it is an impossible task.

The film does not, however, end with Ye’s departure from Shanghai. We see her life after returning to Anshan, a city that seems to have been left out of the nation’s globalisation and economic transformation. In contrast to Shanghai, Anshan is shown as a city of manufacturing (rather than consumption), of empty lots, old buildings and cramped living spaces. It is a place that offers no excitement or promise for the future. In one scene, Ye’s daughter and her fellow employees sit outside their
workplace, silently smoking and looking blankly into the distance. The Anshan sequence raises questions about the geographic imbalance in China’s economic development and the whole country’s integration into the global economy. The film ends with an unsentimental but heart-wrenching long take: at a marketplace, Ye opens a lunchbox and silently bites into a bun, while a vendor behind her listens to Peking opera on the radio, a song Ye’s Shanghai lover used to sing. This last scene is full of ambivalence: Does Ye regret her return to Anshan? Will her life be better in this place? What we can read into this scene is Ye’s compromise – a bitter one. The ending implies a strong sense of non-belonging, an emotional symptom caused by social and spatial transformation.

In addition to its different approach to the changing cityscape, The postmodern life of my aunt refuses the patriarchal narrative of the eroticised woman as representative of the city, by focusing on a middle-aged retired woman. More critically, this film offers an ironic view of the exploitation of women’s bodies in the name of the global economy and consumerism through the character of Feifei, a young woman Ye meets through her nephew Kuangkuang. An accident in Feifei’s childhood has left a scar on her face, and she always covers the scarred side with her long hair, dyed in various colours. When she is first introduced, she gives the audience the impression of a beautiful, stylish and mysterious woman, almost the same image as that of the typical eroticised Shanghai woman created by popular culture. However, the conventional association between the city and the sexualised woman’s body is immediately challenged in the next scene. Feifei walks down the street and is whistled at by some young boys. She confronts them by revealing her scar, which scares them away. This is one of the most powerful moments in the film. Feifei’s act is a gesture of challenging the male gaze, of refusing to be an object of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’, and of denying conventional viewing pleasure (Murvey 1975).

The feminist perspective of The postmodern life of my aunt is consistent. In a faked abduction sequence, the film refutes any compromise with the more conventionally gendered structure of urban space. Kuangkuang, the teenage boy, fakes his own abduction in order to collect a ransom from his aunt and use it to cure Feifei’s scar. His plan fails and the sequence ends comically. Despite the humorous tone, the sequence presents a serious and ironic commentary on the cultural stereotype of the feminine body and female sexuality, one that a modern teenage boy readily buys into. This story does not turn into a conventional narrative of transformation, as The longest night in Shanghai does. Feifei still carries her scar, and remains optimistic and strong. She is last seen working at night, alone, at a dry cleaner’s – a place that does not require visibility and thus does not ‘stain’ the city of fashion.
Living for the city: cinematic imaginary of the cityscape in China’s transnational films

Shanghai story: nostalgia in a transforming space

Shanghai story, directed by Peng Xiaolian, a Shanghai-born-and-based filmmaker, beat out Zhang Yimou’s big-budget martial arts film House of flying daggers for best picture in the 19th Golden Rooster Awards competition, China’s highest film honours. The film’s theatrical release, however, was delayed for nearly a year, perhaps due to its critical and uncompromising exploration of Shanghai’s urban transformation. Not necessarily more authentic than Longest night or Postmodern life, Peng’s film does provide a valuable perspective on how the city’s urbanisation has affected families and communities, a topic not touched on in the other two films. Many new urban films (mis)represent a glamorous global space and sell the audience the promise of a better future, one which in practice will only be fulfilled through ‘necessary adjustments’, such as the demolition of buildings and the relocation of families and whole neighbourhoods (Huang 2004: 118). Shanghai story is one of the few films that question the consequences of demolishing traditional spaces – in this case, familial and communal spaces.

The film revolves around four siblings who live in different cities (including one in the US and one in Mongolia), but have come back to Shanghai, their hometown, for a brief family reunion sparked by their mother’s sudden illness. A series of conflicts arises around the ownership of their mother’s apartment, which has acquired greater value due to Shanghai’s rapid urbanisation. Their mother urges them to always remember the hardships the family endured together during the Cultural Revolution and to love one another. When the mother dies in the end, the siblings have formed a stronger family bond. They decide that the older brother and older sister, who suffered most because of the Cultural Revolution, will have joint ownership of the apartment. However, the film ends with the demolition of the apartment building to make way for the construction of highway overpasses.

The film’s emphasis on communal space is indicated during the opening credits, which include the following words: ‘At the beginning of the 20th century, Shanghai witnessed a wave of construction of European-style villas. By and by, more families moved in and turned what used to be private villas into a bustling residential compound. This has become a unique scene of Shanghai’s metropolitan life. Our story takes place in one of these villas.’ This introduction cues us to the importance of the ‘bustling residential compound’, ‘unique’ to Shanghai, which provides the setting for the film’s narrative. The film starts with a smooth tracking shot revealing a three-story building, the main locale of the story. On the soundtrack, we hear it starting to rain and a woman calls her neighbour to collect the washing hanging outside. In the same shot, the camera moves into the public kitchen shared by the households in this building, where some people are cooking and chatting, while others are watching television. This scene immediately establishes a friendly communal living
environment. The kitchen becomes a significant motif in this film. We frequently see people there talking about daily issues or giving each other advice on family life or work. The kitchen scenes evoke nostalgia for the traditional community, which is fast disappearing from the urban landscape.

The current sentiment of nostalgia cropping up in Chinese popular culture has been attributed to the country’s rapid urbanisation and integration into globalisation, which has caused the Chinese people ‘to experience the most chaotic identity crisis in many decades’ (Dai 1997: 147). Memory of the communal space, and openness and friendliness between neighbours, is a response to the spatial transformation that has resulted in an increasingly indifferent living environment and a detached courtesy among residents of the same building (now perhaps divided into condominiums). *Shanghai story* is not the first urban film to exhibit nostalgia for the traditional community. Zhang Yang’s commercially successful and critically acclaimed *Shower* (1999) caught the attention of both the general public and cultural scholars for its exploration of the conflict between traditional/communal and modern/consumer spaces. *Shower* depicts the fate of an old-fashioned public bathhouse run by a father and son in a globalising and urbanising Beijing. The bathhouse scenes are beautifully shot and the film has touched audiences with its portrayal of the close, friendly, caring relationships among the bathhouse visitors, as well as the open and lively atmosphere of the establishment.

*Shower* and *Shanghai story* both evoke nostalgia for the traditional communal space, but the films differ in their responses to the demolition of that space. At the end of *Shower* the father dies, the bathhouse is demolished to make way for a department store, and the protagonist takes his mentally disabled younger brother with him to Shengzhen (one of China’s economic development zones). *Shower* ends with a promising tone, and I agree with Lu (2008) that the film does not intend to criticise the process of urbanisation and globalisation, but rather raises questions about how to create a balance between tradition and economic transformation. By contrast, the ending of *Shanghai story* is much darker and more provocative. After the siblings decide that the elder brother and sister will share ownership of the apartment, the film abruptly ends with the demolition of the building to make way for highway overpasses. The final scene is shot in one long take. Starting with a close-up of Jingwen, the elder sister, sitting by the window, going through family photos, the camera slowly pulls away from her until she becomes a silhouette barely visible in the background. On the soundtrack, we hear piano music coming from a neighbour’s practising, which is then replaced by the noise of construction outside, becoming louder and louder. The ending recalls the film’s beginning, evoking sadness for the communal space sacrificed for the construction of an expanding urban and global environment. It refuses to gloss over the uncertainty, anxiety and pain created by
the demolition of the communal space, and its impact on ordinary families and individuals.

Nostalgia for the past can easily become ‘restorative’ and ‘totalising’, that is, idealising the past and smoothing over historical and social discontinuity (Boym 2001). Popular discourses that imagine Shanghai’s present in relation to the 1930s largely fall into the category of ‘restorative nostalgia’. Shanghai’s contemporary identity as a global city is often described as the ‘remake’ or ‘reappearance’ of ‘the international city it believes it once was’ (Abbas 2002: 52). The old Shanghai in which the city takes great pride, and which popular films and television dramas have obsessively repackaged, refers to the city of the 1920s and 1930s, when Shanghai was the most urban, industrial and cosmopolitan city in Asia. Such a linkage is problematic, because it construes a non-interruptive continuity from the past to the present, in which Shanghai now ‘reappears’ as an international city with no shadow of colonial powers. In fact, the city’s metropolitan glamour and reputation disappeared during the years when China was closed off to the outside world, between 1949 and 1978. Although Beijing was the center of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Shanghai played a major role in that disastrous political movement. It was the base for the Gang of Four, who manipulated interior Party struggles and accelerated chaos and calamity; and it was one of the most violent centres of political struggle. Nostalgia for old Shanghai selectively leaves out the city’s history from 1949 to the 1970s, thus effacing ‘the divide between communist past and consumerist present’ (Palmer 2007: 202).

*Shanghai story* defies ‘totalising nostalgia’, with its celebratory attitude towards the nation’s newly achieved glamour of globalisation, by returning to the site of disruption – the traumatic history of the Cultural Revolution, a history that both the city and the state are trying to forget. The film introduces the memory of the Cultural Revolution as a thematic motif in the opening credit sequence. Accompanied by sentimental music, the credit sequence opens with a person (whose face is not revealed) sorting through family photos and then stopping at a torn picture of a man in his early 30s. On it is a big ‘X’ mark, which during the Cultural Revolution meant forbidden/condemned. This mark evokes the memory of the traumatic decade, indicating that the man in this photo was persecuted and perhaps died in the political disaster. The film returns to this traumatic family and national history in the climactic scene, when the mother shows Xiao Mei, the youngest daughter, a letter Xiao Mei wrote in 1969 when she was eight. In this letter, which was forced upon her by the Red Guards, Xiao Mei denounced her father, who cared for her the most of all his children. Soon after, her father was persecuted to death. Recalling this horrible past, Xiao Mei breaks down in tears. The mother does not intend to punish Xiao Mei – the only way to cure the wound is to confront the repressed trauma.
Shanghai story suggests that although the city has become more developed and global, the traumatic history shared by the nation, the city and its people is an integral part of Shanghai’s identity, and continues to shape the course of urban development as well as individuals’ relations to the city. For those who still bear the scars of the past, the city’s speedy transformation may be overwhelming. Jingwen is such a victim. She joined the shang shan xia xiang (rustication movement in which millions of young people were ‘sent down’ to rural areas) during the Cultural Revolution. When the movement ended, she returned to Shanghai and got divorced. Deprived of education during the Cultural Revolution, she ended up working at a low-salaried job at a small restaurant and now struggles to raise her daughter. Jingwen is often shown in confined spaces, inside her mother’s apartment or at her workplace. She is an outsider in Shanghai’s world of fashion and consumerism. The film ends with her sitting alone in her mother’s apartment, which is going to be demolished, facing an uncertain, and hardly promising, future. Like The postmodern life of my aunt, Shanghai story presents a sympathetic and realistic portrait of a woman struggling to survive in the city. The changing urban space seems indifferent to her pain. Through its insistence on recalling the Cultural Revolution and its cold gaze at the fate of Jingwen, Shanghai story provokes the viewer into considering whether globalisation does not necessarily mean looking forwards, but also means looking back into the past critically; whether urbanisation does not have to sacrifice communities, but rather should incorporate building communities.

Shanghai story provides a subtle commentary on the gendered cityscape by contrasting Jingwen and A-rong, the younger brother. In contrast to Jingwen’s confined space, A-rong is linked to the monumental cityscape. He is introduced to the audience in a shot that situates him in a modern high-rise, a symbol of success. In this long take, the camera moves slowly from a busy street in a business district to a high-rise with huge glass windows, then zooms-in, pans and stops at A-rong, wearing a well-cut suit, discussing a case with his client. He represents the successful entrepreneur, a member of the new middle class that benefits from China’s market economy and globalisation. The demolition of a conventional space may be easier for men like A-rong and the male protagonist in Shower to deal with, but not for women in an increasingly gendered society. A global city is not necessarily accessible to everyone. Women, who become more marginalised by global capitalism, are ‘living just enough for the city’.

Conclusion

While pursuing a strategy of employing stars and creative personnel from different regions and countries to ensure commercial appeal, transnational urban films create a critical space for examining important issues, such as the relationship between
the local/national and the national/global, the clash between urbanisation and the preservation of a traditional community, the gap between the conceived space and the lived space, changing relations between the city and its inhabitants, and the gendered structure of the cityscape. The three films under study here have provided different approaches to Shanghai’s economic and spatial transformation and restructuring in the era of globalisation. The longest night in Shanghai, which echoes the official perspective, creates a dazzling montage of the glamorous cityscape, a showcase of China’s newly achieved economic power, and pleases its audience with a promise that the city is accessible to anyone regardless of gender and class. The historical and political conflicts between China and Japan are resolved, symbolically, through redesigning the female body to fit into the patriarchal space of transnational capitalism.

While Zhang’s film adheres to the conventional model, only in a more flashy and expensive fashion, the other two films by female directors offer a more critical view of the gendered urban space in the era of globalisation and grander urbanisation. The postmodern life of my aunt exposes the disparities between the monumental space of global capital and the lived space of the local inhabitants, and expresses sympathy for those – women, in this film’s context – who are left behind by urban transformation. Shanghai story criticises the demolition of the traditional communal space in Shanghai’s urbanisation and, most significantly, evokes the repressed history of the Cultural Revolution and offers a new perspective on China’s globalisation, suggesting that moving forward and embracing the future does not exclude looking back.

The competing representations and voices in these films do more than reflect the uncertainties and confusions involved in the process of China’s urbanisation and globalisation. They also actively participate in configuring the city’s identity, and thus may shape the way in which we view our relation to the city, as well as the relation between the domestic and the public. As Hopkins quite insightfully points out, the cinematic image of the city, a milieu of verisimilitude ‘where distinctions between the real and the imaginary become nebulous, situates the spectator in a cinematic place where the pleasure, the power, and the ideology of film are first manifest’ (1994: 49). It is important to identify ‘the pleasure, the power, and the ideology’ underlying the ‘projected city’ (Barber 2002), to question the symbolic meaning and ideological function of the gap between the concrete place and the conceived space. As this article has attempted to demonstrate, how Shanghai is defined and re-defined, how it is represented or misrepresented, reveals an underlying ideology of gender, space and identity in the transnational cinematic imagination of China’s urban landscape.
Note

1 Stevie Wonder’s 1973 hit song ‘Living for the city’ describes a young African-American man’s struggle with racial discrimination and his difficulty in making a living in New York City. Although this song has nothing to do with Chinese films, its expression of an individual’s identity in relation to the geopolitical landscape finds echoes in contemporary Chinese urban cinema.

References


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