



China Perspectives

2011/1 | 2011
The National Learning Revival

Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*

Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2010, 257 pp.

Judith Pernin

Translator: N. Jayaram



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5489>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.5489

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 2011

Number of pages: 95-96

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Judith Pernin, « Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China* », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2011/1 | 2011, Online since 30 March 2011, connection on 22 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5489> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.5489>

This text was automatically generated on 22 September 2020.

© All rights reserved

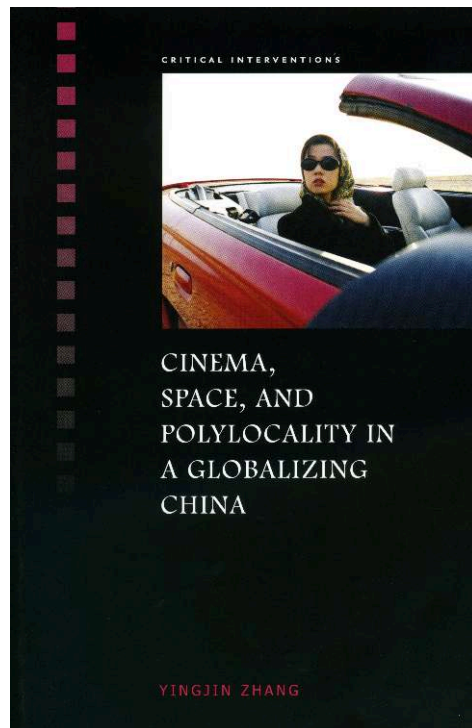
Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*

Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2010, 257 pp.

Judith Pernin

Translation : N. Jayaram

- 1 In recent years, the concept of space has assumed a significant role in cinematographic studies, especially those focusing on China.¹ *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, a collection of articles by Yingjin Zhang² published in various magazines and journals between 2004 and 2009, considers space and its influence on several genres of contemporary cinematography (from martial arts blockbusters to official cinema, as well as independent productions). The author has twin aims: he offers a reconsideration of Chinese cinema from the angle of space, and uses this concept to reopen the question of methods and challenges of cinematographic studies, especially around the problematic raised by the idea of a “national cinema.” Zhang seeks not only to treat the filmic representation of space, but also to re-examine the state of Chinese cinema in the globalisation era and to reflect on issues of space, scale, and flow, both within cinematic works and in the Chinese cinematographic lifeline: production, distribution, and exploitation.



- 2 In the general first chapter headed “Cinema, Space, Polylocality,” Zhang places himself and his work in the line of authors who have written on globalisation, urbanism and the relationship with the city (Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, Michel de Certeau, and Manuel Castells), and on the reception of films and “cinematographic” public space (Miriam Bratu-Hansen, Chris Berry, Sheldon Lu, etc.). After drawing these linkages, the author extends his reflection to cinema’s “space of scholarship” in the following chapter. He draws our attention to recent advances in research on “national cinemas” and the renewed interest in issues that for long had remained minor or marginal beside the studies on “major authors” and “major movements.” Declaring that cinema is not uni-dimensional but has multiple facets, much like “nation,” and that these are interlinked, Zhang has sought to distance himself from a compartmentalised and “elitist” vision of the Seventh Art and to consider Chinese cinema as “a *spatial continuum* stretching across scale from the local to the global.”³ This “cartographic” image of a horizontal cinema helps place it in a “transnational” context of trade exchanges, festivals, aesthetics, and theories, and helps distinguish it from historic studies that had been much in vogue and that made distinctions based on purely temporal and political considerations. With this, a comparative approach is argued for and adopted, because “comparative studies are more likely to capture the multi-directionality with which film studies simultaneously look outwards (transnationalism, globalisation), inwards (cultural traditions, aesthetic conventions), backwards (history, memory), and sideways (cross-media practices, interdisciplinary research).”⁴
- 3 Having set this theoretical framework, Zhang devotes the rest of the book to applying it. In Chapter 3, he considers the issue of “production space” in China, in a “postsocialist” context in which the local stretches into the global and spheres of authority extend into the underground. From the 1980s, two major elements have completely transformed the very nature of the cinematographic act in China. Economic reforms weakened the studios, withheld state funding from the Sixth Generation cineastes and propelled them to seek alternative means of production funding. International attention towards Chinese cinema has been growing significantly, encouraging cinematographic exchanges between China and the rest of the world. All this, the author says, has led to a reconfiguration of Chinese cinema into four poles with complex linkages: “art,” “politics,” “capital,” and “marginality.”⁵
- 4 In Chapter 4, Zhang proceeds to analyse the representation of space, especially the city, in a series of films set in Beijing (*Beijing Bicycle*, Wang Xiaoshuai, 2001; *I Love Beijing*, Ning Ying, 2001; *Big Shot’s Funeral*, Feng Xiaogang, 2001; *The World*, Jia Zhangke, 2004). He then focuses specifically on three works by Jia Zhangke – *In Public* (2001), *Still Life*, and *Dong* (2006) – which deal with, respectively, travel spaces, the Three Gorges, and South-East Asia. Yingjin Zhang seeks to observe how the local, the urban, the national, the transnational, and the global are articulated in the changing scenery of Chinese urban areas in the twenty-first century. He says “Chinese cinema has participated in various projects of remapping the city”⁶ in China by depicting characters “drifting” in the city with different means of transport (bicycle, motorcycle, taxi, and plane).
- 5 Chapter 5 deals with independent documentaries and examines yet another spatial aspect – the space of subjectivity to which the directors lay claim. Zhang uses the famous line “my camera doesn’t lie” – as claimed by some filmmakers in the early 1990s – to characterise the “new documentary movement” that grew from this period. He

says this emblematic motto lets directors occupy an objective space such that the authorities cannot challenge their films' "truth."

- 6 In Chapter 6, Zhang pursues his analysis of documentaries by considering the space they have to circulate and their reception in a context of "political surveillance." How do they convey their information, and through which "media" or "mediations" do they succeed in doing so? The answer lies in two elements according to Zhang: the performance – embedded in the films – and piracy, which ensures dissemination of works and their ideas.
- 7 In conclusion, Zhang offers a synthesis of recent changes in the production and exhibition of Chinese cinema. He shows that the considerable commercial successes of recent years have not been confined to China, but have benefited also from a "transnational" coproduction system: the global market has played a critical role in the critical and commercial success of some films. However, while Chinese cinema is becoming ever stronger in a context combining the polylocal with the international, its poor infrastructure, rules, and national exhibition system keep it in a weakened state.
- 8 *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China* is without doubt a major contribution to the study of Chinese cinema: this volume gathers together the main problematic of the notion of space in cinema and offers a number of answers. The *horizontal* approach helps solve problems raised by difficult concepts (such as "Chinese cinema," "Chinese language cinema," or "Sinophone cinema") by integrating the films in a much larger and more complex framework of transnational artistic and commercial exchanges. The ambitious task of recasting cinematographic studies using this concept seems useful because the new elements examined by the author broaden the perspectives of scholarly research on cinema, and call for a transversal approach on issues that have for long been looked at solely through the prisms of history and cultural specificity. Nevertheless, the author lays himself open to reproach for excessive and not always judicious reliance on the spatial metaphor (as for example the use of "cartography" for "representation"). It also seems curious that traditional studies of national cinemas are rejected in favour of a method that in fact contributes also to defining the same old idea of nation through cinema: even though researchers take into account other parameters of exchange and spatiality in this new approach, and substitute the prefixes "pre" and "post" for "trans" and "poly," their adherence to the same root – "nation" – sets their sights on the same objective.
- 9 The spatial parameter is, finally, a little under-exploited in what might be its most interesting aspect: its cinematographic role, its relevance to the practice of directors with regard to film montage and structure, and its aesthetics in their works. In the analyses of films contained in the book, Zhang adheres to a highly literary approach: he focuses more on the narration and the all too often social problematic of relations between peoples than on the real spatial dimension of the films. Barring some observations on the scales of shots and on the representation of the city, the films' spatiality – conveyed by the depth of images, the continuity, rhythm, and internal movements within shots – remains hardly examined.
- 10 One of the major achievements of the book – apart from the valuable information it provides on the Chinese film market and industry – lies in its attempt to redefine cinematographic studies by taking up neglected notions such as space, and its consideration of a new problematic bound to be expanded on by researchers in the years to come.

NOTES

1. It is worth mentioning the works of Sheldon Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2007, and *Chinese Ecocinema in the Age of Environmental Challenge*, Hong Kong, University of Hong Kong Press, 2009, as well as of Luke Robinson, "Contingency and Event in China's New Documentary Film Movement," 30 October 2007, <http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/546/>. See also the discussions on space in the special issue of *China Perspectives*: "Independent Chinese Cinema: Filming in the 'Space of the People'," *China Perspectives*, 2010, no. 1.
 2. Yingjin Zhang is professor of Chinese Studies at the University of California, San Diego, and received his doctorate in comparative literature for a work on the city in modern Chinese cinema and novel. He has also written extensively on various aspects and periods of Chinese cinema (ranging from "national" to *underground* cinema; from the 1920s to the present). With Zhiwei Xiao, he has also authored the *Encyclopaedia of Chinese Film*, London, Routledge, 1998, 475 pp.
 3. Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2010, p. 25.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
 6. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
-

AUTHORS

JUDITH PERNIN

Ph.D. candidate at the EHESS, Paris, and a Research Fellow at the CEFC, Hong Kong.