

Clara Law's *Farewell China* - A Melodrama of Chinese Migration

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Introduction - Arthouse Cinema with a Commercial Imperative

Clara Law is an anomalous figure in contemporary Hong Kong cinema for a number of reasons. Part of the 'second wave' of directors (including Wong Kar-wai, Alex Law, Jacob Cheung and Lawrence Ah Mong) who emerged from film schools to make their first feature in 1988, she has collaborated on all her films so far with her husband, 'first wave' director and screenwriter Eddie Fong, and pursued a resolutely arthouse filmmaking ethos in the highly commercial, unsubsidised environment of Hong Kong cinema. Li Cheuk-To has noted that the directors of the 'second wave' displayed 'a refreshing new touch in the handling of both subject matter and style', but finds them wanting in comparison with the 'status and achievements' of the first wave of 1979, which included Ann Hui, Allen Fong, Tsui Hark and others. He also finds their films, somewhat contentiously, 'an expression of the new conservatism that has befallen Hong Kong cinema - the tendency to embrace "tradition"' which also showed 'there was no getting round the mainstream commercial paradigms of Hong Kong cinema after all' (1994:177-179).

While Wong Kar-wai could hardly be regarded as a commercially-oriented traditionalist in either subject matter or style, Law's films do embrace the Confucian traditions of Chinese ancestry, filial piety and family unity, but at the same time she has been resolute in her attempts to avoid the 'mainstream commercial paradigms' of Hong Kong cinema. Despite her avowed influences (in Wang and Mitchell 2000) of the Russian poetic stylist Andrei Tarkovsky and the Japanese poetic minimalist Yasuhiro Ozu (also a strong influence on the 1970s 'young German cinema' of Wenders, Fassbinder and others, to whom Law has been compared), she has also incorporated populist elements in her films, as has Wong Kar-wai, although in very

different ways. Both have become known as 'festival directors' in Hong Kong cinema since they began winning awards at international film festivals in the 1990s (*Farewell China* won the Special Jury Award at the 1990 Turin Film Festival and four Golden Horse Awards in Taiwan in 1990). As David Bordwell noted in his book *Planet Hong Kong*:

Hong Kong has a few 'art films' that feed into festivals. Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994) became a cult hit, and his *Happy Together* (1997) won the Best Director prize at Cannes. Until very recently, though, local moviemaking has been unsubsidised, so internationally prestigious directors like Clara Law, Ann Hui and Stanley Kwan depend on mainstream styles, stars and genres. In comparison to their contemporaries – say, the austere Taiwanese directors Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang – Hong Kong's 'festival' filmmakers look decidedly pop (2000:6).

Apart from Ang Lee's phenomenal 'crossover' commercial success *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, the most recent Hong Kong 'festival' success acknowledged at the 2001 Hong Kong Film Awards was Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*, starring Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung Chiu-wai. This elegant, minimalist, stylishly arthouse study of two victims of adultery in Hong Kong in 1962, won Leung Best Actor, and awards for cinematography and editing at the 2000 Cannes Film festival, as well as five Hong Kong film Awards, and was nominated for a US Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. In both cases, there appears to be an erosion of the boundaries between arthouse and commercial cinema. But Law's work, especially since she and Fong migrated to Australia in 1995, mainly to escape the relentless commercial pressures of the Hong Kong film industry and live in an environment more conducive to 'artistic growth' (Law 1997:1), is considerably less 'pop' than Wong Kar-wai's, and she and Fong have a much higher regard for the austerity of Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang than for their peers in Hong Kong. Stylistically they are more aligned with the 'static compositions and ambivalent moods' and the 'cinema of suggestive atmosphere' Bordwell attributes to European arthouse directors like Tarkovsky, Wenders, Fassbinder and Antonioni (2000:7). Nonetheless Law and Fong still employ populist genres such as the road movie, as evidenced in

their most recent film, *The Goddess of 1976* (2001), about a young Japanese man and a blind Australian girl driving a rare Citroen DS through outback Australia, and in the early sequences of *Autumn Moon* (1992), a film about the experiences of a Japanese tourist in pre-handover Hong Kong. *The Other Half and the Other Half* (1989) is a light comic treatment of the relationship between two young people whose partners have emigrated to Canada and explores the *taikongren* (flying immigrant) or Hong Kong 'astronaut' phenomenon, and *Fruit Punch* (1992), a Leon Lai star vehicle made mainly for commercial reasons, is a madcap comedy about a group of young men trying out a business venture and eventually deciding to emigrate to Australia. Fong's work as a director, at least up until *Private Eye Blues* (1994), which Bordwell notes for its quirkiness in a gangster set piece standoff with guns levelled, which 'explodes into a gun battle when someone's phone suddenly beeps' (2000:38), has also been predominantly commercially oriented. But it is Law and Fong's consistent concern with issues of identity, migration, home and the Chinese diaspora which is the most salient and prominent feature uniting their body of work and giving it a poignancy and cutting edge which marks Law out as an important international director. As Stephen Teo has indicated, most of her films, from *Farewell China* (1990) to *Autumn Moon* to *Floating Life* (1996), about a Hong Kong Chinese family who migrate to Australia (see Mitchell 2000), to *The Goddess of 1967*, form 'a canon about migration and despondency, geography and ethnicity' (2001:1).

Farewell China (*Ai zai taxiang de jijie* – literally 'The Season of Love in Another Land') is a melodrama about a young woman, Li Hong, who migrates legally from the People's Republic of China to New York in the late 1980s. Her communication with her husband, Zhao Nansheng, and baby in China ceases, and her progress through a Chinese migrant underworld in New York is subsequently retraced by Zhao - who enters the USA as an illegal immigrant - with the assistance of a Chinese-American teenage prostitute, Jane, in his quest to find her, with ultimately tragic results. The film deals in a confronting way with the hardships, squalour, degradation, heartbreak and mental collapse suffered by some Mainland Chinese migrants in New York, and occupies an important, but under-acknowledged place in the Law-

Fong 'canon'. It also has its share of 'mainstream styles, stars and genres' - the highly bankable Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung Ka-fai play the two protagonists, and it was distributed by the leading commercial Hong Kong box office company Golden Harvest, who specialise in martial arts movies and Jackie Chan films. Like a number of Law's films, it was produced by versatile actor-director-producer-composer Teddy Robin Kwan, better known for C-grade action and youth films such as *All the Wrong Spies* (1983), *Banana Cop* (1984) and *Hong Kong Graffiti* (1995), and his music for Ringo Lam's *City on Fire* (1987). Nonetheless *Farewell China* ran for just three weeks in Hong Kong in December 1990 and made a relatively modest \$ HK2,445,406 at the box office (compared to Wong Kar-wai's *Days of Being Wild*, also starring Maggie Cheung, which made \$HK9,751.942 in just 12 days at the same time).¹ According to Teo, *Farewell China* was also 'much maligned by critics at the time' (1997:186) and regarded as an overstated and exaggerated portrayal of the perils and hazards of Chinese migration to the USA at a time when many people in Hong Kong were thinking about emigrating to the USA to escape the 1997 handover.² Law and Fong claim the film's portrayal of migration from China to New York touched something of a raw nerve for many people in Hong Kong, which had itself had an increasing number of illegal immigrants from Mainland China, who had been regarded as something of a cultural problem since the 1970s, and it was regarded by some as a shameful exposure of internal immigration problems (in Wang and Mitchell 2000). At the same time China is still considered by many Hong Kong inhabitants as an ambivalent homeland; as Tan See Kam has noted:

Together with their common Chinese ancestry, the Chinese diaspora of the twentieth century produces the dilemmas of many Hong Kong Chinese. Many have strong emotional, cultural and even 'patriotic' ties with China. But these should be distinguished from their disapproval of communism ... '1997' can mean going back to where they have come from and the ideology and practices of a political system (communism) with which they cannot relate; and also an environment which they have left to escape in colonial Hong Kong. Many Hong Kong people are thus caught in a dilemma, between cultural (even 'emotional')

identification with China (self) and paranoid alienation from communism (Other) (1994:58-59).

Farewell China was never released in the PRC, but its unrelenting catalogue of the harsh realities of the Chinese migrant experience in the USA clearly stirred up issues which were uncomfortable to many people in Hong Kong. Because of its focus on the tragic experiences of Chinese migrants who are portrayed as victims, Law maintains that *Farewell China* was received by Hong Kong audiences with a kind of 'denial', and a refusal to sympathise with the characters' plight, whereas it received a more positive response in Taiwan, where it was regarded in more of an historical perspective, and in the context of problems created by Communist China (in Wang and Mitchell 2000). In any case, it remains an overlooked and neglected film which rewards detailed study of the powerful resonances arising from its portrayal of the experiences of a wide range of Mainland Chinese, Taiwanese and Hong Kong Chinese migrants of differing social strata living in New York. Its shattering concluding scene's tragically ironic and bleak reflections on and contrasts with the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 are also notable, as are its principal actors' strong portrayals of innocents abroad who are brutalised by their journeys through the lower depths of the Chinese diaspora in New York.

Hybridity and the Chinese Diaspora

Maggie Cheung's role as Li Hong in *Farewell China* occurred in the same year in which she played hybridised migrant characters in two other Chinese diasporic melodramas made by prominent first wave Hong Kong directors. The first of these was Li-feng Kiu, an assured and relatively prosperous Hong Kong-born head waitress in a Manhattan restaurant who forms an unlikely friendship with two of her customers, Huang Hsiung-ping, a woman from Taiwan (played by actress-director Sylvia Chan) and Zhao Hong, a woman from Mainland China, in Stanley Kwan's *Full Moon in New York*. The second was Hueyin, a young woman who returns to Hong Kong from film school in London and confronts her Japanese-born mother,

travelling to Macao, where she spent her childhood, Japan and Guangdong province in the PRC in the process, before deciding to stay in Hong Kong and work in television, in Ann Hui's autobiographical *Song of the Exile*. The three roles suggest Cheung's embodiment of something of a transnational hybrid Chinese diasporic *zeitgeist* in Hong Kong cinema in 1990.

Teo is scathing about her role in *Full Moon in New York*, suggesting that 'the script pushes her to the company of two tiresome friends who have China (one all too real, the other fictional and mythic) on their minds ... all bitchiness is set aside for the sake of an abstract vision of China which means more to the filmmakers than to the characters' (1992:109). Kwan's tokenistic representation of transnational Chinese female solidarity may be pushing melodrama to the limits of idealised fantasy in its idyllic attempt at forging a sense of hybrid unity in a 'third space' represented by New York, but Hui's exploration of transnational displacement and belonging in the context of generational conflicts and their eventual resolution offers a much deeper examination of diasporic identity. Patricia Brett Erens claims that '*Song of the Exile* presents a multicultural and multilingual space, a reflection of the hybridity that characterises the lifestyle of a large segment of Hong Kong's population (2000:187)' which, along with its extensive use of flashbacks, is perhaps closer to Law's exploration of the migrant experience in New York in *Farewell China*, and indeed Law's own biography. Erens has also noted that Hui's film 'parallels mother-daughter treatments common in traditional literary and cinematic melodramas' (in Williams 1997:95), offering another stylistic and thematic affinity with Law's film which will be discussed below.

Law was born in Macau to parents who migrated there from the People's Republic of China in 1949, before moving to Hong Kong in the 1960s, and studying at the National Film and Television School in London in the early 1980s, and beginning her career in Hong Kong working in television. She has indicated that living and working in Australia enables her to 'take what I already have which is my heritage, the Chinese part of me, and bring it with me wherever I go ... Because that world I

was having longings for, that Chinese world, is a little non-existent anyway' (in Wood 1998:79). This suggests a 'Chinese imaginary' which inscribes her films with neo-Confucian values and which impacts directly on the scenario of *Farewell China*, in which the dilemmas and hardships of migration also relate to Hong Kong, which Law has described as 'basically a refugee camp' (in Wood 1998:81).

China Behind and In Front

Teo compares *Farewell China* to another film made by a Hong Kong woman director in 1974, Cecille Tang Shu Shuen's *China Behind*, which was banned by the Hong Kong censors for its bleakly critical portrayal of five fugitive Mainland Chinese who swim to Hong Kong to escape the oppression of the Cultural Revolution. Not released until 1987, Shuen's film focuses on the struggles the emigres endure as they are caught 'between two worlds' in Hong Kong, suffering exploitation in a factory and indifference at large, and eventually seeking refuge in a church. In contrast to this portrayal of a backward China and a more sophisticated, but excessively materialistic Hong Kong, Teo argues, Law's film confronts the looming realities of the 1980s, when China's political role with regard to Hong Kong became directly 'in front':

As Hong Kong came face to face with China, director Clara Law, a generation younger than Tang Shu Shen and belonging to the generation that probably has the most to lose in terms of a bona fide 'Hong Kong identity' as a result of the Chinese takeover in 1997, responded with her own variation of the 'China behind' syndrome ... The film deals with the latent desire of Chinese to leave China. More precisely, it deals with every prospective Chinese emigrant's belief in the myth of the American dream (1997:216).

Bordwell argues that films like *Farewell China* were forced to criticise China 'in oblique ways' owing to the 1977 Hong Kong Television and Entertainment Licensing

Authority's policy which forbade film damaging 'good relations with other territories' (2000:127). But Law is still very scathing in her portrayal of her characters' obsessive desire to leave China - as the protagonist Li Hong says in her interview with the US consul in Shanghai, 'our generation's wasted so much time'. In two 'rhyming' scenes in the film, we see Li Hong's husband Zhao Nansheng replying to her letter stating she wants to come home to China, 'Don't come back under any circumstances', and hear his father replying 'Whatever you do, don't come back here' to his telephone call expressing his desire to come home. In both statements there is a sense of finality and definiteness which assumes that life in the USA can only be better than life in China, whatever the circumstances. Li Hong and Zhao Nansheng are an apparently model citizen couple - he is a primary school teacher, they met in a work unit during the Cultural Revolution, and in accordance with the post-1979 modernisation drive, have just one child. Nonetheless Li Hong has the baby primarily to 'look less beautiful' and increase her chances of getting a visa to emigrate, and she is prepared to break up the family in order to emigrate.

Despite refusing in her films to dwell on the causes and motivations behind her characters' decisions to migrate, preferring to concentrate on the effects and consequences (in Wang and Mitchell 2000), Law has been outspoken in her criticisms of China, especially since Beijing banned her 1993 Tang Dynasty martial arts epic film *Temptation of a Monk*. This was a Chinese-Hong Kong co-production starring Joan Chen, which Chinese authorities attempted to have withdrawn from the Rotterdam and Hong Kong film festivals. At the 1997 Rotterdam Film festival, Law compared the Chinese takeover of Hong Kong to the Soviet Union's occupation of Czechoslovakia, invoking Milan Kundera, another of her principal influences, and accusing the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) of 'dishonest intellectualism' and a lack of 'moral conscience', and Hong Kong's mass media of self-censorship and hypocrisy (1997:1). The contemporary political realities of Communist China are clearly at loggerheads with the enriching Chinese cultural imaginary of traditions, ancestry and heritage which Law expresses in her work.

Musical Counterpoints

Farewell China is undoubtedly a politically motivated film in its focus on the human effects of migration from Communist China to the capitalist west, but it is far from didactic anti-Communist propaganda, and the flashbacks to China the film shows are presented in an idyllic, nostalgic manner. They are also emotionally underscored by the recurrent use of a raw, poignant dialect folk song from the village of Heng Chun in Southern Taiwan entitled 'Thinking Of', which evokes Chinese ancestors leaving their homeland, and their desire to return home again, and proclaims that 'Chinese people are born with patience unbounded' (in Stokes and Hoover 1999:156, note 15). Law heard a recording of this song, which as the anonymous 'Production Notes- The Search for a Lost Sound' on the CD album of the soundtrack music from *Farewell China* puts it, 'has both the feel of provincial folk music, and the sentiment of country blues', on an album by Chen Da, a singer who had since died. The song deals with Mainland Chinese who have emigrated to Taiwan, and their feelings of longing for their homeland. Law and Jim Shum, the film's music director, went to Hang Chun and recorded one version of the song by Cheung Sun-chuen, a student of Chen Da, then in his 70s, accompanying himself on a Taiwanese version of a 2-string banjo, and another version by a unnamed female student of Chen Da. Teo. Mis-interpreting the song as a Fujian folk song, has suggested that the use of this song is inappropriate and 'problematic' (1997:217), since the film's main characters are from Canton, but it arguably becomes representative of all Chinese migrants, a cross-section of whom are portrayed in the film. Law and Shum also recorded some segments of blues guitar in Taipei with Richie Walker, a guitarist and disc jockey for a former US Armed Forces radio station, creating what the soundtrack liner notes describe as 'a more western, more processed sound based on the "Hang Chun" songs, produced through jamming sessions with electronic guitar ... What resulted was a Chinese-inspired electronic blues'. These were used throughout the New York sequences, often presented as coming from a radio station.

The Taiwanese folk song and its western blues re-interpretation used throughout

Farewell China is of particular importance at different moments in the film in both expressing and counterpointing the predominantly bleak mood of the situations and the characters as well as alternating between and juxtaposing Chinese and US realities and ideologies. At times, as Stokes and Hoover have stated, '[s]natches of song parallel characters' torn-apart lives' (1999:156). The highly emotive, searing guitar and vocals of 'Thinking Of' which begin and end the film sometimes also overlap with the slightly distorted, plangent electric guitar emanating from the New York radio station which accompanies the tracking shots of New York streets, signalling Zhao Nansheng's arrival in New York and recurring throughout the narrative.

Other sections of the film also juxtapose Chinese and US musical signifiers, while the soundtrack album even combines the two elements, accompanying the Taiwanese folk song with the electric guitar. Zhao Nansheng's decision to leave China to look for his wife is underscored by a group of Chinese children singing 'Red River Valley', and when he tracks down Li Hong's English teacher in a Latino neighbourhood salsa music sets the scene, while the flashback of Li Hong trying to carry a double mattress on a bicycle down the street is accompanied by 'Thinking Of', as are the poignant flashbacks to scenes of the couple in China looking for a sponsor to the USA and sharing food and water. The American-born Chinese character Jane's final decision to return to her parent's home in Detroit in her convertible ('New York's got millions of illegal immigrants' is her parting shot) is ironically accompanied by an electric guitar rendition of 'The Star Spangled Banner', Jimi Hendrix-style, as the camera pans to the Statue of Liberty. When Zhao Nansheng and Li Hong finally meet by chance outside her modest apartment, she plays him the record she has kept since leaving China, a soaring choral song entitled 'You Don't Understand My Heart'; 'music's my only company' she tells him, as they embrace and make love. However, as the New York rock music station returns to break the mood the morning after, she abuses him - 'Shut up you fucking stupid chink' - signalling the defiantly anti-Chinese, 'American' side of the schizoid Chinese-American identities she oscillates between. 'Thinking Of' returns again in

the ritualistic climactic scene, when Li Hong stabs Zhao Nansheng to death under the statue of the goddess of democracy which Chinese-American students erected in Columbia Park in memory of the students in Tiananmen Square. It carries through into the closing scenes of the film, where the camera dollies up to the US flag before returning to China and the view from the train window we have seen at the beginning of the film, before settling on a final shot of the couple's child. US and Chinese-defined music thus oscillate and intertwine to define and express the differently hyphenated Chinese-American identities, feelings and dilemmas of the three main characters and underscore the melodrama of their situation.

Migration and Melodrama

The music in the film provides the emotive atmospherical context for its melodrama, in the original sense of melodrama as 'drama' accompanied by 'melos' (music). The narrative structure of migration, separation, loss and quest *Farewell China* follows is also full of standard features of popular melodrama, most notably in its use of the narrative of the 'fallen woman', although Li Ho's fall is as much in social and economic status as in moral and sexual decline (which applies more markedly to Jane). At the same time the film maintains what Los Angeles film critic Andy Klein has described as an 'absolutely depressing realism' (in Dannen and Long 1997:353). Although according to Dissanayake, 'classic' melodrama usually situates realism as its 'stylistic antithesis' (Dissanayake 1993:2), here the separation, alienation and abjection suffered by both Li Hong and Zhao Nansheng, while occasionally exaggerated in its gruesomeness and squalour (as in the scene where we see Li Hong sick in bed in a horrifically damp, dark and airless slum basement), have an important grounding in a heightened realism which reflects the experiences and sufferings of less fortunate Chinese migrants to the USA and elsewhere. (The film is based on research Law did while working for a cable television station in New York's Chinatown after completing her graduation film at the National Film School in London.) In this sense, *Farewell China* illustrates the tendency of melodrama to 'side with the powerless', as Martha Vicinus has stated (in Gledhill 1987:21). This

powerlessness is linked to what Laura Mulvey has articulated as the difference between tragedy and melodrama: 'while the tragic hero is conscious of his fate and torn between conflicting forces, characters caught in the world of melodrama are not allowed transcendent awareness or knowledge' (in Gledhill 1987:77).

Zhao Nansheng also undergoes a number of experiences which emphasise his powerlessness, and that of illegal immigrants generally. His brief and almost incidental description to his artist friend Ah-mun of his ordeal in arriving illegally in the USA via Panama in a group of fifteen refugees, nine of whom died on the journey, and the rest of whom were robbed by their Mexican guide in complicity with a group of bandits, is a familiar enough scenario for it not to need to be shown it. Similarly the five hour walk he endures to reach his friend's apartment in Manhattan, only to be suddenly woken and ejected onto the street a few days later as Ah-mun is seeking permanent residence in New York. Ah-mun, who has become a successful painter, has his own melodramatic tale of hardship: like many emigre Chinese artists, he began by painting portraits on 42nd Street, and he stresses the importance of having 'a place to pee' which he has had to work hard for in an environment where 'you don't need permission to move house - it's like ordering a pizza'. Indeed, the almost stereotypical universality of Zhao Nansheng's initial experiences as an illegal immigrant are ironically underscored by the wry comedy of his arrival in New York in 'disguise' looking like a Mexican illegal immigrant in a sombrero, and bumping into a passer-by who cautions him, 'Yo, amigo'. His experiences searching for his wife take on the overtones of a mythical quest through an immigrant inferno - what Teo describes as 'a nightmarish odyssey into the diaspora' (1997:217) - as the increasingly horrific experiences Li Hong undergoes in New York are pieced together in flashbacks narrated by the people she has encountered, and her descent into illness, poverty and madness have the bleak features of a melodrama of a fallen woman who is a victim of circumstances beyond her control.

In *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, Dissanayake discusses the revaluation of melodrama

in feminist film theory since the 1970s, which was due partly to the supposed postmodern erosion of borders between 'high' art and popular culture, and partly to the fact that 'melodrama tends to give prominence to the experiences, emotions and activities of women' (1993:2). Claiming that there is no equivalent to the term 'melodrama' in any Asian language, Dissanayake emphasises its capacity to 'illuminate the deeper structures of diverse cultures' (2) and maintains that '[b]oth in Western and Asian melodramas, questions of interpersonal relations, moral meanings, and the workings of good and evil are depicted in accordance with a poetics of hyperbole' (4). In contrast Williams, in an article about Ann Hui's *Song of the Exile*, asserts that 'melodrama has a long history in both Chinese literature and film', citing Li Cheuk-to's 1986 edited volume *Cantonese Melodrama 1950-1969*, and notes that Hui's film, unlike the predominant focus of Western melodrama on individual and sexual subjectivity, 'emphasizes cultural, historical and political factors' (1997:95). A similar case could be made for *Farewell China*, which could also be placed within this Chinese historical genre. Teo in an article about Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*, has pointed out that the Chinese term *wenyi pian* corresponds to 'melodrama' in Chinese literary and cinematic tradition. Melodrama, Teo argues, found 'classic expression' in Mandarin films in Hong Kong and Taiwan, especially those adapted from the novels of Qiong Yao in the 1960s, which resembled soap operas. He notes also that soap operas and romance films have had a resurgence in popularity in Hong Kong cinema in Japanese television serials and the recent 'romance cycle' of films such as Wilson Yip's *Juliet in Love* (2000) and Sylvia Chan's *Tempting Heart* (1999), among others. Teo regards *In the Mood for Love* as an exploration of the more literary aspects of the genre (Teo 2001:2,5), in contrast with *Farewell China's* more tragic realist focus. The essentially popular origins and focus of melodrama are also an important factor in *Farewell China*, which confronts Communist China's representations of 'the people' with the American dream and US capitalist and consumerist paradigms of popular desire.

Observing that suffering is pivotal to the discourse of film melodramas in Asian cultures, and the family unit a central focus, Dissanayake states that 'Asian

melodramas represent a confluence of tradition and modernity, Eastern and Western sensibilities, voices of past and present' (4-5). All of these features can be found in the storyline and characters of *Farewell China*. Like most of Law's films, it has strong Western influences, and balances artistic and populist leanings, as has already been noted, and its central focus is on women characters (Li Hong and Jane), even if these are mediated through Zhao Nansheng's experiences of migration and quest. Law's concern with interpersonal relations and morality within the family, especially the sufferings caused when the family is separated by migration, is a key feature of many of her films, which also assert the necessity of incorporating Chinese traditions into situations of Chinese diasporic migrant modernity and of balancing Eastern and Western sensibilities (see Mitchell 2000). But *Farewell China*, both stylistically and in its focus on the sufferings of migration, touches on a 'poetics of hyperbole' more than Law's other films. In addition, it can be argued that *Farewell China* articulates two other features which E. Ann Kaplan has identified in film melodrama: the individual is shown to be at the mercy of forces beyond his or her control, and frequently political discourses are expressed through concerns about 'repressed social prohibitions to do with, in particular, class and race' (in Dissanayake 10). The experiences of Chinese migration explored in Law's film involve circumstances in which the individuals concerned are not able to take control of their destinies, due to economic, social and ethnic factors – Teo describes *Farewell China* as 'Law's depiction of the Chinese Diaspora as a Dantesque descent into an American Inferno (New York City)' (1997:186). All the film's diasporic Chinese characters are subjected to discrimination due to both their class and race, and are shown as occupying the lowest rungs of New York's social hierarchy. Indeed, Gledhill's statement that 'melodrama touches the socio-political only at that point where it triggers the psychic' (1987:37) is particularly applicable to *Farewell China*, as it deals primarily, but not exclusively, with the psychic, emotional, interpersonal and survival dilemmas of its characters, with the socio-political, ethnic and cultural ramifications of these dilemmas arising as by-products of the psychic events the narrative explores.

Melodrama's psychic dimension is particularly evident in the key part played in the quest-narrative of *Farewell China* by the punkoid teenage runaway prostitute Jane (whom Zhao Nansheng refers to as 'Jing', stressing her Chinese origins), a particularly schizoid, hybridised figure at the most Americanised extreme of the film's panoply of Chinese diasporic characters. Born in Detroit, on the pill at 10, and undergoing her first abortion at 12, Jane deplores her Chinese origins, refuses to speak Chinese (but does so fluently when Zhao's halting English is inadequate), hates the smell of Chinese food, and has dyed her hair red, green and yellow to disguise her ethnicity. Jane is played with considerable grit and panache by Hayley Man, a 17 year old amateur theatre actress Law 'discovered' in Chinatown in New York, who had not made a film previously, and whom Law later cast in her 1995 short film *Won Ton* (in the compendium film *Erotique*). Man deservedly won a special Golden Horse Film Award in Hong Kong for Best New Performer for her performance in *Farewell China*. Jane exudes a cheeky, abrasive and fearless vibrancy and energy born of desperation, which enables her to help and support the otherwise hapless and helpless Zhao, as well as providing a rather lurid, pop-trash subplot to the film which develops into a grotesque, Warholesque romance narrative. As Zhao's guide and protector through the perils of New York, she becomes his surrogate partner, after he first encounters her when he mistakes her for Li Hong because of the red dress she is wearing, and pursues her through a rubbish dump and into an underworld Chinese-American nightclub, where he is shot at.

Jane's denial of her Chinese ethnicity and her insistence that she is 'American' parallels Li Hong's attempt to Americanise herself. (Li Hong's English teacher notes that she has great difficulty pronouncing 'Elaine', the Anglicised version of her name she has chosen for herself.) While Jane becomes 'Jing' for Zhao, she ironically refers to him as 'Lincoln', and his quest takes on the mock-heroic melodramatic American parameters of 'looking for Mrs. Lincoln'. Jane coaches and coaxes Zhao through his quest for Li Hong, helping him spruce up and giving him some flowers to take to his wife in his initial, naïve expectations that he will find her in the Harlem restaurant. She then takes care of him after he discovers Li Hong's relationship with the owner

of a Chinese laundry, collapses in the street and becomes sick. Zhao later becomes Jane's pimp, dressed in a silk 'Bremerton' (mock Benneton?) jacket, with slicked back hair, resembling what Stokes and Hoover describe as 'a Chinese Elvis wannabe' (1999:154), and touting Jane's services in the street in his broken English, 'Chinese little girl, fifteen years old'. But after a farcical scene where she defrauds a Chinese punter and hides a drunken Zhao in her closet, French farce style, while she is turning a trick, he becomes emotional. Jane then comforts him in a scene on a balcony, which develops into a romantic sexual encounter. Horrified by his infidelity to Li Hong, Zhao screams and runs into the street, eventually becoming entangled in a nightmarish *walpurgnacht* punk street theatre performance with a huge, stylised phallus, which seems to provide a metaphorical, ritualised mockery of his descent into hell and his sexual rapport with Jane. He then rings home in China from a telephone box, only to be told 'whatever you do, don't come back here', before he is cut off. This symbolic definitive separation from China is echoed by Jane's subsequent exit from the narrative, after she decides to return to Detroit, and marks the termination of Zhao's quest for Li Hong and his insertion into the lower strata of New York society as a delivery boy. But it is primarily through his rapport with Jane, who counsels and trains him in survival techniques, that Zhao becomes psychically initiated into the melodrama of street life of the New York underworld.

Chinese-American Identities: *Farewell China*, *Citizen Kane* and *Chan is Missing*

The New York migrant underworld portrayed through the subsidiary characters in *Farewell China* contains different strata of diasporic Chinese-Americans, from Li Hong's wealthy Chinese-American businessman sponsor in Brooklyn, who claims never to have seen her and slams the door on Zhao and Jane, to the much less prosperous Taiwanese-American restaurateur couple Li Hong works for, who serve Chinese takeaway to African-American street youths in Harlem and who describe themselves as 'the last of the struggling students'. The Taiwanese woman is concerned about Li Hong's welfare, and deplores what she regards as a mainlander tendency for men to send their wives to the USA, confronting Zhao with the realities

of being a woman alone in New York without enough money even to afford sanitary napkins, and being raped, as Li Hong has been. Both Zhao and Li Hong are 'FOBs' ('Fresh off the Boat', to use the stereotypical term interrogated in the eponymous 1979 play *FOB* by Chinese-American playwright David Henry Hwang) who begin at the bottom of the heap and never rise much higher. Zhao progresses from homeless destitute to pimp to delivery boy, Li Hong works in a Chinese restaurant before falling ill in her squalid lodgings and offering herself in marriage to the owner of a Chinese hand laundry who advertises for a partner, before resorting to making money by defrauding elderly members of the Chinese-American community by offering to take care of their financial business in China. As Peter Feng has observed, there is a marked discrepancy between male and female FOBs which enables Li Hong to become more immersed into New York society, making her more difficult for to find:

The FOB stereotype, as articulated by Hwang's character, is rooted in the exchange of women in a sexual economy: women assimilate more easily than men, because women are sexual possessions and can be more easily absorbed into US society (1996:104).

Stokes and Hoover state the situation more brutally, referring to both Li Hong and Jane:

Female characters become whores valued only for the exchange of their bodies and looks. Use or be used is the American way that both learn; beyond that the option is to get out or go crazy in an urban society based on force (1999:154).

Feng is here referring to Hong Kong-born Chinese-American director Wayne Wang's 1984 feature film *Chan is Missing*, a highly imaginative and insightful quasi-documentary interrogation of Chinese-American identity set in San Francisco's Chinatown, which has some noteworthy resemblances to *Farewell China*. The narrative structure of *Chan is Missing*, which Feng argues 'foregrounds the

heterogeneity of Chinese American subjectivities, thereby arguing for the fluidity of Chinese American identity' (1996:91), also involves an investigative search for a missing person. In his case it is an FOB taxi driver who has disappeared after a car accident, along with the \$4,000 that the film's protagonist Jo and his nephew Steve, two ABC (American born Chinese) taxi drivers, had intended to buy a taxi license with. The resulting search, in which Chan is never found, but in which the fragmented and often contradictory pieces of an identikit of his character are assembled through the recollections of his family, friends and associates in the Chinese-American community, also involves an investigation and debate about the complexities, variations and dilemmas of Chinese, Chinese-American and Asian-American identities, and an ironic interrogation of Chinese and Asian stereotypes in US cinema (such as Charlie Chan). Both *Chan is Missing* and *Farewell China* share the stylistic influence of Ozu in their use of narrative ellipses, in which, as Bordwell and Thompson indicate, 'key narrative events are de-emphasized ... whereas narrative events that we do see in the plot are simple and understated' (1990:329) and in employing 'pillow shots', usually accompanied by music, which intervene between narrative sequences, establishing the passing of time and establishing 'the environment as a "character" in its own right' (Wang in Pym and Rayns 1985:622). They also share the classic piecemeal, mosaic Hollywood narrative structure of flashbacks (even if these are not shown directly in *Chan is Missing*, but rather recounted by others) of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*. This employs in exemplary fashion what Bordwell and Thompson have described as 'an intricate tapestry of plot events' and 'a realistic depiction of the process of investigation' as both a storytelling device which involves 'the withholding of key pieces of information, and the arousing of curiosity and suspense' and 'an investigation into traits of character' (1990: 75, 82, 75). Suspense and curiosity are similarly evoked in *Farewell China* by the gradual retrospective assemblage of scenes from Li Hong's life in New York, which are then fed into the scenes from her present life which Zhao observes once he encounters her.

The main narrative of *Farewell China* is driven by the investigation and quest which

impels Zhao to leave China and migrate illegally to New York. It is our gradual discovery through mostly chronological flashbacks of fragments of Li Hong's life in the Chinese diaspora of New York, with Jane acting as a catalyst and providing her own contrapuntal subplot, that provides the film's main narrative drive and sets up its ultimate tragic closure. The first flashback we see of Li Hong is at the artist Ah-mun's exhibition; wearing a striking red dress, she tells Ah-mun excitedly (in English) about a multi-million dollar business deal she is involved in, before leaving on the arm of a suited Anglo-American called Steve. The image of assuredness, prosperity and apparent social integration has its aspects of ostentatious display which for the viewer strike a false note, but which provide Zhao with hope, and lead him to pursue Jane when he sees her in a red dress after he has been ejected from Ah-mun's apartment and had his shoes stolen. The next flashback of Li Hong is considerably less reassuring: her English teacher recalls her attacking a young Hispanic man with a screwdriver, accusing him of trying to rape her; an incident that was hushed up as both the young man and the teacher are illegal immigrants. This is followed by the teacher's further recollection of meeting Li Hong as she tries to manoeuvre a double mattress down the road on a bicycle, and makes reference to her husband and son. The Taiwanese woman who runs the restaurant in Harlem where Li Hong worked then takes up the narrative of her decline; and we see her pursued in the street by two men who rape her, then later briefly encountered in the company of an older Chinese man at a home appliances store. The narrative of the suitcase she has left with the restaurateurs is then played out, and we descend into the hellish damp room where she lies, sick in bed, described as 'like discarded dishwasher', with a picture of her husband and son on the wall. This section of the narrative culminates in grim melodrama with Zhao vomiting after his grisly discovery of what appears to be a maggotty slice of pizza inside the suitcase. We then proceed to the elderly proprietor of the Chinese hand laundry and his narration of his newspaper advertisement for a partner, which Li Hong answers, and at first rejects, only to reappear in the freezing cold, asking him to marry her. Her subsequent 'wedding' - which we deduce never takes place, as she has presumably taken the old man's money and disappeared - is followed by the last two flashbacks

we see of her. These are both from her life with Zhao in China, recalled by the feverish Zhao, and in which the couple seek a sponsor for the USA and Zhao affectionately shares food and water with her.

These 'deeper' flashbacks to the couple's past in China terminate Li Hong's backstory, and she is next encountered in present time when Zhao Nansheng runs into her by chance delivering groceries. He conceals the prior knowledge he has of her situation, telling her he has only been in New York one month, and she exhibits signs of paranoia, associating him with past recollections of China, asking him if he is being followed, and suggesting her letters to him have been censored. (Stokes and Hoover suggest at this point 'she's lost her identity and her mind, and would probably be described as a paranoid schizophrenic' (1997:155)). Her delusional, schizoid behaviour in the morning, when she refuses to recognise Zhao, and his discovery of a cache of letters she has written to him but never sent, prompts him to follow her to the Canal Street subway. There he sees her extorting money from a couple of elderly Chinese migrants and consorting with a young man before he confronts her, trying to remind her who he is. She stabs him under a statue of the goddess of democracy replicating the one erected by the students in Tiananmen Square, shouting that he has tried to rape her, in an echo of the earlier rape scene in the English school, and the film's macabre, ritualistic conclusion is reached.

The central melodramatic narrative of Li Hong's mental and emotional collapse, induced by her bleak experiences as a stranger in a strange land, and her schizoid loss of identity in her obsessive desire to become 'American', is reprised with variations by Law in her 1997 film *Floating Life*. Here Bing, a Hong Kong-Chinese migrant in Australia, suffers a similar paranoid and delusional mental collapse due to her attempt to compensate for her displacement by over-assimilation into her migrant Australian status, and her pursuit of a rigidly disciplined regime through which she attempts to regiment her family into the Australian system. In a critique of the latter film, Teo suggests that Bing is an extension of Li Hong, but that in *Floating Life* 'migration is a more redemptive process' due to the intervention of Bing's

mother in a more positive ritualistic ending which involves praying to the family's ancestors. Viewing *Farewell China* from this retrospective position, he argues that the latter film

[is] so harrowing that Law's message is somewhat lost. We don't know whether [Law] is sketching out some allegory about migration to warn Chinese migrants about the perils of living in foreign lands or whether there's some didactic message for Hong Kong people to stay put: better to face the domestic hell of China than the foreign hell of the United States (2001:4-5).

But this reduction to a cautionary tale is to make too literal a reading of *Farewell China* as a parable of migration, and interpreting its melodramatic narrative as either allegory or didacticism is surely to extract too simple a conclusion from its complex presentation of subjectivities. Teo's comments are perhaps influenced by the heavily marked reference to Tiananmen Square at the end of the film, which was in a sense 'tacked on' after Law and Fong discovered the Columbia Park monument by chance during shooting, but which nonetheless provides a devastatingly ironic public, political stage for the private, personal tragedy of the film's narrative closure. *Farewell China* focuses on the psychic consequences of displacement and the exile of poverty and social alienation, and perhaps has more affinities with a sub-genre of US films which deal with New York as a social inferno, such as Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy*. Like those films, *Farewell China* is as much concerned with portraying the psychological, social and emotional dilemmas of its characters as individuals as it is in presenting any cohesive ideological statement about the perils and pitfalls of migration. Nonetheless, Teo aptly includes both *Farewell China* and *Floating Life* as key films in his assessment of the fundamental importance of local and global identity in contemporary Hong Kong cinema, in their treatment of the major theme of balancing east and west identities which are thrown into crisis by migration. As he argues, they illustrate how Hong Kong cinema of the past three decades has been 'obsessed with the notion of identity':

From Jackie Chan to Wong Kar-wai to Clara Law to Sammo Hung – from action pictures to art pictures – it is possible to see Hong Kong pictures as sharing one perennial theme, that of identity: the quest of, the assertion of, the affirmation of, identity (2000:3).

In *Farewell China*, which is a poignant dramatisation of the loss of identity, the fragmentation, dislocation and imaginative reconstruction of the variously hyphenated Chinese-American identities its characters experience as migrant outsiders construct a powerful transnational cinema which combines arthouse style with popular melodrama. In doing so it translates lived experiences of Chinese migration into a memorably modern mythic descent into an urban underworld.

Endnotes

1. Statistics taken from the Hong Kong Movie Database (<http://www.hkmdb.com/db/movies/view.mhtml>)
2. Ackbar Abbas, in *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, his study of cinema, architecture and writing in Hong Kong, refers erroneously to a 'well-regarded' film directed by Clara Law which he identifies as *Autumn Story*, made in the late 1980s about Hong Kong Chinese in New York, which, in its 'attempts to be international' he suggests 'may strike us as awkward and provincial' (1997:28). Clearly he is referring to Mabel Cheung's commercially successful 1987 comedy *An Autumn's Tale (Qiu Tian de Tonghua)*, written by Alex Law, in which Chow-yun Fat plays a Hong Kong Chinese cook in New York who falls in love with a Chinese student and eventually sets up his dream restaurant on a beach. This confusion with *Farewell China* is ironic, to say the least. Stokes and Hoover suggest that *Farewell China* 'makes the difficulties of *An Autumn's Tale* appear as surmountable complications and inconveniences' (1999: 153). Abbas' mistaken identity affirms that Clara Law's work is a particularly strong example of his claim that 'on the evidence

of what has been written about it, the more interesting examples of recent Hong Kong cinema must be among the most elusive films being made today' (1997:17).

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