Envisioning a New Cultural Topography: Linking Chinese Global Cities

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ABSTRACT

Situating in the theoretical framework of "Greater China," this article discusses the possibilities of conceiving a new cultural geography that will allow us to view the world in a new kind of global spatial order, instead of looking at the world as composed of a body of nations. This new inter-and cross-cultural map will show that a global urban culture has been in the making within the proposed Chinese global cities, namely, Shanghai, Taipei, and Hong Kong, and that in fact they share more in common with each other than with the cultures of the state where these cities exist.

KEY WORDS

"Greater China," "Cultural China," "global city," Hong Kong, *l'objet petit a,* Taipei, cultural identity, locality, Shanghai, market economy, global aspirations, Chinese cultural topography

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Clearly since the 1990s the economic integration of the three major Chinese regions—mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—has intensified. Ideological differences and political divisions that long separated these three societies have been gradually replaced by common commercial interests, shared cultural roots in language and tradition, and the pervasive global culture. With this new economic and cultural reality looming ever larger, it is imperative that we consider new ways of conceptualizing the unity of these three major Chinese regions, in order to transcend the political divide and the ideological chauvinism that crosses, and helps to form, regional and national boundaries.

In this new conceptualization, major Chinese cosmopolitan cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Taipei, Hong Kong, and Singapore may become the basic units of a new kind of network. When this new network of Chinese cities is placed in the larger global context, there will emerge fresh perspectives on the ways in which we look at Chinese culture. These new perspectives will bring attention to the global circulation of cultures and yield possibilities for conceiving an alternative cultural geography that views the world in terms of a new kind of global spatial order, instead of looking at the world as composed of a body of nations. This new inter-and cross-cultural map will show that a global urban culture in fact has long been in the making within these Chinese-cosmopolitan cities, and that in fact they share more in common with each other than with the state culture within which these cities are situated.

In this essay, I will review the popular "Greater China" concept and some of its implications, and compare it with the idea of a network of Chinese cosmopolitan centers to show that the latter is in fact more effective in creating an imagined community without necessarily evoking power tensions among the involved nations/regions. In discussing the potential for applying the concept of "global city" to the imagining of a new Chinese cultural topography, I will focus on three of the most cosmopolitan Chinese cities—Hong Kong, Taipei, and Shanghai—and discuss some of the issues brought forth by local filmmakers as they reflect on the dynamics between the local and the global. My essay will serve, then, as an introduction to the subsequent essays in this special issue, essays in which my collaborators in this project will undertake more in-depth examinations of an individual city or a particular issue.

1. "Greater China" and Its Implications

A manifestation of contemporary China's economic boom is the commonly accepted idea of "Greater China" (*dazhonghua*). The concept was first suggested in the late 1970s in anticipation of China's economic growth after Deng Xiaoping's reform policies.[1] The notion entails the potential economic integration of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (including Macau). Discussion of "Greater China" gained popular currency in both East Asia and the West in the early 1990s; since then, the definition of the scope of "Greater China" also has gone beyond these three regions to include Singapore, Southeast Asian Chinese communities, and overseas Chinese in Western countries. However, China, Taiwan and Hong Kong remain the primary components of "Greater China" in most discussions. While the term "Greater China" maintains its popularity as a concept unifying various Chinese regions and communities, it is not unproblematic. I will therefore first briefly discuss the political, economic, and cultural implications of the "Greater China" concept.

1.1 Political Implications

As a commonly used term, the concept of "Greater China" is usually employed to analyze the economic cooperation between and among mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. However, the concept also carries political implications. Edward J. Lazzerini summarizes it's historical evolution in an interesting way:

> As an idea, Greater China is not of recent vintage. One can identify a variant of it in the empire-building and empire-maintaining that have been part of Chinese experience for centuries, and another in the CCP's [Chinese Communist Party] self-view as a revolutionary model for other countries. But the nineteenth and twentieth centuries . . . [s]ocioeconomic developments native to China . . . encouraged significant mobility not only within the country but also abroad. The extensive Chinese presence in places such as Singapore, Thailand, and the United States is testimony in large measure to these developments. . . . On the other hand, the fates of Hong Kong and Taiwan are linked more to . . . the intrusion of European power. . . . European imperialism and investment further upset China's ability to conduct its own affairs and shape its own directions in ways with which it had grown comfortable through centuries of experience. . . .[2]

"Greater China," when evoked, thus brings out uneasy reactions to and associations with China's growing power in East Asia and its hard-liner stance on the Taiwan issue. Similarly, using "Greater China" as an umbrella term to signal an integrated China-Taiwan-Hong Kong economic-cultural zone will inevitable empower PRC to becoming the power center of this body since mainland China is the largest and the only internationally recognized nation in this alliance. Particularly when perceived by mainland Chinese people, as Michael Yahuda points out in his study, the term suggests precisely the very inter-regional politics that gets disguised within an apolitical zone built upon common economic interests and cultural practices.[3] To avoid this downfall, this new Chinese global city alliance thus must be incorporated into the larger international networks of global cities in order to ensure important issues such as civil and human rights, environmental responsibilities, and legal justices be kept in the forefront.

1.2 Economic Implications

Despite the political repercussions embedded in the concept of "Greater China," the concept itself has become an indisputable economic reality as the world has now moved into the 21st century. In his study of the role Hong Kong's economy plays in the growing economic ties among China, Taiwan and Hong Kong after the 1997 handover, Changqi Wu observes that, one of the main driving forces behind the concept of "Greater China" is, in fact, the foreign investors and the wide circulation of their products in these three regions. Wu states: "It was the large multinational corporations that finally solidified the concept of Greater China. When visiting the regional headquarters of large multinational firms in Hong Kong, one finds that may of the have Greater China in their organizational charts. This has come about largely because of the evolution of the market and of customers' preferences. . . . The *de facto* disappearance of borders between these markets put pressures on corporate leaders to respond by setting up the Greater China units to coordinate cross-border activities."[4] It is thus clear that the reality of "Greater China" is deeply embedded in the global economic development. But what needs to be cautioned about is the human aspect of the working of global economic system. One example comes to mind is the miscalculation by the Chinese authority in handling the outbreak of SARS in November 2002. A main reason the Beijing city government decided to cover up the spread of SARS within its city walls is precisely the concern of economy: to keep its foreign investors from leaving. But the decision backfired, only because the Chinese authority failed to comprehend the power dynamics between domestic governance and world capitalism.

1.3 Cultural Implications

But the economy is not the strongest element at play in informing the "Greater China" reality. A more prevalent and consequential factor is culture. Scholars have suggested that recreating a global Chinese culture through economics is the key to maintaining the integrity of "Greater China." Basing on the Confucian order of human interrelations, Tu Wei-ming proposes his vision of "Cultural China" to be the foundation of a common/global Chinese cultural identity that can unify all people of Chinese descent.[5] An immediate concern to this proposal is the challenge of relinquishing the very idea of *center*. Chinese culture, with its many manifestations in various Chinese societies and communities, is always in flux. To imagine that there is a unified understanding of what this culture is unpins the very ideological dichotomy (center vs. periphery) that Tu intends to overthrow with his "Cultural China" thesis. By fashioning Confucianism as the dominant value system and using it as a replacement of an existing geopolitical center (viz. People's Republic of China) is to deny other equally vibrant facets (such as liberalism and democracy) found in different Chinese societies and communities around the world. Harry Harding suggests that ideological pluralism thus should be the guiding principle of imagining a larger Chinese collective.[6] In his final assessment of the various interpretations of "Greater China," Harding believes that the concept's potential for multiple centers will probably continue to give it its validity in today's discussion of the global Chinese community as a whole.[7]

Despite Harding's optimistic assessment and the fact that "Greater China" is an informal, non-institutionalized term, it still suggests serious political repercussions that inescapably hinder the term's applicability. Similarly "Cultural China" also faces its own ideological and conceptual downfalls. As such, both "Greater China" and "Cultural China" have their limitations as concepts to encapsulate the convergence of diverse Chinese societies and communities across the globe. The reason for which perhaps lies in the merely evocation of the idea of "China." It seems that no matter how many variations and how broad scholars attempt to define the idea of "China," the word itself always tends to bring out alarmist reactions amongst people.

Hence the problem: in reality we are now faced with the emerging integration of several major Chinese "societies," but we still lack a suitable and uncontroversial conceptual principle to help us understand this new reality. Clearly "China" cannot be used as the building block of this new organizing principle, not simply because it implies a degree of political hegemony, but also because it embodies the amorphous and dynamic nature of Chinese culture itself. We therefore need to look elsewhere for answers.

2. "Global City" Investigated

The figure of a "global village" is emblematic of the intense critical interest which has recently been directed to rethinking different theoretical conceptualizations and methodological approaches to the increasingly transnational terrain of modern urban topographies. Focusing on the different dimensions of urban social, spatial, and cultural reality, various global studies have converged on the topic of the global city. In 1991, Saskia Sassen first proposed that a hierarchy of global cities has emerged. These global cities should be seen as constituting a system rather than competing with each other. Instead of looking at the world as composed of a body of nations, Sassen's examination suggests that a new kind of global spatial/geographical order has already been formed and subsequently a different inter-and cross-cultural map can be drawn. Taking Sassen's proposal one step further, Paul L. Knox argues that the economic link between these cities has created a global urban culture that is integrated into the cultures of/within these individual cities, allowing them to have more in common with each other than with their own national culture.

Using the above statement as its theoretical framework, this special issue proposes to investigate the common urban experiences shared by Hong Kong, Taipei, and Shanghai—three of the most cosmopolitan and global Chinese cities—and asks what would be at stake if a new cultural geography is to be conceived. Issues under investigation include: What perspectives can we deploy to investigate the different and yet similar cosmopolitan cultures of Hong Kong, Taipei, and Shanghai? How do cultures of these three cities work in practice and how are they embedded in everyday-life situations as locatable phenomena? What approaches can we use to explore the experience of place and space, the dynamics between local and global, culture and economy, and the dilemmas of knowledge? How do states, empires and nations, corporations, shops and goods, literature, music, film, etc., figure in our examination of the cultures of consumption and production? How do places develop meanings for people? What are the struggles over defining who belongs in a place? And finally, what role do travel, information technology, and other means of communication play in shaping a global city network among these three cities and beyond?[8]

Taking "global city" as an alternative conceptual model (as opposed to "Greater China") for a new cartography is not to evade political and ideological issues across nations and regions. On the contrary, "global city" allows us to recognize the limitations of the nation-state model and to look beyond the traditional divisions of national boundaries. While the model of "global city" is based more on similarities than differences, each such city's unique historical experience and local identity are necessary considerations in the making of the city a "global city" precisely because these factors can provide justifications for the application of the model and for continuing growth of the city's identity. It is only by examining each city's unique historical, political, and cultural context that the great potential of "global city" can be fully realized. In the following I will further delineate the individual condition of the three proposed Chinese cities—Hong Kong, Taipei, and Shanghai—to illustrate how the concept of "global city" can provide new visions and new possibilities for these cities and subsequently for the people and the nation at large.

2.1 Hong Kong

The ambiguous and anxious state of Hong Kong's post-1997 cultural identity incorporates nativism (a desire to emphasize the uniqueness of the place "Hong Kong" as a counter-measure to Chinese nationalism), nationalism (the willingness to embrace wholesale Chineseness and Hong Kong as a part of China), cosmopolitanism (championing on its inherent cultural hybridity thus bypassing the issue of national identification), and transnationalism (projecting the cultural borders of Hong Kong beyond its geopolitical confines in order to undermine national identification). Grappling with such ambiguity and anxiety has become the dominant theme in various mass cultural productions since 1997.

The Mission (1999), a film directed by Johnnie To and produced by Milkyway Image, reveals a paradoxical coexistence of confidence and fragility that characterizes the psychological complexity of Hong Kong's cultural identity at this time. Similar to his other film *Running out of Time,* which was also shot in 1999, both films celebrate male homosocial bonding through the male characters willingly adhere to the honor codes of sacrifice and integrity. Both are gangster action films, a trademark genre of Hong Kong cinema. *The Mission* in particular exhibits a distinct Hong Kong aesthetics of violence that combines artistic sensitivity and commercial awareness. This aesthetics is an integral part of the Hong Kong cultural identity shown through the city-state's most celebrated art form: this sense of cultural identity is confident as the cinematic aesthetics is mature.

However, within the story of the film, the masculine world is portrayed as both powerful and fragile. The seemingly unbreakable bond among the gangsters is easily corrupted by the intrusion of a woman. One of the gangster members of this group committed adultery with the boss's woman. Order immediately collapses and brothers are forced to execute brothers. The female intrusion is perceived as destructive and must be eliminated. Laikwan Pang situates *The Mission* in the larger socio-political context of post-1997 and points out a deep internal anxiety of a (postcolonial) identity under siege: "The woman's adultery signals the demolishing of the power structure headed by Big Brother. It also jeopardizes the homosocial bonding among the five brothers, as they are made to face a dilemma between loyalty to authority and loyalty to brotherhood. Only when the woman is executed can Lung's power, and the entire homosocial structure, be reinstated. It is also at this moment, when the patriarch fights back, that all the deceptions legitimizing the tyranny are exposed" (336).[9]

The non-negotiable rejection of any female presence in *The Mission*, as seen in the minimal role of the only female character and the killing of her when the crisis erupts, betrays a certain kind of ambiguity coming from the deep structure of Hong Kong cultural identity when the culture and the society as a whole faces a new and uncertain political (viz. national reunification with PRC) and economic (viz. the Asian financial crisis) situation. This ambiguity manifests itself in gender terms in which preservation of masculinity is only possible at the total expense of femininity. What, then, is the root of this identity/gender ambiguity? What does it signify and how can we understand it? More importantly, what does it say about the continuing development of Hong Kong cultural identity under the PRC regime? In other words, will China's cultural authority/authenticity "correct" or "de-contaminate" Hong Kong's coloniality and cultural hybridity?

The incompatibility of masculinity and femininity in *The Mission* is not a creative choice. Rather it reflects an intrinsic conflict within the culture itself and it becomes apparent when challenged by China, its ultimate cultural Other. Hybridity is the nature of the cultural identity of Hong Kong: it is colonial and yet autonomous, East but also West, indigenous as well as cosmopolitan, and it is a local identity with global prominence. What it is not is: it is not endowed with any kind of legitimacy precisely because it is a product of colonialism and has no prospect of transitioning into a national identity. What Hong Kong faces is not what usually happens at the end of a typical decolonization process that leads to a postcolonial stage in which, the previous colonial identity is transformed to a new national identity when the former colony becomes an independent nation-state.

Hong Kong's cultural identity, the future of such an identity, probably will be subsumed by China's national identity. The only way this "illegitimate" cultural identity can be articulated *as if* it is legitimate would be to align with the mainstream, patriarchal, hegemonic (mainland Chinese) discourse in order to gain currency. But to preserve Hong Kong identity's independence, this alignment also has to stay clear of China's nationalistic discourse. It is therefore not difficult to understand why in Johnnie To's cinematic vision, this inherent conflict must be disguised in sublime masculinity. This sublime masculinity is pure, clean, sexless and self-endowed with truth claim. It rejects any hint of homosexuality and does not tolerate heterosexuality. Thus, instead of crystallizing its duality or challenging the normative of identity construction, Johnnie To chooses to neutralize such duality and create a conception of masculinity that is entirely self-referential.

But To is not home free with his utopian solution to the legitimacy problem of Hong Kong cultural identity. This anonymous and insignificant female character is, in the Lacanian theory of psychoanalysis, *l'objet petit a* whose existence almost makes no sense in the purely masculine world. But it is necessary because it must be there to hinder the realization of To's fantastic masculine world from taking place so as to preserve the continuing process of creating such a fantasy or utopia. Thus, *l'objet petit a*, as Žižek explains it, is often the means through which a subject can come close to the kernel of its self.[10] But this kernel must never be attained or chaos will inevitably arise. Psychosis will happen once the barrier between the real and the symbolic breaks down. The anonymous woman thus must be killed when she infiltrates the world of male bonding (by way of an affair with one of the five body guards). Her intrusion threatens the survival of the masculine world because she has come too close to the center. So she has to be executed, because it is only by so doing that the process of desiring can continue.

What *The Mission* discloses is the anxiety of how the essence of Hong Kong—of what Hong Kong is—cannot be incorporated into the superstructure of nation and national history. In relation to China, the quintessential embodiment of grand History and Culture, Hong Kong is a misnomer, an abnormity. Hong Kong culture's hybrid condition lies at the root of its own anxiety. It is no wonder Johnnie To chooses a pure form of masculinity both as a rejection of and a desire to transcend normative sexuality/identity.

The challenge and predicament facing Hong Kong after 1997 is well articulated by the editors of *Hong Kong's Reunion with China: The Global Dimension*: "Unless it maintains its special international status and global linkages after July 1, 1997, Hong Kong could very well become just another city in South China. . . . Although already highly international, Hong Kong cannot rest on its laurels if it is to meet the challenges of becoming a successful Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China while at the same time maintaining as well as strengthening its global position."[11] For Hong Kong to sustain its global prominence is not a choice but an imperative. Failing to do so will only result in Hong Kong losing its cultural identity and quickly being subsumed by China's national apparatus. The path has been a difficult one: since the 1997 handover, Hong Kong people, who traditionally have been known as apolitical, have been compelled to march on the streets to protest Beijing's heavy-handed interferences with the territory's move towards democracy. On July 1, 2003 Hong Kong people exhibited unprecedented solidarity with a large turnout of more than 500,000 residents peacefully demonstrating against Article 23, a security bill many believed would violate people's basic civil rights such as freedom of speech.[12] Less than a year later, on April 11, 2004, thousands of Hong Kong people again took to the streets to protest against the Chinese government's stringent interpretation of the election of Hong Kong's chief executive after 2007.[13] The city that once was known for its lack of interest in politics may become a most politically minded community in the world. The main driving force behind this collective change is to protect Hong Kong's autonomy under the new sovereignty that rules Hong Kong.

It is indeed ironic that, while under Western colonial rule the people of Hong Kong were least interested in or felt compelled to fight for democratic freedom, but now that it is decolonized and reunified with its motherland, the political awareness should have risen to such height. Economic success has always been Hong Kong's redemption; can it continue to work under a new political operating system governed by different ideologies? Some scholars have debated that one of Hong Kong's most important aspirations now is to continue to build and maintain its already established global position, such as being a global city.[14] Spreading Hong Kong popular culture across the globe is a viable way to help Hong Kong sustain its global position. For Hong Kong to continue its economic prosperity and global prominence not only would allow the people of Hong Kong to preserve their unique cultural identity, but it also could prevent Hong Kong from being subsumed by the national apparatus and becoming a mere "Chinese" city.

2.2 Taipei

Taiwan's cultural ties to and political antagonism with China inevitably complicate any attempt to assert an authentic "Taiwanese" (and here we must even be careful about using this term, about which "sense" we are giving it) cultural identity. We only need look to Taiwan's ambiguous political status—as an independent political entity lacking formal recognition by most nations in the world—to realize the difficulty of legitimizing Taiwan's independent cultural identity. Like Hong Kong, Taiwan needs to look beyond the notion of the "nation-state"—as the basis for a collective cultural identity—as a way out of its predicament. Promotion of any forms of global aspiration should have humanitarian spirit as its foundation. Terry Eagleton explains the different "nature" of or subsisting within each kind of identity formation: "What constitutes my own self-identity is the self-identity of the human spirit. What makes me what I am is my essence, which is the species to which I belong. Culture is itself the spirit of humanity individuating itself in specific works; and its discourse links the individual and the universal, the quick of the self and the truth of humanity, without the mediation of the historically particular." [15] Under the banner of this humanitarian vision of identity, locality and community—or simply, a bounded space with cultural homogeneity—loses its significance. There are no longer such clear and concrete local boundaries as our perceptions of space and time become increasingly affected by current technologies in/of communications, transportation, and commerce. This opening up of boundaries should allow us more freedom to experience as well as to expand our understanding of identity.

In Tsai Ming-liang's film, *What Time Is It There?* (2001), time and space are collapsed into one lingering desire to connect. This film is a temporal investigation of reaching beyond one's locality. Taipei and Paris exist on the same temporal-spatial plane as Hsiao Kang (Lee

Kang-sheng) changes local time to Paris time on every single clock he can find throughout Taipei city—from the clock in his house to finally a giant one on a high-rise building. Despite the absurdity of his action, nevertheless it is his way of connecting with the young woman (Chen Shiang-chyi) who bought his watch (ironically with two time zones) before her departure to Paris. The film cuts back and forth between Taipei and Paris, portraying the two protagonists wandering through their respective cities searching, in quiet desperation, for ways to break through the alienation that haunts them.

Shiang-chyi's trip to Paris provides Hsiao Kang the idea of an "elsewhere" that inspires him to "transform" his mundane and lonely existence in quite a literal manner by changing time on the clocks around him. This transformation puts his city in a new time zone—Paris's—and turning Taipei into Paris. Hsiao Kang thus is able to be "here" and "there" simultaneously, even if only in a figurative sense. But this figurative gesture for Tsai Ming-liang, a master of minimalism and understatement, is already quite a statement in and of itself.

Shiang-chyi's journey to Paris is the antithesis of Hsiao Kang's immobility, but with an inherent irony. Although she is able to go "elsewhere," she in fact has never really left "here." She spends many aimless moments in Paris, no more alone than when she is in Taipei. Her silent sadness and alienation in a foreign city is constantly echoed back to Taipei where Hsiao Kang also spends many lonely days and nights futilely trying to be in temporal sync with this young woman whom he barely knows.

The significance of needing to connect takes on a philosophical turn as Shiang-chyi seeks refuge in a cemetery. Here she unexpectedly encounters a strange man (Jean-Pierre Léaud) who attempts to give her his phone number: "You look for a phone number? I will write you a (my) phone number." We cannot help but wonder whose phone number she looks for—could it be Hsiao Kang's, since we have seen her calling him at the beginning of the film? Surrounded by several larger-than-life statures on the ground as markers of grave sites, Shiang-chyi for the first time indicates the desire to reach out. Those astonishing-looking sculptures seem to indicate humans' attempt to transcend death while reminding the spectator that our time in this world is finite. The question in the film title, "What time is it there?" becomes an existential inquiry of our life here in this world. Themes like making connection, transcending the spatial-temporal barriers and contemplating on the question of (life and) death, thus converge to one central issue: the search for oneself. The real purpose behind Hsiao Kang's and Shiang-chyi's wandering in their respective city is for them to come face to face with themselves. Although the moment of epiphany never actually arrives, hopes for both protagonists are hinted at the end.

Near the end of the film Hsiao Kang's deceased father appears, acting like a guarding angel for the sleeping Shiang-chyi on a bench in a park. As the father walks toward the large Ferris wheel with a barely detectable smile on his face, a hint of hope for this desolate young woman arises. Although it is difficult to pinpoint what Tsai has in mind with this mysterious (as well as mystical) closing, the symbolic meaning of the wheel is apparent. Among its many religious significations, one of them suggests the Buddhist notion of reincarnation—the fluidity of life and death, and the possibility of enlightenment and paradise.

What Time Is It There? is Tsai's first film to go beyond the geography of Taiwan in order to incorporate another continent (vis-à-vis Paris) in his continuous exploration of urban alienation and the anguish for making connection between people who seem unable to do so. The paralleling of two distant cities is significant as it points to a broader horizon, suggesting perhaps an international/global possibility. This expansion promises to break the mental and emotional claustrophobia characteristic of many of Tsia's films such as *Vive l'Amour* and *The Hole*. Perhaps it would not be a stretch to say that this claustrophobia is a metaphor for Taiwan people's collective psyche in reacting to the stagnant socio-political condition on the island. In this transcontinental setting, Tsai Ming-liang seems to find hope for his melancholic characters in their suffocating environment.

Despite the Taiwanese people's accomplishment in developing a more open environment, culminating in the three general presidential elections in1996, 2000 and 2004, Taiwan's society remains sharply divided along strict ethnic lines. This sad reality was made clear in the last presidential campaigns in 2004. For the people of Taiwan to rise above a politics of ethnic division that has significantly weakened the cohesion of the whole society, global aspirations are necessary. Taipei's cosmopolitan culture certainly qualifies it to be regarded as a global city. I believe it is worth the while of both the government and the people to project Taipei as such a city and to position it within the global network of major cities such as New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, Singapore, Hong Kong, and so on. The rift between different ethnic groups stems primarily from the issue of Taiwan independence and the political antagonism between the Chinese and the Taiwanese governments. Whether Taiwan will become an independent nation-state or be unified with China is anyone's guess; but either outcome will certainly cost the people of Taiwan a great deal. Present debates over independence, unification, or maintaining the *status quo* have already taxed heavily the collective Taiwanese psyche. It would seem, therefore, that for Taiwan to become a more truly global city—or more fully part of a Chinese global city-network—is the only way out of this difficult dilemma.

2.3 Shanghai

Chinese society has been changing drastically since Deng Xiaoping unleashed the people's desire for economic betterment. The most noticeable transformations are found in cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, Guanzhou, Hangzhou, among others. However, China's current socialist capitalism also has created an aporia: while people are encouraged to accumulate as much capital as possible and use it to buy anything they want, they however are not be allowed sufficient civil rights, political freedom, and democracy. From various recent cultural trends, we can discern that there is a growing awareness and desire for a more tolerant government and a more open and freer society where people are able to express their different views. Unfortunately further political changes in the direction of a more democratic society in China will take time. At present, the commonly shared goal of Chinese people is to continue to strive for financial success.

Transformations of Chinese society brought on by a market economy and cultural-economic globalization are reflected in contemporary Chinese literature's thematic shift from the "scar" literature's bitter testimonies of personal suffering during the Cultural Revolution and "root-seeking" literature's painful self-reflexivity, to avant-garde literature's experimentation with innovative aesthetics and techniques for exploring individuality, to the highly self-indulgent and decadent urban literature of the late 1990s and beyond. In films, we can also discern the drastic difference between the fifth and the sixth generation filmmakers in their ideological concerns and sense of history: whereas films by Zhang Yimou (1951-) and Chen Kaige (1952-), born of the Cultural Revolution generation, are burdened with nation and history, younger directors such as Lou Ye (1965-) and Wang Xiaoshuai (1966-), who grew up during the Deng era, are preoccupied with personal strife in an increasingly capital-driven society. In this fast changing society where only less than two decades ago socialist-communism dominated the day, anxiety over uncertainty becomes a popular subject matter for writers and filmmakers. Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (2000) illustrates the profound sense of disillusionment and emptiness felt by the individual in modern-day China.

The film portrays Shanghai in an unfamiliar and unflattering light. The city's famous landmarks such as the Bund, the futuristic skyline of Pudong and the Oriental Pearl TV Tower are captured briefly by an out-of-focus camera from a great distance. Shanghai appears as an industrial wasteland infiltrated with poverty-stricken boat people, displaced migrant workers, chimneys shooting out heavy gray smoke, and the Suzhou River polluted with garbage. Lou Ye's Shanghai becomes the witness of the dark side of China's seemingly victorious economic boom, its young residents lost in a nation's sweeping transformation.

The underlying impulse of this film is to destabilize any assumption of the "real." Opening with a blank screen and a puzzling conversation between two lovers who re questioning the permanence of love, the director films the first scene with a deliberately unstable and crude quasi-documentary camera. The film's sense of reality is thus limited and dubious from the onset. Accompanying the opening shots is the voice-over of a video photographer whose face is never shown, identity thus unknown. He is the (unreliable) narrator (whose perspective dictates the viewer's) of a strangely twisted love story. This story is based partly on a report he read from the newspaper and partly on his conjecture. This love story involves a delivery motorcyclist Mada who is caught up in some local gangsters' kidnapping scheme of a rich liquor smuggler's daughter, Mudan. Despite Mada's growing attachment to Mudan, the kidnap must proceed. Mudan, after finding out Mada's betrayal, throws herself into the Suzhou River as her desperate way of protest. Mada is then imprisoned for two years for his involvement. Upon release, he vows to find Mudan since her body was never recovered. Accidentally in a nightclub, Mada sees a girl who looks exactly like Mudan—Meimei, the video photographer's love obsession. Mada begins his pursuit of Meimei by telling his tragic story every night when Meimei dresses up like a mermaid to work in that cheesy nightclub. Gradually Meimei becomes affected by Mada's story and begins to develop feelings for him. Because of his relationship with Meimei, the video photographer finds himself involved in this bizarre love triangle. Unexpectedly one day, Mada runs into Mudan in a convenient store. But their reunion only lasts briefly. Near the end of the film, two dead bodies of a young man and a young woman are found by fishermen on the Suzhou River. In the final scene, Meimei turns toward the camera with a look of indescribable terror after seeing the dead woman who looks just like her.

What should have been a straightforward love story is masked by the highly subjective docu-dramatic style of camera work, the confusing identity of the two identical-looking female protagonists, and the ambiguous role of the narrator-video photographer whose double mission of residing above the story (as its recorder) and at times participating in the unfolding of the event constantly destabilizes the temporal logic of the plot. What furthers the film's enigmatic allure is the symbol of the mermaid—it is an urban legend in the Suzhou River neighborhood, the Barbie doll that Mada gave to Mudan for her birthday, which is later personified by Meimei in the nightclub's large aquarium. When Mudan's mermaid doll comes alive in Meimei's exotic mermaid entertainer, the eeriness undermines the love testament in the Mada-Mudan story. But this love is already marred by Mada's greed for money and his ultimate betrayal to Mudan's trust. Meimei's relationship with the video photographer has even less commitment to speak of—at the first sign of doubt, the video photographer's sinister reaction is, "Should we make love before or after we break up?" Love becomes an item for exchange or consumption. Even the happiest moment, which comes when Mada celebrates her birthday with Mudan, is filled with superficial thrills: a fast motorcycle ride along the river with heavy vodka drinking and a cheap Barbie doll.

The pervasive sense of unreliability throughout the film reveals an underlying anxiety that questions the permanence of things. The impoverished life style of these young people hints at the spiritual emptiness of an urban existence. The symbol of the mermaid, a Western/Disney import, further affirms the limited cultural imagination of the local people at the height of China's economic prosperity.[16] Instead of exhibiting nationalistic pride of China's achievement, Lou Ye expresses doubts, ambivalence and worries about the society's unbalanced economic and cultural growth. Instead of fully embracing globalization, Lou Ye is showing caution.

It is not difficult to imagine that a spiritual and moral vacuum causes the director's anxiety toward the meaning of the real. The present Chinese society is a place where pursuing material fulfillment is encouraged, but probing difficult questions is not. History, particularly the most recent one of the Mao era, is one important subject that has yet to be fully explored. When the nation made its transition (and transformation) from the Mao's socialist-communism to today's semi-capitalist society, what happened in the first fifty years of the nation is not thoroughly reflected upon. Without proper understanding of the nation's most recent past, inevitably it will generate a sense of historical discontinuity for its people, particularly when the society itself has been undergoing drastic changes in all aspects of life.

Global aspirations, on the other hand, can offer a different kind of vision for Chinese people, a way of defining themselves in a transitional environment and to relate their new identity with the equally new world that surrounds them. What I see as being most important in the current socio-economic-cultural development of China is, indeed, for the Chinese people to reestablish their relationship with the world at large. Among China's large cities, Shanghai is a logical city to begin shaping this new global relation. The city has a long history of cosmopolitanism and has always been a place where Chinese culture and foreign cultures mix and mesh. Formerly known as "the Paris in the Orient," Shanghai in the twenty-first century is gaining back its old glory and stature. Now it has risen to the level of sophistication that can rival Hong Kong and Taipei. Also given Shanghai's financial prominence in China's current economy, the city has already gone on its way to becoming a global city. Therefore it only makes sense that the notion of global city be promoted. This new global vision will not only enhance the Chinese people's confidence but also help to develop a more tolerant attitude toward Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as other nations.

3. Conclusion

Utilizing the concept of "global city" (or "global-city-network") to conceptualize a new Chinese cultural topography allows us to achieve a better understanding of the cosmopolitan experience shared by the people of these three Chinese cities. With such an understanding, we can hopefully also establish a new sense of unity that will transcend the divisive ethnic and political ideologies of this region. Cultural and economic globalization has created a new reality, one that cannot be fully comprehended with old concepts (such as ethnicity and nationalism) and models (such as nation-state and government), one with a far-reaching and still partly unpredictable impact. Global cities are like new dots surfacing on our contemporary world map; as they become increasingly linked together, we will be face with a totally new kind of world geography or "topography." This new global vision inevitably will guide us as we (re)shape both our individual cultural identities and our larger global identity.

NOTES

[1] For a detailed historical review of the concept and its variants, please see "The Concept of 'Greater China': Themes, Variations and Reservations," by Harry Harding. The article is collected in *Greater China: The Next Superpower?*, ed. by David Shambaugh (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 8–34.

[2] *The Chinese Revolution* (Westport, CT & London: Greenwood Press, 1999), 81.

[3] "The Foreign Relations of Greater China," collected in *Greater China: The Next Superpower?,* 35–58.

[4] "Hong Kong and Greater China: An Economic Perspective." *Hong Kong Under Chinese Rule: The Economic and Political Implications of Reversion*, eds. by Warren I. Cohen and Li Zhao (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1997), 119.

[5] Tu Wei-ming, "Cultural China: The Periphery as Center," *Daedalus*, vol. 120, no. 2 (1991), 2–3.

[6] "The Concept of 'Greater China': Themes, Variations and Reservations," 23.

[7] *Ibid.*, 31–34.

[8] This list of issues appeared in the call-for-papers for a conference I organized in May 3–4, 2002, "Mapping a New Cultural Geography: Taipei, Hong Kong, and Shanghai as Global Cities," held at Washington University in St. Louis. Articles in this special issue are selected from the papers presented at this conference.

[9] "Masculinity in Crisis: Films of Milkyway Image and Post-1997 Hong Kong Cinema," *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3 (March 2002), 325–40.

[10] "From Reality to the Real," *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT P, 1998), 12.

[11] Ed. by Gerald A. Postiglione, James T. H. Tang, and James Tuck-Hong Tang. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997, 3.

[12] Article 23 would allow police to search homes, imprison journalists,

and arrest citizens who have affiliations with groups that are banned by the Chinese government, such as the Falun Gong and pro-Tibet organizations.

[13] According to the report in *The New York Times* on April 12, 2004, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) ruled on April 6, 2004 that "Hong Kong's chief executive would have to obtain its approval before submitting any electoral reform bills to the legislature" (A 10). The controversy lies in the gray area of the Basic Law, Hong Kong's mini-constitution, which states that Hong Kong will be able to change its electoral process after 2007, such as electing its executive leader by poplar votes; it however does not specify who—the SAR government or the central Beijing government—has the final authority to decide whether changes are necessary. The April 6 ruling by the NPC ultimately says that the final decision is rested upon the Chinese government; and the NPC disagrees that the Basic Law allows for the election of the territory's leader in 2007. But Hong Kong pro-democracy activists insist it is the people of Hong Kong who have the right to decide the need for electoral changes and the assent of Beijing is asked for only at the end of the process. Under the Basic Law, Hong Kong people are allowed to rule Hong Kong with a high degree of autonomy for fifty years. This is the principle of the "one country, two systems" formula that PRC designed for Hong Kong, with intent to implement it in Taiwan in the future once the island comes under the Chinese rule.

[14] Agnes S. Ku's "Postcolonial Cultural Trends in Hong Kong: Imagining the Local, the National, and the Global" presents a thoughtful discussion of this issue. This article is collected in *Crisis and Transformation in China's Hong Kong*, ed. by Ming K. Chan and Alvin Y. So. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2002.

[15] *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000), 55.

[16] Ban Wang also has a similar observation on the mermaid symbol, that it is not only an indication of "the poverty of local cultural resources" but also "the preference for things global." Please see the section on *Suzhou River* in his book, *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 253–57.

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