

If China Can Say No, Can China Make Movies? Or, Do Movies Make China? Rethinking National Cinema and National Agency

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Writing about national cinemas used to be an easy task: film critics believed all they had to do was construct a linear historical narrative describing the development of a cinema within a particular national boundary whose unity and coherence seemed beyond all doubt. -Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, "The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Film Studies and the Postcolonial World Order," *Japan in the World*

Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto's enumeration of the problematic elements of the national cinema paradigm in film studies is elegant and concise. But one element is missing: national agency. For an underlying assumption of the paradigm is that films from a certain country are somehow the expression of that country, that in some sense the nation authors them. In 1996, a nationalist and anti-American book called *China Can Say No* took the Chinese book market by storm,¹ reportedly selling out its first print run of 130,000 copies in a matter of weeks.² The title implies that the nation called "China" is a collective agency, a conscious being that can speak, in much the same manner that national cinema assumes nations make movies. For many years, this was not so much a theoretically articulated paradigm as implicit and taken for granted. Over the last decade or so, the nation, including the nation in China, has come into focus as an object of critical and theoretical interrogation.³ Yoshimoto's remark registers the impact of this shift on the national cinema paradigm and also seems to beg the question of what should take its place.

After all, once one starts to think about it, the idea of a nation speaking or shooting movies can seem like quite a ridiculous fantasy. And for those of us predisposed against nationalisms of all sorts, the temptation to redefine the nation as a discursive fiction and to dismiss the whole issue of national collective agency and its mobilization in relation to cinema must be strong. Indeed, although a number of works have engaged the national cinema paradigm very productively in recent years, I believe there has been a tendency in this direction of eliding or foreclosing upon consideration of the national as a collective agency with a putative collective consciousness. However, whether he mentions national agency or not, Yoshimoto's statement has stuck in my mind for some time now. Despite the growing number of new works on the national cinema paradigm, as far as I am aware, there

¹ Song Qiang, Zhang Zangzang, Qiao Bian, Tang Zhengyu, and Gu Qingsheng, *China Can Say No* (Zhongguo keyi shuo bu) (Beijing: Zhonghua Gongshang Lianhe Chubanshe, 1996). In an interesting response to this volume and the issue of nationalism today, "Thoughts on Reading the China That Can Say No," *Sinorama* 21, no. 10 (October 1996): 76-96, Ju Gau-jeng points out that the title is adapted from Ishihara Shintaro and Morita Akio's 1990 bestseller *The Japan That Can Say No*.

² Charles Hutzler, "Anti-US Sentiment Swells in China, Threatening Improving Ties," <http://sddt.com/files/librarywire/96wireheadlines/08_96/DN96_08_12/DN96_08_12_1b.html>. Rone Tempest, in "Close-up: China's Youth Find It's Cool to Be Seen As Anti-American," <http://www.seattletimes.com/extra/browse/html/altchin_070896.html>, quotes Song Qiang as saying that China needs its own ultranationalist like the Russian Zhironovsky.

³ On the importation and deployment of the concept of the nation in China, see in particular Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

has been little detailed discussion of national agency as a problematic in regard to Chinese cinema. Maybe that is why his statement has stayed with me. Clearly it is time to ask again what we mean when we talk about "Chinese cinema," and whether or not and under what conditions we should speak of "Chinese cinema" (or "French cinema" or "Italian cinema") as a national cinema or even a number of national cinemas.

In what follows, I discuss what sort of theoretical reorganization is necessary if we are to begin to answer these questions. I believe that in order to rethink the issue of the national and cinema, it is necessary to return to the question of national agency and other types of collective agencies. It is necessary to examine their forms, their modes of agency, and their legitimization, and the cinema's participation in all these regards. Maybe China *can* make movies after all, but maybe not in the expressive and monolithic sense assumed by the national cinema paradigm (or, I suspect, by the book title *China Can Say No*). Drawing on theories of the performative, I will argue that the making of "China" as national agency is an ongoing, dynamic, and contested project. In a paradoxical fashion, statements such as that of the book title or the complex significations of the cinema participate in the constitution of "China" as national agency by signifying the existence of this collective entity prior to the very statements that constitute them. However, the variety of such significations itself belies their frequent significations of "China" as singular, essential, and naturalized, revealing instead not that "China" is a nonexistent fiction but that it is a discursively produced and socially and historically contingent collective entity. In this sense, it is not so much China that makes movies, but movies that help to make China. In order to reach this conclusion, I first examine the relative absence of detailed discussion about collective agency and national cinema in English-language studies on Chinese cinema.⁴ I argue that this may be the result of the very same factor that makes Chinese cinema a particularly compelling site for this project, namely the evident difficulty of knowing what the Chinese nation is. Underlying this particular difficulty are broader questions about the conceptual status of the nation itself. I then turn to recent works on other cinemas that engage in the national cinema problematic to see what they can offer, as well as a recent critique of those works by Michael Walsh. Walsh argues that, in their invocation of Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities," many recent works lean toward reinstalling the Lacanian Imaginary and the nation as a collective version of the universal subject. However, I find that Walsh's own argument responds to these problems in conceptualization by moving away from the issue of collective agency and its constitution altogether. In contrast, I argue here that a deeper engagement with this concept is necessary.

In the wake of Anderson's work, the imagined community-as-nation is sometimes understood as only a textual trope and therefore a social fiction to be dispelled and replaced with empirical truth. In contrast, I argue that Anderson's concept participates in that larger range of work that recasts the concept of being, previously understood as essential, natural, and given ("I think therefore I am"), and places it as discursively constructed and historically and socially contingent. From this perspective, the nation is not merely an imagined textual object but a

⁴ In regard to the conception of the "national" at least, I believe that Chinese-language film theory and criticism remains somewhat autonomous from English-language theory and criticism. Therefore any proper study of the issue in Chinese-language film theory and criticism, although certainly desirable and necessary, would require separate attention extending beyond the range of this essay.

historically and socially contingent construction of a form of collective agency. Here, I draw upon Judith Butler's work on performativity. In these circumstances, if "China" can say no, we need to ask about the circumstances of the constitution of this collective agency. Similarly, rather than arguing for the total abandonment of the concept of national agency in regard to national cinema, I argue for recasting national cinema as a multiplicity of projects, authored by different individuals, groups, and institutions with various purposes, but bound together by the politics of national agency and collective subjectivity as constructed entities. In regard to China, this recasting, then, means that Chinese national cinema is not simply the same as all cinema produced within Chinese territories or by Chinese people. Instead, we have to speak of Chinese national cinemas and distinguish their specific circumstances as socially, politically, and historically specific projects contesting each other in the construction of Chinese national agency, which is itself defined in various ways.

At first, the lack of detailed attention paid to Chinese cinema and the issue of national cinema may seem odd. The eagerness with which the Japanese government pursued the project of constructing Japan as a modern nation and nation-state well before the invention of cinema might excuse the ready assumption of the national cinema model in that case (although, of course, that assumption also needs interrogation).⁵ But one glance at twentieth-century Chinese history should make immediately obvious the problem of assuming a national cinema in the Chinese case and its potential productiveness as a site for the investigation of the issue. Yet maybe it is the very obviousness of the difficulties presented by the uniqueness of the Chinese situation—the **existence of two political regimes, the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China**, each claiming to be the one and only Chinese nation-state, and the separate but not national space of Hong Kong—that is still inhibiting discussion.

Certainly, that obviousness has not stopped us from sidestepping the problem in the past.⁶ In the introduction to their remarkable website on Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *City of Sadness* (*Beiqing chengshi*), Abe Mark Nornes and Yeh Yueh-yu note, "The preference for mainland China studies over other Chinese areas (e.g., Taiwan and Hong Kong) has also been replicated in film studies. As a result, Chinese-language films from Taiwan and Hong Kong were relatively ignored under a specious definition of 'Chinese' identical with the People's Republic of China. Therefore, the politics of choosing *City of Sadness* ... can be seen as an intervention against the monolithic perspective dominating the definition of 'Chinese' cinema in film studies."⁷ Nornes and Yeh emphasize a bias toward socialism. They note that Jay Leyda, author of the first major text in English on the Chinese cinema, had an explicit interest in leftist politics and the "wave of pilgrimages to postMao China" upon invitations in the late 1980s.⁸ While I am skeptical about the existence of any Communist plot to seduce American film academics, Taiwanese and Hong Kong cinemas certainly were relatively overlooked. No doubt the long-prevailing interest in art-house and "high-culture" non-Hollywood cinemas over popular and

⁵ Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).

⁶ I include myself in the list of guilty parties here. In the introduction to *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 1991), which includes what could be seen as only token articles on Hong Kong and Taiwan, I simply ignore the problem entirely.

⁷ Abe Mark Nornes and Yeh Yueh-yu, "Introduction," "<http://cinemaspace.berkeley.edu/Papers/CityOfSadness/table.html>," 4.

⁸ Jay Leyda, *Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972). On the alleged "pilgrimages," see Hu Ke, "Contemporary Film Theory in China," trans. Ted Wang, Chris Berry, and Chen Mei, in *Screening the Past*, "http://www.latrobe.edu.au/www/screening_the_past/teruns/hkn2b.html" (25 March 1998).

"low-culture" non-Hollywood cinemas played a part in this, particularly in the case of Hong Kong cinema, which rightly or wrongly is so often perceived as an archetypal popular and "low-culture" cinema. But I would argue that the national cinema framework was also important. Hong Kong was a colonial territory, and the primary market of Hong Kong cinema is as much the Chinese global diaspora as it is the population of Hong Kong itself. It simply does not fit the national cinema paradigm, and attempting to examine Hong Kong cinema would inevitably have threatened that model. For different reasons, much the same is true of Taiwanese cinema. The Kuomintang KMT Nationalist party maintains it is the government of all China despite being confined to the island of Taiwan for almost fifty years now. Writing about Taiwanese cinema would require paying attention to this peculiar situation, again potentially undermining the convenient epistemological fiction of national cinema.

Despite this history of avoidance, some work has touched upon the national issue. The recent *New Chinese Cinemas* volume does cover the People's Republic, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. In his introduction, Nick Browne does not sidestep the question of how these territories are related to each other and to Chinese culture but makes comparisons and traces connections. It is in the tracing of connections that the issue of national cinema is alluded to. For, having stated that "the presumption that Chinese cinema is the monolithic cultural expression of a Chinese nation has been dramatically undercut by history," he goes on to speak of "a common cultural tradition of social, ideological, and aesthetic forms that stands behind and informs Chinese cinema as a whole."⁹ Although there can be no doubt that shared elements inform certain films from different Chinese territories, this is a rather strong statement. Here, I believe, there is a risk of replacing the discredited essentialized and transcendent nation as the author of national cinema with an equally essentialized and transcendent "common cultural tradition." Although there is nothing to suggest that either the editors of the book or specifically Browne's introduction intend to engage in such a move, it must be pointed out that this repositioning risks appropriation by those cultural nationalist forces eager to mobilize one or another form of "Greater China."¹⁰ Retrospectively constructing a common cultural tradition is one of the most basic moves in the mobilization of modern nationalism, if not indeed a precondition for it.¹¹ But pointing to common cultural characteristics across certain periods and territories as informing cinema from those territories does not have to be done in a manner that invokes the type of transcendent cultural identity that would subtend Greater China-ism. To avoid this danger requires the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that would enable such distinctions to be made. In other words, it requires a rethinking of the conceptual framework surrounding culture, agency, and cinema as surely as rethinking national cinemas requires rethinking national agency.

A second book that invokes issues of collective agency in relationship to cinema is Rey Chow's *Primitive Passions*, in which she speaks of contemporary Chinese cinema as

⁹ Nick Browne, introduction to *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, ed. Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.

¹⁰ Jing Wang points to some of the complicated and contradictory articulations of various Greater China projects in *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 65-73, 327-28 n. 34.

¹¹ See, for example, the essays collected in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

"a kind of postmodern self-writing or autoethnography."¹² As far as I can tell, Chow does not explicitly address the connection between this concept of autoethnography and the issues I am raising here, but insofar as *ethnos* means "people," I understand that issues of collective agency and authorship are at stake here, too, although it must be emphasized that Chow insists this process is always already a cross-cultural one. I will return to this and to Browne's concept of a common cultural tradition as interesting and important ideas that invoke collective Chinese agency exceeding the modern Chinese nation-states after I consider other current work on other cinemas that is attempting to move beyond the old national cinema paradigm.¹³ Perhaps such work can provide the concepts and tools needed to rethink Chinese cinema and the issue of national cinema.

In a recent article, Michael Walsh surveys a number of books on national cinemas.¹⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, he finds that, "of all the theorists of nationalism in the fields of history and political science, Anderson has been the only writer consistently appropriated by those working on issues of the national in film studies."¹⁵ Anderson's felicitous term "imagined communities" has been the trigger in many fields for rethinking the nation, not as something taken for granted but as a socially and historically specific idea of community. As an ideal concept at least, the nation is defined by unity and shared characteristics among its national citizenry, as opposed to the hierarchies of differences structuring the subjects of monarchies, empires, and religious realms.¹⁶

Walsh then focuses on and questions what he perceives as the dangerous slide from Anderson's use of the word *imaginary* to its conflation with the Lacanian concept of the Imaginary in much of the work surveyed. His objections are numerous but can be summarized as a concern that this implies a return to an already discredited Marxist-psychoanalytic structuralist approach that is essentialist, unified, and ahistorical in its pretense to scientific objectivity and universal truth. This untenable essentialism manifests itself not only in the positing of the nation itself as a collective subject but also in the relations between the film and the spectator, whereby the cinema is said to participate in the constitution of that subject. This does not allow for the heterogeneity of cinematic texts, the range of spectator responses, and the instability of the subject, be it individual or collective. He cites the example of the New Zealand films *The Piano*, *Heavenly Creatures*, and *Once Were Warriors* as evidence of a "plurality of conceptions of the nation and of identity within nations."¹⁷

¹² Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), xi.

¹³ Zhang Xudong also has a chapter on Fifth Generation as "national cinema" in *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 347-66. However, what constitutes the national and how it is to be understood theoretically is not a major issue in the chapter.

¹⁴ Michael Walsh, "National Cinema, National Imaginary," *Film History* 8 (1996), 5-17. The main works Walsh surveys are: Susan Hayward, *French National Cinemas* (London: Routledge, 1993); Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Sumita Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994); Stuart Cunningham, *Featuring Australia: The Cinema of Charles Chauvel* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991); and John King, Ana M. Lopez, and Manuel Alvarado, eds., *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas* (London: British Film Institute, 1993).

¹⁵ Walsh, "National Cinema," 6.

¹⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

¹⁷ Walsh, "National Cinema," 12.

However, Walsh also acknowledges that the works he is considering are short on explicit theoretical exposition and that he is extrapolating from what is often only implicit in the adoption of the language of Lacanian- Althusserian film studies. His critique certainly highlights an aspect of these recent works that lacks adequate theorization, although I suspect this general elision of explicit and theorized discussion of collective agency and its construction, rather than wholesale and unquestioning acceptance of the Lacanian-Althusserian paradigm, may be the problem. And insofar as Walsh is arguing that the model of the psychoanalytic subject cannot be assumed to be universal, seamlessly complete, or the only model of subjectivity and agency available or suitable, I am in complete agreement with him. Despite the fact that I have frequently deployed concepts derived from psychoanalytic theory in my work on Chinese cinema, I want to emphasize that I have no interest in privileging that conceptual framework over others. And in recognition that there is a real (if sometimes inadvertent) danger of suggesting such a position by using terms like "the national imaginary" and "the national subject," I will continue to use what I hope will be accepted as less specifically psychoanalytic terminology such as "agency" and "collectivity" here. But I am afraid that in his concluding paragraphs Walsh makes his own slide from questioning the universality of the Lacanian-Althusserian paradigm toward abandoning questions of national agency and its construction altogether. He concludes by suggesting, "If the term [national imaginary] simply refers to a body of conventionalized imagery related to nations and nationally-bounded groups, I would argue that more interesting theories of national and transnational cinema could be produced by simply talking about conventions rather than this proliferation of imaginaries."¹⁸

Perhaps we can get a stronger idea of the type of work Walsh is advocating by looking at his citations. In passages prior to the one quoted above, writers such as David Bordwell and Noel Carroll, along with literary formalism, are mentioned with approval. Walsh points out quite rightly that attention to formal categories need not entail lack of attention to sociohistorical grounding and conditions of production. Indeed, Bordwell's meticulous attention in his book on Ozu to the filmmaker's biography, the institutional conditions within which he worked, and other proximate and material evidence could all be cited as examples for similar work on cinema and national identity.¹⁹ Also, in what is probably the most popular academic introduction to the field of film studies today, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson define national cinemas in terms of, first, films made within a particular nation that share formal features and, second, filmmakers who share assumptions about filmmaking and work within a common production structure.²⁰

Certainly, there are considerable benefits to be derived from focusing on concrete analysis and socially and historically located discussion of the texts involved in relation to the construction and signification of national agency and nationalism, rather than simply assuming that all films from a particular country express some national essence. Indeed, I believe that many of the works Walsh cites attempt to do just that. In addition to the examples he gives, I would add Tom O'Regan's more recent book on Australian cinema. O'Regan's book explores a variety of competing representations of Australian national identity and national culture in the manner suggested by Walsh's citation of New Zealand films. He also moves away from automatically encompassing all Australian films in a discussion of national cinema. Instead, he locates national cinema as a project developed in re-

¹⁸ Walsh, "National Cinema," 16.

¹⁹ David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

²⁰ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 3d ed (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 371.

sponse to American Hollywood domination of certain territories, noting, "In Australia's case, the project of national cinema did not emerge until 1969."²¹

With this approach to replace the concept of national cinema itself, two different but potentially linked areas of work on cinema and the national appear. One consists of mapping patterns of film discourse that signify the nation in various ways. The second concerns locating institutions involved in the production of national cinema, whether conceived of in terms of locally based industry or in terms of a local industry that also produces and promotes cinematic constructions of the national. This second project can also be expanded into the investigation of groups of filmmakers working toward such goals with or without institutional support.

In the case of Chinese cinema, this approach can yield a number of potentially productive projects that move beyond the old national cinema concept to distinguish different textual and institutional concepts of national cinema and the national. For example, the film policies pursued by the government of the People's Republic of China after 1949 were heavily informed by a particular conception of national cinema and the Chinese nation. These policies entailed nationalization of studios not only to put them into state ownership but also to secure the leadership and control of the state through the Film Bureau in the Ministry of Culture and an entire administrative structure that was constructed under it. The import of American films was terminated, and the circulation of existing prints came to a halt with China's involvement in the Korean War in the early 1950s, effectively reversing American domination of the Chinese market and replacing it with a near monopoly of Chinese films. In addition to this institutional transformation of the cinema, a series of policies were instituted concerning cinematic content and form. What is particularly interesting here is the intersection of socialism and nationalism under the rubric of the "New China," as opposed to the "Old China." In other words, as a project of the revolution, the Chinese nation was understood to be undergoing a transformation in which the undesirable was being discarded and the new was being built. Notable here is the *gongnongbing* (worker-peasant-soldier) policy, which not only placed an emphasis on themes concerning workers, peasants, and soldiers but also emphasized a style appropriate to audiences composed of such people. Among other things, this involved the endorsement of clear moral plots in which other people, such as landlords and capitalists, appeared as villains. Often their villainy was signified not only by class treachery but also by betrayal of the nation to foreign enemies. This cinema was part of a broad media complex that communicated the message that in the People's Republic of China not all China's citizens were members of the "people."

Most of the details in the brief sketch I have provided above have been drawn from Paul Clark's history of the Chinese cinema between 1949 and 1981.²² But it would be interesting to carry out further research that examined those details in regard to the particular ways in which the revolution's dual emphasis on the nation and socialism had a mutually transforming effect in both matters of policy and cinema aesthetics over the years. These details could then be contrasted, say, to the policies in the cinema pursued by the KMT in Taiwan. In the case of the People's Republic, it may be particularly interesting to trace the production of "New China" and the national cinema that participated in that production as a dynamic contested, and ongoing process of sorting and categorizing, a process that excluded not only certain foreign things but also much of "old society," forming the backdrop for the 1980s films that rediscover

²¹ Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), 51.

²² Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics Since 1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

prerevolutionary China as an exotic and, one could even say, foreign culture.²³ This applies not only to the ornate and invented rituals and details of Zhang Yimou's films, which have been much discussed and branded by some critics in China as selforientalizing products designed for foreign consumers,²⁴ but also to a wide range of other less well-known works made primarily for contemporary Chinese viewers and sufficiently welcomed by them that they have become a staple genre of contemporary Chinese cinema.

In this sorting process, differing interpretations of revolutionary politics mandated the acceptance of certain things as part of this new national collective cultural formation and the rejection of others, and the things accepted and rejected could be both foreign and Chinese in origin.²⁵ The connotations of costume are a relatively simple example. Wang Ping's 1958 film *The Unfailing Beam* (*Yong bu xiaoshi de dianbo*) is a typical spy drama set before the revolution. Unsurprisingly, Chinese who are traitors are marked by foreign clothes and habits. However, these are not just any foreign clothes and habits but those marked as bourgeois and Western, that is, those of the imperialists. Liu Nina, the main collaborator with the Japanese, has a Western given name. When she first appears, she is sitting in the back of a car, wearing heavy makeup, a wide-brimmed hat with flowers and fruit, prominent earrings, a fitted white suit that clings to her body, and a dark cape. Other male collaborators putting in later appearances wear aloha shirts patterned with palm trees, wide ties, and white, double-breasted Western suits. Liu Nina is chauffeured to a large hotel, where a flunky in a uniform opens the car door for her. The positive characters also appear in costumes that could be said to be foreign in origin, such as modern army uniforms, overalls, and simple, less extravagant Western-style clothes. Here, the soldier or worker-class connotations of their clothing make them an acceptable part of the new Chinese nation. In rural films like the numerous versions of *The White-Haired Girl* (*Baimao nu*), where most if not all the characters typically wear Chinese-style clothing, class again determines what is and what is not part of the new Chinese nation, with landlords distinguished by their robes as opposed to the working clothes of the farmers. This sorting process in the construction of the new Chinese national is found in other elements, including modes of speech, gesture, religion, and so forth.

The authors who accuse Zhang Yimou of making prerevolutionary China exotic in order to catch the eye of foreigners also often accuse him of catering to them by adopting Hollywood techniques.²⁶ This ignores the fact that the whole of Chinese cinema between 1949 and 1979 was also dominated by a realism itself drawn from Western culture, and especially Hollywood. The history of realism in Chinese cinema is a complex topic, probably deserving of a book in its own right. However, in regard to the sorting process mentioned above, it seems the imperialist and foreign pedigree of the dominant realist form in much of People's Republic cinema has been buried. Two factors may have contributed to this. One is the detour via Soviet

²³ This idea underpins Chow's discernment of primitivism and autoethnography in Fifth Generation cinema in *Primitive Passions*; see esp. 142-45.

²⁴ The best-known example translated into English is Dai Qing, "Raised Eyebrows for *Raise the Red Lantern*," trans. Jeanne Tai, *Public Culture* 5, no. 2 (1993): 333-37. Chow discusses this critique of Zhang in "The Force of Surfaces," in *Primitive Passions*.

²⁵ Clark sets up the useful device of a spectrum between hard-line Yan'an politics and softer, less class-struggle-dominated Shanghai politics to examine these shifting political sands in the film industry.

²⁶ For a sophisticated example of this type of critique, see Dai Jinhua, "Liegu: Jiushi niandai dianying biji zhi'er" (Riffs: Notes on nineties cinema, part 2), in Dai Jinhua, *Dianying lilun yu piping shouce* (Handbook of film theory and criticism) (Beijing: Kexue Jishu Wenxian Chubanshe [Science and Technology Documents Press], 1993), 82-86.

cinema that overlays the Hollywood origins of this model with a revolutionary pedigree, making it acceptable for adoption as part of the new Chinese national culture. The other is the retrospective search for local forms similar to realism in order to legitimate its adoption as the dominant form in the literature and the arts of the People's Republic via nationalism.²⁷

Another interesting area for further research linked to the above projects would be the "Progressive Left-Wing" cinema of the 1930s and its late 1940s follow-up. Here again, a project of national construction and mobilization in response to the Japanese invasion was clearly a major element in the 1930s, and disillusion with the KMT was clearly an important element in the late 1940s. But the question of whether this cinema was directed by the Communist Party of China or whether these filmmakers of the 1930s and 1940s should be seen as part of a social realist cinema as opposed to socialist realist cinema remains unresolved and requires further analysis of both the films and the circumstances of their production.²⁸

I have tried to sketch out these possible projects according to my understanding of what Walsh sees as the positive directions in the new scholarship that has succeeded the old national cinema paradigm. I have focused on various discursive patterns and conventions signifying the national and on the relevant institutions and policies whose determination upon the texts is relatively material, direct, and traceable. I have carefully avoided concepts and rhetoric relating to identity or the imaginary that might invoke the psychoanalytic in any form. Certainly, I believe this approach is an important advance on the old model, and no doubt a considerable number of other projects along these lines and relating to Chinese cinema could be proposed. However, before we start introducing more such projects, it is necessary to ask whether this new conceptual framework is adequate.

Unfortunately, I believe the new conceptual framework sketched out above, although a very important move forward, is still incomplete. Wittingly or unwittingly, it performs a sort of short circuit that forecloses consideration of what is most crucially at stake in cinematic significations of the national. It highlights discursive patterns within the texts and the immediate material circumstances of their production, but downplays consideration of the ways in which these texts usually attempt to solicit recognition of membership in a collectivity and to signify that this collectivity extends to include both the audience and the filmmakers. Yet I believe that this must be one of the core issues in any consideration of cinema and the national. For whether or not such cinematic efforts to participate in the construction of collective agency are effective, this is their aim. And in the case of Chinese cinema, where there are clearly so many different and competing efforts to constitute Chinese collective agency, the development of an adequate conceptual framework for thinking about this issue is particularly important.

How is it that Walsh's discussion slides away from this core issue? Two tendencies can be observed. One is his insistence on locking discussions of collective agency into a rigid Lacanian-Althusserian model of subjectivity, which excludes it from further consideration. The

²⁷ David Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 57-58.

²⁸ For an analysis that favors a "social realist" reading of these films, see Leo Oufan Lee, "The Tradition of Modern Chinese Cinema: Some Preliminary Explorations and Hypotheses," in Berry, ed., *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, 6-21.

second is his failure to question the individual as subject or the issue of collective agency in regard to groups, which amounts to a simple equation of subjectivity and agency with individual identity. At one point, Walsh remarks, without further justification, "I would argue that personal identity, especially in the way psychoanalysis conceives of it, is much more fixed and marked by at least the conscious illusion of unity, than is national identity."²⁹ I find this an intriguing and, dare I say it, symptomatic remark. For, first, it reveals Walsh's understanding that the models of subjectivity he critiques assume the successful production of a fixed, essentialized unity. And second, it reveals his tendency to downplay the problems in assuming any such unity in the case of the individual subject, leading him to speak of filmmakers and critics without questioning the constitution of their subjectivity. His thoughts are contrary to my reading of psychoanalytic theory. The origins of psychoanalytic theory lie in the questioning of the seemingly natural self, by placing an emphasis on the tenuous and contingent nature of any seeming unity, be it individual or collective, and its constructedness. Having downplayed the problem of the constitution of the individual subject, Walsh's discussion of the social impact of discursive constructions of the national is confined to the advocacy of learning theories to understand how individual audience members respond to such textual figurations, and then to the tracing of institutionalized critical responses that feed back into state policy. The constitution of collective agency is in danger of disappearing from view again. This in itself is an ideological move, conscious or not, that follows the liberal individualist tendency to deny the collective and draw attention away from it, as exemplified in Margaret Thatcher's notorious remark to the effect that society did not exist, a comment she made while in an office that empowered her to transform the very entity she denied.

To move beyond this deadlock requires rethinking theories of subjectivity, including psychoanalytically derived ones, rather than rejecting them *tout court*. After all, if Walsh can rescue literary formalism from charges that it is ahistorical by anchoring textual studies socially and historically, there is no logical reason that theories of subjectivity, including but not only those that draw on psychoanalytic concepts, cannot be socially and historically grounded. If we return to Anderson's discussion of "imagined communities," his intervention and the vast quantity of writing that has followed it join a larger conceptual shift that works to erase the naturalized realm of the essential, the absolute, and the universal, and to re-situate it as historically and socially constructed, as contingent. This shift should be understood as applying not only to the national as textual figurations but also to national agency as a mode of being itself. National agency does not just disappear with the discrediting of discourses that place it as essential; rather, it reappears as a contingent formation.

From this perspective, psychoanalysis and psychoanalytically derived theories along with other models for understanding various forms of agency and their constitution become cultural patterns that do not pre-exist the discourses that speak them but subtend the various social institutions and texts that circulate those discourses. Walsh objects to Susan Hayward's nomination of the relationship of French national cinema to Hollywood in terms of a relation to the Other, and to Homi Bhabha's discussion of colonialism as fetishistic on the grounds that these arguments necessarily slide back into the universalism and essentialism of Lacanian-Althusserian psychoanalytic theory.³⁰ But it is not at all clear to me that the deployment of

²⁹ Walsh, "National Cinema," 11.

³⁰ Walsh, "National Cinema," 11.

these and related terms by Bhabha, Hayward, and others is necessarily essentialized and not the description of a historically and socially located discursive pattern. Certainly, there is no reason to confine ourselves to psychoanalytic terms in such discussions, and indeed there are almost certainly many other patterns and models to be discerned. For example, in the last pages of the revised edition of *Imagined Communities*, Anderson compares the way modern individual life history is constructed through the writing of biography with the writing of histories of modern nations.³¹ And in the specific case of China, it is important to undertake genealogical research to trace the specific local inflections in the terms that are used to speak of the national and collective agency in regard to cinema.³²

With this understanding, to invoke collective agency, and the nation as a form of it, does not necessarily entail a slide back into essentialistic, universal, unified categories, psychoanalytic or otherwise. And with this in mind, we can turn again to the connection between Chinese cinema and the constitution of Chinese national identities, not as absolute or unified but as contingent, dynamic, contested, and often competing. In some cases, we do not have to rely only on the evidence of the discursive patterns found across bodies of films for this discussion. In the case of post-1949 People's Republic of China cinema, for example, its deployment in support of efforts to construct a national agency can be traced quite clearly with the type of proximate material evidence Walsh advocates. If one consults the media coverage of any film, one will find numerous accounts that place a film in precisely this way, connecting and often conflating nationalism and socialism in the manner suggested above. Critical articles on a film explicitly focus on the issue of whether or not and in what ways leading characters are suitable for audience emulation. In addition, there are numerous reports on film study groups that are formed to encourage this emulation by relating the film characters to people among the local audience. This discourse in itself is highly unified, policed and disciplined as it was by the administrative mechanisms of a totalitarian state, that is, a state that admits of no more than token internal difference and allows no competing institutions within the borders of its territory. Of course, it must be noted that the existence of this discourse with its structures to engage cinema spectators does not necessarily mean it succeeded entirely in doing so. But finding the material traces of any such failure may be more difficult.

In understanding mobilizations of national agency such as the one I have described for the post-1949 period in mainland China and the cinema's participation in that effort, a useful model that might be excluded by any taboo on psychoanalytic terminology is the work of Judith Butler and others on performativity. I believe Butler's work is particularly useful here precisely because it offers an account of the construction of subjectivity and agency that is neither universalist, nor determinist, nor devoid of historical and social specificity. As such, it may offer the possibility of tracing and accounting for **the ways in which Chinese cinema participates in the construction of a variety of possible Chinese national collectivities**. Butler's work produces an account of subjectivity and agency that is grounded by the concepts of citation and

³¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 204-6.

³² Minzu is one term that has already received attention in English-language scholarship, although so far only in regard to issues of race. Chris Berry, "Race: Chinese Film and the Politics of Nationalism," *Cinema Journal* 31, no. 2 (1992): 45-58; Yingjin Zhang, "From 'Minority Film' to 'Minority Discourse': Questions of Nationhood and Ethnicity in Chinese Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 3 (1997): 73-90.

iterability. In so doing, she utilizes Althusserian ideas like interpellation to note the paradoxical discursive effect whereby subject positions are implied to pre-exist the very texts that construct them. This insight relocates "being" from transcendent space into the materiality of discourse. Butler further grounds her observation socially and historically by noting that each such citation is part of a chain that links different times and places, making it different from the original it claims to repeat but simultaneously conditioned by that original it requires for the work of citation. In other words, each citation is necessarily a mutation, in the Foucauldian sense of the term. Sometimes, the forces deploying such mutations will strive to minimize or erase their difference from the original. At other times, they may use the original strategically to push in new directions. It is this understanding of performativity that enables her to state of interpellation, "If the one who delivers it does not author it, and the one who is marked by it is not described by it, then the workings of interpellative power exceed the subjects constituted by its terms, and the subjects so constituted exceed the interpellations by which they are animated."³³ Perhaps this concept can be extended to provide a model of national agency as performed, and as always exceeding and exceeded by, in contingent ways, both those who author it and those it attempts to recruit. I believe that with this model of performativity we can begin to think of cinema in a dynamic relation to the national, as something that mutates in every citation and every screening (which is a form of citation in itself). And we can also think of filmmakers and audiences in relation to those cinematic invocations of the nation without reducing them to mere functions of those invocations.³⁴

As I indicated at the outset of this article, I think the complex question of what the Chinese nation is places particular pressure upon us to develop such an understanding of collective being as contingent and performative, rather than eliding the issue. Instead of having to answer this question in the singular, we now have a flexible conceptual framework that suggests any identity is infinitely plural because it exists only in its infinitely different citations. Yet, at the same time, these citations are linked into clusters and chains that can be treated as bundles. For example, rather than trying to abstract an effort toward a singular construction of Chinese national agency in the People's Republic of China after 1949, we may be able to trace a chain of citations in which this collectivity that links the national and the socialist undergoes various mutations. These mutations might include, for example, greater emphasis on class struggle at certain times and greater emphasis on patriotic unity at others and would be bolstered by critical writings citing party line, Mao's thoughts, and so forth. However, the possibilities for "perverse" citation within cinema itself were always limited by the tight institutional controls that prevailed during this period. By way of contrast, the Fifth Generation films often stand as greater mutations of the originals they cite, empowered by the internal devolution and exposure to foreign culture inspired by Deng's reforms. From this performative perspective, a film like *Yellow Earth (Huang tudi)* cites well-established socialist narratives about revolutionary history and the horrors of life in the prerevolutionary countryside and equally well-established character types, such as the tragic child-bride, the earnest and sincere revolutionary soldier, the superstitious and impoverished

³³ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 34.

³⁴ However, at the same time we must also be careful not to elide issues of access to discourse and public visibility as though all were equally empowered to cite and transform originals. I have discussed these issues further in relation to performativity in the films of Zhang Yuan in *Staging Gay Life in China: Zhang Yuan and East Palace, West Palace, Jump Cut* (forthcoming, 1998).

peasant farmer, and so on. But, as is commonly noted by critics, it also cites Chinese traditional landscape painting styles, which are translated into cinematography, and the codes of certain types of European art cinema, including a minimization of dialogue, the latter legitimated by critical citation of the Dengist call to "modernization," in this case as the "modernization of film language." The incorporation of these additional elements, in turn, opens up the film because it replaces the didactic linearity of the socialist realist mode with contemplative ambiguity and distance. The resultant variety of interpretations ranges from the completely conventional, which allowed it to be passed by the censors, to scandalous readings that break the line between new and old China to see the prerevolutionary as a metaphor for postrevolutionary society. A reading along these latter lines, then, impacts upon the kind of collectivity the film can be said to construct, shifting it from a simple investment in the revolutionary vision of a new China to a broader perspective that exceeds that particular nation-state project and questions its inclusiveness. It is in this sense that I would refer to it as mobilizing or attempting to mobilize a "postsocialist" Chinese collective perspective.

From this example, it is possible to see that with a model of national agency that is plural and performative another question about cinema and national agency can also be considered productively in the Chinese context. The existence of two nation-states claiming to be the one and only China and, until 1997, Hong Kong's existence as a colonial territory, taken together with the Chinese diaspora, all suggest that China exceeds the nation-state in a way that may be more obvious than is the case in many other places, such as Japan, which I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. In these circumstances, then, is it possible to think of some of the "Chinas" that are making movies as collective agencies other than the nation-state, or as performative mutations that move away from that model?

The example of certain readings of *Yellow Earth I* I have just given is one possible instance of that. However, it must be noted that China's postsocialist condition is characterized by continuing strict political and ideological controls operating simultaneously with economic and cultural diversification. In these circumstances, it is difficult to tell if films like *Yellow Earth* should be read as voluntarily subscribing to a position that eschews any readily visible advocacy of an alternative nation-state project or as doing so as a survival tactic.

I think Browne's discussion of a "common cultural tradition," however problematic I have suggested that term can be, also invokes the possibility of collectivity that moves beyond nation-state projects. And I also think this is what intrigues me about Rey Chow's use of the term *autoethnography* in *Primitive Passions*. In part, Chow uses this term to invoke the self-alienation and even self-orientalism in which some of the so-called Fifth Generation filmmakers can be said to engage in their images of either historic or out-of-the-way parts of China. But I think it is also fair to say that if these filmmakers are engaged in writing-themselves-as-a-people, which is what both the term *autoethnography* and the metaphorical possibilities of films like *King of the Children (Haizi wang)*, *Raise the Red Lantern (Da hong denglong gao gao gua)*, *Red Sorghum (Hong gaoliang)*, and *Judou* suggest to me, then perhaps they can be said to be engaged in the effort to produce a collective agency. However, Chow does not use the term *national* in regard to these films. I would suggest one way of understanding this is that it precludes any confusion of the self that is producing this ethnography with the self that is invoked by the nation-state of the People's Republic of China, and the type of collectivity

that model invokes. For, to give an obvious example, if all those evil patriarchs in Zhang Yimou's films can be read as allegorical representations of China's current regime by some viewers, then these films may be understood as producing a kind of collective Chinese agency that claims to be a popular one distinct from the nation-state as it currently exists. I might note here that for Walsh and other analysts who place a premium on proximate material evidence, such an interpretation, which is unsupported by recorded audience response or critical writings from within the People's Republic and is based on wholly allegorical reading, will seem flimsy at best. While I understand this concern, I can only point out again that in a situation in which the practices of the regime attempt to rigorously police any explicitly oppositional statements, this is hard to avoid, and indeed this is what makes cinematic discourse particularly interesting. Jing Wang, in *High Culture Fever*, notes that the national continued to be an overarching sign of legitimacy in the People's Republic throughout the 1980s, so that different intellectuals contesting one another's power or (usually implicitly) the power of the nation-state consistently laid claim to the national in attempts to authorize themselves. However, the question that a performative understanding of the national begs is what sort of "nation" these various discourses invoke, and in particular whether or not it is a "nation" that can be accommodated within the modern, unified nation-state model or one that exceeds it. Perhaps the Fifth Generation films can also be placed in this context.³⁵

Finally, if a performative model of collective agency allows us to begin to speak of Chinese national cinemas that construct collectivity distinct from the existing nation-states, I would like to raise the question of how we should understand the type of collectivity and agency that Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *City of Sadness* can be understood as enabling. As is, I think, well-known, the film deals with a major event in Taiwanese history, discussion of which was suppressed for forty years. This is the so-called February 28th Incident of 1947, in which a revolt by the local Taiwanese Chinese against the new KMT government on the island was put down brutally with considerable loss of life. However, the film does not depict the incident directly, focusing instead on its effects on an extended family living in the hills outside Taipei. Furthermore, the main character in the film is a deaf and mute photographer who seems to stand in for the filmmaker. As Ping-hui Liao points out about the film in his commentary on the contemporary debate around the incident, "By using a deaf and mute character, the filmmaker can maintain an ambivalence that allows him at once to say nothing or anything about the character (and the Incident)... Hou consistently-and redundantly-turns his gaze away and focuses on the landscape that, in its permanent silence, seems to witness the loss of human lives and nevertheless survives."³⁶

Certainly this use of the photographer character and the grassroots focus of the film made it difficult to mobilize as a tool in the production of Taiwanese anti-KMT feeling, as Liao notes and Nornes and Yeh also discuss in their website. How, then, should we understand the agency the film constructs? Is this a purely individual agency, quite apart from any kind of

³⁵ Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever*. Particularly relevant to this essay is chapter 5, "Romancing the Subject: Utopian Moments in the Chinese Aesthetics of the 1980s," in which Wang considers the Chinese adoption and utilization of the concept of the "subject," including and in particular the collective and national subject (195-232). As mentioned in note 13, Zhang Xudong does place these films within this "national" context but without problematizing or retheorizing what is meant by the "national" itself.

³⁶ Ping-hui Liao, "Rewriting Taiwanese National History: The February 28 Incident as Spectacle," *Public Culture* 5, no. 2 (1993): 294.

national or other collective agency and sense of selfhood, an agency similar to the seemingly private agency of the photographer and his wife, who it seems would prefer to disengage from any involvement in public affairs? Can it be understood as a broad Taiwanese sense of self, resistant to the projects of both the KMT and Taiwanese nationalism? Or is it part of an even broader Chinese cultural consciousness resistant to state projects and politics?³⁷ Rather than attempting to answer these questions in any definitive way, I would suggest that if agency and consciousness are understood as performative, we need only look to the various mobilizations of this ambiguous text by different audiences and critics to understand how each is a different and specific citation of both the text and, via the interpretations of it, the agency, whether individual, Taiwanese, Chinese, or a combination of these three. But I would also add that what interests me most about the *City of Sadness* in terms of the topics raised in this essay is not only its potential for the mobilization of a Taiwanese collectivity that, like the films of the Fifth Generation, exceeds the unified collectivities invoked by the nation-state and modern nationalisms at the same time that it registers the violence perpetrated by them. I am also particularly interested in the insistent heterogeneity of that collectivity as it is inscribed in the film by different dialects, languages, personal histories, and so forth, which to me invokes a collectivity and perhaps even a "common cultural tradition" that not only exceeds but resists co-optation into modern, unified national formations.

³⁷ Discussing another of Hou's films, Nick Browne, in "Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Puppetmaster*: The Poetics of Landscape," *Asian Cinema* 8, no. 1 (1996), also writes of Hou's grassroots perspective and use of landscape, arguing that "politics has real effects and consequences, but they are viewed as incidental and temporary against the landscape and the larger pattern of life. The value of any post-colonial critique must confront and come to terms with the aesthetic ontology of Hou's work and the equivocal place it accords to political administration" (37).