

Identity and Bodies of Immigrants—on The ONE International Women's Film Festival

ZHANG Qianyu, Sun Yat-sun University, Guangzhou, China

CHEN Shumin, Guangzhou University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

Abstract:

Telling immigration stories has become an effective method to picture the experiences of the underprivileged immigrants and refugees. While documentaries allow us to observe them from an anthropological perspective, feature films can let us immerse ourselves in the fabrics of their lives. At the recent The ONE International Women's Film Festival, many films with the themes of identity and consequences of immigration as well as social mobility caught much attention of local and international spectators. These visual productions demonstrate the situation of the ongoing plight of immigrants that concerns the whole world. Despite discrepant immigration systems and policies in the countries, these marginalized groups, particularly the female, continue to struggle for survival.

Keywords: film; immigration, identity, body, narrative

The first thing that one associates with immigration is most likely the turmoil of displacement. Yet the apparent struggles are merely the tip of the iceberg, as immigration, with the identity issue, is intertwined with modernization and serves as a footnote in urban culture.

At the recent The ONE International Women's Film Festival, the film *Antigone* (2019) catches much attention. The production is an epitome of the ongoing plight of immigrants that concerns the whole world. Drawing from the ancient Greek tragedy *Antigone* and real-life incidents in 2008, director Sophie Deraspe urges spectators to face the harsh realities, i.e. despite the seemingly open immigration system in Canada, marginalized refugees continue to struggle for survival.

Antigone's parents perished while attempting to illegally immigrate into Canada, leaving her and her three siblings, along with their grandmother, barely hanging on together. Antigone is an exceptional student and the glue that sticks the family together. In the process of the police arresting her brother Polynice, Antigone's other brother, Étéocle, is mistakenly killed. In order to protect Polynice, Antigone decides to take his place in prison to buy him time to escape. However, as she believes that she is sacrificing herself for the good of her family, the truth about Polynice's double life gradually comes to light.

The film leads viewers on an adventure of these immigrants. There will be stories about their new identities generated from geographical changes, which never cease to draw our attention.

From a macro perspective, with migration come cultural collisions and integration, especially in metropolitan cities. Whether it's in New York, Hong Kong, or Beijing, we share similar urban experiences, especially those of the lower class, formulating a breeding ground for stories of the cities. In the midst of this

complexity, we see that identity implies segregations and inequalities based on family background, social class, ethnicity, and race. Films about immigration can never be simplistic and are often inherently political or politically correct.

Films from Hong Kong and Taiwan provide us with the initial depictions of immigrants' life in modern society. When examining the new wave of films in Taiwan, one will find elements of the "mainlander" and the former "military dependents' villages" everywhere. The film *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991) portrays the rootlessness and confusion of second-generation immigrants to the fullest. Whether Xiao Si hides in that Japanese-style cubicle or discovers a military knife, he unintentionally enters the realm of historical legacy. However, whether it is the legacy of Japanese colonial rule or the legacy of the mainland's governing, it only causes him disorientation and chaos. He has no reliance except for his own physical strength in his youth. He is isolated from the past and the future, and his present youth is his only asset. The Hong Kong film industry offers a more revealing perspective, from Chen Guo's serious film *Durian Durian* (2000) to Pang Ho-Cheung's motional *Vulgaria* (2012), and various gangster films. In these films, there are always some female characters speaking with a Mandarin accent and living by selling their bodies. This may reflect the commercial reality and present a view of the "other". It may not necessarily convey any meaningful viewpoint, but rather serve as visually pleasing objects of gaze.



A Brighter Summer Day (1991)

The presence of young men and women often serves as an additional factor in immigration narratives. It emphasizes the protagonist's isolation and alienation as a figure of the "other", which leads him into a swamp of psychological distress. To put in other words, immigrants, as outsiders, find themselves in a situation like that of marginalized groups within a society. It is important to note that in a traditional community, an outsider would never be accepted by the locals as their own. Therefore, the issue of immigration is a product of social conflicts, validating whether those supposedly open and equal cities have

enough opportunities for everyone. Before immigrants can establish themselves, they must first obtain legal status, which always comes at a cost. This is where most stories start to develop. While the immigration to Taiwan is due to war and political policies, that issue to Hong Kong is much more complex, and mainly due to economic reasons. We learned from the film *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996) early on about the most realistic aspect of love, and Ann Hui and Yan Geling's portrayal of Hong Kong or the United States in films and novels respectively further adds to the issue of cultural identity.

In bottom-class narrative, the issue of immigration may well be a symbol. For example, the Dardenne brothers dedicate to building up the world of the bottom-class, with immigrants' stories as an essential part. *The Silence of Lorna* (2008) tells the most cliché plot of using marriage to obtain legal status, but rational calculation ultimately surrenders to irrational and unknown emotions. Lorna ends up pregnant with nowhere to go, what she has left is her own body, and her body becomes her only home. Moving to a strange land led to a huge change in both body and mind. After losing connection and reliance on the outside world, a person can only return to self and become a "bare being".



The Silence of Lorna (2008)

That could be why love stories in times of war and turmoil are always so captivating, even becoming epics. In peaceful times, the reshaping of one's identity is no different from a personal revolution. While those had left their homes and burnt their boats, their offspring would always seek a way back, tracing the revolutionary remnants. In recent years, there has been an increase in "root-seeking" films worldwide, which is a result of globalization and a form of reflection. Present-day realism may not directly reflect reality, but in the post-revolution era, there is a greater need for a spiritual revolution within individuals.

Perhaps the external identities can be something to be rid of, and perhaps inner freedom can be found amidst cultural shocks, which is a dialectic of modernization. *The Farewell* (2019) directed by Lulu Wang opens with the heavy subject of death but manages to do so composedly and effortlessly. Since the film sets aside

dramatic elements, why should the audience pay attention to the Chinese American protagonist's childhood memories? This is different from Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (2006) and *Mountains May Depart* (2015), where space is used as a metaphor for time to express emotions. Here in *The Farewell*, death is literally death itself. This film is more like Jia Zhangke's documentary *Xiao Jia Going Home* (2007) which tells the story of an ordinary American girl returning to her hometown. There is neither praise nor criticism of China's development through the camera lens, simply the lives of another group of people in another place. These lives are unfamiliar to "me" inside the film, but because of the love for humanity, "I" am willing to accept it.



The Farewell (2019)

Life itself is the answer: there is no need for deliberately emphasizing drifting and solitude. In the face of widespread migration and mobility, those who have a singular identity are the minority. This does not mean that all places have become like the United States, or that political correctness has become a universal value, but rather that people have a greater awareness of their own identity and its complexity. Bai Xue's *The Crossing* (2018) combines the perspectives of young men and women, accurately focusing on the "cross-border" experience in Shenzhen and Hong Kong, telling the story of a dual identity. Yang Xiuhua's *A Land Imagined* (2018) attempts to use a magical narrative to closely capture the innermost feeling of alienation of the Singaporean laborers. These films are certainly narrative-driven, but they place more emphasis on unique depiction of the emotional and psychological aspects of humans.

Telling immigration stories has become an effective method to picture the experiences of the underprivileged. While documentaries allow us to observe immigrants and refugees from an anthropological perspective, it is through feature films that we can truly immerse ourselves in the fabrics of their lives. Just

like Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994) that captures the romantic sentiments of the turn of the century through fragmented scenes, the fragments about immigration in feature films focus not on the plot, but on the erratic and unsettling atmosphere that the director creates through visuals. This method can also be found in the films directed by MiDi Z and Zhang Lu respectively.

Ethnic Chinese directors also highlight their subjectivity through this theme of immigration in their films. Notable examples are highly accessible films such as *Saving Face* (2004) and *The Half of It* (2020) directed by Alice Wu, protegee of Ang Lee, as well as *Model* (2018) directed by Jing Ran, which participated in the Shanghai International Film Festival in 2020. These female directors attempt to reclaim space for self-expression from the perspectives of both female and the minority. Then perhaps the greatest significance and aesthetic innovation of immigrant films is to showcase a certain state where the transformation of identity does not have to be essential or decisive, like the perspective of these master directors. In Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007), the actor Song Fang, who plays the role of a private tutor, herself once studied in France, almost performing as her own self. Similarly, in Petzold's *Transit* (2018) the filmmaker cleverly places a World War II story in a contemporary setting, using allegory to narrate the eternal emotional dilemma of staying or leaving.



Transit (2018)

In the film *Transit*, the male protagonist takes the identity of a friend and falls in love with someone else's girlfriend. The premise of the plot is that he is in a difficult situation in a foreign land, which also reflects the feeling of lacking sense of belonging for modern men. The cleverest aspect of the film is that the narrator of the film seems to be the café owner who witnesses the love story between the male and female protagonists, which starts and ends at a café. Eventually, the female protagonist mysteriously disappears, and the male protagonist decides to stay in this transient city forever, while his heart will forever remain in that café.

In our mundane lives, we, like the café owner, have a very limited perspective that by no means is omniscient. All we can see is countless strangers coming and going like passers-by. The saying that "life is like a journey" is too vague and what truly matters are those stops that people make along the way. Just by looking out from this corner of a small café, there are infinite joys and sorrows passing by. As you empathize and immerse yourself in someone else's story, perhaps you would find yourself living through that very story.

About the Authors: Zhang Qianyu, assistant professor, College of Arts, Sun Yat-sun University, Guangzhou, China, Email: zhangqy93@mail.sysu.edu.cn; Chen Shumin, doctoral researcher, Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangzhou University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China, Email: 461117858@qq.com)