
H-France Review Vol. 17 (March 2017), No. 56

Michelle E. Bloom, *Contemporary Sino-French Cinemas: Absent Fathers, Banned Books, and Red Balloons*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. xi + 271 pp. Illustrations, notes, filmography, bibliography, and index. \$59.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8248-5158-3.

Review by Chris Berry, King's College London.

Michelle Bloom's *Contemporary Sino-French Cinemas* analyses recent films directed by Taiwan-based and mainland Chinese directors to focus on the emergence of what she calls the "Sino-French" in its various forms. Put very simply, she argues that for the Taiwan-based filmmakers, France is a glamorous place that one can imagine visiting, whereas for their mainland counterparts it is a largely imaginary space. The Taiwan-based filmmakers often use France to figure alienation, whereas for the mainland directors it is more often a place of escape or refuge.

Such a brief summation is not inaccurate, and further details will be given below. However, it does not do the book justice. We are in an era when film researchers are more conscious than before about how the assumptions behind our research questions and approaches frame what gets included for consideration and what gets excluded, as well as have a powerful predetermining effect on the answers. In film studies, talking about directors tends toward the auteurist presumption that a film has an artist and can be understood as in some way an expression of that artist. This has been a remarkably persistent framework, despite many decades of talk about the "death of the author," as well as the evident fact that films are rarely made by one person alone.

Equally entrenched and equally powerfully attacked, has been methodological nationalism, or the presumption of "the nation" as an appropriate framework for understanding. Indeed, Sheldon Lu, editor of the Critical Interventions series that Bloom's monograph appears in, is one of the major promoters of a transnational approach to cinema. However, what does it mean to actually undertake transnational analysis? One cannot simply examine all kinds of transborder flows in all directions at once. More specific frameworks have to be developed. Examining the cinematic connections between two cultures is one example, as might be looking at how films travel through film festivals, or how filmmakers move from one film industry to another. Reading *Contemporary Sino-French Cinemas*, the question lurking in the background is what the approach pursued here frames in and what it frames out. What does it make it possible to see and what does it occlude? I will return to this question after giving more concrete details about the contents of the book.

Bloom divides the core chapters of *Contemporary Sino-French Cinemas* into two sections. The first has three chapters about "Franco-Taiwanese Cinema," and the second has two chapters on "Franco-Chinese Cinema." As the titles of the sections and the book imply, Bloom understands the Sino-French not as either French or Chinese/Taiwanese cinema but as an emergent hybrid category in its own right. Each chapter focuses on a different mode of textual interplay that constructs and characterizes a particular type of Sino-French convergence. Chapter one examines Cheng Yu-chieh's *Yang Yang* (2009) through the idea of *métissage*. This concept clearly refers to the eponymous protagonist of the film, who is a Franco-

Taiwanese model and actress. Bloom cites the claims of critics like Françoise Lionnet that the term *métissage* has no English-language equivalent, as it refers to being mixed-race, but without any negative connotations. However, the film analysis shows just how difficult it is to be *métis* in Taiwan. Bloom also extends the idea of *métissage* aesthetically, to argue for Sino-French cinema as a type of *métissage*.

In Chapter two, Bloom further develops her idea of the Sino-French as *métissage*, by analyzing how intertextuality works in Tsai Ming-liang's films, *What Time Is It There?* (*Ni Neibian Jidian*, 2001), large sections of which are set in Paris, and *Face* (*Visage/Liang*, 2009), which features the Louvre Museum. Both films received French funding. Bloom's chapter brings out a vast range of intertextual references, ranging from French- to Chinese-language culture and beyond, and including quite a few of Tsai's own earlier works, as well as his fascination with Truffaut. In the process, not only are the films constituted as a web of references, Bloom argues, but also that web is a Sino-French *métissage*.

In her final chapter in the first section on Franco-Taiwanese cinema, Bloom extends the degree of referencing from intertextuality to the makeover, which is not quite a remake, because it involves a large degree of change from the original. The film in question is Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Flight of the Red Balloon* (*Le Voyage du Ballon Rouge*, 2007), inspired by Albert Lamorisse's short children's film, *The Red Balloon* (*Le Ballon Rouge*, 1956). Among the many changes in the remake is the addition of a Chinese character who is herself remaking Lamorisse's film, thus licensing lots of red balloon references. For Bloom, this remaking also takes the combination of the Sino and the French to a level where, again, it is impossible to tease out which elements of the final film are French or Taiwanese.

Opening the second section of the book, on Franco-Chinese cinema, with her fourth chapter, Bloom highlights adaptation. She points out that "whereas we considered the makeover as a form of intertextuality, the adaptation qualifies as a kind of translation" (p. 139). The case study is Dai Sijie's *Balzac and the Little Seamstress* (*Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse Chinoise/Xiao Caifeng*, 2001), itself an adaptation from the director's own eponymous novel. However, the dimensions of the adaptation and translation phenomenon are more complex than only the adaptation of the novel. First, an important element in the narrative is a treasured copy of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, which the protagonists manage to hang on to in a remote corner of China during the Cultural Revolution. This prompts comparisons between the narratives of *Madame Bovary* and *Balzac and the Little Seamstress*. Furthermore, Dai's status as a Chinese-born French resident who writes in French not only makes him *métis*, but also opens up a series of questions about whether he translates China in a way that panders to French Orientalism, and so forth.

Chapter five, the final chapter in the book, looks at two films, Emily Tang Xiaobai's *Conjugation* (*Dongci Bianwei*, 2001) and Jia Zhangke's *The World* (*Shijie*, 2004). Here, the mode of aesthetic interplay is imitation, which Bloom considers another variety of translation. Bloom points to the Chinese aesthetic tradition that has prized faithful imitation at least as much as originality. However, as she points out, in these films French culture is imitated in China, but the Chinese characters are signified as being trapped in China. Not only is this unlike their counterparts in the Taiwanese films, but also it suggests a less celebratory vision of the fruits of imitation.

Bloom's elaboration of *métissage*, intertextuality, the makeover, translation, and imitation in the various films under consideration is detailed and provides a series of useful textual models for thinking about how connections and linkages occur across different national or quasi-national cinemas. But what does this textual approach to the transnational include and exclude? Within minutes of beginning to read the book, the reader will notice that the Sino-French as elaborated here is confined to the mainland and Taiwan and to art or festival films. How can we understand these patterns? Just as we turn to context to understand what sustains a national cinema, so too we would need to look at factors such as individual film production histories, government policies such as tax breaks, and more to understand what has led those involved in making each of these films to the particular Sino-French connections undergirding each film. And, equally significant, we would have to look at similar factors to understand why Chinese-language commercial

cinema, which has been so eager to cooperate with Hollywood in various ways, has been less interested in other cinemas, including, it seems, French cinema, which, we gather, has also been less eager or able to establish links with Chinese-language commercial cinemas.

Another issue is the extent to which the films considered here cohere. At various points in the book, Bloom refers to Sino-French as a genre, without elaborating on the implications of such a statement. As already noted, they are all art or festival films, and Bloom demonstrates that they share various kinds of cultural mixing that makes it hard to label them as simply either French- or Chinese-language films. But it is more difficult to see them as a genre if that is understood as implying a sustained production category of films with conventions that each new film refers to, or, even more challenging, as implying a marketing category known to audiences. Is there any textual evidence to suggest that these filmmakers thought of other Sino-French films or that there is a set of Sino-French conventions?

From the careful and detailed analysis of intertextuality, imitation, making over, and so forth that Bloom herself gives here, the films under consideration mostly turn to other films that are more simply French, Chinese, or Taiwanese. And I seriously doubt whether any audience member would suggest to their movie companion that they should go see a Sino-French film together. This implies that Sino-French films are, perhaps, better understood as individual transborder projects rather than a coherent group. If that is correct, does it mean that we need to look at transborder films in general to try and find stronger connections? What group or groups are these films best understood as part of?

And how might we find those stronger connections? Beyond questions of form and those of production, there are also questions of how films relate to society and culture. Perhaps these are the most difficult conceptual and theoretical challenges raised by transnational production. Even if we accept that, on a textual level, these films not only exceed the national, but cannot be parsed out into distinct “Sino” and “French” components, there is clearly no “Sino-French” audience that corresponds to their discursive mixture. Which are the markets they circulate amongst, and how do audiences engage with them as part of their own cultures? Is there a way to consider this question without falling back into national frameworks? For example, is there a festival film audience, regardless of what country it is in? If so, what do its members get out of watching films such as these? While *Contemporary Sino-French Cinemas* is very effective in pinpointing specific modes of textual mixing, it is also valuable because it demonstrates the necessity of these future directions of enquiry.

Chris Berry
King's College London
chris.berry@kcl.ac.uk

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.