Regional Filmmaking After Jia Zhangke: Relational Cinematic Space and Ying Liang’s The Other Half

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Abstract
This article examines Ying Liang’s films to illustrate Chinese independent filmmakers’ growing propensity for representing regional space through innovative cinematic techniques. As one of the most conspicuous directors onstage in the 2000s, Ying Liang rekindles independent regional film following the legacy of Jia Zhangke’s hometown trilogy. Varying shooting angles and camera positions, his exemplar work of formalistic experimentation, The Other Half (Ling yiban, 2006), presents space as a pivot of relations, within which the position of self and the situation of the local are intertwined. In line with Doreen Massey’s proposition for a spatial turn in theoretical conceptions, I argue that Ying Liang’s exploration of relational cinematic space, between on-screen and offscreen, from selfhood to nation, continues to challenge the legitimacy of the foretold metanarrative of national progression in which the countryside and inland cities belong to a bygone time that ought to be replaced in a forward-looking timeline. The explosive endings characteristic of Ying’s film oeuvre, in which all the imminent calamities happening to the region and its inhabitants eventually break out, belie the promise of a bright future told by the state and underline the symbolic violence endured by the local.

Keywords
regional film, relational cinematic space, discourse, symbolic violence

Chinese independent cinema arose in the early 1990s against the dominance of Fifth Generation filmmaking and the encroachment of Hollywood blockbusters. Among other filmmakers, Jia Zhangke challenged prevailing national allegories with his accented hometown narratives and created an imaginary space remote from the political centers of Beijing and Shanghai. Inspired by Jia’s cinematic achievement, younger filmmakers employ amateur actors to make films about their hometown or regions they are familiar with, displaying ascending sensitivity to the specifics of the local space, including its linguistic features. With productions such as Han Jie’s Walking on the Wild Side (Lai xiao zi, 2006), Gao Wendong’s Food Village (Meishi cun, 2008), Yang Heng’s Betelnut (Bing lang, 2006), and Robin Weng’s Fujian Blue (Jinbi huihuang, 2007), the scope of the regional imagery is expanded from Jia’s Fenyang to a cluster of small cities.1

Different terms have been coined, including “cinema with an accent” (Teo, 2001, p. 18) and “Chinese dialect films” (Bai & Si, 2006), to account for the momentum of regional imagery on screen that has yet to be fully investigated. Nonetheless, as this article sets out to analyze, these designations are more or less restricted to the linguistic characteristic and therefore inadequate to map the discursive scope in the abovementioned films in which dialect is only the facade that transmits the undiminishing tension between the regional, the national, and the global. Represented by Jia Zhangke, many directors who make these dialect films identify strongly with the regions they come from and perceive their films as more than a glimpse of their hometown but a microcosm of contemporary China (M. Berry, 2009). I contend that “regional film” is a more appropriate designation for these films and “regional filmmaking” can better capture the phenomenon of regionalization across different sectors, be it mass media or independent art. The concept of regional film can help to break down not merely the barrier between commercial and art cinema but also the division between different generations of film directors as perceived by critics and filmmakers alike. While one remains cautious that regionalization or regionalism can have different meanings across fields,2 it is also vital to see how the field of filmmaking in particular contributes to this cacophony of definitions.

When interpreting films by independent filmmakers onstage in the 2000s vis-à-vis the 1990s,3 regional filmmaking...
as a concept helps to encompass recurring themes and aesthetic styles in their works. Ying Liang, who made films about Zigong, a small city in the Sichuan province where the director once resided in, is one of the most prominent young directors whose production sheds light on the textures of the local psyche in provincial China. Ying studied photography and video production at Beijing Normal University and later graduated from the Department of Directing at the Chongqing Film Academy. As with other young filmmakers who lack resources, he started off by making shorts and then invested money he was awarded for these films in longer features. The first film Ying made was The Missing House (2003), which won the best script award at the Beijing Student Film Festival, and Critics Award at the Hong Kong Independent Short Film Festival.

As a young director, Ying Liang has not amassed an artistic and social influence comparable to established Sixth Generation directors. Nonetheless, his single-handed approach, being director, scriptwriter, photographer, and editor, has surely inspired more followers than is acknowledged within academia. On film viewing portals such as mt ime.com, users pinpoint the lineage from Jia Zhangke to Ying Liang in Chinese independent cinema and the latter’s contribution to the independent mode of film production in present-day China. The study of Ying’s films bears a threefold significance: First of all, his continued use of accent to depict local reality and the dire situation of underdevelopment is a relentless gesture against the dominance of official language about national prosperity. Second, his film canvas displays an innovationalism in film style, epitomizing how younger independent filmmakers consciously break away from tradition and push realistic aesthetics to a further front, at a time when most Sixth Generation directors venture into commercial films. Although techniques such as the noninter vening long shot that showcases the vastness of a cityscape stays prevalent, many of the young directors experiment with extreme close-ups that contract the cinematic space. The third dimension of import relates to a transitional point in the course of independent filmmaking in contemporary China and the field of Chinese film studies at large.

Although Jia Zhangke’s success in making regional features continues to inspire younger directors to explore the side of China not as promising by the state, it seems to also threaten to channel their creativity in one singular direction. Customary practices, from the extended long take to diegetic sound of state broadcasts, once standing for the artistic pinnacle of Chinese independent film, have now become formulaic and bespeak nothing but their banality. It is also against the yardstick of Jia Zhangke that younger filmmakers’ experiments with formal innovation can easily be read as opportunistic gimmicks aiming for personal gain in global film market. Furthermore, the generational di vision between the dominant and the dominated in Chinese cinema leads to the precarious tendency among film critics to gauge less-prominent filmmakers by their comparable traits and preexisting standard for generational taxonomies. Thus, the merits of novice independent filmmakers’ output should be attributed to properties other than whether or not they surpass the aesthetics crafted by their predecessors.

Studies on Chinese independent film, a burgeoning field proffering insightful research on a broad breath of motifs—artist subjectivity, amateurism, sexuality, and subculture, to name a few, have been duly committed to titular directors such as Zhang Yuan, Lou Ye, and Wang Xiaoshuai in the 1990s, and Jia Zhangke in the 2000s. Films characterized by distinctive regional features, and theoretical implications associated with the rise of these films as a somewhat collective phenomenon, are still understudied. Tonglin Lu’s (2010) analysis on the devastating metrics of globalization in the local and Michael Berry’s (2009) study on Jia Zhangke’s hometown trilogy are among the few examples that direct our attention away from city aesthetics and alternative cultures, but instead look at the transformation and destruction of provincial China. More recently, in China’s iGeneration, Cinema and Moving Image Culture for the Twenty-First Century, scholars deliver timely critiques about new tendencies—aesthetical, technical, and sociopolitical—among young filmmakers over the last decade (Johnson, Wagner, Yu, & Vulpiani, 2014). In this valuable volume, Keith Wagner touches on xiancheng (county-level cities) mise-en-scène of “the dilapidated post-industrial landscape,” tackling juvenile crime and the issue of underdevelopment as seen in documentaries, especially those by the iconoclastic documentarian, Xue Jianqiang (p. 151).

In dialogue with present studies on regional imagery, this article attends to the cinematic configuration of relational spaces—the selfhood, the local, and the national—in Ying Liang’s narrative features. In particular, I examine how experimental techniques in The Other Half (Ling yiban, 2006) activate a relational cinematic space that projects subjugated selfhood onto the entrapped local. The existences of both selfhood and the local rely on their references to a ubiquitous but unreachable outside world, envisioned as a modernized metropolitan or a foreign land of prosperity. A reexamination of regional Chinese independent films, from the perspective of cinematic space, allows us not to dismiss their artistic experimentalism as imitation of global commodities but identify discourse that shapes the transformative cultural scene in China and its textured embodiment in artistic creations. Cinematic space in Ying Liang’s work exemplifies the connection between regional issues and relational formalities: how the local is isolated but at the same time is subject to outside forces, and how reality is shown not as urban, or rural, but the gray area in between. For all the contentions in regional studies that rightly warn us against treating China as a monolithic object while emphasizing the agency of the disparate local regions, Ying’s films demonstrate that the disintegrated (periphery) regions are not autonomous entities but are still shaped by their dialectical relationship with the center.
**From the National to the Regional**

In the aftermath of Chinese government’s vigorous promotion of standard mandarin, a national campaign launched in the 1950s and strengthened in the 1980s (Zhou, 2004), dialect films disappeared from the screen for decades. Before Jia Zhangke made his accented films, Fifth Generation filmmakers were some of the pioneers who brought Chinese dialects and remote areas to public attention, with films such as Zhang Yimou’s *The Story of Qiu Ju* (*Qiuju da guansi*, 1992) and Zhou Xiaowen’s *Ermo* (1994). Filmmaking after the millennium is situated amid the reconstruction of the film industry in particular and the regionalization of media at large. The industrialization of Chinese cinema inaugurated in the early 2000s germinated an increasingly diversified film market, where a low- to medium-budget film (that tends to feature a realistic style) at times becomes the black horse that sweeps domestic theaters and overtakes domestic or even Hollywood blockbusters (Wang, 2013; Zhu, 2010). As early as 2002, Lu Chuan’s debut, *The Missing Gun* (*Xun qiang*), provoked the ire of the Chinese National Language and Character Committee for using a Guizhou dialect instead of standard Chinese but had tremendous success in various cities, with box office revenue surpassing *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (T. Ying, 2002). Ning Hao’s *Crazy Stone* (*Fengkuang de shitou*, 2006), a digitally shot black comedy, used four different dialects and was immensely popular: The film gleaned RMB 6 million in its first week of release and more than RMB 23 million in total box office in mainland China despite its low budget (equivalent to RMB 3 million) and cast of unknowns (Goldkorn, 2006). These films considered preferences of local audiences and challenged the predominance of Mandarin on screen and, at the same time, brought academic attention to the mixture of regional identity, accented playfulness, and exuberant (black) humor.

Most films made by independent filmmakers are not widely released, so the choice of using regional characteristics, including the language, is arguably not to catch the attention of the audience with a theatrical, exaggerative tone, or to please viewers from specific regions, as critics point out (Bai & Si, 2006; Berra & Yang, 2012). Instead, dialect in independent film is a device that serves to explore the potential of cinematic realism (C. Berry, 2010; Pickowicz, 2006). First of all, the aesthetic pursuit of independent filmmakers, that is, to offer a faithful account of the reality of contemporary China, is set against the social backdrop of unequal economic development and particularly the increasing magnitude of spatial disparities. Regional issues in their films shed light on inequality of regional development that tends to be overlooked on the big screen. Over the past 50 years, inequality, as measured by production and income distribution, has peaked during three time periods in China—during the Great Famine, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, and in the current period of global integration (Fan, Kanbur, & Zhang, 2011). Disparities in the provincial, regional, urban, and rural dimensions have only grown since 1985 and worsened with the accelerating processes of globalization after 2001 (Fan et al., 2011).

However, the popularity of dialect films among the general public corresponds with the phenomenon of rising regionalization and localization of the Chinese media (Fitzgerald, 2003; Goodman, 1997, 2002; Hendrischke, 1999; Sun, 2012). De-territorializing technologies such as satellite TV and the Internet have enabled place-specific media forms made by local and provincial stations to be accessed from further regions or even nationwide. A well-known example is Hunan Satellite Television based in central China, which has become China’s most successful producer of variety shows and entertainment programs. These regional producers occasionally contest the center’s hegemony on various issues, “challenging the cultural authority, if not the discursive legitimacy, of the Centre’s leadership” (Sun, 2012, p. 12).

The urban–rural divide as a socioeconomic reality, well discussed within social science and humanities, is not merely the context of filmmakers’ production, but provides the text they reflect upon, probe into, and critique against. Through representation, filmmakers seek to establish their agency as artists and intellectuals, contesting mainstream narratives that tend to glorify center-down urbanization and spaceless globalization. It is worth noting that many of the so-called city films are not about the glittering urban experience (Z. Zhang, 2007), but deal with the transitional area between the rural and the urban. While the rural–urban gap accounts for a large share of overall inequality in China, inland–coastal disparity has grown rapidly since the onset of the economic reform (Fan et al., 2011). Aesthetically, regional films shot in inland small towns accurately capture the gray area between the lure of the urban and the reality of a falling-behind countryside, which, to these directors, more properly defines what is real China and hints at its future.

Indeed, regional films addressing uneven economic development do not simply criticize inequality as a social problem that needs to be solved. Neither do these films portray unevenness as a reality that might have universal application or a manifestation of the materialistic dialectics, as claimed by theorists. Rather, joining other cultural forms, these films illuminate historical and epistemological mechanisms that shape the urban–rural divide as a notion and geographical disparity in conception. In his canonical work, *Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China*, sociologist William Skinner called attention to the continuation between the rural area and the city in traditional villages and therefore challenged their separation in modernity. Literature pieces such as Ye Shengtao’s short story, “Three to Five Bushels More” (*Duou shoule san wu dou*; Isaacs, 1974, pp. 337-347), point to how world capitalism invaded the countryside and displaced the rule of nature as early as the 1930s. The widely noticed 2004 exposé, *Survey of Chinese Peasants,*
undeniably reveals that the disparity between the countryside and the city is an outcome of state policies molded by global industrialization. More recently, Liang Hong’s novels, *China in Liang Village* and *Liang Village in China*, impart her dismayed personal experience of hometown demise and lament the dominance of dualism and social Darwinism in policy making (Cao, 2013).

As articulated by Doreen Massey, under modernity, space is conceived as divided into bounded places and spatial difference is convened into temporal sequence. “Different ‘places’ were interpreted as different stages in a single temporal development.” She goes on to underline that “in these conceptions of singular progress, temporality itself is not really open. The future is already foretold; inscribed into the story” (Massey, 2005, p. 68). Her critique resonates with the contention that uneven development is an intricate condition of capitalism and/or modernity (Harvey, 2006; Smith, 1984). In the case of China, the foretold story of national progression from its battered past to a promising future of wealth and power, pertinent to political discourse since the May Fourth era (S. Lu, 2007), legitimizes the ruling of the state and the subjugation of selfhood. Marshall Berman’s remark, quoted in Zhang Xudong’s *Chinese Modernism*, about the inability of falling-behind nations to make their own history, also applies to provincial regions: “the modernism of underdevelopment is forced to build on fantasies and dreams of modernity, to nourish itself on an intimacy and a struggle with mirages and ghosts” (Berman, 1982, p. 232; X. Zhang, 1997, p. 20). Regional disparity, to place against the discourse of modernity, is co-opted into sequential development from backward to forward, from premodern to modern, which declares the nonexistence of the inland regions in a forward-looking timeline—In such a timeline, the local is erased as much as the subjectivity of selfhood is canceled.

Even though the new generation of independent filmmakers unexceptionally proclaim their intention of withdrawing from the Fifth Generation’s national allegories and resorting to the private space of self, such private space is far from a secure place of abode. What these young directors present on screen are the suppression of the psyche and its eventual implosion in the confined space. Implosion is defined as inward movement when the subject loses his or her outward or upward mobility. The local is shown as an entrapped inland space that makes at most symbolic references to the outside world but lacks valid connections to it. Crisscrossing the multilayered spaces contained in the imagery of the local, therefore, accentuates the efforts of players on the lowest rung of the society who try to tell a story of their own, countering the discourse of national development. Independent filmmakers’ unwavering preoccupation with regional imageries, to understand in this vein, reflects not so much a feeling of solace for marginalized regions, but a vision of confronting the mainstream narratives that tend to reiterate the “inscribed” and “foretold” story of the future.

**Ying Liang’s Regional Trilogy**

The first film of Ying Liang’s trilogy about Zigong, *Taking Father Home* (*Bei yazi de nanhai*, 2005), was also his feature film debut. Completed with borrowed equipment, including a digital camera, and recruiting friends and family as the actors, the production cost of the film was only RMB 30,000 (i.e., less than US$5,000). This film follows a countryside teen, Xu Zhen, traveling to the nearby city, in search of his father, only to find that his debt-ridden father has established another family in the city. Set against a flood warning forcing the city residents to evacuate, Xu kills his father right before the rainstorm hits. He cuts off a lock of his father’s hair to accomplish his mission of “taking father home.” As with his shorts, this feature by Ying Liang won widespread recognition, including awards from the Tokyo Filmex Film Festival, the Hong Kong International Film Festival, the San Francisco International Film Festival, and the support of the Hubert Bals Fund (HBF) from the Rotterdam International Film Festival. With more financial assistance, Ying Liang made *The Other Half*, a narrative that details the life tragedy of a young woman living in Zigong. Zeng Xiaofen, newly hired as a clerk at a law firm, documents the complaints of various plaintiffs—from a business owner rebuffing workers’ compensation to housewives demanding divorce. Like the other women involved in the lawsuits, Xiaofen is inured in her own emotional turmoil—torn between her attachment for a gambling boyfriend, Deng Gang, and her mother’s opposition to this debilitating relationship. As the narrative develops, Xiaofen’s mother pesters her to meet a local factory chief because Xiaofen supposedly looks like the internationally famed actress, Zhang Ziyi, and is expected to marry well. Later Deng Gang goes missing while the city is threatened by an explosion caused by Benzene leakage from a chemical plant.

In a haunting tone, the third feature in the trilogy, *Good Cats* (*Hao mao*, 2008) relays the ripple effect of the infamous aphorism from reformist Deng Xiaoping, “white cats or black cats, whoever catch the mice are good cats” (Guo, 2003, p. 181). This saying, coming from Deng’s home province Sichuan where the film was made, justified the implementation of a pragmatic system and helped to evade the deadlock antagonism between socialism and capitalism. In place of Mao’s economic policy, postsocialist China adopts Williamson’s inverted-U hypothesis and the center-down paradigm in western theories (Williamson, 1965; Zhao & Tong, 2000), assuming that regional disparities will eventually level off, hence Deng Xiaoping’s slogan of “let some people get rich first.” The film, as an intimate portrait of social crisis in central China caused by the irrational housing market, suggests otherwise: Hysterical desire for fast accumulation of wealth drives both the haves and have-nots to disarray.
Luo Liang, a driver working for a real estate company, has drifted away from his disgruntled wife and has an affair with a prostitute, who turns out to be a gangster working to scam ransom money. In parallel with Luo’s familial difficulties is a story about his distressed mentor who eventually commits suicide. Meanwhile, Luo’s boss, Mr. Peng, is in the process of negotiating a deal with nearby villagers to purchase their land—the business, however, is taken over by Peng’s consultant. In the end, Peng goes insane, and believes that cats are meowing in his building. As an expressive device, a posthumous band appears on a stage and sings elegies when a main character’s life sinks to a low point, as if to indicate the advent of death, or to blur the line between death and life. Categorized as suspense, this film is permeated by an ever-increasing feel of despair that leads to the emotional and physical collapse of the protagonist.

Thereafter, the director was afflicted by his doubt about the relevance and usefulness of cinema and stopped making full-length features for a few years (with the exception of Condolence, 2009, a 19-min short film). His return in 2012 with the docudrama, When Night Falls, caught widespread attention due to the sensitive subject matter the film deals with: the conviction and execution of Yang Jia, who, in 2008, stabbed six Shanghai police officers to death, a legal case that caused nationwide angst about judicial injustice. The success of the film in international film festivals did not help it dodge escalating film censorship accompanying the opening of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party. At the time of its premiere at the Jeongju Film Festival, the Chinese government tried to purchase the film to prevent its further distribution. Upon refusal, government officials visited the filmmaker, who was residing in Hong Kong, in the hope of persuading him to change the plot. In Ying Liang’s twitter account, he revealed that some government personnel threatened him with arrest if he returned home, which essentially places him in exile.

From Taking Father Home to Good Cats, Ying Liang’s films integrate an amateur acting crew, who execute the humor and personal warmth through local dialects, and a detached camera lens that inquires into various cityscapes. The films’ deliberation on the relation between city space and individuals’ life journeys departs from Jia Zhangke’s regional films and attempts the zeniths of Edward Yang’s urban saga in which the city becomes the eternal tribunal for the rootless populaces of modern life. Whereas in Jia’s works, memory about a bygone community offers the bruised space—the linguistic, topological, domestic, transnational, embodied, and imaginative, on-screen and offscreen, all of which are harbored in the local. He captures the space as an observer and, concomitantly, as an entity that undergoes transformation and intrusion in a way similar to what is experienced by its inhabitants. Equalized to its limitless use, as continuous construction projects span the country, space is not open any more, but locked to its official definition. Its existence as possibility, nonfulfillment, dynamics, and relation is hastily displaced and filled with one function after the other. In Taking Father Home, the teenager holds a city map that fails to direct him to the address written on the mail his father sent home. With the aid of a city policeman, he arrives at the address and discovers that not only the building is demolished but also the street name is changed from “happiness” to “freedom.” The hotel his father lived in becomes a construction site for a shopping mall.

Ying Liang’s regional films quietly present space as a pivot of relations, within which the position of self and the situation of the local are intertwined. In such a relational space, dialects convey a merry shrewdness enjoyed by local people and mandarin stands in as a disembodied authority. The cinematic space is where the imaginative outside world meets the represented reality of humble living in an underprivileged small city and where the topological dimension of the region recedes to the existential. In Taking Father Home, the increase of water level in the river denotes not simply the impending natural disaster but also the rising despair of the country boy, whose determination to bring his father back is destroyed at the same time when the destruction of the city begins. In the cinematic space, topographical features of the regional space such as meandering alleys, while obstructing the full body of the characters from display, are associated with surreptitious and undetectable cases of murder.

Compared with other independent regional films, many of which fixate on either the victimization of the local or the moralistic endurance of the subject, Ying Liang’s features stand out with explosive endings where prophesying signs of imminent calamity eventually break out in forceful and violent ways. As part of the destructive social milieu, such an explosion/implosion both suffocates the characters and brings to surface the degree of agony they endure. The impending destruction of the local space, seen both in Taking Father Home and The Other Half, serves as an explosive expression for the subdued self and coagulates the symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1999) imposed on the local. Bourdieu (2000) contended that the cognitive framework shared by the
dominant and the dominated, rather than the consciousness of the dominated, should constitute the basis for a better understanding of power relations. In his view, the fundamental source of state power is its monopoly on symbolic capital, which determines social divisions and helps the state maintain an orderly society without even resorting to military force. In light of Bourdieu’s propositions, what Ying’s film canvas exposes is the violence immanent to the process of the reincarnation of state discourse in the local, a process usually considered neutral and necessary in mainstream narratives. State discourse becomes a framework shared by the local and a parameter the latter’s existence relies on, which constitutes the inscribed and foremost violence from which the local cannot break away.

**The Other Half: A Relational Cinematic Space**

This section of the article offers a detailed analysis on how formalistic experiments in *The Other Half*—the contrast and correspondence between on-screen and offscreen spaces—deftly bring forward a relational cinematic space. Joining other films that reflect on the dire situation faced by left-behind inland regions, Ying Liang’s work provides an invaluable account that contributes to an alternative chronology of national development. I maintain that, in cultural studies, textual details ought to be accorded a weight no less than macroscopic dimensions, with the belief that the former could open new ground for theoretic exploration. It is of relevance to recall Wendy Larson's (2009) observation on the dilemma faced by area studies:

Now that our . . . faith in the power of aesthetics has been tempered by an understanding of exclusion and social power, we should recognize that aesthetic and creative texts and films may unravel their own unique and imaginative logic, and may point us toward more deeply theoretical understanding. (p. 11)

The interior scenes of *The Other Half* are characterized by shots of exactly the same angle, that is, the camera is placed at eye level with the characters, and at a medium distance from the objects in view. These techniques put forth the dynamics between on-screen and offscreen spaces and present the camera as a mirroring device capable of capturing the full picture. The division between the two spaces, on-screen and offscreen, is insinuated in the opening sequence and reconfirmed in succeeding frontal shots of different plaintiffs making testimonies. The opening of the film features a 3-min close-up of Xiaofen being interviewed by the offscreen recruiter. While establishing the divide between the interviewee and the recruiter, the first scene initiates the film’s reference to the unseen half, the half erased from direct representation, as suggested by the film title. As pointed out by a critic, the director uses the two sets of story lines, narrations of plaintiffs in the law firm and Xiaofen’s personal life, to inquire about the intricate relationship between the collective and the individual, the public and the personal (Scheib, 2007).

The film presents the process in which each site undergoes ruthless transformations at the same time when Xiaofen’s life suffers different intrusions, accentuating how different forces penetrate an enduring space. These transformations are constant, often brutal and violent, erasing the communal ground the characters live on. The “fairy lady tailor shop,” a neighboring site Xiaofen passes by every day, is remodeled into a mahjong parlor after its owner is murdered. However, a mysterious fire soon destroys this new location of leisurely entertainment. The reverse shot at the closing of the film resembles the ending in Hou Hsiao-shien’s 1989 film, *A City of Sadness* (*Beijing chengshi*), where the static shot of family dinner concludes a chronicle of historical turmoil and community vicissitudes. Ying Liang’s film displays the same tableau of a group of villagers sitting in front of the camera before they rush away from the fire. Then the film reverses the sequence as if to rewind the flow of time to retrieve a lost time. The formalistic composition where each character occupies a specific position in the shot is disrupted by the aberrant time flow. If the blinking house light in *A City of Sadness* indicates the possibility that something might go wrong and the increasing speed of that blinking hints at an urgency that needs to be addressed, then the ending of *The Other Half* attempts to restore a space that remains intact and immune to different forms of violation.

As enduring as the violated local space is the silent heroine who is often placed in a secondary position in the scene or in a long shot receding from the view, as if allowing the camera to comment on her subjugated social position. The film further maneuvers the mismatch between image and sound to dwell on the impingement she suffers. Concluding the first day of her work, the image of her crossing an overpass is juxtaposed with sound from the local radio station. Shot from a high angle that miniaturizes her posture, the overpass signals not mobility but an entrapment overtaking her personal endeavors. Another example of innovative camerawork displays on-screen images matched with sound from the subsequent shot. The morning after her transient reunion with her boyfriend, Xiaofen is seen riding a bus to work, a view brimmed with the voice of a woman complaining about her gambling husband. It is then disclosed that these complaints are from a plaintiff sitting in Xiaofen’s law firm. That the heroine’s distress is not articulated by her but expressed cinematically by a stranger reaffirms her quiet demeanor. It also serves to emboss her acquiescence to multiple claims, including her mother’s instruction about marriage, the local government’s public announcements and, here, the plaintiff’s complaints about family disputes.

Such a relational cinematic space congeals into narratives about the ironic relation between the local space (which is provincial, subordinate, and doomed) and the outside world (envisioned as cosmopolitan, empowering, and propitious):
The local inhabitants’ search for an exit, an endeavor at transcending geographical disparities, unexceptionally ends in failure and meets with the unresponsiveness of the external world, as if the latter only exists as a mirage. After Deng Gang goes missing, Xiaofen searches through different sites, including a labyrinth-like karaoke bar, in which she asks the guard to direct her to the exit. “Where is the exit,” one of the few sentences the quiet heroine ever utters throughout the film, is a desperate but suppressed calling for help. The resounding question about “the exit,” shown as the characters’ admiring references to foreign regions and countries, marks the isolated status of the local and its inhabitants. In an earlier scene, when Deng Gang, for his delinquency and mistreatment of his girlfriend, was chastised by his policeman buddy, Deng impassionedly rebuked him, asking “will you ever be able to get out of this place?”

The film shows that whatever connection built to reach out to the outside world is at most feeble and whimsical, if not a complete illusion. In Xiaofen’s workplace, a woman asks for divorce from her Taiwanese husband, citing a preceding case in which the local court ruled that if a husband did not respond to a divorce announcement in 10 days, the divorce would be legalized. Here the film does not stop at alluding to the phenomenon that Chinese women living in provincial areas marry internationally to emigrate, or to the fragility of this type of marriage. Instead, it satirizes how the outside world, the opposite side of spatial development that is portrayed as urban, modern, and frequently transnational, is unresponsive and even ensnaring, as the story in the film unfolds that Xiaofen’s friend dies as a stowaway to America. Xiaofen’s father, who disappeared for 20 years, suddenly returned in the middle of the film and promised his wife and daughter reunion and prosperity. However, he disappears again in the end of the film when the city faces evacuation—The befalling external savior turns out to be completely useless.

The lighthearted tone permeating the complainants’ narration changes abruptly toward the end of the film, with the deterioration of Xiaofen’s health and the advent of the chemical plant explosion. As in his first feature, Taking Father Home, the subtle and neutral tone of the first half is abruptly cut off in the middle of the film, as if to demonstrate the sudden breakout of all the offscreen spaces, when accumulating anxieties begin to intrude into the characters’ lives. Similar to Jia Zhangke’s Unknown Pleasures (Renxiaoyao, 2002) where disaster becomes the only noticeable expression for the two quiet teenage friends, The Other Half features a factory explosion that offers a mystic correspondence and the only conclusion to the suffocated inhabitants in the local. The sensation created by the disastrous accident projects individual problems onto the broader social background and serves to dramatize the subdued emotions of an otherwise invisible group.

The ending of the film touts well-crafted image compositions: Xiaofen walks away from the camera toward a destroyed building compound, while radio announcements shift between news about the chemical plant explosion and announcements by those searching for missing families, as if weighing the relative importance of the official news and the requests from individual households. The disastrous accident in the chemical plant trivializes Xiaofen’s personal sufferings, insomuch as her wretched life is mixed in other women’s tragedies and becomes unnoticeable. She eventually disappears from the screen, amid the urgent radio calls for “missing people.” The contrast between the vast and empty landscape that Xiaofen is walking into and her persistence in walking away from a city decimated by the explosion becomes a paradoxical metaphor for “erasure and persistence” (Acquarello, 2009). Her personal suffering is exacerbated by its unprivileged place inside a social context overburdened with various malaise. As in the end none of the “missing persons” radio announcements are meant for her, the solution to her life problems, something she longs for, is declared not to be hers. When she passes out on the ground, the resounding theme of death seemingly becomes the only endorsement of her life, and it is here the film reaches the aesthetics of tragedy—Death becomes the eternal solution and ultimate salvation when justice elsewhere is unattainable. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s (2003) reflection on German tragical drama, in which, he observes, everything “about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death’s head” (p. 166), the theme of demise in many regional films constitutes a collective resolution for historical justice.

In comparison with mainstream films that deal with national disasters in recent years, the “explosive ending” in Ying Liang’s films sidesteps the well-treaded motif—the binding effect of disasters (e.g., Feng Xiaogang’s Aftershock, Back to 1942 and Zhang Yimou’s The Flowers of War)—and leaves the characters wandering alone in the wasteland. Rather than offer the dialectic between disasters and their aftermath, Ying depicts the minute moments of an unprivileged life constantly dictated by erasure and nonexistence. The same social occurrence that speaks to their torturous inner feelings erases the significance of their life: The explosion encapsulates and expresses their personal pain, but this “expression” is soon inundated by the voices coming from various sources that place them in an even wider gulf of alienation.

**Conclusion**

In 90 min (the filmmaker names his film studio “90 minutes film studio”), Ying Liang maintains the vibrancy of independent narrative features with a keen observation of relational space and its disposition in the local. In the search for a new film language, one different from that set up by Jia Zhangke and other established independent filmmakers, Ying captures the local in transfiguration, from the axis of lost memory to
the entrapped space of signifiers. Whereas Jia Zhangke’s films depict a time of regional difference in the 1990s, when hope of modernization is shown as the train waiting for boarding, even for inlanders, films made by his followers show a more desperate picture of the locked-up inhabitants seeking a way out. While in Jia’s Unknown Pleasure, globalization mostly exists as an abstract symbol, that is, in the form of a dollar bill, in Ying Liang’s regional features, it becomes a constant reality. Images in Ying’s films show that globalization, as an external force that dictates local life but is not reachable and unable to offer any help, has compounded and worsened regional inequality. The abrupt endings, faulted by some critics as contrived or unfitting for the generally observatory representation in his films, underlines the director’s deliberation on the rising anxieties haunting the local, an afflicted and violated space whose existence is paradoxically only shown as its erasure in the timeline of national progression and modernization.

The Chinese title of Ying Liang’s most recent film, “I still have words unsaid” (When Night Falls), reflects the contemplation of the director—after all, something important still has not been said. In a transitional time of filmmaking in China, when an escalating market economy does not naturally lead to a freer arena for nonconforming expressions, Ying continues to consolidate the validity of Chinese independent cinema and illuminate the regional and personal sacrifice made for the seemingly well-justified visage of national glory. Ying’s keen awareness and deep concern about the sacrifice made for the seemingly well-justified visage of national development; see Fan, Kanbur, and Zhang (2011).

As the director himself remarks,

The Other Half is a film that comes from both despair and hope. The ill-fated incident did not actually occur in the city in which the story is set, but disaster such as this is a worldwide problem . . . My film attempts to show a portrait of the future, and symbolizes the existential and spiritual crisis which ordinary people experience. (L. Ying, 2010)

The confined screen space hints at the other (not shown) half of Chinese reality, taking the form of a haunting anxiety and the totality of personal sufferings. Xiaofen’s chronic cough is as persistent and detrimental as the chemical pollution and environmental disasters that have contributed to her illness. Ying Liang’s experimental film language successfully builds the linkage between the subjugation of selfhood and the entrapment of the local, in which an abandoned subject and an evacuated city stand in as a quiet but disturbing challenge to the legitimacy of the discourse of national development.

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Notes
1. This article mainly discusses fictional films, admitting that documentaries constitute a separate area of study, considering the latter’s disparate production mode, different typography, developmental trajectory, and aesthetic tradition (Nichols, 2010). It is worth noting that independent documentaries in contemporary China overlap with fictional films in subject matters and thematic concerns and are thus similarly replete with intimate regional depictions.

2. In China studies, regionalization can mean the rise of cities and provinces in media production and its centrifugal effect in China’s political configuration (Sun, 2012), or the cultural significance of the East Asian region in the world (Chua, 2012). Another dimension of regionalization diagnoses unequal economic development; see Fan, Kanbur, and Zhang (2011).

3. Sometimes, especially in news, these directors are called “the Seventh Generation.” This article mostly refrains from using this term because it is very loosely defined and has not been widely acknowledged among film directors or critics.

4. For example, a blogger comments that

Independent films are not only a dream; it needs sincerity and acute observation of life. For a long time on our screen are illusionary images remote from real life, in which we cannot see real characters . . . Yet since Jia Zhangke’s Xiaoshan Going Home (Xiaoshan huijia, 1995) things are quietly changing. Spending 30,000 RMB completing a 90mins narrative feature by one person sounds like a dream; yet someone made it—that is Ying Liang. He not only tried but also persisted. Under his camera, ordinary city life shows a different aliveness, making me feel that in the populace there is naturally a lively atmosphere, full of vigor—these are exactly what we can’t see on TV screen. (Liuhua, 2010)

5. Particularly, Liu Jiayin’s Oxhide (Niupi, 2005) and Oxhide II (Niupi II, 2009).

6. In China’s iGeneration (Johnson et al., 2014), scholars examine multiple aspects of aesthetic innovations achieved by new filmmakers. Luke Vulpiani contends that Jia Zhangke’s 24 City (Ershi si cheng ji, 2008) and Lou Ye’s Summer Palace (Yihe Yuan, 2006) denote “a passage to a different film style in China, particularly in terms of the representation of subjectivity and history” (p. 89). In line with Vulpiani’s observation, Keith Wagner presents the extreme case of a young filmmaker, Xue Jianqiang, trying to debase the legacy of established documentarian Wu Wenguang and to break the restrictive generational division. Wagner suggests that Xue’s “reckless” indulgence in juvenile crime, shared by a few other filmmakers, is an effort to reject traditional modes of Chinese documentary filmmaking (p. 160).

7. Having peaked in the first decade after the turn of the millennium, independent film in China is facing changes caused by external forces (more rigid government censorship) and internal reassessment. Scholars have observed inertia in subject matters and aesthetic tendencies and attribute such nadir
in creativity to the exhaustion of direct cinema (Chan, 2010; Kraicer, 2009; Normes, 2009; Ran, 2012).
8. For instance, Jason McGrath (2008) maintains that these films constitute “a middlebrow art cinema that has been largely drained of intellectual content or critical power,” and the “autonomy of form from ideological or narrative content” becomes “not a moment of modernist autonomy or critique but rather an embodiment of the new ideology of capitalism, insofar as form itself appears as a globalized commodity” (p. 208).
9. In this book, scholars examine multiple aspects of aesthetic innovations achieved by new filmmakers. Importantly, Luke Vulpiani contends that Jia Zhangke’s 24 City (Ershi si cheng ji, 2008) and Lou Ye’s Summer Palace (Yihe Yuan, 2006) denote “a passage to a different film style in China, particularly in terms of the representation of subjectivity and history”(p. 89). In line with Vulpiani’s observation, Keith Wagner presents the extreme case of a young filmmaker, Xue Jianqiang, trying to debase the legacy of established documentarian Wu Wenguang and to break the restrictive generational division. Wagner suggests that Xue’s “reckless” indulgence in juvenile crime, shared by a few other filmmakers, is an effort to reject traditional modes of Chinese documentary filmmaking (p. 160).
10. Another important factor that boosted the use of dialect in media is the success of the comic skits by Zhao Benshan, an actor and director who speaks Northeastern dialect (dong-beihua), in his shows for the “Chinese New Year celebration program” (Chunjie lianhuwan wanhai) aired annually on China Central Television (CCTV).
11. Among other propositions for changes, filmmakers and critics in China welcome the possibility of establishing a film rating system that might be able to separate production and distribution for films, similar to that in Euro-American cinema. The anticipated outcome that Chinese independent films may be reduced to targeting a niche market in the global market of cultural consumption has, however, resulted in cautiousness among filmmakers. Numerous Chinese-language articles have been written about this issue. One of the most recent articles is “Qianxi woguo jianli dianying fenji zhidu de biyaoxing” (Discussion on the necessity of establishing a film rating system in our country; Qiu, 2014). For general discussion, refer to the column of “Zhongguo dianying fenji zhidu” in Southern Weekend, a weekly newspaper based in Guangzhou, China. For critical analysis on the transformation of the Chinese film industry in the 2000s, refer to Art, Politics, and Commerce in Chinese Cinema (Zhu, 2010).
12. Ernest Mandel claims that uneven development is not restricted to the history of capitalism but “a universal law of human history” (Mandel, 1968, p. 91), and Louis Althusser maintains that uneven development exists in “contradiction itself” (Althusser, 1969, pp. 200-213). Or one may argue in light of Hegelian dialectics and see inequality as an innate character of human history. Neil Smith (1984) disagreed with these more universal claims and attributes unevenness to modern history of capitalist expansion. This article mostly adopts Smith’s stance.
13. Discussion on the significance of modernity and modernization in China, as shown in different aspects of social life, as a discourse transposed to literary works, or their historical development, is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that Zhang Xudong and Tang Xiaobing are two of the better known China scholars who bridged heated discussion in 1980s China, during the so-called cultural fever, and studies of modernism in the west, such as The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, Modernity and Ambivalence, and Reflexive Modernization, to name a few (Bauman, 1991; Beck, 1994; Habermas, 1987). Refer to Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms (X. Zhang, 1997), Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian (Tang, 2000).
14. A great deal of scholarly work has been devoted to the motif of trauma, individual sacrifice of different forms, and the building of national identity in modern China. It is argued that literary works configure the process when physical needs and personal desire are intertwined into political forces (Yue, 1999), and historical violence is connected to the ideas of modernity and nation (M. Berry, 2008). Such views are echoed in Jing Tsu’s (2005) Failure, Nationalism, and Literature: The Making of Modern Chinese Identity, 1895-1937.
15. The Hegelian and Marxist notion of linear historical advance- ment manifests in China as various government slogans that place economic development as the core strategy of the state, that is, “development is the absolute principle,” and more recently the “Chinese dream” (“Background: Connotations of Chinese Dream,” 2014). The discourse of modernity in post-Mao China forms a type of metamarrative, to borrow Lyotard’s term (Lyotard, 1984), that sustains the state apparatus and mandates its effect on human agency (Cai, 2004).
16. Refer to the website of “dGenerate Films,” a distributor of contemporary independent film from mainland China: http://dgeneratefilms.com/filmmakers/ying-liang-2
17. The film won Best Director and the leading actress won Best Actress at the Locarno Film Festival, summer 2012.
18. The ban on Ying Liang’s film is only one incident in a sequence of state interventions taking place in 2012, the destined year of transition in Chinese political leadership. On the opening night of the 9th Beijing Independent Film Festival, for example, plainclothes police and local officials visited the screen hall and pressed organizers to halt the opening film. After organizers refused the demand, about a half hour into the film, the power in the hall went out and the audiences were forced to move to the organizers’ offices to watch the films (Ran, 2012).
19. The famous “white cats, black cats” saying first appeared in Deng’s 1962 talk entitled “Restore Agricultural Production,” quoting his longtime assistant Liu Bocheng, another marshal from Sichuan (Deng, 1992). In Good Cats, the relationship between the protagonist and his mentor becomes somewhat political when one considers such background. This is another subtle detail in the film, in addition to the dialect, that seems to be more easily appreciated by local audiences.

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