Zhang Lü’s Korean Diaspora Cinema in Rhetoric, Ethnographic, and Ethic Perspectives (2010–2014)

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Abstract. Zhang Lü, an ethnically Korean Chinese director, the motif of wander and “superimposition” between homeland and an alien land can find its origin in whose special identity and life environment. In his films, we will encounter Korean “wanderers” in mainland China, Mongolia, South Korea and Japan. Some critics notice the similarity between Zhang Lü and Hong Sang-soo, especially in the repeating dining scenes. Although the two directors share resemblant narrative and style, what Zhang Lü tries to expresses is distinguished.

1. Audiovisual Comment on Man and his World

1.1 Audio

The sound design in Zhang Lü’s earlier films is on one hand documentary, and on the other, significantly controlled and thrust by surrealism, impossible voices. From Grain in Ear to Dooman River, little voice-over is heard, and every piece of silence, sigh, groan, speech, cry, and music has itself a visible source. The control on sound reveals the technological limit of most early independent films, and more importantly, makes the characters’ lives intolerable.

One approach to understand the anthropological message from Zhang Lü’s film is language misuse. One of the two female visitors in Gyeongju asks whether Choi Hyeon will forgive Japanese as to their wartime ill doings, he responds: “I like natto.” To liquefy the embarrassment, Yoon-hee translates for both: “The pain can hardly be forgotten, but to become better side by side matters more”. In a later sequence in which Choi Hyeon phones, however, we come to know he understands Japanese, but by language misuse, he skirts the historical dilemma. This tickling shows Zhang Lü’s cunning sense of humor to crack the depression in film. The North Korean escapist in Desert Dream tells her son that day she talks with a Mongolian granny—she cannot speak Mongolian—only to raise something about her passed away husband. The language misuse addressed in the films is a basic need for man but a little compelled.

The personification of language invalidity appears in Dooman River and again Desert Dream. The sister in Dooman River is mute but her speaking disability is remedied by the talent to draw, for instance, a megabridge across Dooman river. The little girl in the latter film is losing her hearing as the rangeland is losing its vitality. In Zhang Lü’s philosophy of life, the language of adult is hollow and self-contradictory, embodied, for example, in the Chinese learning class (Chongqing), no one has as adequate confidence as the assigned essay topic “Tomorrow Will Be Better” promises. Iri, original name of the city reconstructed after an explosion, has been excluded by the survivors’ consciousness. Jin-seo’s brother, a taxi driver, receives a Christian’s blessing right after being cheated by a passenger. But in exploiting meaningfulness, the visual-word association tends to become abused, such as the sequence in Chongqing where the blackboard on the facade of Huoyaoju (gunpowder bureau) police station is scribbled with a boy’s curse (“I will make your family blasted, Huang Song you bastard.”). Another example is the apposition of a prostitute and a bedding poster. We can see the prostitute feeding chickens (in Chinese, “chicken” is a substitute for sex worker). The meaningfulness is as too much for the wandering protagonist to recite the nostalgia poetry.
The lines are defamiliarized. In *Chongqing*, Li Bai’s poem are not read fluently but word by word, and thus fractured. At another extreme of Zhang Lü’s acoustic spectrum vibrates the kids’ babbles, such as retarded sister’s newly acquired Chinese. This detail is a confirmation of a simple greeting as an ethical action to break the cultural barrier and make each other’s experience shared. The Mongolian herder says an-nyeong-ha-se-yo to the mother and son from North Korea.

Zhang Lü’s disbelief in language is underlined by his affirmative use of non-language communication. In *Gyeongju*, the reserved dialogue between Choi Hyeon and Yoon-hee is only the development of the silence and incoherency in their conversations. They talk with their bodies. Choi Hyeon let Yoon-hee hide behind him when he takes a panning to seize a panorama of the tea house. Both turn back to back and in an increasingly intimate circle. That night Yoon-hee keeps her bedroom door narrowly open, hinting that she accepts Choi Hyeon. This expression of love is subtle and need little lingual assistance. Da-yeon’s love for Yeong-min is non-lingual, too: absentmindedness at meal while waiting for him, delivering food as he gloomily drinks soju.

The director notices that language is reaffirmation of one’s cultural identity-Hangai, the hero in *Desert Dream* speaks to himself as the mother and son do not get what he is murmuring, while communication and cultural inheritance depend more on body language, to be specific, imitation, in the scenes Chang-ho(the son) learns to pray around the pagoda, to bless for the tent with a watered bottle, to protect his mother with a gun.

Another non-language in Zhang Lü’s film is diegetic music that comes up when language appears invalid. The music, whether it is from a wireless radio, a mobile phone, or a character’s mouth, seems the only way to get one expressed in the sterility of words. Apparently, the love song Yoon-hee sings is for Choi Hyeon. She faces him and he also stands up and begins to dance. As a requiem to end the day of affair, *Jasmine* sung by Choi Hyeon’s wife wakes him. The threnode hummed by the aged for their friend who has passed away, the love tune chanted by geracomium dwellers in Iri, the melody sung by Sui’s father when he thinks about his daughter, Chang-ho’s *Arilang* and Mongolian soldier’s khoomei all belong to the director’s playlist of pure emotion. Apart from the musical forms abovementioned, Karaoke bar suggests a space of love and sex, like Tae-woong’s one-night-love with a unknown passenger, and Cui’s drunk romance with Kim.

1.2 Visual

Zhang Lü uses restrained camera movement and shows little interest in sophisticated composition and mise-en-scène. His settings always hold geometrical forms so regular that most frames, towards both still and moving camera, are obsessively bisected or trisected. For instance, in the travel agency scene, the elder clerk appears in the window up left to Choi Hyeon, then the young clerk comes back; after a brief while, the elder leaves, the young pulls her head out of the same window to converse with Choi Hyeon. A loop is consummated. The geometrical form relates to Zhang Lü’s focus on frames in everyday life: door, window, TV screen, and interior design. The big window or the gazebo edges frame the moving landscape and becomes a “screen”. When Choi Hyeon and his old friend stand at opposite sides of a waste bin outside the funeral parlor, the door case bisects the wall and the windowed door. The space design not only stylizes what we see on screen, but also clues on human relation notably. The waste bins, which recur as a division between Choi Hyeon cutting his fingernails and the smoking woman, between smoking Choi Hyeon and the soldier attempting to borrow his lighter, works in a logistics of modern space arrangement of gathering and distancing. Zhang Lü’s camera attends to the traditional diner custom of the family sitting around a table, unlike the more formal, urbanism fashion, and puts the Korean folk house and Mongolian prairie in low angle shots in comparison to the high angle shots from a gazebo view point of the city. In a scene of *Dooman River*, the Korean-nationality boy and North Korea boy sit up above a window frame. All of a sudden, the North Korea boy jumps down the sash and runs away. Then a Chinese patrol comes into the window frame. Later, a cruiser stops aside a window frame, and the policemen walk away from the adjacent one. From the viewpoint of camera, we can see the delator (the Korean-nationality boy) concealing himself under the lower wall between two windows. His father has been informed against for helping North Korea escapists.
A possible explanation will be the width and framed structure of Korean traditional living space that is comparted by few facades, where various home-uses are piled instead of being laid horizontally, and their minimalism lifestyle. Making claustrophobia, as many space-conscious directors try, should also be considered. But we should not forget that the issue of identity and its intermediacy echoes with a space constantly being celled and traversed.

Another series of “plastic materials”[1] that assume intermediacy are mass media. Choi Hyeon is a fancier of cellphone photoing—a memory device. Ironically, however, taking a picture, his memorization is interrupted all the times: Yeong-min calls him to stop photoing and go for a cup of tea, his old flame deletes all her photos in his phone, Da-yeon comes to invite Yoon-hee for dinner, hindering his panning shot. The recurrence of television, radio, mobile phone both produces noise and gives a way to mutual understanding. The television in Dooman River is a postmodern installation showing mix of North Korea propaganda and advertisement; the hotel screen in Iri is very permeated with porn programme; for the son in Grain in Ear, radio becomes a fantasy machine that helps him break out of reality, and he turns it up to overwhelm the mother’s words about her new lover. Zhang Lü’s cinematic comments on mass media seem inconsistent. The herder knows Chang-ho’s origin when Chang-ho follows the radio to sing Arilang. But in Chongqing, the anonymous call in class time is carking, and the smart phone Sui hands to her father to say something to her tombed mother, dreary.

2. Sorrow and Body Performance

It is a problem of representation that many filmmakers, especially the male directors, face. In other words, although the vulnerable gender is endued with visibility via documentary and independent film, being woman is apt to be essentialized in the relation between its extrinsic feature and inner value. Despite, Zhang’s compassion for woman makes a comparison to his satire of man. The violent sex in Zhang Lü’s film reflects the director’s aversion to masculine scoundrelism and schizophrenia. In Grain in Ear, the help from Kim, the driving school chef, and the policeman is not free; Soon-hee, in Desert Dream, have to dedicate herself to Hangai and the Mongolian soldier in exchange of protection; the police official who exempt Sui’s father’s criminal treats her like a toy lodged in hotel; Jin-seo’s uterus is badly impaired during aborticides after being raped by strangers; an escapist from North Korea ravishes the mute sister who has served him with food and place to stay, when the sound track blends the sister’s painful cry and the sinewing TV broadcast. Zhang Lü likes to cast a shadow upon humanity that the audience has just confided in. The man who gives Jin-seo a hat is actually a rapist. Gyeongju leaves sexual violence in the past for which our female character pays the fiddler. As we can see, almost all the males who look tender and righteous will betray the females in the end. For these men, female body is a resource necessary to get help. On the other side, sexual pleasure of woman may be interdicted by her child who hates to share his mother with another man.

The only exception is the Mongolian woman who reins Hangai from upward. Other sex acts are absurd and abnormal, without eye contact, while male character intrudes himself from back, or covers the partner’s eyes. Sui makes love with the Tibetan singer but he is blind. Even the unattractive Aunt Tofu belongs to the bevy of adulterers. So to speak, abolition signifies hopelessness of the grown-up as a whole.

The vulnerability in Zhang Lü’s film challenges our attention as it is relative. Who is vulnerable? That depends. Patrols are everywhere along Dooman river, searching for North Korea escaptists. The lingering policemen are undoubtedly emblem of the decent institutionalized violence, and their interrogation (answer exactly what they ask!) are more of performing power than acquiring information. The SARS inspector in Grain in Ear decides who can get a pass. In Chongqing, the internationale sung by protesters is drowned out by sirens. The police’s rooted superiority in Iri can be clearly felt when he stigmatizes the laborer from Central Asia. But in these films, the power of police is overthrown. Defeated by his fiancée’s frigidity, the police in Grain in Ear forces Cui to be his mistress. At the end, he and the guests coming to his wedding are poisoned by Cui, a woman in despair who has lost her son. In Chongqing, Sui steals the unscrupulous official’s gun-a “castrating”
act. And his naked dance with a sex doll later looks as weak and insane as the Korean man castrated in the explosion who dances mechanically in the hall.

Is the mother who works in Seoul advantaged? This assumption is contravened with the postbag of pills and pitifully little money. Who is more disadvantaged, the children from North Korea who bring unstability to Dooman riverbank or the Korean-nationality boys take revenge on them? As an underdog, the leading role loses his friend and jumps from rooftop—seemingly a homage to Rossellini (selling trike in *Grain in Ear* is saluting to De Sica, as it seems). The kids’ world, from the very start, is stained by adults’, as can be inferred from the gift in *Dooman River*: a missile model. But the sighs about security (in *Desert Dream*) and woman (in *Grain in Ear*) from the kids’ mouths remind us of the blurring of child-adult boundary. Is the Central Asian labourer disadvantaged? Jin-seo washes clothes for him and he does not pay. Are the veterans who live in the war memory and legionary formality disadvantaged? They raped Jin-seo. Is the coffee girl who is fucked by Jin-seo’s brother disadvantaged? She exploits Jin-seo. Putting in a feuilleton of a cleaner imposing a mean fine on a harlot, Zhang Lü implies that the hierarchy within the poor yields a petty version of “all for one, one for all”.

With an eye to the total darkness of Zhang Lü’s film, it is not difficult to read mortality out. Melancholy infects all his aimless characters wasting their lives away. Yoon-hee lives near an ancient king’s grave. On the night she gets slopped, she laps the grave, asking if she can be let in after death. Earlier, the feminized friend keeps folding paper flowers for unknown reason. A sick boy from North Korea falls on the frozen earth and never gets up, ignored. Hangai sees a dead horse aside the highway to Ulanbator, and when he comes back, the horse has become a skeleton. The old people are surely disadvantaged, and by exhibiting mortality in itself, provide a context for the futitarian stories.

It seems that only the disabled characters are intrinsically complete. Jin-seo’s kiss calms the geezer. But something else complicates her innocence. She sees newly bathed nude of herself in mirror—a motif of female’s mirrored self, and out of the sexual awaking, or thirst for love, she lays unclothed in the rest home, causing the same old’s suicide, though he just sniffs at her. She slaps herself and makes her moral consciousness anew. In accordance with Zhang Lü’s faith in the small-fries, Jin-seo befriends a little girl at fruit stall, and shares an apple with her.

At the end of *Iri*, Jin-seo’s brother drowns her and blasts the bridge model designed by himself. This anarchic action is a counterpoint for the 1977 explosion, both of which are some sort of revengeful reply to the indifferent society.

For the ever wandering and nowhere-to-settle protagonists, the last and only connections to home are music, food, tongue, and their own bodies. Nausea and vomit are not only physiological reactivity of intoxication or pregnancy, but also comments on life. The director does not regard life as incurably meaningless, however.

### 3. Reality and the Surreal

Zhang Lü’s film belong to a sub-genre can be entitled as “freak film”. Choi Hyeon quits smoking for his wife and smells the cigarette case every time he is called by tobacco only until he knows that his one night lover, his junior, appealed to abortion when he crams two cigars at one time. The photo of his deceased friend at the funeral is a chromatic and smiling one, taken during a hike in Gyeongju years ago. In a much later scene, when he struggles with the lust at Yoon-hee’s bedroom door, Choi Hyeon lights a candle and pumps up to extinguish it. This strange behavior echoes with an earlier scene in which he tootles to a fish. An unnoticed shot builds relation between the fish and a wind bell. A Buddhism proverb reveals that all the movements are reflections of one’s touched heart. Eccentricity of the hero is also imaged in Choi Hyeon playing Tai-chi with a practitioner in front of a bamboo grove after being thwarted by his university junior. Later in the film, Choi Hyeon gets her call that her husband is coming for him, and rushes out of the restaurant. It is illogical and intensifies the eccentricity.

Zhang Lü is adept in projecting human relationship onto day-to-day trivia. When Soon-hee sees Hangai talking happily with the strange woman, the first move she takes is to lipstick. At the funeral,
an old friend replies to Choi Hyeon’s recount with “you probably will...he probably will”. The reply may be less a fruit of deep mutual understanding than a chinchin, the words only to fill the gaps across conversation. When this unreliable friend suggests a cigar, considering Choi Hyeon’s wife is absent, the latter says: “My wife is here.” What he means is his wife seems looking at him from behind whenever he wants to smoke, and he is somewhat amused by the deceased friend’s wife. In this way, belief is suspended. The friend tells Choi Hyeon that the deceased guy spent two indoor years merrily with his wife and died asleep after a year’s estrangement to his wife found disloyal. The whole story is eerie but receives a wide spread, treated as alleged and participatory truth, which is the basis of a great amount of narrative texts. At the dinner, Da-yeon asks Yoon-hee about “the hairless pervert” harassing her, in the presence of Choi Hyeon. In fact, at the first sight, Yoon-hee feels that Choi Hyeon’s ears are very much like her husband’s.

Narration can even reach fantasy that truth cannot. When Choi Hyeon returns to the fortuneteller who says the university junior will not have child, the fortuneteller’s granddaughter informs that her grandfather died six years ago. In the last shot, Choi Hyeon and his friends, including the deceased one and the unreliable one, come to Yoon-hee’s tea house, enjoying the tea and the porn painting. Resurrection and reunification often occur at the end of Korean films as a moment when art overcomes the limit of reality.

As a matter of fact, our life world is comprised of reality and the “surreal”, of truth, association, memory, and memory loss. In Iri, the granny waiting for love comes across her lover. He speaks nothing. Jin-seo says: “Why! I can hear my handclap, but I can’t hear your utterance.” The old man replies: “For no reason shall I let you hear our whisper of love.” And then the old parade into the screen, singing a love song. When Choi Hyeon recalls the bicker of stream under a stone bridge on his outing with friends, the girl at travel agency giggles and doubts it, alluding to the sound of pee. Another tickle for the girl is Choi Hyeon’s neurotism about the thunder-like bang which he believes is the nuclear experimentation of North Korea. It is what Dali defines as “critical state of paranoia” in art, reality into illusion through misidentification of things.

In Zhang Lü’s efforts to unfold the complexity of life, the border between highbrow culture and popular culture seems to blur. One of Choi Hyeon’s deepest memories is about a porn painting he and his friends noted on their visit to the tea house seven years ago. On the painting, a crane is looking at a half-naked couple into one, with an piece of inscription: have a cup of tea before doing it. So, from a certain “heretical” angle of view, covering the painting with wallpaper goes against the spirit of tea. Also in the tea house owned by a Confucius’ offspring, as Yoon-hee calls herself, it is grotesque that on the toilet wall writes “drink some tea and you piss well”. Here we can see Zhang Lü’s shift from the bold description of sex in earlier works to a body writing more subtle. Another paint, Feng Zikai’s “Farewell, New moon, Watery sky”, unveils Yoon-hee’s husband’s oddly abstruse despair before suicide. And later, Yoon-hee touches Choi Hyeon’s ears and denies that they are like her husband’s. The drawing Hangai witnesses in the capital renders distorted Dadaism herds and horses, and violates the romantic imagination about prairie. Not a coincidence that his daughter daubs a horse skeleton.

4. Self-reflectiveness

The self-reflectiveness in Zhang Lü’s film is worth discussing. On the surface level, a French student in Chinese class mentions Cannes and Gong Li. Sometimes the film frame and a camera frame on screen become one, like when Choi Hyeon and the Japanese visitors who believe he is a film star take a picture, and sometimes they are separate, when Sui photos the blurred cityscape, instead of the lovers. On the Mongolian desert, a film crew is led by a tyrant director. In Grain in Ear, the son paints a kite blue. It is a symbol of artistic unconsciousness, or melancholy, but is also possibly refers to Blue Kite (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993). Zhang is a rebel to film convention. He knows it, and goes an opposite way. Numerous scenery shots, waiting for something to happen, confirm Zhang’s resistance to camera movement. But the something(e.g. unnoticed deaths), as Zhang suggests, is over, and there is no need to wait.
Something (gunshot, arguing, whispers) yet always off-screen is heard, and it drives us to guess, to eavesdrop, and to imagine with the visual trails of the characters’ lives. Moreover, silence is a voice. The pool room varlet’s dirty words are erased, subtitle left visible, though. (Grain in Ear)

The long shot, on the other hand, is applied in intriguing ways when the deceased friend’s wife comes to Choi Hyeon that afternoon and tells him the secret of nirvana. He holds her hands affectionately. And the camera moves to the right, the wife off-screen. Then the camera comes back to show Choi Hyeon holding the teapoy. At the beginning of Chongqing, we hear Li Bai’s poem first, and after quite a while, see the classroom. The camera is so lethargic that when someone starts to talk, it keeps on the character’s back. The character could only see what his/her sluggish eyes reach and the audience could only behold what the camera’s indolent eye achieves. The moment pessimist Sui stands on a gazebo, she makes an erratic action, with eyes open angry. It looks like male’s “inserting”. The camera pans down, and we see a blood stained cactus. Now it is revealed that the action is self-aggressive.

We are not always ready to conclude that Zhang Lü’s camerawork is documentary because it is highly controlled. A searching sequence in Dooman River, when it starts, takes on the look of a POV in the deserted classroom, but as the camera pans, it shows two Korean-nationality boys. Then they run away, and looks back to see the boy from North Korea. The juxtaposed, confused camera viewpoints will bewilder the audience as much as the identity of characters. The camera viewpoint in Desert Dream is also unclear as it is from a bystander who peeps afar.

Within the beginning frame of Iri that is also a photographer’s frame, a presswoman is reporting the 1977 Explosion Memorial. Her focus, as joyfully alienated as the emcee’s from the historical event, is the celebrities who are participating the soiree. Outside the stadium where the explosion happened is a photographic exhibition, and now, an in-utero victim of the shock, Jin-seo, is looking at the photos. The crosscut of locations is a critique on mass media and their evasion from real problem. It is interesting that the presswoman appears again when the film comes to its fin and this time she is following the election. However, the photographer’s unexpected emergence prompts us of the division of two frames. There exists another omniscient camera that is no one else’s but of the artist.

5. Conclusion

Gyeongju is located at a pivotal point in Zhang Lü’s filmmaking. Since he has made 4 South Korea-based art house features that inherit his earlier motifs of Korean diaspora and dreamlike wandering, though technologically polish and in collaboration with stars. In trajectory of Zhang Lü’s career we see the manner in which a director born in the 1960s continues to film against an ethnographic and ethic backdrop and help young artists out of financial and “symbolic capital” embarrassment to be seen on international screen. So Zhang Lü is a mirror of his contemporaries.

A question rooted in a larger historical-geographical context will be what is Asia? Where is Asia? Does there really exist an integrated Asia given within a single ethnic group consensus can scarcely be achieved and interpersonal war seems inevitable? Attempting to answer the question, Zhang Lü points to the “bridge across river” motif. It appears in Desert Dream when the mother and son see a bridge and a panning finally stops at it which is now decorated with blue ribbons. Even though the motif is vague in Chongqing, it is on a bridge that Jin-seo encounters Sui from Chongqing. Dooman river ends with a misty scene in which a granny staggering on a bridge across river. Choi Hyeon, at long last, finds the bridge he and his friends came upon 7 years ago. As Godard says, “a dolly shot is a moral statement” [2], Zhang Lü’s film provides a reference for ethical action when we face the situations his screen stories address.

References

[1] See chapter 8 Soviet Montage in G. Mast, B. Kawin, A Short History of the Movies, eleventh abridged ed., Pearson, Boston, 2012.

[2] J. Godard, T. Milne (trans.), Godard on Godard, Viking, New York, 1972.