

〈講演会報告〉

〈Lecture〉

Autumn Hearts
Filming Feminine “Psychic Interiority” in *Song of the Exile**

Rey Chow

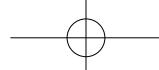


FIGURE 1 Little Hueyin and her grandfather taking a nap together in a flashback in *Ke tu qiu hen / Song of the Exile* (Copyright Cos Group / Central Motion Pictures, 1990)

Few preoccupations are as banal or as popular as the exploration of the individual self. If this cultural thematic of the self continues to hold a certain fascination for us, it is probably less because of its theoretical inexhaustibility than because of its associative open-endedness, the fact that it can be inserted into virtually any type of representational situation without any perceived loss of relevance. The self, as such, has often been discussed in modern and contemporary Chinese literature and culture, which in the twentieth century alone have witnessed multifarious examples of autobiography in fictional as well as nonfictional writings. In a world still largely dominated by the interests of heterosexual kinship bonds and thus, ultimately, by male supremacy, the emergence of the self as a problematic is often closely affined with cultural experiences of marginalization and subordination such as those of women.¹ In this chapter, as part of a reading of Hong Kong director Ann Hui's film *Ke tu qiu hen* (*Song of the Exile*, 1990), I'd like to approach the question of exploring the self—clichéd as it may indeed seem to be—from several perspectives.

First, returning to an early moment of modern Chinese women's writing, I will show how processes of self-reflection are culturally specific phenomena, often constructed with recurrent formal codes—that is, fundamental features of presentation that allow a text to become intelligible in a certain way. The history of the gradual visibility and agency accorded women in modernity,

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then, is in many ways a history of the progressive molding and remolding of the abstraction I will call “psychic interiority.” Second, it would be interesting to see how the formal codes and their variables are adapted and elaborated in different media—in film, for instance, as opposed to writing. How does film at once enrich and transform the terms in which this interiority is imagined? Finally, it is necessary to evaluate, however speculatively, the continued relation between the presentation of such feminine psychic interiority and the social strictures they are intended to counter.

INVENTING “PSYCHIC INTERIORITY”: SOME BASIC CODES

In a short fictional piece, “Xifeng” (West wind), first published in 1936, the well-known author Bing Xin tells the story of a middle-aged woman’s chance reunion with the intimate male friend she rejected ten years before in order to pursue her career.² An accomplished educator, Qiuxin is on her way to deliver a lecture entitled “The Two Major Issues for Women: Career and Marriage.” Recalling her youthful decision to turn down the offer of marriage from Yuan, Qiuxin notices, with a mild sadness, that it is late autumn. This allusion to the season is a suggestion both of her age and of her state of mind, which is clearly fatigued and lonely.³ Unexpectedly, Qiuxin runs into Yuan, who happens to be traveling to the same destination. The two renew their friendship and keep each other company on the rest of their journey, first on the train and then on a boat.

We are soon introduced into a process of quiet observation and self-reflection. Qiuxin thinks that, unlike herself, Yuan, now married with two children, does not seem to have changed. He looks as handsome as ever and seems content with his life. This wonderfully positive ability to remain untouched by time, readily attributed to the other, turns simultaneously into a negative and inferior self-concept, one that is then reprojected outward onto her own aging appearance: “Looking into the mirror under the light, she saw the dust in her hair, the black circles around her eyes, and the fatigue and pallor on her face. ‘I’m not what I used to be anymore.’ She stood numbly for a while. The bell for dinner startled her. She quickly changed and washed her face, and for the first time in years, put on a little rouge” (“Xifeng” 300).

The hypersensitivity to the passing of time and her own physical deterioration is accompanied by a mounting sense of regret: did she make a mistake those many years ago? Qiuxin cannot help being filled with self-loathing, which she extends to women in general: “What happened today happened too abruptly, too unexpectedly, and too much like a dream. She was so confused she did not know where to begin to think. She hated the ten busy years that made her feel she wanted to cry before Yuan yet could not. ‘This is woman!’ she cursed herself” (“Xifeng” 302–3).

Although Qiuxin still has tender feelings for Yuan, and although she realizes through his conversation that he cares for her and intends to remain a loyal friend, the consideration of extramarital sexual propriety means that it is unlikely they will continue in a normal relationship.

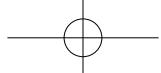
Once again, we realize this through Qiuxin's painfully self-conscious ponderings: "Qiuxin...began hating herself again. The conversation of the past hour was not what she had wanted. Why did she reveal her vulnerability to Yuan after not seeing him for ten years? What's more, wouldn't it be harmful to Yuan's obligations to his family?" ("Xifeng," 309-10).

In this confused and self-blaming frame of mind, Qiuxin arrives at her destination. Coming to greet Yuan at the pier are his young wife and two children. After they depart in the mood of a happily reunited family, Qiu-xin disembarks by herself, as "a breath of west wind brushed across her expressionless face, sweeping up scattered pieces of paper and twirling them on the ground" ("Xifeng" 313).

If the theme of this story is loneliness, loneliness needs to be further specified—less as a mere human condition, as is commonly assumed, than as a new cultural condition, the condition of being a woman in early twentieth-century China who has opted to abandon the well-trodden and relatively secure path of wifehood and motherhood. The perplexity of Qiuxin's newfound freedom lies in the heavy price she *feels* she has had to pay. To her thinking, freedom has only materialized in the rigid form of a mutual exclusion: either career or marriage but not both. Although Qiuxin can discuss this choice rationally and authoritatively (as the title of her lecture suggests), she nonetheless feels emotionally trapped while at the same time obligated to move on as though she has no choice, *as though she is the one who has been excluded and left behind*. This contradictory psychological condition—brought into sharp focus in this case by the chance reappearance of the former male friend—in which physical and social emancipation is somehow lived and experienced as paralysis, points to modern Chinese women's continued bondage to a social contract based, predominantly, on heterosexual, reproductive domesticity. Qiuxin, we might say, is the personification of an incomplete revolution: she can consciously opt against traditional womanhood, but she remains imprisoned in its affective shadow by way of a deep sense of personal dejection. Nowhere is this sense of dejection more directly expressed than in her name, "autumn heart," two characters that, when combined, form the character *chou*, meaning sadness.

Without a doubt, Bing Xin's story, like much of her work, is a piece of sentimentalism. From a technical point of view, however, what it highlights with economical means (within the space of just a few pages) is the formal congealment of—and at that time still a novel experimentation with—what we would nowadays call psychic interiority. As a progressive woman writer, responsive to the tensions of modernity in early twentieth-century China, Bing Xin rightly understood that, to portray feminine agency in a cultural context in which women, even highly educated ones like herself, had long been subordinated, one needed to present that agency with special narrative methods. What makes her infrequently read short story formally remarkable, then, are precisely the codes that remain crucial to this day to the exploration of the self as the self is sutured with modernized femininity.

The first such code is the modern woman's physical mobility: Qiuxin, for instance, is a traveler, with the freedom to move from place to place that comes with education and relative



social standing. Second, physical mobility leads logically to hitherto unavailable opportunities for observation—as one is constantly in the company of strangers—and thus for self-examination and introspection. As she reminisces about events of the past, Qiuxin literally looks at herself in the mirror. Third, this “inward” turn toward the self (as seen by other people, as an objectified image), albeit stemming from freedom, is ironically accompanied by a sense of entrapment and degradation as well as by low self-esteem. Fourth, the insights of introspection are revealed to be a belated illumination—of time and relationships that have receded and/or progressed beyond one’s grasp. Fifth, a predominant feeling of melancholy pervades the character(s) involved, a feeling that is then semiotically reexternalized or metaphorized as nature, in the form of the elements and the seasons, such as the west wind, late autumn, and so forth. (In this regard, the writing of feminine sorrow borrows conveniently from the rich rhetorical repertoires of classical Chinese and European romantic poetry, in which nature has often been anthropomorphized with human affect and cultural meaning.)

Ultimately, there is a lingering sense of loss. What exactly is lost? Beyond all the unpretentious signs of a mournful psychic reality, Bing Xin’s story compels us to ask: how does a free and highly educated woman come to think of herself in terms of loss, of having missed out on something, when to all appearances she has achieved a degree of autonomy that few in early twentieth-century Chinese society, including men, ever enjoyed? In no uncertain terms, the story suggests that Qiuxin’s emotional disorientation is caused by her skepticism and insecurity about her own choice (to forsake the rewards of the kinship family). We thus arrive at the final presentation code familiar to sentimental introspection: whereas Yuan (the other) has reached *home*, Qiuxin (the self) must, as it were, continue her journey in the form of an abject, self-imposed *exile*.

The legacy of “Xifeng” is historical as well as formal. It brings to the fore the question of how to deal, in writing, with women’s agency at a time when the constraints on that agency remained, as ever, unrelenting, especially in the form of popular conceptions. To this question, Bing Xin supplied the experimental answer of constructing a feminine psychic interiority, in which it is the woman character’s act of self-examination that may be seen as the beginning of an alternative form of empowerment. Yet what remains unresolved in this legacy is precisely the self-contradictory form taken by this empowerment. In the midst of action and mobility, and professional achievement, pangs of self-doubt, self-denigration, and self-beratement slowly thicken into a kind of subjecthood with unmitigated—and seemingly unmitigable—feelings of sadness. It is not the unfree woman but the free woman who feels herself trapped. Is this affective overdetermination, which occupies such a central place in the narrative, also an ideological overdetermination? The implications of this question are rich and weighty, and far from having been exhaustively scrutinized. Perhaps because of this, several if not all of the (coded) features of Bing Xin’s little piece continue to reappear in different versions even in contemporary cultural representations of modern Chinese women.

PSYCHIC INTERIORITIES IN THE FORM OF CINEMATIC FLASHBACKS: MULTIPLICITIES IN MOTION

We may now turn to Ann Hui's film *Song of the Exile*, an autobiographical screen drama about the coming-of-age of a young woman, Hueyin Cheung, whose life events span the 1950s to 1970s in Portuguese Macao, British Hong Kong, England, Japan, and mainland China.⁴ (Notably, the screenplay was written by Wu Nianzhen, the famous collaborator with Taiwan director Hou Hsiao-hsien and an actor in films such as Hou's *City of Sadness* and Edward Yang's *Yi Yi*.) At the heart of this drama is Hueyin's difficult relationship with her mother since young childhood. Before discussing the multiple dimensions of this relationship, let me first recapitulate the main events and the order in which they appear in the film.

Chronologically, the main events revolving around the various characters are as follows:

1. Early 1940s: Aiko (Hueyin's mother), while a young woman in Beppu, her hometown, has an episode of unrequited love. She soon leaves Japan to join her elder brother and his family in Manchuria, a Japanese colony at that time.
2. 1945: After Japan loses the war, Aiko and her family are in hiding in Manchuria. Her brother's baby has fallen seriously ill, and, in an attempt to save him, she risks her own life by running out onto the main road to seek help. Hueyin's father, a young translator for the military with a family background in Chinese herbal medicine, saves the baby's life and becomes friends with the Japanese family. When the family members, like other Japanese residents in Manchuria, are being repatriated to Japan, the young man asks Aiko to stay with him in China.
3. The period from the late 1940s to 1963: Hueyin's parents are married, and Hueyin is born in Manchuria in 1948. With his wife and child, Hueyin's father rejoins his parents in Macao but then leaves them behind as he goes alone to work in Hong Kong. Eventually, Aiko rejoins her husband in Hong Kong, but little Hueyin refuses to leave Macao with her parents. She remains in the care of her grandparents until 1963, when the latter decide to go back to Guangdong (south China) to join their younger son. At the age of about fifteen, Hueyin is finally reunited with her parents and younger sister in Hong Kong.
4. The period from 1963 to the early 1970s: At her parents' home in Hong Kong, Hueyin feels increasingly alienated from and critical of her mother. For the first time, she learns (from her father and to her surprise) that her mother is Japanese and that much of her mother's seemingly unacceptable behavior is the result of having to cope with living a foreign culture.⁵ Despite this discovery, Hueyin decides to move out and live by herself.
5. 1973: Hueyin completes a master's degree in communications/film studies in London. (Her father is dead by this point.) She is turned down for a job at the BBC, and, despite being scheduled for an interview with another television station, she returns to Hong Kong to attend her sister's wedding. Her sister and brother-in-law then emigrate to Canada.

6. 1973: Hueyin stays in Hong Kong in her mother’s flat, watching television news reports on the Cultural Revolution that is raging in China, especially in the Guangdong area.
7. Hueyin accompanies her mother on a visit to Beppu. This is the first visit home to Japan that Aiko has made in three decades. It is an eye-opening experience for Hueyin, who begins discovering things about her mother’s past and comes to a new and sympathetic understanding of the older woman.
8. Back in Hong Kong, news of Hueyin’s grandfather’s having had a stroke arrives. Hueyin visits her grandparents in Guangzhou, bringing gifts of groceries and merchandise that her mother has packed for her in-laws. The elders are living in rather modest conditions and taking care of a young child with Down syndrome left in their care by Hueyin’s uncle. As Hueyin sits by her grandfather’s bed watching him fall asleep, she recalls her childhood years in Macao and tears roll down her cheeks.

As pointed out by critics, the use of flashbacks—commonly understood as a literary or cinematic device in which an earlier event is inserted into the chronological order of a narrative—is a regular feature in Ann Hui’s films.⁶ Does this have something to do with Hui’s interest in women’s issues and in devising ways to portray a nonsynchronous but not nonexistent frame of action/agency from within the minds of female characters? (As Elaine Yee-lin Ho points out, “her films centralize and individualize women subjects in ways that the earlier Cantonese cinema had rarely attempted.”)⁷ While the answer to this will have to remain conjectural, it seems fair to say that, in the context of modern Chinese culture, cinematic flashbacks have provided one of the most productive methods for elaborating women’s psychic interiority, a method that can be traced to early twentieth-century writers such as Bing Xin.⁸ Flashbacks allow for a specific kind of cognitive and epistemic shift, whereby the world becomes comprehensible not so much through direct sensory-motor movements as through temporally mediated events such as memories, retellings, and juxtapositions of disparate images. As a filmmaker, Hui’s investment in flashbacks is thus historically in step with what Gilles Deleuze has discussed as the emergence of the time image in post-Second World War (European, American, and Japanese) cinema, wherein human agency itself, or so Deleuze argues, has undergone a mutation from being rational action to being a “seeing function, at once fantasy and report, criticism and compassion”—a mutation in which, in other words, action (in all its spontaneity) has become irreversibly supplanted by and subordinated to time (with its inassimilable complexities). Hui’s own academic work on the French *nouveau roman* author Alain Robbe-Grillet—the subject of her master of philosophy thesis at the University of Hong Kong in the 1970s—was, in this light, an early indication of her ongoing attraction to avant-garde experimentation with narrative time in contemporary literature as well as film.

Although Deleuze himself, notably, expressed reservation about flashbacks—his reason being that they tend to require external justification¹⁰—I nonetheless believe that flashbacks can offer

a highly interesting kind of narrative mediation, one that has extensive implications for the construction of psychic interiority. In representational terms, cinematic flashbacks are nothing short of a palpable link at which the otherwise imperceptible processes of mental transition and transfer involving temporal differences can be visibly displayed and observed.¹¹ But therein lies the paradox, in ways that remind us of Pasolini's point about the double nature of cinema (as discussed in the previous chapter): once displayed on the screen, such flashbacks ineluctably confront us with the question of whether they can always be rerouted back to some originating consciousness. And even where such rerouting is made explicit (as, for instance, by voice-over narration or by visual focalization on a particular character), the projectile, objectlike nature of cinematic images, with their appearance of ontological self-sufficiency, tends to leave something ambiguous about their supposedly obvious (re)connectability to a clearly demarcated psychic interiority. Whereas in Bing Xin's story, psychic interiority is consigned to a single woman character in such a manner as to leave little doubt that she is the subject of the thoughts, memories, and reflections being described, the cinematic flashbacks in Hui's film seem to push beyond the demarcations of such subjecthood and beyond a simple or direct correspondence between individual characters and (the objectified images of) memory/interiority.

On the screen, through the interweaving of different characters' perspectives, the events in Hui's film actually unfold in the following order:

5, 3, 6, 3, 5/6, 3, 4, 6, 7, 1, 2, 8

One can tell by this drastically altered sequencing the constitutive role played by the flashbacks (and, by implication, memories). Even this sequencing, moreover, is not an absolutely precise rendition of the images appearing on the screen because there are occasionally memories/flashbacks inserted within memories/flashbacks. For this reason, a reading of the film cannot, to my mind, proceed by simply reestablishing the chronology of the events. Rather, it is necessary to consider how the film's materiality resides in these temporal reversals and dispersions, which are seldom straightforward.

In other words, rather than using chronology as the ultimate rationale for (re)organizing the events, the question to consider is how the disjointedness in which the events literally appear signifies. What kind of status should the flashbacks be given? Should they be treated as reality, the way the nonflashback scenes are?¹² But strictly speaking, are there nonflashback scenes in this film? After all, the film begins, continues, and concludes explicitly with Hueyin's voice-over narration recounting events of the past.¹³ Even what seems to be the present or chronologically the most recent moment—1973—is rendered as a set of memories, to which Hueyin's voice-over refers, significantly, as “that year” in the latter part of the film. Is the entire film a collection of flashbacks then? If so, how are we to determine the relative or differential function of one flashback against another? Should we suppose that each flashback simply gives way to another

and so on, ad infinitum, or is there some final, stable referent that transcends them and gives them coherence from the outside, in an extradiegetic fashion?¹⁴

To begin to approach these questions, let me note that there are at least three types of flashbacks in play in *Song of the Exile*. The most accessible type is the flashback with a voice-over. For instance, on her return to Hong Kong at the beginning of the film, Hueyin and her mother get into an argument over what she should wear at her sister’s wedding. As Hueyin stands by the window with her back to the camera, we hear her voice-over—“In my memory, mother wasn’t like that.... She used to be a silent and reserved woman”—and we are then shown the flashback to the Macao period. Or, when, toward the end of their trip to Japan, Aiko recalls (for her daughter) how she met her husband in Manchuria, her voice gives clear indications that we are reentering the past. In these scenes, a character’s voice serves as the narrative consciousness guiding us back to the past, and the flashback in the form of images becomes subordinated to the voice, which provides a supporting frame.

The second type of flashback is the flashback without any voice-over. In this case, the audience is shown one set of images and then another without being explicitly told who is doing the remembering. We see this, for instance, when the unpleasant haircut scene of 1973 (in preparation for the sister’s wedding) shifts (back) to the unpleasant haircut scene of the 1950s in Macao or when Hueyin’s somewhat awkward experience of being surrounded and talked about by curious strangers in Japan shifts (back) to her mother’s experience of being surrounded and talked about by unfriendly strangers in the Macao household. Although Hui tends in such cases to refocalize on a character’s face as a way to signal to the audience “this is what *this* person is remembering,” the perspectival polysemy embedded in each set of flashbacks makes it difficult to accept such refocalization as the only possible or exclusive meaning available. Instead of simply (re)matching the flashback with a character’s face/consciousness (in what is sometimes called “point of view”), I believe this second type of flashback raises a more tricky issue, namely: how do we evaluate the juxtaposition of images without ultimately falling back on the logic of omniscient narration?¹⁵ If the point is not simply to trace the images back to a definite someone, not even an omniscient storyteller or seer, how do we begin to process imagistic transitions and transfers? Are they to be grasped as connections, mutual reflections, unexpected crossings, or infinite becomings (whereby one set of images mysteriously transforms into another)?

Third, there are the flashbacks within flashbacks—the best example being Aiko’s story of her past (in Manchuria and, before that, in Japan) within Hueyin’s narration/memory of their trip to Japan. There is also the example of Hueyin’s flashback to herself (as a child in Macao) watching her grandfather picking up a papaya at a Macao market stall, within the flashback of her (as a secondary-school pupil in uniform in Hong Kong) watching an older man (who resembles her grandfather) picking up some lotus root at a Hong Kong market stall. In this type of flashback, the act of remembering has become its own referent, so that behind one memory is not simply another memory but, strictly speaking, another act of remembering, with no clear-cut or ultimate

beginning to be ascertained. At this juncture, the fact that the entire film is offered as an account of past events can, arguably, be used to advance the point that every scene we see is always already a flashback (a past self's act of remembering) within a flashback (a present self's act of remembering).

Whether it serves to unify two or more temporally segregated events, raise questions about the subject or agent of memory (and, with that, the ontological status of adjacent images—and of imagistic adjacency), or demonstrate the *mise-en-abîme* inscribed in the act of remembering, flashbacks in Hui's work are without question a provocative way of articulating boundaries—not just spatial and geographical but also temporal and mental—and their malleability. To this extent, the actual unfolding of events in *Song of the Exile* is not, and should not be, understood simply as a secondary arrangement that stands in a dualist relationship with the original, linear chronological order. Rather, it is more fruitful to see in the alternative sequencing the emergence of a temporal crisscrossing that, in the process of multiplying perspectives, also challenges a simple bifurcation of time (into, for instance, story and plot or chronology and narration). That is to say, once flashbacks are in use, what is of interest is not so much pinpointing a polarized structural relation between clock/calendar time and artificial/fictive time, as apprehending a proliferation of cognitive and epistemic potentialities beyond what is allowed by such a polarity. The meaning of successive time—of time as succession—whether in the form of linear chronology or even in the form of a jumbled sequence—is no longer the most crucial concern here.¹⁶

Accordingly, in Hui's hands, "psychic interiority" as a narrative technique has mutated (and advanced) to the point of being an open, because endlessly expandable and extendable, time and space, quite distinct from the claustrophobic introspective recoiling of the self that we encounter in Bing Xin. Interiority is now not so distinguishable from exteriority, if only because it has to be conveyed through objectlike images, images that are accessibly out there for all to see. In this respect, even the most simple flashback does not exactly invite a straightforward restoration of connections; rather, it makes visible what I would call multiplicities in motion (multiplicities in terms of characters, times, actions, and memories)—a specifically filmic process, perhaps, that signals at once the pluralizing and inevitable dividing—and fissuring—of mental and affective circuits.¹⁷

The absolute centrality of flashbacks in *Song of the Exile* suggests both Hui's affinity with older modern Chinese women intellectuals such as Bing Xin (insofar as she has continued to remold "psychic interiority" by borrowing some of the familiar formal codes of presentation) and her arrival, through the cinematographic interspersing of temporalities, at a considerably more dynamic working model than the single woman character's perspective. Multiplicities in motion, engendered in Hui's film by cinematic flashbacks, indicate that the exploration of "psychic interiority" has reached a stage at which a cohesive reassembling of meanings is, at the level of technique, unnecessary if not altogether impossible. Instead, it is precisely the disintegration of such cohesive reassembling that lends such exploration an energy that implodes and splinters the

notion of “psychic interiority” as a neatly bounded self.

THE CHINESE KINSHIP FAMILY: ETHNOSOCIAL STRONGHOLD AND . . . RECUPERATIVE CLOSURE?

Although Hueyin is aware that her mother is Japanese, it is not until she accompanies Aiko to Japan that she finally achieves her personal enlightenment, her coming-of-age, as it were. This journey to Japan enables Hueyin to appreciate for the first time how her mother has lived in the Cheung family as a foreigner, slighted and discriminated against during her years in Macao by her in-laws and their house guests and condemned to a life of loneliness when her husband was away for long periods of time. In the figure of the emotionally remote mother with whom the daughter could not communicate, Hui offers an outsider’s perspective on the Chinese kinship family, which thrives as an ethnosocial stronghold with entrenched customs and practices. These include a condoned belittlement of women, demand for filial piety, indulgence of young children, and, most important of all, xenophobia toward those who happen not to be familial or ethnic insiders. Because, even under the most benevolent of circumstances, a daughter-in-law traditionally occupies the suspect position of someone from the outside, Aiko’s status is triply exterior—as a daughter-in-law; as a representative of the disdained, though by the latter part of 1945 defeated, national enemy; and, most crucially, as non-Chinese.

In a story that explicitly alludes to exile in its title, the boundaries governing people’s cultural identities, with their modes of inclusion and exclusion, logically constitute a major source of the human drama,¹⁸ but how is a director supposed to depict such boundaries on film? Hui’s method is ingenious: I am thinking of the incidents that feature the mundane and almost unnoticeable details of food consumption and food sharing. Whereas in *The Road Home* and *In the Mood for Love* food is associated in different nostalgic manners with labor or with languor, in *Song of the Exile* food is perceptively presented as the place where ethnocultural boundaries are most intimately—and obstinately—drawn.

In London, as a foreign student, Hueyin leads her fellow students to purchase a Chinese takeout meal of spring rolls. Why spring rolls—why not fish and chips, for instance? Are these spring rolls, marking Hueyin as an East Asian, an outsider (a colonial subject, in fact) to England despite her fluent English, a means of prefiguring the kind of cultural conflict that is to be enacted repeatedly over food in the rest of the film? Among Hueyin’s memories of her childhood and adolescence are several having to do with eating—in Macao, of buying bread from a hawker who is passing by her grandparents’ house, of her grandmother taking her to school with treats of Chinese snacks (pieces of sweetened winter melon and beef jerky), and of having dim sum with her grandparents at a traditional teahouse; in Hong Kong, of being ordered by her father to cook dinner when her mother neglects her housewifely duties by playing mah-jongg all day. Food in these memories is associated with Hueyin’s estrangement from and resentment of her mother,

but the ethnocultural import of their fraught relationship will only be understood later (by the audience), when Hueyin learns that her mother is Japanese.

Nowhere is the phenomenon of ethnosculture as aggressive boundary setting more acutely portrayed than in the grandparents' treatment of their Japanese daughter-in-law in the Macao household. Dismissing the food prepared by Aiko as unacceptably "raw" and "cold" (*shengsheng lengleng*)—in ways that bring to mind Claude Lévi-Strauss's analysis of culinary significations in *The Raw and the Cooked*¹⁹—and hence bad for the stomach, the elders are shown gathering in their own bedroom with a portable stove, cooking and sharing dishes that are more agreeable to their southern Chinese taste. "Raw" and "cold" is, of course, also the way Hueyin's mother comes across to her own child. By contrast, the camera shows the grandfather beckoning affectionately to his granddaughter to join them in their insiders' properly cooked feast, while Aiko is banished outside their door like a savage, left to eat her deplored, because uncooked and uncivilized, meal all by herself. In the name of procuring culinary satisfaction ("things taste better when cooked this way"), the grandparents have de facto used their eating habits as a way to mark their territory. By stigmatizing and excluding Aiko, what they consume and incorporate—we might also say internalize—is none other than the violence of a rigidly enforced cultural border, with "us" on this side and "them" on the other.

While the early part of the film concentrates on Hueyin's recollection of her mother's alienation (a condition that she, as a child, was unwittingly complicit in aggravating), the second half of the film reverses the roles of daughter and mother as cultural insider and outsider as they travel to Japan. Now it is Hueyin who feels she is the foreigner, observing the local customs and festivities, the reunions with family and friends, and the visit to her mother's home (including her maternal grandparents' graves) with a sense of fascination, intensified in part by her inability to speak and understand the Japanese language. Interestingly, this episode of exoticism, suggesting a brief symmetry between mother and daughter, produces a new sense of reflexivity on Hueyin's part. It is as though the inconvenience of being stuck in a foreign country where she is deaf and mute—a multifaceted obstacle in narratological terms—becomes in the end a rewarding homecoming experience. For the first time, Hueyin feels reconciled with and able to return home to the mother from whom she has been exiled all these years. With the interruptions caused by the lack of understanding finally smoothed away, she can forge ahead in the course of her own personal growth.

From the mother's perspective, things are quite different, and the positive change and self-development that we witness taking place in Hueyin cannot be said to be evident in Aiko. Aiko thus stands out in the film as an enigma, a character who remains only partially discernible and whose perpetual cultural liminality punctures the illusion of a continuum between mother's and daughter's perspectives. For Aiko, the trip to Japan is a journey to a past—her familial and national origin—that has become distant and emotionally demanding; it is a return to a home that is fast disappearing. Not only is she confronted with her own unresolved feelings about the people

and events of her youth (she repeatedly praises Japanese things when talking to Hueyin yet never forgets, while they are with her Japanese family and friends, to show off her daughter as a trophy of her time abroad and a sign of her social enviability); she also has to cope with and concede to her brothers’ intent to sell their parental home, the only stable reference point she has left in Japan.²⁰

More critically, how has Aiko managed to survive in a foreign land, among people who have marginalized and rejected her with such hostility? What are the revealing traces of her survival tactics among the Chinese—and of her permanent dislocation from her own culture? From the beginning of the film, we notice that she is (or has become) a quite typical Cantonese maternal figure, who dresses not only herself but also her daughters for ceremonious occasions in gaudy Cantonese styles (with overkills of deep red and gold colors and glittery jewels) and who keeps stressing the importance of their looking like one family. To be sure, Aiko’s efforts to make herself look the same as the people around her have been evident since the early days in Macao, when she is always seen wearing a *cheongsam/qipao*, but, again, nowhere are such efforts more striking than in the rituals of cooking and eating.

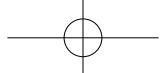
After the wedding banquet is over, Aiko brings home the leftovers with the intention of making a “hot pot” the same way her in-laws used to do in Macao. On her return to Japan, she is at first delighted to sample again the authentic Japanese dishes she misses such as soba noodles with tempura, shrimp, and tofu. Once they have stayed for a while, however, she begins to express exactly the same critical attitude toward Japanese cooking that was expressed by her in-laws years earlier—that it is “not right” because it is raw and cold, that it makes her stomach feel uncomfortable, and that she much prefers—is homesick for—Cantonese food, especially the hot homemade soups. Having more or less completely assimilated to her husband’s culture over the decades, Aiko discovers that her former home has receded to the margins of the civilized—so much so that it has become distasteful, inedible, indeed uninhabitable. Eventually, back in Hong Kong, when news of Hueyin’s grandfather’s stroke reaches them, it is Aiko who, like a dutiful Chinese daughter-in-law, instructs her own daughter that, no matter how busy she is, she must visit her grandparents in Guangdong. As she informs Hueyin, she has spent the afternoon shopping for and packing what she imagines are basic necessities for the elders, including, remarkably (as we find out when Hueyin’s luggage is unpacked on arrival), some *caigan* (dried bok choy), a traditional Cantonese soup ingredient.

If the ending of the film shows a homecoming for the daughter, whose attitude toward her mother has become much more compassionate, it marks Aiko’s future trajectory rather differently, with much more uncertainty. In the manner of Qiuxin, Bing Xin’s heroine, a sense of loss and melancholy haunts the older woman’s story as she faces the consequences of the life choices she made years ago when she was a courageously independent young woman. (Hueyin observes that Aiko seems to have become “much more quiet and reserved” and “turned much older” since their trip to Japan.) Although she has followed the rules of the heterosexual social contract by getting

married and having children, she has, it seems, paid a heavy price in terms of what she has had to abandon along the way, namely, her ties to her own country and family. (For instance, her own younger brother has never forgiven her for having been disloyal to Japan by marrying a Chinese man.) Just when Hueyin seems to have refound her home in Aiko, then, Aiko has bade farewell to hers, not knowing if she will ever return. Because of Aiko's story, the flashbacks of the trip to Japan loom as a set of fractured passages, with profoundly divergent directions and implications for the two women, who seem to have been briefly brought together in one dimension yet otherwise go in separate ways.

Like Bing Xin, Ann Hui names her story with a purposeful evocation of autumn. "Ke tu qiu hen," literally "Autumn melancholy on a sojourn away from home," is the title of a well-known Cantonese song (based on the musical form *nanyin*, or "the southern tune") in which a poor scholar, on a trip under the autumn moon, laments his lost love, a faithful courtesan who, unlike others in her profession, did not mind his poverty and gave him her heart. Performed to great renown by the Cantonese opera actor and singer Bai Jurong during the 1910s and 1920s, the song, still heard from time to time in contemporary Hong Kong, exists now as a nostalgic reminder of bygone eras for older Cantonese-speaking populations.²¹ In *Song of the Exile*, the song is introduced in flashbacks to Hueyin's childhood in Macao: her grandmother is taking a nap while the song is being played on the radio, and Hueyin (in the manner of young Chinese children who are coached by elders during their early years) is reciting Tang Dynasty poems for her grandfather, who rewards her with some candy and coaxes her how not to "forget [her] origins" (*wangben*), before the two of them fall asleep together, with the little girl lying prone on top of the old man (fig. 1). The leisurely daytime rest, the sweet intimacy between the generations (with the grandfather gently telling the grandchild to study medicine when she grows up so she can serve China), and the mildly sad tune of Bai Jurong's singing blend together to compose an unforgettable picture of a previous life moment. The song is heard again at the film's closing, with flashbacks to a scene of grandchild and grandparents sauntering past a pond of lotuses in bloom. Just as the lyrics speak of a lost romantic love and just as the tune recalls a musical form that has long since declined, so do Grandfather and Grandmother loom in Hueyin's mind as loved ones whose times on earth are about to end. Her own independence and freedom—as a cosmopolitan traveler, journalist, daughter, grandchild, and urban woman—hence becomes finally tinged, as the title of the song suggests, with the autumnal melancholy of the brooding exile, her mind saturated with the awareness of the passing of time.

As in Bing Xin's story, we see the prominence of a chain of imaginary associations: the well-educated woman, whose physical mobility becomes the backdrop to a series of introspective processes. In Bing Xin's story, the exploration of the feminine self is contained within one character's life and over one journey; in Hui's film, the effort is a complex one involving two women characters from two generations, over a number of decades, cultural locations, and political situations. Importantly, however, even when it is continually challenged by modern capitalist



society, in which women are gaining various degrees of social and professional autonomy, the Chinese kinship family is able to reassert its demands with deep-rooted force. Just as Qiuxin’s sorrow seems to confirm and revalidate the virtue of what she has forsaken (husband and children), so, too, does Aiko’s voluntary conversion into a Cantonese daughter-in-law and mother seem to confirm the unyielding domination of Chinese family life, notwithstanding the imminent mortality of the elders.

In this regard, the individualization and empowerment of women in Hui’s films, albeit generically and genealogically tied to the release of “psychic interiorities” into multiplicities in motion (as I suggested in the previous section), need to be assessed not only in and by themselves but also against a recurrent feature in Hui’s work: the patriotic patriarch figures in whom she seems consistently and positively invested. Consider the spectrum of older men in her films: not just Hueyin’s grandfather, who even on his sickbed urges Hueyin not to “lose hope in China” (literally, “not to be disappointed with China” in the Cantonese dialogue) but also the grandfather who holds on to Chinese values against the onslaught of youthful American culture in *Shanghai jiaqi* (*My American Grandson*, 1991) and the old man with Alzheimer’s disease who continues to believe he is a fighter pilot flying a warplane for the Chinese Nationalist government in *Nüren shishi* (*Summer Snow*, 1995). No matter how xenophobic, prejudiced, or literally amnesic, these patriarchs are in the end shown to be worth loving and tolerating. By contrast, the women characters, in whom Hui places her vision for change, are often shown to be sympathetic only insofar as they seem capable of learning to accommodate these father figures, together with the values they embody, exactly as they are. In a nutshell, the women—and the women alone—are asked to be versatile and flexible: they must actively adapt and adjust even as the old men are adored for remaining themselves.

I am therefore tempted to read in the conclusion of *Song of the Exile* a recuperative attitude toward the Chinese kinship family. Elaine Yee-lin Ho’s remarks offer a fair summation of Hui’s work here: “The exploration of agency is heavily circumscribed by a continued investment in what inherited strictures will both allow and afford and increasingly reincorporated into an ethnocultural determinism that is, by history and definition, patriarchal in its social exemplifications. As such, her films tread the narrow path between the critique and reinvention of tradition and estrange it even while affirming its continued power to structure, coopt, and exclude women’s subjects.”²²

Whether in early twentieth-century fiction or in late twentieth-century film, the feminine dramas I have discussed suggest that what Ho aptly refers to as “ethnocultural determinism” has survived with tenacity, condemning those who dare oppose or resist it to a life of isolation and forlornness. Autumn hearts, with their heavy sense of melancholy and loss, are thus ideologically overdetermined and seem to persist in spite of the novelization and avant-gardism that writers and directors alike have achieved at the level of technique. In Hui’s case, one may go so far as to say that, where there is dispersion and disintegration at the level of the cinematic flashbacks,

there is also assimilation, patriarchization, and sinification at the level of communal belonging. For Hui as for Bing Xin, if the engagement with “psychic interiority” has delivered possibilities for imagining an insuppressible feminine agency, ultimately it is also in women’s social lives that the emotional strictures imposed by the Chinese kinship family seem the least escapable. Where boundaries have been made more fluid by means of avant-garde experimentalism, boundaries also seem to be reinforced—sentimentally—in terms of kinship bondage. To that extent, *Song of the Exile* is a powerful reminder of the ethnoculturally specific *and* imperialist excesses of the Chinese family tradition, which is as treacherous as it can be life-sustaining and which continues to command submission like a kind of nature. Autumn hearts are the recurrent symptoms of enduring this “natural” environment.

Notes

1. For discussions of biographical and autobiographical writings in modern Chinese literature, including those in relation to women’s experiences, see Wendy Larson, *Literary Authority and the Modern Chinese Writer: Ambivalence and Autobiography* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1991); Jin Feng, *The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue UP, 2004); Lingzhen Wang, *Personal Matters: Autobiographical Practice in Women’s Writing in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004).
2. *Bing Xin xiaoshuo ji* (Shanghai: Kaiming shudian, 1943), 296–313. Translations from the Chinese are mine. Henceforth references will be included in parentheses in the text.
3. On the theme of loneliness in this story, see C. T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1961), 76–77. Hsia’s view is that the recurrence of this theme indicates Bing Xin’s “inability to develop further” as a writer (77). See also Gloria Bien, “Images of Women in Bing Xin’s Fiction,” in *Women Writers of 20th-Century China*, ed. Angela Jung Palandri (Eugene: Asian Studies Program at the U of Oregon, 1982). For a discussion of the problem with seeing women’s writings as underdeveloped and immature, see chapter 4 of my *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991).
4. “Hueyin” is the spelling of the character’s name (based on its Cantonese pronunciation) in the film’s English subtitles, though a more accurate transliteration of the Cantonese would be “Hugh-yun.” In *pinyin*, the name would be Xiaoen.
5. Hueyin’s astonishment at hearing about her mother’s ethnic origins at this point is, I believe, a flawed detail in the film because Aiko’s Japanese origin has been introduced numerous times during the flashbacks to the Macao period, when Hueyin is present as a child. Even if the repression of such an important piece of information is possible, it is not probable or convincing.
6. For a substantive discussion of Hui’s works, including the implications of memory, see Elaine Yee-lin Ho, “Women on the Edges of Hong Kong Modernity: The Films of Ann Hui,” in *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, ed. Esther C. M. Yau (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001), 177–206. For brief general discussions of Hui’s contributions to Hong Kong cinema, see Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 149–52, 211–15, 212–13, 265–66. For an analysis of *Song of the Exile*, see Patricia Brett Erens, “Crossing Borders: Time, Memory, and the Construction of Identity in *Song of the Exile*,” in *Between Home and World: A Reader in Hong Kong Cinema*, ed. Esther M. K. Cheung and Chu Yiu-wai (Hong Kong: Oxford UP, 2004), 177–95 (this essay

- was originally published in *Cinema Journal* 39.4 [Summer 2000]: 43–59). See also Erens, “The Film Work of Ann Hui,” in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, ed. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 176–95 (this essay overlaps in part with “Crossing Borders”). Additional relevant information on Hui and her work, including references to Chinese-language materials, can be found in Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers*, foreword by Martin Scorsese (New York: Columbia UP, 2005), 423–39.
7. Ho, “Women on the Edges of Hong Kong Modernity,” 180.
 8. For an example of Bing Xin’s use of the flashback in literary writing, see my discussion of her story “Di yi ci yanhu” (The first dinner party) in chapter 4 of *Woman and Chinese Modernity*.
 9. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989), 19.
 10. “The question of the flashback is this: it has to be justified from elsewhere” (*ibid.*, 48). Although I do not find Deleuze’s qualification to be entirely useful in the present discussion, I have benefited from his philosophically rich argument about the centrality of time in post-Second World War cinema.
 11. For a detailed historical and theoretical study of the flashback, see Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (London: Routledge, 1989), especially chap. 6, in which she discusses the renovation of the flashback as an element of modernism in film after the Second World War.
 12. A contemporary Hong Kong film in which flashbacks take on a fantastical status (because they are the memories of a ghost) is Stanley Kwan’s *Rouge*. See my discussion in the chapter “A Souvenir of Love,” in *Ethics after Idealism: Theory—Culture—Ethnicity—Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998). The chapter was originally published in *Modern Chinese Literature* 7.2 (Fall 1993): 59–78.
 13. This is what leads Erens to write: “The past is seen only in terms of its relevance to the present. A present consciousness pervades the representation of the past” (“Crossing Borders,” 186).
 14. Erens provides such a final, stable referent by reading the film as Ann Hui’s autobiography. Accordingly, she suggests distinguishing between Ann Hui’s past and her memories of her past: “I am going to refer to the scenes in Macau and the years before her third birthday as memories or recollections rather than flashbacks because I feel that Hui has consciously constructed a subject in the present (Hueyin as narrator who addresses us in the first person). Despite the so-called ever ‘present tense’ of cinema, we never literally return to the past in *Song of the Exile*. Rather, Hueyin, in the present, tells us her memories of various stages of her life” (“Crossing Borders,” 185). Erens’s proposed solution is reasonable, but it works only insofar as the film’s significations are rerouted to the consciousness of the author (in this case, director) as the ultimate determinant. Such a rerouting would seem to defeat the point of engaging with the material/semiotic complexity of the representations of the past in the first place. Another way of putting all this would be to say that, while autobiographical elements are undoubtedly present in the film, the film does not have to be read exclusively as autobiography.
 15. Some critics refer to the non-character-specific flashback as the impersonal flashback and attribute it to an “omniscient camera” or “omniscient filmmaker.” See Bernard F. Dick, *Anatomy of Film*, 3d ed. (New York: St. Martins, 1998), 194.
 16. For this insight, I am indebted to Turim’s discussion of Roland Barthes on pages 10–12 of *Flashbacks in Film*.
 17. Leung Ping-kwan’s remarks on Hui’s earlier film *Fengjie (The Secret)* are relevant here: “All these different forces cannot be harmonized, just as the divergent perspectives and fragmented narratives refuse to be easily unified, but it is exactly through their conflicts that the complex hybrid nature of the urban space and the cultural identity of Hong Kong are revealed” (“Urban Cinema and the Cultural Identity of Hong Kong,” in *The Cinema of Hong Kong*, 227–51; the quotation is from 241).

18. This is a consistent feature of Hui's films, many of which thematize people crossing cultures—for example, *Touben nuhai* (*Boat People*), *Hu Yue de gushi* (*The Story of Woo Viet*), *Shanghai jiaqi* (*My American Grandson*), *Shujian enchou lu* (*Romance of Book and Sword*), and *Xiangxiang gongzhu* (*Princess Fragrance*), among others. As Erens writes: "Throughout her career, she has focused on the lives of characters who find themselves exiles in a foreign land: Vietnamese in Hong Kong and the Philippines, Japanese in Vietnam, Mainlanders in Hong Kong, Hong Kongers in England and Japan, Americans in China, foreigners in Macau, and even Han Chinese under the Manchus" ("The Film Work of Ann Hui," 179). Teo writes that "the burden of the quest for ethnic purity was a theme never better treated by a Hong Kong director" (*Hong Kong Cinema*, 151).
19. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).
20. In her own reflections on the film, Ann Hui has said:

My main feeling was about my mom's experience and the irony of her journey. When she was in Hong Kong, all she did was scream for her homeland, but when she finally went back to Japan she didn't appreciate it at all. . . . The concept that we should unconditionally love our homeland was just an idea that had been drummed into our heads, and I was beginning to grow skeptical of such concepts. But my skepticism was not just about the concept of one's homeland, but about all conceptions of identity and nationality. The definition of these concepts can be very different for different individuals based on their own background and experiences. (interview with HUI, in BERRY, *Speaking in Images*, 431)

21. The song is also featured in *Rouge*; see my brief discussion of its connotations in the context of that film in "A Souvenir of Love."
22. Ho, "Women on the Edges of Hong Kong Modernity," 186. Ho's remarks are intended as reflections on Hui's earlier films (from 1979 to 1982), but they are, in my opinion, relevant to Hui's works as a whole.