

〈Response 2 to Rey chow〉

**Impossible Nostalgia in *Song of the Exile*:  
A Response to Rey Chow's "Autumn Hearts"**

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Before making some comments on Prof. Rey Chow, I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Chow for having offered us insightful readings of Chinese films and novels for more than a decade. Prof. Chow has continuously focused on cultural representations of modern Chinese women in terms of the rise of cinema as a new technology, which has drastically caused an epistemic change to modern Chinese culture. Although I major in British literature and not in Chinese literature or cinema, and have just watched a lot of Chinese films since my childhood, I have been much inspired by Prof. Chow's books. Actually, I'm working on how modern female stereotypes were produced through British literature in relation to Hollywood films. Prof. Chow argues that the emergence of cinema should be taken into consideration for assessment of Chinese modern literature. British literature during the 1920s and the 1930s also suffered the similar epistemic change due to the rise of Hollywood, the powerful cinematic apparatus. For analyses of literary texts of British modernism under the cinematic influence, therefore, Prof. Chow's discussion is very stimulating, even though we have to clearly and carefully distinguish the cultural production in the metropolis from that in the colonial/postcolonial contexts.

Among the analyses in chapter 4 of Prof. Chow's book, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films*, I am most impressed with the section analyzing flashbacks, which the director Ann Hui uses in *Song of the Exile*. Prof. Chow precisely details how flashbacks in Hui's film explore and complexify two different women's characters' "psychic interiority" as a narrative technique. These flashbacks make the film more than a simple autobiography of a young woman. This is a marvelous insight because this film visualizes a psychic predicament of modern women created by the malfunction of domesticity, and those women suffer from the predicament not only as the individual female subject. Their predicaments are intensified by the fact that they are involved in the mother-daughter relationship. In the film, a mother and her daughter respectively irritate with each other because of the fact that they cannot find their home in themselves. For example, Hueyin's voiceover at the graveyard in Japan narrates that she also left home at the age of 15 like her mother and so she feels like she understands how her mother is feeling. As clearly illustrated by this, Hueyin has regarded her own home as her early days with her grandparents in Macao, not the mother-daughter relationship in Hong Kong. But as the film progresses, especially after visiting Japan, Hueyin gradually regards herself as an exile like her mother. In the last

sequences in Japan, as if all flashbacks in the film culminated in the dissolution of two women's memories and consciousness, they intersubjectively share their predicaments of the exile. The second bathing scene in particular depicts a casual but intimate conversation between the mother and her daughter. They say, "Do you want to go home?" and "Yes." Coupled with its intimate atmosphere, these flashback scenes visualize their final reconciliation, which is brought about by their estrangement from "home" rather than by each of their separate restoration of it.

In addition to the careful analysis of the effects of flashbacks, Prof. Chow shows us how a Cantonese traditional song works at the end of the film. According to Prof. Chow, this song "exists as a nostalgic reminder of bygone eras for older Cantonese-speaking populations". Here, I would like to add a few more words to Prof. Chow's analysis of the use of the song, by paying attention to another song used in the film. It is "Kuroda-Bushi", a Japanese traditional folk song about *samurai* spirit, especially popular in Kyushu area (Aiko's birthplace), which is performed in Aiko's reunion party with Japanese old friends in the film. Whether the director Ann Hui uses it intentionally or not, it is also a song about the exile. "Kuroda-Bushi" is popular among Japanese elder generations and it usually enlivens the drinking party, encouraging people to drink more and more, as Aiko performs a traditional Japanese dance to the song. But in fact, the song implicitly foretells that Aiko's homecoming to Japan will result in bitterness. In the last stanza of "Kuroda-Bushi," a *samurai* laments loss of home, witnessing the desolation of the place where he used to live. Moreover, the final line of the song is that "I feel the deep sorrow, blowing in the autumn wind (Akikaze nomizo miniwa shimu)," as if it resonated with the title of the film as well as another Chinese traditional song. The use of these Chinese and Japanese songs of the exile thus suggests that "autumn melancholy" in this film is the symptoms of nostalgia for the lost home. Then, what kind of home are two female characters losing and going back in the film?

In order to examine how "home" is explored in *Song of the Exile*, I would like to compare the film with a short novel "West Wind" by Bing Xin, one that Prof. Chow discussed in the book. In Bing Xin's story, "home" is depicted and fully idealized as the modern nuclear family, which is supported by heterosexual romance, marriage, and reproduction. The female protagonist of the story, who is at once a professional feminist figure and a secret admirer of family values, is forced to locate herself outside of such family. In other words, the novel's protagonist's own internalized idealization and evaluation of the modern nuclear family turns herself into its outsider, causing her melancholy. In Hui's film, on the contrary, home is not presented as an embodiment of such family values. In the flashback scenes of Hueyin's as well as Aiko's, each of their homes in Macao, Hong Kong, or Japan is described as discorded and collapsed rather than as idealized and harmonious. In contrast to Bing Xin's idealization and evaluation of the modern nuclear family, the film does not idealize such family as a crucial referent point. What, then, causes the mother and the daughter melancholy and finally leads them to share a sense of loss intersubjectively? As

a matter of fact, it is the loss of an ideal image of a family that intensifies their melancholy. For example, Hui's film shows the contrasting deployment of the female protagonist's old boyfriend to Bing Xin's story. In one of the sequences of her stay in Japan, Aiko, disappointed at her brother's decision to sell her parental home, gets heavily drunk in the bar which her old boyfriend runs. Her old boyfriend's miserable wedlock is far from an envious one for Aiko as opposed to the idealized family in Bin Xin's story. Therefore, she feels isolated from "home" in a double sense — home as a birthplace and home as an idealized family. Hueyin, who left home and is still unable to find her new home anywhere, is also in similar circumstances to Aiko's, even if she romanticizes, at the end of the film, her younger days with her grandparents in Macao. The two women's melancholy is thus caused not only by nostalgia for their lost home in the past but also by impossible nostalgia for the ideal home.

I completely agree with Prof. Chow regarding the director's recuperative attitude toward the Chinese kinship family shown in the end of the film. On the other hand, I am also tempted to read the conversation between Aiko and Hueyin in the bathing scene ("Do you wanna go home?" "Yes") as their discovery of their own home within themselves and their resolution to live together in exile, as Hong Konger. In other words, it seems to me that they try to configure a family outside of the patriarchal imperatives. In this sense, Professor Chow, could you tell us what you think about the difference between Bing Xin's story and Ann Hui's film in terms of representations of family? This is what I've been curious about, stimulated by your talk. Thank you.

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