

Sing-song Girls of the Globe: Hou Hsiao-hsien's Border Thinking in *Flowers of Shanghai*

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Haishanghua (Flowers of Shanghai; 1998) is the latest film directed and produced by Hou Hsiao-hsien. Hou's long-time collaborator Zhu Tianwen wrote the screenplay based on a limited number of scenes and characters selected from the original novel with the same title, which was written by Han Bangqing and first published in a serialized form in 1892. The novel belongs to the late-Qing genre of courtesan fiction and shares with some other courtesan novels in its detailed portrait of Shanghai's high-level prostitutes and its exclusive use of the *Wu*-dialect for the conversations of the characters. Han Bangqing distances his work, however, away from other courtesan novels, especially in his masterful creation of gaps between a succinct narrative style and rich hidden meanings that are nevertheless indicated in chapter titles or in pretexts. Because of the difficulty in understanding the hidden meanings and the *Wu*-dialect, this novel was never popular during Han's time. It was not until early twentieth century that this novel started to attract critical attention. Lu Xun, Hu Shi, and Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang) all considered *Haishanghua* one of the few standouts among traditional Chinese novels precisely due to its painstakingly designed narrative structure. Zhang Ailing liked this novel so much that she even translated it into both Mandarin and English. In order to increase the novel's readability, Zhang Ailing also added many notes in her translations, notes that locate and fill the gaps of meaning in the original novel.¹

Noticeably, Zhang's English translation is entitled "Sing-song Girls of Shanghai," not the more direct "Flowers of Shanghai." According to Zhang, her title comes from a

mistake in translation: Foreign patrons mistook “sing-sen,” the Shanghai pronunciation of *xiansheng* that refers to the female storytellers who are also courtesans, as the English word “sing-song.” The mistake in translation caused the confusion between storytellers, who entertained their patrons by performing *pingdan*, and sing-song girls (*genü*), who belonged to a much lower level in the strictly hierarchical pleasure quarter and only became popular in Nanjing during the 1920s and 1930s.²

Highly influenced by Zhang Ailing, Zhu Tianwen certainly shares with Zhang the penchant for Han Bangqing’s seemingly natural but actually artificial narrative style. From this stylistic aspect, it is also not difficult to understand Hou Hsiao-hsien’s choosing of Han Bangqing’s novel for his latest endeavor to create a distinctive personal style which pushes naturalism to such an extreme that it becomes artificial. In terms of motif, Hou Hsiao-hsien is undoubtedly attracted by Han Bangqing’s exclusive attention on everyday trivialities, for Hou himself has expressed strong interest in everyday situations entailing scenes of eating, drinking, and exchanging emotions. We have to remember, however, Hou’s re-presentation of the everyday is inseparable from his consistent concerns over Taiwan’s culture and history. In his earlier films, Hou contrasts rural idyll against urban decadence under the theme of *bildung* (*Dongdong de jiaji* [A summer at Grandpa’s; 1984], *Lianlian fengchen* [Dust in the wind; 1986], etc.). The contrast reaches its apex in Hou’s attempt to retrieve historical trauma in *Beiqing chengshi* (A city of sadness; 1989), and further extends into the other two films in his ambitious “Taiwan Trilogy” (*Ximeng rensheng* [The puppet master; 1993], *Haonan haonü* [Good men, good women; 1995]). These films may have been controversial in terms of their possible complicity with the dominant ideology, but even the most severe

criticism, which is represented by the 1991 collection of *Xindianying zhi si* (The death of the new cinema)³, cannot deny Hou's calling attention to Taiwan's local history, language, and culture in general. Hou's production based on Han Bangqing's novel apparently breaks away from his familiar subjects related to Taiwan. A series of questions thus arises: Why Shanghai? Why the colonial Shanghai at one century ago? Why the *Wu*-dialect? It seems to many people that this time Hou Hsiao-hsien has gone too far in his pursuit of individual style and artistic idiosyncrasy⁴, so much so that he departs completely from his concern over his native land in a conspicuous historical juncture.

I believe, however, that the temporal and spatial gap separating Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Haishanghua* from all his previous films needs to be studied more carefully. We must examine more closely the differences and similarities between Hou's film version and Han Bangqing's original novel. To me, the re-staging of the late nineteenth-century pleasure quarter in Shanghai's French Concession and International Settlement for the audience in late twentieth-century Taipei, under the sponsorship of international capital, is truly reflective of the colonial difference that the spectre of ideology tries to deny within the ambiguities of national identity. Hou Hsiao-hsien shows in this film his sensibility for the colonial difference which enables his "border thinking," a way of thinking that is consistent with but further developed from his previous concerns over Taiwan's local history and linguistic particularities.

There are many differences between Hou's *Haishanghua* and the original novel, but the biggest one lies in the movie's total isolation of the courtesan houses from the outside world. Han Bangqing also sets his focus in the domestic scenes within the

courtesan houses, detailing endlessly the daily routines of courtesans and their merchant or gentry patrons. Curiously, the patrons are exclusively Chinese despite the fact that all brothels are located in foreign concessions and regulated by colonial authorities. In scenes of eating, drinking, banqueting, sleeping, bickering, and bargaining, Han creates a closed family atmosphere that paradoxically imitates all the normative ethical relationships. But the world of mimicry and self-sufficiency cannot avoid being frequently intruded by forces from the outside: patrons' wives can rush into the brothel in order to restore the ethical norm, concession authorities can threaten the very existence of the brothels by arresting gamblers and other perpetrators. The colonial power presents itself paradoxically in its absence from the closed world of the pleasure quarter, which is evidenced by one episode in chapter twenty-eight:

It turned out to be a foreign police, who was standing straight up on the top of the building right across the street. He was all wrapped up in black uniform, with a big steel knife in his hand. Lightened by the electric lamp, the knife was extraordinarily shining.⁵

The guests are stunned first, then attracted by the ensuing incident in which the policemen arrest several gamblers, but return to their feast in no time. Flirting with the courtesans, they appear to have not been disturbed by the incident. But the towering image of a foreign police in completely dark uniform would linger on as an unknown and heterogeneous force, threatening to end the banquets at any given time.

The towering image of the colonial presence never appears in the film. Hou Hsiao-hsien does have kept the scene, but all we can see is a stir of excitement among the crowd in a courtesan's room. People are whispering about gamblers next door being

caught and one of them plunging to his death. They rush to the window, but the focus of the camera stays with Wang Liansheng, who appears to have something weighing upon his mind and pays no attention to the disturbance. Audience without prior knowledge of the original novel would never know what has happened outside. Even so, this scene remains the only occasion in the film that refers to the existence of a world beyond the brothel. The rest of the film is completely sealed off from the outside world. Without the help by the subtitle at the very beginning of the film, we won't even know that the temporal and spatial setting was at "the end of the nineteenth century" and within "the so-called 'three-dollar storytelling houses' which constituted the pleasure-quarter in Shanghai's International Settlement." Disappeared from the film is the urban hustle and bustle in the original novel, which links activities and characters in one brothel to another and hints differences between the "Chinese territory" and the "foreign territory." All that is left in the film are scenes of eating and drinking, from one brothel to another, only separated by the photographic techniques of fade-in and fade-out, which were rarely used by Hou in his previous films. Low-key lighting and soft coloring further enhances the sense of enclosure.

Within the enclosed space, Hou Hsiao-hsien is suspicious of sensualizing the image of Asian women. Hou uses almost exclusively long-takes in the film, a technique that has become his trademark. The lack of movement makes the camera become the equivalent of the male gaze, caressing the passive, hyperfeminized, and exoticized female characters who are performed by not only Chinese but also Japanese beauties. This suspicion of eroticizing woman under the male gaze is not unprecedented. In his article "Nüxing yu taifeng" (Woman and Typhoon), Liao Ping-hui accuses Hou Hsiao-hsien of

misogyny. Liao even criticizes Hou for equating women with disastrous typhoon by setting human activities against the panoramic vast landscape.⁶

Hou Hsiao-hsien's drastic change in arranging the cinematographic space from panorama to framed interior seems to serve as a reaction to Liao's accusation. During an interview, Hou discusses the reason for his change: "From *Fenggui* to *Haishanghua*, I have changed my understanding of spacing. I used to think that camera has to be set in a distance in order to show an emotionless observation from a vantage point. But in *Haishanghua*, I realized that objective observation had to depend on the subjective maneuvers in presenting the characters. I could be cool or emotional toward the characters at the shooting site. My feelings are not important in terms of objectivity, because, in the meantime, there is another pair of eyes watching the characters. No matter how close the camera is, the same effect of double gazing still exists. The camera is like a person standing beside me and he is watching this group of characters."⁷ Here Hou Hsiao-hsien is still talking in a cinematographic language. He may not be critically aware of the significance of his new discovery, but the gap between his directorial intention and the camera's mechanical observation is actually revealing of the colonial differences that underlie Han Bangqing's original representation of courtesans in a colonial situation.

Colonial differences, according to the Latin American cultural anthropologist Walter Mignolo, are related to "the classification of the planet in the modern/colonial imaginary, by enacting coloniality of power, an energy and a machinery to transform differences into values."⁸ A crucial mechanism under which coloniality of power functions is to *define spaces* appropriate to the classification or reclassification of the world population. In the case of late-nineteenth century China, the most representative

and most widespread definition of space was Liang Qichao's powerful rhetoric, which pictures a new Chinese citizen integrated into the world system of modernization against the imaginary of the old China as an isolated, closed, and dilapidated house.⁹ Han Bangqing as a well-educated and sophisticated Shanghai intellectual must have been aware of Liang's rhetoric, but he chose to retreat back into the old house full of opium smokes and etiolated desires. Han nevertheless reveals his sensibility to the coloniality of power by allowing us a glimpse of the towering image of the colonizer whose gaze keeps the colonized under constant surveillance.

As pointed out by many film critics, Hou has attempted various ways to define cinematographic space.¹⁰ Only this time the sealed and isolated space becomes his exclusive focus. With the help from Zhu Tianwen, whose familiarity with Foucault is quite evident in her novel *Huangren shouji* (Notes of a desolate man), Hou builds an imagined space eerily resembling what Foucault has said about the panopticon, the major protocol for the modern state apparatus: in the center there is a surveillance tower, which watches over the incommunicable cells that jail a madman, a patient, a schoolboy, and, in the case of *Haishanghua*, a prostitute. "By the effect of backlighting," Foucault describes, "one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theaters, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible."¹¹ The backlighting is masterfully manipulated in Hou's film. The surveillance tower does not appear on stage in Hou Hsiao-hsien's redefined space, neither does the black-uniformed foreign police standing on the roof across the street, but the camera serves as a stand-in for the tower, for they both are creations of modern optical technology.

Disciplining the madman through constant surveillance is the means by which the modern state maintains its internal order. Disciplining the sensualized Asian prostitute through cinematographic redefinition of space, on the other hand, is reflective of the way in which the modern colonizer erases colonial differences. Through the (mis)translation from “flowers” to “sing-song girls,” from novel to film, from the *Wu*-dialect to the Mandarin, from Chinese to Japanese and English, the image of the Asian prostitute becomes a universalized and globalized substitute for women, who are located by the muscular imagination into their individual cells from which they come out to prey on men. A French film critic praises *Haishanghua* by saying that “it is fascinating to see in the film how women use their beauty and prudence prey on men, like spiders glue their victim on their gossamer.”

This understanding of Hou Hsiao-hsien is unavoidably a misreading, for it was solely based on colonial translations. Since Hou himself has become fully aware of the existence of the camera beside himself, as demonstrated by his own words in the interview, his staging of the colonial spectacles is always already self-reflective of the colonality of power. What he has engaged in, therefore, is precisely what Mignolo terms as the “border thinking,” which shows a sensibility toward the colonality of power and “works toward the restitution of the colonial difference that colonial translation attempted to erase.”¹²

Only from the perspective of border thinking can we understand Hou’s choice of the *Wu*-dialect for the audience in Taiwan and around the world. Upon close examination of the film, we should realize that the daily activities of the characters are mainly focused on money transactions. From Hong Shanqing’s mediating within the brothels for the

purpose of making profit, and Huang Cuifeng's buying out of herself from the madam, to Zhou Shuangyu's blackmailing of Zhu Shuren under the name of love, money seems to be the center of everyone's attention. But since the brothels are completely sealed off from the outside world, the audience has no one way of knowing the real value of those monetary transactions. For example, Shuangyu receives 10,000 dollars from Shuren, but what exactly can this amount of money buy? In other words, values are impossible to establish without outside reference to differences in exchange. The same observation holds true for the language spoken by the characters. Without outside reference, without communications that exchange words spoken with ideas, without the value produced only by exchanges, it is impossible to have the process of signification, as made clear by Saussure long time ago.¹³ Living in a closed world, engaging in a self-sufficient circle of transaction, speaking in a language incomprehensible by a modern audience if without the help of subtitled translations, our courtesans put on a meaningless show, which nevertheless registers the conflicts engendered by coloniality at the level of social-semiotic interactions. For Hou Hsiao-hsien the spokesperson for Taiwan's imaginary in the globalized world, this meaningless show could very well be an allegory about Taiwan's colonial semiosis, about the fighting for a national language in conjunction with nation building, and about the image of an island nation sealed off by hegemonic power.

¹ Zhang Ailing's Mandarin translation was published in two installments, *Haishanghua kai and Haishanghua luo*. Taipei: Huangguan, 1992. For Zhang's gap-filling notes, see, for example, pp, 112 and 364. Zhang's full English translation was recently discovered and will soon be published by Columbia University Press.

² Zhang Ailing, *Haishanghua kai*, p. 47.

³ Mizou, Liang Xinhua, ed., *Xin dianying zhi si*. Taipei: Tangshan, 1991.

⁴ For example, a film critic makes this comment: "With Flowers of Shanghai, Hou seems to have reached an aesthetic dead end, a breakthrough, or both." Peter Keough, "Cinema of Sadness: Recapturing Lost Illusions in the Films of Hou Hsiao-hsien," *The Boston Phoenix*, March 2-9, 2000.

⁵ Han Bangqing, *Haishanghua*. Taipei: Sanmin, 1998, p. 274.

⁶ Liao Ping-hui, "Nüxing yu taifeng," in Ling Wenqi, et al, ed., *Hou Hsiao-hsien dianying yanjiu* (Studies of Hou Hsiao-hsien's films). Taipei: Maitian, 2000, p. 145.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 344.

⁸ Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 13.

⁹ See Xiaobing Tang, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

¹⁰ Most articles in the collection *Hou Hsiao-hsien dianying yanjiu* have touched upon this issue.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. trans., Alan Sharidan. New York: Vantage, 1995, p. 200.

¹² Mignolo, p. 1.

¹³ See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*. trans., Wade Baskin. London: Fontana/Collins, 1974.