

## Cinema of Displaced Identity

“Insert image fig 1 here” *CAPTION: Jennifer Lim as Xiao Mei in Red (1996)*

Eric Fong Cown was born to Fong Tee Cown and Florrie Jones on 2 February 1924 in Birkenhead, Merseyside. He was part of the community of Eurasian children that came to be because of the Chinese seamen who worked on the Blue Funnel Line in Liverpool. When my father was little, my grandfather sent him to live in China. Some people might think this was a strange thing to do, but many overseas Chinese sent their eldest son back to China to grow up “culturally Chinese” (Sui, 2005). Maritime records show that Eric Fong departed on a Blue Funnel ship called the Achilles on the 6 November 1929, final destination Shanghai<sup>i</sup>. My father was six years old and was travelling with a clansman<sup>ii</sup>. It took him three months to get to Canton (Guangdong) and thirty-six years to get back to England.

When I was little, my Nan Flo used to show me this tiny tin gun she had tucked away in her handbag. She said my Dad had given it to her when he was ‘taken away’; she’d kept it for all those years. She used to say to me, ‘Your granddad told me Eric was just going on holiday’. The next time she saw him, he was a grown man and they no longer spoke the same language. I can’t imagine how hard it must have been for my father, not to be able to tell his mother about all those lost years.

In 1962, China was on the cusp of the Cultural Revolution. The feeling of hysteria seeped into every aspect of family life in China. No one knew who to trust - your own family would denounce you as being anti-communist if it meant avoiding being sent to do hard labour. This was the emotional and psychological state that gripped our family when we left China. Like millions of Chinese Diaspora my parents fled looking for a better life for their children. We were in exile, ‘on the run’ from Communist China. The Chinese authorities told my father that he would never be allowed to return to China. The feeling of being in exile pervaded my early years; my family history is one of dislocation and disconnection. These themes reoccur throughout my filmmaking.

My love of film came about from growing up in a Chinese restaurant. The restaurant, called the Kowloon, was in a dying seaside resort called New Brighton. To cater for local tastes we served Chinglish dishes such as Chop suey, a mixture of Chinese food made up of English ingredients. Chop suey literally translates to mixed bits, a kind of hybrid dish made up of whatever was to hand in the host country. It is a metaphor for the ability for a migrant culture to survive and adapt. Like many Chinese British kids, I hated working in my parents' establishment. Every weekend and evening after school, I'd be in the Kowloon kitchen washing dishes or peeling prawns. So as an escape I would bunk over the backyard wall into the local cinema via the fire exit. The darkened cinema and exotic films seemed a world away from growing up as a Chinese kid in New Brighton. I didn't understand many of the films I saw at the time, such as *The Conversation* (Coppola 1974), which blew my mind because of its attention to the sound design, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Forman, 1975). However, the counter-cultural values of the American auteur directors of the early 1970s left an indelible impression on me. I would later go on to work at the same cinema as an usherette. This was the era of the blockbuster, when films like *Saturday Night Fever* (Badham 1977) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg 1977) would play to packed houses and I witnessed the power of film. Those two aspects of 1970s cinema, that is filmmaking with a voice, and the power of cinema, have had a formative influence on my own work. But what defines me as a filmmaker is my hybrid perspective, being neither 'here' nor 'there', much like the Chinglish fare served at my parents' restaurant.

In the following chapter I will discuss my films and I will share my reflections on the sources of inspiration in my filmmaking. Throughout the chapter I have identified key themes that run through my work such as displacement and identity, which are central to my hybrid self. I have described how my films reflect a crossover between Chinese and British culture and I have found useful Naficy's term *Accented Cinema* (2001) in describing my work. My examination of identity has been informed by identity politics, but of equal importance is my exploration of alternative cinematic

structures. My film *Linear Rhythm* (1990) is a case in point and I describe how the film uses a non-linear structure as a way to frame Chinese diasporic identity. The stylistic choices I have made in my films reflect my fondness of genre and I illustrate how I have used the melodramatic mode in *Red* (1996) and I discuss the influence of the avant-garde in *A Dream of Venus Butterfly* (1992). Using genre allows me to deal with the themes in films in a more nuanced way. Notions of performance and performativity are discussed in the context of my series of mini-shorts called *Chinese for Beginners* (2002) and the documentary *Deconstructing Zoe* (2016). Different modes of performance are present in each work: *Chinese for Beginners* is a self-reflexive performance of identity as I situate myself in the narratives, albeit in an oblique way. Whilst in *Deconstructing Zoe* I was interested in how the subject Zoe used a stylized performance of the self in ways that affirm that identity is complex and fluid. Ultimately my filmmaking is born out of a desire to tell stories. The stories I tell are often seen as marginal, because characters not often seen in mainstream cinema populate them. The stories and characters I find interesting are the ones that are in a state of flux. They drift in a liminal space and are in a constant state of trying to negotiate their identity. The fact that these characters are Chinese is just a reflection of what I see around me, but they could equally be English with a sense of displacement. The themes within my work are after all universal.

### **Linear Rhythm: A Portrait of Three Artists (1990)**

The relationship between images and words should render visible and audible the “cracks”...of filmic language that usually works at gluing things together as smoothly as possible, banishing thereby all reflections, supporting and ideology that keeps the workings of its own language as invisible as possible, and thereby mystifying filmmaking, stifling criticism, and generating complacency among both makers and viewers

(Trinh 1992: 151)

The work of Vietnamese filmmaker, writer, ethnographer and literary theorist Trinh T. Min-Ha was an influence on the first films made in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In particular, two of my early documentaries, *Dotting the Eyes on a Painted Dragon* (1988) and *Linear Rhythm* (1990) explored alternative narrative structures, such as an elliptical structure and non-linear structure respectively.

Trinh's film *Reassemblage* (1982) made me reassess what I knew and understood about filmic language and how marginal voices are represented in history and on film. She talks about how 'the voice' is used in documentary practice either as a voice-over or to present a set of binary arguments to 'bring out objectivity' (Trinh 1991). However, she questions this so called 'objectivity' in film. She interrogates the way films are made and how it 'relates to its subject' and 'viewers' reception'. This interrogation, she says, has sharpened her 'awareness of how ideological patriarchy and hegemony works' (Trinh 1991:147).

Her work was experimental, but she felt some avant-garde filmmakers did not embrace her films. She cites, but does not name one experimental filmmaker who said, 'She doesn't know what she's doing' (Trinh 1992: 144). Much of avant-garde cinema was historically characterised by formalism, elitism and snobbery (O'Pray 2002, Hoyle 2006). Perhaps because Trinh sought to expose the 'politics of representation', rather than to 'transcend representation' (Trinh 1992: 144), she came under criticism from the avant-garde filmmakers. She goes on to say,

Many still hold on to a mystical concept of 'visionary art',  
and any preoccupation with or attempt at exposing  
ideology is rejected as 'corrupt' – lacking pure vision,  
hence being no real Art.

(Trinh 1992: 139)

Other experimental Black and Minority Ethnic filmmakers have grappled with the same distinction. John Akomfrah of Black Audio recalls the time he went to the Arts Council to form an avant-garde group and he was told that they couldn't be avant-

garde because they were Black (Sandhu 2012). Despite this, they fought for creative freedom. Coco Fusco highlights the work of Black British filmmakers Sankofa and Black Audio, suggesting that:

Their insistence on shifting the terms of avant-garde film theory and practice to include an ongoing engagement with the politics of race sets them apart from longstanding traditions of documentary realism in British and Black film cultures

(Fusco 1988: 8)

Sankofa and Black Audio drew on the theoretical debates on colonialism and postcolonialism posited by Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Homi Bhabha (Fusco 1988: 11) They questioned the politics of representation. Akomfrah said Black Audio rejected social realism and instead looked to create a cinematic language that articulated migrant experiences of Black people (Sandhu 2012).

Whilst these filmmakers were a generation before me, as a minority filmmaker I connected with their politics. Black and Asian filmmakers such as Amanda Holiday and Symrath Patti, who were my contemporaries drew me into their network under the inclusivity of the socio-political use of the term 'Black filmmaker'. My work at this time was very much informed by these debates around filmmaking, race, representation and alternative cinematic structures.

My graduation film, *Dotting the Eyes on a Painted Dragon* (1988) borrowed the technique of repetition and jump-cuts from Trinh's *Reassemblage*, which she used as a 'transforming, as well as a rhythmic and structural device' (Trinh 1992: 114). In the film, my mother can be seen making dumplings. The action is looped and seen from different angles, as if exploring various perspectives. On the soundtrack there is a conversation between my mother and me in a mixture of Cantonese and English. There is repetition in the dialogue as my mother tries to get me to understand what she is saying. The subtitles reveal the miscommunication between us – the nuances

of the Chinese language lost in translation. The looping and repetition of the image mirrors the way one learns a mother tongue, but the scene also serves to highlight the slippage of culture.

Historically, two events characterized minority ethnic filmmaking in Britain in the 1980s: the launch of Channel 4 in 1982, and the linked creation of the black and Asian independent video workshops, such as Black Audio Film Collective, Sankofa Film and Video, Retake and Ceddo (UK Film Council 2009). This was a defining moment for Black and Asian filmmaking in Britain because these collectives were able to find a common language and develop a distinct filmic voice. In particular, Black Audio and Sankofa's work centred around the 'figuration of identity' in cinema with particular reference to black representation (Akomfrah 2015). They developed a filmic aesthetic from diasporic experiences common to Black people (Fusco 1988), which has been described as 'a poetic tone of voice, a particular filmic space that resisted categorisation' (Searle 2007).

There were, however, no video workshops for filmmakers of Chinese descent. We worked in isolation; marginalized within the margins. The only public assisted funding specifically for Black and Asian artist film was the Arts Council of England *Black Arts Video Project*, which ran from 1988–1996. However, minority Chinese filmmakers and artists were not included in this initial spectrum of funding.<sup>3</sup> I wrote to the then Director of the Film, Video and Broadcasting, Rodney Wilson, to ask why the Chinese were excluded given that we were the third largest ethnic minority group in England (HMSO, 1993). The following year, the *Black Arts Video Project* did include Chinese arts in its remit, and my documentary film *Linear Rhythm* (1990) about Chinese artists, was the first to feature Chinese artists behind and in front of the camera, to be produced under the scheme.

With this work, I wanted to get away from the traditional 'talking heads' style documentary and decided to use the art form of each artist in the film to help determine the staging of the documentary. I gave each artist the same key words and phrases then asked them to respond to the questions using the art form in which

they worked. The words were 'Childhood', 'Why I paint/ act/ write', 'Influences', 'Difficulties' and 'Characters'.

There is a tendency to think of the Chinese in Britain as a homogeneous group, but this is far from the truth (Li 1994: 37). I deliberately chose three Chinese artists from different backgrounds to reflect this diversity. I was incredibly fortunate to find three talented Chinese British artists who were leaders in their field. They were also willing to engage in the experimental approach of the film. I wanted to show the experience of a Chinese artist who grew up in Britain, as I felt the Chinese British voice was not often heard in the media. I knew the work of the actor Lucy Sheen both in theatre and film. She was a strong advocate of BAME visibility in the arts. She has worked extensively in theatre, in productions at the Royal Exchange, and Bristol Old Vic. She was also a member of the legendary Joint Stock Theatre Company.

The history of Africans slavery in the Caribbean is rightly well known; less is known about the history of indentured and coolie labour of the Chinese in the Caribbean. Meiling Jin is was born in Guyana and her poetry often alludes to the Chinese Caribbean experience. Her poem *Strangers in a hostile landscape* (Jin, 1985) deals with her family's history as indentured labour. She also writes about her experience of being a Gay woman of colour. I felt her work would bring a complex and rich tapestry to the film.

When I made *Linear Rhythm*, little was known about the artists from mainland China who were making contemporary modern art. Que Lei Lei was a well known fine artist from China and I was interested in his conceptual work that challenged his relationship with the establishment in China.

The documentary was conceived using three section headings, which I chose according to how I felt their individual stories were framed. Qu Lei lei answered as if writing in a diary; Lucy Sheen's responses were narrated in the form of an audition in theatre, and Meilin Jin wrote her answers in poetry.

*The Diary: Created and performed by Qu Lei Lei.*

Lei Lei is one of China's leading contemporary fine artists and calligrapher. Born in Heilongjiang, China, he came to England at the age of thirty-four to study painting and drawing at the Central School of Art and Design. He was a leading figure of the Stars Art Movement, which was an influential group of Chinese artist who demanded greater freedom of expression within the arts after the Cultural Revolution.

Just after the protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989, Lei Lei had created a triptych called *Beijing – June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989*. The triptych consisted of collages taken from images relating to the protest. One panel shows newspaper clippings of people injured in the Tiananmen Square massacre. Another shows tanks in front of Ge Xiaoguang's portrait of Mao, hung at Tiananmen Gate. The final collage has the iconic image of the lone figure standing defiantly in front of the advancing tank. In the centre of each panel was a frame of colour, one black, one white and one red. The glass in the frame reflects the image of whoever is looking at the collage. In my film *Linear Rhythm*, the camera flows across the images in the triptychs as we hear Lei Lei's voice explaining how the pictures change because there is always a different person reflected in the frame. He talks about his struggle to define himself as a contemporary fine artist and the depth of his inspiration by explaining,

I take the whole of art history as my palette, mixing it with my feelings. That is my inspiration. Behind this face lies a heart which is full of pain and dignity'

(Qu Lei Lei in *Linear Rhythm* 1990)

*The Audition: Written and Performed by Lucy Sheen.*

Lucy was born in Hong Kong and brought to England as a baby as a transracial adoptee. She was the first Chinese British actress to graduate from drama school and her first job was playing the lead role in Po Ch'ih Leong's seminal film *Ping Pong* (Leong 1986). This was the first feature film to explore the complex issues of the British Chinese community. As described by Chan and Willis (2014) Leong effectively distils the fluidity of the Chinese British experience in the opening shot of



the film. In one four-minute uninterrupted swoop of the camera, Leong situates the Chinese British experience as being diasporic but also part of a multicultural Britain.

In *Linear Rhythm*, a single spotlight illuminates a stage. Lucy Sheen stands in the pool of light. The voice of a casting director calls out, 'I'd like to see something from your childhood.' Lucy performs as a child. She cups her hand around her nose, 'My name is Lai-Tuen. Shall I show you?' She uncovers her nose. 'Look poorly, squashed. I don't look like anybody, not even on TV.' She pulls a clothes peg from her pocket, 'See, I wear this on my nose at night and it's going to be long and straight when I grow up. Then I'll be able to do all the things everybody else does. But they're still going to ask about my eyes.' Lucy explores the complexities of being bicultural and how she feels she has been 'pushed from pillar to post' between two cultures and accepted by neither.

*The Journey: Poems Written and Performed by Meiling Jin.*

Meiling Jin is a poet and writer. She was born in Guyana, but in 1964 her family fled the country due to the political instability of the country. They came to England and it was here that she began writing.

Meiling Jin's poem, *A Long Over-due Poem to my Eyes*, is a powerful opening to *Linear Rhythm*. Meiling stands in front of a cinema screen, her face is on the edge the frame with the camera cutting her face in half. Images are projected behind her: we see a hand writing a poem. She recites her poem that starts,

Oh brown slit eyes  
you cause me so much pain  
but for you, I would be,  
Totally invisible.

When young,  
You filled with tears  
At the slightest provocation.  
When children teased,  
It was because of you  
They hated me...

(excerpt from *A long overdue poem to my eyes* Jin 1985)

Meiling's story is very much about a journey: a journey from the Caribbean to England, discovering her creativity and a journey finding her voice through her poetry.

It has been said that Chinese calligraphy uses linear rhythm as the 'main method of expression' (Fry 1935: 2). This notion gave me the unifying structure of my film. The experience of each artist was different, but there was a unifying connection: the Chinese diasporic experience. I interwove the responses from each artist, making conceptual and thematic links. For instance both Lucy and Meiling imbue the topic of their eyes with racial meaning and I interweave their stories at the point where they discuss their 'slit eyes'. Their individual stories trace a linear connection creating a rhythmic flow between the diasporic experience of each artist.

### **A Dream of Venus Butterfly (1992)**

I was given the chance to explore my love of avant-garde film through the Arts Council of England and Channel 4's, Eleventh Hour award with my film *A Dream of Venus Butterfly* (1992). At that time I was interested in the multifaceted ideas posited by Edward Said and his notion of Orientalism. This is 'a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident."' (Said 1979: 2). I was fascinated how a discourse on a race could be rendered 'real' in another culture's consciousness. This was a vivid notion and I was interested in exploring these thematic concerns in an oblique way.

Stylistically I was drawn to surrealism, magic realism and somnambulist films that dealt with Freudian notions of the unconscious and fable. Three films in particular were influential: Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943); Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* (1946) and Francesco Stefani's *Singing Ringing Tree* (1957). I will first describe what drew me to these films then I will go on to look at how I use some of the modes in the above works in my own film.

The first time I saw Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) it shook my filmic senses. The film works on so many levels, but ultimately like any work of art it creates an emotional experience. Beautifully shot in black and white the somnambulant feel and the lack of dialogue allows the viewer to meditate on the unconscious mind. This seemed like the perfect tone through which to explore some of the themes in *A Dream of Venus Butterfly*. Deren's autobiographical approach to her filmmaking in creating a personal film in the tradition of the avant-garde was also key. *A Dream of Venus Butterfly* was not autobiographical, but I have recognized how my work often draws upon personal experiences to understand and explore cultural experiences. This is sometimes called autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner 2000) and I recognize now that I have used this approach in many of my films.

*A Dream of Venus Butterfly* drew on the mythical and fable-like quality of *The Singing Ringing Tree* (Stefani 1957) and *Beauty and the Beast* (Cocteau 1946). I was less interested in the elements of virtue often found in fairytales, but drawn to the idea of the grotesque. The Grotesque is a subgenre of fantasy, which is characterized by surrealist imagery, body parts morphing with inanimate objects and where boundaries are transgressed (Connelly 2003). *The Singing Ringing Tree* was shown in three-parts on British television in the early 70s. Originally a full-length film, it was made in East Germany and has been called 'a terrifying Communist fairytale' (Collick 2013). It has been said that a whole generation has this film etched in their psyche.<sup>iii</sup> The film tells the story of handsome prince who wants the hand of a stubborn princess. She sets him the task of bringing her the 'fabled' singing ringing tree before she will marry him. His travels take him to a grotto-like technicolour world, where he meets an evil dwarf with magical powers. When the princess rejects the prince, the dwarf turns him into a bear. By turn the dwarf makes the princess ugly for her selfishness. However, she redeems herself by undertaking acts of goodness, such as rescuing a giant goldfish that gets trapped in ice. Shot on Agfacolor film, the hues are intensely saturated so as to appear psychedelic. The artificiality of the set and costume design made no attempt at reality and created a grotto-like verisimilitude. Set and props look artificial which 'enhances the inherent wrongness of the environment'.<sup>iv</sup> No attempt is made to make the bear look real; the giant goldfish is

clearly a papier maché model with mechanical parts that move awkwardly. There is a feeling of the carnivalesque grotesque (Bakhtin 1965) in *The Singing Ringing Tree*, which my childlike sensibilities were drawn to. Its influence of the grotesque and fable-like quality on my work had laid buried in my subconscious only to resurface when I had to retrace the roots of my creative process for this chapter.

*Beauty and the Beast* (1946), was shot in black and white, giving it a gothic-like feel. It follows the story of Belle, a lowly merchant's daughter who is sent to the castle of the Beast to atone for her father stealing a rose from the Beast. The castle is a living, breathing place and its magic seems to consume Belle from the moment she arrives there. On entering the castle she magically floats through the hall, caressed by the billowing curtains as she succumbs to her destiny. It was this feeling of woozy eroticism that I wanted to capture in *A Dream of Venus Butterfly*. There are elements of the grotesque in Cocteau's film, for instance disembodied arms jut through walls, acting as candlestick holders. Statues animate as they watch over Beauty and the Beast's every move. Unlike the Bear in the *Singing Ringing Tree*, the Beast is grotesquely authentic and bestial. Cocteau with his cinematographer Henri Alekan used mechanical special effects, such as reverse and slow motion to create images that hang in the memory. Who can forget the moment when Belle, wearing the magical glove, returns home by emerging through the wall like an unfolding flower? These sumptuous images taught me that simple in-camera cinematic tricks could be used to convey the uncanny.

*A Dream of Venus Butterfly* was imagined as a magic realist narrative on myth and power. There is little in the way of a story in the film and the narrative follows the logic of dreams. In the film, the protagonist Cathay, played by Leanne Hong, is caught in the lush, tropical but artificial setting of the Lepidopterist's dream. He chases her with his butterfly net, but she escapes his clutches. Cathay is on her own search for a butterfly. But instead of capturing it, she allows it to transform from a butterfly into a caterpillar. She kisses the hairy caterpillar, triggering her own transformation.

As in *The Singing Ringing Tree* and *Beauty and the Beast*, I wanted to create a setting that looked theatrical and artificial to reflect the dream-like world of the film. The Art Director, Janice Flint, and cinematographer, Maggie Jailler, helped create a tropical mise-en-scene in our location, which was a Victorian palm house and disused council house. We emphasised bold reds and greens that would pop out on the screen. My reference point was the technicolour colour palette used in *The Red Shoes* (Powell and Pressburger 1948). In order to achieve some of the cinematic tricks used in *Beauty and the Beast*, we shot on 16mm film. I worked with Maggie Jailler to devise several in-camera effects to achieve the slightly unsettling images in the film. We over-cranked the camera to create a dream-like effect of Cathay running through the palm house chased by the Lepidopterist. Natural history photographers Mark Yates and Juliet Smith recorded the metamorphosis of a butterfly, which we reversed to create the transformation of the butterfly to a caterpillar. A prosthetic mask was made of actor Leanne Hong's face and we poked hair through the upper lip and filmed the hair being pulled through. We reversed the film to make it appear as if the hair was growing from her upper lip.

In the final dénouement of a *Dream of Venus Butterfly*, Cathay is searching for her 'prince'. She enters a room full of butterflies. As if willing her unconscious desires, a butterfly starts its backward metamorphosis. Out of the chrysalis emerges a hairy caterpillar. Cathay leans in to kiss the ugly beast and out of her lip sprouts a surrealist moustache.

It has been said that at the end of Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*, Greta Garbo reportedly yelled out at the screen, 'Give me back my beast' (Kael, 1973), because she preferred the Beast to the Prince. Well, at the end of *A Dream of Venus Butterfly*, Cathay gets her Beast.

### **Red (1996)**

As a filmmaker one does not make a conscious attempt to enunciate theoretical discourse within one's work, rather the films are born out of the desire to tell a story. However this is not to say that a discourse might be absent, rather any critical

underpinning, if present at all, is often inscribed onto the work self-reflectively or discursively. Only upon reflection might one find these connections. It is with this understanding that I will discuss my short film *Red* (1996).

*Red* (1996) was made with the British Film Institute's *New Directors* scheme through their Production Board, and Channel 4 Television. At this time, Channel 4 had a 'special remit' to produce quality programming in the independent sector. The Minister of State noted that 'Channel 4 should be required to cater for tastes and interests which are not served by other parts of the independent television sector; to encourage innovation; to experiment in the programming which it commissions (Earl HL (1988) 502 col. 841). The Production Board's remit was aimed at, and 'explicitly charged with backing work by new and uncommercial filmmakers' (The BFI). Michael Brooke suggested that, '[t]he scheme was seen to 'nurture the career of auteurs' (Brooke 2013). This was the climate in which my film *Red* was funded.

*Red* has also been billed as 'a fable about love, freedom and Elvis' (IMDb 1996). The description alludes to some of the themes within the film, specifically of loss, longing and displacement in postmodern times, which I will explore through the framework of Hamid Naficy's idea of 'Accented Cinema' (2001). In addition, I will describe the generic and stylistic approaches I used in *Red* in order to explain the narrative modes used within the film. By doing this, I look to give a reading of *Red* on a thematic, dramatic and textual level to describe how it employs an accented mode of cinema.

The opening sequence of *Red* places us in a village house in 1970s Communist China. This is implied by the set, costume and the diegetic sound of communist slogans on a tannoy. A young woman, Xiao Mei, tips the contents of a small box onto the table and we see letters and trinkets seemingly kept as mementos. She finds a circular slide card, the type used in a child's stereoscope, and holds it towards the light. The image from the slide is projected on to her face and becomes animated. It depicts a family with a young boy waving to her. The non-diegetic sounds are nostalgic: children playing and a cuckoo calling, bringing to mind English

summers. The cuckoo alludes to the idea of displacement, and so the image is one of longing for an imaginary family and homeland. Xiao Mei calls in the village matchmaker, who shows her a photograph of a young Chinese man, called Johnny who lives in England. Xiao Mei has a romantic image of England. The idea of an idealized place is further suggested when, Xiao Mei referring to the man Johnny in the photograph, asks:

Do you think he lives in a beautiful English house with a rose garden?

(Fong 1996)

This sequence produces a sense of nostalgia not only by the use of period setting, but also through a feeling of sentimentality implied by Xiao Mei's longing for her family. The animated images on Xiao Mei's face breaks the naturalism. This implies an anti-realist narrative and whilst may be suggestive of an ontological magical realism (Spindler 1993), *Red* is not a magical realist film. Magic realism is a term borrowed from literature and has a range of different approaches when applied to film, but generally it presents a realistic view of the world, whilst using magical elements or fables to reveal the story.

However, magical elements do operate in the film. When in England, the cinematic space and mise-en-scène in *Red* creates a heightened sense of reality. Colours are vivid and the camera style is formal (that is, neatly framed), with little camera movement. There is also an emphasis on compositional elements, such as line and colour. Xiao Mei wears clothes out of place with her setting; for instance, her Mao suit' and cheongsam allude to time caught in the past. This, together with the 'magical moments' of the projected images from the stereoscope slide, is meant to reposition the spectator's reading, by suggesting that the world being presented is in Xiao Mei's imagination. In addition, the film resonates on a textual level via the 'magical moments' and the sensual experiences accessed through Xiao Mei's 3D stereoscopical world. Naficy reminds us that 'since some of the most poignant reminders of exile are non-visual and deeply rooted in everyday experiences, they

tend to emphasize tactile sensibilities' (Naficy 2001: 28).

Naficy argues that accented cinema is characterized by a certain style. He identifies three categories that constitute accented cinema, those being exilic, diasporic, and ethnic. He contends that postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmakers are both 'ethnic' and 'diasporic', but differ from diasporic filmmakers 'in their emphasis on their ethnic and racial identity within their host country' (2001: 15). Whilst the exilic, diasporic, and identity accented style all deal with displacement, 'identity filmmakers' emphasize the politics of identity. As described earlier, my films echo feelings of displacement, however my position as a British East Asian filmmaker positions me within a politics of identity. I use the term British East Asian at this juncture quite pointedly. The term East Asian has gained much traction lately and whilst it can be used to describe a geographical and economic region, I use it in a socio-political sense. To me it signifies the coming together of a political consciousness within the East Asian artistic community. Whereas in the 80s and 90s I aligned myself with the identity politics of the Black and Asian artists, it now seems possible to create our own community, as a united yet heterogeneous group. Identity political formations look to secure self-determination by challenging dominant and often times, oppressive characterization within the wider environment. As a mode of organizing it connects to the idea that certain people can be held down because of their identity, say as woman or by their ethnicity. This makes them vulnerable to marginalization or erasure (Young 1990). Therefore, being an East Asian filmmaker for me signifies a transformative power within the politics of identity.

These themes of identity, displacement and exile impact upon the film aesthetics to produce what Naficy calls the "accented style" (Martin, 2002). Rather than dealing directly with exile, diaspora and identity, these themes are inflected in the work, shaping its style. Style itself is seen as an attitude and, quoting Dick Hebdige, Naficy notes that style is 'a gesture of defiance or contempt, in a smile or sneer. It signals Refusal' (Hebdige, qtd in Naficy 2001: 26). Naficy also points toward the hybrid nature of accented cinema and suggests that, rather than rejecting the dominant cinematic style or any specific film movement it is influenced by them all.



In *Red*, Xiao Mei is lost; dislocated in search of her family. This creates an 'essential sadness' (Said, quoted in Naficy 2001:27), that is symptomatic of exile and diaspora. Xiao Mei's desire to 'recapture the homeland or return to it' (Naficy 2001: 27), is indeed present in the film, but the homeland she longs for is not China, but England where she now finds herself. This complicates the idea of the referent home being that from which we are exiled. In *Red*, home is a liminal space, yet to be discovered.

In *Red*, the tropes of loneliness, displacement and looking for a homeland, allude to the diasporic condition. However the homeland to which Xiao Mei returns is characterized by hostility and misconception. She discovers England in the 1970s to be a divided country, with racist groups such as the National Front habitually attacking ethnic minorities. She finds she is unable to communicate with her new husband Johnny, as he cannot speak Chinese. She comes across a similar setback when she finally finds her brother, but he too can only speak English and they are unable to talk to each other. I explained the idea behind this in an interview in *A Small Cinema*, where I suggested that 'I often see [people] that talk the same language but [they] are unable to communicate and I find that fascinating – this is a more literal form of that' (A Small Cinema, 2011).

The final montage scene, which is seen through Xiao Mei's stereoscope intercuts photographs of her family, images of China, Communist art, Elvis, and Johnny. This is accompanied by the clicking sound of the stereoscope and a cacophony of discordant sounds. This cinematic effect chimes in with the 'audio sampling, fleeting moments of vision, memory and voice, replicating distracted attention' that Naficy (2011: 29) claims is characteristic of the accented style.

Some of the themes outlined above have been explored and inflected on to the text of the film via the dramatic mode used in *Red*. There have been many debates surrounding the definition of melodrama by film theorists (Nowell-Smith 1977; Elsaesser 1972), feminist film scholars (Mulvey 1975; Gledhill 1987; Creed 1977) and on the audience reception of the genre (Neale 1986). Indeed it continues to be redefined by theorists such as Altman (1998), who felt that the genre was not a fixed

category. It is precisely melodrama's leaky boundaries that have allowed it to be re-appropriated. However, rather than being a melodrama, *Red* uses the melodramatic mode to convey meaning and explore the inner world of the protagonist. As a mode, melodrama is dominated by a non-verbal aesthetic such as gestural performances, music and mise-en-scène (Mercer and Shingler 2004)

In *Red*, the pictorial style of the mise-en-scène is reminiscent of images from Xiao Mei's 3D stereoscope. This alludes to the feeling that the characters are trapped or framed within an artificial reality. The heightened use of colour and gestural performances imbue it with excess that 'disrupts the conventions of cinematic realism' (Mercer and Shingler 2004: 24). Repressed emotions are expressed through metaphor as Xiao Mei and her new husband are locked in their own emotional worlds, portrayed by their obsessive fetishization of the 3D stereoscope and Elvis respectively. The pent-up emotion during the meeting with her long lost brother is externalized by the frustration at the inability of Xiao Mei and her brother to communicate, as they do not share a common language, and in true melodramatic mode, she explodes (Nowell-Smith 1977).

Mise-en-scène is again employed during the revelation that Xiao Mei's parents are dead, when her brother takes her to see their shrine. Xiao Mei's stereoscope that she left for her brother to look after is among the offerings that sit on the altar. It is gesture rather than dialogue that conveys the sentiment of loss and time moving on, when brother and sister try to re-enact a childhood habit of sharing an eyepiece each of the stereoscope, only to find that their adult heads are now too big to accommodate it. Xiao Mei is a symbolic cuckoo, nested in a foreign place and looking for her home. She negotiates the symbolic boundaries of her identity and is in the process of remaking herself. As Naficy contends, identity is no longer defined by biological moorings, but is now recognized as being socially produced.

### **Chinese for Beginners (2002)**

When you grow up in a culture you do not self-consciously learn the modes and values of that culture. Like learning a mother tongue, it is absorbed and learnt by

osmosis. Culture is not pure; it is a living and breathing thing. We were culturally different from most Chinese people in Britain at that time as many came from British colonies (Teague 1993). My parents grew up under Communism and we didn't celebrate Chinese festivals, as Mao wanted to rid the people of old feudal traditions. As a consequence Chinese people I met often said I wasn't 'truly Chinese'. One well-meaning Chinese woman gave me a weighty tome called *Chinese Creeds and Customs* (Burkhardt 1982), ironically written by a British Colonel who served time in China in 1940s and who was an amateur Sinologist. I was curious: did I have to learn traditional Chinese culture to be Chinese? Was my family's version of Chinese culture, which was a product of Communism inauthentic? What does a Chinese British hybrid culture look like? *Chinese for Beginners* was my filmic attempt at answering these questions.

*Chinese for Beginners* (2002) was a series of four three-minute films for Channel 4's *The Slot*. The basis for the series I made was to give a voice to hybrid identities. What did it mean in real terms to be Chinese and British?

Whilst these are the least theorized films in this chapter, the films deal with the some of the themes already discussed in my earlier films, such as hybridity and identity. These shorts can be seen as autoethnographic, as they draw on personal experience to understand the cultural. In this way they are a performance of my identity. As Naficy states, "...identity is not a fixed essence but a process of becoming, even a performance of identity. Indeed each accented film may be thought of as a performance of its author's identity" (Naficy 2001: 6).

I focused on four Chinese philosophies: Taoism, Feng Shui, Confucianism, and Chi. I worked with a group of Chinese British actors to create a series of vignettes. The journalist Ling Wan Pak gave this assessment of *Chinese for Beginners*,

The series offers the audience a humorous, accessible and offbeat introduction to the Chinese philosophies. They reflect an assimilation of traditional Chinese values

and principles into today's British culture, creating a hybrid, westernized Chinese philosophy.

(Screenonline 2014)

I have given a brief synopsis of each episode, with the addition of QR links, which when scanned with a mobile device enables you to watch three of the episodes.

#### Taoism with Daniel York and Paul Chan

“inserts image Fig 6 here” CAPTION: *Taoism and beanbag philosophy with Daniel York and Paul Chan.*

*Taoism* subverts the stereotype of the hardworking Chinese as armchair slackers and philosophers Dan and Paul concoct their own version of Taoism. Using a smattering of knowledge from their Chinese upbringing, they use Taoist principles to argue the value of idleness as a balance to the hardworking people in society.

#### Feng Shui with Chowee Leow and Hi Ching

“insert image Fig 7 here” CAPTION: *Chowee Leow as Zoe in Feng Shui, Chinese for Beginners.*

After a night on the town, drag queens Ming and Zoe explore the assorted intricacies of Feng Shui design. Ming throws Zoe’s domestic bliss into disarray when she tells her that her Feng shui is all wrong.

#### Confucius with Pui Fan Lee

*Confucius* takes us behind the takeaway counter to give the woman serving a voice. Using the teachings of Confucius she ponders on the invisibility of the Chinese in Britain and what it means to be Chinese British.

### Cosmic Chi with Papillon Soo Lam

“insert image Fig 8 here” CAPTION: *Papillon Soo Lam in Cosmic Chi, Chinese for Beginners.*

Shot in the style of a documentary, Papillon explains the nature of Chi. Papillon lives and breaths Chi - she is Cosmic Chi.

### **Deconstructing Zoe (2016)**

When I'm driving as a man, nobody notices me, everyone goes Chink, but when I'm Zoe people are honking [at] me, winking at me, tailing me and she's like vroom, speeding down the West Way.

Ivan Heng's provocative quote from my film *Deconstructing Zoe* (2016) encapsulates the key themes in the documentary, which are the performance of race and British East Asian identity. The use of the word 'Chink', coupled with the implied desirability of Zoe, brings into sharp relief Western perceptions of the gendered other: in the case of the Chinese man despised, but as a Chinese woman desired. Zoe personifies Edward Said's notion of Orientalism outlined above. Zoe describes how as a Chinese man she is desexualised, but as a Chinese woman she is desirable. She acts out playing 'Madam Butterfly – that is the stereotypical, passive and sexualised Oriental woman. Zoe's performance of race and gender, informed by stereotypical perceptions, creates a narrative that demonstrates how identity is produced and negotiated between people in relationships (Lawler 2008).

I became interested in how identity is constructed and maintained through performance and how identity is used to perpetuate the sense of the self. I had developed these themes in *Council House Movie Star* (2012), a short film I made with dance maker Mark Edward. The film used Edward's drag persona 'to think about the difficult experience of ageing in non-heterosexual contexts and an image obsessed culture' (Edward 2014). My own point of interest was to question whether

identity could be embodied through performance and subsequently captured on narrative film. In the context of *Deconstructing Zoe*, I questioned if gender is 'performed', 'manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body' (Butler 1999: xv), then can the same also be said of race? Do we act out in ways that consolidate an impression of what it is to be 'Chinese', for example? Current postmodern critiques of identity were thus also of interest here, and in relation to performativity, masquerade, mimicry, drag and simulacrum (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Lacan 1985; Bhabha 1994) they are key terms used in this diverse approach to notions of identity. It is the investigation of these aspects of performance that comprise the enquiry for my documentary. The filmic approach was to respond to the nature of the performance in front of the camera, to draw out the nuances of the act, and thus allow the film itself to be an articulation and exploration of the themes.

In making *Deconstructing Zoe*, I wanted to use a more accessible documentary format than was used in *Linear Rhythm* (1990). In *Deconstructing Zoe*, I decided to use 'talking head' style interviews and archival photographs. However, I wanted to find a structure that would allow the viewer to connect with the thematic elements in the film in a textual way. Documentaries such as *The Thin Blue Line* (Morris 1988), and more recently, *Dreams of a Life* (Morley 2011), did this successfully. They used dramatic re-enactments alongside interviews to tease out the themes in the film. *The Thin Blue Line* uses interviews and re-enactments to frame different perspectives. Meanwhile, *Dreams of a Life* juxtaposes interviews with dramatic sequences to weave a commentary on how as a society we have become disconnected from one another. Both films used dramatic sequences in a way that allow an idea or point of view to be pronounced without the need for verbal commentary. In *Deconstructing Zoe*, I used the one-person play *An Occasional Orchid* (1996), written and performed by Heng to help enunciate the interconnections of East Asian 'life in the diaspora and in the arts, exoticification and imperialism, transmisogyny, gender and sexual fluidity, racism, and femininity' (Translations 2016). The play, together with Zoe's interviews, draws attention to the performative nature of Zoe's gender and racial identity. The closing sequence of the documentary where I can be seen directing the film crew on set points to the metafictional nature of the film.

## CONCLUSION

Directing starts not when the script is being discussed with the writer, nor during work with the actor, or with the composer, but at the time when, before the interior gaze of the person making the film and known as the director, there emerges an image of the film: this might be a series of episodes worked out in detail, or perhaps the consciousness of an aesthetic texture and emotional atmosphere, to materialise on the screen.

(Tarkovsky 1988: 60)

In writing this chapter I was compelled to assess the roots of my inspiration, leading me down avenues that have lain dormant for some time. I have looked at how the feeling of exile, dislocation and disconnection has imbued my films, creating an 'aesthetic texture and emotional atmosphere' that informs my work. I have identified how those themes may have been expressed in my films, not in any intended self-conscious way, but they have seeped into the texture of them. This has also been the case with the films where I have not authored the story, as in *Water Wings* (2006). I myself have only recognised this upon reflection.

As an artist, I am driven to try and make sense of my experiences – those have led me to engage with debates around race, representation and identity. My early films explored how that identity has been 'othered'. Indeed, in those early years I found a connection with other Black and ethnic minority filmmakers, such as Gurinda Chadha, Amanda Holiday, Trin T Min Ha, Julie Dash and the filmmakers from Black Audio and Sankofa, who explored similar imperatives. As I have described, Chinese British filmmakers found it difficult to get recognition during the 1990s. This can be traced back to the exclusion of a British East Asian perspective by key institutions and critics stemming from the 1980s when the definition of 'black' became defined as racial rather than a socio-political category. Whilst the term was intended to be inclusive it was in fact used narrowly to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. Despite this, Chinese British filmmakers have been able to articulate a sensibility that is unique and different, contesting the idea of a homogeneous identity. The Chinese

British filmmakers who chose to assert their identity have struggled to gain mainstream acceptance. The racial bias of the Western cinematic tradition was laid bare when Mike Newell was asked why his film *Soursweet* (1988), couldn't get mainstream distribution,<sup>v</sup> to which he replied, the distributors told him it was because the film was about "slopes<sup>vi</sup>". Current debates on Yellow face and whitewashing in Hollywood highlight how the struggle to resist erasure is still present.

I have described the characters in my films as belonging 'neither here nor there and in a constant state of trying to negotiate their identity' (A Small Cinema 2011), alluding to the hybrid nature of their experiences. Some of my films presented that hybridity in overt ways, such as in my television series *Chinese of Beginners* (2002). The series was also a direct response to an ethnic essentialism that questions the authenticity of the Chinese British, as Chinese. Coupled with our marginalisation from the mainstream, this ethnic essentialism creates a dual erasure for the Chinese British. Chan and Willis in their chapter, 'British Chinese Short Films' (Chan and Willis, 2014) recognise the struggle Chinese British filmmakers face when they say that whilst 'British and not necessarily Sinophone<sup>vii</sup> it would be inaccurate to say they are 'not Chinese'" (Chan and Willis 2014: 173). The very nature of cultural hybridity in the films of their study is seen as 'central to the struggle for a voice and identity' (Chan and Willis 2014: 173).

What I witnessed during my formative experiences with cinema back in the 1970s – where auteur directors made way to a more commercial cinema – points towards tensions in my own filmmaking. On the one hand I'm driven by the need for self-expression, and drawn to a cinema that is a critical investigation of form. As I have discussed, films that express an accented identity (Naficy 2001) may have a limited appeal. Then, on the other hand I'm acutely aware of cinema's commercial bent. How to reconcile the two? Abbas Kiarostami came to the conclusion many years ago that if the filmmaker can satisfy themselves with the films they make, the films will resonate with an audience somewhere. He goes on to say 'so if I'm an independent filmmaker I should accept that I might hardly have even one theatre with limited seats' (Kiarostami in Sani 2013: 49). So, if my films resonate with at least one



viewer and they are able to make a connection on some level with my work, I will feel truly honoured.

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<sup>i</sup> Blue Funnel line Britain: Outbound passenger list 1890-1960

<sup>ii</sup> Clansmanship is strong in Southern Chinese culture and refers to a group of Chinese people with a shared surname and from the same ancestral village.

<sup>3</sup> Lola Young offers a discussion of the problems of terminology for Black and British Asian cinema giving her reasons for adopting “black” as the appropriate description. However, Isaac Julian also concurs that the term black is problematic because of the fragmentary nature of identity.

<sup>iii</sup> <sup>1</sup>[http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/singing\\_ringing\\_tree.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/singing_ringing_tree.shtml)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://eastgermancinema.com/2011/08/03/the-singing-ringing-tree/>

<sup>v</sup> China in Britain, Myths and Realities, 31 May 2012, London, co-organised by Dr Anne Wichard, University of Westminster and Dr Diana Yeh, Birkbeck College, University of London.

<sup>vi</sup> A pejorative term used for people of East Asian decent.

<sup>vii</sup> Chinese speaking places outside of Mainland China.