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距離電影：趙德胤「歸鄉三部曲」與後殖民及華語語系的邊界

Cinema of Distance: Midi Z's "Homecoming Trilogy" and the Borders of the Postcolonial and the Sinophone

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本論文係沈昆賢君（R03122026）在國立臺灣大學外國語文學系完成之碩士學位論文，於民國 107 年 7 月 2 日承下列考試委員審查通過及口試及格，特此證明

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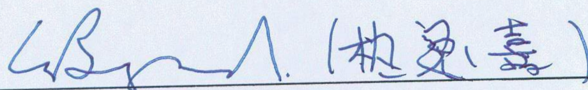

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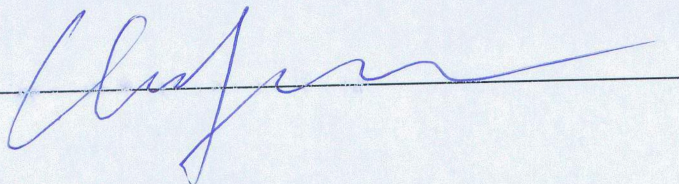

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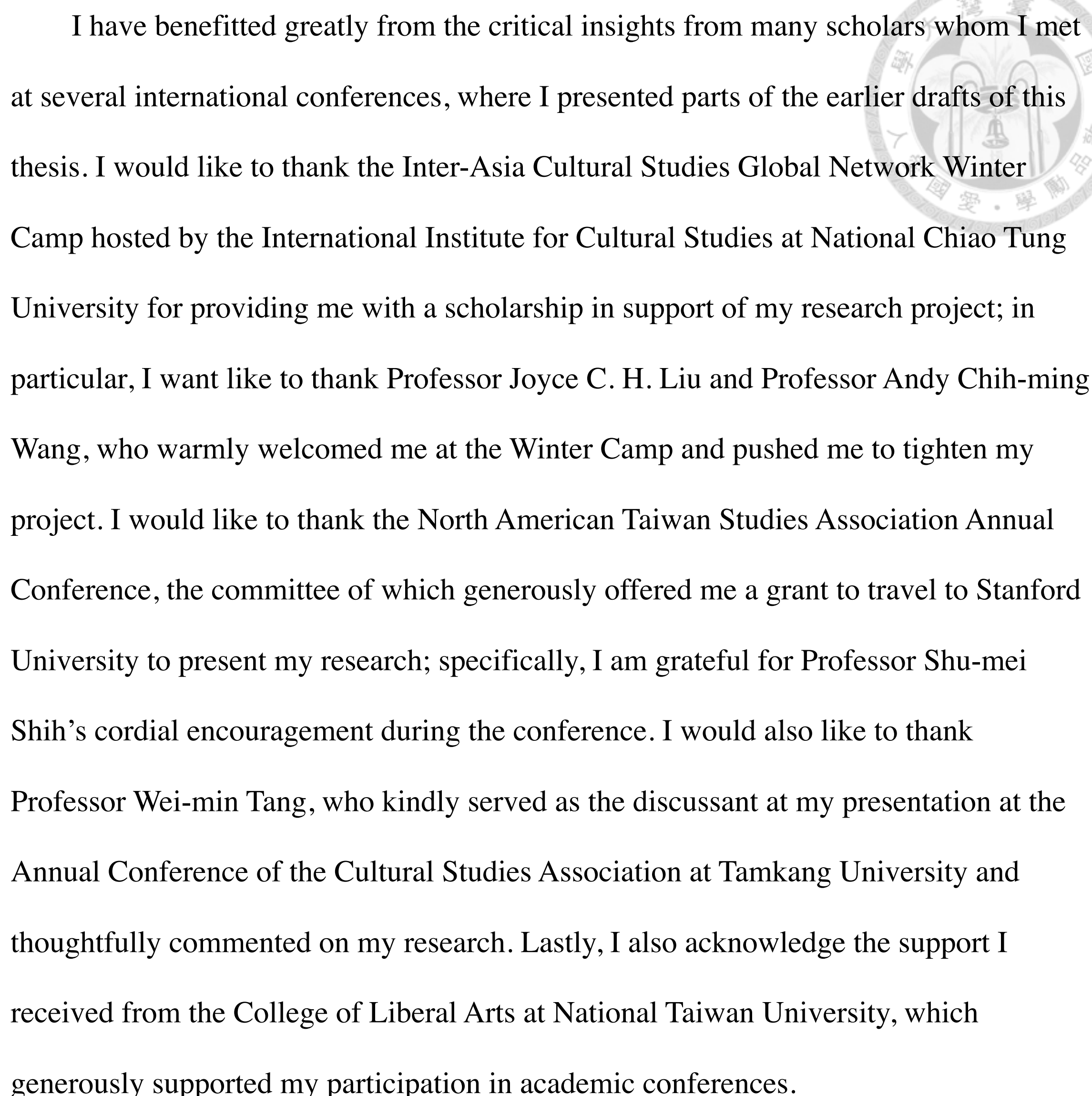

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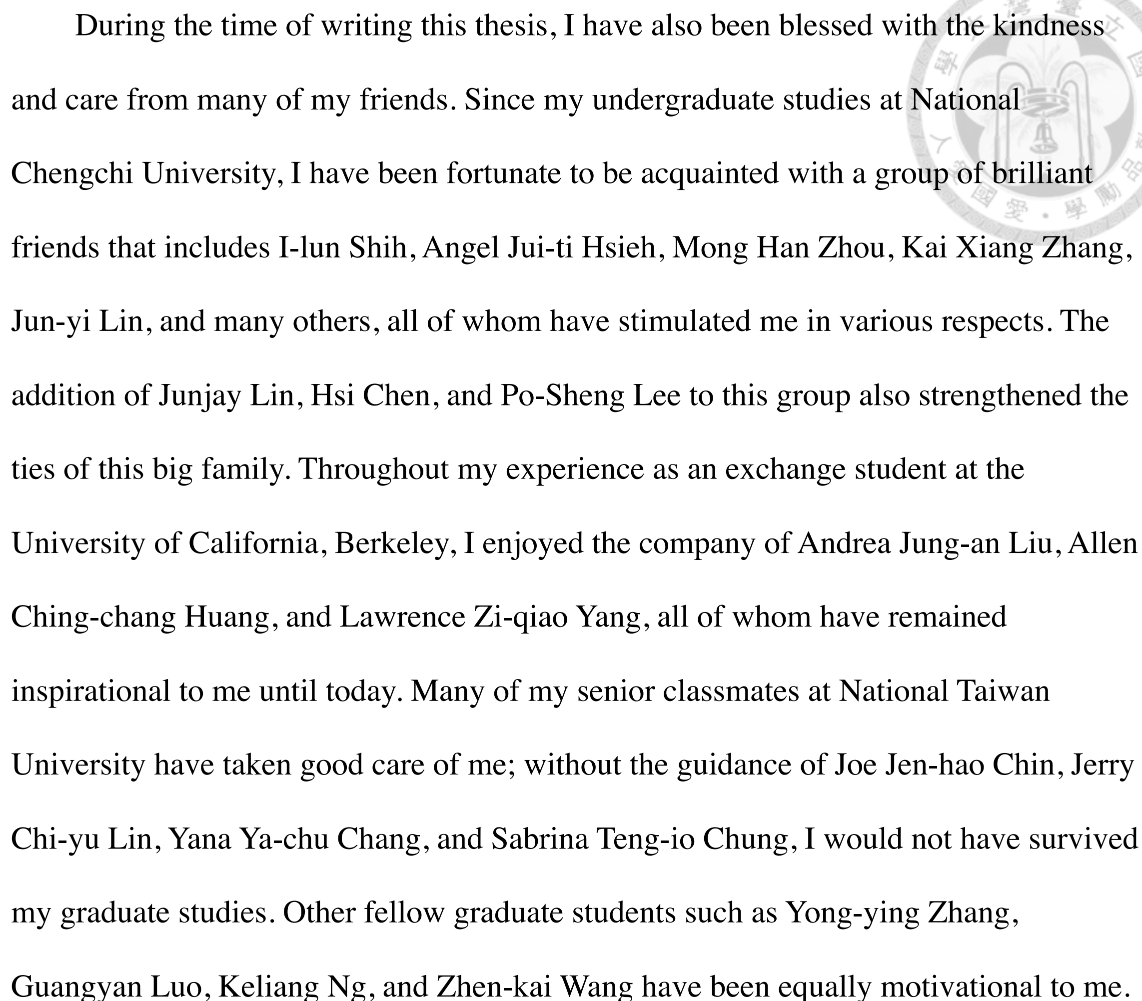

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the representations of the Burmese Chinese characters' failed inter-Asian migrations in Midi Z's Homecoming Trilogy—including *Return to Burma* (2011), *Poor Folk* (2012), and *Ice Poison* (2014)—by discussing this trilogy as a "cinema of distance." Through this discussion, this thesis suggests that Midi Z's films not only challenge narratives of linear migration, but also push at the epistemological borders of postcolonial studies and Sinophone studies. Chapter One first reveals the incongruity between the mainstream discursive formation of Midi Z as a successful ethnic minority director, a discourse based upon a colonial unconscious in Taiwan, and the dominant theme of failed inter-Asian migrations in his films. This chapter also introduces critical ideas from the fields of postcolonial studies and Sinophone studies and provides a definition of a cinema of distance to introduce alternative ways to analyze his films. Chapter Two analyzes how discourses of the Taiwanese dream and Burmese reforms that attract migrants are critiqued through the story of return migration in *Return to Burma*, while specifically listening to this film's use of sounds. Chapter Three explores the quality of in-betweenness embodied by the Thailand-Burma border space and the border-crossing migrants in *Poor Folk*, while paying special attention to the aspect of performance in the film. Chapter Four examines the dialectic between mobility and immobility faced by lower-class ethnic Chinese in Burma as they are represented in *Ice Poison* through a discussion of this film's use of camera movement. Chapter Five concludes this thesis and asks: how does Midi Z's cinema of distance complicate the dichotomy between "foreign" and "native" in a Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures in Taiwan? Through a discussion of the term "distance" and the position of Burmese Chinese students, the thesis suggests a radical reconsideration

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of certain uncritical distances that have been maintained between different disciplines and subjects in Taiwan.

Key Words: Midi Z, Homecoming Trilogy, postcolonial studies, Sinophone studies, inter-Asian migrancy, Burmese Chinese, distance

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摘要

本論文旨在探討趙德胤導演所拍攝之「歸鄉三部曲」中對於緬甸華人角色失敗的亞際遷移的再現，並將此三部作品—包括《歸來的人》(2011)、《窮人。榴槤。麻藥。偷渡客》(2012)，與《冰毒》(2014)—定義為「距離電影」。本論文的核心論點指出，距離電影不但能夠挑戰線性的移民敘事，同時也推展後殖民研究與華語語系研究的知識邊界。論文第一章首先揭露將趙德胤描繪為在台灣獲得成功的少數族裔導演的主流論述形構如何與其電影中失敗的亞際遷移的主題產生矛盾，並且藉由詳細定義距離電影來提供分析其作品的另類方法。本章節同時也引介後殖民研究與華語語系研究中的批判思維，並點出其能夠與無法幫助本論文分析之處。第二章分析《歸來的人》如何藉由緬甸的回流移民來批判台灣夢與緬甸改革等吸引移民的論述，並且著重於傾聽影片部署之聲音。第三章探討《窮人。榴槤。麻藥。偷渡客》中由泰緬邊界空間與跨界移民所體現的居間性，並且關注影片中的表演面向。第四章檢視《冰毒》中緬甸當地的底層華人所面臨的機動性與不動性的辯證關係，同時考量影片中的攝影機運動。第五章總結本論文，並且提問：趙德胤的距離電影如何挑戰台灣的外文系中固有的「外國」與「本地」的二元對立？透過對於「距離」此一概念的更多討論，本論文提議趙德胤的電影促此我們重思台灣過去在不同學科與主體間不加批判所設立的距離。

關鍵字：趙德胤、歸鄉三部曲、後殖民、華語語系、亞際遷移、緬甸華人、距離

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Chapter One:

Introduction

At the 53rd Golden Horse Awards Ceremony that took place in Taipei in November 2016, Taiwan-based Burmese Chinese director Midi Z (*Zhao De-yin* 趙德胤) received the award "Outstanding Taiwanese Filmmaker of the Year" for "expanding the field and definition of Taiwanese cinema" ("Announcement").[1] Expressing his gratitude to the general Taiwanese public, he claimed:

> If it were not for the diversity and freedom in Taiwan . . . I, Midi Z, could not have possibly stood here on the stage today. . . . If even a Burmese kid who had never dreamt of anything beyond survival can obtain this award . . . and if this is an inspirational story, then Taiwan is the only place in the world that such inspirational story can happen! (qtd. in "Acceptance")

As he referred to himself as "a Burmese kid," Midi Z chose to self-consciously foreground his identity as an ethnic minority in Taiwan, and to claim that it is the freedom to express his unique cultural background that has pushed him to his success. At first glance, this achievement may seem counter-intuitive, as the apparently nationalistic title "Outstanding Taiwanese Filmmaker" is more often associated with an imagined and constructed "Taiwaneseness" that prioritizes the grassroots culture of

[1] As an ethnic Chinese growing up in Burma, Midi Z has been described with different titles, including "Burmese Chinese," "Myanmar-born Taiwanese" and "Sino-Burmese." In this thesis, I use the term "Burmese Chinese," as "Myanmar-born Taiwanese" and "Sino-Burmese" both seem to strengthen given nationalities instead of pointing toward a more flexible cultural identity. However, I would like to note that Midi Z often characterizes himself with each of these terms in different contexts. Midi Z also goes by many different names that indicate his cross-cultural background. In Taiwan, he is usually referred to as Zhao De-yin, the pronunciation of his name in Standard Mandarin (*guoyu* 國語 in Taiwan; *putonghua* 普通話 in China). However, in international contexts (e.g. international film festivals), he chooses to be called Midi Z, with "Midi" (咪弟) meaning "younger brother" in Southwestern Mandarin (*xinanguanhua* 西南官話) and "Z" indicating the first letter in the Romanized version of his family name Zhao. Furthermore, as it is the custom for Burmese Chinese to blend in with the mainstream Burmese society, there is also a Burmese transliteration of his name: Kyawk Dad-Yin; see Wen-chin Chang, "Poverty" 43.

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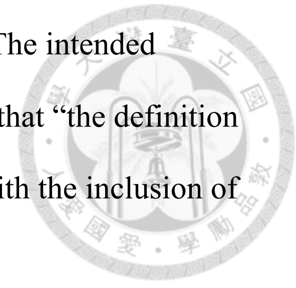

local Han Chinese, the dominant settler colonizers on the island.[2] The intended message from the Golden Horse Awards to the public, however, is that "the definition of Taiwan cinema" has become more inclusive and multicultural with the inclusion of the Burmese Chinese director Midi Z as a "Taiwanese filmmaker."

In general, this inclusive tendency corresponds to Taiwanese cinema's historical shift from what Darrell William Davis calls its didactic "civilizing mission" (2) led by the *Kuomintang*-controlled state (國民黨, the Chinese Nationalist Party, hereafter the KMT) during the Cold War period to "alternative modes of film form, storytelling, marginal voices, and practices that question cinema's position as a national culture" (5), a process accelerated by Taiwan's influential New Cinema movement (*xindianyin* 新電影) from 1982 to 1987 and the end of the martial law period on Taiwan proper in 1987. In particular, the official recognition of Midi Z serves as a culmination of the efforts of an increasing number of Taiwanese filmmakers who have turned their camera lens towards Taiwan's Southeast Asian "new immigrants" (*xinyimin* 新移民), whose presences were first indirectly introduced by the Taiwanese government's policies in the 1990s to strengthen its link with the area imagined as Southeast Asia.[3]

[2] Shih defines the term "settler colonialism" vis-à-vis Taiwan as the process of how Han Chinese migrants from Mainland China "systematically marginalized indigenous peoples" in the history of the island ("Foreword" 7). In this thesis, I extend the idea of marginalized people to consider lower-class transnational immigrants in Taiwan, particularly the Southeast Asian migrants of various ethnic backgrounds. The effect of the marginalization of other lower-class immigrants in the formation of "Taiwaneseness" is reflected in the Golden Horse Awards. At the time of writing, all recipients of the "Outstanding Taiwanese Filmmaker" have been Han Chinese born in Taiwan, with the exception of the Malaysian Chinese director Tsai Ming-liang in 2001. Interestingly, 2001 was also the only year when the award was titled "Special Jury Prize for an Individual" instead of "Outstanding Taiwanese Filmmaker." Tsai, upon receiving this award, questioned on stage if "this is a consolation prize?" before joking ironically that "I suppose this puts me out of contention for Best Director" (qtd. in Yu). Similar to Tsai's situation, Midi Z had not received other awards from the Golden Horse for the recognition of his artistry before accepting this award. In these instances, this award was awarded arguably only to confer a designated Taiwanese identity on a filmmaker, instead of valuing their artistic achievement. See Shen, "Midi Z's First" for further critique of Golden Horse Awards.

[3] Before the former President of Taiwan Lee Teng-hui initiated the "Go South Policy" (南向政策 *Nanxiang Zhengce*) in 1993 to encourage investment in Southeast Asian countries, Taiwan had already approved the legal introduction of Southeast Asian laborers in 1992. Both policies symbolized Taiwan's intention to veer away from interaction with China for national security (Tseng 19). In response to this social change, many filmmakers have addressed the influx of Southeast Asian "new immigrants" in their works, including Tsai Tsung-lung's "Trilogy of Immigrant Brides" (2003), Ho Wi

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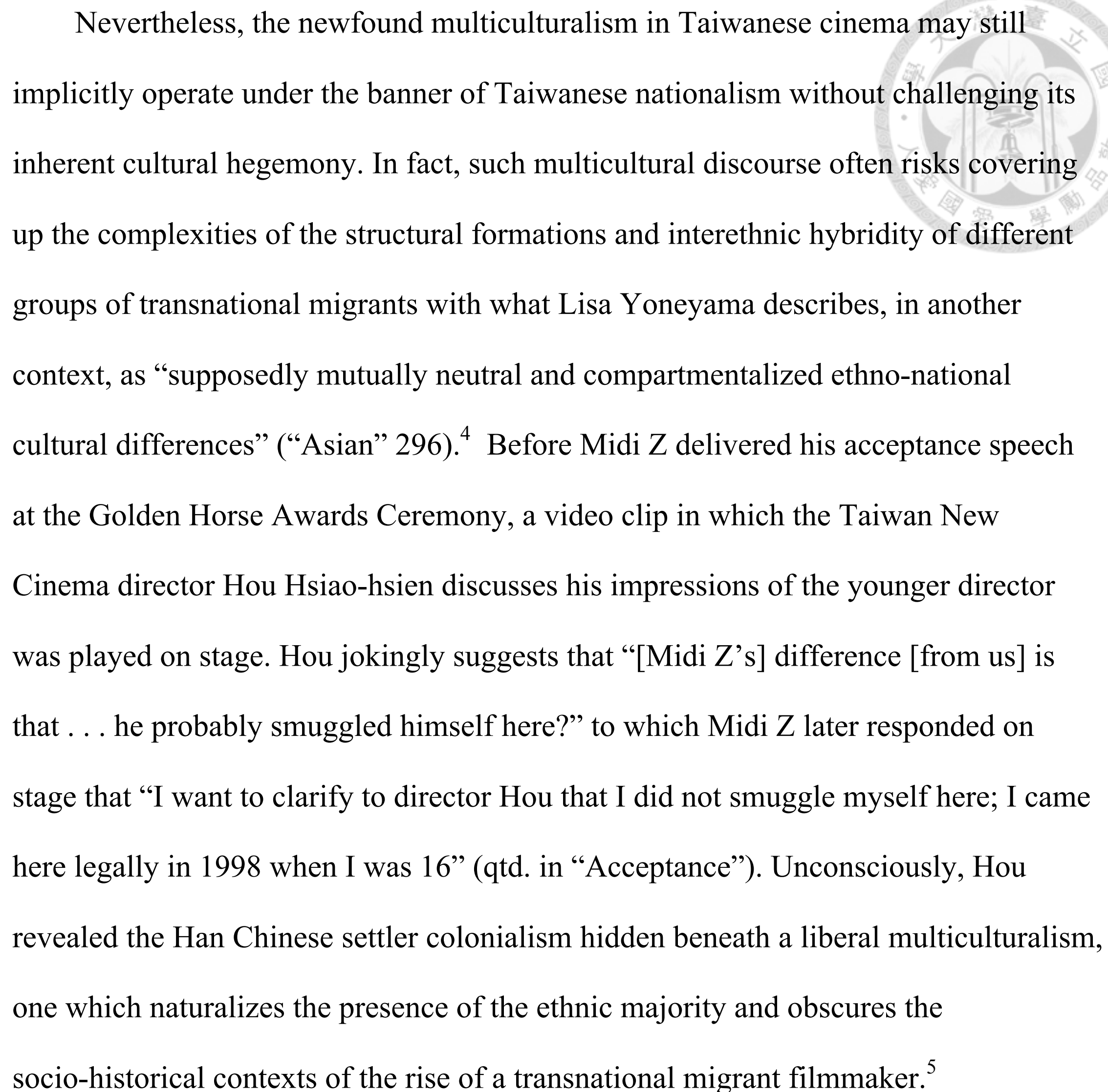

Nevertheless, the newfound multiculturalism in Taiwanese cinema may still implicitly operate under the banner of Taiwanese nationalism without challenging its inherent cultural hegemony. In fact, such multicultural discourse often risks covering up the complexities of the structural formations and interethnic hybridity of different groups of transnational migrants with what Lisa Yoneyama describes, in another context, as "supposedly mutually neutral and compartmentalized ethno-national cultural differences" ("Asian" 296).[4] Before Midi Z delivered his acceptance speech at the Golden Horse Awards Ceremony, a video clip in which the Taiwan New Cinema director Hou Hsiao-hsien discusses his impressions of the younger director was played on stage. Hou jokingly suggests that "[Midi Z's] difference [from us] is that . . . he probably smuggled himself here?" to which Midi Z later responded on stage that "I want to clarify to director Hou that I did not smuggle myself here; I came here legally in 1998 when I was 16" (qtd. in "Acceptance"). Unconsciously, Hou revealed the Han Chinese settler colonialism hidden beneath a liberal multiculturalism, one which naturalizes the presence of the ethnic majority and obscures the socio-historical contexts of the rise of a transnational migrant filmmaker.[5]

Departing from this discrepancy between multicultural discourse and a colonial unconscious in Taiwan, this MA thesis seeks to understand how Midi Z's cinematic

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Ding's *Pinoy Sunday* (2009), and Nguyen Kim-Hong's *Out/Marriage* (2012). Continuing a policy that President Lee had enacted two decades earlier, the current President of Taiwan Tsai Ing-wen initiated what she called a "New Southbound" (新南向政策 *Xinnanxiang Zhengce*) policy in 2016.

[4] While I am aware that Yoneyama is thinking about the problems of liberal multiculturalism in terms of Asian American studies, I believe her proposal to rethink ethnic studies in the U.S. with a transnational perspective is helpful in tackling the problems of multiculturalism in Taiwan, where ethnic minorities such as Southeast Asian migrants are often viewed as separate entities without connections to other domestic/transnational groups. Mau-kuei Chang also argues, in the Taiwanese context, "[multicultural] policies easily fall into a 'depoliticized' cultural performances" (321).

[5] Hou is not the only person who implicitly treats Midi Z as an outsider who "smuggled" himself to Taiwan. In the *2014 Taiwan Cinema Yearbook*, the country of production of his *Return to Burma* is listed by the Taiwan Film Institute as "Burma" (71), which contradicts the fact that Midi Z has constantly been seen as a Taiwanese director. Interestingly, the notion of "outsider" has actually been prevalent in the history of Taiwanese cinema. As Yeh and Davis point out, many important Taiwanese directors come from a transnational background, including "pan-Chinese" like Li Hanxiang and King Hu (10), "mainlanders" like Wang Tong (79), Edward Yang (103), and Hou Hsiao-hsien (166), as well as the "second-generation Chinese immigrant in Malaysia" Tsai Ming-liang (245).

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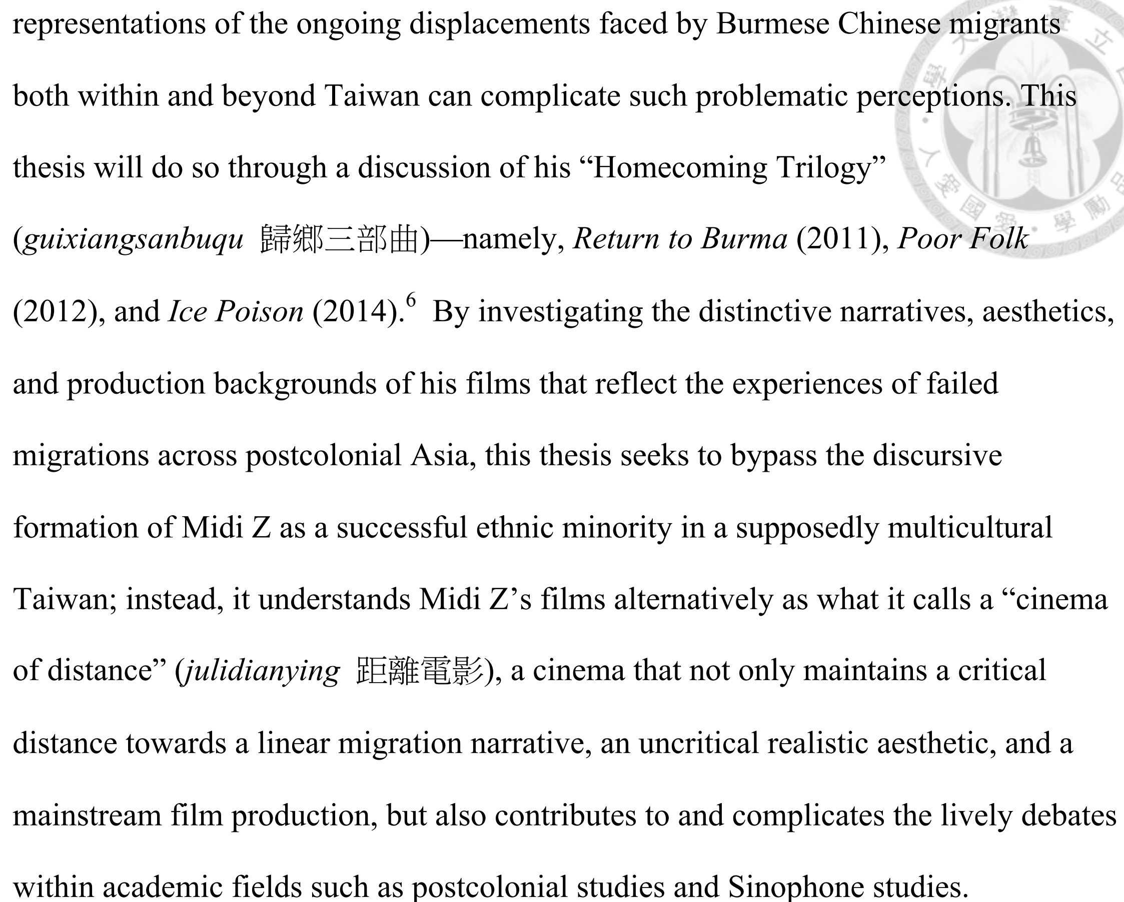

representations of the ongoing displacements faced by Burmese Chinese migrants both within and beyond Taiwan can complicate such problematic perceptions. This thesis will do so through a discussion of his "Homecoming Trilogy" (*guixiangsanbuqu* 歸鄉三部曲)—namely, *Return to Burma* (2011), *Poor Folk* (2012), and *Ice Poison* (2014).[6] By investigating the distinctive narratives, aesthetics, and production backgrounds of his films that reflect the experiences of failed migrations across postcolonial Asia, this thesis seeks to bypass the discursive formation of Midi Z as a successful ethnic minority in a supposedly multicultural Taiwan; instead, it understands Midi Z's films alternatively as what it calls a "cinema of distance" (*julidianying* 距離電影), a cinema that not only maintains a critical distance towards a linear migration narrative, an uncritical realistic aesthetic, and a mainstream film production, but also contributes to and complicates the lively debates within academic fields such as postcolonial studies and Sinophone studies.

Before I further explain how I situate Midi Z's works in relation to wider academic concerns, I would like to first provide a biographical introduction to Midi Z and elaborate on what I call Midi Z's "cinema of distance," so as to better illustrate the critical potential of his films. It is to this topic that I would like to turn now.

Introduction: Midi Z and the Cinema of Distance

Prior to becoming a champion of multicultural Taiwanese cinema, Midi Z was a Burmese native of ethnic Chinese origin with ancestry in Yunnan.[7] During his early

[6] Production company Flash Forward Entertainment and home video distributor Deltamac in Taiwan have named Midi Z's first three feature films as the Homecoming Trilogy, implying that the recurring setting of Burma in his films signifies his nostalgia for it as his home. The Asia Society in New York also named what is described as the first U.S. survey of Midi Z's films "Homecoming Myanmar: A Midi Z Retrospective," an event curated by La Frances Hui in 2015. Such naming, however, implicitly denies the fact that Taiwan is also his "home," not least because he acquired its citizenship in 2011.

[7] In Wen-chin Chang's account, "[t]he primary proportion of the Yunnanese migrants in Burma today are descendants of refugees fleeing Yunnan after the Chinese Communist Party took over China" ("Poverty" 52). Often in relation to the KMT forces operating in the border area between Burma and Thailand against the Chinese Communist Party, this specific Burmese Chinese group has had strong

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years, he had lived under poverty, ethnocentrism, and authoritarianism in Burma, a country where the local film industry was marked by low-quality/low-budget production, Burman-centered themes, and state censorship that "[stifled] creativity and [rejected] anything not considered 'traditional Burmese culture'" (Hudson).[8] Under such hardship, it is unsurprising that Midi Z was pushed "to leave the country at 16 in search of a better education and future in Taiwan" in 1998, according to Wen-chin Chang ("Poverty" 44). It was only after his college education that he began to develop a critical consciousness with his short thesis film *Paloma Blanca* (2006), which was successfully screened at various international film festivals.[9] Later on, he also enrolled in the acclaimed Golden Horse Film Academy, a short-term film school inaugurated by the film festival of the same name and led by Hou Hsiao-hsien. Following Hou's suggestion that "an individual's life experiences can make an impact on the audiences" (qtd. in Zhao, *Unification* 224), Midi Z produced a more

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historical ties to Taiwan, as the KMT later retreated to and reestablished itself on the island. The historical formation of this ethnic group is further discussed in the subsequent chapters.

[8] Even though Burmese cinema has enjoyed a "nine-decade history of motion picture production" (Ferguson 23), the nationalization of the industry, the censorship imposed by the Motion Picture Censor Board, and the low quality and budget for productions have all led to its downfall. Not only is there no "significant market for [Burmese] films outside the country" (Hamilton 270), but "a steep decline in cinema attendance" (Yeni) is also apparent in Burma's domestic market. Furthermore, even after general media censorship in Burma has been abolished in 2012 after its democratic reforms, the Motion Picture Censor Board still exists. The famed actress Michelle Yeoh was notably deported from Burma for portraying Aung San Suu Kyi in Luc Besson's *The Lady* (2011), while another film *Twilight Over Burma* (2015) was also forbidden to be screened at Yangon's Human Rights Human Dignity International Film Festival in 2016, as the government feared its focus on the ethnic minority Shan would cause controversy. Even Midi Z's *The Road to Mandalay*, invited to be screened in Yangon in 2016 at the Memory! International Film Heritage Festival, was partly cut by the Censor Board (most notably, an ending scene where blood was splashed onto an image of Buddha was deleted). For the censorship on film and other media in Burma, see Chan; Larkin; and Brooten.

[9] Successfully screened at the Busan International Film Festival among other venues, *Paloma Blanca* (meaning "white dove") appears to be a critique of Taiwan's capitalistic craze over the cruel tradition of pigeon racing. While its topic is not unfamiliar in the "ecodocumentary" tradition in Taiwan in which Chiu identifies the emergence of "non-anthropocentric environmental discourse" (15), the short film is unique in that it does not merely present animal rights issues in a directly realistic manner; instead, it blurs the boundary between documentary and fictional film in the form of a mockumentary by casting hundreds of women dressed in white as anthropomorphic pigeons, while inserting supposedly authoritative materials like maps, mock interviews, and a pseudo-Westernized voiceover with accented English to create a façade of traditional documentary. With the mockumentary form and the anthropomorphic performance, the film presents the fatal journey for the pigeons as a metaphor for the precarity faced by transnational lower-class migrants, echoing the fates of Burmese Chinese migrant workers represented in Midi Z's later films.

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self-reflexive short film *Huasin Incident* (2009) that looks at the internal conflict between two groups of Burmese Chinese migrants in Taiwan.[10] The focus on Burmese Chinese migrants' ambivalent identity formation eventually drove Midi Z to follow their complex migratory routes across different sites in Asia and produce video works in a variety of forms that include short films, documentaries, video installations, and feature films such as those in the Homecoming Trilogy. Similar to many directors of Taiwan New Cinema, Midi Z has become a prominent player in the international film festival circuit, which in turn resulted in his recognition in Taiwan.[11]

At first glance, it seems legitimate to read the trajectory of Midi Z's successful migration and career development as a form of linear, upward process, as many in Taiwan have attempted to do so whether from a Sinocentric, liberal, or multicultural viewpoint. For instance, typically interpellated as a *huaqiao* (華僑, literally Chinese sojourner) or a *qiaosheng* (僑生, Chinese sojourner student) by the mainstream media in Taiwan, Midi Z is often categorized under an imaginative umbrella of "Overseas Chinese" (*haiwaihuaren* 海外華人) who are presumed to be eager to return to their motherland Taiwan, even when they have never set foot on the island.[12] This

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[10] The self-reflexive theme of Burmese Chinese migrants in Taiwan is repeated in Midi Z's other short films such as *A Home-Letter* (2008), *The Man from Hometown* (2009), and *Diary at Construction Site* (2010), as well as his first feature film *Return to Burma*. Hou's suggestion of self-reflexivity should not come as a surprise, as Yip points out that Taiwan New Cinema was "widely considered to be a direct heir to the *hsiang-t'u* [鄉土] literary movement" in the 1970s, a movement that encouraged the New Cinema directors such as Hou to deal with "the lived experiences of the native Taiwanese people" (60) or the "native consciousness" (*bentuyishi* 本土意識) (62).

[11] Chronologically speaking, Midi Z's path to his "recognition" in Taiwan was achieved only after his emergence in the international film circuit, a process similar to what Shih calls "technologies of recognition" when she talks about the selective logic in the formation of "world literature"; see Shih "Global." Similarly, Tweedie also discusses international film festivals as "one of the mechanisms through which institutions transform, cement, or even elevate their status in the global cultural economy" (23-24). The festivals at which Midi Z acquired such cultural capital include the Busan International Film Festival, International Film Festival Rotterdam, Edinburg International Film Festival, Berlin International Film Festival, and Venice International Film Festival. For a more complete list of Midi Z's filmography and the awards and nominations he has received, see Appendix.

[12] Pham defines the ideological presumption behind the usage of *huaqiao* as one that assumes the existence of "homelandness" (*zuguoxing* 祖國性), a term that points to the identification of a transnational group of people with one ethnic identity and one state (139; 145). However, as Ang notes, the term *huaqiao* is not only problematic as it falsely implies "the unity of Overseas Chinese communities as one people and their unbroken ties with the Chinese homeland" (*On Not Speaking* 81),

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prevalent Sinocentric designation of Taiwan as Midi Z's and other ethnic Chinese's cultural homeland is further strengthened by the discursive construction of Taiwan as a liberal state, whose "freedom and democracy" allegedly "[motivated Midi Z] to pursue his goals in literary creation and making movies" according to Wen-chin Chang ("Poverty" 56).[13] What's more, this purported freedom to pursue one's dream and climb the social ladder is then portrayed as a key factor in Taiwan's multiculturalism, as many people have attributed Midi Z's achievements in telling rare stories of the Burmese Chinese minority (including his own life narrative) to Taiwan's tolerance of other ethnic groups.[14] Apparently, all the above-mentioned

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but also dangerous as its "ideological China-centredness and obsession with Chineseness [help] fuel anti-Chinese suspicion and discrimination in foreign lands" (82). Such Sinocentric and nationalistic presumption characterizes both popular imaginations and official records of Midi Z's life. For instance, the National Immigration Agency in Taiwan calls Midi Z "a *huaqiao* director" ("Burmese *Huaqiao*"), while the Overseas Community Affairs Council in Taiwan uses the title "*qiaosheng* director," referring to his status as an "Overseas Chinese" (a term that is also ideologically designated to establish unity between the state and the ethnic Chinese overseas) student when he arrived in Taiwan ("*Qiaosheng* Director"). Ang's warning certainly rings true in Burma, where anti-Chinese sentiment has pushed out many Burmese Chinese, a historical phenomenon that has had a significant impact on Midi Z's life. He recalls vividly that "because Burma is anti-Chinese, schools are not allowed to teach Chinese, and as a Han Chinese, I was only able to secretly study the language" (qtd. in Weng). For more on anti-Chinese sentiment, especially the 1967 riot in Burma, see Fan.

[13] The historical construction of Taiwan as a liberal homeland for all "Overseas Chinese" was in fact in accordance with the United States' advocacy of freedom against authoritarian communism during the Cold War period. As Pham points out, "in combination with the U.S.'s international hegemony and liberal pluralism . . . the U.S. also made use of Taiwan's Overseas Chinese policy in Southeast Asia to influence Southeast Asian Chinese's political attitudes" (163). Calling this construction "Cold War liberalism," Pham names the Entrance Exam for Overseas Chinese Students that was only made possible by the U.S. Aid to Taiwan (*meiyuan* 美援) as an example (164-66), a recruitment test that Midi Z took as he recalls that "I came here because of the Taiwanese government student recruitment test; I felt like I won the lottery at the time" (qtd. in "Acceptance"). This recruitment system that distributes the chance to a selected few to migrate to a wealthier country resembles what Nguyen calls the "gift of freedom," which in her account points to the chance to seek sanctuary granted to Vietnamese refugees by the U.S., which was actually responsible for their refugee status in the first place. Calling this benevolence "liberalism's [innovation] of empire" (2), Nguyen reminds us that freedom, distributed as a gift, can be as problematic and double-sided as Jacques Derrida's elaboration on the concept of the gift, especially when we consider that it is not simply given away, but also designates what Michel Foucault calls a "relation between governors and governed" (qtd. in M. Nguyen 6) that binds those who are rescued through a debt to the rescuer.

[14] According to a report done by Zhao-lun Jiang, for instance, Midi Z's success is credited to the "accommodating and embracing power" of Taiwan. While many have tried to understand the multicultural diversity in Taiwanese cinema today as a result of Taiwan's openness, it is perhaps ironic that, in reality, Burmese Chinese migrants often perform as ethnic Burmese/Bamar in Taiwan at least in part because of the racism they experienced there. As Hsin-chun Tasaw Lu points out, "many local Taiwanese treat the [Burmese Chinese] returners as social and financial inferiors, and as Others," which "shattered the Burmese Chinese dream of embracing their home, underscoring the illusory nature of the move back to their motherland. In response, they have cultivated a collective Burmese identity that I call 'counter-nostalgia'" (44), namely the transformation of the nostalgia for a

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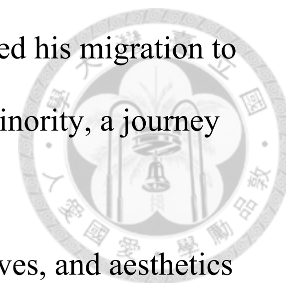

mainstream discourses on Midi Z's life and career have characterized his migration to Taiwan as a linear process towards becoming a successful ethnic minority, a journey claimed to be aided by the host country's generosity and openness.

If we take a closer look at the production backgrounds, narratives, and aesthetics of Midi Z's films, however, the linear imagination of a successful migration to Taiwan is interrupted and complicated by various counter-examples. To begin with, unlike many contemporary Taiwanese filmmakers of the so-called "post-Taiwan New Cinema" (*hou—xindianyin* 後—新電影) that seek to affirm Taiwanese subjectivities by presenting local stories set in Taiwan with dialogues in Taiwanese Hokkien (*taiyu* 台語 or *minnanyu* 閩南語), Midi Z has chosen to "return to Burma" (as the title of his debut feature film suggests) to shoot films about Burmese Chinese migrants who mix Southwestern Mandarin (*xinanguanhua* 西南官話) with Burmese, Thai, and other languages.[15] The decision serves as a rare oddity in the Taiwanese film industry, as it not only shifts our attention from the host country to the home country of the Burmese Chinese migrants, but also challenges Taiwan's Ministry of Culture's nationalistic regulation that decrees the applicants of its "domestic feature film assistance grant" (*fudaojin* 輔導金) "should not be entirely shot overseas" ("Republic of China").[16] What's more, even though Midi Z has in many public occasions

Sinocentric Chineseness to an appreciation for their lives and cultures back in Burma, which could also mark out their uniqueness in Taiwan and attracts more attention from mainstream society.

[15] It is often argued that the commercial success of Wei Te-sheng's *Cape No. 7* (2008) kicked off the new trend of "post-Taiwan New Cinema" in Taiwan, as it became the highest grossing Taiwanese domestic film produced after a long decline of domestic productions. As Lim observes, "*Cape No. 7* may be said to have led the way in shifting the self-image of Taiwan cinema from the auteur-centered, film-festival-participating, domestic-audience-alienating TNC [Taiwan New Cinema] period of the 1980s and 1990s, to a post-TNC period in the new millennium marked by a more popular mode of filmmaking that aims to appeal to a wider audience" ("Taiwan" 158). To explain the film's popularity, Ivy I-chu Chang treats *Cape* as an imagined national allegory that bespeaks a grassroots "Taiwaneseness" suppressed in the past, while Chiu and Liao believes post-Taiwan New Cinema in general bring forward "important issues in Taiwanese history and society. . . in combination with Hollywood cinematic techniques" (11).

[16] As Midi Z's film editor Lin Sheng-wen (林聖文) points out, "since [Midi Z] shoots his films overseas, [he] cannot obtain film assistance grant from the government" (qtd. in Sun). The grant, known as *fudaojin*, has been effective in assisting many successful Taiwanese directors from Hou

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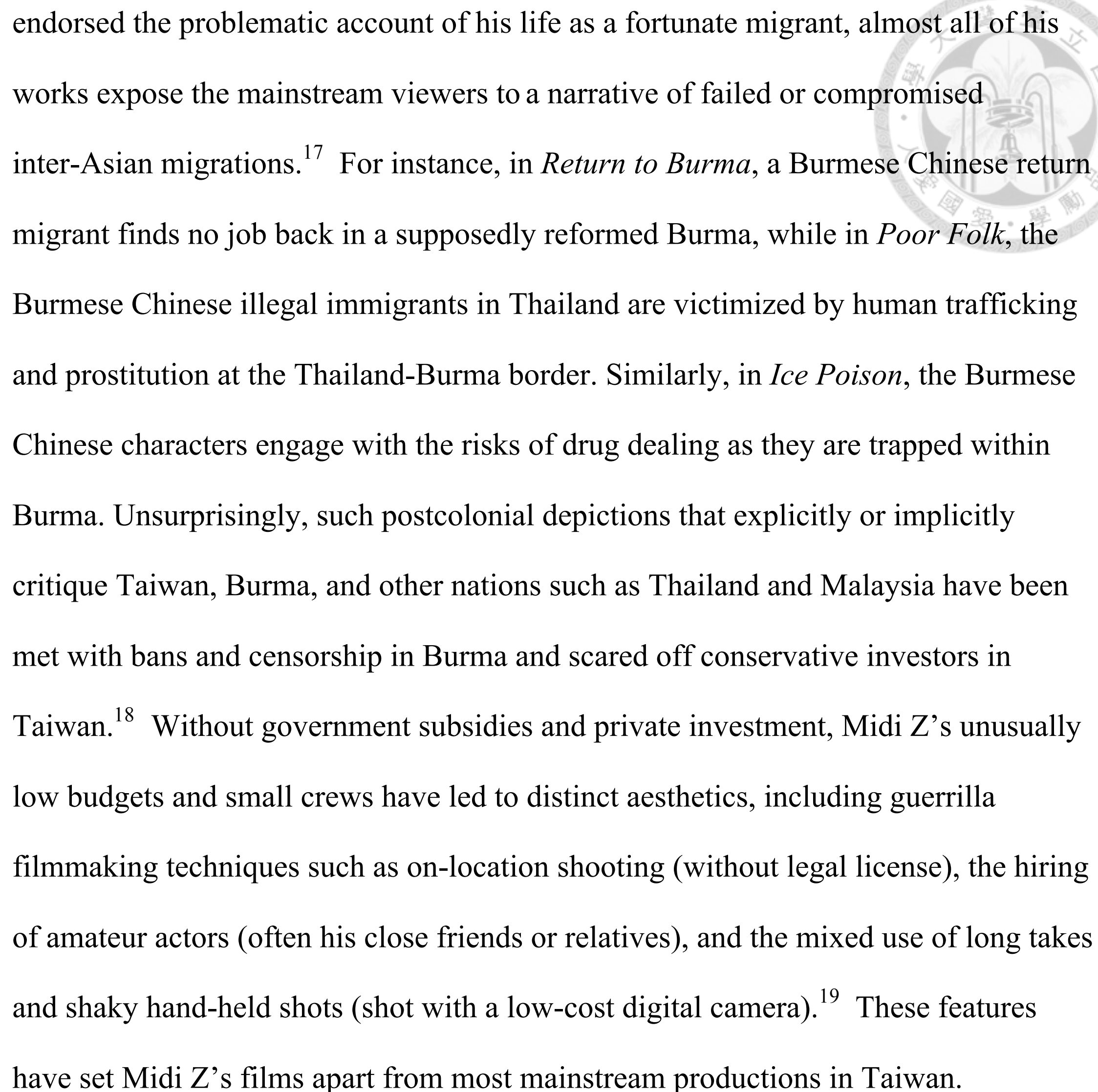

endorsed the problematic account of his life as a fortunate migrant, almost all of his works expose the mainstream viewers to a narrative of failed or compromised inter-Asian migrations.[17] For instance, in *Return to Burma*, a Burmese Chinese return migrant finds no job back in a supposedly reformed Burma, while in *Poor Folk*, the Burmese Chinese illegal immigrants in Thailand are victimized by human trafficking and prostitution at the Thailand-Burma border. Similarly, in *Ice Poison*, the Burmese Chinese characters engage with the risks of drug dealing as they are trapped within Burma. Unsurprisingly, such postcolonial depictions that explicitly or implicitly critique Taiwan, Burma, and other nations such as Thailand and Malaysia have been met with bans and censorship in Burma and scared off conservative investors in Taiwan.[18] Without government subsidies and private investment, Midi Z's unusually low budgets and small crews have led to distinct aesthetics, including guerrilla filmmaking techniques such as on-location shooting (without legal license), the hiring of amateur actors (often his close friends or relatives), and the mixed use of long takes and shaky hand-held shots (shot with a low-cost digital camera).[19] These features have set Midi Z's films apart from most mainstream productions in Taiwan.

Hsiao-hsien to Tsai Ming-liang. Even though there are indeed references to Taiwan in his feature films, Midi Z is still barred from the grant, as he mostly shot his films in Burma and Thailand.

[17] One sharp contrast between Midi Z's works and his life lies in the experience of applying for a Taiwanese ID card. Even though Midi Z successfully obtained an ID card in 2011 (Zhao, *Unification* 30), he constantly presents the difficulty of the application process in his films, most notably through the female protagonist Sun-mei in *Poor Folk* who cries for almost three minutes in a long take following the rejection of her application.

[18] Recounting the experience of directing *Return to Burma*, Midi Z remembers that "what the [investors] are doubtful about is whether the Taiwanese audiences would want to watch a film about 'foreign laborers' [*waijilaogong* 外籍勞工]" (*Unification* 22), a doubt that led to their refusal to fund the film. This discrimination resembles the problem that the Malaysian Chinese director Ho Wi Ding's *Pinoy Sunday* met when it was rejected for screening in almost every Taiwanese film theater. Director Ho recounts that the owners of the theaters feared "there will be foreign laborers all over the theater." See Wi Ding Ho for this account.

[19] As Wan-Jui Wang rightly points out, "stylistically, Midi Z does not continue the production of genre film after Wei Te-sheng's *Cape No.7*. . . . Midi Z's emergence is [thus] different from the tendency of genre films from directors like Wei Te-sheng, Niu Chen-zer, and Tsai Yueh-hsun in the post-Taiwan New Cinema period" (151). Instead of following the revival of mainstream commercial film in Taiwan, Midi Z's films are more in line with his contemporary Southeast Asian filmmakers, whose independent films are "empowered by the easy and cheap access to digital video" (Baumgärtel 2). Like Midi Z, these rising directors are independent of government censorship, mainstream studios, and traditional

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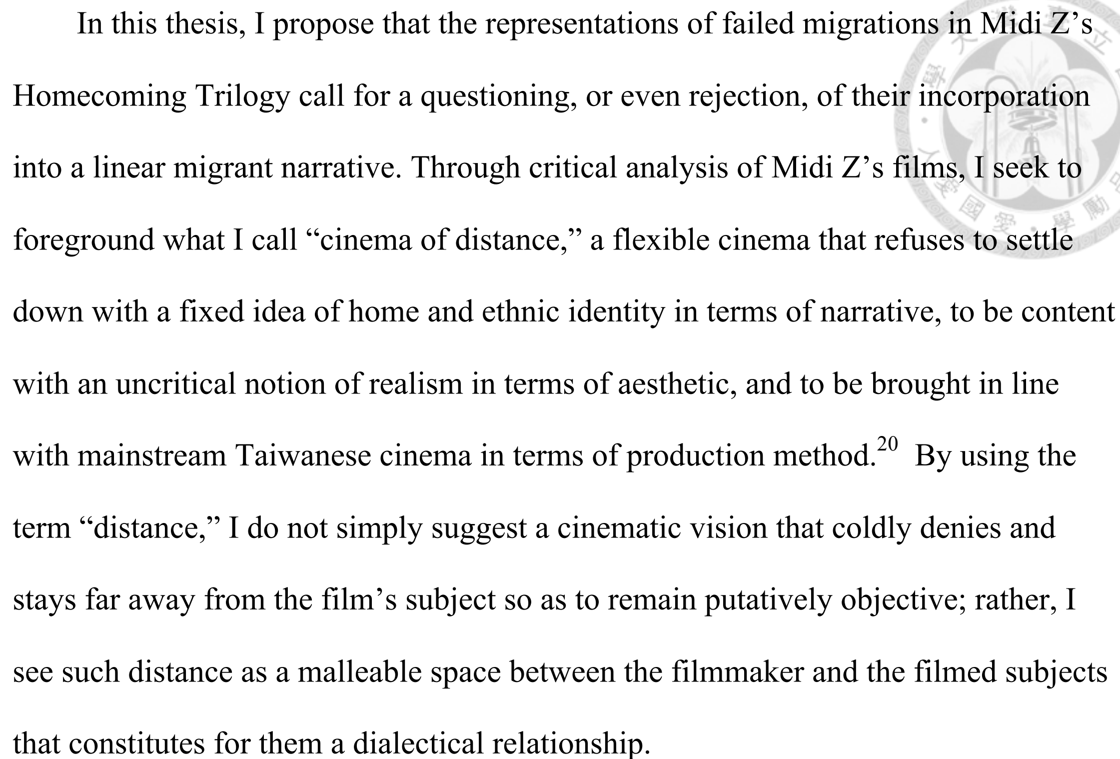

In this thesis, I propose that the representations of failed migrations in Midi Z's Homecoming Trilogy call for a questioning, or even rejection, of their incorporation into a linear migrant narrative. Through critical analysis of Midi Z's films, I seek to foreground what I call "cinema of distance," a flexible cinema that refuses to settle down with a fixed idea of home and ethnic identity in terms of narrative, to be content with an uncritical notion of realism in terms of aesthetic, and to be brought in line with mainstream Taiwanese cinema in terms of production method.[20] By using the term "distance," I do not simply suggest a cinematic vision that coldly denies and stays far away from the film's subject so as to remain putatively objective; rather, I see such distance as a malleable space between the filmmaker and the filmed subjects that constitutes for them a dialectical relationship.

My use of the term "distance" is inspired by the title of Midi Z's biography *Unification, Separation, Ice Poison* (*Ju, Li, Bingdu* 聚。離。冰毒) as translated by Wen-chin Chang, the first two Chinese characters of which come together as a homophonic pun for the Chinese translation of the term "distance" (距離 *juli*). With a link between "unification and separation" and "distance," the latter no longer needs to be understood solely as an immutable space that separates migrants from the homeland they left behind. Rather, its spatial quality becomes flexible as it is defined simultaneously by the dialectical acts of unification and separation, by which migrants move back and forth between different locations and refuse to be pinned down at a specific site defined as an ultimate homeland. Indeed, it is arguable that such defiance of a linear perspective of migration is already deeply rooted in Midi Z's creative

filmmaking techniques, as Lent points out. For discussion of digital filmmaking, see Chapter Three. For more on Southeast Asian independent cinema, see Baumgärtel; Lent; Ingawanji and McKay.

[20] The reason for not including Midi Z's fourth feature film *The Road to Mandalay* (2016) in the discussion of a cinema of distance in this thesis is that while the films in Homecoming Trilogy were produced with similarly low budget, *The Road to Mandalay* enjoyed a much higher budget and featured a more mainstream plot that seeks to attract the general audiences in Taiwan.

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vision.[21] Not only does he present stories of interrelated migration patterns that mostly end up in the loss of a secure home, including the return migration back to Burma (*Return to Burma*), international migration across the border of Thailand and Burma (*Poor Folk*), and intranational migration within Burma (*Ice Poison*), but he also links this doubt of an ultimate homeland to his personal history:

> When I was shooting these three films and thought of China, Burma and Taiwan and their relationships with my family and myself, I would eventually realize that geographical location does not mean much, and the act of drifting around is only intended for survival. And in my films, the universal core value . . . is more or less "survival." (Zhao, *Unification* 30)

Despite being a migrant who obtained Taiwanese citizenship in 2011 and "developed a certain level of affection for Taiwan" (Zhao, *Unification* 20), Midi Z obviously still holds strong emotional ties to Burma, especially as his family remains in the country. Eventually, he has come to realize that the term "homeland" does not necessarily denote a single and fixed "geographical location."[22]

Aside from treating the idea of "distance" as a challenge against a fixed imagination of linear migration and homeland, I also assert that it can be understood as a cinematic concept that defies a simple link between Midi Z's films and cinematic realism, or what Mary Ann Doane calls "the lure of the indexical" (129) of the

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[21] It is helpful to return to Midi Z's *Huasin Incident* here. In this short film, Midi Z makes clear to the audiences that it is precisely the differences in the imaginations of a homeland that result in the clash between two groups of Burmese Chinese migrants in Taiwan. For the younger Burmese Chinese characters who come to Taiwan to seek success, Taiwan is an ideal destination where they wish to belong. Ironically, for a character of an older generation of Burmese Chinese in Taiwan, he is eager to go back to Burma. Not sympathizing with this nostalgia, the young people declare: "I don't care if he misses his home or not," before they violently clash with him. Apparently, even within what is perceived to be a homogeneous ethnic community, the divergent reasons for migration can result in conflicting interpretations of an imagined "homeland," causing disagreements and ruptures.

[22] Likewise, Leslie Hao-shan Lee sees Tsai Ming-liang as a director who "maintains a critical distance towards the issues of ethno-nationality and . . . both in Taiwan and Malaysia" (3), while Hee also identifies a distance towards Malaysia and Chineseness in Tsai's and other Malaysian Chinese films.

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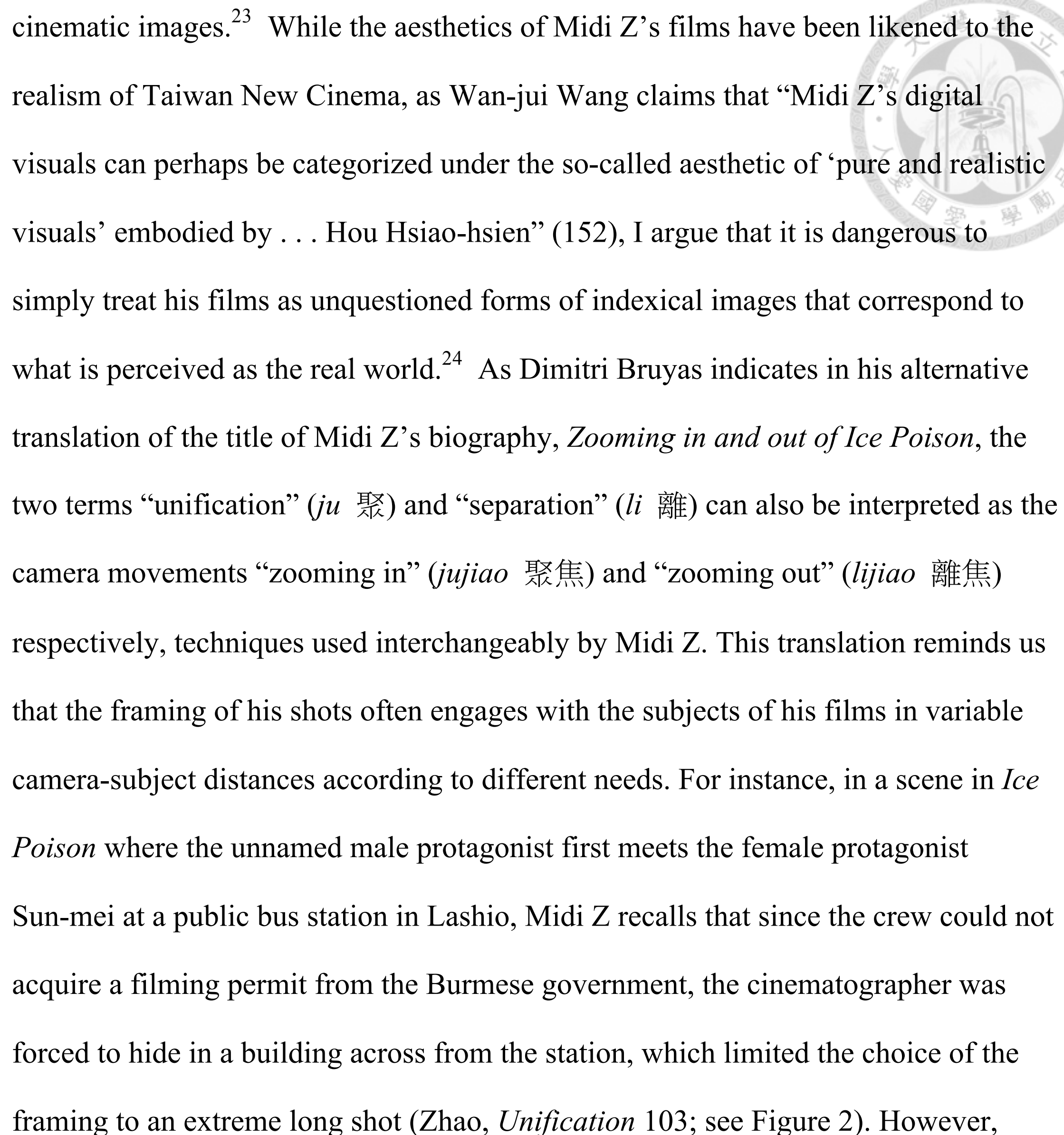

cinematic images.[23] While the aesthetics of Midi Z's films have been likened to the realism of Taiwan New Cinema, as Wan-jui Wang claims that "Midi Z's digital visuals can perhaps be categorized under the so-called aesthetic of 'pure and realistic visuals' embodied by . . . Hou Hsiao-hsien" (152), I argue that it is dangerous to simply treat his films as unquestioned forms of indexical images that correspond to what is perceived as the real world.[24] As Dimitri Bruyas indicates in his alternative translation of the title of Midi Z's biography, *Zooming in and out of Ice Poison*, the two terms "unification" (*ju* 聚) and "separation" (*li* 離) can also be interpreted as the camera movements "zooming in" (*jujiao* 聚焦) and "zooming out" (*lijiao* 離焦) respectively, techniques used interchangeably by Midi Z. This translation reminds us that the framing of his shots often engages with the subjects of his films in variable camera-subject distances according to different needs. For instance, in a scene in *Ice Poison* where the unnamed male protagonist first meets the female protagonist Sun-mei at a public bus station in Lashio, Midi Z recalls that since the crew could not acquire a filming permit from the Burmese government, the cinematographer was forced to hide in a building across from the station, which limited the choice of the framing to an extreme long shot (Zhao, *Unification* 103; see Figure 2). However,

[23] In discussing the indexical, Doane points out how "the illusion of the real" (132) has been brought about by the belief in the "indexicality [of cinema] as the guarantee of a privileged relation to the real, to referentiality, and to materiality" (132). To challenge (but not entirely deny) "the specificity and singularity associated with the index" (133), Doane then introduces how the iconic and the symbolic are constantly mixed with the indexical, arguing that "the 'real' referenced by the index is not the 'real' of realism, which purports to give the spectator knowledge of the world" (135).

[24] The rare documentation of the lower-class ethnic Chinese in Burma in Midi Z's films has attracted critics to highlight the "realism" employed in the films: for instance, La Frances Hui, the film curator of Asia Society and the Museum of Modern Art, suggests that "[w]ith a deep personal understanding of these individuals' circumstances, [Midi] Z presents life stripped of drama and sentimentality; his realism is honest, nonjudgmental, and filled with compassion" (qtd. in Zhao, "Interview"). Meanwhile, anthropologists such as Wen-chin Chang argue that Midi Z's works are "grounded in the trend of social realism" ("Poverty" 61), while another anthropologist A-Po claims that "Midi Z's realism illustrates a real Burma that travelers do not see. . . . That's why many people are reminded of Hou Hsiao-hsien of the Taiwan New Cinema movement." Kuipers, a film critic at *Variety*, even goes as far to claim that Midi Z is now placed "in the top rank of Asian social realists," presumably referring to other "realist" filmmakers like Jia Zhangke and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, as he points out that Midi Z borrowed film editor Matthieu Laclau and production designer Akekarat Homlaor from Jia and Apichatpong respectively in the making of his fourth feature film, *The Road to Mandalay*.

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when the narrative takes place in less-monitored spaces, Midi Z tended to use medium shots to approach the characters and eclipse details of landscapes in the background. Evidently, the distance between the director and the filmed subjects is contingent upon filming conditions and artistic purposes. In light of this, I argue in this thesis that this flexible filming method cannot be reduced to a singular form of realism.[25]

As I have explained, this thesis aims to treat Midi Z as a filmmaker who is able to maintain a critical and flexible distance from a limited narrative of a fixed homeland and linear migration, an uncritical aesthetic of realism, and a mainstream production method. More importantly, however, I also treat the term "distance" as a method to study Midi Z's films, partly inspired by the analytical frame that Franco Moretti calls "distant reading," by which "distance . . . is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems" (57).[26] By invoking distant reading, I do not intend to merely identify the specific narratives and aesthetic "devices" in Midi Z's films; rather, I seek to follow Moretti's attempt to relate different works on a literary map by linking Midi Z's distinctive uses of film sound, performance, and camera movement to similar film movements around the world. Such comparative

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[25] I do not suggest that the aesthetics of Hou and other New Cinema directors should be understood as purely realistic. Unlike Wan-jui Wang or other critics' more simplistic views of cinematic realism, Daw-ming Lee complicates our understanding of the aesthetics of Taiwan New Cinema by indicating that "[t]he 'distancing' (or 'engaging,' depending on different points of view) effect of such a mode of expression [can create] obstacles for audiences" (348). In high contrast to Wan-jui Wang's view that for "realist directors [of Taiwan New Cinema] . . . their common goal is to reject post-production and continue to strengthen immediacy" (155), Daw-ming Lee reveals that according to the various needs of different directors, the "realism" on the screen can be either distancing or engaging for the audiences, instead of being always immediately accessible and understandable.

[26] I am aware of the debate over the idea of "world literature" that Moretti stirs up with his proposal of "distant reading," a rejection of the traditional close reading/textual analysis adopted in academia and an embrace of computational analysis based on data aggregation that allows us to be in touch with a wider variety of materials. While this thesis does not turn away from close reading of cultural texts, it nevertheless appreciates Moretti's aim to portray a bigger literary map. Similarly, Andrew has questioned Moretti's "distant reading" not by rejecting his systemic effort, but by asking "[w]hy not examine the film as map—cognitive map—while placing the film *on* the map?" (24), a question that anticipates both a more systemic mapping of world cinema as well as close reading of individual films.

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mapping, I believe, encourages us as academics to not easily categorize Midi Z under the title "Taiwanese" simply because he is professionally based in Taiwan.

In the following section, in order to better situate my analysis of Midi Z's films in relation to broader academic concerns, I provide a brief review of recent developments in relevant academic fields, namely postcolonial studies and Sinophone studies. Furthermore, I also point out the new boundaries or borders set up by these fields, and consider how Midi Z's films assist us in maintaining a cautious distance toward these restrictions, if not challenging and revising them.

Literature Review: Reimagining Borders and Communities

A. Postcolonial Studies: Challenges against Borders

While postcolonial studies as a critical field has introduced many key concepts and analytical terms for scholars to examine cultures that have been or are still being colonized by hegemonic powers, including terms such as "colonial unconscious" or "hybridity" that appear in this thesis, there have been a growing number of scholars voicing their concerns about the field's potential blind spots, especially its inability to address specific issues in long-neglected regions such as Southeast Asia. For instance, Ansuman Mondal reminds us that while many postcolonial scholars have already approached South Asian topics in relation to the influences of British colonial rule, certain Southeast Asian countries such as Burma, which was also a former British colony whose ethnic strife and civil wars were the legacies of the British Empire's deliberate "divide and rule" policies, have been overlooked especially as Burma's "isolationism has largely rendered it somewhat marginal to postcolonial concerns notwithstanding its role as a *cause célèbre*" (145-46).[27]

[27] Harootunian has attributed this imbalanced attention in postcolonial studies to English departments in Anglo-America, as he points out that not only does "the migration of [the critique of] colonial discourse to English studies [mean] that its emphasis would be textual, semiotic, and generic"; this

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The relative lack of attention to the vast region known as "Southeast Asia" where disparate colonial and imperial powers have interacted and conflicted with each other has been noted by scholars based in Asia as well. These scholars have begun to formulate their own critical positions designed to examine local postcolonial issues. For example, Singaporean scholar Beng Huat Chua has called for the recognition of Southeast Asia within the field of postcolonial studies, especially as "the other empires" that operated in the region (such as the Japanese Empire) did not share the same logic with Euro-American empires, a difference that requires historical studies of specific empires that disrupt Eurocentric postcolonial theories ("Southeast Asia" 238).[28] In another context, Chua discusses a method that he calls "inter-referencing Southeast Asia," contending that:

> The shared history of postcolonial nationhood . . . places Southeast Asian countries on the same historical timeline, rendering inter-referencing between them an exercise within a temporally coeval and historically horizontal frame, in contrast to the temporally distant and historically hierarchical frame of comparing Asia to Euro-America. ("Inter-referencing" 279)

In other words, Chua asks scholars of postcolonial studies to stop uncritically borrowing ill-fitting postcolonial theories developed in Euro-American academic contexts to understand Southeast Asian postcolonial conditions; instead, scholars

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migration to English studies also "explains why so much of postcolonial discourse has instantiated South Asia, especially Bengal, rather than other parts of the [British] Empire or indeed the empires of other nations" ("Postcoloniality's" 167). Indeed, as many Southeast Asian nations have not adopted English among their official languages, it is understandable that they receive less attention than the English-speaking South Asian region in the field of postcolonial studies in Anglo-American context.

[28] Similarly, Bernards also contends that "[t]he task of the postcolonial critic is not only to 'provincialize' the West . . . but also to disaggregate Asia/the Orient as a singularly colonized object of such imperialism" ("Beyond" 312). In other words, Bernards believes that Asia is not a uniform region governed by Western imperialism; rather, the regions is filled with diverse players, some of whom can also be considered imperial powers.

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should learn to compare and link issues in separate sites in Southeast Asia that share more similar socio-historical backgrounds.[29]

With a conceptually similar but spatially bigger scope, Taiwanese scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen advocates the establishment of inter-Asian cultural studies, an approach that not only challenges the dominant Eurocentric model in postcolonial studies, but also recognizes the correlations between Asian countries' colonial histories and structural positions with "multiply[ing] frames of reference in [Asian] subjectivity and worldview" (*Asia* 223). Similar to Chua's awareness of "the other empires," Chen's focus on inter-Asian connections leads him to provocatively ask his readers to recognize Taiwan as a newly-established "sub-empire" supported by the United States within the region, as he defines "sub-empire" as "a lower-level empire that is dependent on an empire at a higher level in the imperialist hierarchy" (18). Using the Go South policy initiated by Taiwan's former President Lee Teng-hui in 1993 as an example, Chen reveals how Southeast Asian laborers have been regulated and governed by this regional power. To break away from such hierarchical relations, Chen then goes further to demand what he calls "de-Cold War" and "deimperial" actions that resist the "Americanism" that is still influential in Asia, so that "[t]hrough imaginings of a new Asia and a new third world, diverse frames of reference [will] cross our horizon, multiply our perspectives, and enrich our subjectivity" (255).

Despite the immense value of Chua's and Chen's approaches to studying postcolonial issues in Asia, I argue that one of their vulnerabilities lies in their reluctance to link what they picture as postcolonial Asian subjectivities to other subjects beyond the region itself. As Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Hoskins helpfully

[29] I am aware that the region called "Southeast Asia" is also an imaginative construct instead of a coherent and self-enclosed entity, as Benedict Anderson argues that "post-war American anticommunist hegemony" (8) helped with the continuation of the artificial and colonial imagined boundary of "Southeast Asia." What is conceived as Southeast Asia is in fact "a region with no single dominant power, religion, or language" (Bowen 286), assembled together as an "imagined reality," as Benedict Anderson calls it (6).

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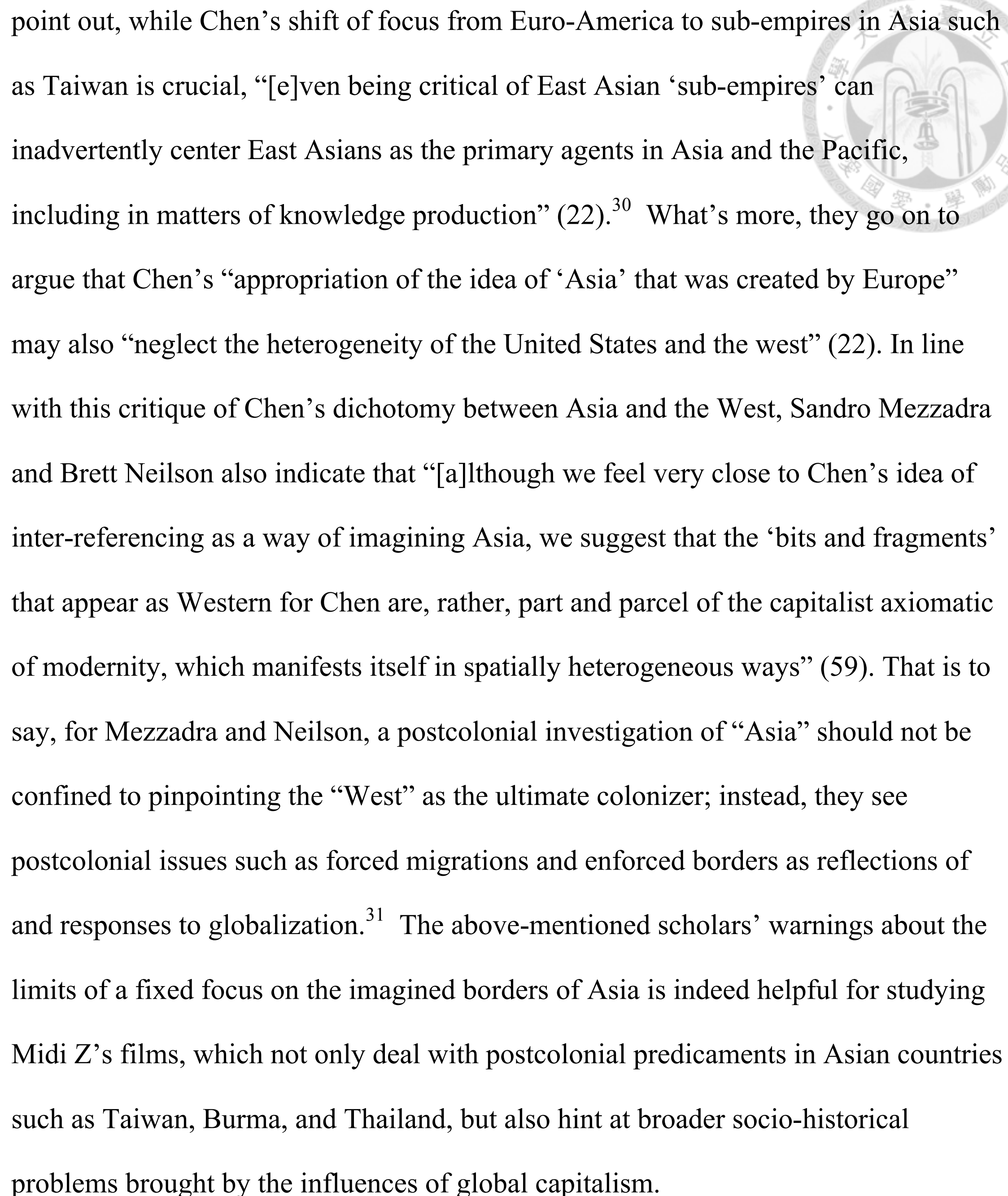

point out, while Chen's shift of focus from Euro-America to sub-empires in Asia such as Taiwan is crucial, "[e]ven being critical of East Asian 'sub-empires' can inadvertently center East Asians as the primary agents in Asia and the Pacific, including in matters of knowledge production" (22).[30] What's more, they go on to argue that Chen's "appropriation of the idea of 'Asia' that was created by Europe" may also "neglect the heterogeneity of the United States and the west" (22). In line with this critique of Chen's dichotomy between Asia and the West, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson also indicate that "[a]lthough we feel very close to Chen's idea of inter-referencing as a way of imagining Asia, we suggest that the 'bits and fragments' that appear as Western for Chen are, rather, part and parcel of the capitalist axiomatic of modernity, which manifests itself in spatially heterogeneous ways" (59). That is to say, for Mezzadra and Neilson, a postcolonial investigation of "Asia" should not be confined to pinpointing the "West" as the ultimate colonizer; instead, they see postcolonial issues such as forced migrations and enforced borders as reflections of and responses to globalization.[31] The above-mentioned scholars' warnings about the limits of a fixed focus on the imagined borders of Asia is indeed helpful for studying Midi Z's films, which not only deal with postcolonial predicaments in Asian countries such as Taiwan, Burma, and Thailand, but also hint at broader socio-historical problems brought by the influences of global capitalism.

[30] In an attempt to reconcile Asian American studies in the U.S. and Asian studies in Asia by questioning the perceived borders in both fields and advocating a new cross-boundary framework named "transpacific studies," Nguyen and Hoskins envision a broader critical scope and advocate transnational cooperation for scholars across the Pacific, cooperation that could enable the recognition and study of different migrations across the Pacific.

[31] The rationale behind Mezzadra and Neilson's challenge against Kuan-hsing Chen's idea of Asia comes from their research on the topic of the border, which defines it as "an epistemological device . . . at work whenever a distinction between subject and object is established" (16). That is to say, for Mezzadra and Neilson, a border signifies not only the geopolitical separation between communities, but also the production of knowledge that can categorize subjects/objects into different fields of knowledge. In light of this, Chen's inter-Asian project also risks setting up an epistemological border.

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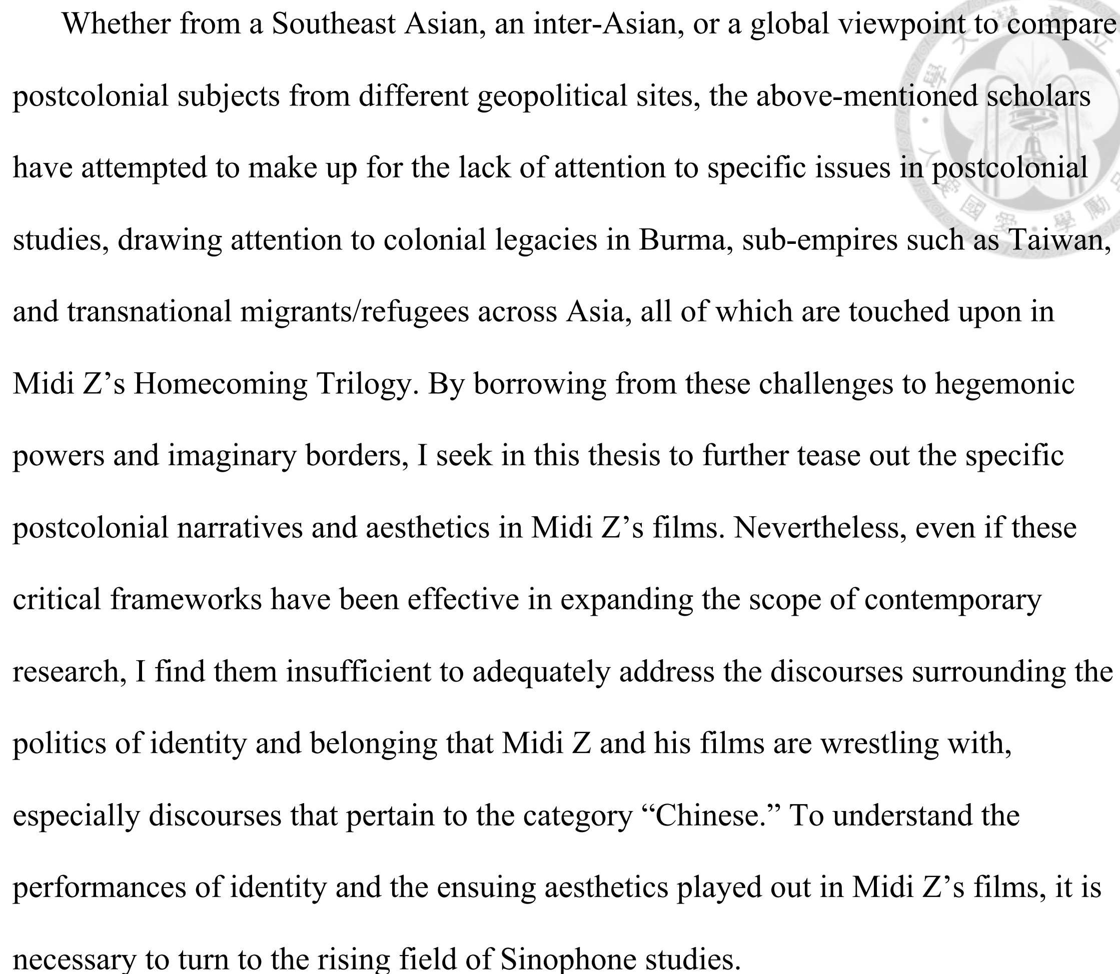

Whether from a Southeast Asian, an inter-Asian, or a global viewpoint to compare postcolonial subjects from different geopolitical sites, the above-mentioned scholars have attempted to make up for the lack of attention to specific issues in postcolonial studies, drawing attention to colonial legacies in Burma, sub-empires such as Taiwan, and transnational migrants/refugees across Asia, all of which are touched upon in Midi Z's Homecoming Trilogy. By borrowing from these challenges to hegemonic powers and imaginary borders, I seek in this thesis to further tease out the specific postcolonial narratives and aesthetics in Midi Z's films. Nevertheless, even if these critical frameworks have been effective in expanding the scope of contemporary research, I find them insufficient to adequately address the discourses surrounding the politics of identity and belonging that Midi Z and his films are wrestling with, especially discourses that pertain to the category "Chinese." To understand the performances of identity and the ensuing aesthetics played out in Midi Z's films, it is necessary to turn to the rising field of Sinophone studies.

B. Sinophone Studies: Reconfiguration of Communities

In an attempt to reach beyond Sinology, a traditional academic field that has at times uncritically bolstered what Rey Chow calls "the fantasy of an essentialized ethnicity, a standardized language, and a coercive equivalence between literary writing and Chineseness per se" (22), Andrea Bachner calls for future research "[to] take into consideration the hybridity at work in the category 'Chinese'" (215). Indeed, much like what Bachner suggests, the inherent heterogeneity of cultural cross-fertilization that is eclipsed by the problematic umbrella term "Chinese" requires more critical engagement. One such form of engagement has directed our attention to what Ien Ang calls "complicated entanglement," which implies "a softening of the boundaries between 'peoples'" ("Together-in-difference" 147).

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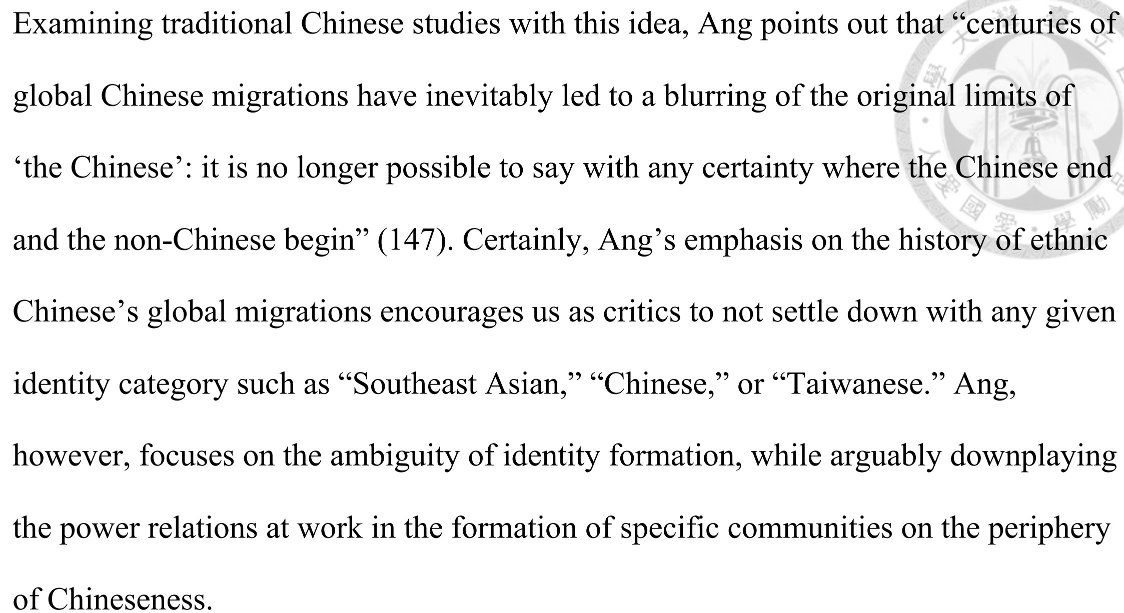

Examining traditional Chinese studies with this idea, Ang points out that "centuries of global Chinese migrations have inevitably led to a blurring of the original limits of 'the Chinese': it is no longer possible to say with any certainty where the Chinese end and the non-Chinese begin" (147). Certainly, Ang's emphasis on the history of ethnic Chinese's global migrations encourages us as critics to not settle down with any given identity category such as "Southeast Asian," "Chinese," or "Taiwanese." Ang, however, focuses on the ambiguity of identity formation, while arguably downplaying the power relations at work in the formation of specific communities on the periphery of Chineseness.

With this in mind, I would like to address critical ideas from the interdisciplinary field of Sinophone studies, which has attempted to revise Chinese studies by initiating what Shu-mei Shih calls "the study of Sinitic-language cultures on the margins of geopolitical nation-states and their hegemonic productions" ("Concept" 710).[32] With subtle nuance compared to Ang's emphasis on the ambivalence of traveling identities, Sinophone studies attempts to formulate a stronger critique against hegemonic Chineseness by paying closer attention to the local specificities of "a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness" (*Visuality* 4).[33] The concentration on the distinctive articulations of

[32] Shih's usage of words such as "hegemony" reminds us of the anti-hegemonic spirits raised in postcolonial studies. Interestingly, however, while Sinophone studies has often been related to the postcolonial concepts of Anglophone, Francophone, Japanophone and other literary studies, Shih warns against the direct linkage between postcolonial studies and Sinophone studies, as she claims that "[p]ostcolonial theory as we know it, particularly its critiques of orientalism, may prove irrelevant or even complicit when we consider how the positions of Chinese intellectuals critical of Western imperialism and orientalism easily slip into an unreflective nationalism, whose flip side may be a new imperialism" ("Concept" 709).

[33] While many scholars have attributed the establishment of Sinophone studies to Shih, including Yue and Khoo (3), Tee indicates that various theorists have also proposed similar concepts around the same period of time, and the contributions of scholars such as Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang to this field should not be neglected. Moreover, it is also a vibrant field with its own debates, as Shih's anti-imperial stance against Chineseness has led to some backlash, including Sheldon Lu's review of Shih's *Visuality* that critiques Shih as setting up another academic border by excluding "China," an entity formed of diverse groups of people, from the discussion. For a more detailed account of the responses that Sinophone studies, originating mainly in U.S. academia, has received in academic communities in Taiwan, China, Malaysia, and Singapore, see Tee.

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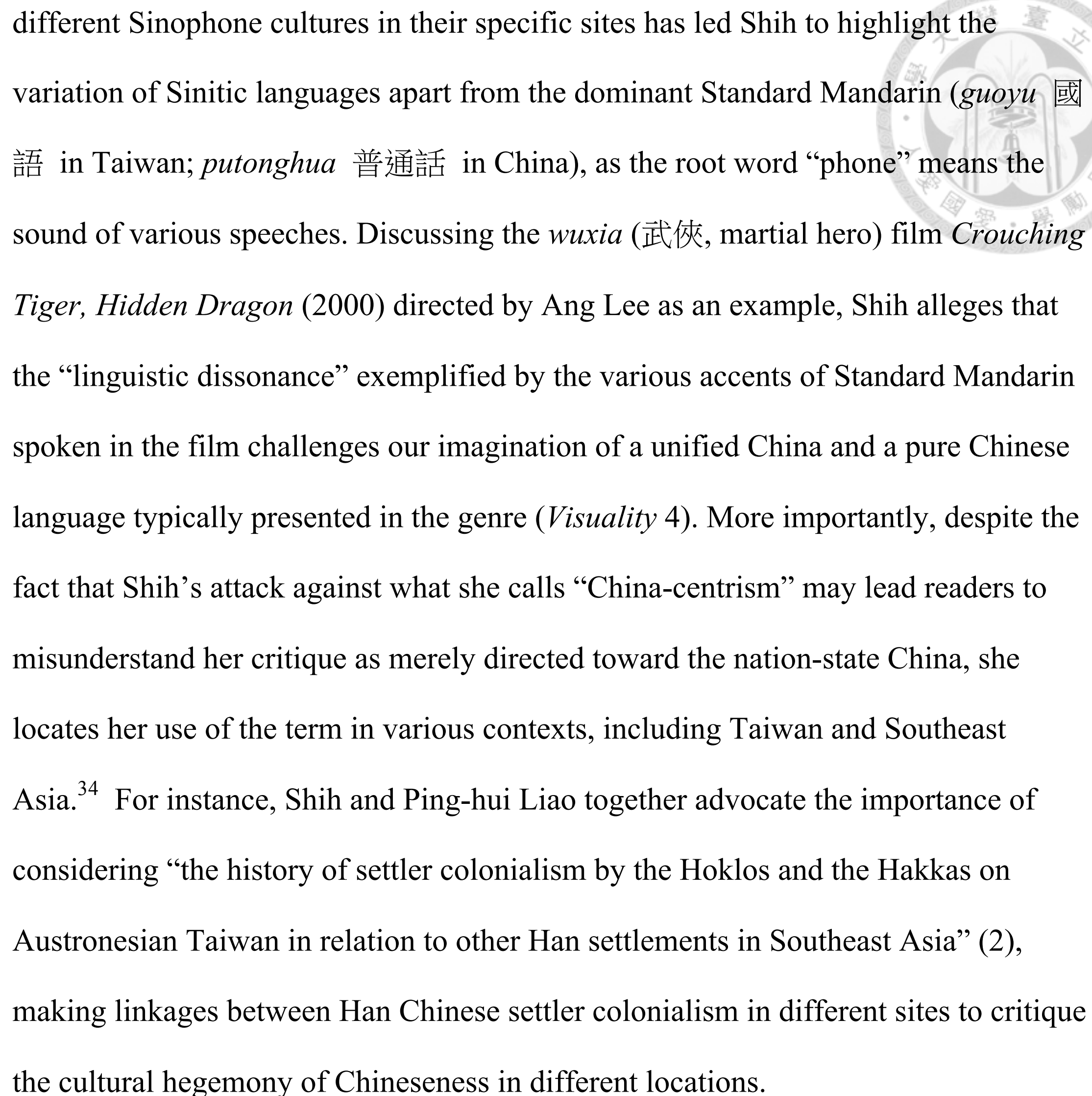

different Sinophone cultures in their specific sites has led Shih to highlight the variation of Sinitic languages apart from the dominant Standard Mandarin (*guoyu* 國語 in Taiwan; *putonghua* 普通話 in China), as the root word "phone" means the sound of various speeches. Discussing the *wuxia* (武俠, martial hero) film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) directed by Ang Lee as an example, Shih alleges that the "linguistic dissonance" exemplified by the various accents of Standard Mandarin spoken in the film challenges our imagination of a unified China and a pure Chinese language typically presented in the genre (*Visuality* 4). More importantly, despite the fact that Shih's attack against what she calls "China-centrism" may lead readers to misunderstand her critique as merely directed toward the nation-state China, she locates her use of the term in various contexts, including Taiwan and Southeast Asia.[34] For instance, Shih and Ping-hui Liao together advocate the importance of considering "the history of settler colonialism by the Hoklos and the Hakkas on Austronesian Taiwan in relation to other Han settlements in Southeast Asia" (2), making linkages between Han Chinese settler colonialism in different sites to critique the cultural hegemony of Chineseness in different locations.

Even though current scholarship developed in Sinophone studies mostly focuses on the study of literature, it is not surprising that the concept of Sinophone has also received attentions in the field of Chinese film studies. Already in *Visuality and Identity*, Shih claims that "the visual media through which the Sinophone is more

[34] For Shih, Sinophone communities can at least be found in "three interrelated historical processes," including "continental colonialism, settler colonialism, and immigration" ("Concept" 711). While continental colonialism refers to the historical expansions of Chinese empires on land to border areas such as the zone between Yunnan and Burma where "multilingual communities . . . resist or adapt to Han Chinese assimilation to different degrees" (713), settler colonialism points to the oppressions posed by Han Chinese against other ethnic groups in nations or regions beyond Mainland China, such as Taiwan or Singapore. The focus on immigration looks at Sinophone communities that migrate to regions or nations where they are minoritized. In this thesis, it seems that Midi Z's films highlight all three types of Sinophone communities, as challenges against the legacy of Chinese imperialism in Burmese Chinese communities in Burma, against Taiwan's Han settler colonialism, and a focus on minoritized Sinophone migrants have all been raised.

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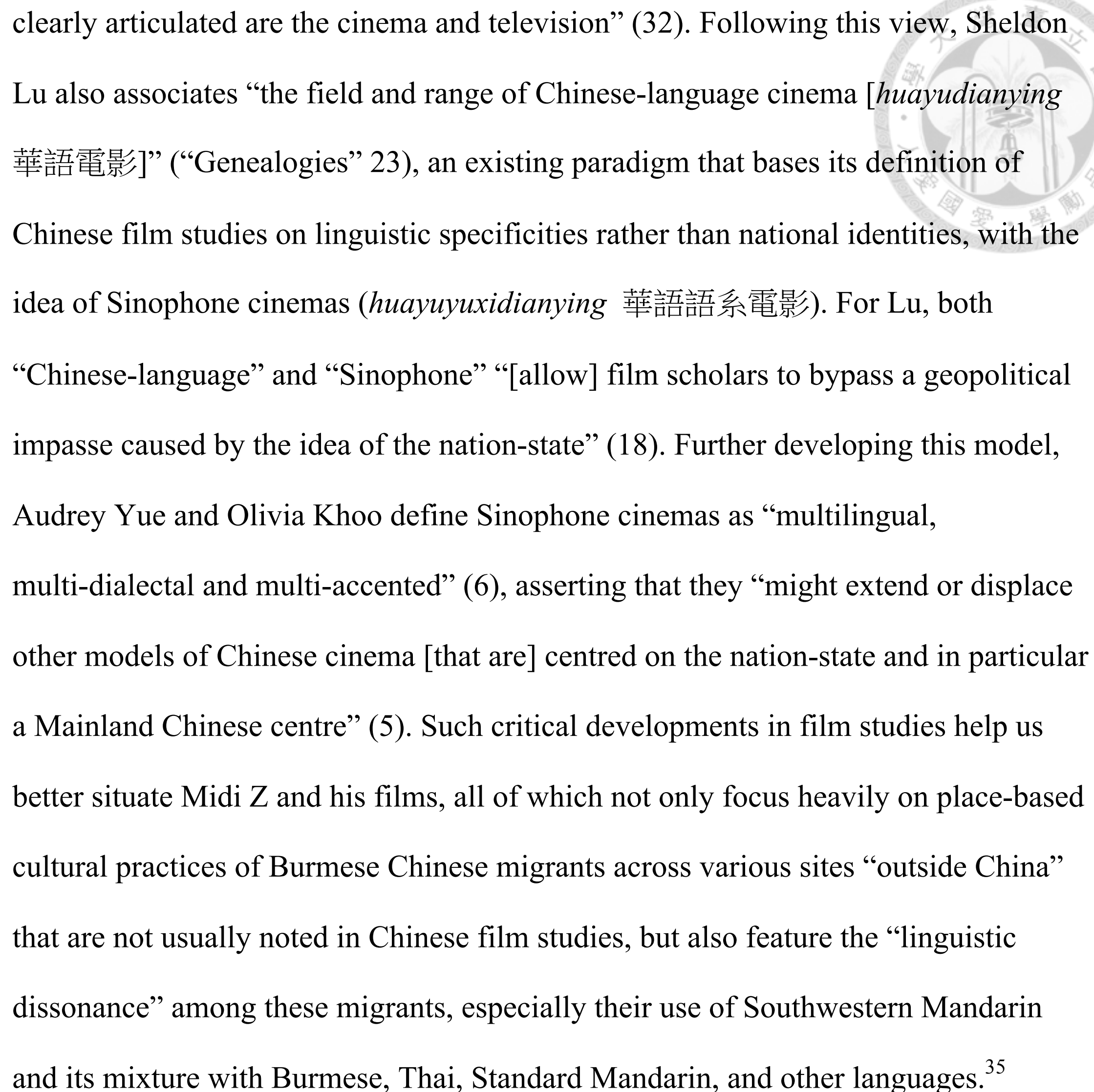

clearly articulated are the cinema and television” (32). Following this view, Sheldon Lu also associates “the field and range of Chinese-language cinema [*huayudianying* 華語電影]” (“Genealogies” 23), an existing paradigm that bases its definition of Chinese film studies on linguistic specificities rather than national identities, with the idea of Sinophone cinemas (*huayuyuxidianying* 華語語系電影). For Lu, both “Chinese-language” and “Sinophone” “[allow] film scholars to bypass a geopolitical impasse caused by the idea of the nation-state” (18). Further developing this model, Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo define Sinophone cinemas as “multilingual, multi-dialectal and multi-accented” (6), asserting that they “might extend or displace other models of Chinese cinema [that are] centred on the nation-state and in particular a Mainland Chinese centre” (5). Such critical developments in film studies help us better situate Midi Z and his films, all of which not only focus heavily on place-based cultural practices of Burmese Chinese migrants across various sites “outside China” that are not usually noted in Chinese film studies, but also feature the “linguistic dissonance” among these migrants, especially their use of Southwestern Mandarin and its mixture with Burmese, Thai, Standard Mandarin, and other languages.[35]

The limit of applying ideas from Sinophone studies to film studies, however, lies in the former’s insistence on highlighting “Sinitic languages,” while film as an artistic medium is capable of mediating more than just spoken languages. As Alvin K. Wong contends, “[Sinophone studies’] dual emphasis on linguistic specificity and global visuality can function as both the theoretical rigor and limits of the Sinophone” (92), as it “privileges the linguistic and hence the literary, over and against the aural, the sonic, and the audible” (92-93). Similarly, Song Hwee Lim also argues that “[t]he

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[35] In line with this point, Chan argues that “[t]he language [the Burmese Chinese characters] speak in the film . . . is not simply a version of Southwestern Mandarin, but contains certain vocabulary rendered in Burmese. In this way, this group of people depicted in the film are further removed from ideas of a Chineseness associated with discourses of authenticity or purity. Their language is always already creolized” (26).

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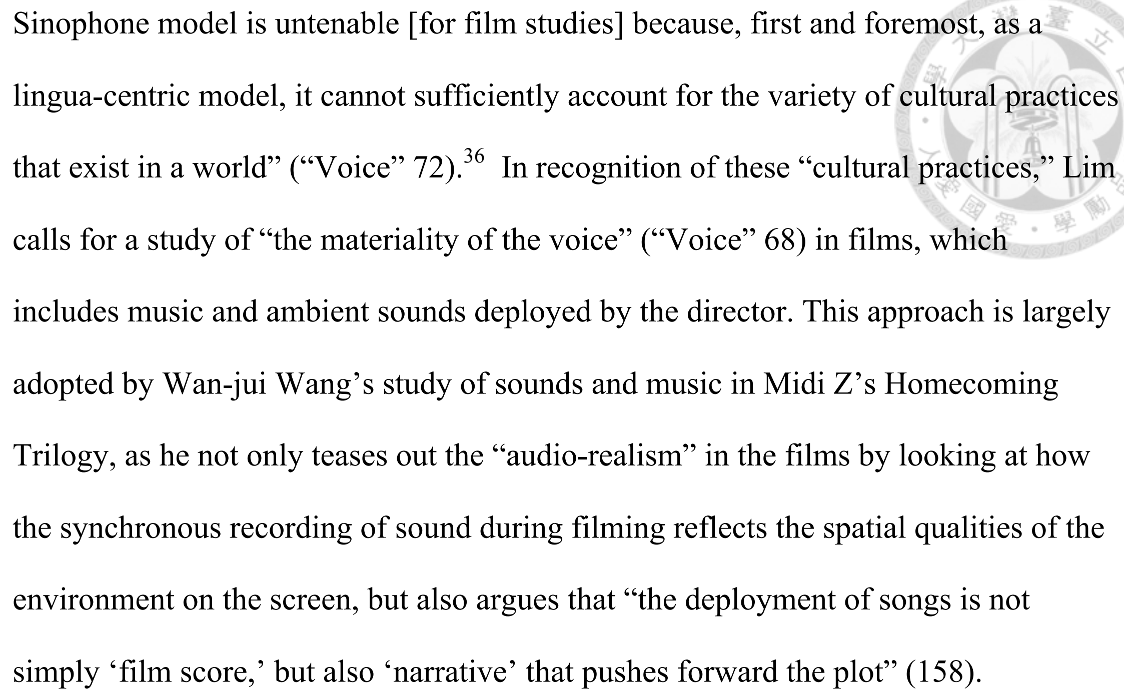

Sinophone model is untenable [for film studies] because, first and foremost, as a lingua-centric model, it cannot sufficiently account for the variety of cultural practices that exist in a world" ("Voice" 72).[36] In recognition of these "cultural practices," Lim calls for a study of "the materiality of the voice" ("Voice" 68) in films, which includes music and ambient sounds deployed by the director. This approach is largely adopted by Wan-jui Wang's study of sounds and music in Midi Z's Homecoming Trilogy, as he not only teases out the "audio-realism" in the films by looking at how the synchronous recording of sound during filming reflects the spatial qualities of the environment on the screen, but also argues that "the deployment of songs is not simply 'film score,' but also 'narrative' that pushes forward the plot" (158).

Apart from the materiality of cinematic voice that exceeds the linguistic model of Sinophone studies, the visual quality of Sinophone cinemas often receives less attention as well. Even though Shih obviously takes into consideration the importance of cinema, she arguably loses sight of the distinct visual techniques and aesthetics of films as she treats them as parts of a global visual culture that exceeds the linguistic boundaries of Sinophone communities. To complicate such analysis, I believe that the diverse visual elements in Midi Z's films—such as performance and camera movement—necessarily enrich the definitions of Sinophone cinemas. Thus, for my study of Midi Z's films, I will not only examine the audio aspects of the Homecoming Trilogy, but will also discuss the visual aesthetics that these films adopt to represent Burmese Chinese migrants and other subjects.

Through a review of the key academic fields of postcolonial studies and Sinophone studies, I have attempted to situate my study of Midi Z's films in relation

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[36] Examples of such cultural practices can be found in Singaporean director Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* (2013), a story of a Singaporean Chinese boy who shares intimacy with his Filipina nanny. There are several scenes in the film where Tagalog is spoken without Chinese subtitles; also, in the final part of the film, it is shown that the Singaporean Chinese family is touched by a Tagalog popular song even if they do not understand the meaning of its lyrics. Clearly, the director is trying to demonstrate the possibility of cross-cultural understanding beyond the limits of Sinitic languages.

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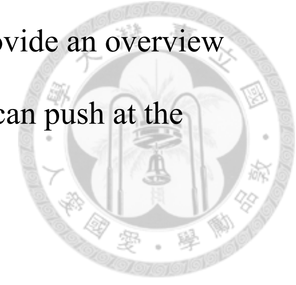
to debates in existing scholarship. In the next section, I go on to provide an overview of the subsequent chapters of this thesis, with a focus on how they can push at the borders of these academic paradigms.



Overview of Subsequent Chapters

In this chapter, I have provided a general account of Midi Z's career, focusing on the incongruity between the discourses about his success as a director and the representations of the precarity faced by the Burmese Chinese characters in his films. In order to further tease out the critical potential of his Homecoming Trilogy, I then introduced the concept of "cinema of distance," a cinema that not only rejects a fixed idea of identities and homeland, but also adopts flexible filmmaking strategies. I have also situated Midi Z's films within wider scholarly concerns by discussing the strengths and limits of academic fields such as postcolonial studies and Sinophone studies. While scholars working in both fields help us tackle aspects of Midi Z's films, I argue that there are also limits to their perspectives. To address some of these limits, I aim to provide a more nuanced look at Midi Z's Homecoming Trilogy in the following chapters, so as to push against the borders of these academic fields.

In the following chapters, I will examine each of Midi Z's three films in his Homecoming Trilogy with regard to their various themes and aesthetics. In line with my argument above, I will not simply provide a summary of the socio-historical and the production backgrounds of these films; rather, I will also strive to complicate the relationship between the films and the socio-historical conditions that they are seeking to portray. To achieve this end, I will concentrate on specific film devices—namely, sound, performance, and camera movement—that Midi Z employs. Despite the fact that many themes, aesthetics, and production methods are effectively deployed across

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all the films, I strategically pair my discussions of each device with one film in each chapter to avoid repetition of my argument.

In Chapter Two, "Moving Back: *Return to Burma* and Sound," I supplement my analysis of Midi Z's first feature film *Return to Burma* with a brief examination of the problematic discourses of the Taiwanese dream and the Burmese political reforms in 2011 that both attract Burmese Chinese migrants. I contend that *Return to Burma* not only critiques these discourses through its narrative, but also stretches beyond the limited focus of Sinophone studies on linguistic dissonance by presenting various sounds in the film, including what I call the sound of silence and the sound of media. Through a close listening to the film, I argue that the sounds deployed in the film produce distance from a linear migration narrative that optimistically highlights the benefits of moving to Taiwan or back to Burma.

In Chapter Three, "Moving In-between: *Poor Folk* and Performance," I first investigate the border-crossing Burmese Chinese migrants between Thailand and Burma in Midi Z's second feature film *Poor Folk* by borrowing ideas from recent border studies. To better understand the in-betweenness embodied by these migrants, I identify three types of performance with which they transform their identities, including disidentification, reenactment, and gendered displacement, all of which challenge the specific forms of ethnolinguistic defiance against China-centrism in Sinophone studies. I also take Midi Z's digital filmmaking into account, exploring how the use of a low-cost digital camera enables an ambiguous performance of the border. In analyzing the distancing effects of the performances, I point out that a rigid imagination of the identities of the migrants and the border space is challenged.

In Chapter Four, "Non-Moving: *Ice Poison* and Camera Movement," I first seek to make sense of the paradox faced by the local Burmese Chinese in Burma in Midi Z's third feature film *Ice Poison*: the status of immobility in an age of globalization.

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Arguing that such immobility questions the foregrounding of transnational movement in theories of globalization and Sinophone studies, I analyze the film's use of static long takes as an alternative critique of the problems of globalization. In the second half of the chapter, I engage with the use of shaky hand-held shots that represent the unstable mobility of the characters. By looking at the dialectical relationship between mobility and immobility in the film, I contend that the camera movement in the film provides a distancing aesthetic that questions linear and optimistic notions of mobility as a solution for local paralysis in an age of globalization.

In Chapter Five, I will summarize my analysis, and self-critically address the potential significance of this MA thesis project. I will conclude the thesis with a discussion of how a "cinema of distance" can contribute to a department of foreign languages and literatures in Taiwan.

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Chapter Two:

Moving Back: *Return to Burma* and Sound

Midi Z's debut feature film *Return to Burma* (2011) stands as one of the few creative attempts in Taiwanese film history to critically examine the historical links between Taiwan and Burma. Undoubtedly, some Taiwanese directors have already dealt with the convoluted history of the Burmese Chinese "Secret Army" (*gujun* 孤軍), a covert military force established in the hope of retrieving Mainland China but subsequently deserted in Burma by Chiang Kai-shek during the Cold War.[36] Most of these filmmakers, however, have based the narratives of their works on a more or less Sinocentric or Taiwan-centric perspective, as they have been more concerned with how Burmese Chinese can complicate Taiwanese subjectivity.[37] Growing up in Burma as an offspring of a member of the Secret Army, Midi Z proposes a reversed perspective to critically engage with the historical connection between Taiwan and Burma, as he implicitly questions Taiwan as an ultimate homeland by focusing on a Burmese Chinese migrant character Shin-Hong who decides to return to postcolonial

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[36] The official title of the Secret Army is the Yunnan Anti-Communist National Salvation Army, the last remnants of the KMT forces on the Asia continent after its defeat by the Chinese Communist Party. Supported by the KMT and the U.S. government, a group of soldiers have secretly remained even until today, and gained ground in the northern part of Thailand as they assisted the U.S. and Thailand in exterminating the Communist Party of Thailand. For more on the Secret Army, see Gibson; and Hsiao-ting Lin. Taiwanese films that deal with this specific history include Daw-ming Lee's experimental documentary *Beyond the Killing Fields: Refugees on the Thai-Cambodian Border* (1986), Chu Yen-ping's epic war films *A Home Too Far* (1991), *A Home Too Far II* (1993) and another short film "The Orphans" in the anthology film *10+10* (2011), Zheng Yu-chieh's drama *Do Over* (2006), Chen Wen-cheng's *Tangle* (2010), and Lee Li-shao's documentary series "Yunnan-Burma Border Area Guerrillas Trilogy" (2012-2015). Video artist Hsu Chia-wei also deals with this history in his video installation *Huai Mo Village* (2012) and *Ruins of the Intelligence Bureau* (2015).

[37] Most of the Taiwanese films dealing with this history only go as far as criticizing Taiwan's inability to adequately accommodate Burmese Chinese as one of its own, but do not take a step further to examine Burmese Chinese experiences in Burma. For instance, in a sequence in Lee Li-shao's documentary *Boundary Revelation* (2013), the first film in the "Yunnan-Burma Border Area Guerrillas Trilogy," he cuts from a loyal Burmese Chinese soldier in Burma singing "Taiwan is a precious island" to a young Burmese Chinese in Taiwan facing the difficulty of obtaining citizenship. While the film attempts to critique Taiwan's treatment of Burmese Chinese, its perspective is undeniably fixated on Taiwanese subjectivity, especially as Lee explains that the narrative of *Boundary Revelation* is born out of Taiwan's Wild Strawberries Movement in 2008 when "provocations against Taiwanese national identity are strong, very confusing." For more on *Boundary Revelation*, see Li-shao Lee.

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Burma after its self-proclaimed democratization in 2011.[38] This reversed perspective enabled by return migration extends beyond the Taiwanese film community's preoccupation with a single site and develops instead what Shu-mei Shih calls the "multidirectional critiques" of Sinophone studies, which she defines as "critical [positions] toward both the country of origin and the country of settlement" (*Visuality* 190).[39] Such a perspective can also be understood as what Michael Chanan calls "the return of the gaze," which "happens when those who have been distant subjects [in films] . . . take up the camera themselves and turn it on their own . . . conditions of existence" (148). By adopting a guerrilla style to film illegally in Burma with a strikingly low budget and a small crew, Midi Z undoubtedly embodies such a return of the gaze in the making of his first feature film.[40]

In this chapter, I first analyze how the narrative of return migration in *Return to Burma* ironizes the "Taiwanese dream" (*taiwanmeng* 台灣夢) that has prompted many Burmese Chinese to migrate to Taiwan, with a special focus on the sound deployed in the film. While it is useful to identify key sections in the narrative where the sound of linguistic dissonance (a critical aspect of Sinophone articulations) is effective in problematizing the Taiwanese dream, I nevertheless argue that the sound

[38] In an interview, Midi Z confesses that his grandfather "has not forgiven Chiang Kai-shek" for abandoning them (the Secret Army) in Burma ("Midi Z"). This anger resulted in Midi Z's refusal to study in the prestigious Jianguo High School (*jianguo* 建國, literally "nation building") when he came to Taiwan, as his father believed the idea of *jianguo* only satisfied Chiang's personal will, but not theirs. For Midi Z's own account of his family background in relation to the Secret Army, see Zhao 56.

[39] Midi Z is not the only director to return from Taiwan to his country of origin. The Malaysian Chinese director Tsai Ming-liang, also based in Taiwan, produced *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006), which deals with the relationship between a Bangladeshi migrant worker and a Malaysian Chinese laborer in Kuala Lumpur (a film subsequently censored in Malaysia). Another Taiwan-based Malaysian Chinese director, Lau Kek-huat, similarly produces a documentary *Absent Without Leave* (2016) about the Malaysian communists. Meanwhile, after Midi Z's attempt to "return to Burma," there have been more and more films shot by Burmese Chinese directors based in Taiwan who also turn their cameras to situations in Burma, including Wang Z. J.'s *Not Burma Anymore* (2016) and Lee Yong Chao's *Huasin Street* (2010), *Heaven Diary* (2013), *Jade Man* (2014), and *Blood Amber* (2017). Lee Yong Chao is also a background actor in *Return to Burma*.

[40] In the making of *Return to Burma*, there were only three people in the crew filming in Burma (excluding the amateur performers that appear in the film)—the director Midi Z, the production manager Wang Fu-Ang (the alias for the male protagonist Wang Shin-Hong 王興宏), and the editor Lin Sheng-wen—and the budget was around NT$250,000. See *2014 Taiwan Cinema Yearbook* 123-24.

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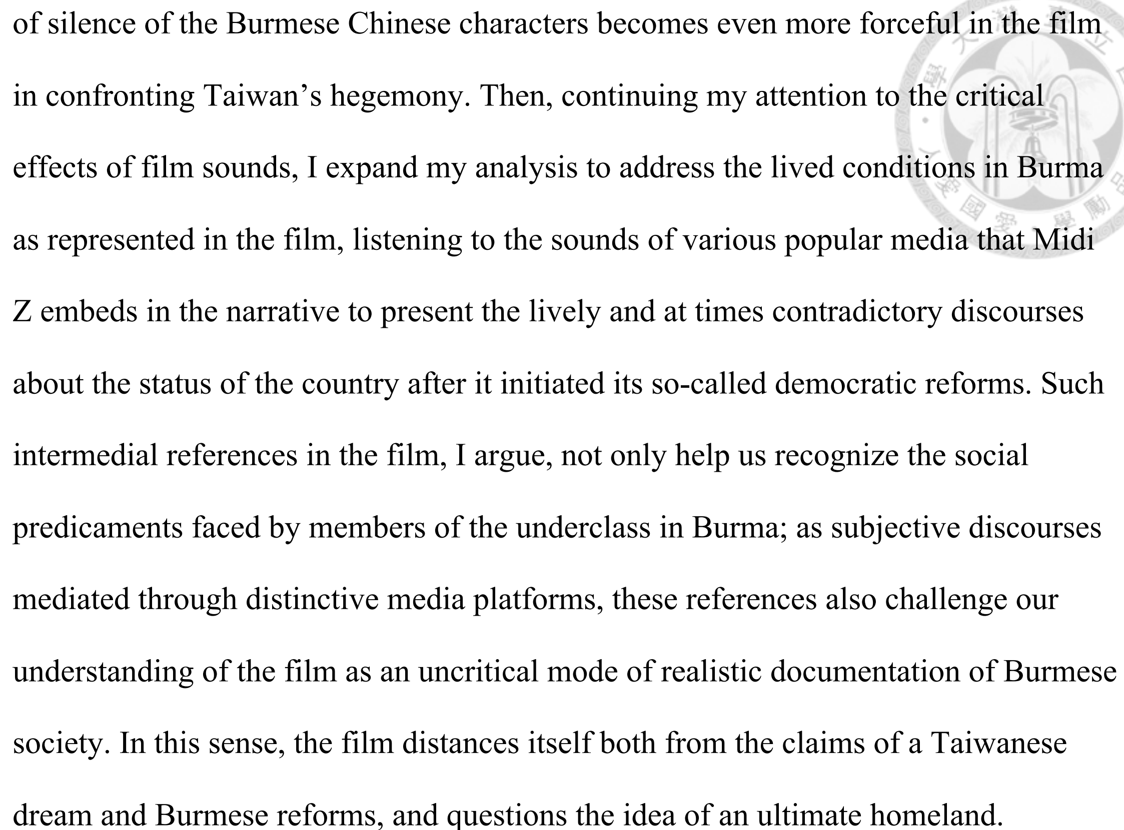

of silence of the Burmese Chinese characters becomes even more forceful in the film in confronting Taiwan's hegemony. Then, continuing my attention to the critical effects of film sounds, I expand my analysis to address the lived conditions in Burma as represented in the film, listening to the sounds of various popular media that Midi Z embeds in the narrative to present the lively and at times contradictory discourses about the status of the country after it initiated its so-called democratic reforms. Such intermedial references in the film, I argue, not only help us recognize the social predicaments faced by members of the underclass in Burma; as subjective discourses mediated through distinctive media platforms, these references also challenge our understanding of the film as an uncritical mode of realistic documentation of Burmese society. In this sense, the film distances itself both from the claims of a Taiwanese dream and Burmese reforms, and questions the idea of an ultimate homeland.

The Sound of Silence: Ironizing the Taiwanese Dream

As a discourse that seeks to solidify and advocate the political, economic, and cultural superiority of Taiwan, the idea of the Taiwanese dream has undergone many changes over recent decades. Before the end of the martial law period, in effect on Taiwan proper from 1949 to 1987, the Taiwanese dream often denoted a pursuit of economic advancement and modernization for middle-class Taiwanese people.[41] Apart from such a vision, this discourse has also worked hand-in-hand with the government's promotion of Taiwan as a free and Sinocentric homeland especially during the Cold War period, so as to appeal to ethnic Chinese students (*qiaosheng*)

[41] Such a notion of a Taiwanese dream has been reflected and challenged in Taiwanese films since the early 1980s. In his discussion of Taiwanese films about urban experiences in Taipei from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, Braester identifies "[t]he Taiwanese dream . . . not in the form of hollow material success but as a return to Taiwanese identity" (37) in the popular musical *Papa, Can You Hear Me Sing?* (1983). Believing that the musical presents glorious urban "architecture [to be] associated with arrogant pretense and . . . a façade erected to cover up unpalatable social reality" (35), Braester argues that the possibility of an alternative "dream" can only reside in the spirit of lower-class Taiwanese people across different ethnic groups.

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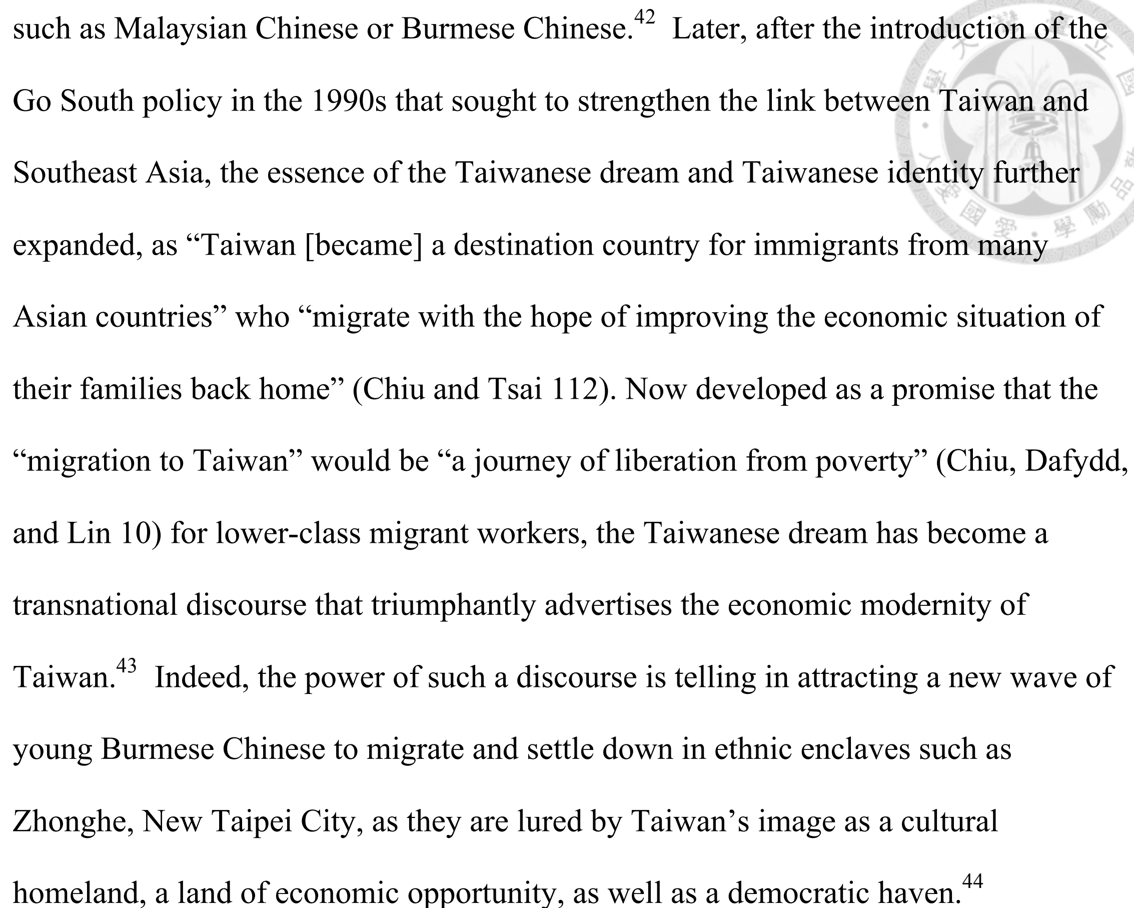

such as Malaysian Chinese or Burmese Chinese.[42] Later, after the introduction of the Go South policy in the 1990s that sought to strengthen the link between Taiwan and Southeast Asia, the essence of the Taiwanese dream and Taiwanese identity further expanded, as "Taiwan [became] a destination country for immigrants from many Asian countries" who "migrate with the hope of improving the economic situation of their families back home" (Chiu and Tsai 112). Now developed as a promise that the "migration to Taiwan" would be "a journey of liberation from poverty" (Chiu, Dafydd, and Lin 10) for lower-class migrant workers, the Taiwanese dream has become a transnational discourse that triumphantly advertises the economic modernity of Taiwan.[43] Indeed, the power of such a discourse is telling in attracting a new wave of young Burmese Chinese to migrate and settle down in ethnic enclaves such as Zhonghe, New Taipei City, as they are lured by Taiwan's image as a cultural homeland, a land of economic opportunity, as well as a democratic haven.[44]

Despite its allure, the notion of a Taiwanese dream has been repeatedly called into question in recent years, as it tends to obscure the darker side of migration. In the case of Burmese Chinese, for instance, it is reported by Hsin-chun Tasaw Lu that many of the migrants soon realize "they are often marginalized as migrant minorities due to cultural differences acquired abroad and their often inferior socio-economic status" after they come to Taiwan (34). Such racial and class discrimination has

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[42] According to Zhao-lun Huang, many Malaysian Chinese students "were called forth by Chinese culture and [the image of] 'free China'" touted by Taiwan during the Cold War period (143); meanwhile, according to Wei-lun Huang, Burmese Chinese students, especially those that share ties with the members of the Secret Army, wish to "[turn] their 'imaginary motherland' into a 'real motherland'" (43) by coming to Taiwan.

[43] While the specific meanings of the "Taiwanese dream" can differ from context to context, it can be assumed in this instance that it is not too far from the idea of an American dream, in which economic and social success is achieved by depending on a liberal economy. Recently, it is also compared to the idea of a Chinese dream (*Zhongguo meng* 中國夢) proposed by the current President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping to highlight China's economic prosperity.

[44] In her study of the Burmese Chinese migrants in Zhonghe, Lu points out that there have been many waves of migrations from Burma to Taiwan throughout the 20th century, including the more recent ones that were "triggered by the Burmese junta's crackdown on protesters during the 1988 student movement" to leave their country (39). Midi Z's short films, *A Home-Letter* and *Huasin Incident*, deal with the distinction between different waves of Burmese Chinese migrant workers in Taiwan.

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driven the migrants to develop what Lu calls "counter-nostalgia," a longing for their family in Burma after they realize that their nostalgia for a homeland in Taiwan is illusory. While Midi Z has endorsed the problematic Taiwanese dream in numerous occasions, he also seems to be critically aware of the limitation of such a discourse.[45] Such awareness can be detected in his self-critical reflection on and complication of the notion of "dream" in his documentary *City of Jade* (2016) about Burmese Chinese jade miners in the war-ridden town Hpakant in Northern Burma. Commenting on his elder brother's faith in jade mining, he says: "[my brother] still dreams about jade, but as an unbiased observer, I think his dream is finished, impossible. . . . [But] he rebuts in return: 'I think your filmmaking is [more like] a passive dream'" ("Misery"). In this exchange, the linear narrative of a successful filmmaker's Taiwanese dream and his illusion as an "unbiased observer" are disrupted by the alternative dream of the subject of his film, a dream that values Burma over Taiwan.

Such a nuanced perspective is certainly reflected in the narratives of *Return to Burma*, in which the Burmese Chinese characters living in the city of Lashio (*Lashu* 臘戍) in northern Burma express their doubts about a Taiwanese dream. For instance, throughout the film, many Burmese Chinese characters question Taiwan as an ideal place for migration, including dialogues in Southwestern Mandarin such as "Taiwan is too expensive now [to go to]," "don't go to a place as far as Taiwan," and "staying there [in Taiwan] for your whole life is not good as well; you will end up being a laborer for your entire life." In line with such dialogues, the geopolitical relation

[45] Apart from his praise of Taiwanese freedom and diversity in his Golden Horse Awards acceptance speech or the direct mention of the term "Taiwanese dream" in his biography (*Unification* 29), Midi Z also endorses the Taiwanese dream in one of his public speeches "From Cinematic Dream to Taiwanese Dream, from Taiwanese Dream to World Dream," a talk between him and another successful Burmese Chinese migrant Peter Chou (the former chief executive officer and a co-founder of the electronics company HTC in Taiwan). The link between Chou's corporate success and Midi Z's achievement in filmmaking is highly problematic and paradoxical, especially as Midi Z's films include many critiques of the transnational neoliberal economy. For a record of this conversation between Midi Z and Chou, see "From Cinematic Dream."

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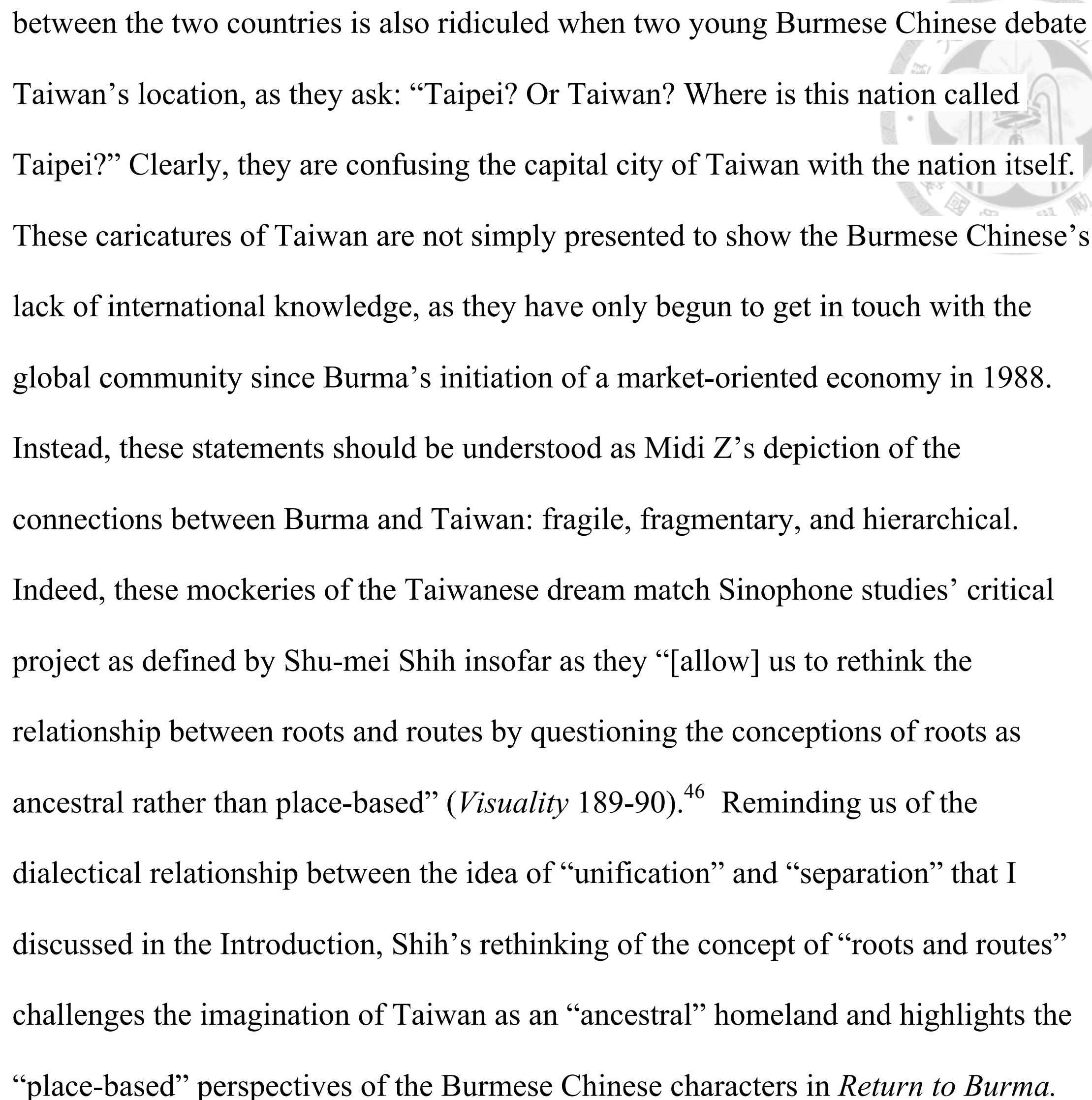

between the two countries is also ridiculed when two young Burmese Chinese debate Taiwan's location, as they ask: "Taipei? Or Taiwan? Where is this nation called Taipei?" Clearly, they are confusing the capital city of Taiwan with the nation itself. These caricatures of Taiwan are not simply presented to show the Burmese Chinese's lack of international knowledge, as they have only begun to get in touch with the global community since Burma's initiation of a market-oriented economy in 1988. Instead, these statements should be understood as Midi Z's depiction of the connections between Burma and Taiwan: fragile, fragmentary, and hierarchical. Indeed, these mockeries of the Taiwanese dream match Sinophone studies' critical project as defined by Shu-mei Shih insofar as they "[allow] us to rethink the relationship between roots and routes by questioning the conceptions of roots as ancestral rather than place-based" (*Visuality* 189-90).[46] Reminding us of the dialectical relationship between the idea of "unification" and "separation" that I discussed in the Introduction, Shih's rethinking of the concept of "roots and routes" challenges the imagination of Taiwan as an "ancestral" homeland and highlights the "place-based" perspectives of the Burmese Chinese characters in *Return to Burma.*

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that such critique is not only evident in the narratives, but can also be identified in the soundscape of the film.[47] For instance, starting with the ambient sound of engineering machines, *Return to Burma* first presents to us a half-completed construction site in Taipei in a three-minute static long

[46] In her definition of what she calls "Sinophone articulation," Shih indicates that "[t]he Sinophone's favorite mode . . . tend to be intertextual: satire, irony, paradox, bricolage, collage, and others" (*Visuality* 35-36). Throughout *Return to Burma*, a sense of irony against a Taiwanese dream can be felt.

[47] I use the term soundscape in tandem with Schafer, who defines it as "an acoustic environment" that "consists of events *heard* not objects *seen*" (99). Apart from examining a landscape in terms of its sounds, Schafer further stresses that "the general acoustic environment of a society can be read as an indicator of social conditions which produce it" (98). While it is not entirely viable to equate mediated sound with social reality in all analysis of cinema and other media, the sound of urban construction in *Return to Burma* does vividly signify the ideology of developmentalism and modernity in Taiwan.

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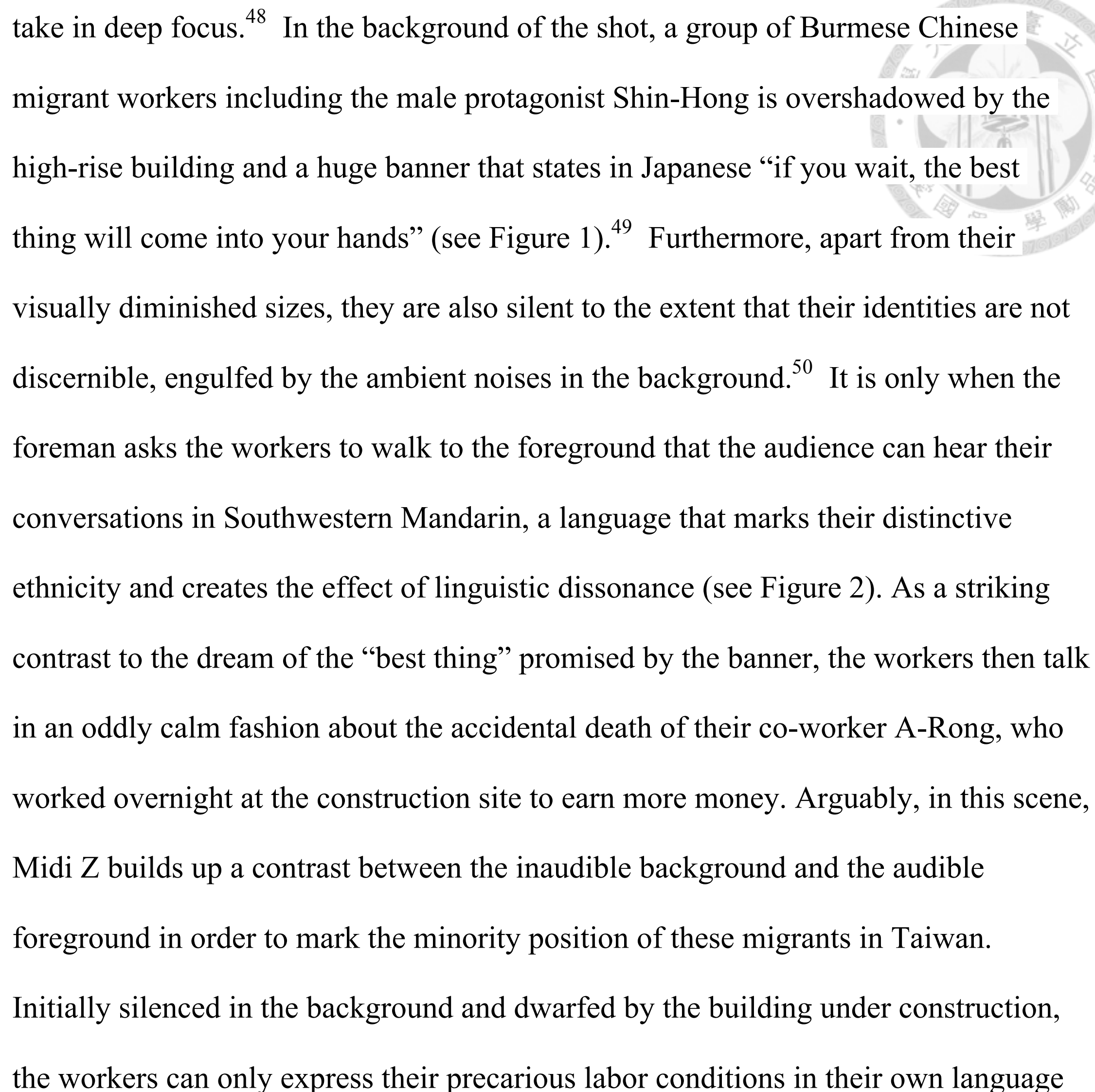

take in deep focus.[48] In the background of the shot, a group of Burmese Chinese migrant workers including the male protagonist Shin-Hong is overshadowed by the high-rise building and a huge banner that states in Japanese “if you wait, the best thing will come into your hands” (see Figure 1).[49] Furthermore, apart from their visually diminished sizes, they are also silent to the extent that their identities are not discernible, engulfed by the ambient noises in the background.[50] It is only when the foreman asks the workers to walk to the foreground that the audience can hear their conversations in Southwestern Mandarin, a language that marks their distinctive ethnicity and creates the effect of linguistic dissonance (see Figure 2). As a striking contrast to the dream of the “best thing” promised by the banner, the workers then talk in an oddly calm fashion about the accidental death of their co-worker A-Rong, who worked overnight at the construction site to earn more money. Arguably, in this scene, Midi Z builds up a contrast between the inaudible background and the audible foreground in order to mark the minority position of these migrants in Taiwan. Initially silenced in the background and dwarfed by the building under construction, the workers can only express their precarious labor conditions in their own language

[48] This scene recalls Braester’s observation of the violent reconstruction taking place in *Papa Can You Hear Me Sing?*, as well as the construction site presented in Edward Yang’s *Taipei Story* (1985), as “Taipei and its architecture [in *Taipei Story*] are seen as an element in its people’s alienation” (Anderson 38). The scene also reflects Midi Z’s own experience in Taiwan, as Wen-chin Chang points out that “[o]n the second day after his arrival [in Taiwan], he started working at a construction site 20 stories high in order to earn his tuition fees and living costs” (“Poverty” 54).

[49] The original sentence in Japanese goes: “待ってれば、一番いいものが手に入る.” The Japanese banner seems to suggest Taiwanese’s imagination of Japanese capitalist prosperity. In Kuan-hsing Chen’s discussion of Taiwan’s Go South policy (translated as “Southward Advance” in Chen’s article) to economically influence Southeast Asia in the 1990s, he not only exposes that “the discourse of southward-advancing provides ideological support for empire formation,” but he also contends that its ideology is “a pirating of the Japanese imaginary of a half century ago,” referring to the “[t]he map of the old Japanese empire” (“Imperialist” 59) embodied in the notorious “Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” prior to and during World War II. While the Japanese inscriptions in *Return to Burma* obliquely signify the worship of the image of Japanese capital in the 21st century, it also hints at the similarity between Taiwanese and Japanese expansions across time.

[50] The silence of the characters can be understood as what Chion calls an “ambient silence” in films, a silence that is not “a neutral emptiness” or “an absence of noise,” but a “product of a contrast” to other subtle sounds such as the background noises of the environment (57).

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by coming to the foreground.[51] Later, this ironic contrast is further strengthened as the workers leave Shin-Hong to walk back to the background alone, silenced and dwarfed again by the building and the banner. Through the changes of the workers' sizes on screen, their distances towards the camera, and the volumes of their sounds in a static long take, Midi Z implicitly reveals to us the gap between the promise of a Taiwanese dream and the precarity faced by the Burmese Chinese migrant workers. Indeed, the workers are background actors (extras) not only in the sense of filmmaking, but also in terms of their status in Taiwanese society.

Figure 1: Burmese Chinese workers dwarfed in the background (Source: *Return to Burma*)

Figure 2: The workers come to the foreground of the shot to speak (Source: *Return to Burma*)

The above analysis of the contrast between the foreground and the background, I argue, can help to complicate Sinophone studies. While scholars of Sinophone studies often attempt to identify the critical power of linguistic dissonance in cultural texts, what Midi Z reminds us in his film is the fact that the dissonant voices of the ethnic minorities can rarely be heard in the mainstream society. In fact, the silence of the characters continues after the first scene, when Shin-Hong decides to bring photos and ashes of A-Rong back to his family in Burma. In another long take that shows a dimly

[51] This technique is particularly reminiscent of Jia Zhangke's *The World* (2004), a film that also features powerful ironies of the contrast between spectacular buildings in Beijing (featuring replicas of famous scenic spots around the world like Paris's Eiffel Tower) or the promise of happiness written on the wall ("the world belongs to you") and the death of a migrant worker at a construction site, a character who is last seen on the screen in a long take in front of unfinished cement columns.

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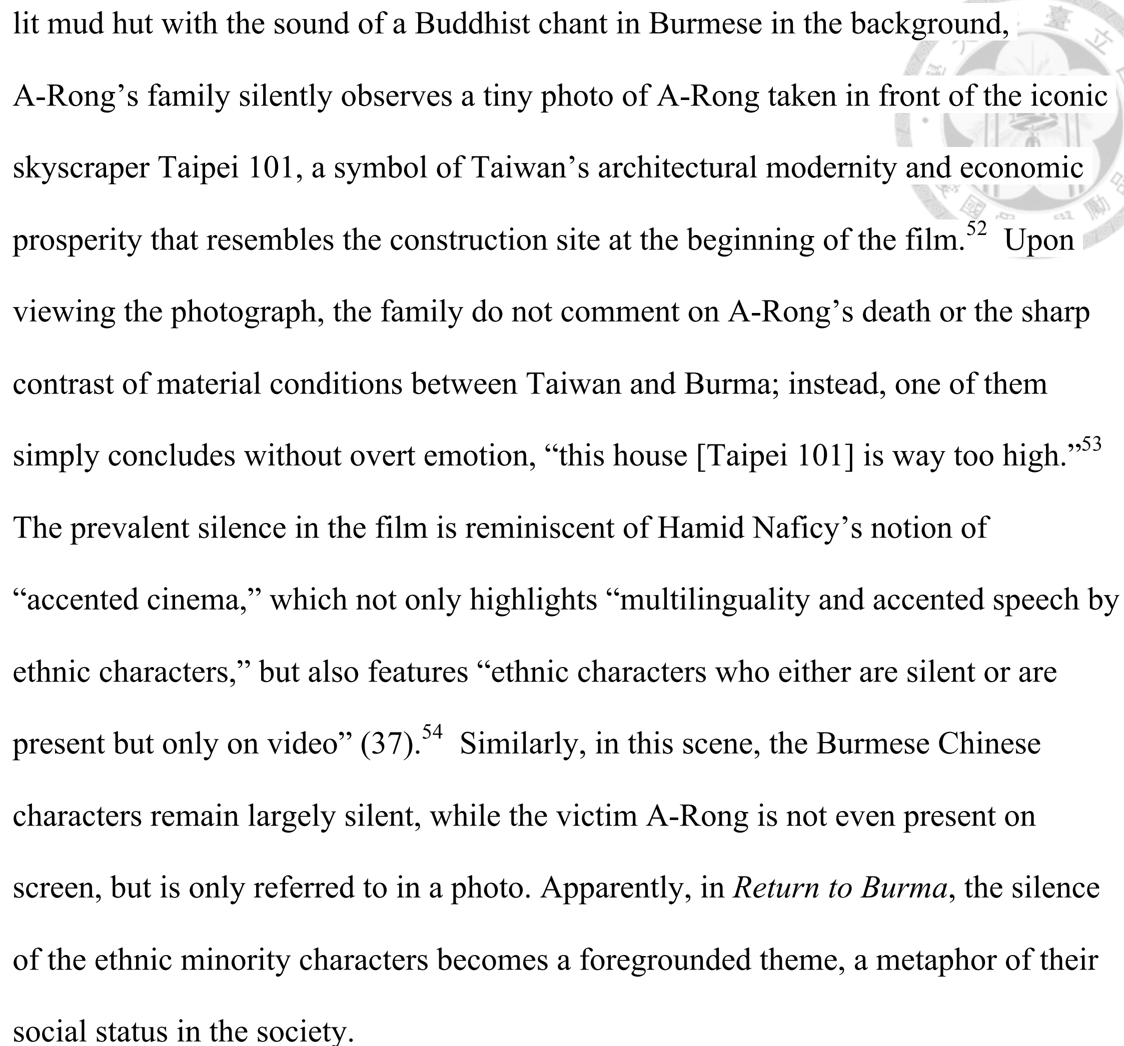

lit mud hut with the sound of a Buddhist chant in Burmese in the background, A-Rong's family silently observes a tiny photo of A-Rong taken in front of the iconic skyscraper Taipei 101, a symbol of Taiwan's architectural modernity and economic prosperity that resembles the construction site at the beginning of the film.[52] Upon viewing the photograph, the family do not comment on A-Rong's death or the sharp contrast of material conditions between Taiwan and Burma; instead, one of them simply concludes without overt emotion, "this house [Taipei 101] is way too high."[53] The prevalent silence in the film is reminiscent of Hamid Naficy's notion of "accented cinema," which not only highlights "multilinguality and accented speech by ethnic characters," but also features "ethnic characters who either are silent or are present but only on video" (37).[54] Similarly, in this scene, the Burmese Chinese characters remain largely silent, while the victim A-Rong is not even present on screen, but is only referred to in a photo. Apparently, in *Return to Burma*, the silence of the ethnic minority characters becomes a foregrounded theme, a metaphor of their social status in the society.

Even though the lack of overt emotion in the face of precarity in the film sometimes invites assertions that the film is embedded within the trend of objective

[52] It is not surprising that A-Rong's face in the photo is never directly presented to the audience, as he is not only dwarfed by Taipei 101 in the photo, much like the scene in the beginning of the film where workers are overshadowed by the building under construction, but he also belongs to a class of subaltern people that have no power to speak for themselves. See Zion Chen for more on the issue of the subaltern in *Return to Burma*.

[53] In her analysis of a Sinophone film—in this instance, the Singaporean director Eric Khoo's *Be With Me* (2005)—Hsiung touches upon the power of silence in films as a way of rebelling against discrimination, as she argues that "we can interpret the act of muting as a rebellion against the dominant language in Singapore—English" (103).

[54] Raising Armenian Canadian director Atom Egoyan's film *Calendar* (1993) as an example of the silence in "accented cinema," Naficy highlights "[Egoyan's] suppression of orality" in the film (38). Egoyan constantly presents the audiences with static extreme long shots of beautiful scenes in Armenia, all of which represent camera recordings shot by the protagonist in the film (played by Egoyan himself), a photographer sent to Armenia to take scenic pictures for a commercial calendar. In the protagonist's recordings, he never pays attention to the important cultural trivia provided by a local Armenian tour guide, as he frames the guide in a small size in the background of shot. This neglect of the local ethnic minority, as expressed in camera framing, resembles Midi Z's deliberate framing of his migrant worker characters in the background of the shot to expose their status as a social and ethnic minority.

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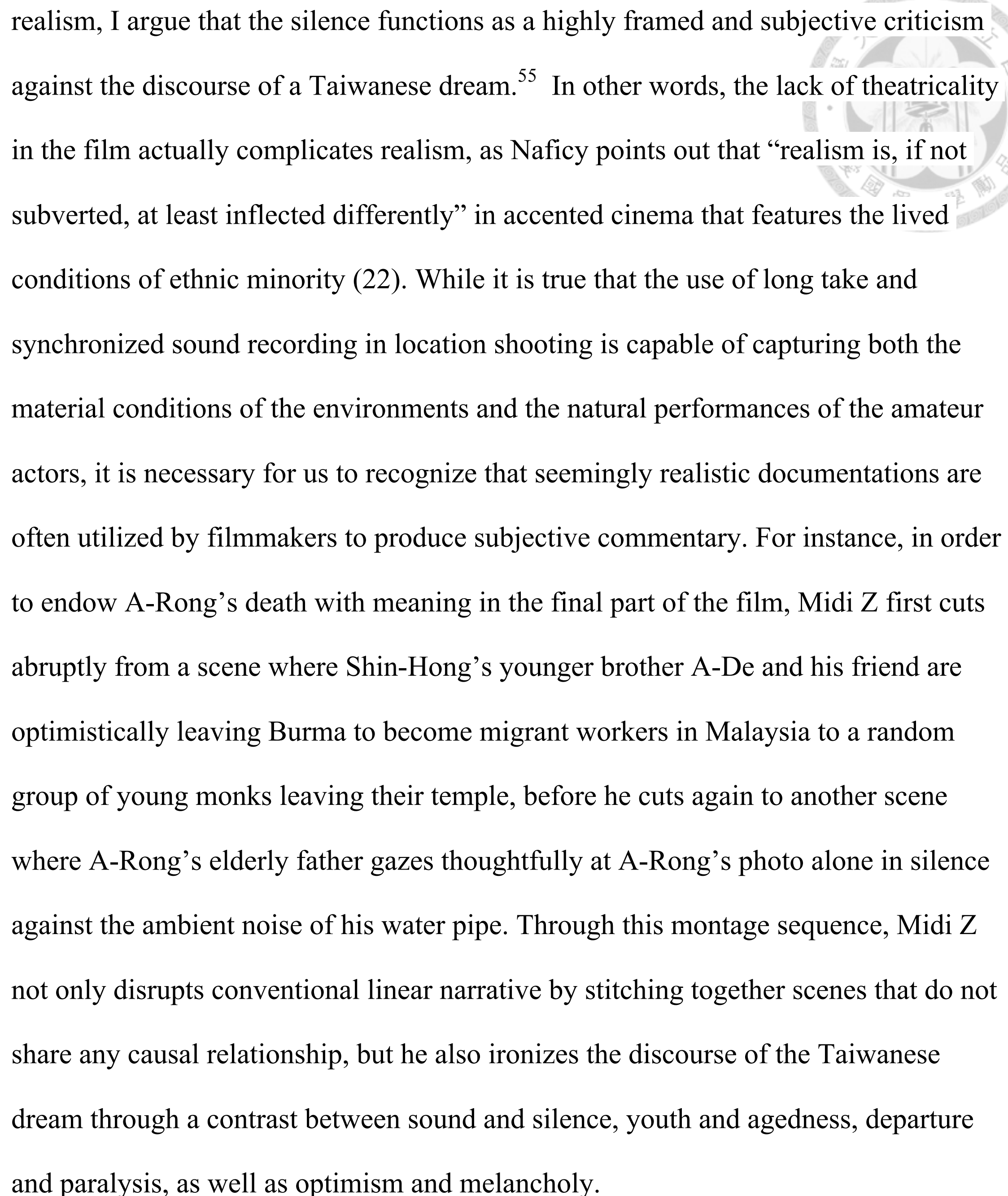

realism, I argue that the silence functions as a highly framed and subjective criticism against the discourse of a Taiwanese dream.[55] In other words, the lack of theatricality in the film actually complicates realism, as Naficy points out that "realism is, if not subverted, at least inflected differently" in accented cinema that features the lived conditions of ethnic minority (22). While it is true that the use of long take and synchronized sound recording in location shooting is capable of capturing both the material conditions of the environments and the natural performances of the amateur actors, it is necessary for us to recognize that seemingly realistic documentations are often utilized by filmmakers to produce subjective commentary. For instance, in order to endow A-Rong's death with meaning in the final part of the film, Midi Z first cuts abruptly from a scene where Shin-Hong's younger brother A-De and his friend are optimistically leaving Burma to become migrant workers in Malaysia to a random group of young monks leaving their temple, before he cuts again to another scene where A-Rong's elderly father gazes thoughtfully at A-Rong's photo alone in silence against the ambient noise of his water pipe. Through this montage sequence, Midi Z not only disrupts conventional linear narrative by stitching together scenes that do not share any causal relationship, but he also ironizes the discourse of the Taiwanese dream through a contrast between sound and silence, youth and agedness, departure and paralysis, as well as optimism and melancholy.

It seems clear, then, that *Return to Burma* offers subjective critiques or ironies against the Taiwanese dream not simply in the form of linguistic dissonance, but also in the prevalent silence among the Burmese Chinese characters as reflected in several

[55] For instance, critic Jian-zhang Lee describes the film's treatment of emotions as "the deliberate eradication of emotional interference," while Zheng depicts the film as an "essay or journal-like instinctive writing." Meanwhile, Wan-jui Wang has described the film's use of long take as a device that "realistically inscribes the frustrations of poverty and the breath of silence" (152).

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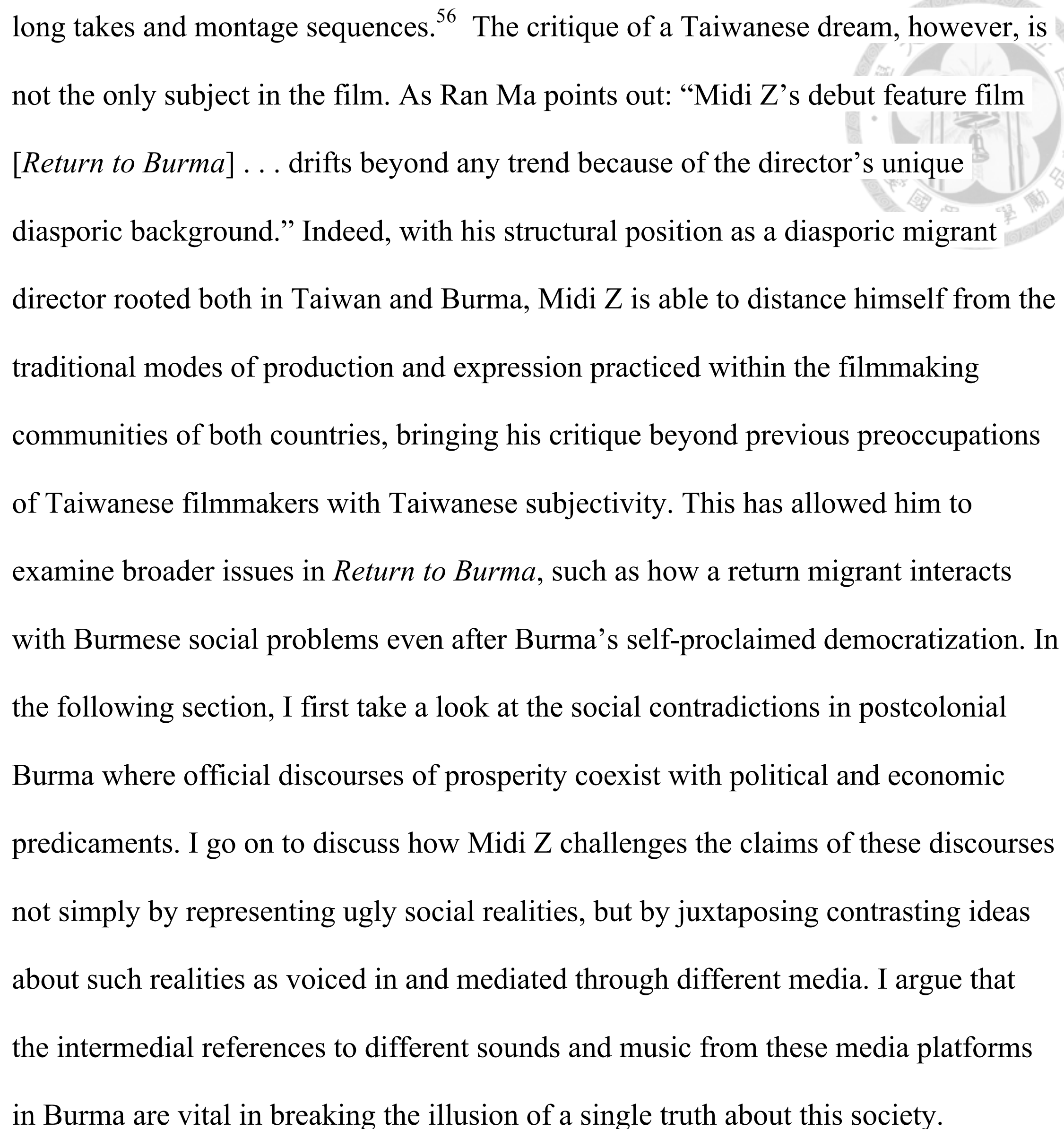

long takes and montage sequences.[56] The critique of a Taiwanese dream, however, is not the only subject in the film. As Ran Ma points out: "Midi Z's debut feature film [*Return to Burma*] . . . drifts beyond any trend because of the director's unique diasporic background." Indeed, with his structural position as a diasporic migrant director rooted both in Taiwan and Burma, Midi Z is able to distance himself from the traditional modes of production and expression practiced within the filmmaking communities of both countries, bringing his critique beyond previous preoccupations of Taiwanese filmmakers with Taiwanese subjectivity. This has allowed him to examine broader issues in *Return to Burma*, such as how a return migrant interacts with Burmese social problems even after Burma's self-proclaimed democratization. In the following section, I first take a look at the social contradictions in postcolonial Burma where official discourses of prosperity coexist with political and economic predicaments. I go on to discuss how Midi Z challenges the claims of these discourses not simply by representing ugly social realities, but by juxtaposing contrasting ideas about such realities as voiced in and mediated through different media. I argue that the intermedial references to different sounds and music from these media platforms in Burma are vital in breaking the illusion of a single truth about this society.

The Sound of Media: Ironizing Burmese Reforms

Since the period of British colonial governance from 1824 to 1948, Burma has been impaired by ethnic conflicts and an under-developed economy, which were further worsened by interrelated nationalistic and authoritarian policies during the

[56] In a face-to-face exchange with Shu-mei Shih on Skype in February 2018, she responded to my analysis by claiming that, "silence is also a form of articulation." I agree with Shih's argument, and also see the silence of the Burmese Chinese characters in *Return to Burma* as an effective form of Sinophone articulation, despite the fact that not many scholars have recognized it as such.

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post-war military rule from 1962 to 2011.[57] Burma's military junta, however, framed these social problems as merely rebel-related issues or foreign threats, and sugarcoated them with discourses of national prosperity and multiethnic harmony in state-controlled media.[58] For instance, while Burmese nationalism has constantly subjugated the ethnic minorities in Burma (including ethnic Chinese), the military government often defended itself with what Sai Latt calls "two seemingly contradictory elements," including the "promotion of Buddhist Burman-centric nationalism on the one hand, and the state's aim for a multi-ethnic union on the other."[59] The situation, however, is far from multi-ethnic harmony, as Midi Z was negatively influenced by the anti-Chinese sentiment in Burma in his childhood, not to mention the state's ongoing civil wars with many ethnic groups.[60] The national economy, moreover, was no better, even as it sought to embrace what Michael Charney depicts as "the liberalizing of trade . . . [that declared] that Burma would now

[57] Before Burma officially gained independence in 1948, the national leader General Aung San was assassinated in 1947 soon after he convened the influential Panglong Conference that called for a unification of different ethnic groups against the British Empire. Succeeding Aung San, U Nu led the country in a comparatively liberal fashion from 1948 to 1962, despite continuous ethnic conflicts at the border areas. Later on, General Ne Win initiated the 1962 coup d'état, beginning what he called "Burmese Way to Socialism" that lasted until 1988, when national protests broke out to demand change. Ne Win's "Socialism" is widely considered as a cause of Burma's downtrodden economy.

[58] Discussing the censorship of media in Burma during the period of military rule, Brooten describes that "[o]f the 30 papers that existed at the start of military rule, by 1988 only 6 remained, all mouthpieces for the army or Ne Win's political party" (687). While it is true that state-controlled propaganda made up for the majority of information in Burma, Brooten also highlights the efforts of exile media, including *The Irrawaddy*, an online publication that this thesis also cites.

[59] Burma's ethnic conflicts are related to the British Empire's "typical colonial strategy of 'divide and rule'" (Charney 201), which has "essentialized ethnic identifications" (202) and led to continuing conflicts between ethnic groups in Burma. Meanwhile, the paradox between the aim for multi-ethnic harmony and ethno-nationalism is evident in Burma's change of national title from Union of Burma to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, a political response in 1989 on the part of the military government to the famous 8888 Uprising in 1988. Many social groups, including ethnic minorities, have refused to acknowledge the title *Myanmar* partly because they do not recognize the legitimacy of the rule of the military government ("Who"). Furthermore, Houtman points out that "[the name change] is a form of censorship" (qtd. in "Who"). In this thesis, I choose to use *Burma* because Midi Z follows this usage, as the title of *Return to Burma* suggests.

[60] Apart from the antagonism against the Secret Army in northern Burma, the 1967 anti-Chinese riots also broke out in 1967, partly a result of the then-national leader Ne Win's decision to make use of "the xenophobia of the Burmese as a weapon for his political legitimacy" (Fan 250). In the riots, many Burmese Chinese were killed, which eventually led to Burmese Chinese's suppression of "their Chineseness because the 1967 anti-Chinese riots clearly marked them as foreigners who could be summarily driven out of the country" (Roberts 12).

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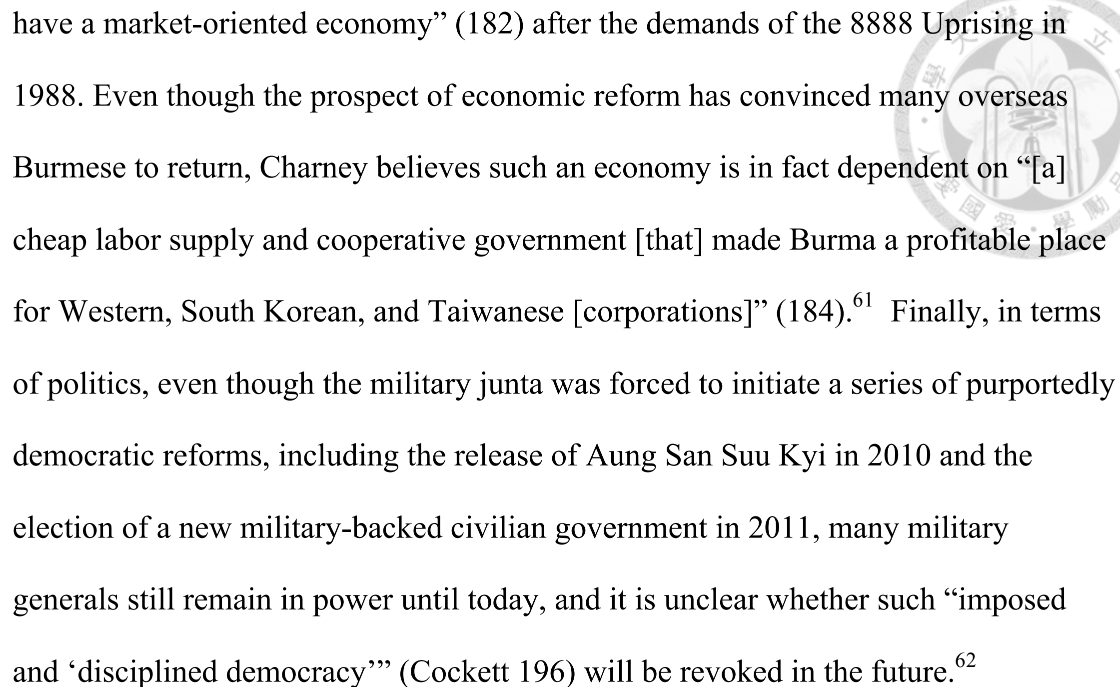

have a market-oriented economy" (182) after the demands of the 8888 Uprising in 1988. Even though the prospect of economic reform has convinced many overseas Burmese to return, Charney believes such an economy is in fact dependent on "[a] cheap labor supply and cooperative government [that] made Burma a profitable place for Western, South Korean, and Taiwanese [corporations]" (184).[61] Finally, in terms of politics, even though the military junta was forced to initiate a series of purportedly democratic reforms, including the release of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2010 and the election of a new military-backed civilian government in 2011, many military generals still remain in power until today, and it is unclear whether such "imposed and 'disciplined democracy'" (Cockett 196) will be revoked in the future.[62]

Growing up under the shadows of these ethnic, economic, and political crises, Midi Z, among many other Burmese Chinese abroad, was unsurprisingly attracted by the prospect of reforms in 2011 to return to his hometown and shoot his first feature film (*Unification* 21).[63] Despite the reason of his return, he did not blindly accept mainstream optimism about this transition; instead, focusing on the gap between the official discourses of the Burmese government and the social malaise as seen and voiced in local communities, he has taken a critical perspective by presenting stories

[61] Pholphirul discovers that the open-market reforms, including policies that welcomed "foreign direct investment" in Burma or initiated "deregulation," were "statistically significant in determining the probability of migrants returning" (995). The Burmese Chinese migrants have also been eager to return. As Chai points out, "[after] the military regime gave up on socialism, [they attempted] to enact market economy to attract foreign investments in the 1990s . . . according to [a Burmese Chinese] informant, this is 'the dusk after darkness,' and more and more Burmese Chinese migrants abroad [have returned] to Burma since the 1990s" (147). However, characterizing the economic reform as a part of "crony capitalism," Cockett writes that "[the reform] was all run primarily for the benefit of a small club of people at the apex of Burmese society, [and] very few others saw any benefit" (194).

[62] In her analysis of *Return to Burma*, Wen-Chin Chang points out how Midi Z ironizes the "ethnic conflicts and military violence" ("Poverty" 69) in Burma in two scenes; in one of them, Shin-Hong is greeted by his friend who "[holds] a toy gun to his head, mocking a shooting" (68); in another, a group of children is seen shooting one another with toy guns, and they "all play dead on the ground" (69).

[63] 2011 is also the year when Burmese independent directors/curators Thu Thu Shein and Thaiddhi kicked off the Wathann Film Festival in Yangon (the first of its kind in Burma) right after the political reforms. Midi Z's short *The Palace on the Sea* was screened at this festival in 2014. Other festivals, such as Memory! International Film Heritage Festival, Human Rights Human Dignity International Film Festival, and &Proud Yangon LGBT Film Festival, were also initiated after the start of Wathann.

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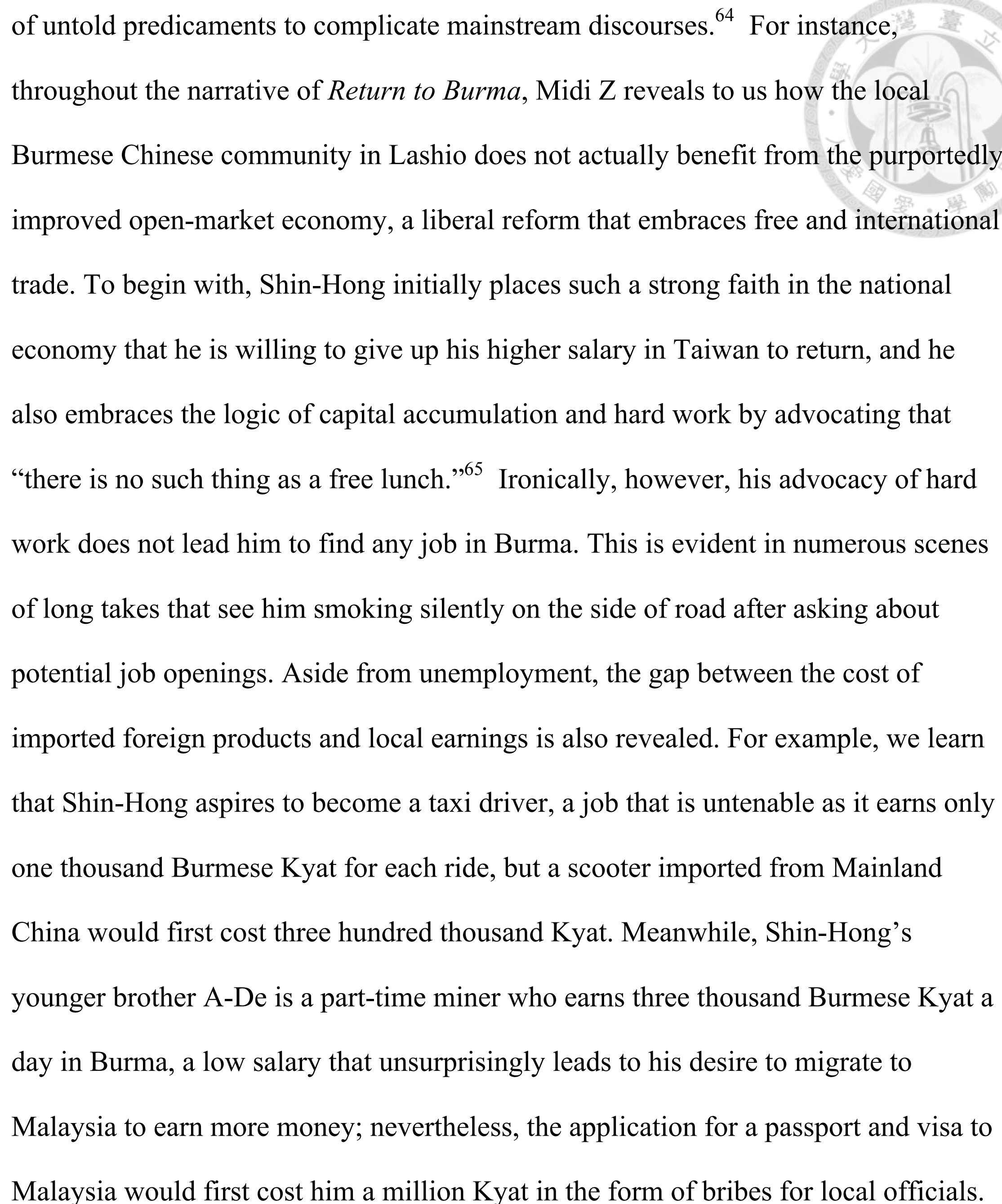

of untold predicaments to complicate mainstream discourses.[64] For instance, throughout the narrative of *Return to Burma*, Midi Z reveals to us how the local Burmese Chinese community in Lashio does not actually benefit from the purportedly improved open-market economy, a liberal reform that embraces free and international trade. To begin with, Shin-Hong initially places such a strong faith in the national economy that he is willing to give up his higher salary in Taiwan to return, and he also embraces the logic of capital accumulation and hard work by advocating that "there is no such thing as a free lunch."[65] Ironically, however, his advocacy of hard work does not lead him to find any job in Burma. This is evident in numerous scenes of long takes that see him smoking silently on the side of road after asking about potential job openings. Aside from unemployment, the gap between the cost of imported foreign products and local earnings is also revealed. For example, we learn that Shin-Hong aspires to become a taxi driver, a job that is untenable as it earns only one thousand Burmese Kyat for each ride, but a scooter imported from Mainland China would first cost three hundred thousand Kyat. Meanwhile, Shin-Hong's younger brother A-De is a part-time miner who earns three thousand Burmese Kyat a day in Burma, a low salary that unsurprisingly leads to his desire to migrate to Malaysia to earn more money; nevertheless, the application for a passport and visa to Malaysia would first cost him a million Kyat in the form of bribes for local officials.

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[64] In his interview with *The Irrawaddy*, Midi Z says that "[*Return to Burma*] is the closest [film] to me because, in 2008, I was actually planning to go back to Burma to run a wedding photo studio. But that plan failed" ("In Person"). Apparently, Midi Z was also influenced by mainstream discourse in Burma about the country's prosperity and future prospects, before he realized that conditions remained harsh for members of the social underclass.

[65] The original idiom in Standard Mandarin is: *tianxiameiyoubaichidewucan* (天下沒有白吃的午餐). Xing-hong uses this idiom when he is invited to his alma mater to share his supposedly successful migrant experiences. Interestingly, he code-switches from Southwestern Mandarin to Standard Mandarin when he is giving the speech, which reminds us of the banner in Japanese at the Taiwanese construction site in the beginning of the film that asks people to wait for the "best thing" that it promises. After Xing-hong's speech, the camera ironically cuts to a befuddled and silent crowd of many elder "students" staring blankly in different directions (or even eating) in a shot reverse shot, hinting that the local underclass as presented in this scene does not necessarily comprehend his logic.

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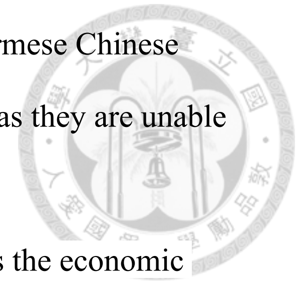

Arguably, both the class and spatial mobility of the lower-class Burmese Chinese characters remain limited under Burma's so-called open economy, as they are unable to buy foreign products, let alone migrate abroad.

While it is indisputable that the narrative of the film represents the economic problems in Burma with ironic contrasts, I also seek to pay attention to the film techniques adopted by Midi Z to challenge the proclaimed benefits of reforms promulgated in official discourses. In the following analysis, I listen carefully to the sounds in the background, and argue that Midi Z successfully creates dramatic tensions and ironies by juxtaposing different discourses circulating in these sounds. For example, in a montage sequence that presents Shin-Hong's journey from Taiwan back to Burma on an airplane, a tuk tuk, and a bus, Midi Z mixes the use of non-diegetic and diegetic sounds from different popular media to juxtapose contrasting viewpoints on the democratic reform. On one hand, several upbeat radio songs sung by a female chorus in Burmese about Burma's newborn democracy can first be heard in the background of this sequence, with optimistic lyrics such as "we freely cast the vote that speaks our mind, adding new power to the democratic nation" and "use the power to unite different ethnic groups, to unite different ethnic groups" (see Figure 3). On the surface, it is tempting to perceive these songs on the radio as diegetic music that is recorded synchronously to realistically present the space that Shin-Hong inhabits on screen, as Wan-jui Wang claims that Midi Z "purposely avoids non-diegetic music and other post-production tricks" (148) throughout all of his films to achieve realism. If we listen carefully, however, we can discover that the songs are actually non-diegetic music, as they are deployed as a sound bridge to be played through separate scenes. This suggests that the music is deliberately inserted by Midi Z not only to realistically document the environment, but also to hint at the subjective mood of Shin-Hong (happy about homecoming) as well as the general atmosphere in

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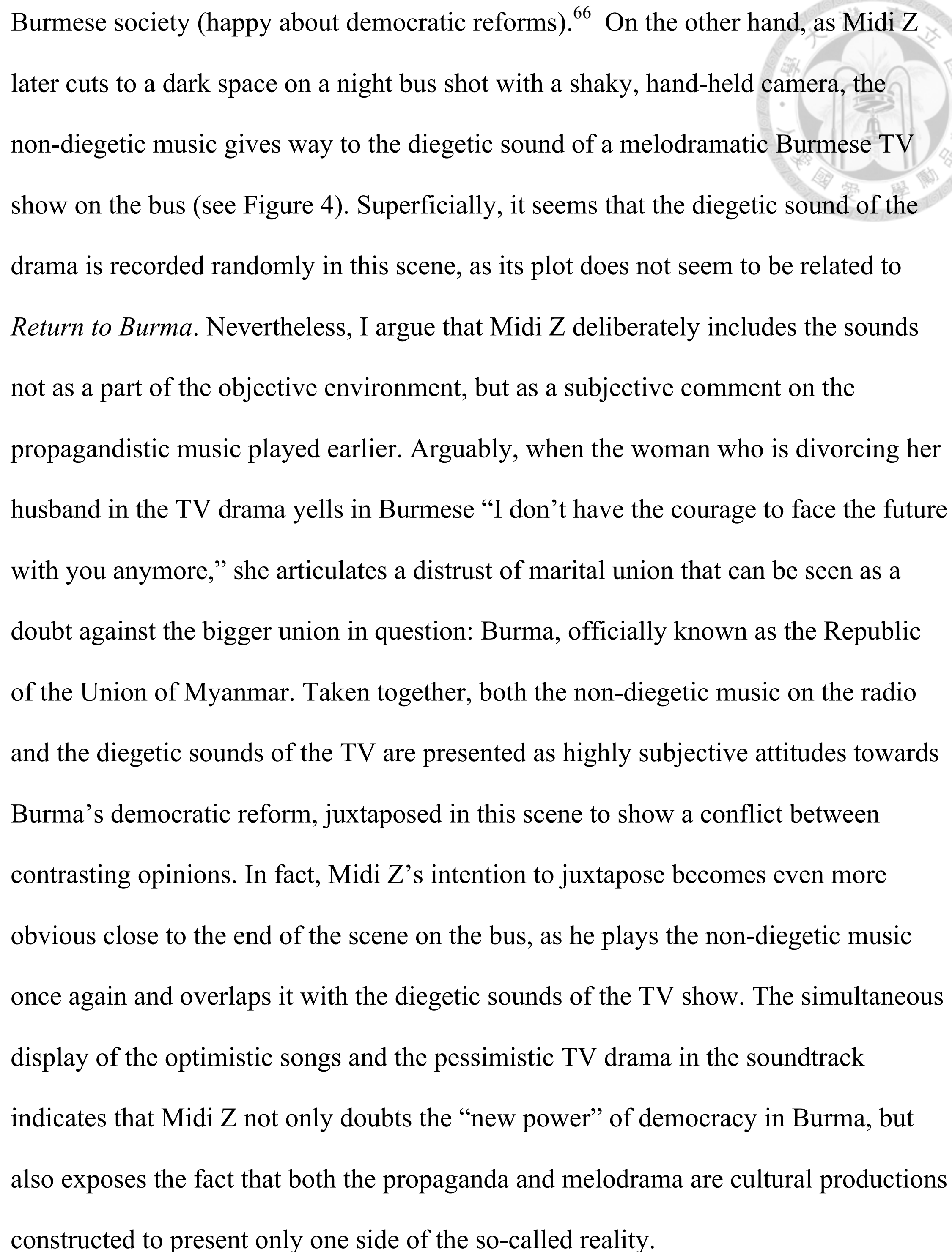

Burmese society (happy about democratic reforms).[66] On the other hand, as Midi Z later cuts to a dark space on a night bus shot with a shaky, hand-held camera, the non-diegetic music gives way to the diegetic sound of a melodramatic Burmese TV show on the bus (see Figure 4). Superficially, it seems that the diegetic sound of the drama is recorded randomly in this scene, as its plot does not seem to be related to *Return to Burma*. Nevertheless, I argue that Midi Z deliberately includes the sounds not as a part of the objective environment, but as a subjective comment on the propagandistic music played earlier. Arguably, when the woman who is divorcing her husband in the TV drama yells in Burmese "I don't have the courage to face the future with you anymore," she articulates a distrust of marital union that can be seen as a doubt against the bigger union in question: Burma, officially known as the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Taken together, both the non-diegetic music on the radio and the diegetic sounds of the TV are presented as highly subjective attitudes towards Burma's democratic reform, juxtaposed in this scene to show a conflict between contrasting opinions. In fact, Midi Z's intention to juxtapose becomes even more obvious close to the end of the scene on the bus, as he plays the non-diegetic music once again and overlaps it with the diegetic sounds of the TV show. The simultaneous display of the optimistic songs and the pessimistic TV drama in the soundtrack indicates that Midi Z not only doubts the "new power" of democracy in Burma, but also exposes the fact that both the propaganda and melodrama are cultural productions constructed to present only one side of the so-called reality.

[66] As Rogers indicates, the subjective feeling introduced by non-diegetic music can often interfere with the sense of realism created by diegetic sound and synchronous recording (2). Stilwell, however, warns against the link of "nondiegetic scores [to] subjectivity and source music to a kind of realistic 'objectivity'" (190). Instead, Stilwell argues, both sounds "diverge from a single point, the point of view/audition/feeling of a character in the diegesis" (191).

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Figure 3: The lyrics of the song: "We freely cast the vote that speaks our mind" (Source: *Return to Burma*)

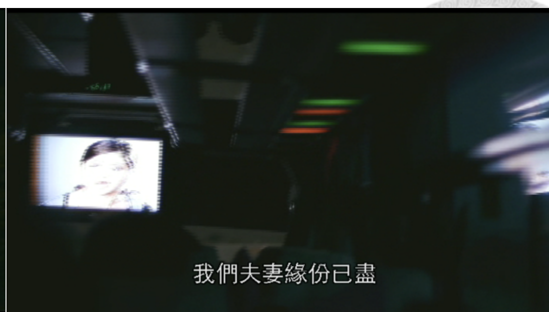

Figure 4: A melodrama that exudes pessimism for (marital) union (Source: *Return to Burma*)

In other parts of the film, Midi Z continues to include sounds and music from different media as reflections of various subjective discourses about Burmese society, while making contrasts through montage to question their claims. Outwardly, Shin-Hong's return to his family seems like a joyous event, especially as he comes across the festive atmosphere of the Chinese New Year. Such optimism is reflected in Shin-Hong's family reunion scene, where we can hear the diegetic sounds of singers in a New Year special program on a TV belting out lyrics in Standard Mandarin such as: "congratulations to everyone who has money in their pocket!" Nevertheless, similar to the propagandistic songs played in the travel sequence, this confidence in the economy reflected on the TV is questioned, as Midi Z also presents the New Year through dismal scenarios. Before the immediate cut to the reunion scene, there are two successive scenes linked together by a sound bridge: first, we witness a chicken being slaughtered silently on site for the reunion banquet; then, a non-diegetic voice singing "when everything is over…" sets in as the chicken gradually dies on screen, before Midi Z cuts to the next scene that shows the singer of the voice continues a Burmese love song with lyrics such as "we can never avoid failure." Not only does the insertion of the butchering scene and the gloomy song contradict the cheerful feeling on TV, but it also echoes or anticipates the pessimistic love songs sung by

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other characters in the film: in two separate scenes, A-De and other Burmese Chinese adolescents sing lyrics such as "it is hard for our lives to come together" or "my dreams always fall apart" in the chorus, expressing a sense of despair over romantic relationships that reminds us of the TV melodrama in the travel sequence. More importantly, compared to the elaborately arranged music on the propagandistic radio and the New Year TV program that expresses faith in Burma's reformed politics and economy, all the pessimistic love songs are performed acoustically without bands to accompany them, exuding a raw quality that reflects the singers' social status. As Wan-jui Wang rightly points out, the pessimism in the love songs "echoes the weak economic system in Burma" (169) and challenges the optimism in mainstream media.

The use of sounds and music as indicators of ironic social and economic gaps is continued in a scene at a local oil refinery that opens with the diegetic sound of a Burmese radio advertisement in the background that boasts, "it is so disturbing that there are so many goldsmiths out there now, [because] I don't know which one to go to." Despite such exaggerated confidence in economic progress, Shin-Hong is told by the owner of the refinery that a single machine imported from China would cost two million Kyat, while a refinery worker's monthly salary is a meagre forty thousand. As if oblivious to this sharp contrast, the owner then continues to brag about the avowedly prosperous economy in Burma, saying that "the electricity is great now. . . . As long as the electricity is fine, everything can develop well in Burma . . . now our Burma is getting better and better."[67] After such one-sided statements, however, the camera suddenly cuts to a closer shot of a refinery worker who is originally in the

[67] Midi Z expresses his doubt concerning the owner's claim that basic electricity is well-established in many parts of the film, as he presents many indoor and outdoor scenes with almost no lighting at night, hinting at the fact that there is no electricity for any lighting equipment. At one point, Shin-Hong complains, "When will the electricity come? Sigh, this electricity provided by the government." The lack of basic infrastructure represented in the film certainly has real-life bases, as Cockett cites a report conducted in 2009 by a team of economists from Harvard University that "a comparison of [official] GDP [reported by Burmese government] and electricity growth [shows] . . . that false reporting has been built into the system and to some extent believed" (159).

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background of the shot, while the voice of the radio advertisement switches to a sad love song sung by the worker that goes: "life without another important half would be empty." Midi Z's intention to critique the positive statement about the economy cannot be clearer. In the next scene, Shin-Hong is seen sitting idly at the side of road smoking in silence in a long take, implying that he is not able to make a living by running a refinery. Once again, it is clear that the love songs in the film not only hint at the downtrodden economy in Burma; they also serve as ironic contrasts to the exaggerated prosperity expressed across different media or dialogues in the film.[68]

Ostensibly, the assortment of sounds from different media such as TV shows, radio broadcasts, and the performances of love songs seems to be recorded randomly to provide a sense of cinematic realism. However, with the analysis above, I argue instead that Midi Z deliberately selects contrasting discourses reflected in these sounds to satirize the enthusiasm for Burmese reforms. In doing so, not only does he "[undercut] the discourse of the political classes and the conventional wisdom of the mass media" (Chanan 149); he also aligns himself with the aesthetics of Third Cinema proposed by Argentinian filmmakers and theorists Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their manifesto "Towards a Third Cinema" in 1969.[69] Pinpointing "[t]he third cinematic language . . . initiated by laborers or common citizens to mostly protest against current policies [introduced by] the authorities" as one of his key inspirations (*Unification* 241), Midi Z's postcolonial critiques are indeed in line with

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[68] The reason for the use of tragic love songs is explained by Midi Z, who points out that "these vocabularies [in love songs] that come from [cases of] betrayal, secret love crush, waiting, and unfaithfulness are mostly choices made after a consideration of money and wealth" (*Unification* 199).

[69] While past scholarship often credits the idea of Third Cinema to the Argentine filmmakers Solanas and Getino, who belonged to the Grupo Cine Liberación, it was in fact a transnational movement linked with other cinematic traditions, influencing many filmmakers from different countries in Latin America at the time. Before the term was coined in 1969, a loose coalition of what was called "New Latin American Cinema" (*El Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano*) was formed. This would include filmmakers such as the Argentine Fernando Birri (often deemed the father of New Latin American Cinema), the Cuban Santiago Álvarez (a friend of Solanas and Getino), and the Brazilian Glauber Rocha (associated with the movement Cinema Novo). Meanwhile, "Towards a Third Cinema" was not the only written document related to the movement. The Cuban director Julio García Espinosa raises the concept of "imperfect cinema," while Rocha also advocates for "the aesthetics of hunger."

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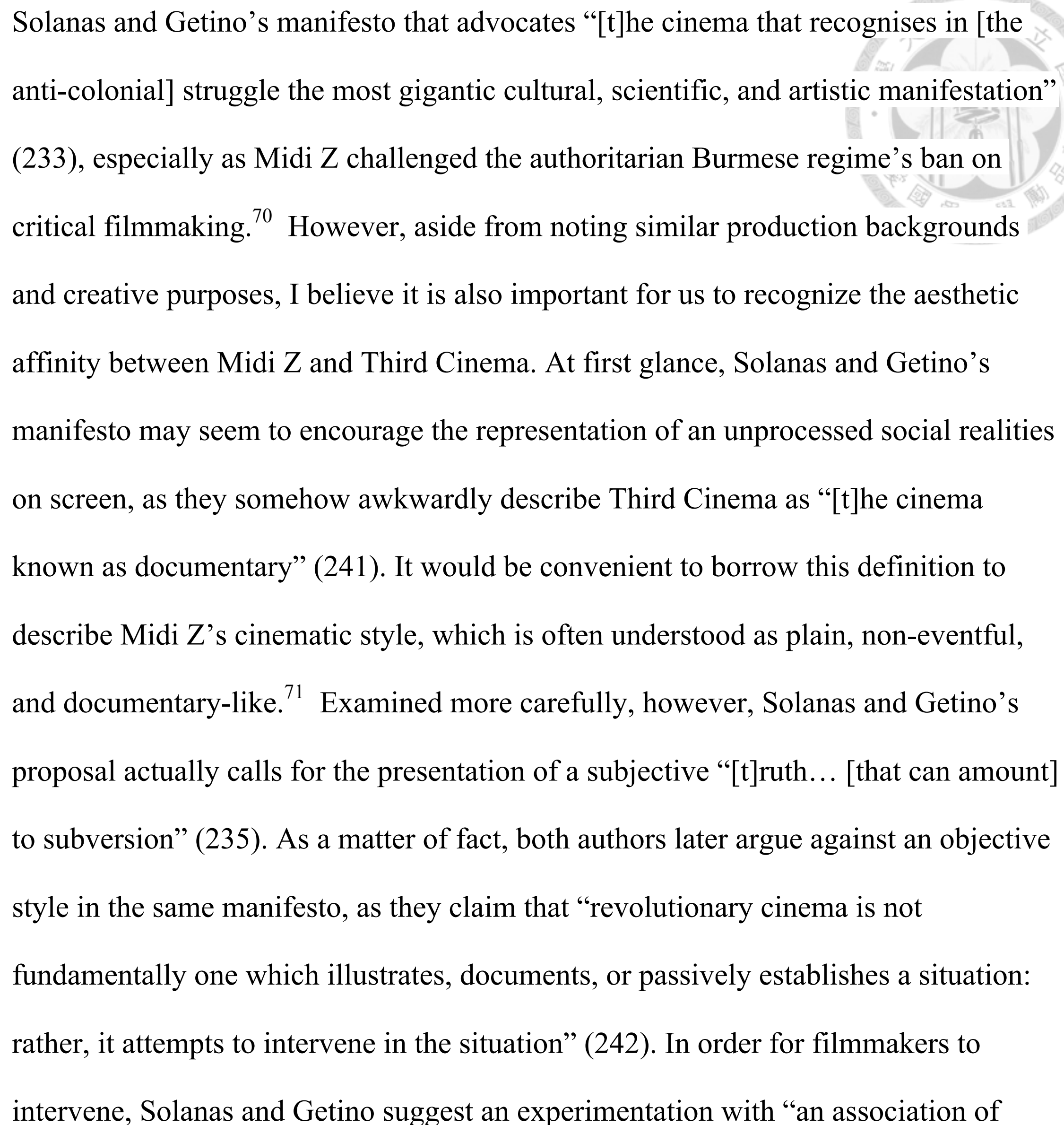

Solanas and Getino's manifesto that advocates "[t]he cinema that recognises in [the anti-colonial] struggle the most gigantic cultural, scientific, and artistic manifestation" (233), especially as Midi Z challenged the authoritarian Burmese regime's ban on critical filmmaking.[70] However, aside from noting similar production backgrounds and creative purposes, I believe it is also important for us to recognize the aesthetic affinity between Midi Z and Third Cinema. At first glance, Solanas and Getino's manifesto may seem to encourage the representation of an unprocessed social realities on screen, as they somehow awkwardly describe Third Cinema as "[t]he cinema known as documentary" (241). It would be convenient to borrow this definition to describe Midi Z's cinematic style, which is often understood as plain, non-eventful, and documentary-like.[71] Examined more carefully, however, Solanas and Getino's proposal actually calls for the presentation of a subjective "[t]ruth… [that can amount] to subversion" (235). As a matter of fact, both authors later argue against an objective style in the same manifesto, as they claim that "revolutionary cinema is not fundamentally one which illustrates, documents, or passively establishes a situation: rather, it attempts to intervene in the situation" (242). In order for filmmakers to intervene, Solanas and Getino suggest an experimentation with "an association of

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[70] Some may question the viability of comparing Third Cinema and Midi Z's films. For instance, Taiwanese film critic Ping-Hao Chen rightly warns: "borrowing the practices of Latin American cinema [to look at] Asian cinema can in reality face many obstructions and problems," hinting at the differences between the film industries in two regions. Indeed, while Third Cinema was born out of "a response to the military coup of 1966 [in Argentina] and the [Argentine Military Government's] repression of artistic freedom and political liberties" (Winn 430), Taiwan did not give birth to a similar film movement during its martial law period. Some may even question Taiwan as a part of the Third World in terms of its economy. However, such differences do not exclude filmmakers in Taiwan from adopting the strategies practiced in Third Cinema. Lamenting that "[Third Cinema] has suffered the contradictory fate of never being treated seriously as a theory" (1), Guneratne cites films from different regions to assert that the influences of Third Cinema are not limited in Latin America, including "unique expression [of history] in the films of the Taiwanese Hou Hsiao-Hsien" (6). Yip, similarly, also links the advocacy of "an alternative cinema" (*lingyizhongdianying* 另一種電影) in the famous "Taiwan New Cinema Manifesto" in 1987 to Third Cinema (65).

[71] For instance, Wan-jui Wang not only links Midi Z's cinematic style to that of Taiwan New Cinema, but also attributes such style to "the reality-recording [*jishi* 紀實] style of documentary" (152), without explaining further the substance of the "reality" that he describes. Other film critics have used phrases such as "film that witnesses the transformation in Burma" (Anna) to describe Midi Z's films.

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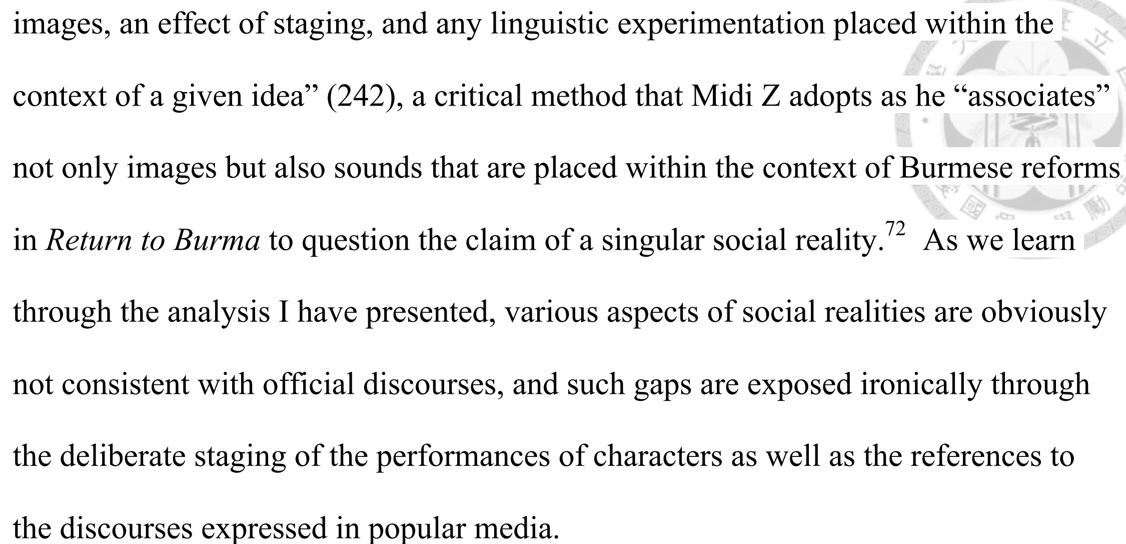

images, an effect of staging, and any linguistic experimentation placed within the context of a given idea" (242), a critical method that Midi Z adopts as he "associates" not only images but also sounds that are placed within the context of Burmese reforms in *Return to Burma* to question the claim of a singular social reality.[72] As we learn through the analysis I have presented, various aspects of social realities are obviously not consistent with official discourses, and such gaps are exposed ironically through the deliberate staging of the performances of characters as well as the references to the discourses expressed in popular media.

The Distancing Effect of Sound

In this chapter, I have first tried to read Midi Z's debut feature film *Return to Burma* as a film that critiques the concept of a Taiwanese dream. However, instead of simply identifying the linguistic dissonance of the ethnic minority characters in the film, I have argued that Midi Z further exposes the silence of the Burmese Chinese characters, complicating the premise of Sinophone studies through cinematic languages that link the film to the concept of accented cinema. Then, in the second half of the chapter, I have explored how *Return to Burma* ironizes Burmese political and economic reforms. Arguing that the film satirizes Burmese mainstream discourses through the presentation of various sounds and music that reflect contrasting discourses from different media, I have contended that Midi Z is following what

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[72] These techniques can be seen in Solanas and Getino's experimental documentary *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968) that challenges the idea of an absolute "reality," which may obscure other aspects of society. For instance, in a sequence where cows are being slaughtered collectively in Argentina, Solanas and Getino deliberately play a non-diegetic American soft jazz song in the background, before they jump to a sequence of images that symbolize American consumerism, such as the photos of Hollywood celebrities or the posters of Coca Cola. The contrast between the gruesome slaughter scene and the laid-back atmosphere of an American commercial lifestyle elicits a strong sense of irony, as the montage hints that the wealth in the First World is in fact built upon the miseries of the Third World. Moreover, the ironic juxtaposition of contrasting social conditions is achieved through intertextual references to multiple mainstream media, such as popular music, commercial advertisement, and documentary footage. Believing that the technique of juxtaposition destabilizes the dominant legitimacy of documentary images, Stam argues that "[t]he spectator [of Third Cinema] is taught to distrust images or, better, to see through them to their underlying structures" (276).

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Solanas and Getino call Third Cinema's techniques of "association" and "staging" that challenge a singular notion of truth in a society. Altogether, I argue that the sounds deployed in the film create a critical effect that allows us to take a distance from a linear perspective of migration that optimistically celebrates the attractive prosperity of the countries of destination—namely Taiwan and Burma in the context of this film—while also questioning uncritical views of realism that see the film purely as an indexical representation of the lived conditions in Burma.[73]

In the final scene of the film, after numerous failed attempts to search for a job in Lashio, Shin-Hong ends up with his friend chopping wood by hand, a primitive form of labor that can be considered worse than the job at the construction site in Taiwan appearing in the beginning of the film. Shot in an extreme long shot, the scene not only shows both characters once again dwarfed by nature—the bush, the trees, and the mountains—in Burma, but it also once again repeats the silence so ubiquitous in the film, as the sound of wood chopping is the only ambient noise we can hear. From the alienating sound of engineering machines in the first scene to the disquieting sound of wood-chopping in the final scene, Midi Z not only hints at a gap between the development in both countries, but also creates a circular, arguably close-ended migrant narrative that critiques both a Taiwanese dream and Burmese reforms, in contrast to linear migrant narratives where migrants are shown to be saved by the host countries. Indeed, the concluding scene vividly demonstrates that, in *Return to Burma*, there is literally no place like home: not in Taiwan, and not in Burma.

[73] Similarly, Hee also analyzes Tsai Ming-liang's *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* with the concept of Sinophone cinema and accented cinema. Taking the prevalent silence of the characters and the insertion of "multilingual Sinophone songs" (115) in the film into account, Hee defines the film as "an accented cinema that tends towards [the featuring of] silence" (110), in contrast to other accented cinemas that feature a variety of accents and languages.

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Chapter Three:

Moving In-Between: *Poor Folk* and Performance

In Chapter Two, I analyzed how Midi Z offers in his debut feature film *Return to Burma* a new perspective both on the idea of a Taiwanese dream and the discourse of political and economic reforms in Burma. As the title of the film suggests, *Return to Burma* focuses on Burmese Chinese return migrant Shin-Hong's journey from Taiwan back to Burma. Contrary to the mainstream imagination of successful migration, it does not provide an optimistic and linear narrative, but offers instead an implicit critique of Taiwan's transnational hegemony and Burma's postcolonial predicaments. With a focus on the sounds deployed in the film, I argued that Midi Z adopts a distancing aesthetic not dissimilar to the tradition of accented cinema and Third Cinema to express a Burmese Chinese migrant's disillusion with both sites.

In this chapter, I examine Midi Z's second feature film *Poor Folk* (2012), one that strays further away from a critical preoccupation with a Taiwanese dream, turning instead towards the issue of transnational tourism, cross-border human trafficking, and illegal drug dealing in and between Burma and Thailand. After the independent and low-budget *Return to Burma* was nominated in the prestigious Tiger Awards Competition at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2012, Midi Z garnered enough attention there to apply for the festival's Hubert Bals Fund for the production of *Poor Folk*.[74] With a bigger budget, the second film becomes more ambitious as well: not only does it cast a

[74] The International Film Festival Rotterdam is well-known for recognizing and presenting independent and experimental films from places or regions not normally represented at international film festivals. The festival's Hubert Bals Fund, named after the founder of the festival Hubertus Bernardus "Huub" Bals who values films from "the so-called Third World," also caters specifically to "filmmakers from Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and parts of Eastern Europe" ("About"). In line with such a tendency, according to Hong, the International Film Festival Rotterdam is the first major international film festival in the West to discover Midi Z's works. Explaining their rationale for the nomination of *Return to Burma*, the Festival describes the film as "[a] rare Tiger [Award nominee] . . . because we don't see many films from Burma at all" ("Return").

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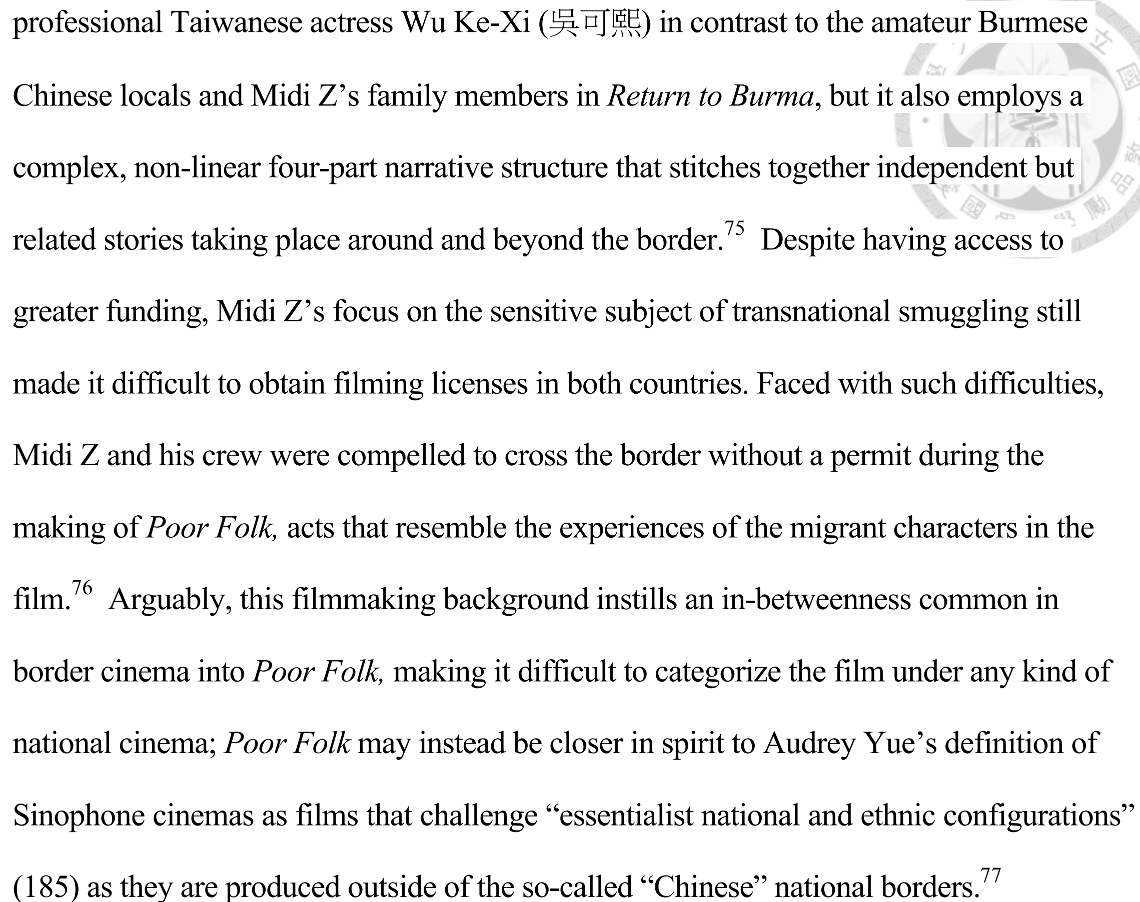

professional Taiwanese actress Wu Ke-Xi (吳可熙) in contrast to the amateur Burmese Chinese locals and Midi Z's family members in *Return to Burma*, but it also employs a complex, non-linear four-part narrative structure that stitches together independent but related stories taking place around and beyond the border.[75] Despite having access to greater funding, Midi Z's focus on the sensitive subject of transnational smuggling still made it difficult to obtain filming licenses in both countries. Faced with such difficulties, Midi Z and his crew were compelled to cross the border without a permit during the making of *Poor Folk,* acts that resemble the experiences of the migrant characters in the film.[76] Arguably, this filmmaking background instills an in-betweenness common in border cinema into *Poor Folk,* making it difficult to categorize the film under any kind of national cinema; *Poor Folk* may instead be closer in spirit to Audrey Yue's definition of Sinophone cinemas as films that challenge "essentialist national and ethnic configurations" (185) as they are produced outside of the so-called "Chinese" national borders.[77]

In order to better understand the significance of such in-betweenness, it is necessary to analyze the acts of border-crossing and the role of the borders represented in *Poor Folk*. Through a look at academic discussions of the border and its relationship with film, I argue in the first part of the chapter that contrary to the common understanding of a border as physically concrete and absolute, it is presented as aesthetically blurry and

[75] The Chinese title of *Poor Folk* is *Qiongren, Liulian, Mayao, Touduke* (窮人，榴槤，麻藥，偷渡客, literally *Poor Folk, Durian, Amphetamine, and Smuggler*), with each phrase referring to the title of a specific section in the film. The four-part structure is similar to Alejandro González Iñárritu's film *Babel* (2005), part of which deals with cultural and political conflict at the US-Mexico border.
[76] As Shi-da Zhang reports, the actors in *Poor Folk* were too "immersed in the drama" (*ruxi* 入戲) during a scene filmed at the Thailand-Burma border, an immersion that prompted them to cross the border from Thailand into Burma and disappear for 20 minutes. This misstep resulted in potential real-life danger, as the crew had to ask the Burmese border patrol to not open fire. It is obvious in this account that there is only a fine line between dramatic performance and real-life action.
[77] Yue's account of what she deems as transnational Sinophone cinemas is underscored by her discussion of Australian-Chinese co-productions in the 2000s. In a similar vein but with a broader scale, Yingjin Zhang challenges the idea of national cinema as defined by Stephen Crofts by looking at the complex political entanglements among Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China, as each site has their own self-sustained, robust film industry that can and often tries to claim the title of Chinese national cinema. Zhang's challenge, however, is still limited by accentuating the national borders of the three states, while a film about ethnic Chinese beyond these national borders such as *Poor Folk* cannot be adequately recognized in such structure.

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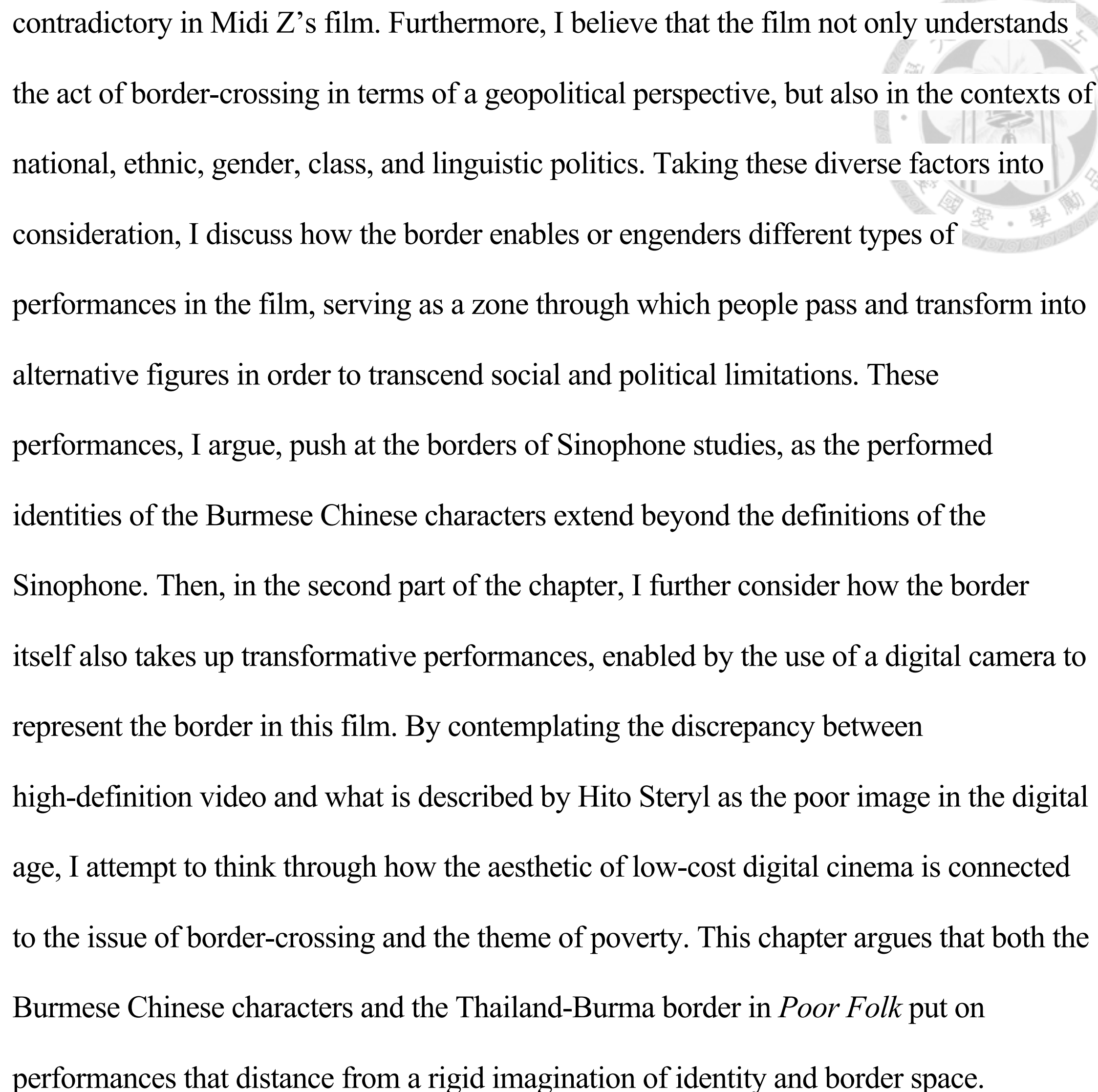

contradictory in Midi Z's film. Furthermore, I believe that the film not only understands the act of border-crossing in terms of a geopolitical perspective, but also in the contexts of national, ethnic, gender, class, and linguistic politics. Taking these diverse factors into consideration, I discuss how the border enables or engenders different types of performances in the film, serving as a zone through which people pass and transform into alternative figures in order to transcend social and political limitations. These performances, I argue, push at the borders of Sinophone studies, as the performed identities of the Burmese Chinese characters extend beyond the definitions of the Sinophone. Then, in the second part of the chapter, I further consider how the border itself also takes up transformative performances, enabled by the use of a digital camera to represent the border in this film. By contemplating the discrepancy between high-definition video and what is described by Hito Steryl as the poor image in the digital age, I attempt to think through how the aesthetic of low-cost digital cinema is connected to the issue of border-crossing and the theme of poverty. This chapter argues that both the Burmese Chinese characters and the Thailand-Burma border in *Poor Folk* put on performances that distance from a rigid imagination of identity and border space.

The Performance of Identity: Transforming the Migrants

Recent scholarship in border studies has challenged conventional views of borders as static and preordained lines between separate regions or nation states.[78] Now understanding the border itself as an in-between space, scholars from different disciplines have reminded us of the ambiguities of identity formations and the contentions over

[78] Even in studies of Sinophone cinemas, the view of borders as static lines is continued; for instance, in what he calls "the border of the Sinophone" (57), Hee sees the border as "a reality, which is given a sacred absoluteness" (58), while "the border of the Sinophone" indicates "a demarcation line with which ethnic Chinese outside of China . . . define [the understanding] that overseas Chinese are no longer Chinese" (58). In this chapter, I see the border as an ambiguous zone where what Hee calls "a demarcation line" is not necessarily functioning.

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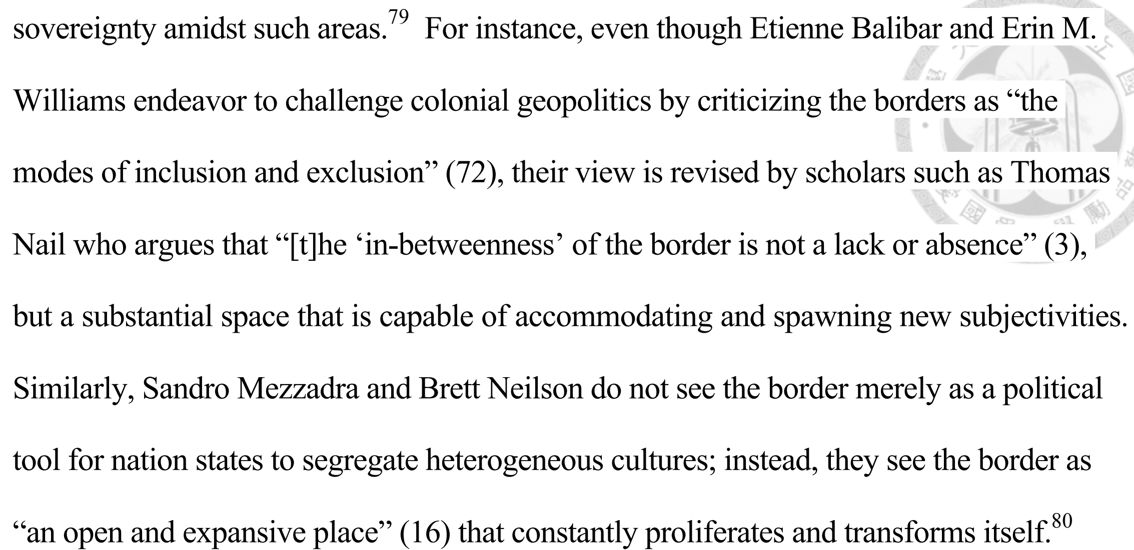

sovereignty amidst such areas.[79] For instance, even though Etienne Balibar and Erin M. Williams endeavor to challenge colonial geopolitics by criticizing the borders as "the modes of inclusion and exclusion" (72), their view is revised by scholars such as Thomas Nail who argues that "[t]he 'in-betweenness' of the border is not a lack or absence" (3), but a substantial space that is capable of accommodating and spawning new subjectivities. Similarly, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson do not see the border merely as a political tool for nation states to segregate heterogeneous cultures; instead, they see the border as "an open and expansive place" (16) that constantly proliferates and transforms itself.[80]

A revised understanding of the border as an open and in-between space is crucial not only in recognizing what Anssi Paasi calls "the hybridity of cultures, and non-essentialist identities" (484) amidst such areas, but also the "symbols . . . that are mobilized ideologically" (485) to represent the lived conditions at the border. That is to say, apart from real-life socio-political phenomena, cultural discourses such as the narratives and aesthetics of border cinema are also conditioned by (and in turn condition) the in-between nature of the border. In line with this point, Hamid Naficy discusses what he calls "border consciousness" in border cinema that is "theoretically against binarism and duality" (31), nailing down several key features of such consciousness that includes the expression of "multifocality, multilinguality, asynchronicity, critical distance, [and] fragmented or multiple subjectivity" (32). While the aspect of multilingual articulation may be analogous to the idea of linguistic dissonance highlighted in Sinophone studies, it is

[79] According to Borsò, the idea of in-between space can be traced in the works of many intellectuals and scholars, including Homi Bhabha's "third space," Stuart Hall's "space of negotiation," Jacques Derrida's "space of différance," Jean-François Lyotard's "space of the different," as well as Michel Foucault's "heterotopia" (775). More specifically in relation to the borders, Borsò also introduces other postcolonial scholars who have dealt with this problem, including Alberto Moreiras, Silviano Santiago, Édouard Glissant, Walter Mignolo, Mary Louise Pratt, and Ana Pizarro (775).

[80] With what they call "border as method," Mezzadra and Neilson observe the phenomenon of the "proliferation" and "heterogenization" of borders (2-3) in the contemporary world. Despite the increasing acts of border-crossing in an age of globalization, they believe such acts only reinforce and multiply borders, which are formulated to manage the increasingly instable labor power and capital. This observation undoubtedly challenges the belief that borders are static lines that can only include and exclude, as "[borders] are often subject to shifting and often unpredictable patterns of mobility" (6) and undergo "metamorphosis and continuous development" (15).

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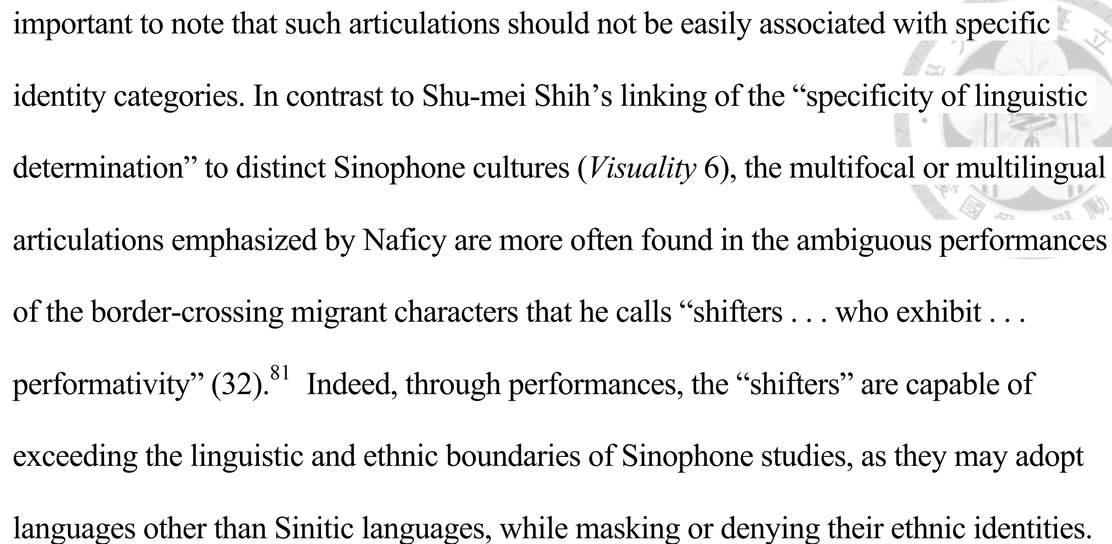

important to note that such articulations should not be easily associated with specific identity categories. In contrast to Shu-mei Shih's linking of the "specificity of linguistic determination" to distinct Sinophone cultures (*Visuality* 6), the multifocal or multilingual articulations emphasized by Naficy are more often found in the ambiguous performances of the border-crossing migrant characters that he calls "shifters . . . who exhibit . . . performativity" (32).[81] Indeed, through performances, the "shifters" are capable of exceeding the linguistic and ethnic boundaries of Sinophone studies, as they may adopt languages other than Sinitic languages, while masking or denying their ethnic identities.

Recently, even though it has been widely observed that there are many ongoing border disputes or acts of border-crossing in many parts of Southeast Asia, including the Thailand-Burma border, little research has been done on border films that center on this region.[82] It is therefore imperative to critically examine the border consciousness as well as the performativity of the migrant characters in Midi Z's *Poor Folk*, a film set both in Bangkok and a border town Dagudi (大谷地, also known as Arunothai in Thai) in Northern Thailand facing Burma. For one thing, Dagudi is one of the many ethnic Chinese or Yunnanese-dominated "refugee villages" (*nanmincun* 難民村) established by the Thai government for the Secret Army during the 1970s, an army whose members

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[81] Naficy elaborates on his use of the term "performativity" by citing various modes of performance that have been analyzed by other scholars, such as "mimicry, passing, posing, camp, drag, sly civility, doubling, and masquerade [that are dependent on] the existence of an original something that is turned into something else, a copy of the original" (270).

[82] While previous studies on border cinema have discussed many aspects of its features, including conservative films that "represent the border as a demarcated boundary" (Dell'Agnese 217) or critical films that allow "the border [to figure] as a space of in-betweenness" (Fregoso 170), most of this research mainly cites Latino/a cinemas vis-à-vis the US-Mexico border as examples, ignoring other cinemas around the world that also deal with site-specific borders beyond the Euro-American context. The gap between the relatively little attention paid to the films about Thailand-Burma border and the high number of such films across different genres is striking. Apart from Hollywood productions such as *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and *Rambo* (2008), or the Chinese blockbuster *Operation Mekong* (2016), art films such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Blissfully Yours* (2002) or documentaries such as Wang Bing's *Ta'ang* (2016) also focus on this region, not to mention the numerous films about the Secret Army mentioned in note 34. Meanwhile, the political and economic reforms in Burma also initiated commercial co-productions between Thailand and Burma in recent years, such as *Myanmar in Love with Bangkok* (2014) and *From Bangkok to Mandalay* (2016), the latter of which is the first film legally shot in Burma by a Thai production crew.

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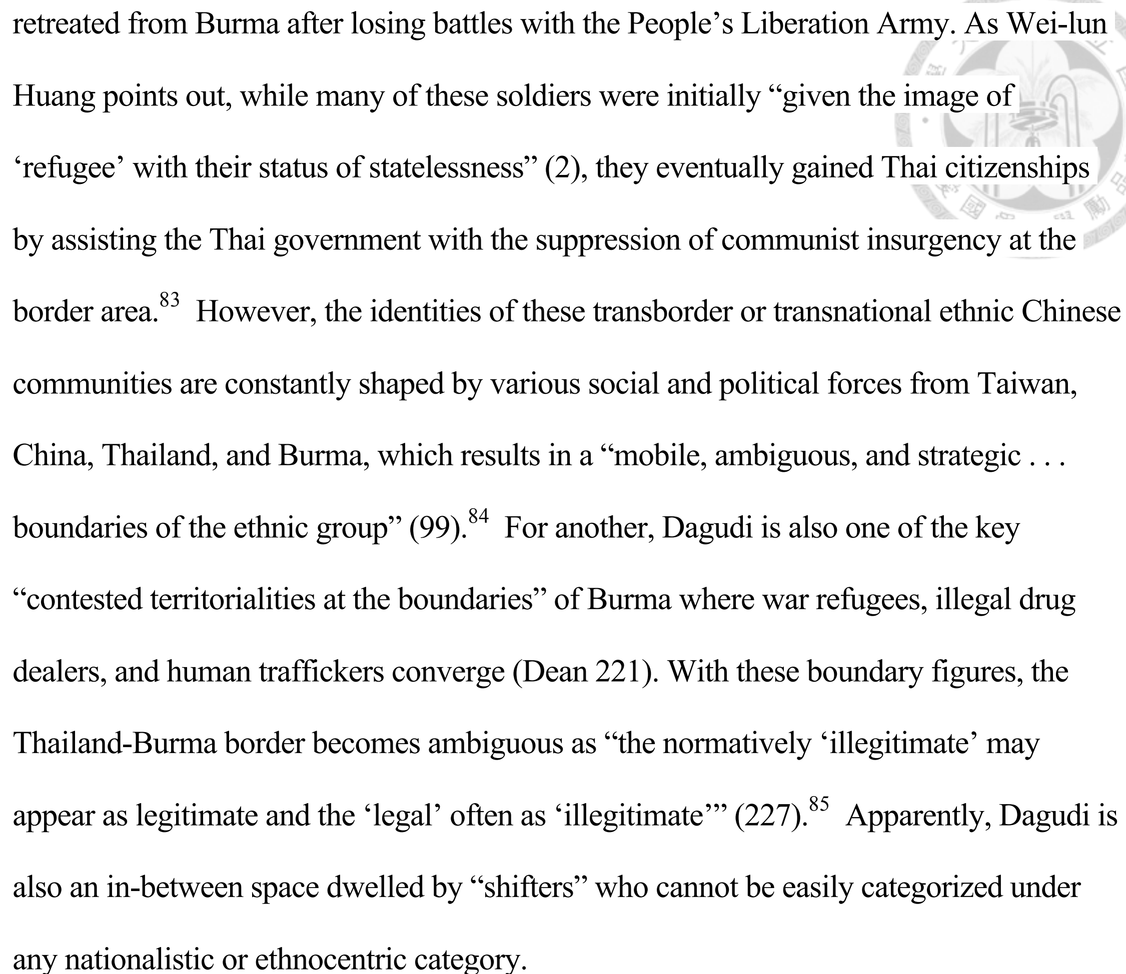

retreated from Burma after losing battles with the People's Liberation Army. As Wei-lun Huang points out, while many of these soldiers were initially "given the image of 'refugee' with their status of statelessness" (2), they eventually gained Thai citizenships by assisting the Thai government with the suppression of communist insurgency at the border area.[83] However, the identities of these transborder or transnational ethnic Chinese communities are constantly shaped by various social and political forces from Taiwan, China, Thailand, and Burma, which results in a "mobile, ambiguous, and strategic . . . boundaries of the ethnic group" (99).[84] For another, Dagudi is also one of the key "contested territorialities at the boundaries" of Burma where war refugees, illegal drug dealers, and human traffickers converge (Dean 221). With these boundary figures, the Thailand-Burma border becomes ambiguous as "the normatively 'illegitimate' may appear as legitimate and the 'legal' often as 'illegitimate'" (227).[85] Apparently, Dagudi is also an in-between space dwelled by "shifters" who cannot be easily categorized under any nationalistic or ethnocentric category.

Expressing his outlook on the border represented in *Poor Folk*, Midi Z suggests that the "[border] is very complicated, which resembles what the Chinese calls '*jianghu*' [江湖, literally rivers and lakes, a metaphor for a martial art community in fictional texts], within which there are military deserters, human traffickers, or drug-dealing gangsters" (Maromi), before he claims that the depiction of these figures at the border in his film

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[83] Deemed as "refugee villages" by the Taiwanese government, Burmese Chinese villages with the members of the Secret Army such as the more famous Mae Salong and Mae Sot in Northwestern Thailand received great attention in Taiwan in the 1980s. According to Hung and Baird, "media coverage [in the 1980s in Taiwan] publicized the 'abandoned' KMT soldiers living in the northern Thai borderland. These stories ignited sympathy within the general public in Taiwan, which started calling for assistance to be extended to the KMT soldiers from both the government and society more generally" (7). Such media attention was, however, partly at the service of maintaining a relationship between Taiwan and Thailand, especially as the two states broke official diplomatic links in 1975.

[84] The use of the term "transborder" comes from Wen-chin Chang's idea of a "transborder popular realm" that describes the transnational civil society formed by Burmese Chinese migrants across the borders of Thailand, Burma, and China. See Wen-chin Chang "Everyday Politics."

[85] The blurred boundary between legal and illegal activities results in a dangerous living condition that compels the residents at the Thailand-Burma border area to constantly hide or transform their identities. This is true even for researchers, as Dean recounts that she had to undergo "identity change" for "security considerations of the informants and [herself]" (229) during her field work.

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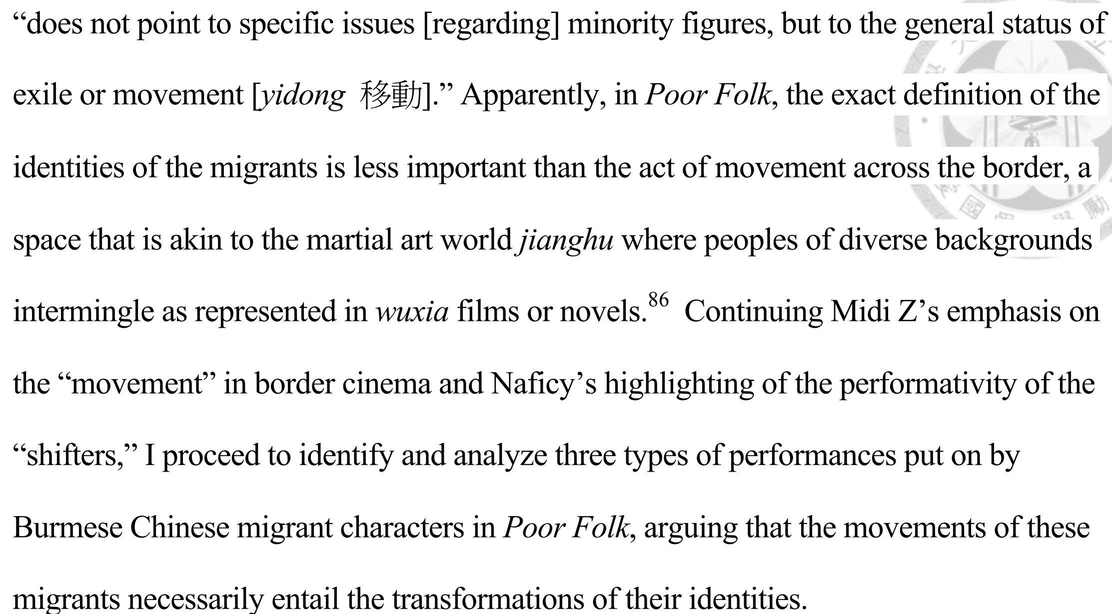

"does not point to specific issues [regarding] minority figures, but to the general status of exile or movement [*yidong* 移動]." Apparently, in *Poor Folk*, the exact definition of the identities of the migrants is less important than the act of movement across the border, a space that is akin to the martial art world *jianghu* where peoples of diverse backgrounds intermingle as represented in *wuxia* films or novels.[86] Continuing Midi Z's emphasis on the "movement" in border cinema and Naficy's highlighting of the performativity of the "shifters," I proceed to identify and analyze three types of performances put on by Burmese Chinese migrant characters in *Poor Folk*, arguing that the movements of these migrants necessarily entail the transformations of their identities.

The four-part narrative of *Poor Folk* starts with the section "Poor Folk," a story of how two Burmese Chinese migrant workers A-Fu and A-Hong (played by Wang Shin-Hong again) strategically perform as local Thai people in Bangkok to survive, even if such ethno-racial passing is not always seamless. Pretending to be a Thai tour guide for ethnic Chinese tourists from China in a scene on a tour bus, A-Fu seemingly denies his ethnic background by mixing accented Mandarin and Thai in his talk, while claiming that a translator may be needed to assist him as he is "after all a local Thai person" whose Mandarin can "sometimes be incomprehensible" (*cibudayi* 詞不達意). With his deliberately ethnicized performance and multilingual dialogues, A-Fu is apparently able to convince the Chinese tourists that he is qualified to "familiarize them with Thailand." While such problematic passing is not entirely exposed in the narrative, we later learn that A-Fu's performance is not a perfect mimicry, as traces of his cultural background are revealed. On the one hand, in the scenes where A-Fu performs "on stage" as a Thai tour guide on the tour bus, Midi Z positions the camera at an eye-level angle facing him,

[86] As I briefly discussed in Chapter One, Shih cites the *wuxia* film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as a prominent example of Sinophone linguistic dissonance; meanwhile, in her analysis of the writer Jin Yong's and director Tsui Hark's martial arts fictions, Shih also discusses the martial arts tradition in relation to gender and ethnic identities. See Shih "Chinese."

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creating a point-of-view shot that indicates the gaze of the Chinese tourists who are seemingly persuaded by A-Fu's ethnicized performance (see Figure 5).[87] On the other hand, when A-Fu goes "off stage," it is revealed that he switches to Southwestern Mandarin to chat with A-Hong and other fellow Burmese Chinese. Breaking away from the use of point-of-view shot, Midi Z positions the camera at a low angle on a spot where no character is sitting in this scene (see Figure 6), implying a voyeuristic peek into the backstage life of the "shifter" A-Fu, who casually mocks his own pretense as an ethnic Thai person by bragging about his knowledge of the Chinese philosopher Zhu Xi.

Figure 5: A-Fu's performance on the bus in front of the tourists (Source: *Poor Folk*)

Figure 6: A-Fu chatting with his countrymen in private (Source: *Poor Folk*)

Far from being affirmations of a purely Thai, Chinese, or Burmese identity, the contrast between A-Fu's performances on stage and off stage signify an ambiguous in-betweenness that flirts with the clear-cut logic of ethnicity and nationality. Moreover, such in-betweenness also challenges Audrey Yue's definition of Sinophone cinemas as the "excentric mediascape of transnational Chineseness" (185), as A-Fu's performances stretch across multiple cultural expressions and languages other than "Chineseness" and Sinitic languages. As Brian Bernards rightly argues, "the multilingual audioscape" in *Poor Folk* requires us to move beyond a sole focus on Sinitic languages to consider a

[87] According to Hayward, the point-of-view shot can also be described as "subjective shots . . . [which] implicate the spectator into the narrative in that she or he identifies with the point of view" (404).

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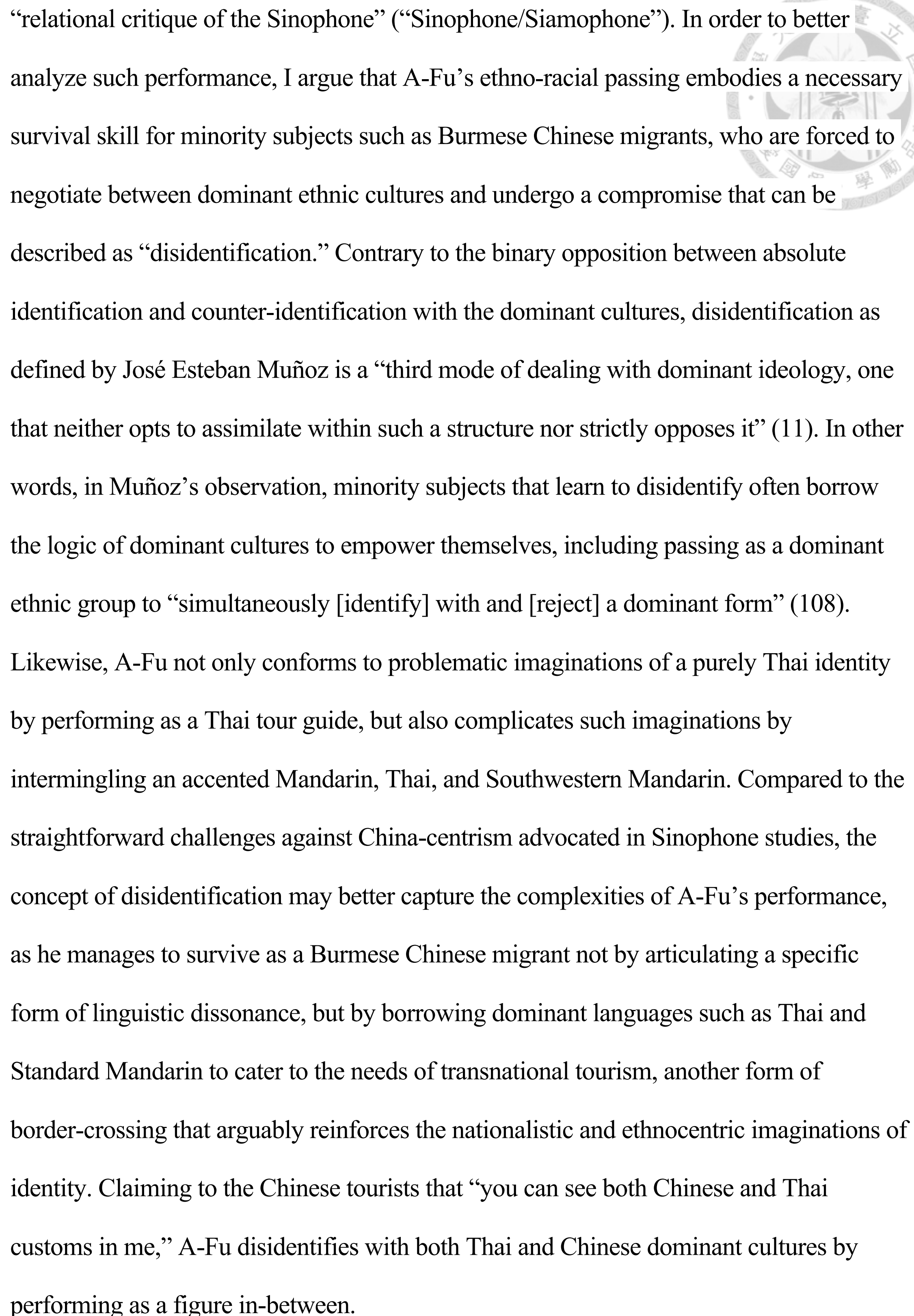

"relational critique of the Sinophone" ("Sinophone/Siamophone"). In order to better analyze such performance, I argue that A-Fu's ethno-racial passing embodies a necessary survival skill for minority subjects such as Burmese Chinese migrants, who are forced to negotiate between dominant ethnic cultures and undergo a compromise that can be described as "disidentification." Contrary to the binary opposition between absolute identification and counter-identification with the dominant cultures, disidentification as defined by José Esteban Muñoz is a "third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it" (11). In other words, in Muñoz's observation, minority subjects that learn to disidentify often borrow the logic of dominant cultures to empower themselves, including passing as a dominant ethnic group to "simultaneously [identify] with and [reject] a dominant form" (108). Likewise, A-Fu not only conforms to problematic imaginations of a purely Thai identity by performing as a Thai tour guide, but also complicates such imaginations by intermingling an accented Mandarin, Thai, and Southwestern Mandarin. Compared to the straightforward challenges against China-centrism advocated in Sinophone studies, the concept of disidentification may better capture the complexities of A-Fu's performance, as he manages to survive as a Burmese Chinese migrant not by articulating a specific form of linguistic dissonance, but by borrowing dominant languages such as Thai and Standard Mandarin to cater to the needs of transnational tourism, another form of border-crossing that arguably reinforces the nationalistic and ethnocentric imaginations of identity. Claiming to the Chinese tourists that "you can see both Chinese and Thai customs in me," A-Fu disidentifies with both Thai and Chinese dominant cultures by performing as a figure in-between.

In addition to the act of disidentification, another mode of performance can be identified in the casting of local people as amateur performers who reprise the roles that they have already been playing in their daily life, producing performances that straddle

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the line between reality and fiction. While it is less surprising that the actor Wang Shin-Hong appears again as the character A-Hong who shares a highly similar name with the protagonist Shin-Hong in *Return to Burma*, it is rather uncanny that A-Fu is played by Midi Z's older brother who also works as a tour guide in Thailand. Meanwhile, in the third section of the film "Amphetamine" where A-Hong and A-Fu try to sell illegal drugs to gangsters at Dagudi to make up for the failure of their tourism business, Midi Z also casts actual gangsters from the border to perform as drug dealers in the film.[88] Paradoxically, however, the casting of real-life figures does not result in a kind of realism that reinforces the persuasiveness of the fictional plot, as the amateur performances of the gangsters in *Poor Folk* are mostly staged as plain conversations without theatrical actions.[89] Captured under natural lighting in medium shots and static long takes, most of the gangsters simply speak their lines (or even remain silent) in a single take without large-scale bodily movements or emotions, minimalistic performances that more closely resemble real-life interviews in low-budget documentaries than stylized sequences in fictional gangster films.[90] Adding to this downplaying of theatricality, Midi Z further eclipses sensational violence when conflicts occur: when A-Hong and A-Fu discuss death threats at the border (with a reference to the infamous Burmese warlord Khun Sa), only sounds of gunshots are heard beyond the frame of the shot; and when A-Hong is later

[88] Midi Z mostly views the local gangsters as real-life "consultants that [told us] drugs are not like this or that, or guns should not be held like this or that" (Liu). That is to say, the amateur actors serve as sources of realism that introduce an indexical authenticity into a fictional plot. However, it should be observed that their performances are still largely managed and conditioned by Midi Z, as he also claims that "I never said they can perform according to their own will. . . . They had to follow the structure of the story." This suggests that even if the amateur performances provide a certain degree of realism, the role of artistic intervention cannot be overlooked.

[89] In Wen-Chin Chang's interview with Midi Z, she mentions that "[t]o help these amateur actors immerse themselves in acting, [Midi Z] listened to their stories and ideas and allowed them to improvise their conversations, guided by a script outline, thereby applying some techniques of documentary filmmaking" ("Poverty" 65).

[90] According to Nichols, several conventions help to distinguish the traditional documentary as a film genre, including "interviews, location sound recording . . . and a reliance on social actors, or people in their everyday roles and activities" (15).

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cheated and about to be executed by the gangsters, Midi Z does not feature dramatic performances within the frame as well, but simply cuts to a black screen.

Arguably, the amateur performers who star as themselves in *Poor Folk* introduce a specific form of realism that does not reinforce but rather complicates the fictional aspect of the film.[91] As the real-life figures are allowed to reinterpret their own daily lives at the border and insert such narratives into a fictional story created by the director, their performances can be understood as what Thomas Waugh calls the "presentational" mode of reenactment that allows the amateur actors to "perform [their] daily life" and "analyze [their] present . . . or remember the past" (82). Such performance is differentiated from the "representational" mode of reenactment that includes elaborately designed setting, artificial lighting, and choreographed performances given by professional performers commonly adopted in commercial biopics or docudramas.[92] While both modes of reenactment can be considered realistic in their own ways, it should be noted that the former achieves its effects through a more natural presentation of the performers and the environment that reduces directorial intervention, while the latter does so through more dramatic acts that support the imaginary vision of the director. With this difference, the presentational reenactments given by amateur performers in *Poor Folk* can be said to introduce a non-dramatic realism that vividly captures the lived conditions at the border, a presentation that can be understood as what Midi Z describes as "a mixture of truth and falseness" (*xuxushishi* 虛虛實實) in his films (Zhao "From Intermediating").

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[91] My discussion of the realism of the presentational mode of reenactment does not equate it with reality; instead, as Kahana reminds us, while reenactment "[adheres] more or less to the details of their subjects' lives" (48), it also indulges "in cinematic liberties of scenic and characterological reconstruction." That is to say, the casting of non-professional actors in their real-life roles should also be seen as a directorial intervention that blurs the boundary between documentary and fictional film.

[92] In video artist Hsu Chia-wei's video installation *Huai Mo Village* (2012) and *Ruins of the Intelligence Bureau* (2015), he also features the storytelling of a real-life former gangster/member of the Secret Army. However, different from both Midi Z's fictional film and the conventional interviews in documentaries, Hsu deliberately exposes all of the filmmaking techniques that are adopted to record the storytelling in his video, including the camera, the lighting, and even the post-editing studio commonly seen in digital film productions.

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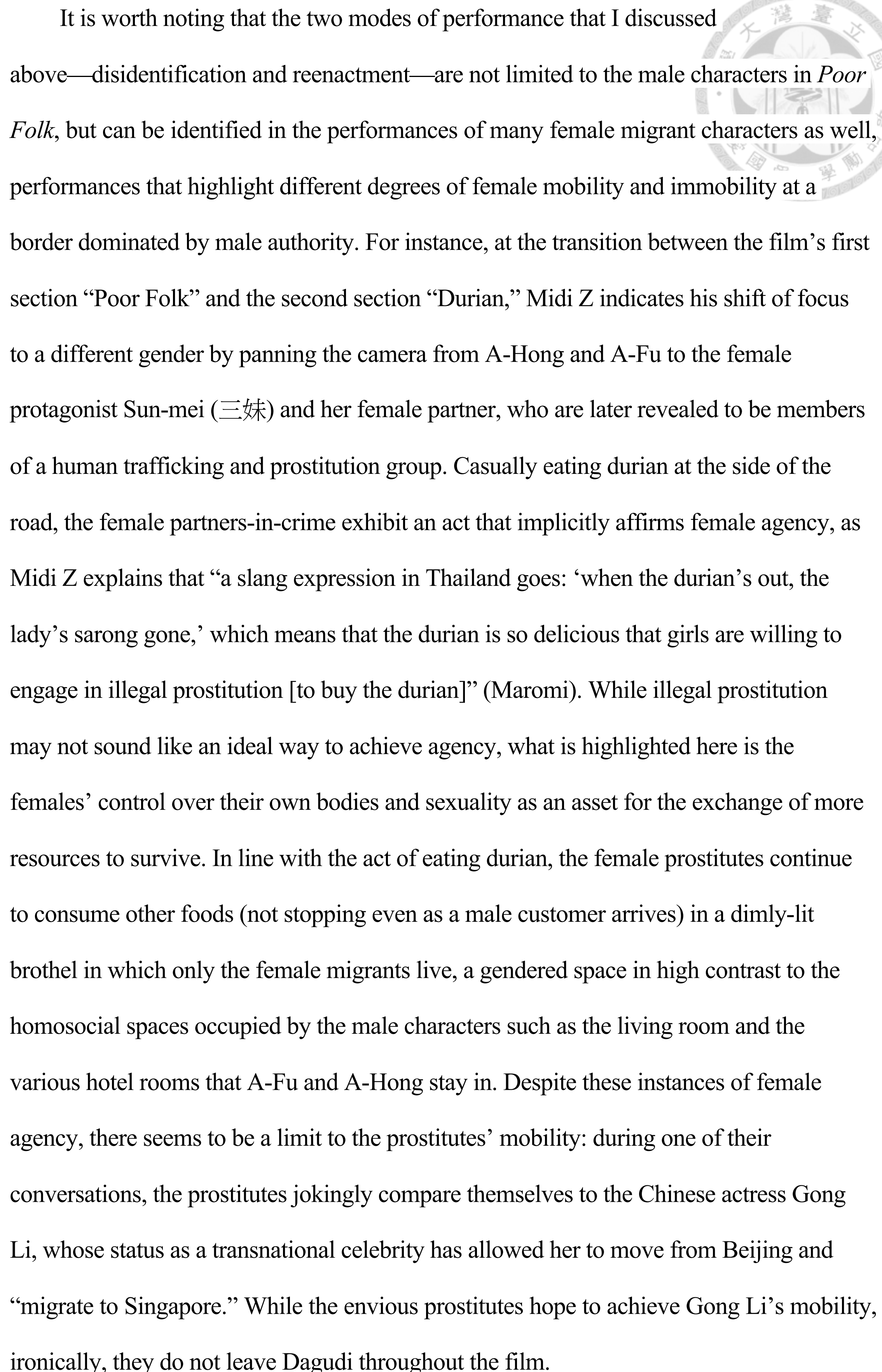

It is worth noting that the two modes of performance that I discussed above—disidentification and reenactment—are not limited to the male characters in *Poor Folk*, but can be identified in the performances of many female migrant characters as well, performances that highlight different degrees of female mobility and immobility at a border dominated by male authority. For instance, at the transition between the film's first section "Poor Folk" and the second section "Durian," Midi Z indicates his shift of focus to a different gender by panning the camera from A-Hong and A-Fu to the female protagonist Sun-mei (三妹) and her female partner, who are later revealed to be members of a human trafficking and prostitution group. Casually eating durian at the side of the road, the female partners-in-crime exhibit an act that implicitly affirms female agency, as Midi Z explains that "a slang expression in Thailand goes: 'when the durian's out, the lady's sarong gone,' which means that the durian is so delicious that girls are willing to engage in illegal prostitution [to buy the durian]" (Maromi). While illegal prostitution may not sound like an ideal way to achieve agency, what is highlighted here is the females' control over their own bodies and sexuality as an asset for the exchange of more resources to survive. In line with the act of eating durian, the female prostitutes continue to consume other foods (not stopping even as a male customer arrives) in a dimly-lit brothel in which only the female migrants live, a gendered space in high contrast to the homosocial spaces occupied by the male characters such as the living room and the various hotel rooms that A-Fu and A-Hong stay in. Despite these instances of female agency, there seems to be a limit to the prostitutes' mobility: during one of their conversations, the prostitutes jokingly compare themselves to the Chinese actress Gong Li, whose status as a transnational celebrity has allowed her to move from Beijing and "migrate to Singapore." While the envious prostitutes hope to achieve Gong Li's mobility, ironically, they do not leave Dagudi throughout the film.

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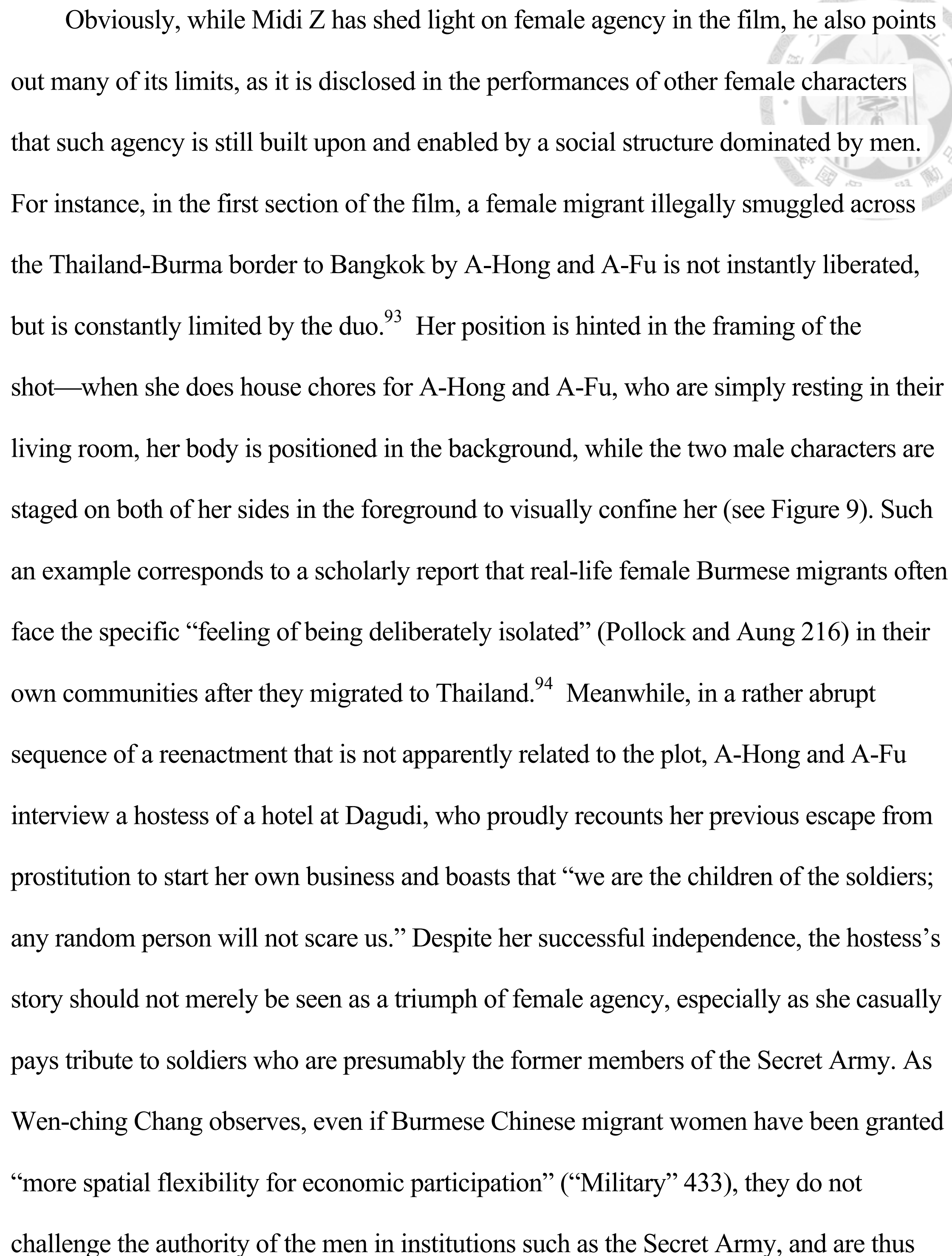

Obviously, while Midi Z has shed light on female agency in the film, he also points out many of its limits, as it is disclosed in the performances of other female characters that such agency is still built upon and enabled by a social structure dominated by men. For instance, in the first section of the film, a female migrant illegally smuggled across the Thailand-Burma border to Bangkok by A-Hong and A-Fu is not instantly liberated, but is constantly limited by the duo.[93] Her position is hinted in the framing of the shot—when she does house chores for A-Hong and A-Fu, who are simply resting in their living room, her body is positioned in the background, while the two male characters are staged on both of her sides in the foreground to visually confine her (see Figure 9). Such an example corresponds to a scholarly report that real-life female Burmese migrants often face the specific "feeling of being deliberately isolated" (Pollock and Aung 216) in their own communities after they migrated to Thailand.[94] Meanwhile, in a rather abrupt sequence of a reenactment that is not apparently related to the plot, A-Hong and A-Fu interview a hostess of a hotel at Dagudi, who proudly recounts her previous escape from prostitution to start her own business and boasts that "we are the children of the soldiers; any random person will not scare us." Despite her successful independence, the hostess's story should not merely be seen as a triumph of female agency, especially as she casually pays tribute to soldiers who are presumably the former members of the Secret Army. As Wen-ching Chang observes, even if Burmese Chinese migrant women have been granted "more spatial flexibility for economic participation" ("Military" 433), they do not challenge the authority of the men in institutions such as the Secret Army, and are thus

[93] A-Fu's sexism is obvious in the film, as he not only criticizes a fellow tour guide who lost his money because he flirts with a female Chinese tourist, but he also exaggerates to the Chinese tourists that a Thai man can marry up to four wives. His sexism is later intermingled with ethnocentrism, as he claims that he has a Chinese wife who "unlike a Thai wife, is more docile."

[94] According to Pollock and Aung, it is already severe that "[t]he vast majority of migrants from Burma/Myanmar arrive in Thailand without any form of documentation" (215); furthermore, for female migrants in particular, they might face "death or injury; the constant fear of arrest and deportation; debt-bonds to employers, and dependency on informal brokers" (216), all of which subject them to the threats and control of a male-dominated authority.

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"still perceived as subordinate to men, who [are] the center of social life" (440).[95] Chang's observation rings true for the film, as a gunman played by Midi Z himself can be seen walking back and forth behind the hostess during their interview, hinting at an ominous male-centered authority working behind female mobility (see Figure 10).

Figure 7: The female migrant is framed in the middle in the background (Source: *Poor Folk*)

Figure 8: A cameo of Midi Z as a gunman in the background (Source: *Poor Folk*)

Apart from the direct influence of male authority, it is obvious that the more dominant females also depend upon the sacrifice of other female figures to achieve their social power, a form of exploitation encouraged by the patriarchal system. Not only do we learn that A-Hong's younger sister is illegally sold to the human trafficking and prostitution group led by Sun-mei and her partners; we also find out later that they cheat young female migrants into the prostitution business in exchange for the opportunity to gain a Taiwan identity card, a vicious cycle facilitated by an invisible man on Sun-mei's phone who is never revealed on the screen. While it is easy to condemn any of the female human traffickers, it is clear that they are also the victims of the broader patriarchal structure. For example, Sun-mei suffers from a form of gendered racism that implicitly forces her to perform as a qualified Taiwanese on the phone with the invisible man in order to get the identity card, as she needs to constantly switch from the use of Southwest

[95] For more on the mobility and immobility of the female Burmese Chinese migrants, see Wen-chin Chang "Transcending."

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Mandarin to Standard Mandarin. Similar to A-Fu, a Burmese Chinese shifter who strategically performs as a Thai that speaks accented Mandarin, Sun-mei also undergoes a process of disidentification by acting as a Taiwanese; however, unlike A-Fu, she is not only subjected to ethnocentrism but is also oppressed by structural sexism, as female mobility is still controlled by the invisible hands of a patriarchal structure.[96]

In the instances that I analyzed above, it is clear that female agency at the border is implicated by veiled power relations, as it is often in negotiation with male-dominated and ethnocentric authority. Such limited agency can be understood with what Tamara Ho calls Burmese female's "flexible tactics of displacement" (3). According to Ho, Burmese female migrant characters who face "gendered displacement" (1) in literature or films often adopt flexible strategies that resist ties "to an essentialized identity or specific location" (93), strategies that specifically "[barter] [their bodies] for mobility" (96).[97] That is to say, in order to break away from the status of immobility, the Burmese female migrants often need to transform or even trade their displaced, sexualized, and ethnicized bodies. Likewise, in *Poor Folk*, the female characters such as Sun-mei can only achieve a certain degree of freedom by acting as prostitutes whose bodies are for sale or as a Taiwanese who speaks in Standard Mandarin.

Altogether, the three modes of performance that I discussed above—namely disidentification, reenactment, and gendered displacement—embody an in-betweenness in *Poor Folk*. Such in-betweenness not only highlights what Wei-lun Huang calls the

[96] Beyond the film, this politics of performance is further complicated by the fact that the character Sun-mei, a Burmese Chinese trying to pass as a Taiwanese, is played by a Taiwanese actress Wu Ke-xi. According to a report by Ni-ping Lin, Wu is constantly misrecognized in Taiwan as a Burmese Chinese because of her persuasive performances, an interpellation that has driven her to state in the media: "but I am a real Taiwanese!" Wu's desire to be recognized as a "real" Taiwanese in real life is in conflict with her persuasive performance as a Burmese Chinese in the film. Such a paradox speaks perfectly to the fact that Wu crosses and blurs the boundaries that define presumably authentic identities.

[97] Specifically, Tamara Ho raises the novel *Irrawaddy Tengo* by Burmese American writer Wendy Law-Yone as an example of the ambivalence of what she calls gendered displacement. Arguing that "[i]n Law-Yone's novels, Burmese-ness operates as a vexed condition of gendered displacement, temporary affiliation, and narrative negotiation against multiple simultaneous fronts" (95), Ho details the difficulty of sacrificing female bodies for mobility.

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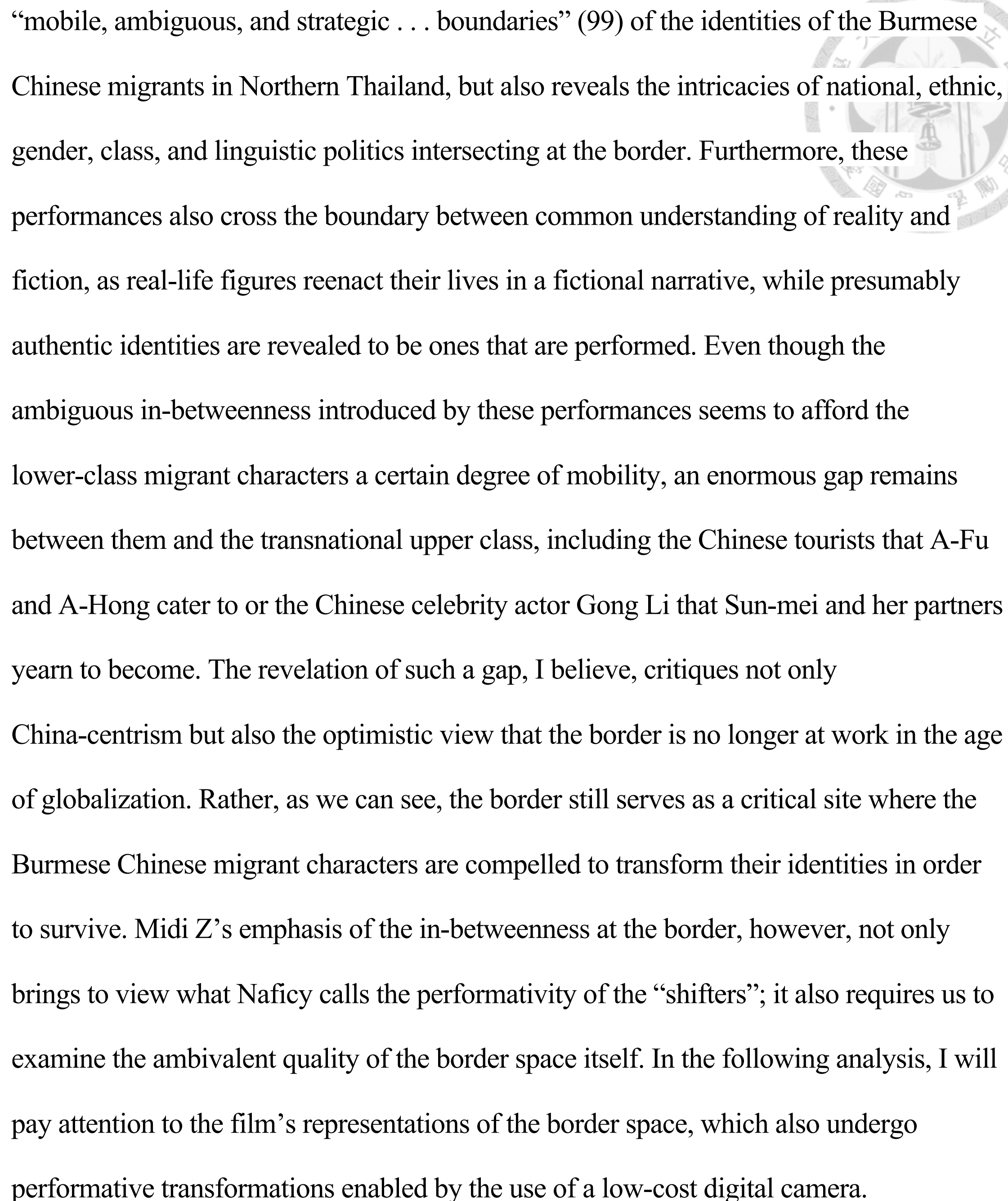

“mobile, ambiguous, and strategic . . . boundaries” (99) of the identities of the Burmese Chinese migrants in Northern Thailand, but also reveals the intricacies of national, ethnic, gender, class, and linguistic politics intersecting at the border. Furthermore, these performances also cross the boundary between common understanding of reality and fiction, as real-life figures reenact their lives in a fictional narrative, while presumably authentic identities are revealed to be ones that are performed. Even though the ambiguous in-betweenness introduced by these performances seems to afford the lower-class migrant characters a certain degree of mobility, an enormous gap remains between them and the transnational upper class, including the Chinese tourists that A-Fu and A-Hong cater to or the Chinese celebrity actor Gong Li that Sun-mei and her partners yearn to become. The revelation of such a gap, I believe, critiques not only China-centrism but also the optimistic view that the border is no longer at work in the age of globalization. Rather, as we can see, the border still serves as a critical site where the Burmese Chinese migrant characters are compelled to transform their identities in order to survive. Midi Z’s emphasis of the in-betweenness at the border, however, not only brings to view what Naficy calls the performativity of the “shifters”; it also requires us to examine the ambivalent quality of the border space itself. In the following analysis, I will pay attention to the film’s representations of the border space, which also undergo performative transformations enabled by the use of a low-cost digital camera.

The Performance of Materiality: Transforming the Border

While I have discussed the ambiguity of the various modes of performance that the migrant characters take on in *Poor Folk*, I have not yet adequately examined the film’s representation of the border as an in-between space. An analysis of the materiality of such space is crucial, especially as the aspect of materiality has so far been widely neglected in the field of Sinophone studies. For instance, even though Melissa Chan seeks to

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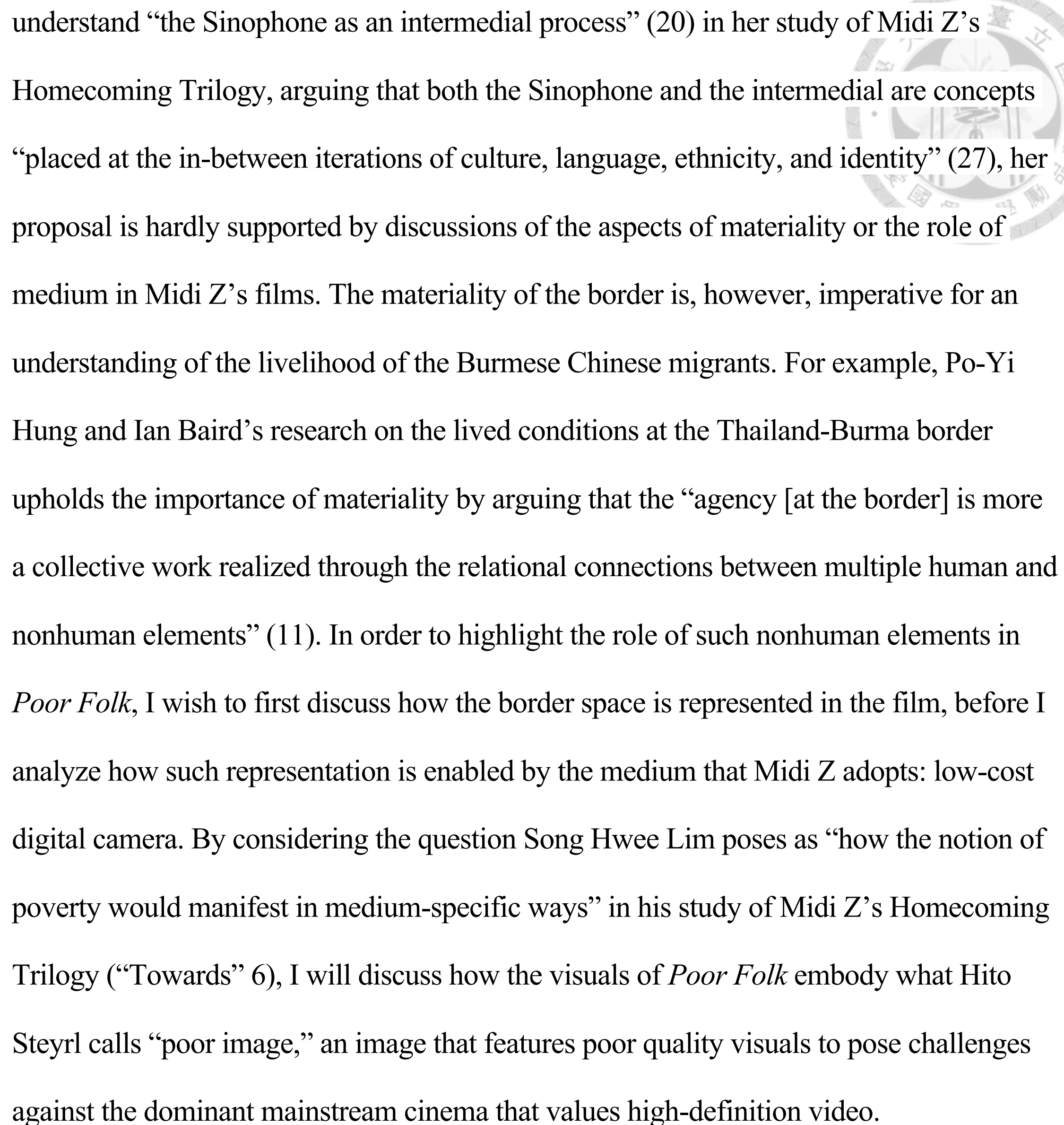

understand "the Sinophone as an intermedial process" (20) in her study of Midi Z's Homecoming Trilogy, arguing that both the Sinophone and the intermedial are concepts "placed at the in-between iterations of culture, language, ethnicity, and identity" (27), her proposal is hardly supported by discussions of the aspects of materiality or the role of medium in Midi Z's films. The materiality of the border is, however, imperative for an understanding of the livelihood of the Burmese Chinese migrants. For example, Po-Yi Hung and Ian Baird's research on the lived conditions at the Thailand-Burma border upholds the importance of materiality by arguing that the "agency [at the border] is more a collective work realized through the relational connections between multiple human and nonhuman elements" (11). In order to highlight the role of such nonhuman elements in *Poor Folk*, I wish to first discuss how the border space is represented in the film, before I analyze how such representation is enabled by the medium that Midi Z adopts: low-cost digital camera. By considering the question Song Hwee Lim poses as "how the notion of poverty would manifest in medium-specific ways" in his study of Midi Z's Homecoming Trilogy ("Towards" 6), I will discuss how the visuals of *Poor Folk* embody what Hito Steyrl calls "poor image," an image that features poor quality visuals to pose challenges against the dominant mainstream cinema that values high-definition video.

Instead of the use of static long takes that stably record the characters' conversations or performances, the border space in *Poor Folk* is mostly represented in many shorter shaky hand-held shots that tend to blur the screen and refuse a clear view of the environment. Immediately in the opening of the first scene, for example, Midi Z employs a hand-held tracking shot to present how A-Fu and A-Hong illegally search for the drugs that they intend to sell to the gangsters in a maze of tall grass at the border. Trembling, blurred, over-exposed, and at times out-of-focus, the hand-held shot embodies the subjective feeling of uncertainty that both characters experience at the border, rather than providing an objective overview of the environment. Similarly, when A-Hong's sister

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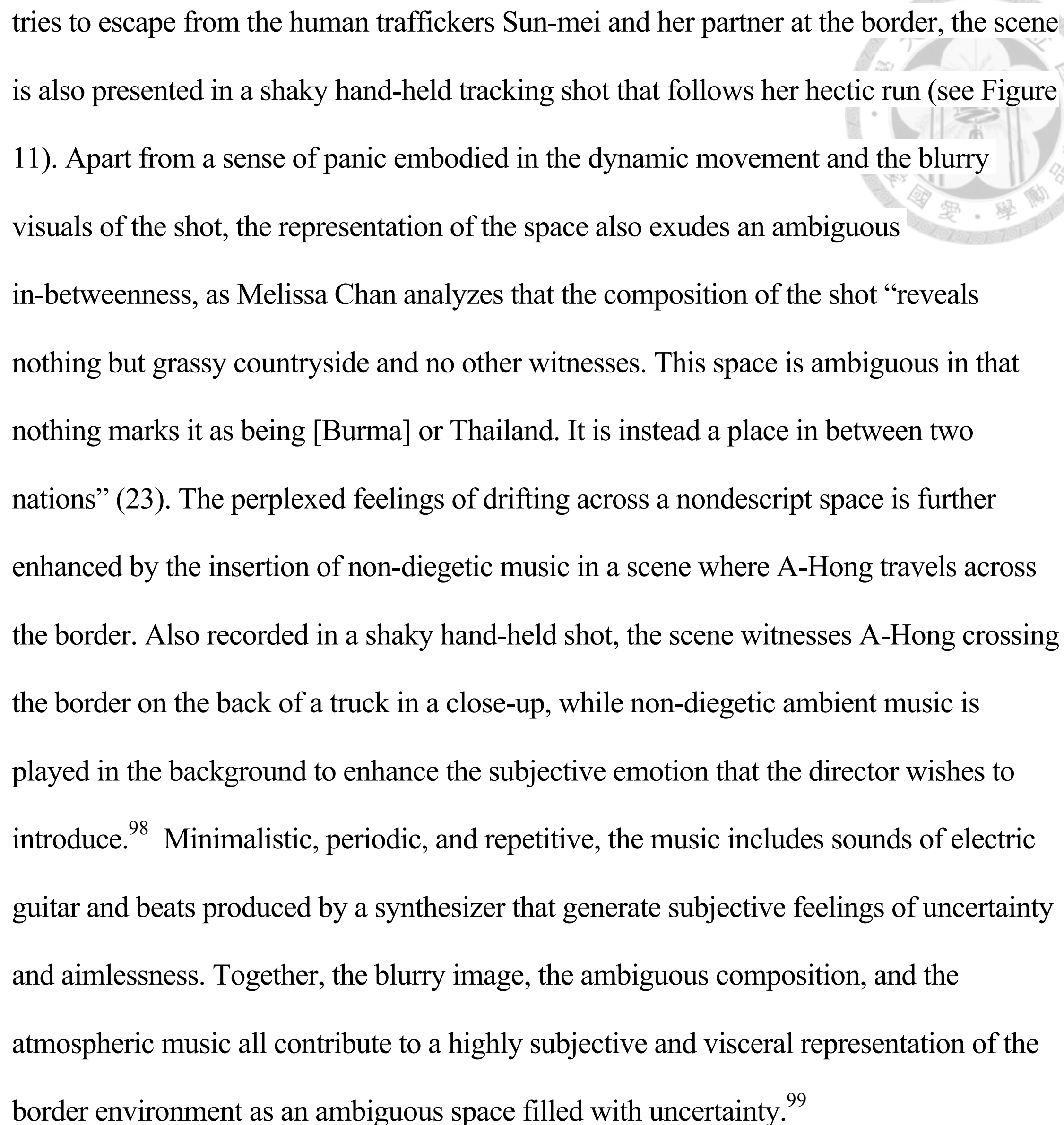

tries to escape from the human traffickers Sun-mei and her partner at the border, the scene is also presented in a shaky hand-held tracking shot that follows her hectic run (see Figure 11). Apart from a sense of panic embodied in the dynamic movement and the blurry visuals of the shot, the representation of the space also exudes an ambiguous in-betweenness, as Melissa Chan analyzes that the composition of the shot "reveals nothing but grassy countryside and no other witnesses. This space is ambiguous in that nothing marks it as being [Burma] or Thailand. It is instead a place in between two nations" (23). The perplexed feelings of drifting across a nondescript space is further enhanced by the insertion of non-diegetic music in a scene where A-Hong travels across the border. Also recorded in a shaky hand-held shot, the scene witnesses A-Hong crossing the border on the back of a truck in a close-up, while non-diegetic ambient music is played in the background to enhance the subjective emotion that the director wishes to introduce.[98] Minimalistic, periodic, and repetitive, the music includes sounds of electric guitar and beats produced by a synthesizer that generate subjective feelings of uncertainty and aimlessness. Together, the blurry image, the ambiguous composition, and the atmospheric music all contribute to a highly subjective and visceral representation of the border environment as an ambiguous space filled with uncertainty.[99]

[98] The concept of ambient music was first proposed by the musician Brian Eno. In Roquet's analysis of Eno's ambient music, he seeks to understand "how these [ambient] sounds can negotiate a 'sense of place' with the environment around them" (364). While it may seem that ambient music attempts to imitate the sounds of the environment, Roquet further argues that such music is not simply background sound, but an artistic creation that suggests "how [the listener] might 'fit in' to an environment" (366). In *Poor Folk*, the ambient music is composed by award-winning Taiwanese musician Sonic Deadhorse, who is known for his productions of electronic ambient music and who also participated in the productions of Midi Z's *The Palace on the Sea* (2014). Meanwhile, the use of electronic music also anticipated the addition of Lim Giong, another prominent figure in the Taiwanese electronic music community, as a music designer in *The Road to Mandalay*.

[99] The mesmerizing atmosphere of the border in the film is in line with Naficy's observation that "exilic border spaces and border crossings" are inscribed both in fixed spaces and "mobile spaces such as vehicles" (257). Nevertheless, unlike Naficy's argument that "[c]laustrophobia pervades the mise-en-scene, shot composition, and often the narratives of films that feature buses and trains as vehicles and symbols of displacement" (257), Midi Z's *Poor Folk* makes use of a cinematic openness to express the uncertainty at the border.

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Figure 9: The trembling camera in the chasing scene (Source: *Poor Folk*)

It is worth noting that such an aesthetic of ambiguity—particularly the trembling video recorded with kinetic movement—is undoubtedly compelled by the use of a cheap and low-quality digital camera, or handicam, a form of equipment adopted to satisfy the need of a low-budget and mobile film production. Unlike the generally depreciative attitude towards the use of such camera in the mainstream film industry, Midi Z embraces it and recounts that, "I bought a non-professional digital camera that costs less than NT$30,000 . . . thanks to digital technology, I can express my stories with this low-budget equipment" (*Unification* 236-37). Apparently, the low cost of a digital camera allows filmmakers such as Midi Z to produce critical works independently without a strong need to attract large-scale investment or to heed the commercial market, a tendency consistent with the rise of what Tilman Baumgärtel calls "Southeast Asian independent cinema" heralded by a "new generation of filmmakers [that] has been empowered by the easy and cheap access to digital video" since the early 2000s (2).[100] Meanwhile, the portable size of such a camera also requires a much smaller crew and permits a higher degree of mobility, characteristics that are advantageous for illegal guerrilla shooting or even

[100] In Baumgärtel's account, many Southeast Asian filmmakers adopt the use of a low-cost digital camera in order to avoid the high cost required to compete in the local commercial film market; instead, they directly screen their films in international film festivals. These directors include "Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Wisit Sasanatieng, Nonzee Nimibutr, and Pen-ek Ratanaruang from Thailand; Yasmin Ahmad, Amir Muhammad, James Lee, and Ho Yuhang from Malaysia; Lav Diaz, Khavn de la Cruz, Raya Martinor [and] Brillante Mendoza from the Philippines; Royston Tan [and] Tan Pin Pin from Singapore; and Riri Riza, Nia Dinata [and] Edwin from Indonesia" (2).

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clandestine monitoring.[101] According to both Midi Z and Wang Shin-Hong, the soldiers stationed at the border never stopped the crew for the lack of filming permit, as the camera was evidently compact enough to avoid being discovered ("Video"). Last but not least, the medium specificity of a digital camera also allows the filmmaker to manage the recorded video more conveniently than film reels. Not only does Midi Z mention the possibility of recording much more audio-visual content without extra cost as long as there remains storage space on the digital memory card; he also brings up the importance of non-linear editing: "if you only shoot with a digital camera, it is not a complete digital content; but if you process it with non-linear editing, if becomes a story after the digital re-creation" ("Low-Cost" 8). Compared to traditional editing method through which the editor has to literally cut and paste sections of film reels, the non-linear editing of digital video allows the editor to randomly access any part of the content without violating them. Arguably, with such convenience, Midi Z is able to produce the complex four-part structure of *Poor Folk* in a short filming schedule of 14 days.

Despite these positive traits, there are also downsides to a low-cost digital camera that could possibly result in limits for the filmmakers. For instance, apart from blurriness, over-exposure, and out-of-focus shots, the video shot with a low-cost camera also comes in low resolution. Such visual quality can be understood as what Hito Steryl calls the "poor image," which she describes as "resolutely compromised—blurred, amateurish, and full of artifacts." Not only does Steryl discuss the material quality of the images produced by a cheap digital camera; she further argues that the "[p]oor images are poor because they are not assigned any value within the class society of images." Indeed, her

[101] In Chan's analysis, she likens Midi Z's films to the prevalence of surveillance cameras in our society, while Midi Z himself describes his technique as "secret photography" (*toupai* 偷拍) in his account of the making of *Huasin Incident* ("Low-Cost" 41). Lim also points out in his research on Midi Z's films that "the significant reduction in the cost of filming equipment with the advent of the digital camera . . . has brought about a democratization of film production at the same time as the digital camera has made trafficking—by definition, a clandestine and cross-border activity—of images much easier" ("Towards" 2).

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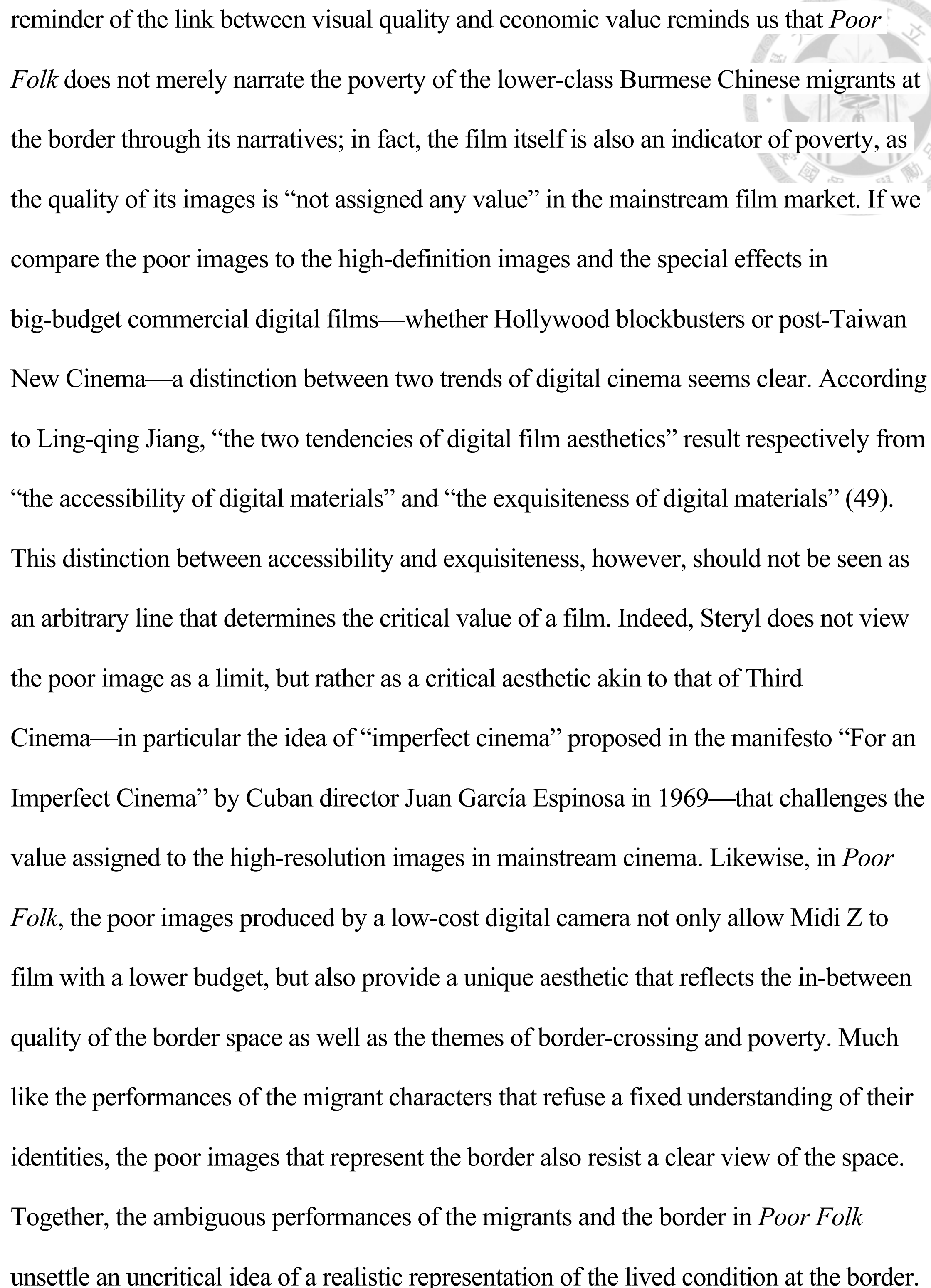

reminder of the link between visual quality and economic value reminds us that *Poor Folk* does not merely narrate the poverty of the lower-class Burmese Chinese migrants at the border through its narratives; in fact, the film itself is also an indicator of poverty, as the quality of its images is "not assigned any value" in the mainstream film market. If we compare the poor images to the high-definition images and the special effects in big-budget commercial digital films—whether Hollywood blockbusters or post-Taiwan New Cinema—a distinction between two trends of digital cinema seems clear. According to Ling-qing Jiang, "the two tendencies of digital film aesthetics" result respectively from "the accessibility of digital materials" and "the exquisiteness of digital materials" (49). This distinction between accessibility and exquisiteness, however, should not be seen as an arbitrary line that determines the critical value of a film. Indeed, Steryl does not view the poor image as a limit, but rather as a critical aesthetic akin to that of Third Cinema—in particular the idea of "imperfect cinema" proposed in the manifesto "For an Imperfect Cinema" by Cuban director Juan García Espinosa in 1969—that challenges the value assigned to the high-resolution images in mainstream cinema. Likewise, in *Poor Folk*, the poor images produced by a low-cost digital camera not only allow Midi Z to film with a lower budget, but also provide a unique aesthetic that reflects the in-between quality of the border space as well as the themes of border-crossing and poverty. Much like the performances of the migrant characters that refuse a fixed understanding of their identities, the poor images that represent the border also resist a clear view of the space. Together, the ambiguous performances of the migrants and the border in *Poor Folk* unsettle an uncritical idea of a realistic representation of the lived condition at the border.

The Distancing Effect of Performance

In this chapter, I have analyzed the in-between nature of the act of border-crossing and the role of borders represented in Midi Z's second feature film *Poor Folk*. Through a

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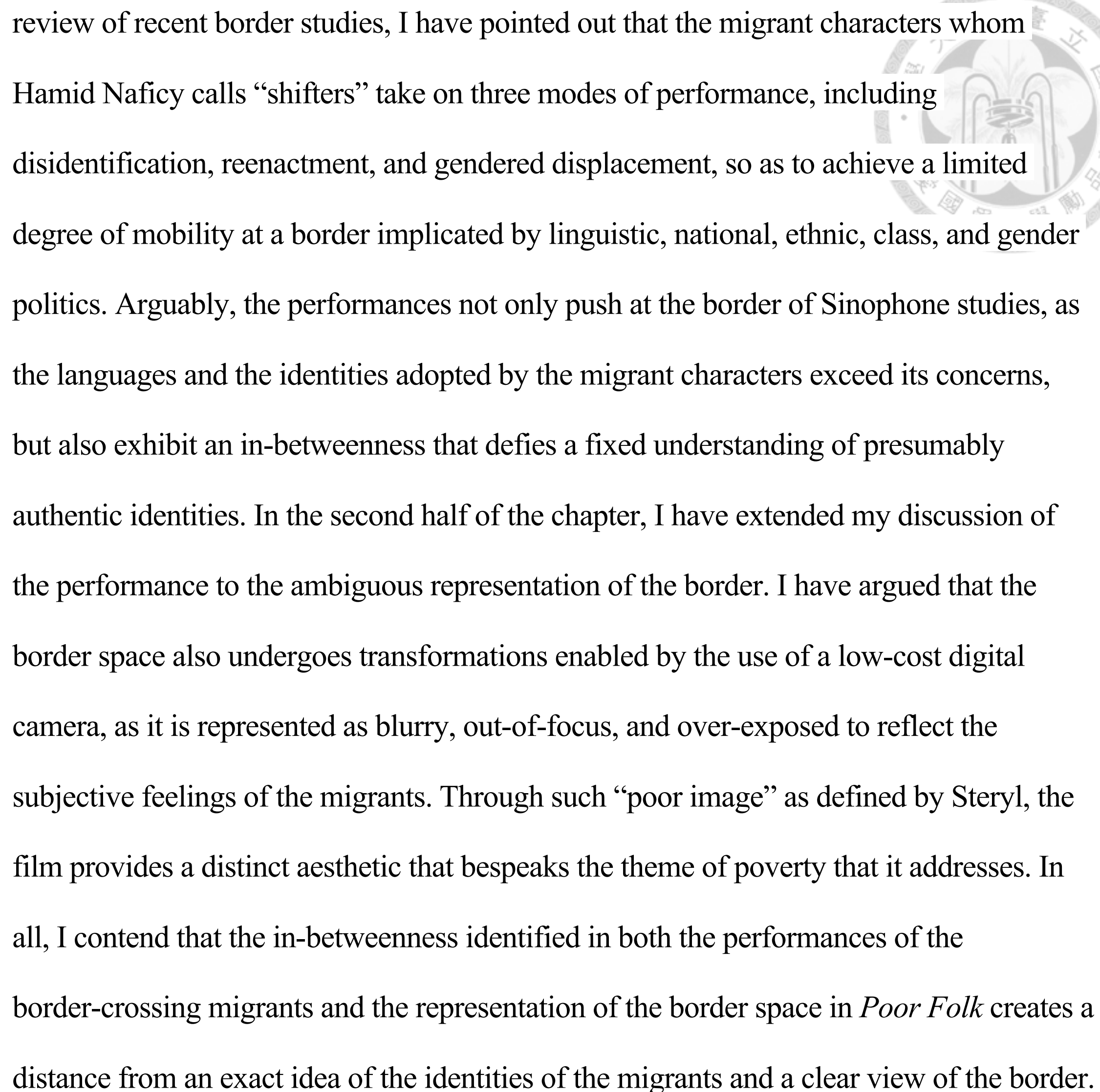

review of recent border studies, I have pointed out that the migrant characters whom Hamid Naficy calls "shifters" take on three modes of performance, including disidentification, reenactment, and gendered displacement, so as to achieve a limited degree of mobility at a border implicated by linguistic, national, ethnic, class, and gender politics. Arguably, the performances not only push at the border of Sinophone studies, as the languages and the identities adopted by the migrant characters exceed its concerns, but also exhibit an in-betweenness that defies a fixed understanding of presumably authentic identities. In the second half of the chapter, I have extended my discussion of the performance to the ambiguous representation of the border. I have argued that the border space also undergoes transformations enabled by the use of a low-cost digital camera, as it is represented as blurry, out-of-focus, and over-exposed to reflect the subjective feelings of the migrants. Through such "poor image" as defined by Steryl, the film provides a distinct aesthetic that bespeaks the theme of poverty that it addresses. In all, I contend that the in-betweenness identified in both the performances of the border-crossing migrants and the representation of the border space in *Poor Folk* creates a distance from an exact idea of the identities of the migrants and a clear view of the border.

In the film's final section "Smuggler," after Sun-mei and her partner have recaptured A-Hong's smuggled sister, they ride a scooter past a crashed, smoking military drone with an indistinct mark "USA" on its shell. Seemingly unrelated to the main plot, this striking scene is presented in an extreme long shot to show the massive scale of the plane, along with non-diegetic electronic ambient music that is also played during the scene of A-Hong's border-crossing to exude feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty. The female smugglers are in apparent awe of this spectacular ruin, as a medium shot shows us the dazed expressions on their faces. Their bewilderment seems to speak for the audience's confusion as well, as a critic Yun-yan Wang comments "[the plane crash] is a magical moment, but also a reflection of reality." Paradoxically, a sense of reality and a sense of

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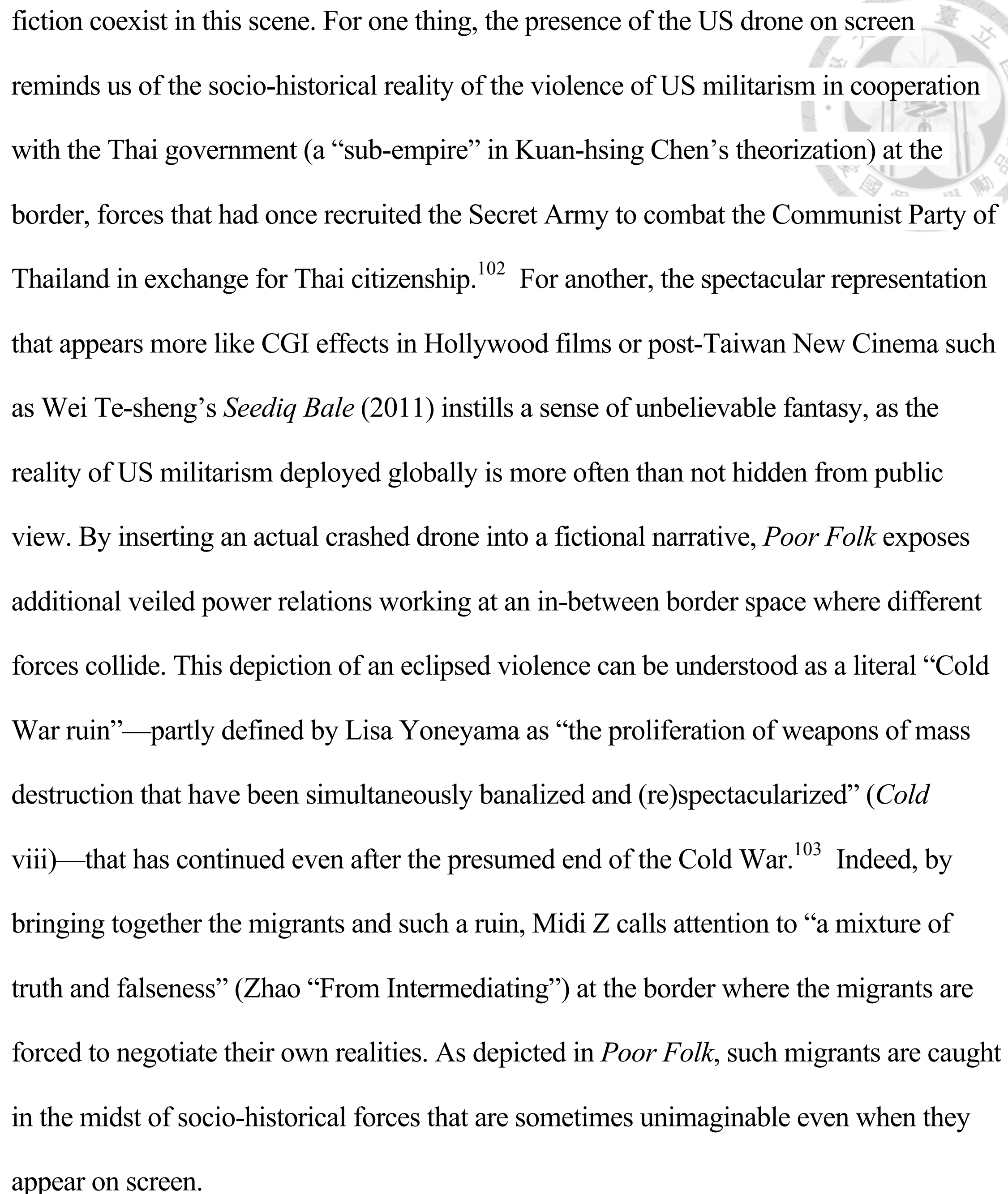

fiction coexist in this scene. For one thing, the presence of the US drone on screen reminds us of the socio-historical reality of the violence of US militarism in cooperation with the Thai government (a "sub-empire" in Kuan-hsing Chen's theorization) at the border, forces that had once recruited the Secret Army to combat the Communist Party of Thailand in exchange for Thai citizenship.[102] For another, the spectacular representation that appears more like CGI effects in Hollywood films or post-Taiwan New Cinema such as Wei Te-sheng's *Seediq Bale* (2011) instills a sense of unbelievable fantasy, as the reality of US militarism deployed globally is more often than not hidden from public view. By inserting an actual crashed drone into a fictional narrative, *Poor Folk* exposes additional veiled power relations working at an in-between border space where different forces collide. This depiction of an eclipsed violence can be understood as a literal "Cold War ruin"—partly defined by Lisa Yoneyama as "the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction that have been simultaneously banalized and (re)spectacularized" (*Cold* viii)—that has continued even after the presumed end of the Cold War.[103] Indeed, by bringing together the migrants and such a ruin, Midi Z calls attention to "a mixture of truth and falseness" (Zhao "From Intermediating") at the border where the migrants are forced to negotiate their own realities. As depicted in *Poor Folk*, such migrants are caught in the midst of socio-historical forces that are sometimes unimaginable even when they appear on screen.

[102] According to Hung and Baird, "the appearance of KMT soldiers in northern Thailand had mobilized competing territorial forces . . . [that include] opium, KMT soldiers, trafficking routes, the defeated and retreated government in Taiwan, United States Cold War policy, [the Communist Party of Thailand] and the Thai government" (5).

[103] Yoneyama's idea is helpful not simply in analyzing a scene of a literal ruin; rather, her notion of "Cold War ruins" calls attention to the "memories of violence" (*Cold* 7) that have and have not been properly addressed. In her studies of the transpacific "post-1990s redress culture," she seeks to call into question "the parameters of what can be known as violence and whose violence, on which bodies, can be addressed and redressed" (8). It is clear that the ongoing process of US militarism at the Thailand-Burma border area results in "memories of violence" that have yet to be properly addressed as such.

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Chapter Four:

Non-Moving: *Ice Poison* and Camera Movement

In Chapter Three, I investigated the in-betweenness in Midi Z's second feature film *Poor Folk*, a film that employs a non-linear four-part narrative to feature border-crossing migrants and the issues of international tourism, human trafficking, as well as drug dealing in and between Burma and Thailand. With a focus on three modes of performance, I discussed how the migrant characters transform themselves and transcend social limitations to different degrees. Moreover, I extended my focus on performance to look at the representation of the border in the film, arguing that in *Poor Folk* the low-cost digital aesthetic described by Hito Steryl as the poor image not only transforms the border into an open and ambiguous space where migrants are caught in a sense of disorientation, but also reflects Midi Z's low-cost productions. I contended that the film provides a distancing aesthetic of performance that avoids a fixed understanding of identities at the border.

In this chapter, I discuss the importance of the last film in Midi Z's Homecoming Trilogy, *Ice Poison* (2014), a film that turns away from his previous emphasis on transnational movement—embodied in characters such as the return migrant in *Return to Burma* or the border-crossing smugglers in *Poor Folk*—to a focus on the limited mobility of two Burmese Chinese underclass characters who are mostly grounded in the city of Lashio. Featuring a more dramatic story that includes a heterosexual romance between an unnamed male scooter driver played by Wang Shin-Hong and a newly operating female drug dealer Sun-mei played by Wu Ke-Xi, *Ice Poison* was commercially welcomed in Taiwan, as it was not only screened in the mainstream theater circuit for more than eight weeks, but its box office was also three times

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higher than the combined money earned by Midi Z's two previous feature films.[104] Despite the apparently mainstream plot, *Ice Poison* remains critically engaged with the postcolonial condition in Burma. Partly continuing the implicit critique of Burma's economic and political reforms in *Return to Burma*, the film vividly reveals different forms of paralysis faced by the two protagonists who are denied the benefits of globalization.[105] Nevertheless, both characters later find a brief moment of consolation and form a short romance by taking and selling an illegal drug called ice poison (also known as methamphetamine), achieving a limited and short-lived agency. It can be said that the dialectical relationship between the mobility and immobility experienced by the characters in *Ice Poison* not only reflects a postcolonial dilemma introduced by the influences of modernization and globalization (Shen "Poison"), but is also connected to the concerns raised in Sinophone studies, as Shu-mei Shih argues that Sinophone cultures are intimately linked to the global expansion of capitalism and Sinitic-language-speaking people (*Visuality* 16).

Investigating this dilemma in the age of globalization, I seek to understand how the Burmese Chinese characters in *Ice Poison* negotiate the restrictions imposed upon them in Burma. I will do so by considering Midi Z's variation of camera movements—including static long takes and shaky tracking shots—as a dialectical approach to mobility and immobility. In contrast to the focus on the advantages of transnational movement proposed by some theories of globalization and scholars of

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[104] *Ice Poison* marked a turning point in Midi Z's career in Taiwan, as it not only won the Best Director award at Taipei Film Festival in 2014, but was also selected as the Taiwanese entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 87th Academy Awards. Moreover, while *Ice Poison* was screened in the mainstream theater circuit and earned more than NT$600,000, *Return to Burma* and *Poor Folk* were only screened at one art-house cinema, Taipei Film House, earning less than NT$170,000. See *2014 Taiwan Cinema Yearbook*; and *2015 Taiwan Cinema Yearbook*.

[105] While *Ice Poison* is unlike the previous two films in its plot, it does reference many themes that have already been touched upon in Midi Z's previous films; the unnamed scooter driver character, for example, reminds us of the character Shin-Hong who wants to buy a motorcycle in *Return to Burma*. Meanwhile, the character Sun-mei is connected to an invisible character A-mei who is rumored to be kidnapped to China in *Return to Burma*, as well as to the character with the same name in *Poor Folk*.

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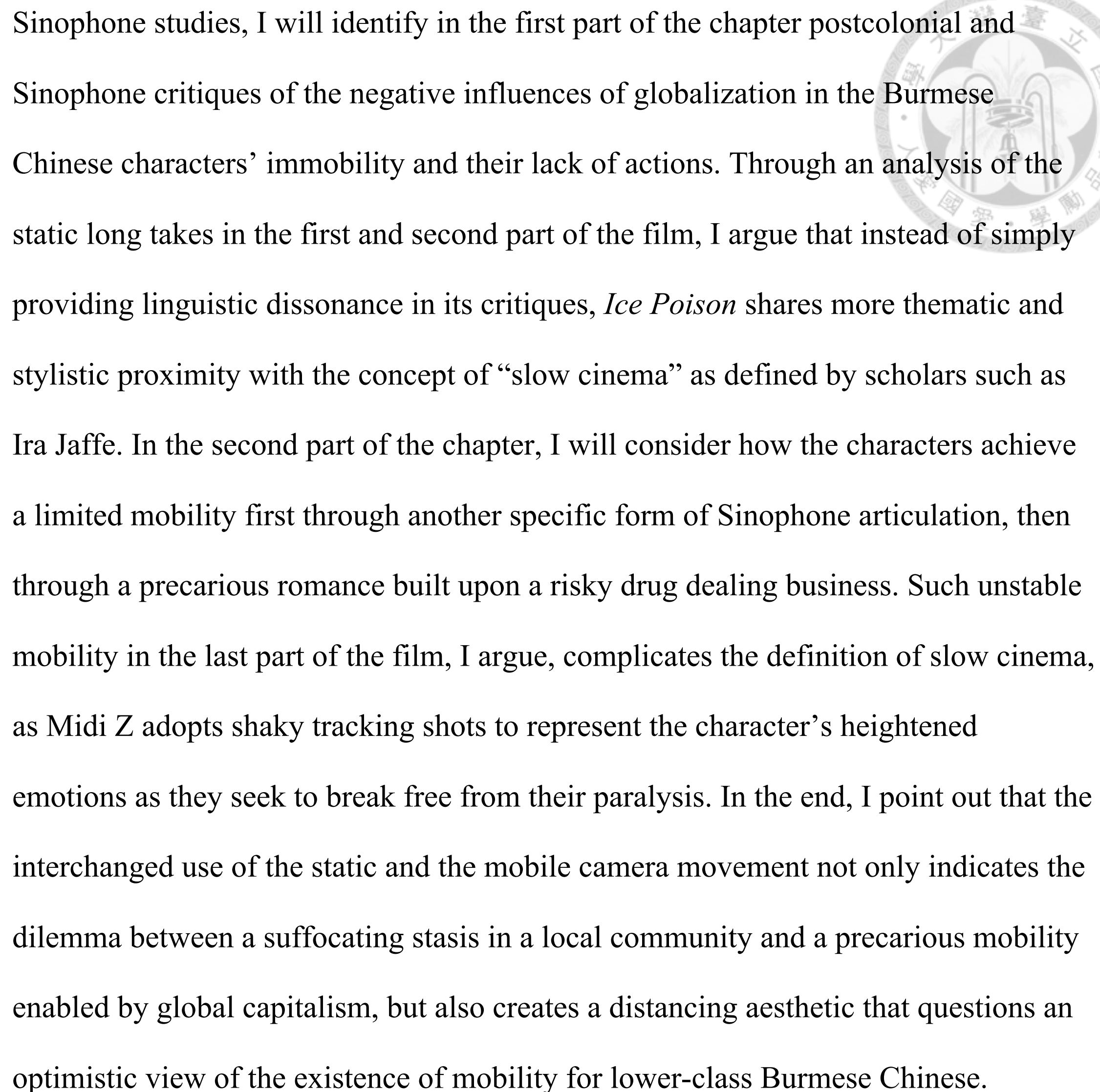

Sinophone studies, I will identify in the first part of the chapter postcolonial and Sinophone critiques of the negative influences of globalization in the Burmese Chinese characters' immobility and their lack of actions. Through an analysis of the static long takes in the first and second part of the film, I argue that instead of simply providing linguistic dissonance in its critiques, *Ice Poison* shares more thematic and stylistic proximity with the concept of "slow cinema" as defined by scholars such as Ira Jaffe. In the second part of the chapter, I will consider how the characters achieve a limited mobility first through another specific form of Sinophone articulation, then through a precarious romance built upon a risky drug dealing business. Such unstable mobility in the last part of the film, I argue, complicates the definition of slow cinema, as Midi Z adopts shaky tracking shots to represent the character's heightened emotions as they seek to break free from their paralysis. In the end, I point out that the interchanged use of the static and the mobile camera movement not only indicates the dilemma between a suffocating stasis in a local community and a precarious mobility enabled by global capitalism, but also creates a distancing aesthetic that questions an optimistic view of the existence of mobility for lower-class Burmese Chinese.

The Stillness of Action: Framing Local Immobility

While much has been said about globalization, most critical discourses about its effects on local communities are inclined towards a strong emphasis on transnational movements. For instance, despite Arjun Appadurai's stress on what he calls "locality" in the age of globalization, he views locality as a "primarily relational and contextual" quality that "[expresses] itself in certain kinds of agency" (178). Meanwhile, even as Saskia Sassen aims to address "geographically immobile" (649) minorities understood as what she calls "peripheralized localities," she still situates these localized minorities in relation to "a politics of places on global networks" (650). In line with

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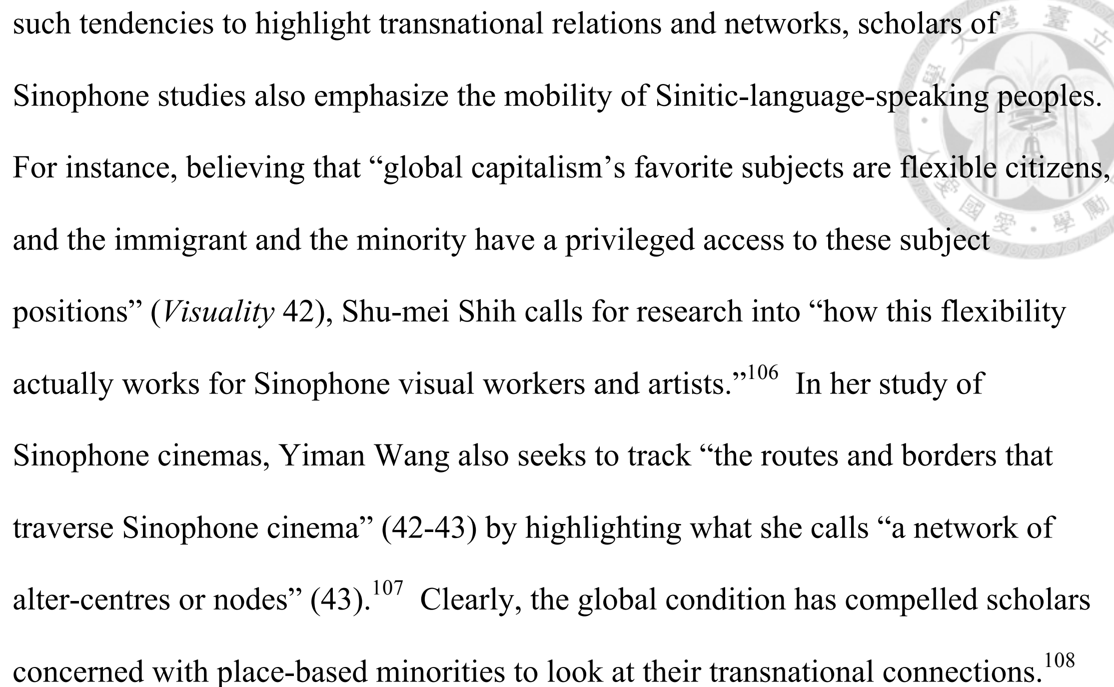

such tendencies to highlight transnational relations and networks, scholars of Sinophone studies also emphasize the mobility of Sinitic-language-speaking peoples. For instance, believing that "global capitalism's favorite subjects are flexible citizens, and the immigrant and the minority have a privileged access to these subject positions" (*Visuality* 42), Shu-mei Shih calls for research into "how this flexibility actually works for Sinophone visual workers and artists."[106] In her study of Sinophone cinemas, Yiman Wang also seeks to track "the routes and borders that traverse Sinophone cinema" (42-43) by highlighting what she calls "a network of alter-centres or nodes" (43).[107] Clearly, the global condition has compelled scholars concerned with place-based minorities to look at their transnational connections.[108]

Even though I do not doubt that possibilities of transnational movements, defined by Shih as "the politicization of . . . mobility" (*Visuality* 190), exist for the lower-class Sinophone minorities, especially as Midi Z himself and his previous two films serve as examples of the transnational movements of the Burmese Chinese people, I also wonder: how do globalization and transnationalism *not* work for Sinophone communities?[109] In other words, in a film such as *Ice Poison* in which the flexibility

[106] Even though Shih, in her conception of Sinophone studies, obviously opposes the upper-class people who benefit the most from globalization and seeks to foreground the minorities whose place-based cultural practices are typically ignored, she still focuses on what she calls "an analysis of flexible subject positions in the transnational context" (45). Using Taiwanese/American director Ang Lee as an example of how "Sinophone articulations, when encountering multiple power dynamics . . . negotiate with diverse nodal points of meaning" (61), Shih's analysis sheds light on the transnational aspect of Sinophone cultures, and Midi Z's life trajectory can certainly be analyzed in this respect. However, in this chapter, as the plot of *Ice Poison* revolves around the topic of immobility, Shih's focus needs to be further expanded and possibly reworked.

[107] Yiman Wang cites Singaporean director Tan Pin Pin's documentary *Singapore GaGa* (2005) as an example of how different languages from multiple sites in the world have come to intersect at a nation later established as Singapore.

[108] Lionnet and Shih argue that "[g]lobalization increasingly favors lateral and nonhierarchical network structures" (2). In light of such network, they call for a study of what they call "minor transnationalism," a "recognition of the creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries" (7).

[109] As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters of my thesis, Midi Z himself enjoys a high degree of mobility, a fact often highlighted in many accounts about his life. For instance, in her discussion of what she calls "Yunnanese migrant's culture of mobility" ("Poverty" 45) embodied by the life trajectory of Midi Z, Wen-Chin Chang claims that "many urban Yunnanese in Burma have progressed economically or even become wealthy in the last two decades and that [Midi Z] himself is a successful

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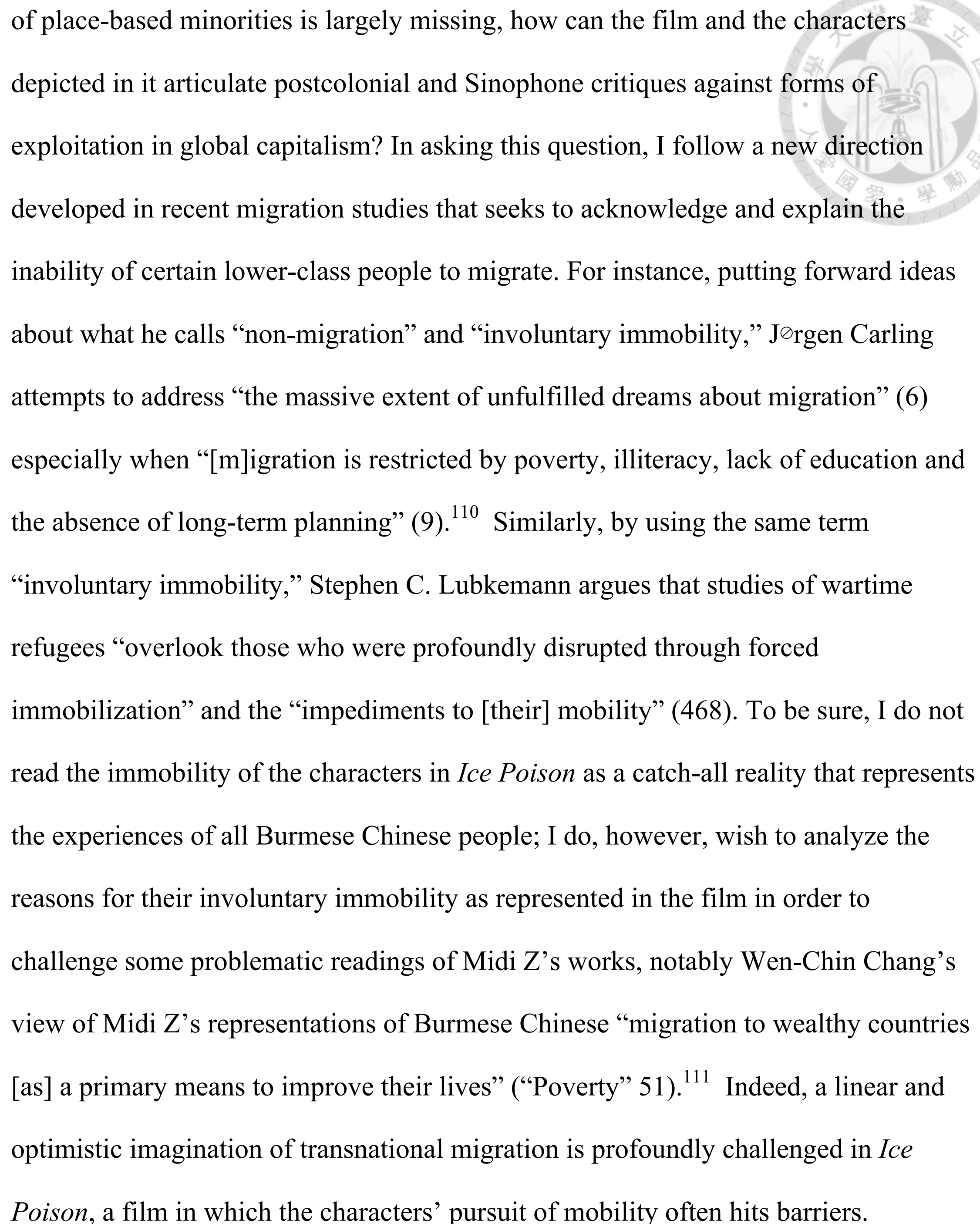

of place-based minorities is largely missing, how can the film and the characters depicted in it articulate postcolonial and Sinophone critiques against forms of exploitation in global capitalism? In asking this question, I follow a new direction developed in recent migration studies that seeks to acknowledge and explain the inability of certain lower-class people to migrate. For instance, putting forward ideas about what he calls "non-migration" and "involuntary immobility," Jørgen Carling attempts to address "the massive extent of unfulfilled dreams about migration" (6) especially when "[m]igration is restricted by poverty, illiteracy, lack of education and the absence of long-term planning" (9).[110] Similarly, by using the same term "involuntary immobility," Stephen C. Lubkemann argues that studies of wartime refugees "overlook those who were profoundly disrupted through forced immobilization" and the "impediments to [their] mobility" (468). To be sure, I do not read the immobility of the characters in *Ice Poison* as a catch-all reality that represents the experiences of all Burmese Chinese people; I do, however, wish to analyze the reasons for their involuntary immobility as represented in the film in order to challenge some problematic readings of Midi Z's works, notably Wen-Chin Chang's view of Midi Z's representations of Burmese Chinese "migration to wealthy countries [as] a primary means to improve their lives" ("Poverty" 51).[111] Indeed, a linear and optimistic imagination of transnational migration is profoundly challenged in *Ice Poison*, a film in which the characters' pursuit of mobility often hits barriers.

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case" (78-79). While this is certainly not wrong in many respects, this celebration of his mobility is contradicted by the plot of *Ice Poison*, a film that discusses the immobility of the Yunnanese in Burma.

[110] The focus on immobility in local communities does not contradict the influences of globalization. Indeed, as Carling points out, "involuntary immobility is a concomitant of globalisation, and a symptom of its contradictory nature" (37). Similarly, Turner also seeks to understand "the paradox that globalization also produces new systems of closure" (289), stating that "the capacities for mobility [in an age of globalization] are unequally shared by any population" (290).

[111] Even though Wen-Chin Chang aims to avoid "essentializing the poor" (46) in her study of the characters in Midi Z's films, which she analyzes "against the backdrop of a more complex, capitalistic, and globalized world" (67), her account still arguably reproduces a mainstream migration narrative that prioritizes an upward progress towards success, with Taiwan as the pinnacle of this journey.

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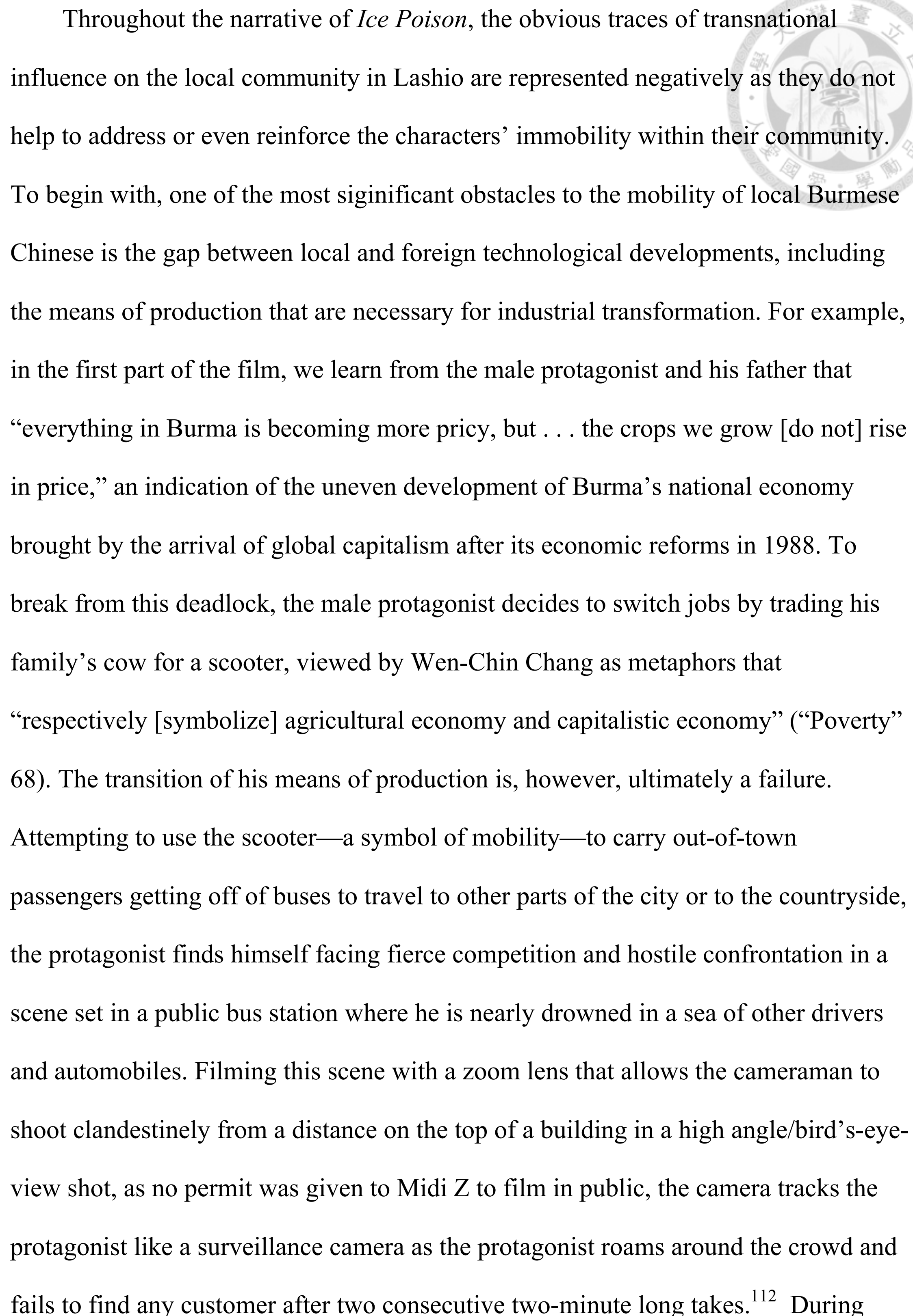

Throughout the narrative of *Ice Poison*, the obvious traces of transnational influence on the local community in Lashio are represented negatively as they do not help to address or even reinforce the characters' immobility within their community. To begin with, one of the most siginificant obstacles to the mobility of local Burmese Chinese is the gap between local and foreign technological developments, including the means of production that are necessary for industrial transformation. For example, in the first part of the film, we learn from the male protagonist and his father that "everything in Burma is becoming more pricy, but . . . the crops we grow [do not] rise in price," an indication of the uneven development of Burma's national economy brought by the arrival of global capitalism after its economic reforms in 1988. To break from this deadlock, the male protagonist decides to switch jobs by trading his family's cow for a scooter, viewed by Wen-Chin Chang as metaphors that "respectively [symbolize] agricultural economy and capitalistic economy" ("Poverty" 68). The transition of his means of production is, however, ultimately a failure. Attempting to use the scooter—a symbol of mobility—to carry out-of-town passengers getting off of buses to travel to other parts of the city or to the countryside, the protagonist finds himself facing fierce competition and hostile confrontation in a scene set in a public bus station where he is nearly drowned in a sea of other drivers and automobiles. Filming this scene with a zoom lens that allows the cameraman to shoot clandestinely from a distance on the top of a building in a high angle/bird's-eye-view shot, as no permit was given to Midi Z to film in public, the camera tracks the protagonist like a surveillance camera as the protagonist roams around the crowd and fails to find any customer after two consecutive two-minute long takes.[112] During

[112] This scene was shot from a distance with a zoom lens, as the distance between the camera and the male protagonist seldom changes even as the protagonist moves around in space. Such distance not only introduces a sense of voyeurism that is perhaps prevalent in a highly monitored society such as Burma, but it also allows Midi Z to blur the boundary between reality and fiction, as the people who interacted with the protagonist in the scene are real-life local people unaware of the camera.

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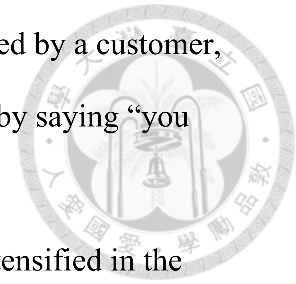

such prolonged wait for business, the protagonist is cruelly dismissed by a customer, who coldly replies to his statement that "I can take you anywhere" by saying "you cannot go anywhere at all!"

The denial of the scooter driver's spatial mobility is further intensified in the portrayals of the underdevelopment of local communication technology required for connections to the global society. Despite Wen-Chin Chang's confidence in the positive impacts of technology such as "[m]odern transportation and electronic media [in Burma] in a globalized world" ("Poverty" 73) as she claims that the Burmese Chinese "learn about China, other Southeast Asian countries and societies further afield" through satellite television and telephone (53-54), such technology has obvious limits in the film. For instance, in the middle part of the film, when Sun-mei needs to call her elder brother working as a migrant worker in Taiwan to inform him of their grandfather's death, not only does she have to make a call at a dimly-lit booth where cellphones are rented, but she also faces a long wait, a poor signal, and a potential disconnection, as the owner of the cellphone informs her that Taiwan and Burma "are too far apart from each other." Despite the short conversation with her brother, the entire scene lasts two minutes in a single long take as Sun-mei spents most of the time waiting for the call to get through to Taiwan. In contrast to this poor connection between Burma and Taiwan, international phone calls from China can ironically reach Burma without much difficulty; such easy access, however, is represented as an undesirable intrusion, as Sun-mei's mother-in-law constantly calls her on a cellphone to demand her return to China to fulfill her duty as a wife, even though Sun-mei is highly reluctant to return. This portrayal of an unwanted connection to China indicates that even if globalization does indeed influence the local underclass in certain cases, such influences often run against their will.

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In fact, the unwelcome connection between Burma and China is not limited to the aspect of communication alone, but is extended throughout the film to address other transnational influences from China. For instance, the iPhone (a symbol of wealth in Burma) delivered to Sun-mei to connect her to her mother-in-law is exposed as “fake stuff made in China,” while an apple imported from China (bigger and more expensive than versions of this fruit grown in Burma) that the male protagonist bought for his father is described as “injected with poisonous drugs.” The critique of Chinese encroachment is further revealed not only in Sun-mei’s gendered displacement—her unhappy marriage to a much older man in China—but also in China’s crackdown on drug dealing at the border area and a tax levied on the importation of Chinese products that inadvertently shut off important ways of making money for lower-class Burmese Chinese people. Most sarcastically, when Sun-mei seeks to retrieve her grandfather’s inherited shroud (*anlaoyi* 安老衣) safeguarded in their ancestor’s family in China for his funeral, she discovers that such a precious item that symbolizes Burmese Chinese people’s tradition is “not being taken good care of” by her supposed blood relative.[113] Obviously, the Burmese Chinese lower-class characters have been negatively influenced by China in terms of technology, gender, class, and even through a deterioration of cultural tradition.

As seen from this brief analysis, both the detrimental influences from other countries and the backward industries of Burma have led to the apparent immobility of the Burmese Chinese characters, as vehicles of mobility and communication technology are both largely ineffective, while forces from China are presented as efficient yet also possibly hazardous. It is arguable that the representation of such

[113] Prior to the making of *Ice Poison*, Midi Z was invited to make a short film “Burial Clothes” (2014) that was included in omnibus film called *Letters from the South* (2014), which includes six short films that deal with different groups of ethnic Chinese living outside of China proper. Notably, the Malaysian Chinese director Tan Chui Mui also participated in this project, and Midi Z later invited her to serve as the associate producer of *Ice Poison*, the plot of which is an extension of “Burial Clothes.”

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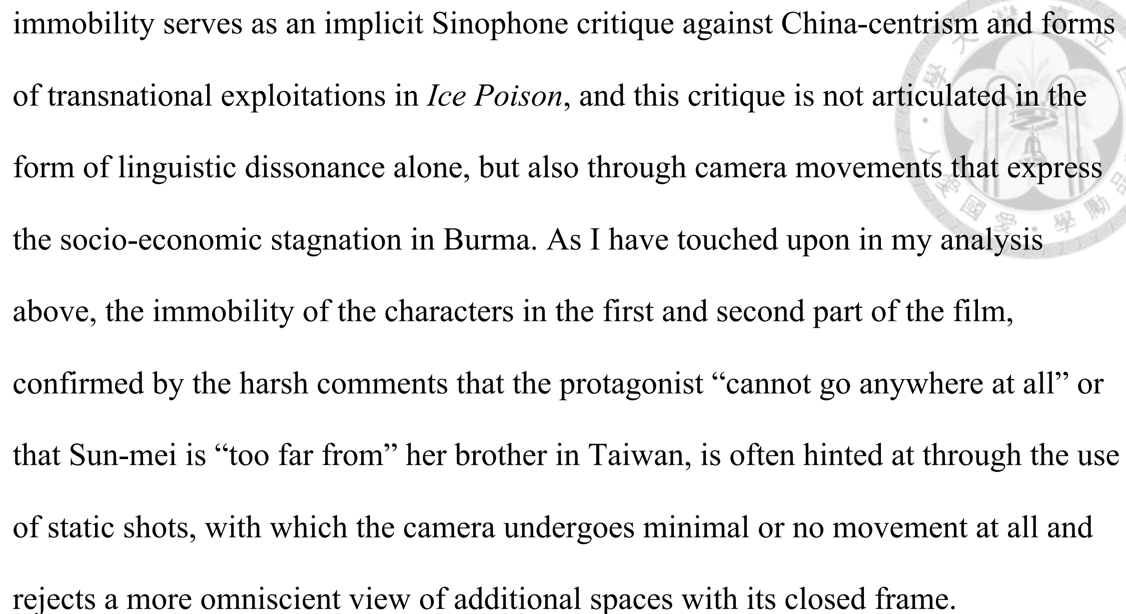

immobility serves as an implicit Sinophone critique against China-centrism and forms of transnational exploitations in *Ice Poison*, and this critique is not articulated in the form of linguistic dissonance alone, but also through camera movements that express the socio-economic stagnation in Burma. As I have touched upon in my analysis above, the immobility of the characters in the first and second part of the film, confirmed by the harsh comments that the protagonist "cannot go anywhere at all" or that Sun-mei is "too far from" her brother in Taiwan, is often hinted at through the use of static shots, with which the camera undergoes minimal or no movement at all and rejects a more omniscient view of additional spaces with its closed frame. Furthermore, such immobility is not limited to the spatial dimension alone, but can also be considered in a temporal aspect, as the shots are usually long takes that last for more than two minutes, an unusually long duration of time that signifies a prologned wait for opportunities in a place where the convenience of technological immediacy remains elusive.[114] While the use of static long takes in *Ice Poison* has been perceived by critics as a link between Midi Z and the aesthetic of realism found in many films of the Taiwan New Cinema—particularly those directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien—I argue that these critics nevertheless risk overlooking other possible intrepretations that Midi Z's aesthetic suggests.[115] Indeed, as Song-Hwee Lim claims, while "Midi Z's extensive use of long takes places him in the tradition of Taiwan New Cinema auteurs Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang" ("Towards" 9), his long

[114] Midi Z says in an interview that "the theme for my recent film projects is still 'waiting.' These people [the characters in his films] are waiting for something to come, as they wait for phone calls, or wait for changes" (Zhao "The Point"). He also mentions the use of long take, as he claims that "it is suitable to use long take to represent the act of waiting, as the 'sense of time' is more adequate."

[115] As I briefly mentioned in the Introduction, Midi Z is constantly hailed as a successor of Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Taiwan New Cinema. For instance, Tsui praises him as proof that "the spirit of the New Taiwan Cinema remains very much alive," while Qiao Ling claims that "under the influence of Taiwanese New Cinema, Midi Z makes use of a great number of long take to express the progress of plot." While both authors' claims are not entirely false, Qiao Ling goes on to claim that "growing under such background [of exposure to New Taiwan Cinema], Midi Z absorbs its creative method," misleadingly treating Midi Z as a native Taiwanese growing up in the 1980s, while he had not come to Taiwan until 1998 when Taiwanese New Cinema was already coming to an end.

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takes "tend to have slightly more action and also more sonic elements." Following Lim's differentiation, I attempt to provide a more detailed analysis of Midi Z's static long takes in *Ice Poison*, before I turn to the concept of slow cinema as an alternative intrepretative category.

A sense of confinement and limitation is clear in the first part of *Ice Poison* where Midi Z follows the jobless male protagonist and his father to visit many of their relatives in Lashio as they attempt to borrow money to buy a scooter. Almost entirely composed of six static long takes (all extending to more than 2 minutues) that share similar composition in medium shots (all showing the full bodies of the characters with only a partial view of the background), this section of the film features different Burmese Chinese characters sitting and conversing face-to-face without many physical actions in common household settings that are devoid of depth of field (see Figure 12). In these sequences, even though no visual evidence is shown on screen, their conversations gradually offer hints of the socio-economic difficulties in Burma as well as the frustrations of working outside of the country. For instance, an elderly lady obliquely refuses to lend the protagonist money by stating that her son earned nothing in Malaysia because he was unable to obtain the correct visa, whereas another lady mourns that her son did not even make it to Malaysia as he was cheated by an overseas employment agency. What's worst, another relatives' son eventually goes mad after returning from Thailand, where he was apparently drugged by his co-workers when he worked as an illegal migrant worker. Midi Z does not choose to present these tragic stories by cutting to other settings beyond Burma (as he does in his previous two films), but instead allows local elders living at a local site to narrate the accounts of young people's failures in foreign countries. Clearly, such narrative stages a contrast between the lived reality of immobility (embodied in the static long takes) and the failed expectations of mobility (imagined to be beyond the frame).

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Comparable to these tales of failed migration, the second part of the film also features six static long takes that illustrate Sun-mei's limited opportunities in Lashio after she ran away from her unwanted marriage in China. For example, in a scene in Sun-mei's home where she sits and talks to her mother, her wish to bring back and raise her child on her own by turning to illegal drug dealing is discouraged by her mother, who believes a female should stay in her designated place in the family. The gendered dimension of the yearning for stronger mobility in an immobile society, which recalls the gendered performances in *Poor Folk*, are presented in a framing and character positioning similar to the scenes in the first part of the film, especially resembling the conversation between the male protagonist and his father when the former is dissuaded from venturing into jade mining at the border (see Figure 10; Figure 11). In both scenes, the frames are limited, the spaces of the settings are shallow, the actions of the characters are minimal, and the duration of time is prolonged. Midi Z once again reveals that immobile lives in Burma conflict with the mobility that the characters anticipate.

Figure 10: The male protagonist discusses his livelihood with his father (Source: *Ice Poison*)

Figure 11: Sun-mei discusses her livelihood with her mother (Source: *Ice Poison*)

Instead of simply sharing a stylistic closeness with the characteristic use of long takes in some films of the Taiwan New Cinema, the atmosphere of immobility conjured in the first two parts of *Ice Poison* may be more evocative of recent

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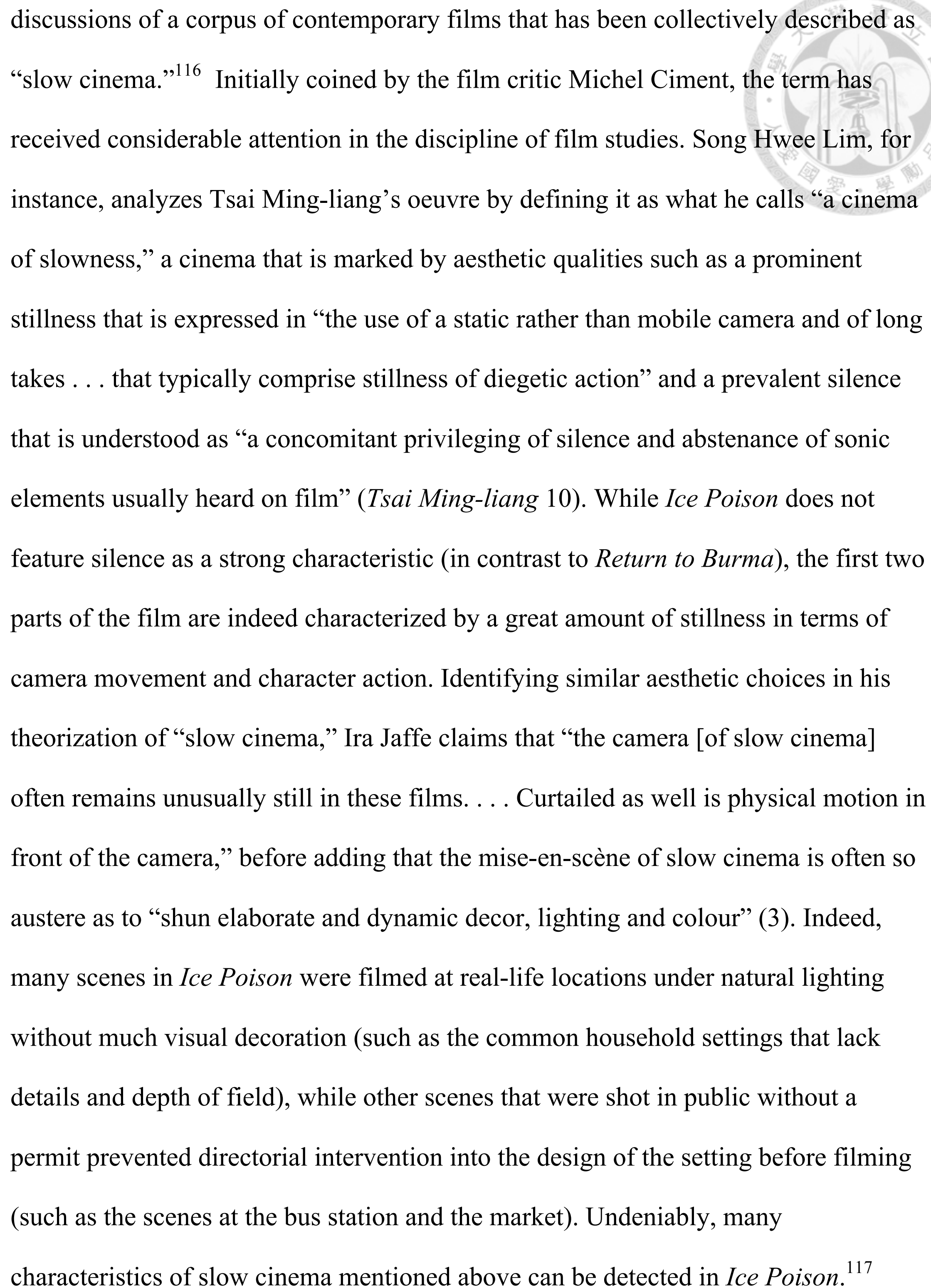

discussions of a corpus of contemporary films that has been collectively described as "slow cinema."[116] Initially coined by the film critic Michel Ciment, the term has received considerable attention in the discipline of film studies. Song Hwee Lim, for instance, analyzes Tsai Ming-liang's oeuvre by defining it as what he calls "a cinema of slowness," a cinema that is marked by aesthetic qualities such as a prominent stillness that is expressed in "the use of a static rather than mobile camera and of long takes . . . that typically comprise stillness of diegetic action" and a prevalent silence that is understood as "a concomitant privileging of silence and abstenance of sonic elements usually heard on film" (*Tsai Ming-liang* 10). While *Ice Poison* does not feature silence as a strong characteristic (in contrast to *Return to Burma*), the first two parts of the film are indeed characterized by a great amount of stillness in terms of camera movement and character action. Identifying similar aesthetic choices in his theorization of "slow cinema," Ira Jaffe claims that "the camera [of slow cinema] often remains unusually still in these films. . . . Curtailed as well is physical motion in front of the camera," before adding that the mise-en-scène of slow cinema is often so austere as to "shun elaborate and dynamic decor, lighting and colour" (3). Indeed, many scenes in *Ice Poison* were filmed at real-life locations under natural lighting without much visual decoration (such as the common household settings that lack details and depth of field), while other scenes that were shot in public without a permit prevented directorial intervention into the design of the setting before filming (such as the scenes at the bus station and the market). Undeniably, many characteristics of slow cinema mentioned above can be detected in *Ice Poison*.[117]

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[116] According to De Luca, directors including "Béla Tarr (Hungary), Lav Diaz (Philippines), Carlos Reygadas (Mexico), Tsai Ming-liang (Taiwan), Lisandro Alonso (Argentina), and Abbas Kiarostami (Iran)" (24) are often considered as contemporary examples of slow cinema; meanwhile, Lim also points out that "Yasujirō Ozu, Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovsky, [and] Chantal Akerman" can be considered the precursors to this trend (*Tsai Ming-liang* 9).

[117] Apart from *Ice Poison*, Midi Z's video art installation work also shares the features of slow cinema: in his *My Folks in Jade City* (2016), exhibited as an installation work at International Film Festival

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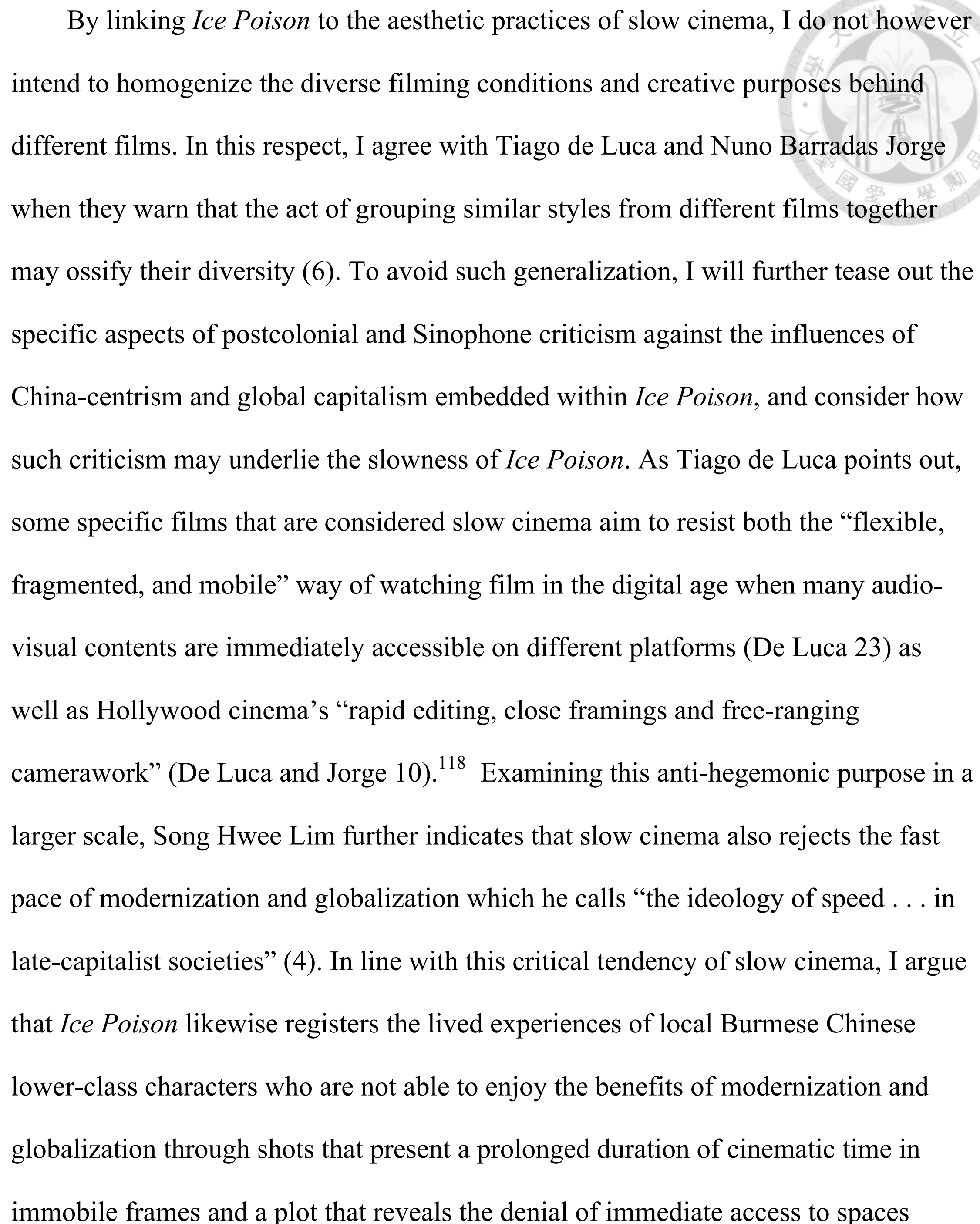

By linking *Ice Poison* to the aesthetic practices of slow cinema, I do not however intend to homogenize the diverse filming conditions and creative purposes behind different films. In this respect, I agree with Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge when they warn that the act of grouping similar styles from different films together may ossify their diversity (6). To avoid such generalization, I will further tease out the specific aspects of postcolonial and Sinophone criticism against the influences of China-centrism and global capitalism embedded within *Ice Poison*, and consider how such criticism may underlie the slowness of *Ice Poison*. As Tiago de Luca points out, some specific films that are considered slow cinema aim to resist both the "flexible, fragmented, and mobile" way of watching film in the digital age when many audio-visual contents are immediately accessible on different platforms (De Luca 23) as well as Hollywood cinema's "rapid editing, close framings and free-ranging camerawork" (De Luca and Jorge 10).[118] Examining this anti-hegemonic purpose in a larger scale, Song Hwee Lim further indicates that slow cinema also rejects the fast pace of modernization and globalization which he calls "the ideology of speed . . . in late-capitalist societies" (4). In line with this critical tendency of slow cinema, I argue that *Ice Poison* likewise registers the lived experiences of local Burmese Chinese lower-class characters who are not able to enjoy the benefits of modernization and globalization through shots that present a prolonged duration of cinematic time in immobile frames and a plot that reveals the denial of immediate access to spaces

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Rotterdam 2016 and later at the Gallery 100 in Taipei, he pushes the idea of static long take to the extreme by asking his friends and family to pose and stand without any movement in front of the camera. Interestingly, as long as the figures and the frame both remain immobile, it is unclear whether the audiences are watching a photograph or a film.

[118] To be sure, De Luca and Jorge is not arguing against all developments of digital technology, especially not against the low-cost digital cinema that I discussed in Chapter Three. In fact, De Luca and Jorge point out that "the same digital technology that enables faster shooting methods and editing patterns . . . has also contributed to the production and circulation of slowness at the turn of the millennium. As the relatively inexpensive and flexible digital equipment offers the ability to record much longer stretches of time, it enables hitherto untenable modes of production and recording based on duration and observation" (10-11).

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beyond the characters' lived environment, in contrast to the "ideology of speed" as exemplified in the phone calls from China that reach Burma easily.

Through a look at the features of slow cinema, I argue that the consistent use of minimal actions and static long takes in the first and second part of *Ice Poison* is an aesthetic choice that seeks to reflect the long-lasting immobility that is spatially and temporally endured by the local characters in Burma.[119] Instead of challenging such violence brought by global capitalism with the flexibility of the minorities that scholars of Sinophone studies such as Shu-mei Shih tend to highlight, *Ice Poison* gives more voices to the people facing what Carling calls "non-migration" and "involuntary immobility" in their lived environment. Critical awareness of immobility, then, becomes both a narrative and aesthetic cornerstone of the film. However, a discussion of the film should not end with the aspect of static camera movement alone; as a matter of fact, in the third/final part of the film, the male protagonist and Sun-mei break from their own respective limited cycles and encounter each other, discovering an opportunity to achieve apparent mobility together through drug dealing, even if only briefly. In this final section, Midi Z employs various shaky tracking shots, disrupting the argument that *Ice Poison* is purely slow cinema. In the following analysis, I seek to explain the shift in Midi Z's use of camera movement.

The Movement of Emotion: Framing Precarious Mobility

In a private occasion, director Ang Lee reportedly provided his comments on *Ice Poison* to Midi Z in person, claiming that "this film has a perfect three-act structure, and its use of long take is entirely different from early Taiwan New Cinema" (qtd. in

[119] Although Naficy does not mention the term slow cinema, he does identify similar aesthetic choices in what he terms as accented cinema, as he points out that "[t]he claustrophobia of [the] settings [in accented cinema] is intensified by a dark lighting scheme that limits sight, by barriers in the shot that impede vision, and by tight shot composition, immobile framing, and a stationary camera" (191).

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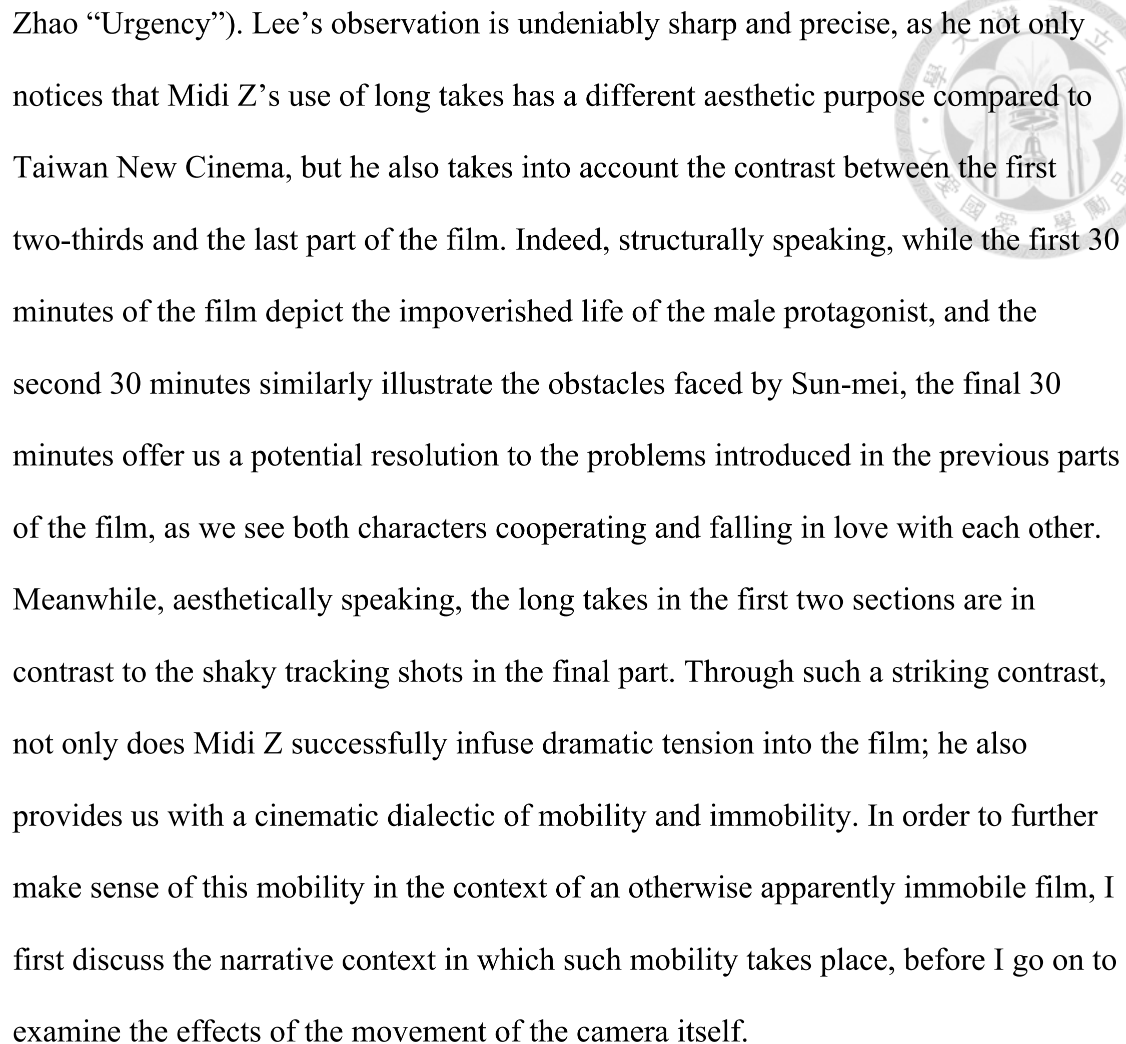

Zhao "Urgency"). Lee's observation is undeniably sharp and precise, as he not only notices that Midi Z's use of long takes has a different aesthetic purpose compared to Taiwan New Cinema, but he also takes into account the contrast between the first two-thirds and the last part of the film. Indeed, structurally speaking, while the first 30 minutes of the film depict the impoverished life of the male protagonist, and the second 30 minutes similarly illustrate the obstacles faced by Sun-mei, the final 30 minutes offer us a potential resolution to the problems introduced in the previous parts of the film, as we see both characters cooperating and falling in love with each other. Meanwhile, aesthetically speaking, the long takes in the first two sections are in contrast to the shaky tracking shots in the final part. Through such a striking contrast, not only does Midi Z successfully infuse dramatic tension into the film; he also provides us with a cinematic dialectic of mobility and immobility. In order to further make sense of this mobility in the context of an otherwise apparently immobile film, I first discuss the narrative context in which such mobility takes place, before I go on to examine the effects of the movement of the camera itself.

As I have mentioned, the first two parts of the film present the unnamed male protagonist and Sun-mei in their limited and separate social networks by positioning them in numerous static long takes, and I argue that it is only after their coincidental encounter that the plot and the camera frame begin to be set in motion. During the scene at the public bus station where Midi Z tracks the male protagonist like a surveillance camera, the male protagonist clearly finds no customer as it is difficult for him to stand out from the majority of Burmese taxi drivers who all yell in Burmese.[120] Later, in an extensive pan that sees the male protagonist stubbornly trying to chase down Sun-mei by running across the station, he suddenly tries his luck

[120] Midi Z discusses the underlying idea in this scene by saying that "the problem of ethnicity still exists in Burma. Because the military government suppresses ethnic groups that are not Burmans, there is a trust issue between ethnic Chinese and other Burmese" (Zhao "Urgency").

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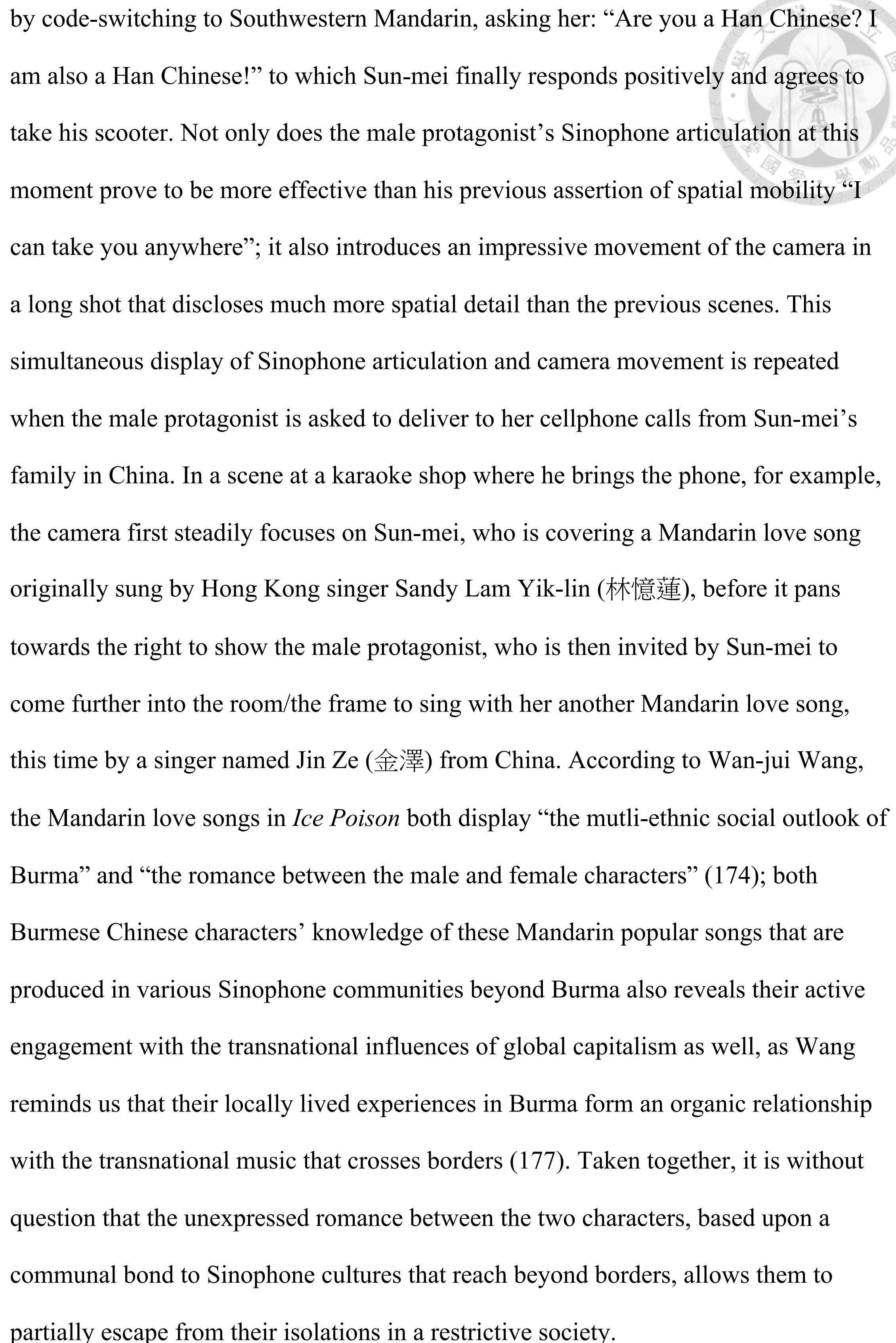

by code-switching to Southwestern Mandarin, asking her: “Are you a Han Chinese? I am also a Han Chinese!” to which Sun-mei finally responds positively and agrees to take his scooter. Not only does the male protagonist’s Sinophone articulation at this moment prove to be more effective than his previous assertion of spatial mobility “I can take you anywhere”; it also introduces an impressive movement of the camera in a long shot that discloses much more spatial detail than the previous scenes. This simultaneous display of Sinophone articulation and camera movement is repeated when the male protagonist is asked to deliver to her cellphone calls from Sun-mei’s family in China. In a scene at a karaoke shop where he brings the phone, for example, the camera first steadily focuses on Sun-mei, who is covering a Mandarin love song originally sung by Hong Kong singer Sandy Lam Yik-lin (林憶蓮), before it pans towards the right to show the male protagonist, who is then invited by Sun-mei to come further into the room/the frame to sing with her another Mandarin love song, this time by a singer named Jin Ze (金澤) from China. According to Wan-jui Wang, the Mandarin love songs in *Ice Poison* both display “the mutli-ethnic social outlook of Burma” and “the romance between the male and female characters” (174); both Burmese Chinese characters’ knowledge of these Mandarin popular songs that are produced in various Sinophone communities beyond Burma also reveals their active engagement with the transnational influences of global capitalism as well, as Wang reminds us that their locally lived experiences in Burma form an organic relationship with the transnational music that crosses borders (177). Taken together, it is without question that the unexpressed romance between the two characters, based upon a communal bond to Sinophone cultures that reach beyond borders, allows them to partially escape from their isolations in a restrictive society.

Eventually, the romantic encounter between the two characters paves the way for the more intense and mobile camera movements that reflect the subjective emotions

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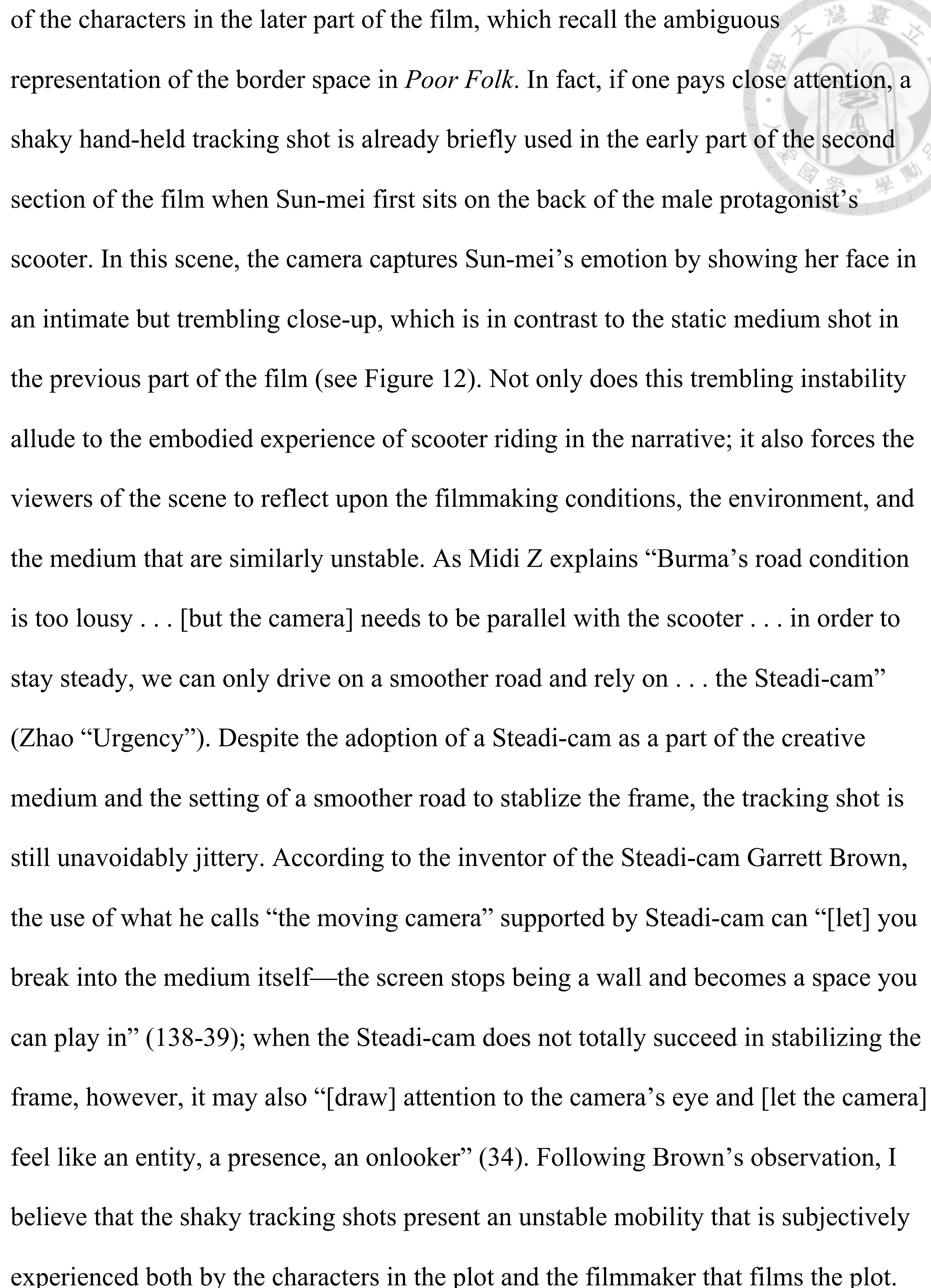

of the characters in the later part of the film, which recall the ambiguous representation of the border space in *Poor Folk*. In fact, if one pays close attention, a shaky hand-held tracking shot is already briefly used in the early part of the second section of the film when Sun-mei first sits on the back of the male protagonist's scooter. In this scene, the camera captures Sun-mei's emotion by showing her face in an intimate but trembling close-up, which is in contrast to the static medium shot in the previous part of the film (see Figure 12). Not only does this trembling instability allude to the embodied experience of scooter riding in the narrative; it also forces the viewers of the scene to reflect upon the filmmaking conditions, the environment, and the medium that are similarly unstable. As Midi Z explains "Burma's road condition is too lousy . . . [but the camera] needs to be parallel with the scooter . . . in order to stay steady, we can only drive on a smoother road and rely on . . . the Steadi-cam" (Zhao "Urgency"). Despite the adoption of a Steadi-cam as a part of the creative medium and the setting of a smoother road to stablize the frame, the tracking shot is still unavoidably jittery. According to the inventor of the Steadi-cam Garrett Brown, the use of what he calls "the moving camera" supported by Steadi-cam can "[let] you break into the medium itself—the screen stops being a wall and becomes a space you can play in" (138-39); when the Steadi-cam does not totally succeed in stabilizing the frame, however, it may also "[draw] attention to the camera's eye and [let the camera] feel like an entity, a presence, an onlooker" (34). Following Brown's observation, I believe that the shaky tracking shots present an unstable mobility that is subjectively experienced both by the characters in the plot and the filmmaker that films the plot.

By affording a sense of uncertain mobility, the scooter driving scene foreshadows the more heightened emotions later when the male protagonist and Sun-mei decide to become drug dealers, especially in two significant travelling shots in the final section of the film. In a scene in a public market where Sun-mei secretly enters

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to deliver ice poison to a buyer (played by Midi Z himself), the hand-held tracking shot is first stationed at a low angle, voyeuristically gazing up at Sun-mei's face in a close-up to show her guilty and nervous look, before it moves unstably with her and shows us limited parts of the public space (see Figure 13). In another scene after both protagonists test the drug themselves, Sun-mei is once again seen sitting at the back of the scooter in an unstable frame, while the image is overexposed due to a backlight coming from the sun that interferes with the audience's vision (see Figure 14). Compared to her nervous appearance in the first scooter driving scene and the drug-dealing scene, the close-up of Sun-mei's face in this scene reveals that she is smiling due to the effect of the drug, while a joyous Burmese popular song that she hums is played non-diegetically throughout the scene. Clearly then, whether it's the bumpiness of scooter riding, the uneasiness of drug dealing, or the cheerfulness of drug taking, these precarious means to achieve mobility are presented in the more subjective shaky hand-held tracking shots that depart from the relatively objective and stable perspective of the static long takes in the early parts of the film. By setting up this contrast of different conditions with different camera movements, Midi Z provides us with a dialectic of mobility and immobility.

Figure 12: Sun-mei on the scooter when she first meets the male protagonist (Source: *Ice Poison*)

Figure 13: Sun-mei delivering ice poison to a buyer (Source: *Ice Poison*)

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Figure 14: After taking the drug, both protagonists happily ride the scooter (Source: *Ice Poison*)

Interestingly, the use of hand-held tracking shots has not always been met with approval, as critic Jean Mitry writes in 1963 that "[n]owadays we find unwatchable any tracking shot where the frame is unsteady or shaky. The most important quality of the shot is to maintain the frame in perfect axial stability, whatever the movement being recorded" (61). This statement, of course, did not prevent the French New Wave and the cinéma vérité from adopting hand-held shot in the 1960s, or more recent big-budget Hollywood films from creating shaky video sequences.[121] However, Mitry's assertion does reveal a certain kind of imagination of an acceptable representation on screen that many viewers may still have in their minds today: a stable shot that provides a complete and clear vision of the characters and the space. Compared to such imagination, what Midi Z conveys in the final part of *Ice Poison* can then be understood as part of the "unwatchable" aspects of the lived conditions in Burma. That is to say, for the Burmese Chinese lower-class characters, a clear vision of a stable environment is not attainable; instead, even if their new-found mobility enabled by illegal drugs allows them to break through the social limits embodied in static long takes without depth-of-field, it is still an unstable and limited mobility embodied in the form of shaky hand-held shots.

[121] In fact, the Lithuanian American director Jonas Mekas claimed in 1962 (a year before Mitry condemns the use of shaky camera) that "I'm sick and tired of the guardians of Cinema Art who accuse the new filmmaker of shaky camera work and bad technique . . . Only this kind of cinema contains the proper vocabulary and syntax to express the true and the beautiful" (qtd. in Rombes 105). Clearly, the debate between the use of shaky hand-held shot was very much in place during the 1960s.

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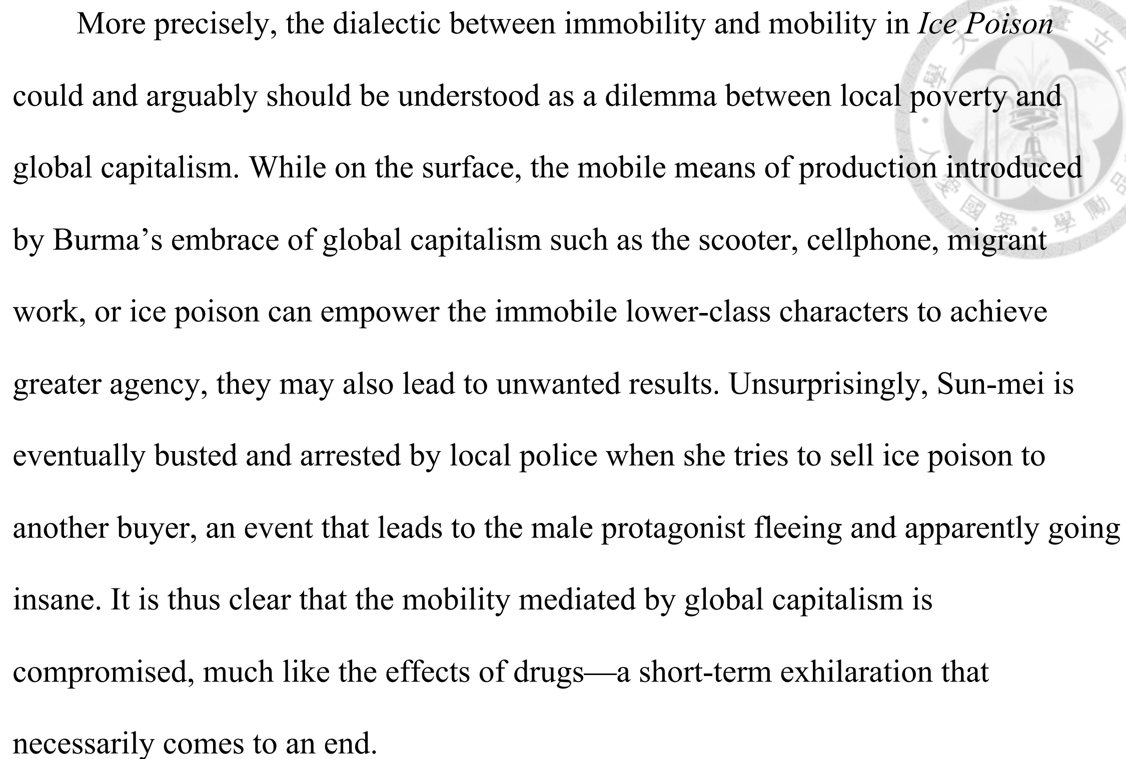

More precisely, the dialectic between immobility and mobility in *Ice Poison* could and arguably should be understood as a dilemma between local poverty and global capitalism. While on the surface, the mobile means of production introduced by Burma's embrace of global capitalism such as the scooter, cellphone, migrant work, or ice poison can empower the immobile lower-class characters to achieve greater agency, they may also lead to unwanted results. Unsurprisingly, Sun-mei is eventually busted and arrested by local police when she tries to sell ice poison to another buyer, an event that leads to the male protagonist fleeing and apparently going insane. It is thus clear that the mobility mediated by global capitalism is compromised, much like the effects of drugs—a short-term exhilaration that necessarily comes to an end.

The Distancing Effect of Camera Movement

In this chapter, I have examined how the Burmese Chinese lower-class characters in *Ice Poison* experience the conditions of both immobility and limited mobility in an underdeveloped local community in Burma in the age of globalization, while paying attention to the changing camera movements that reflect the conditions faced by these characters. I have first pushed at the limits of theories of globalization and Sinophone studies by challenging their strong focus on the mobility of lower-class minorities. In contrast, I have highlighted the immobility of the Burmese Chinese characters embodied in the use of static long takes in the first and second part of the film, shots that are not only critiques of the logic of globalization, but also aesthetic features that resemble what scholars such as Ira Jaffe or Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge have called slow cinema. I then turned to a discussion of the limited mobility initiated by the Sinophone articulations shared by the two protagonists, a form of mobility represented in shaky tracking shots that not only hint

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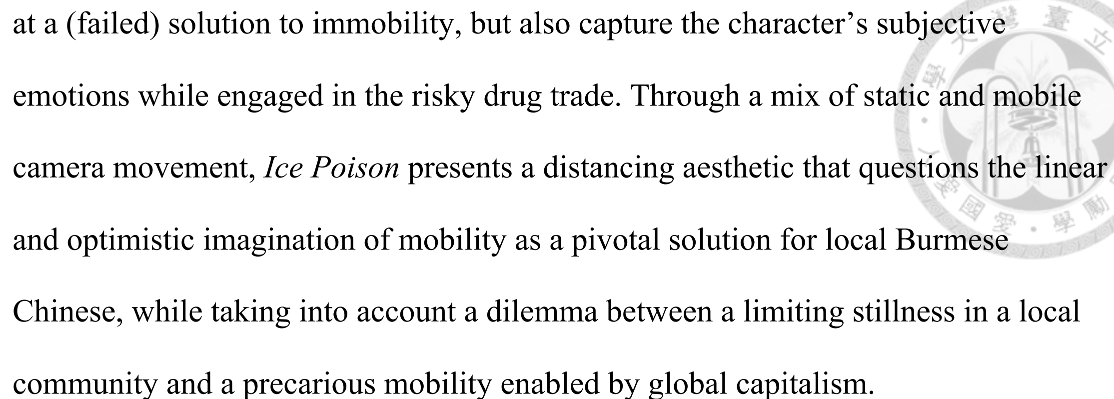

at a (failed) solution to immobility, but also capture the character's subjective emotions while engaged in the risky drug trade. Through a mix of static and mobile camera movement, *Ice Poison* presents a distancing aesthetic that questions the linear and optimistic imagination of mobility as a pivotal solution for local Burmese Chinese, while taking into account a dilemma between a limiting stillness in a local community and a precarious mobility enabled by global capitalism.

Even though the narrative of *Ice Poison* progresses from immobile conditions to apparently mobile possibilities, it does not conclude with a linear development towards a success, as Midi Z returns at the very end of the film to the setbacks faced by the Burmese Chinese characters. When Sun-mei is arrested in the final part of the film, the use of the camera returns from a shaky hand-held shot to a static long take, which seems to suggest a cold look at the tragic result of Sun-mei's pursuit of mobility. Similarly, in the final shot of the film, a static long take presents to us a scene in which unnamed butchers are slaughtering an immobilized cow, whose blood slowly spills out of its slit throat, recalling the slaughtered chicken in *Return to Burma*. Although no direct linkage is made, it can be inferred that the cow in this scene is the one that was traded for the male protagonist's scooter earlier in the film. Through the slow and long duration of the violence inflicted upon the cow, not only a symbol of the agricultural industry as Wen-Chin Chang claims ("Poverty" 68) but also a non-human subject sacrificed for a higher degree of human mobility, Midi Z reminds us of the cost of the human characters' failed attempts to break free through risky capitalistic means. Indeed, even if different camera movements in *Ice Poison* speak to the fact that the lived conditions of the Burmese Chinese in an age of globalization are constantly shifting, the film ends with a powerful punch—a cinematic critique that points directly at the violence of immobility for humans and nonhumans alike.

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Chapter Five:

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have investigated Midi Z's Homecoming Trilogy by discussing it as a "cinema of distance," a cinema that not only challenges linear migrant narratives, but also pushes at the borders of postcolonial studies and Sinophone studies. Through a close analysis of the narratives of failed migrations (such as the story of moving back, moving in-between, and non-moving) and the aesthetic devices in the films (including the use of sound, performance, and camera movement), I have tried to demonstrate how Midi Z destabilizes the logic of fixed identity and homeland as well as the idea of an uncritical mode of realistic representation. Furthermore, I have contended that Midi Z's approach towards the Burmese Chinese characters caught up in various historical forces—involving Taiwan, China, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, and the US—can remind postcolonial studies scholars to not easily settle down with any pre-given identity category or geographical scope in their studies. I have also argued that the various predicaments faced by the Burmese Chinese characters—notably silence, in-betweenness, and immobility—serve as grounds where Sinophone articulations are not easily voiced; instead, such articulations need to be expressed through distinctive film aesthetics that do not rely on linguistic dissonance alone.

In Chapter One, I offered a brief account of Midi Z's career as an ethnic minority director based in Taiwan, where he has been imagined as a successful representative of multicultural Taiwanese cinema. Cautioning against this discursive construction, I called for a careful analysis of Midi Z's Homecoming Trilogy that not only presents negative scenarios faced by the lower-class Burmese Chinese migrant characters to critique their host countries such as Taiwan, China, Thailand, and Malaysia, but also returns to examine existing forms of precarity in their home country, Burma. After

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providing a general definition of what I call a “cinema of distance,” I then went on to review some key developments and limits within the academic fields of postcolonial studies and Sinophone studies. Then, in order to discuss each of the films in Homecoming Trilogy in more detail, I mapped out an overview of how I would engage with different narrative topics and aesthetic devices in each chapter.

In Chapter Two, I sought to understand the act of return migration from Taiwan back to Burma in Midi Z’s first feature film *Return to Burma* with a particular focus on the sounds deployed in the film. In order to do so, I went over a brief historical examination of the notion of a Taiwanese dream, which has prompted many Burmese Chinese to migrate to Taiwan only to face second-class treatment. Asserting that the film does not simply critique the Taiwanese dream through linguistic dissonance, I looked at how the sound of silence of the various Burmese Chinese characters becomes a subjective protest against such mistreatment—a key feature of what Hamid Naficy calls “accented cinema.” In the second half of the chapter, I discussed the mainstream optimism over Burma’s political and economic reforms, which have convinced many of its overseas migrants to return. Rather than conforming to such confidence in the reforms, Midi Z inserts his implicit doubts by juxtaposing conflicting opinions as reflected in the sounds and music from a variety of media in Burma—a technique similar to Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino’s Third Cinema. Together, my close listening to *Return to Burma* brings to light the distancing aesthetic of the sound in the film that questions the optimistic views of migrations both to Taiwan and to Burma, as well as the uncritical notion of indexical realism that views the representation of Burma on screen as real-life lived conditions.

In Chapter Three, I explored the in-between nature of the cross-border migration and the border space between Burma and Thailand represented in Midi Z’s second feature film *Poor Folk*, while paying specific attention to the aspect of performance.

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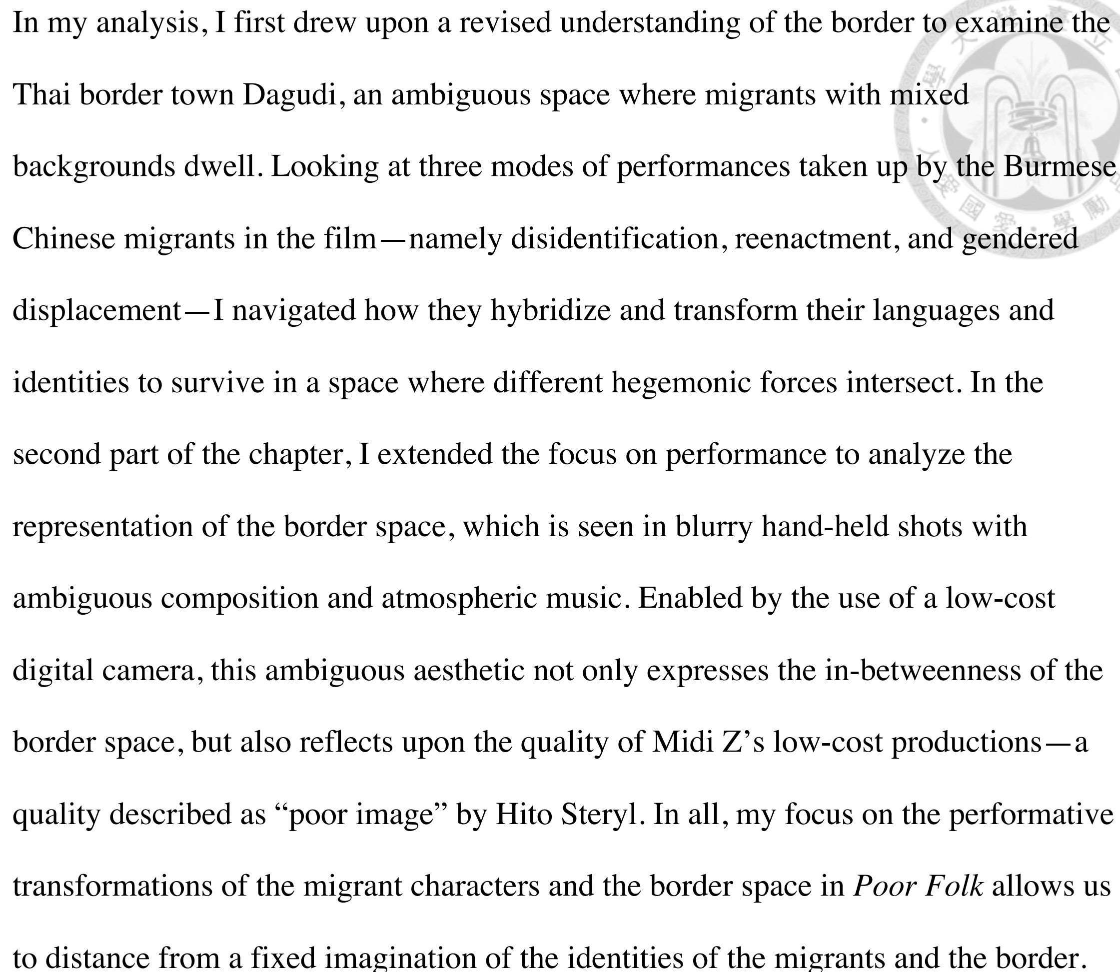

In my analysis, I first drew upon a revised understanding of the border to examine the Thai border town Dagudi, an ambiguous space where migrants with mixed backgrounds dwell. Looking at three modes of performances taken up by the Burmese Chinese migrants in the film—namely disidentification, reenactment, and gendered displacement—I navigated how they hybridize and transform their languages and identities to survive in a space where different hegemonic forces intersect. In the second part of the chapter, I extended the focus on performance to analyze the representation of the border space, which is seen in blurry hand-held shots with ambiguous composition and atmospheric music. Enabled by the use of a low-cost digital camera, this ambiguous aesthetic not only expresses the in-betweenness of the border space, but also reflects upon the quality of Midi Z's low-cost productions—a quality described as "poor image" by Hito Steryl. In all, my focus on the performative transformations of the migrant characters and the border space in *Poor Folk* allows us to distance from a fixed imagination of the identities of the migrants and the border.

In Chapter Four, I attempted to make sense of the dilemma between the conundrum of immobility and the wish for greater mobility confronting the lower-class Burmese Chinese characters in Burma in Midi Z's third feature film *Ice Poison*, in which I identified different usages of camera movement. In light of the characters' immobility, I pushed at the emphasis on transnational movement in theories of globalization; in contrast, I maintained that the critical potential of the film lies in its use of static long takes to represent the paralysis of local people caused by the gaps between Burma and other countries such as Taiwan and China—an aesthetic similar to what Ira Jaffe and others have called "slow cinema." In the second part of the chapter, however, I observed that the adoption of shaky hand-held tracking shots in the later part of the film complicates the alignment of the film with the trend of slow cinema. As the male and female protagonists form a romance and undertake a risky

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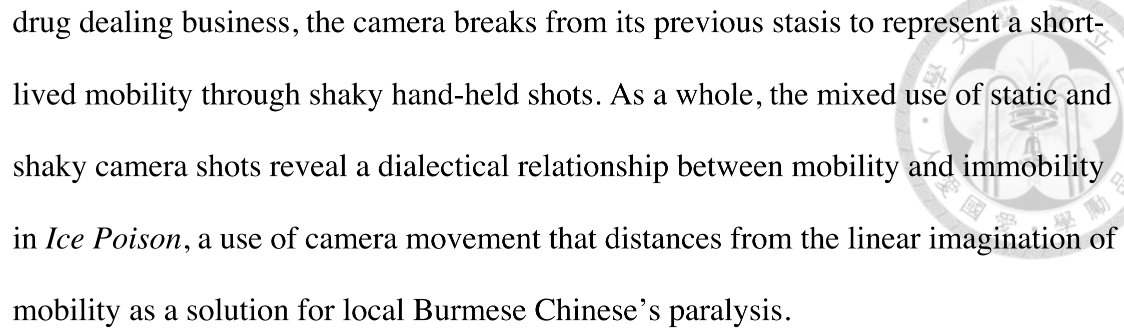

drug dealing business, the camera breaks from its previous stasis to represent a short-lived mobility through shaky hand-held shots. As a whole, the mixed use of static and shaky camera shots reveal a dialectical relationship between mobility and immobility in *Ice Poison*, a use of camera movement that distances from the linear imagination of mobility as a solution for local Burmese Chinese's paralysis.

With the above-mentioned investigations into the distancing narratives and aesthetics of Midi Z's Homecoming Trilogy, this thesis has discussed Midi Z's films as critical postcolonial and Sinophone texts that are capable of remapping our conventional imaginations of migration narratives. More importantly, my critical analysis has also attempted to push at the borders of the fields of postcolonial and Sinophone studies. In terms of postcolonial studies, the critical ideas put forth by scholars such as Beng Huat Chua and Kuan-Hsing Chen have certainly helped me to recognize the Southeast Asian and inter-Asian connections that are represented in the films, as I have attempted to track the varied transnational movements of the Burmese Chinese characters, as well as to identify the sub-empires in Asia such as Taiwan, Thailand, China, and Malaysia that exploit these migrants. Chua's and Chen's focus on postcolonial Asian subjectivities, however, has also arguably excluded references to the influences on Midi Z's films beyond the imaginary scope of "Asia," including various film aesthetics such as accented cinema, Third cinema, poor image, and slow cinema that Midi Z shares with filmmakers from different parts of the world. The idea of postcolonial subjectivity in Midi Z's films thus exceeds a rigid geopolitical scope proposed by some postcolonial studies scholars. In terms of Sinophone studies, the critical perspectives of researchers such as Ien Ang and Shu-mei Shih have assisted me in identifying the place-based cultural articulations of many Sinitic-language-speaking characters such as the mixed use of Standard Mandarin, Southwestern Mandarin, Thai, and Burmese that are too heterogeneous to be simply considered

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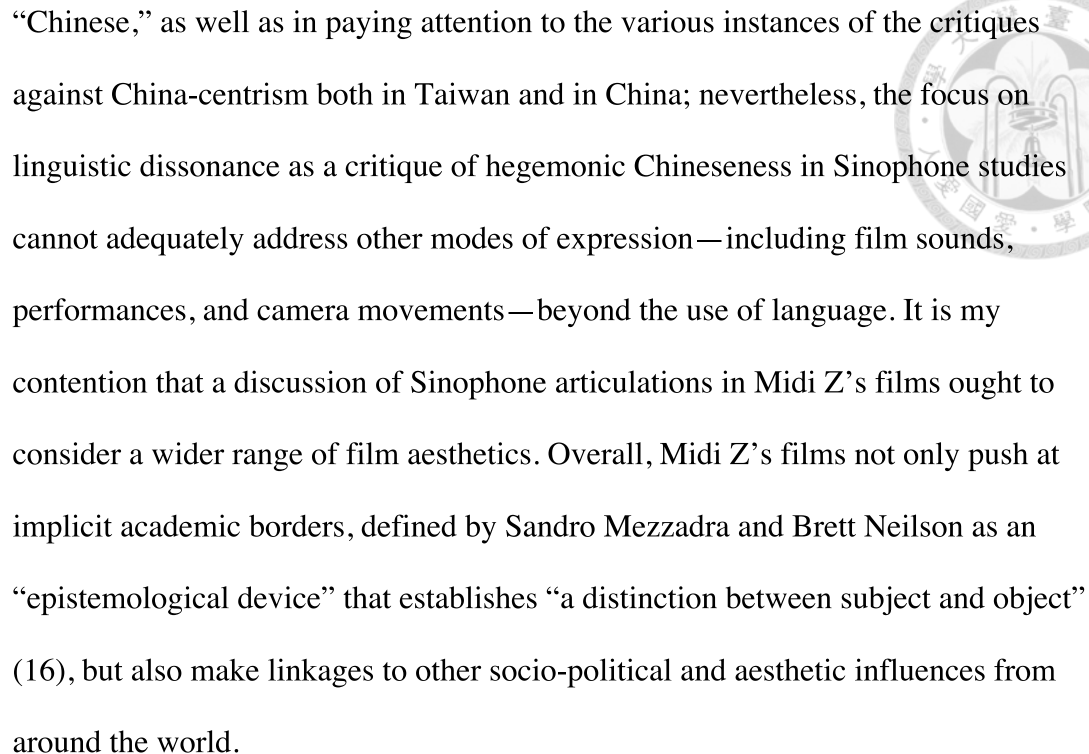

"Chinese," as well as in paying attention to the various instances of the critiques against China-centrism both in Taiwan and in China; nevertheless, the focus on linguistic dissonance as a critique of hegemonic Chineseness in Sinophone studies cannot adequately address other modes of expression—including film sounds, performances, and camera movements—beyond the use of language. It is my contention that a discussion of Sinophone articulations in Midi Z's films ought to consider a wider range of film aesthetics. Overall, Midi Z's films not only push at implicit academic borders, defined by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson as an "epistemological device" that establishes "a distinction between subject and object" (16), but also make linkages to other socio-political and aesthetic influences from around the world.

My analysis throughout this thesis, however, has not yet fully considered the question of how a study of a "cinema of distance" can contribute to a department of foreign languages and literatures in Taiwan. As a graduate student based in such a department in Taiwan, I intend to discuss this thesis's potential contribution to the concerns of such a department by combining my study of Midi Z and his films with a reflection over the meaning of "foreign" and "native" in Taiwan today.

What's in a Distance?

At the 11th Taiwan International Documentary Festival that took place in Taipei in May 2018, a festival in which Midi Z's documentary *City of Jade* (2016) was nominated for an award in the section "Taiwan Competition," a special Focus Programme titled "SEA of Sadness" claimed to introduce "the biggest show of Southeast Asian" films in the history of Taiwan's film festivals ("SEA").[122] During

[122] The title of the Focus Programme "SEA of Sadness" is partly a pun on/acronym of "Southeast Asia." The Programme is radical not simply in introducing a great variety and number of Southeast Asian filmmakers to the Taiwanese public, but also in bridging across film genres such as documentary,

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this previously unseen cultural extravaganza, the guest curator of the Programme Gertjan Zuilhof, one of the key figures who introduced Midi Z's films to the International Film Festival Rotterdam, hosted a roundtable session in Taipei entitled "Southeast Asia from a Distance/from the Heart" on May 28th, 2018 to discuss the importance of introducing Southeast Asian film works to wider international audiences. With a specific interest in the title of the talk, which resembles the title of my thesis "Cinema of Distance," I asked Zuilhof about his definition of the term "distance." Raising the concept of "distant observer" first proposed by the film theorist Noël Burch to describe the relationship between Western film scholars and Japanese cinema, Zuilhof responded that the title aims to "[admit] that we are not from Southeast Asia . . . but as distant observers we can still say something [about it]."[123] While Zuilhof's acknowledgement of the lack of knowledge about the films from Southeast Asia is appreciated, his intent to separate "we"—whether it represents the perspective of a Western film curator or the general Taiwanese public—from the area imagined as "Southeast Asia" with a "distance" should nevertheless be scrutinized. As a matter of fact, Zuilhof's idea of distance cannot quite justify the inclusion of many filmmakers such as Malaysian Chinese directors Ho Yuhang and Tan Chiu-Mui, Indonesian Chinese director Edwin, and Burmese Chinese director Lee Yong-chao in this Programme, as they have already shared many cultural and historical links with Taiwan.[124]

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fiction film, and video art in a film festival called "Documentary Festival." Among the 35 invited works, Lav Diaz and Khavn de la Cruz from the Philippines, Ho Yuhang and Tan Chui-Mui from Malaysia, and Edwin from Indonesia are some of the most important directors of the generation of "Southeast Asian independent cinema" as defined by Baumgärtel.

[123] For more on the notion of "distant observer" in relation to the development of the discipline of film studies and area studies in the U.S. during the Cold War, especially how Japanese cinema was used by Burch to "construct a fictive 'Japan' in order to display how a move to the outside [of the West] immediately discloses the spurious claims of Western subject-centered universalism" (2), see Harootunian "'Detour'."

[124] Ho Yuhang's *At the End of Daybreak* (2009) is an adaptation of a rape case in Taiwan, while his *Mrs K* (2017) stars the Taiwanese rock star Wu Bai. Meanwhile, Tan Chiu-Mui's father migrated from Kinmen, Taiwan to Malaysia to settle down, and she also served as the associate producer of Midi Z's

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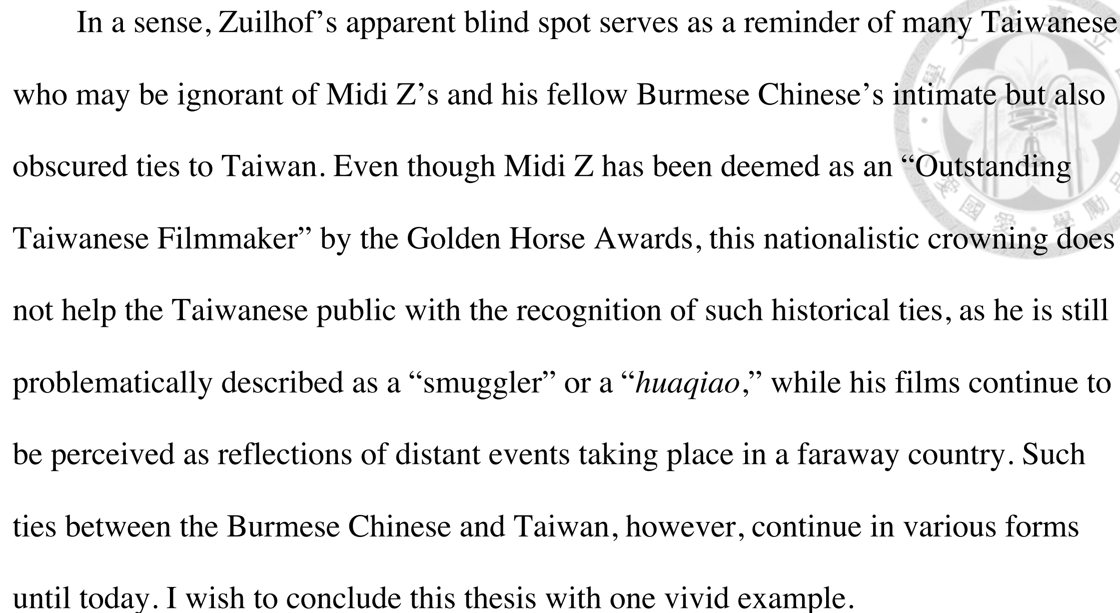

In a sense, Zuilhof's apparent blind spot serves as a reminder of many Taiwanese who may be ignorant of Midi Z's and his fellow Burmese Chinese's intimate but also obscured ties to Taiwan. Even though Midi Z has been deemed as an "Outstanding Taiwanese Filmmaker" by the Golden Horse Awards, this nationalistic crowning does not help the Taiwanese public with the recognition of such historical ties, as he is still problematically described as a "smuggler" or a "*huaqiao*," while his films continue to be perceived as reflections of distant events taking place in a faraway country. Such ties between the Burmese Chinese and Taiwan, however, continue in various forms until today. I wish to conclude this thesis with one vivid example.

As I finished researching and writing this thesis, I encountered an announcement of a college scholarship specifically targeted at "*qiaosheng* from Northern Thailand and Burma" (*Taibei Ji Miandian Qiaosheng* 泰北及緬甸僑生) posted by the Chinese Association for Relief and Ensuing Services outside of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures office at National Taiwan University (see Figure 15). Founded by Soong Mei-ling, sometimes known as Madame Chiang Kai-shek, the Association has "[worked] closely with the Nationalist party in Taiwan . . . to deliver . . . relief to Yunnanese refugees in Northern Thailand" according to Wen-Chin Chang ("From War" 1098-99)—namely to the remnants of the Secret Army who once fought the People's Liberation Army under Chiang's orders during the Cold War. Apparently, while Midi Z and many of his fellow Burmese Chinese have been viewed by some Taiwanese as irrelevant outsiders, the ideological category *huaqiao* that is constructed to appeal to ethnic Chinese living in other societies persists in recruiting such subjects and attempting to make use of their contributions. This

Ice Poison. Edwin's *Blind Pig Who Wants to Fly* (2008) sheds light on the May 1998 riots of Indonesia that targeted against ethnic Chinese, many of whom fled to Taiwan afterwards. Lee Yong-chao, who stars as an extra in Midi Z's *Return to Burma*, also shot many films about Burmese Chinese with ties to Taiwan, not least the documentary *Blood Amber* (2017) in which the protagonist returned from Taiwan to Burma to work as a jade miner.

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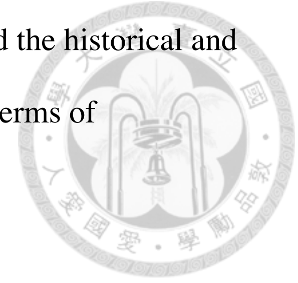
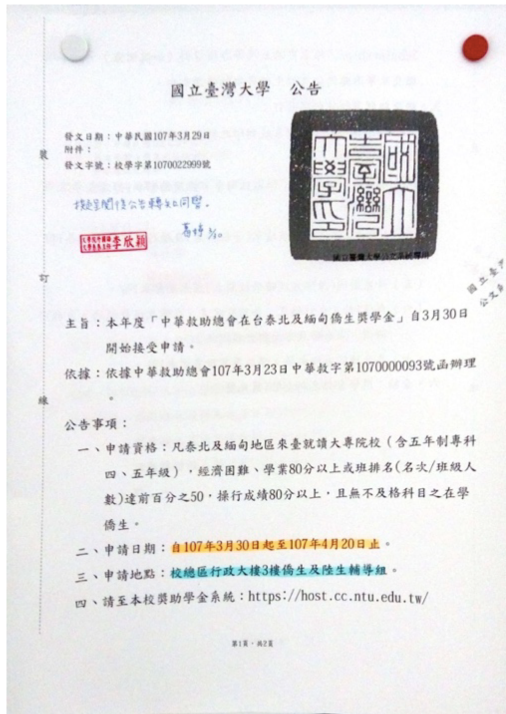
masked relationship between the Burmese Chinese and Taiwan, and the historical and ideological forces underwriting it, cannot be understood simply in terms of "distance."





國立臺灣大學　公告

發文日期：中華民國107年3月29日
附件：
發文字號：校學字第1070022999號

主旨：本年度「中華救助總會在台泰北及緬甸僑生獎學金」自3月30日開始接受申請。

依據：依據中華救助總會107年3月23日中華救字第1070000093號函辦理。

公告事項：

一、申請資格：凡泰北及緬甸地區來臺就讀大專院校（含五年制專科四、五年級），經濟困難、學業80分以上或班排名(名次/班級人數)達前百分之50，操行成績80分以上，且無不及格科目之在學僑生。

二、申請日期：自107年3月30日起至107年4月20日止。

三、申請地點：校總區行政大樓3樓僑生及陸生輔導組。

四、請至本校獎助學金系統：https://host.cc.ntu.edu.tw/

第1頁，共2頁

Figure 15: A college scholarship exclusively for Burmese Chinese students
(Source: Kun Xian Shen's photo)

Despite such a blind spot, I believe that an uncovering of the ongoing recruitment of Burmese Chinese *huaqiao* in a Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures can help to complicate an uncritical imagination of Taiwan's putatively distant and foreign other(s). While such a department has often been imagined as an academic institute where encounters between "native" (often imagined to be local Han Chinese/Taiwanese) researchers and students and "foreign" (often imagined to be Euro-American) texts and cultures take place, the enrollment of *qiaosheng* students who are not typically categorized as Taiwanese but are recruited because of their unique ties to Taiwan arguably disrupts this dichotomy between the insider and the

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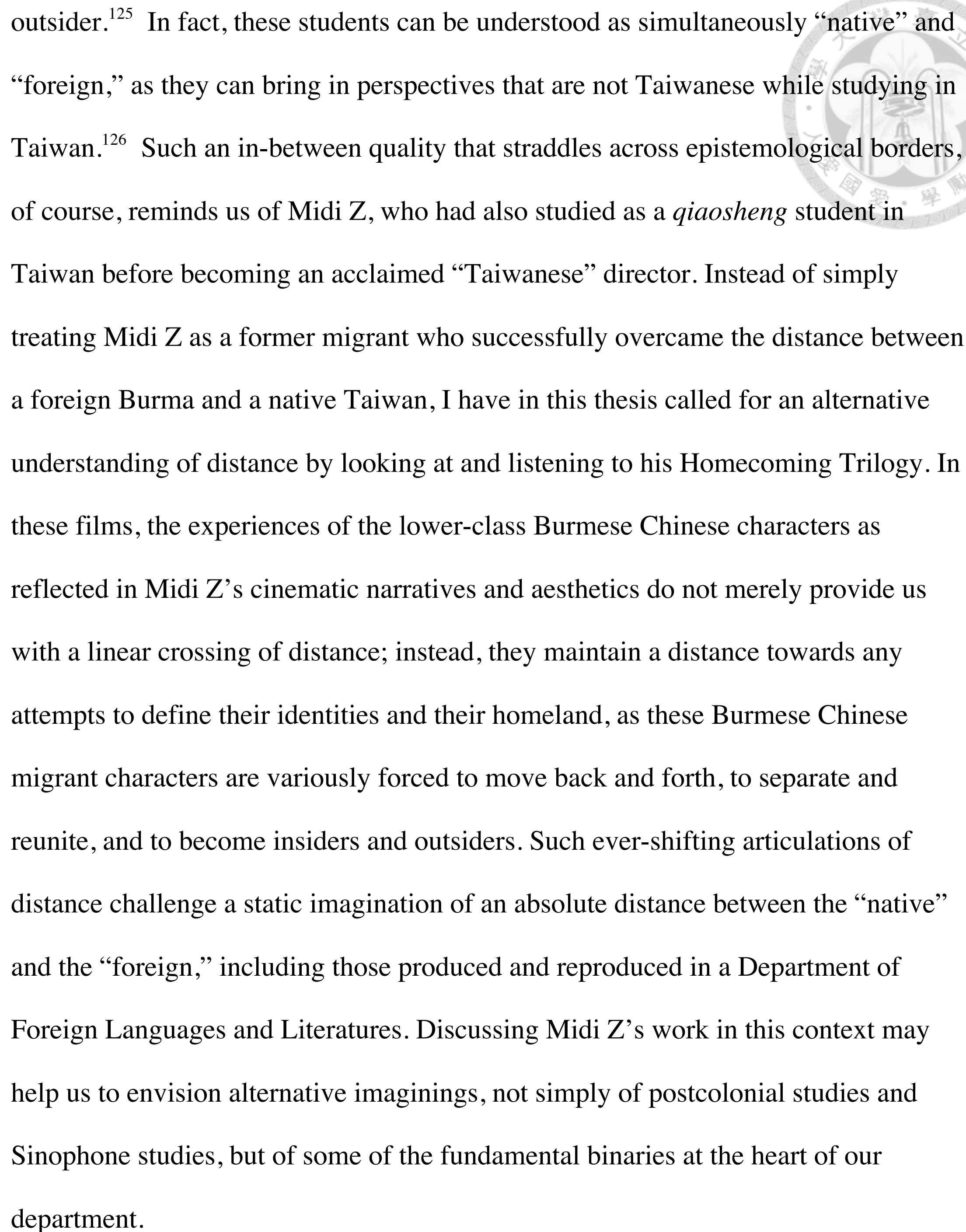

outsider.[125] In fact, these students can be understood as simultaneously "native" and "foreign," as they can bring in perspectives that are not Taiwanese while studying in Taiwan.[126] Such an in-between quality that straddles across epistemological borders, of course, reminds us of Midi Z, who had also studied as a *qiaosheng* student in Taiwan before becoming an acclaimed "Taiwanese" director. Instead of simply treating Midi Z as a former migrant who successfully overcame the distance between a foreign Burma and a native Taiwan, I have in this thesis called for an alternative understanding of distance by looking at and listening to his Homecoming Trilogy. In these films, the experiences of the lower-class Burmese Chinese characters as reflected in Midi Z's cinematic narratives and aesthetics do not merely provide us with a linear crossing of distance; instead, they maintain a distance towards any attempts to define their identities and their homeland, as these Burmese Chinese migrant characters are variously forced to move back and forth, to separate and reunite, and to become insiders and outsiders. Such ever-shifting articulations of distance challenge a static imagination of an absolute distance between the "native" and the "foreign," including those produced and reproduced in a Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures. Discussing Midi Z's work in this context may help us to envision alternative imaginings, not simply of postcolonial studies and Sinophone studies, but of some of the fundamental binaries at the heart of our department.

[125] For a historical review and a critique of the development of departments of foreign languages and literatures in Taiwan, see Chih-ming Wang. Wang not only points out that the idea of "foreign" has in fact reflected modern Chinese and Taiwanese intellectuals' desire to overcome Western modernity by learning from their cultures, but he also indicates that the future of such departments should extend its idea of "foreign" from Euro-America to other cultures in the world.

[126] I am inspired by my undergraduate students at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University where I have served as a Teaching Assistant. I am particularly thinking about those participating in the courses "Postcolonial Africa" and "Postcolonial Asia," students who come from not only Southeast Asia but also all over the world to study fictions that are typically imagined as "foreign" in Taiwan. I hereby offer my gratitude towards these students.

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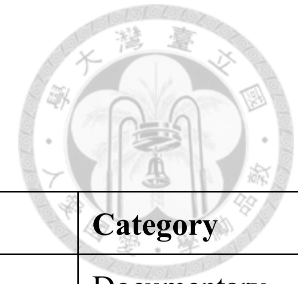

Appendix

A Chronological List of Midi Z's Works

Year	Title (English/Chinese)		Honors (Selected)	Category
2002	Patches of Life	生活浮影		Documentary Short
2006	Social Responsibilities of the Media—Chinese Whispers	媒體的社會責任—以訛傳訛見死不救篇		Advertisement
2006	Paloma Blanca	白鴿	Busan International Film Festival	Short Film
2008	Motorcycle Driver	摩托車伕	South Taiwan Film Festival	Short Film
2008	A Home-Letter	家書		Short Film
2009	A Diary	一則日記		Short Film
2009	Virtual Forest	虛擬森林		Short Film
2009	The Man from Hometown	家鄉來的人	South Taiwan Film Festival	Short Film
2009	Guess Who I Am	猜猜我是誰？		Short Film
2009	Huasin Incident	華新街記事	Golden Horse Film Festival	Short Film
2010	Taipei! Northern Burma! Northern Thailand!	台北！緬北！泰北！		Short Film
2010	Diary at Construction Site	工地日誌		Short Film

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2010	Solitary-ism	一個人主義	Golden Horse Film Festival	Short Film
2011	Return to Burma	歸來的人	International Film Festival Rotterdam, Vancouver International Film Festival, Busan International Film Festival, Hong Kong International Film Festival, Golden Horse Film Festival, Taipei Film Festival	Feature Film
2012	Poor Folk	窮人。榴槤。麻藥。偷渡客	International Film Festival Rotterdam, Festival of the Three Continents, Vancouver International Film Festival, Busan International Film Festival, Taipei Film Festival	Feature Film
2013	Silent Asylum (in Taipei Factory)	台北工廠之沉默庇護	Cannes Film Festival, Busan International Film Festival	Short Film (in an omnibus film)
2014	Ice Poison	冰毒	Best International Feature Film at Edinburg International Film Festival, Best Director at Taipei Film Festival, South Prize at South Taiwan Film Festival, Berlin International Film Festival, Tribeca Film Festival, Hong Kong International Film Festival, Golden Horse Film Festival	Feature Film
2014	Burial Clothes (in Letters from the South)	南方來信之安老衣	Edinburg International Film Festival, Busan International Film Festival	Short Film (in an omnibus film)

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2014	The Palace on the Sea	海上皇宮	International Film Festival Rotterdam, Hong Kong International Film Festival, Taipei Film Festival	Short Film/Video Installation
2015	Jade Miners	挖玉石的人	International Film Festival Rotterdam, Taipei Film Festival	Documentary Feature
2016	The Road to Mandalay	再見瓦城	Fedeora Award for Best Film at Venice Film Festival, International Film Festival Rotterdam, Busan International Film Festival, Golden Horse Film Award, Taipei Film Festival	Feature Film
2016	City of Jade	翡翠之城	Berlin International Film Festival, Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, Hong Kong International Film Festival, Golden Horse Film Festival, Taipei Film Festival, South Taiwan Film Festival	Documentary Feature
2016	My Folks in Jade City	我那些翡翠城的親友們		Video Installation
2016	Advertisement for the 53rd Golden Horse Film Festival—Midi Z	金馬 53 年度廣告—趙德胤篇		Advertisement
2018	14 Apples	十四顆蘋果	Berlin International Film Festival, Taipei Film Festival	Documentary Feature

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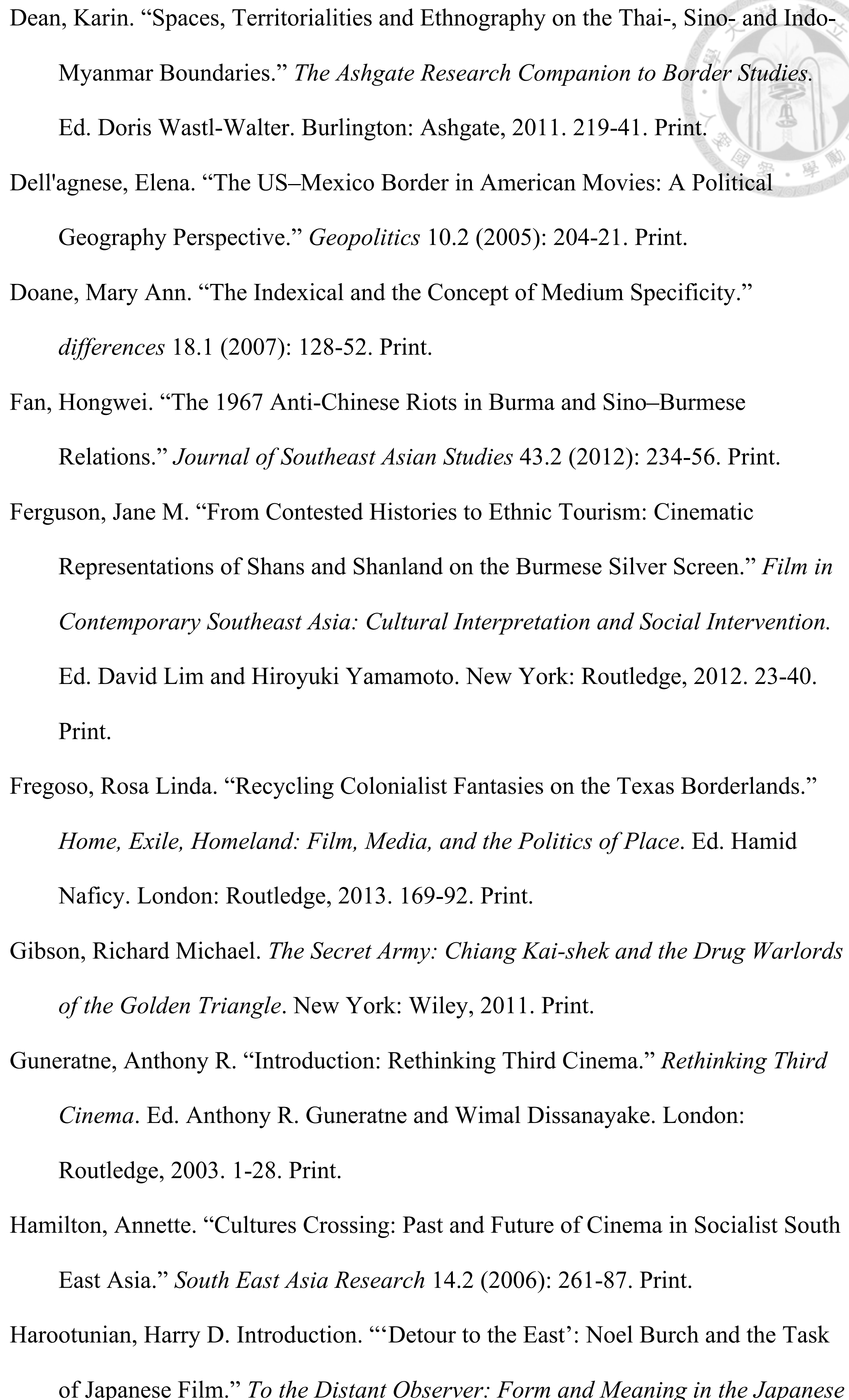

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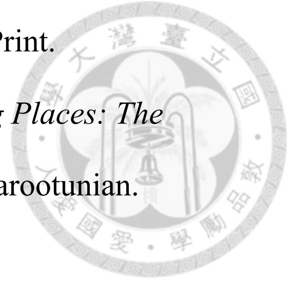

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