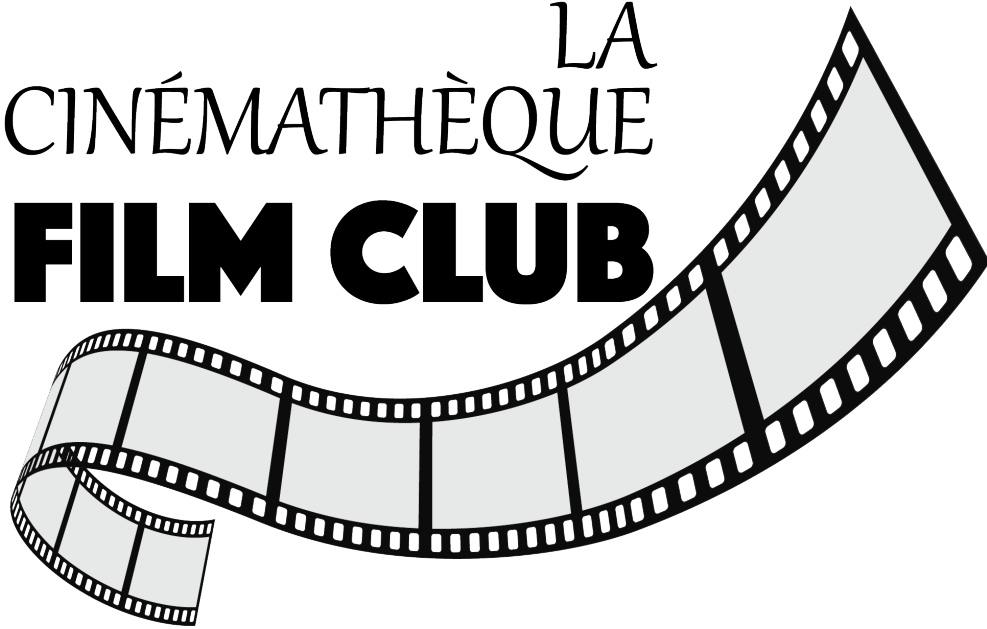


LA  
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Chinese Film Series  
Spring 2019

Ann Hui  
b.1947

A Simple Life  
2011

## A Brief History of Chinese Film

Article sourced from The Confucius Institute: <http://www.confuciusinstitute.ac.uk/cinema-china/briefhistory.html>

### Chinese language filmmaking from the 1930s to 1949

China wasn't involved in the invention of cinema. Europe and America did that, then plied its trade around the world, sending flickering images of Lyon and New Jersey across the globe. By the 1930s, western filmmakers had turned China into a country of exoticism, stereotypes and fetish. Hollywood's celebrated comedian-director Harold Lloyd routinely featured Chinese caricatures, so much so that the Chinese Government protested to America. Joseph Von Sternberg's hothouse melodrama *Shanghai Express* (1932) parachuted Marlene Dietrich into



the imagined erotic atmosphere of a Chinese train. And the whole career of Chinese-American star Anna May Wong was fuelled by a fascination with the Orient.

China was portrayed in western movies as a fantasy, a place to have sex or to daydream, but then Chinese people themselves began to make movies. Bu Wanchang's *Romance of the West Chamber*, made in 1927, probably the first great one, contained hints of what was to follow.

### China's first golden age, 1933-37

Looking back at the films of this period, what is striking is their realism and their focus on women. Take Yuan Muzhi's *Street Angel* (1937) and Bu Wanchang's *The Peach Girl* (1931): neither seemed interested in the gloss and escapism of much of commercial world cinema at this time. Instead, the human poetics of each signaled a dissatisfaction with Imperial China and a compassion for ordinary people. Long before Italian Neo-Realism, Yuan and Bu used understated and realistic filmmaking methods (everyday settings, naturalistic performances, relevant social themes) — to distance themselves from what they thought of as the decadence of the country's elite and to get closer to the truth of real lives. China was rapidly urbanising at the time, peasants were dirt poor and women — especially in cities — symbolised those parts of the country that were repressed and falling behind.

The tragic life of Ruan Lingyu, the star of *The Peach Girl* and *Goddess* (1934), was particularly resonant in this regard. Her performance in the film luminously captured the modernity of her character yet off camera, her life was hell. Shanghai was like LA at the time — a boom town, celebrity obsessed — and another of her films, *New Women* (1934) captures the tragedy of this. About a woman who commits suicide because she is hounded by the tabloids, its awful irony today is that the same year Ruan did just that. At the age of 25, she took an overdose of barbiturates. The New York Times carried the news of her funeral on page one. Her funeral procession was three miles long. If anything signaled that traditional, feudal China was suffering in its attempts to modernise, this did.



Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931. The filmmakers of the time, who tended to be leftists, opposed the invasion, but also Chang Kai Shek's Nationalist reaction to it. When a bloody civil war broke out between the

Communists who insisted that feudalism should be forced to an end, and their bitter Nationalist rivals, filmmakers tended to support the Communists, so the realism of their 30s films, their interest in the underclass, was again appropriate. A second Golden Age (1947-1949) was born, but as no one quite knew who would win, the world of cinema hedged. Cai Chusheng's political melodrama *The Spring River Flows East* was popular and acclaimed in 1947. Fei Mu's *Spring in a Small Town* of 1948 is sometimes voted the best film ever made. Zheng Junli's *Crows and Sparrows* (1949), made as the Communists came to power, was a Hawksian character comedy that lampooned the political chaos. All three married political uncertainty with world class storytelling. Watching them now, it's hard not to read into their engaged cinephilia an innocence about what was to come. Within a year, in 1949, the communists had won. The Nationalists fled to the island of Taiwan, which Japan had lost in what the West called World War 2. Mainland China became a People's Republic under Mao.

There were now three [Chinas] and, inevitably, three film industries. Communists and Nationalists faced each other down in a left-right stand off, and Hong Kong, unaligned, started to look elsewhere.

So what happened to film in this triangular situation? The great filmmakers of the day either fled to Hong Kong or stayed with Mao, running his new, nationalised film industry.

### **Film in the People's Republic of China, 1949 to the Cultural Revolution in 1966**

Yuan Mazhi was, for a while, Mao's movie lieutenant, overseeing the industry's nationalisation between 1949 and 1952, a period of technological advance and a massive increase in the number of cinemas. A Comedy Research Unit was set up in 1955. The famous Beijing Film Academy was established in 1956. The country's first feature animation – the brilliant *Uproar in Heaven* –



was made in 1964. Right up until 1966's Cultural Revolution, socialist realism was the norm in mainland Chinese cinema. Much of the films were formulaic but directors such as Xie Jin emerged. His *Stage Sisters* (1965) was a masterpiece of its kind – a gripping melodrama about choice and redemption, deeply flawed by an over-ideological second half.

### **The emergence of Hong Kong and Taiwan, 1949 – 1966**

The filmmakers who fled to Hong Kong discovered that the city had been making opera movies for years. Rejecting both the PRC and Taiwan they evolved, throughout the 1950s, escapist and un-ideological genres. The great Zhu Shilin specialised in realist comedies. Li Sun-Fung excelled at melodramas, and Li Han Hsiang's *The Love Eterne*, a sumptuous musical about gender confusion, caused a sensation.



Its production company, the soon to be world famous Shaw Brothers, was established in the city in 1957. Most of the Hong Kong film genres of the 1950s centred on women but by the mid 1960s, things began to change, fast. Hong Kong cinema became far more male, a sign of things to come...

Like Hong Kong, the Taiwanese cinema that emerged in the light of the Communist victory on the mainland turned its back on what was happening in Shanghai. This emergence took longer than that in Hong



Kong, but by the mid 1960s former actor King Hu, had become one of the world's greatest directors, combining action cinema with gravity defying choreography and Zen philosophy. Just as Hong Kong cinema was becoming more masculine, Hu's *Come Drink With Me* (1966) signaled a graceful and feminine approach to the emerging action genre – *kung fu*. His *A Touch of Zen* (1969) was considered by many to be as good as the best of Akira Kurosawa.

### Three cinemas: political and cinematic stand-off between 1966 and the new waves of 1979

1966 could not have seen the three cinemas more triangulated. The PRC's polished ideological melodramas, Hong Kong's Shaw bothers, masculine kinetics and the philosophical approach of King Hu each represented very different approaches to cinema. The mainland's Cultural Revolution once again had profound implications for cinema.



One of its masterminds was Mao's third wife, Jiang Qing. A movie actress during the first golden age, in the mid 1930s, she appeared in four films under the name of Lan Ping. Her private life was condemned in public as



immoral, but she declared that she was not Ruan Lingyu, so would not commit suicide. Perhaps as a result of her experience, the Cultural Revolution came down particularly heavily on cinema. Production ground to almost nothing. An astonishing 3000 films – features, documentaries and foreign films – were sealed and stored in massive warehouses.

Hong Kong and Taiwan could only benefit. Hong Kong more brashly. The Shaw Brothers' magnificent *One Armed Swordsman* (1968), a smash hit, furthered the new masculinity of Hong Kong cinema, and introduced themes of castration anxiety, loneliness, male egoism and narcissism. Some saw this, and the films it spawned, as symbols of how Hong Kong saw itself. Three years later the film's central character had morphed into the supercharged Bruce Lee in *The Big Boss* (Low Wei, 1971), which was, of course, a worldwide hit. Lee's death two years later made him the James Dean of his era.

By contrast, Taiwan – which was still under the Nationalists' martial law – continued in its King Hu mode – banning Chinese films, importing some Hong Kong ones, and making some graceful ones of its own.

### 1979 - Three new waves

Such triangulation might have continued indefinitely if it had not been for political and cultural change. Firstly, the PRC's brutal Cultural Revolution came to an end. Two years later, a new era began under Deng Xiaoping. Secondly, Taiwan's thoughtful veteran directors began to search for their roots – perhaps they sensed the weakening of Martial Law, which would finally end in 1987. Thirdly, the advance of global capitalism at the start



of the 1980s turned HK towards bigger, more voracious markets in the West and, at the same time, made its film industry vulnerable to the multiplex blockbusters that those markets had just started to make.

### China since 1979

Mainland China's new wave was the most noticeable. The Beijing Film Academy was closed throughout the Cultural Revolution, but its first graduates after it – the so called 5th generation – included Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, the filmmakers we now associate with China's cinematic revival. Chen's *Yellow Earth* of 1982 shows the



ambiguity with which these new directors were to deal with their country's troubled recent past. The film depicts peasant life under communism but in an abstract, tentative way. The young girl in the story longs to escape the hardship of her life and Communism offers her hope, but Chen and his cinematographer – Zhang Yimou – draw on Buddhist and Taoist ideas about empty space, about the good existing in bad and vice versa, to undermine Maoist certainties about how society should be. *Yellow Earth* – and Zhang Yunzhao's *One and Eight*, also of 1982 – emphasised human and spatial qualities over political and social ones. The result was startling to Western eyes and *Yellow Earth* was acclaimed around the world.

Other films followed suit: 4th Generation directors like the acclaimed Xie Fei charted social change in the 1990s with real subtlety, a Chinese New Wave was born, and Zhang Yimou would become its standard bearer. Indecision, repose, scroll-like composition and emptiness replaced the kinetic, utopian movies of socialist realism. China was debating where it was and where it was going.

Particularly so after the events in Tian'anmen Square in 1989. Some of the Beijing Film Academy's next graduates – the 6th generation – began their careers underground, often working without official sanction, smuggling their films abroad. The title of one of their films – Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards* (1993) – suggests their degree of opposition. Where Chen and his colleagues responded to their country with Taoist and Buddhist meditations, the Sixth Generation expressed their frustrations more directly.



As the 90s progressed, some of the heat went out of the stand-off between Zhang Yuan's generation and their mainland government. Their predecessors, Chen and Zhang Yimou, became more ethnographic and pictorial. Zhang Yimou, in particular, became a director of visual brilliance. After the success of Taiwanese director Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (1999) – a refined homage to the femininity of King Hu's films – and the Asia-influenced *The Matrix* (1999) – Zhang found the international marketplace open to his extraordinary visual, traditional tales. Even so, no-one could quite have predicted that his film *Hero* (2002) would, with the help of Miramax, go

to number one at that international box office which is most resistant to foreign films – America's. A landmark had been set. Other filmmakers like Jia Zhang Ke, with work such as *Unknown Pleasures* (2002) reflected the

drifting, uncertain nature of Chinese young people left high and dry by social change, but it was Zhang who wowed the west.

### Hong Kong since 1979

The other two Chinas wowed the West too, and they, too, underwent New Waves in the 1980s. In Hong Kong, filmmakers emerged who seemed tired of the Bruce Lee/Jackie Chan kinetic style or who at least wanted to play with it stylistically and in terms of gender. Tsui Hark's *Butterfly Murders* and Ann Hui's *The Secret*, both 1979, heralded the changes. Within a few years John Woo would be mixing genres, making gangster pictures with tough but vulnerable heroes in a balletic style. In 1992, Stanley Kwan's *Centre Stage* cast Maggie Cheung as Ruan Lingyu, telling the story of the movie star's suicide in Shanghai in a lushly romantic mode.

Clara Low's *Autumn Moon* (1992) continued the emergence of art and formal cinema in Hong Kong, and the career of Wong Kar-wai, especially films like *Chungking Express* (1994), pushed the new visual ideas as far as they would go, marrying them to characters who drifted, who seemed lost in time, who had no way out. It was interesting to compare their dilemmas and their sense of time with the characters in Chen's *Yellow Earth*.



When we look at Taiwan's cinema of the 80s and 90s we will see that its most innovative directors also picture their protagonists in worlds where the clock seemed to have stopped. Why? Part of this was perhaps millennial, part was in reaction to the speedy cutting of HK cinema and of Hollywood and part, surely, was to do with the uncertainties that they felt in their own countries.

By the end of the 1990s, things had changed again in Hong Kong. Britain had left, the city was fully part of the PRC – the famous “one country, 2 systems” – and its film world had become trans-pacific. John Woo was in America, directing films like *Face/Off* (1997), actress Michelle Yeoh was in a bond movie and *Infernal Affairs* (2002) (by Lau and Mak) had become an international hit.

### Taiwan since 1979

Like China and Hong Kong, Taiwan's cinema of the 80s set an artistic high water mark. Not since the 1960s had its indigenous filmmaking been so innovative. Its foremost auteurs were Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-Hsien. Yang's *Taipei Story* of 1985 was typical of the island's filmmakers' themes: Alienation, the rapid growth of



cities, anomie, the loneliness and directionlessness of urbanites.



In the 70s, the island's directors had started to look at the roots of their state; the end of Martial Law in 1987 encouraged them in this regard. Hou's *A City of Sadness* (1989) was part of a trilogy of films that looked at the layers and repetitions of Taiwanese history. Like Wong in Hong Kong and Chen in the PRC his gaze was long, slow and static.

He was influenced in this by his admiration for the Japanese director Ozu.

In the mid 1990s, a new generation followed in the footsteps of Hou and Yang, just as the 6th generation followed the 5th in the PRC. Of these, Tsai Ming-liang was the master. Tsai took Hou's ideas to their logical conclusion, extending his shots in time, paring down action and dialogue, capturing the numb confusion of characters like those in *The Hole* (1998).

## The Future

Even a summary history of Chinese cinema shows how much talent it contains, how many stylistic transformations there have been and how those transformations have been caused by social change, urbanisation and political upheaval. What is fascinating is that gender, genre and action have been the means through which Chinese filmmakers have expressed their reactions to history. That there have, for some of that history, been three states within the one nation, means that the story has been particularly complex. But the three states have also revealed how split the personality has been of Chinese cinema, almost since its inception.

What of the future? The breakthrough of films like *Hero* and the asianisation of Hollywood means that, just as in the world of economics, so in the world of cinema, China seems to be "winning" or at least coming up from the rear and ready to overtake. Its filmmakers understand action better than western directors and relate it, unlike Hollywood, to repose. This is a powerful and perceptive approach.

But their art cinemas continue to register acutely the psychic paralysis of the vast populations of people who watched the biggest buildings in the world grow up around them and wondered what this accelerated pace of life, this rapid post-modernity means, and how they square it with their more traditional selves. These are big troubling social questions but the fact is this: Cinema always flourishes when it has to deal with meaty themes. The themes in China in the 21st C could hardly be more so.

## Further Reading:

- *Chinese National Cinema* by Zhang Yingjin (Routledge, 2004) is an excellent chronological account of the formation of the film industries of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and is particularly good on movie going, film studios, production details and genres.
- *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, edited by Chris Berry (BFI, 2003) features chapter length essays on twenty-five landmark Chinese language movies, including a number of these showing in Cinema China.
- *China on Screen* by Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar (Columbia University Press, 2006) is a thought provoking series of essays on the relationship between cinema and nation in China.
- *Cinematic Landscapes: Observation on the Visual Arts of China and Japan*, edited by Linda Ehrlich and David Desser (University of Texas Press, 1994), is very good on the influence of Chinese painting on Zhang Yimou and the 5th Generation filmmakers.
- *China into Film: Frames of Reference in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* by Jerome Silbergeld (Reaktion Books, 1999) is an interesting examination of the ways in which Chinese cinema has been historically shaped by Chinese visual and cultural traditions.
- *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* by David Bordwell (Harvard University Press, 2000) traces the rise of the emergence of Hong Kong into one of the most exciting places in the world for popular cinema.
- *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics* by Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, Esther Yau (eds) (Cambridge University Press, 1996) is an exploration of in the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong since the end of the Cultural Revolution.
- *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* by Shuqin Cui (University of Hawaii Press, 2003) is about the role female stardom played in the creation of the nation-state in twentieth-century China.
- *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema 1896-1937* by Zhang Zhen (University of Chicago Press, 2006) is a fascinating story of the most cinematic of all Chinese cities, Shanghai.
- *Confronting Modernity in the Cinema of Taiwan and Mainland China* by Tonglin Lu is a comprehensive examination of the context in which the Chinese and Taiwanese New Waves emerged and the impact their appearance had.

## Border Crossings: Ann Hui's cinema

Freda Freiberg • October 2002

Article sourced from Senses of Cinema: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/filmmaker-profiles/hui/>

This year the Hong Kong International Film Festival paid tribute to Ann Hui, a director with a long track record in the local industry. After an active career in television, directing documentaries and drama, she began making movies in 1979, and has hitherto directed 21 features. Her latest film, *July Rhapsody* (2001), was selected for screening at both the Sydney and the Brisbane International Film Festival. With four features over the past two years, she shows no sign of slowing down and seems to be at the height of her powers. Unlike many of her compatriots, she has not deserted Hong Kong, where she is highly respected for her intelligence, creativity and commitment to local film culture.

The Hong Kong film industry has been most noted for the production of highly entertaining popular genre films – in particular, for frenetically paced martial arts movies, suspense thrillers and ghost stories, all spiced up with comedy and romance – and its flamboyant male directors, Tsui Hark, John Woo and Wong Kar-wai. It is the Taiwanese cinema that is regarded as being more contemplative and of the high art variety thanks in large part to the films of Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang and Tsai Ming-liang. However, there have always been crossovers – some genre movies made in Taiwan and some art movies made in Hong Kong. Ann Hui's work sits somewhere in the middle. Though she started as an assistant to King Hu on the production of martial arts movies, and subsequently directed a number of genre movies (ghost stories, thrillers and martial arts epics), her best work blends a certain documentary realism with the family melodrama to produce a humanist cinema that centres on the experience of women in the home and the world (to borrow a phrase from Tagore). And, though she was associated with Hark and Woo as one of the prime movers of the New Wave in Hong Kong filmmaking, her work is distinctively different from theirs in its thematics and stylistics. While they have devoted their creative talents to the kinetics of movement, action and the choreography of heroic stunts of performance, with explosive and exhilarating bursts of energy and violence punctuating if not overpowering the masochistic male melodramatics of the narrative, Hui has remained a political filmmaker, concerned with issues of class, gender and ethnicity, with history and memory, with the nexus between the public and private lives of ordinary unheroic people. There is violence in her films, but it is always tied to the social and political abuse of power, and is not endowed with the kind of aesthetic and emotional fascination that it has for Woo and Hark.

Soon after her return from England, where she studied filmmaking, Hui worked for Hong Kong television, directing documentaries about social protest action as well as episodes of drama series, and this background in documentary and political activism has inflected her later feature films. Her recent film, *Ordinary Heroes* (1999), is a tribute to the social activists of Hong Kong in the '70s. Her Vietnam trilogy of films – *The Boy from Vietnam* (1978), *The Story of Woo Viet* (1981) and *The Boat People* (1982) – dramatizes the trials and tribulations of Vietnamese refugees and condemns the Hong Kong authorities for failure to help them. Interestingly, it is a Japanese photojournalist (himself a war orphan) who in *The Boat People* becomes committed to improving the refugees' welfare and finally sacrifices himself to help them escape. This casting of a Japanese as investigative and sacrificial hero is interesting because of Hui's own background, as the child of a Japanese mother and Chinese father. Her family background perhaps also helps to explain her interest in displaced and marginal people, her horror of nationalism and ethnocentrism. In *The Boat People*, she shows how the ethnic Chinese were targets of



government oppression in post-liberation Vietnam. In *Song of the Exile*, she shows how her mother, an ethnic Japanese, was the object of discrimination by her Chinese parents-in-law in post-war China.

But Hui is not a didactic filmmaker. She is a narrative filmmaker who situates her characters in the imperfect social world and shows them struggling, and largely succeeding, to survive. Her most recent film, *July*



*Rhapsody*, known in Chinese as *Man of 40*, is a companion piece to *Summer Snow* (1995), with its Chinese title, *Woman of 40*. Both films centre on a mid-life crisis faced by the protagonist. The crisis is not spiritual or existential but the product of social problems simultaneously occurring on the domestic and work fronts. In *Summer Snow*, a cheerful, competent and confident working housewife is faced with the

downgrading of her status at work as a result of the computerization of business administration and is burdened at home with the responsibility of caring for a difficult widowed father-in-law with Alzheimer's disease. In *July Rhapsody*, a respectable, committed and competent teacher of Chinese literature is faced with an attractive student who is infatuated with him at the same time as his wife is nursing her ex-lover and neglecting him. Neither film succumbs to the heavy melodramatic potential of their storylines. Instead, the daily doings and settings of the characters are densely detailed with a kind of documentary realism, and the story unfolds almost casually, with moments of humour and pathos. Hui endows the major characters with vitality and nobility, though she does not shrink from displaying their trying imperfections and aberrations.

Nevertheless, *Song of the Exile* (1989) remains my favourite Ann Hui film. It is her most personal – in fact, it is a fictionalised autobiographical film – and yet it at the same time speaks for countless contemporary women, who identify with the feelings and experiences on show. *Song of the Exile* is about the problems of the mother-daughter relationship in our time, about the impact of socio-historical forces on private life and the crises of identity ensuing from post-colonial migrations. The classic Hollywood melodrama did occasionally treat the subject of mother-daughter relationships (for example, *Now, Voyager* [Irving Rapper, 1942], *Mildred Pierce* [Michael Curtiz, 1945], *Imitation of Life* [Douglas Sirk, 1958], and *Stella Dallas* [King Vidor, 1937]) but always accorded it the heavy melodramatic treatment, with villainous mother (*Now, Voyager*), villainous daughter (*Mildred Pierce*), or tragic mother sacrificing herself for her daughter's welfare (*Stella Dallas*). These classic Hollywood melodramas were also clearly situated within patriarchal ideology, according to which the dyadic relationship between mother and daughter is abnormal and unnatural, one that must be ruptured, as a woman's primary attachments should be with men (fathers, lovers, husbands, sons). *Song of the Exile* departs radically from the Hollywood norm in having no heterosexual romance or love affair to intervene in the mother-daughter relationship. The struggle for the daughter's affection is between the mother and the grandparents, and this conflict in Hui's perspective is grounded in socio-political issues (cultural difference, political conflict, nationalism) rather than in psychoanalytic ones. The grandparents claim her as a Chinese and seek to wrench her from the influence of her mother, their Japanese daughter-in-law. They try to instil in her a love of Chinese culture (language, literature, food) and secure her identity as a Chinese. Gillian Armstrong's *High Tide* (1987)

dramatised a young woman's conflict between attachment to her mother and grandmother but (i) there was no ethnic difference complicating the conflict; and (ii) the mother had abandoned the child and had previously not claimed her, so that the melodrama centres less on the daughter's conflict or the conflict between mother and grandmother than it does on the mother's awakening to her maternal instincts, to the triumph of nature over nurture<sup>1</sup>.

*Song of the Exile* is set in the 1970s but is punctuated with flashbacks to the past, signalled by voice-over as memories of Hueyin (Hui's stand-in, played by Maggie Cheung) or (in the case of events that happened before her birth) as enactments of her uncle's and mother's memories. The film begins in London, where Hueyin has been studying and fails to land a job at the BBC, and soon moves to Hong Kong, whence she returns to attend her sister's wedding. The early scenes of conflict and tension between her and her widowed mother, Aiko (played by Hsiao Feng-lu), centre on issues of dress and grooming for the wedding (mother pressures her to wear a red dress and have her hair permed). The troubled relationship between them seems initially to stem from a generation and education gap. Mother appears to be an empty-headed *bourgeoise*, only interested in her appearance, her clothes, playing *mahjong* and seeing her daughters married. Huejin, her elder daughter, is an educated young woman, interested in the world, in politics and culture. This initial conflict is one only too familiar to tertiary-educated, middle-class women in the developed world who matured in the 1960s and '70s and found a large gap between their mothers' horizons and values and their own. Early flashbacks prompted by Hueyin's resentment towards her mother over the dress and hair issues show mother causing her distress as a child by cutting her hair short and making her wear a sailor suit to school, ignoring her protestations. But later flashbacks provide a more sympathetic view of the mother, as it is revealed that she suffered oppression from her Chinese parents-in-law. Retrospectively, we can understand that the mother was merely following Japanese tradition in preparing her daughter for school (with the statutory short hair cut and school uniform). It gradually becomes evident that the main obstacle to mutual respect and affection between mother and daughter is nationalism. The child Hueyin, under the sway of her paternal grandparents, had rejected her Japanese mother and identifies herself as a Chinese. Though her mother and her grandparents become disillusioned with their respective nations by the end of the film, the damage has been done. The more common tensions between mothers and daughters (due to different levels and types of education, differing views on the role of women, traditional feminine vs. feminist ideologies, as well as psychological factors) are here exacerbated by the introduction of a cultural clash rooted in traumatic historical friction. China and Japan were literally at war in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; Chinese populations and territories suffered greatly under the conquest and rule of the Japanese; Chinese nationalists and communists were united in their hatred of the Japanese. So young Hueyin, who absorbs Chinese patriotism from her nationalist Chinese grandparents, has a real problem accepting her Japanese mother.

But, in the second half of the film, Hueyin accompanies her mother on a visit to Japan, her mother's homeland, and learns what it is to be a stranger who cannot speak the local language and is unfamiliar with the local customs. Her mother too becomes disillusioned with her homeland and is cured of her nostalgic longings,

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1. Interestingly, the sea figures prominently in both *High Tide* and *Song of the Exile*, although it is raging surf on the shoreline (a melodramatic cliché) that features in the former and calmer deep water (associated with introspection as well as maternity) in the latter.

no longer feeling at home there. She comes to recognise that Hong Kong is her home now. Hueyin also has learnt to distrust Chinese nationalism and decides to settle and work in the colony of Hong Kong. So, the rapprochement and ultimate reconciliation between mother and daughter is made possible by mutual recognition of a precarious common “homeland” (a British colony that will be returned to China in 1997), by both abandoning their nostalgic stances as exiles, and by common experience of being situated as outsiders. Hueyin has put herself in her mother’s place and no longer resents her, can now empathise with her.

Hui studied comparative literature at university before she went to London to study filmmaking, and did her thesis on the fiction of Alain Robbe-Grillet. Though her formal style is far from avant-garde, we may observe a debt to the French *nouveau roman* in her interest in memory and her evocative and cerebral use of the telling detail, in the echoes and repetitions that chime through her work. *Song of the Exile* opens and closes with a bridge across water; the film is punctuated by journeys, on bicycle, train and ship, and by departures and farewells. The opening scenes in London introduce the motifs of the bridge, the bike-ride and the necklace. Hueyin rides her bike across Westminster Bridge and through the city streets; later, in Japan, she rides a bike through the Japanese countryside. She lends her English girlfriend her necklace to wear to a job interview; her mother gives her necklace to Huewei, Hueyin’s sister, on her marriage. In both cases, Hueyin is the loser – unlike her English girlfriend, she fails to land an interview with the BBC; unlike her sister, she fails to be recognised as a dutiful daughter by her mother. Partings are most prominently featured. First Hueyin’s parents then she herself leave Macao for Hong Kong; her sister and brother-in-law leave Hong Kong for Canada; her mother farewells her parents at their graveside on her return to Hong Kong; Hueyin parts with her grandparents in Guanjo, in mainland China, to return to Hong Kong. The film closes with a sombre shot of the bridge that connects Hong Kong to the mainland, a bridge that has personal and political connotations, linking Hueyin to her grandparents on the mainland and Hong Kong to the mainland regime that will reclaim Hong Kong in 1997.



In the film, language and food are highlighted as barriers and bridges between people. In Macao, the young Japanese mother is ostracised because of her inability to speak Chinese and to cook in the Chinese manner. In Japan, Hueyin can only communicate via English or limited Mandarin. The mother’s abandonment of the stance of a nostalgic exile is signified by her farewelling her parents at their graveside in Cantonese; she had greeted them on her arrival in Japanese. Japanese food has also lost its appeal for her. Clear parallels are made in regard to the language barrier, with both mother and daughter in turn excluded from comprehension and communication, mother in Macao, Hueyin in Japan. Mandarin supplies a bridge between Hueyin and the Japanese uncle who had lived in northeast China during the war; English is a bridge between her and some educated young Japanese. Her father is a professional interpreter – a bridge between peoples of different

language and culture. The Japanese uncle is another bridge. In Mandarin, he tells Hueyin about her mother's early life and the family's experiences in Manchuria during and after the war. But generally the language barrier produces misunderstandings and tensions in the Japanese section of the film. Hueyin does not understand her aunt's fears and suspicions about her mother's intentions and is unable to placate her; and she misinterprets a farmer's friendly gesture and reads it as a rebuke, inspiring fear of punishment.

The voice-over narration and flashbacks provide an autobiographical as well as retrospective cast to the film. The flashbacks recast the past into short dramatic scenes that explain the early rift between mother and daughter and highlight the pain and distress on both sides. Though the film is explicitly made from the daughter's point of view, the flashbacks increasingly become more empathetic with the mother, stressing her isolation and suffering, her cruel rejection by in-laws and elder daughter. Mother and daughter are expressly (and very expressively) linked in the central ferry shot. First we see mother sadly looking into the water, on her way to Hong Kong, distressed at leaving her daughter in Macao; the mother's view of the water as seen from the moving ferry then dissolves into Hueyin's view of it some years later, when she is on her way to re-join her parents in Hong Kong, leaving her beloved grandparents behind.

Grandpa is associated with the culture and arts of Old China: classical poetry and calligraphy. Though a Chinese patriot, who returns to the mainland after the Revolution, he is shown to be cruelly disillusioned, for the New China does not value the culture dear to him. At the end of the film, when Hueyin visits her grandparents on the mainland, he is dying, and is distressed by the policies of the Cultural Revolution, a disillusioned man but still a patriot who hopes things will change for the better. However, Hui suggests this is unlikely. The little boy her grandmother is looking after bites the hand that feeds him; and a cold front is approaching. These events function as pessimistic and prophetic metaphors, not optimistic of the future. The final image of the film – of the dark bridge over the water at the border – is also rather gloomy. It can be read as a personal and political metaphor. As the link between the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong, it prefigures the imminent 1997 re-incorporation of Hong Kong into the PRC; the bridge also perhaps signifies the re-established link, the end of the Cold War, between mother and daughter. Mother, however, has turned old and quiet; she has lost her spark; the fighting spirit has gone, so the reconciliation is tinged with sorrow, and not signified as a triumph. Furthermore, under the shadow of 1997, a contingent and uncertain future awaits Hueyin in Hong Kong.

Interestingly, *Song of the Exile* kills off the patriarchs: Father is a minor shadowy figure in the flashbacks, no longer alive in the present of the film; Grandpa is ultimately impotent as well as disillusioned. Hui here seems to be positing an alternative world of strong and enduring women, disrupting patriarchal and patrilineal conceptions of nationality and filiation. However, she is by no means a man-hating feminist. If men do not figure strongly in this film, they certainly do in her recent films. She portrays the difficult old man in *Summer Storm* with sympathy and warmth, and positively celebrates the understanding and attachment that develops between him and his feisty daughter-in-law. In *July Rhapsody* she portrays with sympathy the trials and tribulations of a married man who, somewhat reminiscent of Grandpa in *Song of the Exile*, is an inspirational teacher of classical Chinese literature.

The central concern with the mother-daughter relationship in *Song of the Exile* can be likened to a similar concern in diasporic Chinese autobiographical women's literature – the many memoirs and novels published in Britain, Australia and the US. In these books, the rebellious and liberated daughters tell the stories of their

suffering mothers and grandmothers, and exorcise their guilt by paying them tribute. They highlight the tensions between the generations, and underline the suffering of women under Oppressive Old China, in contradistinction to the Free Modern West. They also highlight the betrayal of liberationist policies in modern China, where political idealism is cruelly betrayed by successive waves of political oppression. Although there are points of similarity, I find Hui's representation of the mother-daughter relationship and of political matters more subtle and nuanced than theirs. She is less prone to indulge in melodramatics and extreme binary oppositions.

In Australian independent cinema, there has been a distinct genre of autobiographical women's films, but they are mostly short films, on the experimental edge, employing re-edited pre-existing footage from the family album and home video or detailing empty interior landscapes, with the autobiographical discourse narrated by an off-screen woman's voice<sup>2</sup>. The commercial branch of the industry has also produced features based on Australian women's autobiographical fiction – *My Brilliant Career* (Gillian Armstrong, 1979), adapted from Miles Franklin's autobiographical novel; *The Getting of Wisdom* (Bruce Beresford, 1977), adapted from Henry Handel Richardson's thinly disguised account of her early life; and *We of the Never Never* (Igor Auzins, 1982), based on Mrs Aeneas Gunn's account of her life on an outback cattle station. They are notably all period films inflected by a liberal feminist agenda. But none of these films, experimental or commercial, is centrally concerned with the mother-daughter relationship and Corinne Cantrill alone has addressed the issue of cultural difference generating tensions in the family.

*Song of the Exile* deserves a wider audience. A mainstream commercial film starring the magnificent Maggie Cheung, it is an intelligent and moving woman's film, addressing the nexus between the public and the private, the personal and the political, the local and the global in our time.

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<sup>2</sup> Notable examples of the genre are Jenny Thornley's *Maidens* (1978), Merilee Bennett's *A Song of Air* (1987), Corinne Cantrell's *In This Life's Body* (1984), Gillian Leahy's *My Life without Steve* (1986) and Marie Craven's *Pale Black* (1993).



## Filmography as director

- **Eight & a Half** *filming*
- **Our Time Will Come** (2017)
- **The Golden Era** (2014)
- **“My Way”** (2012) *segment of Beautiful 2012*
- **A Simple Life** (2011)
- **All About Love** (2010)
- **Night and Fog** (2009)
- **The Way We Are** (2008)
- **The Postmodern Life of my Aunt** (2006)
- **Goddess of Mercy** (2003)
- **July Rhapsody** (2002)
- **The Making of ‘Youling renjian – Visible Secret’** (2001) *video documentary short*
- **Visible Secret** (2001)
- **Ordinary Heroes** (1999)
- **Eighteen Springs** (1997)
- **Qu ri ku duo** (1997) *documentary*
- **A Jin de gu shi** (1996)
- **Summer Snow** (1995)
- **Boy and His Hero** (1993)
- **My American Grandson** (1991)
- **Ji dao zhui zong** (1990)
- **Song of the Exile** (1990)
- **The Swordsman** (1990) *uncredited*
- **Jin ye xing guang can lan** (1988)
- **Princess Fragrance** (1987)
- **The Romance of Book and Sword** (1987)
- **Love in a Fallen City** (1984)
- **Boat People** (1982)
- **God of Killers** (1981)
- **The Spooky Bunch** (1980)
- **The Secret** (1979)
- **Below the Lion Rock** (1972) *TV Show*

## Three questions for Ann Hui's *A Simple Life*

Ben Sachs • May 7, 2012

Article sourced from The Chicago Reader: <https://www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2012/05/07/three-questions-for-ann-hui-a-simple-life>

Having now seen Ann Hui's *A Simple Life* (at the improbable outlet of River East 21), I can aver that this Hong Kong feature is well worth checking out. It's the sort of humanist filmmaking (like Satyajit Ray's) that seems to take shape on its own, and it goes down like honey. Hui and her writers (Susan Chan and Roger Lee) let the characters lead the way: it never feels like you're being told a story about these people, but sharing time with them. Given the subtlety of the approach—and the familiarity of the material—it's easy to overlook the movie's odder qualities and its troubling undercurrent. This is indeed about a single man taking filial responsibility for his family's aging maid after she suffers a stroke. But what it manages to suggest about how people live and die in contemporary society is hardly uplifting.

What follows are some initial observations of *A Simple Life*. I hope they create an idea of how complex and mysterious this deceptively easy movie is.

**1) What motivates Roger (Andy Lau) to devote himself to Ah Lao (Deannie Ip)?** Yes, he's known her since he was born and she took a maternal interest in him when he was a boy. But Roger's attention seems almost impossibly compassionate. He pays for all of Ah Lao's treatment at her nursing home and visits her regularly during her stay—the latter being all the more remarkable since he's a successful movie producer who often travels for work. There are numerous hints, however, at Roger's deep dissatisfaction. At 50, he remains unmarried, and he doesn't seem to have any close friends or family ties apart from Ah Lao.

This is a strange role for Lau, one of Hong Kong's biggest movie stars and one of the most charismatic living actors. The part requires him to turn his expressive qualities inward, and he adds to the characterization by using his likability as a mask. Roger's loath to talk about his true feelings (even his eulogy for Ah Lao at the end of the film is all business), and he keeps his social interactions smooth and bland. But as the movie goes on, there are more and more signs of his loneliness. In one of the longest scenes, he and Ah Lao grill each other about why neither ever got married. Each one laughs off the other's interrogation and, by extension, his own disappointment. It's possible that, for both characters, domestic devotion provides a healthy surrogate for romantic love.

**2) Whose life does the title refer to?** It would seem to be Ah Lao's, as it was spent almost entirely in domestic service, unfettered by family bonds of her own. Yet Roger's life is curiously simple for a movie producer. He lives in a small apartment, dresses like a public school teacher, and doesn't seem to have any hobbies. He doesn't even like movies all that much—anyhow, he never discusses them when he isn't at work. *A Simple Life* is full of cameos from luminaries of the Hong Kong film world, including director Tsui Hark and actor/choreographer Sammo Hung (this may be the *Funny People* of Hong Kong dramas), and their consistent modesty becomes something like a running gag. It feels as though the entire business of movies has been recast in terms of Ah Lao's work ethic. The film's few conversations about cinema focus on concrete financial matters, the

housekeeping side of artistic production. In fact, this is one of the oddest depictions of filmmaking I've seen in a movie.

**3) What is Ah Lao doing with her hands?** At times, she's making birdlike gestures; at others, she's fumbling to illustrate some ineffable thought. One of the most discomfiting notions about aging is the thought that we may lose control of our own bodies, that our very individuality will be compromised through no fault of our own. *A Simple Life* doesn't shy from this sad fact: the scenes at the nursing home are so vividly detailed (in matters of incontinence, false teeth, the sexuality of the elderly) that no one could accuse the film of sentimentality. And Ip refuses to overstate Ah Lao's infirmity or her courage in recovering from her stroke.

Even when *A Simple Life* isn't directly confronting the ugly truths about aging, Hui keeps them in our minds through her considered mise-en-scene. She often shoots the interiors of the nursing home at low angles, setting the characters against the drab-colored ceiling; and she utilizes the shallow focus so common to digital video (the film was shot on the RED One camera) to suggest a world closing in on the characters. Her aesthetic creates a chilling counterpoint to the characters' warm behavior. It speaks to realities that the characters—and presumably, all us contented working folk—would just as soon avoid.