RE-VISIONS OF THE PAST: LYRICISM AS HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE

POETRY AND FILM

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Re-visions of the Past: Lyricism as History in Contemporary Chinese Poetry and Film

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This dissertation investigates the role of lyricism in mainland Chinese and Taiwanese poetry and film. The project centers on the directors Hou Hsiao-hsien and Jia Zhangke, whose films are frequently described as lyrical despite their detailed, realistic recreation of the past. The analysis of these filmmakers is paired with chapters dealing with poetry by Ya Xian, Bei Dao, Xi Chuan and others. Drawing on concepts from both the Chinese and Western traditions, the dissertation identifies key poetic strategies that are operative in the films while taking into account the particularities of each medium. Lyricism is a flexible term that has been applied variously to these poems and films in an attempt to capture the way they translate the affective layers of historical experience into comprehensible artistic forms. Much more than a genre or style, lyricism is the result of a particular activation of the reader or spectator, who must participate in the meaning-making process and therefore bring something of his or her own emotional and personal resources to the work. Because of that self-conscious participation, the experience of lyricism therefore enables a particular historical consciousness that can be a productive alternative to the more typical narrative forms of historicism that these artists reject.
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Introduction

It would come as a surprise to many contemporary American students, for whom the prospect of reading a couple of pages of poetry often seems incomparably more difficult than watching a short film, that at a moment in time not long after the birth of cinema, one could suggest that poetry and cinema are comparable precisely because of their equivalent density and semantic complexity. This is precisely the argument made by the Russian formalist critic Yuri Tynyanov in his article, “The Fundamentals of Cinema” part of the collection Poetika kino (The Poetics of Cinema) originally published in 1927. For these theorists, cinema had already begun to evolve far beyond its initial function as a passive recording of the world, and the resources of montage editing and shot construction were allowing it to develop into an art form whose capacity for expression was only beginning to be recognized. Several essays in this collection consider not only the formal properties of film construction in relation to more traditional poetic analyses, but also attempt to seriously consider the ways in which poetry and cinema relate to one another in terms of their mechanisms of expression. Tynyanov writes that techniques such as camera angle and other forms of stylistic transformation are what allow the objects captured by the camera to become artistic. Just as everyday language becomes poetic in part through the intense focalization achieved by poetry, in cinema, the “man” or “object” being represented become transformed both stylistically and semantically, becoming the “‘man’ and ‘object’ of cinema” (38). Far from a mechanical reproduction of the real, he sees in cinema a “crowding of relationships” between the objects in a photograph or film shot as compared with natural vision, which is comparable to the
density of the imagery in a poem when compared to ordinary speech. This leads Tynyanov to the conclusion that,

Shots in film do not ‘unfold’ in a sequential, gradual order, they are precisely exchanged. This is the foundation of montage. They replace each other just as a single verse line, a single metrical unit, replaces another one on a precise boundary....It may seem strange, but if we are to make an analogy between film and the verbal arts, then the only justifiable analogy will be not with prose, but with verse. (45)

While Tynyanov’s analysis here is, for obvious reasons, strictly formalist, my own interest in the analogy between film and poetry derives in large measure from an attempt to account for the experience of this unfolding. While the poetic can be defined in terms of clearly-defined measures such as metrics, prosody and so on, it is also something phenomenological, an experience that strikes one as poetic even if the form that engenders that response is not what we would typically term “poetry.”

This dissertation seeks to bring together films and poetry under the rubric of lyricism, a term which I use to account for the particular effects of the works under discussion on their audiences. Though they vary a great deal in their aesthetic presentation, these works all attempt to engage with personal memory in all of its minutiae and ordinariness without prescribing a particular (particularly national) narrative framework within which that memory must be understood. This non-linear temporality is captured by Tynyanov’s description of the unfolding common to the progression of poetry and film, but in the works I discuss here, that temporality carries a powerful affect which is not generally accounted for in more formalist comparisons of film and poetry. Indeed, it is likely that the difficulty of bringing together these two very different art forms without being either hopelessly vague or dryly formalist, has been behind the relative scarcity of studies comparing film and poetry in the almost 90 years since the Russian formalists first made the attempt. There are many examples of poetic language
being used in descriptions of cinema, and of cinematic techniques (I will focus on
montage here), being used to describe poetics. I attempt here a more sustained
engagement with the relationship between these two art forms, while recognizing their
distinct differences.

A special feature of my approach here is that I rely on insights from outside of the
largely (but not exclusively) Euro-American focus of film theory in order to account for
what I identify as a particular instance of comparison between poetry and film. I use the
term “lyricism” to describe the commonality between the poems and films under
discussion because it helps me to move beyond questions of form and explore the
emotional, affective and finally, historical dimensions of these works which coalesce into
a singular effect on the reader or viewer. The works I examine here were created by
artists from mainland China and Taiwan, which have their own distinct diversity of
cultures and languages, as well as co-dependent but starkly different histories. Despite
their many differences, however, the works I discuss were created in a cultural
environment influenced by both the ancient Chinese and modern Western cultural
traditions. I draw on insights from both of these traditions, particularly their poetic
concepts, in order to redefine lyricism to account for these poems and films. My analysis

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1 I need to state for the record that I acknowledge how problematic will be my usage of the term “Western”
throughout this dissertation as a comparable term to “Chinese.” Obviously, “Western” a broad and vague
designation for nation-states in Europe, the Americas and elsewhere, while “Chinese” can be a national,
linguistic or cultural designation, though it remains somewhat more specific than “Western.” Making these
comparisons is even more problematic because the timelines for each of these “traditions” do not match up,
and most of the inquiries into comparative poetics in English have focused on the Greeks and then skipped
to primarily English-language critics from the Renaissance forward, with special focus on the last two
hundred years or so. Nonetheless, I persist in using these terms for two reasons: first, they still designate
functional (if overly generalized) ways of understanding some of the canonical works and most influential
concepts in each cultural tradition, which has an impact on how contemporary artists in both traditions
think of their work and its artistic heritage and second, because these generalized concepts can be put
together in order to create a much more historically-specific, contextually-sensitive accounting of what I
call lyricism in this particular grouping of poems and films.
is not, however, a poetics in itself. An approach like David Bordwell’s in *Poetics of Cinema* is useful for pinning down the cause of particular effects that we notice in films, but it does not help us to think about the larger impact these formal qualities have on the way these effects impact the reader or viewer. It also does not integrate the historical concerns of the moment into the analysis in a way that these works would deem important. Of course, thinking about the way the audience experiences and interprets a work of art is much more tricky and imprecise than detailing the structural and technical qualities of the work itself, but as we will see, these works are so intimately engaged with the project of memorializing the detailed yet affective experience of a moment that we need to at least attempt to determine how their formal choices succeed or fail in achieving those goals.

In what follows, therefore, I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of how film and poetry relate to one another as forms, epistemologies or mediums of expression. What I do attempt is a detailed consideration of the multiple ways in which poetry and film can address similar concerns and achieve similar effects. I trace the formal characteristics that allow these commonalities, while recognizing that their specific contours may differ case by case. Certain of these characteristics are shared across most of the examples I cite – such as a preference for juxtaposition over continuity, reliance on ordinary details to imply common experiences without representing them directly, emphasis on the personal as part of the collective but not continuous with it, use of emotional and affective expression over narrative, and a recognition of the role of performance and self-conscious presentation inherent in the act of representing the past. Other features are not shared across these works, and my
analysis demonstrates that lyricism can emerge in different ways depending on both the context and the content of the work. I do not trace threads of influence or inspiration between poetry and cinema, nor do I suggest that these artists are working with the aim to create poetic films or cinematic poems. I seek to account for an effect that has already been given a name without singling out a particular conceptual framework, formal structure or chain of influence as determinative.

This dissertation is divided into two sections: the first deals with poetry from Taiwan’s modernist period, specifically the work of Ya Xian [瘂弦 b.1932] in Chapter 1, and then moves to the films of Hou Hsiao-hsien [侯孝贤 b.1947], also from Taiwan, in Chapter 2. The second half explores the work of mainland Chinese poets Bei Dao [北岛 b.1949] and Xi Chuan [西川 b. 1963] in Chapter 3, followed by the films of Jia Zhangke [贾樟柯 b.1970] in Chapter 4, whose work also shows up in Chapter 2. The chapters addressing actual poetry are, in a way, a testing ground for the more difficult work of applying poetic insights to film. The poems I discuss here are not (or not only) the most well-known works within each poet’s oeuvre, nor are they representative of the broad trends of their place and time. The films I examine are, by virtue of being part of the oeuvre of two of the most well-known auteurs in contemporary world cinema, much more familiar, though they are arguably not the most well-known films by either director. I use the poems as evidence of flashes of experimentation, which may not become dominant in either that poet’s career or in that period more broadly, but they help us to understand how an analogous approach in film has the capacity to be so effective. In other words, Ya Xian, Bei Dao and Xi Chuan are not generally thought of as the most lyrical poets of their generations, while Jia Zhangke and Hou Hsiao-hsien are often
described using such language, but understanding how these particular poets can achieve a form of lyrical historicism can help us to recognize how the more familiar designation of Jia and Hou as cinematic “poets” does not crowd out their significant achievements in addressing historical concerns without playing into the assumptions of dominant narrative modes.

Before going any further into the theoretical basis for this comparative project, it is important to take a step back and explore the meaning of the basic terms of the comparison, particularly those which have rather different and complex histories in the two cultural traditions on which I rely for my conceptual grounding. In David Hawkes’s “Chinese Poetry and the English Reader,” he begins by acknowledging that the very term “poetry” which informs his title is indeed difficult to define, both in English and in Chinese. He makes the important point that “what we mean by the one will obviously to some extent condition what we mean by the other” (92). To begin with the Chinese sense of the term “poetry,” one must recognize that the modern word shi [诗] does not, in its traditional meaning, represent the entire body of what we would call “poetry” in the Western sense. In traditional Chinese poetics, shi is a category of verse that does not include the more ballad-like ci [辞], the qu [曲], another form associated with drama, or fu [赋] which is an extended essay-type poem that can include both verse and prose. When we encounter the word shi in the “Great Preface” [大序] to the first collection of Chinese poems, the Shijing [诗经] or Classic of Poetry, it refers specifically to the tetrasyllabic verses that appear in that collection. Later it shifts to include different types of regulated verse [律诗], generally with five or seven syllables.
Hawkes argues for a definition of “poetry” in English to include “all verse literature, leaving to others the task of defining what literature is” and excluding “ambiguous ‘prose-poem’ forms” such as “bits of Whitman and Rimbaud” (92). This is, of course, problematic, because what else would prose-poems be if not poems? On the other hand, if we do include even prose-poems in our English definition of “poetry,” then we encounter a new problem. As Hawkes again points out, even if we exclude (as he does) prose-poems from our definition of poetry, that definition of poetry as “verse literature” becomes “impractically broad in a Chinese [context] when it is remembered that there was a time in the history of Chinese literature when nearly all artistic writing bore the main prosodic features of verse – regular, recurring, rhythmic patterns and rhyme – and it would clearly be absurd to have to classify treatises, letters, obituaries, and chancery documents as poetry” (93). Because this project is concerned with modern poetry, I can conveniently avoid the problem of classifying traditional Chinese forms of writing, but it is important to recognize the tradition of rhythmic and patterned language in most forms of artistic writing in the Chinese tradition, because this fact speaks to the strong link between poetry and music. Both the Classic of Poetry and another major text from the Chinese tradition, the Chuci or Songs of the South [楚辞], were actually collections of songs, though the music has been forgotten. The tradition of the yüefu [樂府] poetry continued uninterrupted from the Han dynasty onwards, despite many other changes in literary forms, and there has been a flourishing ci tradition since the end of the Tang.\(^2\) In other words, music has always been and remains a key element of poetry, even into the present moment, when old forms are still written.

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\(^2\) See Cheng p.16 for more on this.
Similarly, when attempting to account for what constitutes poetry in the modern Chinese context, as opposed to contemporary compositions of old verse forms, the equation of the term “verse” with certain prosodic features is not sufficient to account for free verse forms (as is also true of the Western context). When modern Chinese poetry was initially conceived by Hu Shi [胡適 1891-1962] and others in the early twentieth century as an art form using the vernacular [白话文] as opposed to writing in the classical language [文言文], there followed immediately the question of what separated poetic language from prose writing, if not rhythm and rhyme. As Michelle Yeh describes, poetry began to be defined beyond rules and conventions. Instead, “Zong Baihua spoke of the quality of poetry (shizhi), Xu Zhimo [...] of the feeling of poetry (shigan), and Dai Wangshu [...] of the poetic sentiment (shiqing), to express what they believed to be the quintessential quality of poetry” (22). It is this sense of poetry as defined primarily in terms of a particular feeling or sentiment that allows us to apply the term to cinema.

In the Western context there is a strong association between sentiment or feeling and the poetic as well, and it is this connection that brings us to the next terminological challenge: the terms “lyric” and “lyrical.” In the Western tradition, the term “lyric” comes from the musical instrument the lyre, and as such is classically associated with musicality of expression in much the same way that all of Chinese poetry has been. In its contemporary usage in English, “lyric,” according to David Lindley, “is held to apply to poems employing a first-person speaker, and, by extension, to indicate a preoccupation with the expression of individual feeling or emotion” (qtd. in Lupke, 33). Lyric poetry is generally short and often divided into stanzas, as opposed to longer forms such as the epic. Based on this understanding, the term “lyric” is useful in analyzing modern Chinese
poetic writing because a large portion of it shares the two key characteristics of the first-
person speaker and the “preoccupation with the expression of individual feeling or
emotion.” This is not a surprise, since Western literary forms were immeasurably
influential on modern Chinese prose and poetry, a relationship which we will examine in
more detail in Chapter 1. Yet even here we cannot be too hasty and claim an
unproblematic translatability, because the Chinese classical tradition has multiple verse
forms which have been translated as “lyrical.” For instance, the *ci* is translated by Cai as
“song lyric” while Eva Shan refers to the *shi (shih)* as a “lyric poem” (98).

This problem of translation is due to the fact that what we identify as lyrical in the
English tradition (namely the expression of individual feeling) is not a primary concern
of most poets in the Chinese tradition, though there are exceptions. Among the limited
number of classical poets invoked by modern Chinese poets, a major one is Qu Yuan [屈
原 c.340B.C.E. to c.278B.C.E.], whose *Li Sao* [*离骚 “Encountering Sorrow”, part of the
Songs of the South*] though technically its own genre (a *sao*), could also be considered a
lyric poem (if not for its length, perhaps). Yeh argues that Qu Yuan has been important to
modern poets because along with Li Bai [*李白 701-762*] of the Tang dynasty, he
represents the “tragic hero,” which was appealing to a group of artists who were newly
un-influential in society and felt themselves to be alienated from it. Qu Yuan’s poetics is
also marked by an imaginative use of imagery and likewise a highly personal style. It was
possible to have a relatively individualized voice in *shi* poetry as well, as demonstrated
by Tang poet Li He [*李贺 790-816*], another favorite of modern poets, but Li He is an
exception to the rule. So although “lyric” can be designated by several verse forms in
classical Chinese poetics, it seems that modern poets look to their predecessors in the
classical tradition whose poetics bears the imprint of the very sorts of qualities that we in refer to as “lyrical” in English, particularly individual voice and personal or imaginative imagery. The one feature of lyricism which is commonly cited in both traditions and absent from the modern poems I discuss here is an attention to rhythm and rhyme, and other aural features of language. The poems below are all in free verse, and while they do possess their own sense of rhythm and play on the sonorous qualities of words, these aspects are not a core feature of their lyricism. In place of strictly aural rhythm, I focus on the use of images and their relations to one another, which in their density or pace can achieve an effect similar to the rhythm that arises from attention to syllables and stress.\(^3\)

As we I will discuss further in Chapter 1, Chinese poetry by the mid-twentieth century had transformed to the point where the similarities with Western lyric poetry (in the broadest sense of term “lyric”) were more significant than the differences. Poetry in modern Chinese has much more in common with its Western counterpart in terms of form, the role of the subjective voice, the topical interests common to poetry, and so on. Thus when, in modern Chinese, the word *shuqing* [抒情] is used to denote “lyric” and *shuqingshi* [抒情诗] is used for “lyric poetry,” we can consider the terms to be roughly equivalent across the two languages. But as David Wang has recently shown, *shuqing* is not only a Western loanword; it has a complex history in the Chinese tradition which is highly relevant vis-à-vis the approach to lyricism in the twentieth century. *Shuqing* most literally means “expressing emotion,” and its complexity relies on the many layers of meaning associated with *qing*. *Qing* means “feelings” or “emotions” in modern Chinese,

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\(^3\) In a future iteration of this project I will tackle the issue of sound and musicality in full.
but it “has always indicated an interaction between the self and the world and beyond” (Wang loc. 456). In classical literary treatises, *qing* is described as arising from both factual (external) and emotional (internal) movements, though the Chinese emphasis on emotion is less psychological or individually-oriented than in the Western sense. Pauline Yu cites Lu Ji’s [陆机 261-303] *Exposition on Literature* [文赋] which contains the phrase, “poetry originates in emotion” [诗缘情], and notes that “this emotion is engendered by the response of the poet to the external world” (33). Wang interprets this to suggest that poetry is that which “follows from *qing*,” and calls it the phrase which “inaugurat[es] the lyrical tradition of Chinese poetics” (loc. 705). The “*shu*” of “*shuqing*” is related to words meaning “unravel,” “release/relieve,” the “control device of a water container” and the “loom of a weaving machine” which creates a “bifurcated faculty” combining “relieving and preserving, unraveling and fabricating” (Wang loc. 577-596; 737). The combination of these two terms in *shuqing*, therefore, results in a concept “related to subjectivity’s engagement with both sentiment and *shi* 事 (event). As such the phrase may be extrapolated in terms of a poetic cum historical implication” (Wang loc. 763). The important takeaway for my own understanding of lyricism is the fact that this multi-layered and multi-pronged tradition of *shuqing* understands “lyrical invocation not only as a testimony…but also as a re-vision of both historical consciousness and the poetic mind” (loc. 800). As my analysis will demonstrate, the poets and filmmakers I discuss here are taking that lyrical potential seriously and literally attempting to renew our sense of vision, allowing us to see the echoes of the past in the present, but also re-imagining a new possible future based on that better understanding of the past. They follow the capacity of *shuqing* in ancient Chinese culture which “not only helped
modulate sentiments in public and private spheres but also facilitated the production of knowledge” (loc. 812).

Wang’s important project is to call our attention to the important role that lyricism, especially the concept of shuqing, played in the mid-twentieth century, an historical moment generally associated with epic or narrative, due to the massive historical upheavals which defined it. He writes that the lyrical discourse helps me rethink the sufficiency of the extant paradigm of Chinese modernity, which is largely dominated by the double claims of revolution and enlightenment. I seek to triangulate the paradigm by arguing that revolution can be powered by both political action and poetic provocation, and that enlightenment can have an impact only when charged with creative sensibilities (loc. 126).

I am not claiming here that any of these poets and filmmakers purposefully draw on lyricism as a strategy for engaging with the representational challenges of their moment. In fact, as we will see in the individual chapters, these artists were part of movements or generations which were more likely to define themselves against lyricism, or associate themselves with realism, often seen as lyricism’s opposing term. However, their audiences continue to notice and respond to an emotional, personal sensibility their works, whether it is called the poetic, the lyrical, the sentimental, the nostalgic, or some other related term. It is the presence of this sensibility alongside a careful attention to historical experience and the impersonal details of everyday life that I think distinguishes these works. I use the term “lyricism” to account for that combination of concerns precisely because of its capacity to account for both the emotional and the factual, as the discussion of shuqing above has demonstrated. Moreover, as I will discuss in further detail below, I borrow from Walter Benjamin’s conception of translation as history in order to conceptualize this lyricism’s ability to not only respond to an experience, but
envision – or re-vision – it anew, to create new knowledge about the past in order to imagine a different kind of future.

In order to fully account for the meaning of “lyricism” as I use it here, however, we need to consider how it relates to theories of performance and (film) spectatorship. As we will see in more detail in Chapter 2, critics such as Helen Vendler see the lyric voice as doubled, because of the way in which reading a poem again and again causes us to adopt the words as our own. She speaks of the “performance by the reader – who, as soon as he enters the lyric, is no longer a reader but rather an utterer, saying the words of the poem in propria persona, internally and with proprietary feeling” (xi). Just as the lyric is constituted by a slippery line between the reader and the speaker of the poem, the cinematic, too, is characterized by the tension between the spectator’s identification with the camera (Christian Metz’s primary identification) and an awareness of being secondary to the act of filmic enunciation. As Metz describes, the darkened auditorium, the indexical qualities of the image and the lure of sound all contribute to this partial identification. However, in Andrew’s explanation of Metz’s theory,

[w]hat keeps us from accepting the image as life is a fissure which we sometimes leap, sometimes refuse to leap, and most often straddle. Consisting of such experiential counters as bodily immobility, of nonanalogic aspects such as foreshortening, and of the more basic fact that the scene has been put before us by another, these anti-illusionistic elements lead us to treat the film not as life but as an image in the Sartrian sense, as a presence of an absence. (Concepts 43)

The frame, as Andrew points out, is the marker of this oscillation between image and reality, which is even more slippery in film than that oscillation in lyric poetry. This notion of a gap between “image” and “reality,” or between the past and the present in the representation of memory, will be important to the particular version of lyricism I examine here. At this juncture, therefore, we need to consider how the English and
Chinese traditions understand representation more broadly, starting with the concept of the image.

In English, the term “lyrical” can sometimes be used to simply connote that which is not narrative; in other words, it signifies a poetic form of expression which uses imagistic or figurative language rather than prosaic or narrative forms of speech. Even a consideration of “lyric” in poetry, then, must also consider the meaning of the term “image.” As Pauline Yu points out, in the Chinese tradition, the role of the image has always been a concern, whereas in the West it is primarily a modern question. In English, the term “image” connotes first and foremost a representation or an artificial imitation, secondarily a likeness or apparition, and spinning out from there, a series of other senses such as a mental representation created not by perception but by memory and a verbal representation or figure of speech (OED, “image”). The term “imagery,” which is already more narrow than “image” in English, is in itself confusing because as Norman Friedman notes, “it is used variously to refer to the meaning of a statement involving images, to the images themselves, or to the combination of meaning and images” (qtd. in Yu 3).

According to Yu, up until the Renaissance, the word “image” only meant a picture or copy, but unlike the notion of mimesis in Plato in which the image is a copy, the Renaissance poet thought of himself as an embellisher of the thing, not a copier. Figures were one of man’s tools for conveying an argument, as part of the activity of “making” (poiesis) rather than copying (mimesis). But they were simply an instrument, not the meaning itself. Thus there was little interest in the idea of the image until the late seventeenth century, when it eventually comes to imply figurative language in general,
especially the metaphor.\textsuperscript{4} By the nineteenth century, Romantic poets no longer view the imagination as a passive receptor, asserting its role as an active source of the images instead. This likewise transforms the didactic idea of poetry into an understanding of poetry as a means for the expression of personal emotion. Along with this change came a corresponding shift in the notion of the image, which becomes, according to Yu, the “very differentiae of poetry itself” (9). The idea has always lingered, however, that imagery is a mere accessory, an object which the poet can choose to use or not. This sense of imagery as secondary or decorative spills over into our use of the term “poetic” in English to refer to that which is aesthetically (or perhaps even intellectually) appealing but not necessarily core to the act of representing a non-poetic reality. It is perhaps for this reason that film critics feel free to use terms like “poetic” and “lyrical” in relation to cinema without going into great detail about how they understand these terms, or in order to refer only to the aesthetic dimension of the work without regard to the work’s signification.

Returning to the concept of imagery for a moment, the term “metaphor,” as a key aspect of “imagery,” is equally tricky in English because it is often interchanged with “imagery.” The general sense we have in English of metaphor is that it involves substitution, which harks back to Aristotle’s notion of the “similarity in dissimilars.”\textsuperscript{5} Because of the primacy of \textit{mimesis}, the idea of the image as a copy or representation of

\textsuperscript{4} Ray Frazer has a very interesting discussion of how the shift from a fundamental mistrust in language and rhetoric to a re-valuation of figurative language was achieved due to a shift in interest from the expression of the writer to the effect on the reader. His description of the eighteenth century idea of the image as that which leads the writer back through the “field of memory” is worth pursuing further, though I do not have the space to do so here.

\textsuperscript{5} “But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars” (\textit{Poetics}).
the object, metaphor relies on a fundamental distinction between the concrete and the abstract, what is sensible and what is inaccessible to the senses.

In the Chinese tradition, the term which is comparable to the English “image” is xiang [象]. In modern Chinese, there are multiple words using xiang which carry the various meanings of the English “image,” some of which use another character xiang that means “to resemble” [像]. For example, there is tuxiang [图像] for a graphic image, xingxiang [形象] for a figure or form, and yingxiang [影像] which is most often used for poetic imagery. Notably, the ying of yingxiang means “shadow” and is the same character found in dianying [电影] or “cinema.” The link between cinematic images and imagery in poetry is therefore less metaphorical or abstract of a connection than in English. This is so because in Chinese, the term xiang has never referred to a mere ornamental use of language, as we saw it did in English. The word xiang denotes natural phenomena – in other words, the xiang are out there in the world, whether we notice them or not. Yu cites Willard Peterson’s preference for the translation “figures” over “images” for xiang, and this is compelling because it makes clearer the link between the Chinese understanding of xiang and the longstanding association in the Western tradition between “figure” and physical form, as demonstrated by Eric Auerbach in his essay, “Figura.” Most importantly, the Chinese conception of poetic imagery does not clearly distinguish between the object, its perception, its representation and its meaning. As Yu writes, we see in the “Great Preface” that “[a]s important as the lack of disjunction between image as object and image as representation is that between image and meaning” (40).

While I will not repeat the detailed comparisons between the key poetic concepts from the English and Chinese languages here, the definition of these terms leads us to
consider a contentious but important point of divergence between the Chinese and Western poetic traditions, which is the function of art or poetry in the world. The different conceptions of what art is and does are often centered around the distinction between the Western notion of *mimesis* (and more specifically, the role of metaphor in poetry) as opposed to the Chinese notion of *xing* [*兴*], which informs both the conceptual understanding of what art or poetry is and serves as a literary function comparable to metaphor. In *The Poetics of Repetition in English and Chinese Lyric Poetry*, Cecile Chu-chin Sun devotes an entire chapter and more to examining the similarities and differences between these two sets of concepts, but in brief, she and others cited above highlight the fact that as a general principle, the Chinese tradition is grounded in an understanding of art as the result of an encounter between human beings and nature, a natural manifestation in another form of the patterns and correspondences that are already at work in the world around the artist. The Western sense of *mimesis* tends to see the art work as a secondary depiction of the real object – if not an inferior copy (as in Plato) then still a distinct activity apart from the world, which puts human creativity at the center. In line with what is a generally dualistic sense of the universe, the Western tradition sets the significance of a work of art as something deeper or higher than the words on the page or the image itself. The Chinese tradition, a monistic one in which there are only transformations in this world, not a heavenly above or beyond to which we are all oriented, views the significance of a work of art as the ability to recognize and capture what is already there, not something hidden beyond. In the opening pages to *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics*, Stephen Owen writes that for the reader of a Chinese poem it is “not a fiction: it is a unique, factual account of an experience in historical time, a
human consciousness encountering, interpreting, and responding to the world” a process in which the reader engages “at some later historical moment” (15). Owen explains the difference in terms of two different versions of metaphor:

“The poet is a gull between Heaven and Earth”; “It seemed to me I was like a gull between Heaven and Earth.” Between these two statements is the center of the difference between two traditions of poetry and reading. The first statement is not true: it is a metaphorical fiction and asks you to consider how the poet might be like a gull. The second statement may be literally true; it also asks you to consider the relation between poet and gull, but it asks for the sake of what the comparison reveals about the state of mind of the poet, the direction of his attention, his desire to know himself, to find one like himself, to share his condition with another. (15)

As we see from this comparison, in saying that the Chinese poetic statement is not fictional, Owen is not suggesting that it is impersonal and solely directed toward the factual accounting of the outside world, only that it reflects the human response to and manifestation of the world that surrounds the poet in such a way that the reader feels that he or she can derive true information from the poem. By contrast, the Western reader searches for a new perspective on the world created by the poet in that moment, an approach which leaves the significance of the poem much more open and undefined.

Ancillary to this distinction between the two traditions’ manner of conceptualizing poetry are the concepts of metaphor and *xing*. Metaphor is the combination of a vehicle and a tenor, one relying on the other in a concrete-abstract relationship, and for the metaphor to be judged as successful, it generally needs to provide a new insight through the joining of these previously unrelated things. *Xing*, like *mimesis*, has a long and complex history, but it functions broadly as part of a stimulus-response model, where *xing* is the evocation of a feeling and functions as part of the “scene-feeling” [景请] relationship. The lyricism of traditional Chinese poetry stems not from the freshness of the poet’s perspective, but from the way the poet captures the
dynamic between these two components (“scene” and “feeling”) as it was at work at a particular moment. Sun identifies “two inseparable functions” for the scene in this relationship, which are, “expressing the ‘feeling’ covertly by providing a vivid and concrete correlative to the otherwise elusive ‘feeling’ and evoking ‘feeling’ by setting it astir, not only as a kind of catalyst within the poetic medium but beyond it in the mind of the reader” (98) Xing, literally meaning to “stimulate” or “excite,” is the term given to the poetic lines which help to do this work of expressing and evoking, not in an explicit narrational manner but implicitly, through the scene of the poem. Xing is part of a group of three literary functions, along with fu [賦] and bi [比], which first appear first in the Rituals of Zhou [周禮], along with the names for the three types of poetry. Fu has already been mentioned as an essay genre, so the term signifies exposition and narrative here. Bi means comparison or metaphor (the modern term for metaphor is biyu [比喻]). Cai Zongqi calls the xing an “affective image,” pointing out that often a xing turns out to also be a bi because it can link the human subject of the poem to the emotion being evoked by the xing. It can also be interpreted to have a moralistic function, as we will see in Chapter 1, but the idea of xing as evocation leads to a model of poetry in which the best poems seek out a truth beyond the visible, or beyond language, something that can resonate with the reader and cause him or her to see or feel what the poet did.

While the broad strokes of these distinctions will be important to our discussion of juxtaposition and the image in Chapter 1, I am not actually interested in establishing clear and irreconcilable differences between the Chinese and Western traditions in this project. Although it is important to acknowledge that certain assumptions which are fundamental to one tradition’s way of conceptualizing the poetic act of transference of
meaning are not necessarily shared by another, it is also essential to recognize the many
uANCES and opposing voices within each tradition, which make these distinctions almost
too over-generalized to have much meaning in practice. I am not here to suggest that a
Chinese poet from the classical tradition cannot be understood to be writing a metaphor,
nor that a European poet does not use *xing*, even if he or she might not have been familiar
with the term. Gu Mingdong’s articles on *mimesis* in the Chinese tradition, which
receive detailed attention in Chapter 4, cite recent scholarship which breaks down most of
the oppositions structuring comparative analyses of these two traditions. My own aim in
this dissertation is rather to demonstrate how the resources of both can be drawn upon by
poets and filmmakers seeking a form of engagement with the reality of experience which
is the result of both a personal vision of the world and a transmission of its pre-existing
resonances.

One of the ways in which these broad generalizations can be useful is in helping
us to conceptualize the role of the image in film. While I do not have the space here to
write a history of film theories of the image, it is important to point out that film is often
understood as combining what we might broadly call the mimetic and expressionist
tendencies common to Western and Chinese poets, respectively. On the one hand, film

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6 Sun provides many examples in her book of poems which seem to be doing just this, though she continues
to assert the distinction between the two traditions as general tendencies, treating these examples as outliers
rather than evidence of the tenuousness of their dividing lines. Conversely, Eric Hayot, in his presentation
critiquing the general tendency to police these borders found in most comparative analyses, claims
metaphor for Chinese poetry and vice versa, both in fact and in principle.

7 Earl Miner refers to the Western (though recognizing the problematic opposition between “Western” and
“non-Western”) tradition as broadly “mimetic” when compared to the “affective-expressive” tradition
developed in many East Asian and other non-Western countries. He argues that the Western mimetic
emphasis derives from the fact that drama is its foundational genre, while lyric poetry is the foundational
genre in East Asia and elsewhere. He notes that there is nothing comparable in terms of narrative. This is
interesting because we might say that film combines the poetic (succession of images) with the dramatic
(performance of events and dialogue), and thus it is not surprising that accounting for it requires an
understanding of both the mimetic and the affective-expressive nature of representation.
has been viewed as the representational medium *par excellence*, due to its presumed indexicality, the fact that the (analogical) film image is formed as a result of a mechanical process (skirting the influence of human consciousness) in which light instigates a chemical reaction that mimics the way in which our retinas register light in our eyes. Not surprisingly, though, this straightforward view of the film image is hardly ever promoted unreservedly, as there are myriad factors such as framing and editing of the images, the placement of objects before the camera (*mise-en-scène*), the addition of music, the performances onscreen, and so on which affect the supposed objectivity of the camera’s capturing of the world. As Aumont et al. note, though the development of cinema into a narrative form was not pre-given, once we have narrative, or even the mere presence of a moving image, we introduce a temporal dimension and thus view the object in the process of transformation: “The represented object in the cinema, therefore, is always in the process of *becoming* represented” (69). This temporality of the image results in a tension between representation and presentation inherent in all cinema:

The simple process...of representing and displaying an object in such a way that it may be recognized is an act of presentation implying that one wishes to say something in regard to that object. Thus, the image of a revolver is not only equivalent to the term “revolver,” but it implicitly conveys an énoncé such as “here is a revolver” or “this is a revolver.” As a result, there is evidence of an expositional quality in the image and of a desire to make the object signify beyond its simple representation. (69)

There is a tension here between the “simple” representation and the self-conscious presentation of the object that is at work in all films but also in the poems that I discuss here. As we will see, this tension is not unfamiliar to either Western or Chinese poetics, and indeed the description of film as making the object “signify beyond its simple representation” shows a tendency to view the presentational aspect as resulting in symbolism, rather than, say, a performative constitution of some new conception of the
revolver. But even this qualification is lost when we focus too strongly on the mimetic-expressive dichotomy between these two traditions. Instead, we can draw on the resources of both to theorize the lyrical effect of these works. Lyricism is a broader term in this analysis than its meaning in either tradition. It is an umbrella term that exists at a higher level of generality than its genre- or style-oriented designations, but at the same time, it is more specific than its signification in either tradition because it relates to a particular mode of accessing historical experience which is not shared by every poem or film of the same period, or even of the same poet or director.

One final terminological distinction is in order before I proceed: I use the terms “affect,” “emotion” and “feelings” at times interchangeably here, while recognizing that they are distinct categories of experience. Eric Shouse sums up the differences between them as follows: “Feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social, and affects are prepersonal” (“Feeling, Emotion, Affect”). In particular, the distinction between emotion and affect is relevant to my project because emotion refers to the way in which we display our feelings to others in a social context, while affect is the “non-conscious experience of intensity” which “cannot be fully realised in language” (“Feeling, Emotion, Affect”). To the extent that these films and poems attempt to represent the non-human, tangible features of everyday life in the present or past, they are appealing to our memories of affects, of those bodily sensations which result from our being in the world but which we do not necessarily have words to express. At other times, however, these works are appealing to the memory of encounters with other individuals, of cultural structures and social dynamics which create a certain sensibility. At these times, the works are appealing to our emotions. While feelings certainly play a role here
as well, once we project those feelings for others, we are in the realm of emotions, and
since these works are created for an audience, we cannot use them to access purely
individual feelings. Much of the time, when I refer to the operation of lyricism in these
poems and films, I use either “emotions” or “affects” or variants of these terms to stand
in for the range of internal and external, social and pre-conscious forms of physical and
mental experience that these works attempt to convey to their audience.

While “emotion” and “affect” are the phenomenological components which these
works both represent and self-conscious present to the audience, they work together to
evoke something closer to what Rey Chow calls the “sentimental.” For Chow, the
“sentimental” is not only an “instance of affect” but also a “relation of time” (15). A key
element of contemporary Chinese films, it is a means by which social mores are
untangled and explored, so that

instead of being equated with the occurrence of affective excess per se, [the
sentimental] can more fruitfully be rethought as a discursive constellation – one that
traverses affect, time, identity, and social mores, and whose contours tend to shift and
morph under different cultural circumstances and likely with different genres, forms,
and media. (17)

In Rey Chow’s understanding of the sentimental as a “discursive constellation,” we find
an attempt to account for the impermanence and contingency of the “structures of
feeling” (in Raymond Williams’s sense) that animate these works of art. “Lyricism” is
equally contingent on the particular socio-historical and aesthetic context in which it is
found, even as it “traverses affect, time, identity and social mores” to become sense-able
by various audiences and sensible to a variety of theoretical positions.

Yet this does not mean that “lyricism” is not functional as a broad concept; only
that it at once transcends any particular instance of its use while being more specific than
any broad theorization can capture. The model I borrow from in accounting for the
operation of this term, and the mode of historicism evidenced in its usage, stems from Peter Osborne’s reading of Walter Benjamin’s theories of translation and history in *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*. As part of a project to re-engage cultural studies with historically and politically-engaged inquiry, to move it away from totalizing conceptual narratives and towards the specificity of particular instances, Osborne proposes a return to philosophical thinking, not the type of etiolated analytical philosophy against which cultural studies largely defined itself, but a mode of philosophical inquiry which can think in terms of totalizations without imposing inappropriate generalities. In his chapter on modernism, in which he attempts to develop a transnationally-relevant general concept of modernism without re-imposing “global processes of domination and hegemony,” Osborne notices that translation is often used in cultural theory as a metaphor for the process of comparing terms or concepts cross-culturally, but it is used in such a way as to shut down comparative analysis by suggesting that the historical specificity of the instance makes comparison impossible (53). He looks to Benjamin for a model of translation which instead imagines new possible totalizations to result from the articulation of different instances without allowing one version of a concept (such as the Western version of modernism) to become the generalized one, while all others (such as Chinese modernism) become derivatives. This is the same goal that Hayot has in his call for an approach to comparative poetics that resists “absolute historicism” (which shuts down comparison by overemphasizing supposedly “fundamental” differences) in favor of a “historicist universalism,” or in other words, a set of concepts that are derived from a range of geopolitical contexts. Osborne begins with Benjamin’s view in “The Task of the Translator” that translatability is an inherent part of a work because it is only through
translation, in Benjamin’s words, “that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself,” in what he calls its “afterlife” (254). Benjamin views translation as speculative, as working from the perspective of an as-yet-unattained future moment in which what he calls the “pure language” becomes manifest. Benjamin writes:

all suprahistorical kinship between languages consists in this: in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant. Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language. (257)

In this model, neither the original nor the translation holds the key to the “true” meaning of the word, but this does not lead us to presume that the source and target languages are incommensurable and therefore that translation is useless. Instead, Benjamin views the concept as existing in a third space beyond (but not above) the two languages, inherent as a possibility in both. Thus, the famous assertion that, “to some degree, all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines” (263). The process of translation allows us to enhance both the source and target languages, as the afterlife renews and builds on the resources of the work’s original life.

Osborne recognizes that in this early essay (originally written in 1923), Benjamin’s historical thought had not yet matured, but puts it together with his later work. Benjamin’s idea of history comes out of a dialectical relationship between use and truth, in which, according to Osborne, the objects of historical experience are “constituted through use” but “their truth is nonetheless tied up with the standpoint of the end of time” (14). In this view, the only totality that can sustain itself is one which will have turned out to be true at the end of history, but how that history plays out depends on the way in which a truth is put to use in the present. This is similar to Benjamin’s description of how the original and target languages of a translated work of art continue to gain and lose
meaning in their afterlives, as languages change, the socio-cultural context changes, and so on. There is no ultimate translation, because both the work and its earlier translations change, but through the process of moving toward a better translation, a final accounting of the work, we enhance the significance of both the original and the previous translations. Osborne explains the historical vector of Benjamin’s thought further:

precisely because knowledge is historical, and hence relative, however systematically it is aggregated, truth, which in its classical metaphysical sense is absolute, can only be conceived from the standpoint of history as a fulfilled whole. However, this standpoint is not available (since the future has yet to occur), except speculatively, through the mediation of experience by the idea of history as a completed or fulfilled whole. (14)

This “speculative cultural history” allows for an open-ended range of possibilities that are not endless because they are grounded in the pragmatic requirements of the present. This history is not teleological, but is also not stuck in the endless reproduction of the present form. In his search for “the theorization of the mode of generality of the concepts of a transnational cultural theory,” Osborne looks to the combination of Benjamin’s ideas about translation and history for a means of positing general terms or totalizations that are immanent in individual instances but only visible through the interaction between their historically-sedimented particularity and their “necessarily incomplete and hence speculative generality” (57). He writes:

There is a dialectic of universal and particular – conceptual determination and empirical particularity – internal to all theoretical concepts as a consequence of their historicity. In this respect, the idea of translation at work in cultural theory (general concepts as ‘translation terms’ or media of translation) is less a metaphor than the metonymic register of the interpretive dimension of the process of social intercourse and exchange in general. (57)

In other words, translation is one part of a broader social dynamic in which the mediation between different participants in the exchange enables a more generalized understanding which is always open to further revision by changing empirical conditions on the ground.
In what follows, I will trace an approach to historicism in these poems and films which attempts to maintain this open-ended dialectical process. It is important to note, therefore, that Benjamin understands these pragmatically-constituted, speculative generalizations we call historical experiences as, in Osborne’s words, “necessarily imagistic, since only in the spatial wholeness of the image can the wholeness of history be figured as a form of speculative experience. ‘Wholeness’ is Benjamin’s image of the image; metonymy, the figural basis of his historical thought” (14). This points us to Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image, which appears in a well-known fragment from The Arcades Project:

It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. –Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language. (462)

In this passage we find Benjamin’s familiar concept of the constellation, in which an insight into the connection between various points becomes visible in a flash of recognition that is yet contingent and temporary. The passage goes further, though, and develops an understanding of the relation between past and present in the image. This is the sort of relation which we should keep in mind when reading these films and poems, where images are not only indexical traces of light from the past, but temporary micro-moments of stasis within an ongoing movement. Rather than temporal (and teleological) progression however, that movement is a back-and-forth mediation between “what-has-

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8 It is worth noting that Benjamin’s image of the image is not metaphor but metonymy, a relation of association and displacement on the same level, rather than a standing-in of an abstraction, which is the same way that Stephen Owen characterizes the operation of the art work in the Chinese tradition when compared to the Western one, as we will see in more detail in Chapter 2.
been” and the “now,” a mediation whose insights are contained in the image. By reading filmic and poetic images in this way, we can work toward a more complete historical understanding in the same way that translations move us toward the pure language. That sense of history is not completed by these works, only gestured to in its incompleteness and futurity, but the work of speculation which seeks it out is the only way we can find new insights into complex, globally-significant experiences and concerns.

What remains now, therefore, is only to provide a brief preview of the chapters to come. Building on this initial discussion in this introduction of how a seemingly self-contained poetic form can stimulate historical awareness, the first two chapters use concepts from classical Chinese poetics to consider the way in which these films and poems derive their lyricism from a desire to get at a truth beyond the visible, or a meaning beyond the meaning of the art work. This approach views meaning as neither entirely external nor entirely internal to the work. Instead, the work of art manifests the world while remaining part of it, and the emotional resonances extend beyond the work and into the world of the reader or viewer. At the same time, these poems and films tap into subjective personal experiences while registering the specificities of historical moments in ways quite foreign to traditional Chinese poetry, requiring a new conceptual framework.

The juxtaposition of imagery is the first feature of lyricism I address, in relation to modernist poetry from Taiwan. The poetry of the 1950s and 1960s displayed a diversity of styles and poetic influences, but was criticized in the 1970s for being subservient to Western models and insufficiently concerned with Taiwanese reality. Moving away from the question of influence, I consider how the juxtaposition of imagery is neither a
borrowing nor a return to tradition. In Chinese poetics, the juxtaposition of a scene with the expression of the feelings it engenders is intended to be seamless, to correspond with the mutually-supporting relationship between art and the world. In Western modernism, and in film theory beginning with Sergei Eisenstein’s montage, juxtaposition is used to create a disjunctive effect. These poems aim to represent personal experiences of displacement in emotionally powerful ways, and to do so they use juxtaposition to draw on a specific scene and create an emotional resonance while also inserting a poetic voice that gives a distinct perspective. However, this individualized voice still creates a certain distance or disjuncture between the scene and the subsequent emotion. While this approach to imagery is not predominant in the heyday of modernist poetry in Taiwan, it represents an early attempt to think through the competing demands that would later be polarized into the “modernist” and “nativist” camps.

The second chapter looks at how similar strategies disrupt the clear demarcation between realist and modernist film form. Early in their film careers, both Jia Zhangke and Hou Hsiao-hsien made a trilogy of personal films notable for their realistic representations of ordinary life in mainland China and Taiwan. The lyricism of these films is often treated as an aesthetic gloss, but close analysis reveals it to be a strategy for representing the emotional truth of the past. The chapter focuses on the films of Hou Hsiao-hsien, demonstrating how his combination of a long-take aesthetic with art cinema strategies such as episodic narration blends nativist and modernist concerns much like the poets from chapter one. Although Hou’s films focus on a single character’s experience of growing-up, they are not autobiographical because the distanced, observational style and elliptical structure precludes a full sense of individual development. The films maintain a
middle ground between the subjective, personal perspective and a more objective yet reflective distance on the event. This middle ground, in turn, allows the viewer to remain aware of the film as a textual performance even while being drawn in to the emotional core of the experience.

The latter half of the dissertation investigates the challenge of conveying the temporality of emotional experience without allowing personal memory to be coopted into a progressivist narrative or official history. Here we see a major difference between poetic and filmic lyricism, in that film is required to deal with temporality in some way, while lyric poetry is assumed to be static and even circular. Yet all of these artists are attempting to account for the persistence of the past in the present moment, or the feeling of a present that is almost already past – temporalities that do not fit into neat, sequential understandings of time or history. They also wish to find a way around the collective histories that dominated the political sphere without losing track of history altogether.

In chapter three, I look at how these concerns play out in the work of mainland Chinese poets Bei Dao and Xi Chuan. Although very different, these poets both develop a concern for the lingering effects of the past in the present, which results in a distinctive approach to imagery. For Bei Dao, his post-exile poetry grows increasingly dense, with sequences of seemingly independent images that can be read as existing almost outside of time and space. Yet they continually return to the same themes: displacement, memory, and the act of writing. Rather than read them as static reflections on these themes, I trace the way in which the poems force the reader to actively engage with the images in order to make meaning out of the poem. By paying attention to this interpretive movement, we can see ourselves, as readers, re-enacting the failed attempt at rendering fragmented
memories into language. We grapple with the problem of memorializing a past that cannot be fully incorporated into a coherent historical understanding. The chapter then moves to Xi Chuan, who has a series of poems that read like short narratives. Although this development appears to be an anti-lyrical strategy, the mini-narratives defy realistic relationships between time and space. Sensory images become much more distinct, drawing the reader in on an affective as opposed to intellectual level. The lyricism of these poems is therefore neither strictly mimetic nor entirely expressionist: it is a combination of the representational and presentational modes.

Xi Chuan’s poems raise the possibility that a performative lyricism can more effectively access the true nature of an event than either traditional lyricism or realism alone. This idea is further explored in chapter four through films by Jia Zhangke that tread the border between fiction and documentary. These films call attention to their status as produced images at the same time as they draw on the markers of documentary to attest to the veracity of their stories. Although they blur the lines between “objective” documentary and “subjective” fictional representation, these films do not draw attention to their formal experimentation, nor do they intended to disrupt our belief in the truth-telling capacity of the documentary. Instead, they ask us to re-think our understanding of what constitutes an appropriate representation of emotional experience. I locate models for conceptualizing this combination of representation with performance or self-conscious presentation in both Chinese and Western theories of art. These theories complicate the dichotomy between mimeticism and expressionism, and the final chapter therefore uncovers an aesthetic philosophy common to the two traditions which puts them in conversation in a new way.
Lyrical Montage: Juxtaposition in Modernist Taiwanese Poetry

In a 1956 issue of the journal *Modern Poetry Quarterly* [现代诗季刊], which he founded, the poet Ji Xian (pen name of Luo Yu 路逾 1913-2013) declared, “Modern Chinese poetry is a product of geographical transplantation, not historical heritage. It is a transplanted flower, not a native plant” (qtd. in H. Chang 307-308). Ji Xian9 was himself a “transplanted flower,” having moved from mainland China to Taiwan in 1948. Although he already had a reputation for avant-garde poetry on the mainland, he helped to initiate a new modernist movement in Taiwan. This chapter is about modernist poetry from Taiwan, and looking at the complex dynamics of culture, poetics and historical influence at work in this poetry will set the stage for the poets and filmmakers in the rest of the dissertation. Even identifying this poetry, the product of a complex set of literary and historical forces, emerging from mainland China, Taiwan itself and influence from the West, is a task requiring some elaboration. Carlos Rojas writes that the term “Taiwan literature” in general is a bit paradoxical, because we think of literatures based on national origin, and Taiwan is not a nation. The term is “grounded on a political fiction, but one that insistently and emphatically undercuts its own foundation,” and, for that matter, “helps illuminate the constructedness of the naturalized category the nation-state that it mimics” (1-2).10 It is difficult to even identify which “historical heritage,” in Ji Xian’s terms, Taiwanese poets in this period would claim as their own, because there was a mix of poets from the mainland and native Taiwanese among them. As poet and critic

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9 Throughout this dissertation, when referring to poets by their pen names, I will use the entire name, not just the first name (usually the family name in Chinese) because these are not family names but only part of the chosen pen names.

10 Plus, as several critics have noted recently, it took almost forty years before the term “Taiwan literature” gained currency, and even now many anthologies refer to “Chinese literature from Taiwan,” an indicator of the ongoing instability of the phrase.
Dominic Cheung writes, “Modern Chinese poetry from Taiwan no more represents a continuation of the mainland’s new poetics than it does a break from its own painful, local tradition. Taiwan has its own poetry, with its own Chinese identity” (1). Nevertheless, Ji Xian’s statement has been remembered and repeated, and it understandably created a lot of controversy over the years. As Michelle Yeh notes, the organic nature of the metaphor was ignored in favor of a critique of the uprootedness of the modernists: “Modern Poetry in postwar Taiwan was seen as having ‘lost the earth where its roots are planted’ (Gao 1978: 167), and it was but a short step from the word ‘transplantation’ (yizhi in Chinese) to ‘colonization’ (zhimin)” (Frontier 34). The backlash came to a head in the “nativism” movement, which began with the new poetry debate [现代诗论战 ] in the early 1970s, in which “the consensus reached […] seemed to be that, despite its other merits, the currently practiced New Poetry suffered from such unhealthy qualities as semantic obscurity, excessive use of foreign imagery and Europeanized syntax, and evasion of contemporary social reality” (S. Chang loc. 2687). The criticism of modernist poets carried through the “native literature movement” [乡土文学运动] of 1977-79, which extended beyond literary circles and become “an ideological standoff between the writers and the political rulers” (Chen 39). In addition to current social concerns, there was a push for all writers to “show more respect for their indigenous cultural heritage” as well (Chang loc. 2687).

But what is the “modernism” against which these scholars were pitting themselves? Michelle Yeh opens her introduction to the anthology Frontier Taiwan with an important distinction: “In the Chinese context, ‘modern poetry’ is more than a chronological designation. Although all modern Chinese poetry was written in the
twentieth century, not all twentieth-century poetry written in Chinese is ‘modern.’ This term usually describes two things: language and form” (2). The language of modern Chinese poetry was *baihua* [白话], the vernacular, as opposed to classical poetry, which was written in literary Chinese [文言]. In contrast to the rules about line length, tonal patterns, parallelism and so on from classical Chinese, modern poetry was written largely in free verse, and it took on a broader range of subjects, not to mention a completely different approach to imagery, which we will discuss in detail in this chapter. Yet it is important to remember that classical poetry was still being written and read in the twentieth century, and despite modern poetry’s near dominance of academic scholarship, classical poetry remained more familiar to ordinary people in both mainland China and Taiwan. In terms of formal and thematic innovation, much of the influence came from Western European poets, though not all, and the same is true of Taiwan, though there are both continuities and distinctions in the way Taiwanese writers make use of Western literature. We will see some examples of this below.

As both Yeh and Yvonne Chang stress, however, far from a wholesale “transplantation” of Western ideas into China, as Ji’s quotation suggests, the intellectual energy behind modernist movements in both mainland China and Taiwan were motivated at least as much by immediate social, political and cultural concerns as by the desire to import Western methods. In Taiwan, those concerns included the search for a language

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11 In terms of chronology, I follow Yeh and define “modern” poetry as beginning in 1917, the year of the start of the New Literature Movement [新文学运动] that became part of the May Fourth movement of 1919, while recognizing that much scholarship has been done recently to highlight changes which were underway in the decades prior, making this more of a shorthand than a firm dividing line.

12 This is being remedied in recent years. For example, see Wu Shengqing’s detailed study *Modern Archaics: Continuity and Innovation in the Chinese Lyric Tradition 1900-1937*.

13 Yvonne Chang elaborates on this point in detail. See Chapter 1 of *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance*. 
and a role for Taiwanese poetry as the island emerged from colonialism and into what Chen Fangming calls a neo-colonial period of rule by the Guomindang (国民党/KMT) or Nationalist Party from the mainland. Chang acknowledges that while the “Taiwanese modernists’ faith in the universal validity of Western cultural concepts seems politically incorrect” to us now, at the time these concepts were seen as liberating because of the “stagnant cultural landscape dominated by political propaganda” (158-9).14 These poets were also reacting against legacies of Chinese literary history that came to Taiwan from the mainland, such as “amateurism, unexamined devotion to an overly exalted traditionalist style, the May Fourth legacy of lyrical sentimentalism, and the politically truncated notion of human nature favored in the government’s anti-Communist cultural campaigning” (159). She continues:

In a nutshell, while the modernists acted primarily in the artistic realm, they were also reacting against a politically instituted, conservative dominant culture. The alternative visions that they offered were defined against the particular ‘lacks’ and ‘excesses’ of their specific historical context. The modernists’ high-culture quest was an elitist vision, to be sure, but not a wholesale importation of detached foreign ideals. Instead, it was driven by, and responded to, conditions on the ground in Taiwan – and to historically significant effect. (160)15

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14 Though in Modernism and the Nativist Resistance, she clarifies that although “it is widely assumed that the Modernist literary movement reacted against the anti-Communist propaganda in literature in the 1950s […] such an objection is directed more toward the politicization of literature than to the government’s political stance itself” (loc. 455).

15 In Modernism and the Nativist Resistance, Chang also argues that while it might not have been “counter-hegemonic” like the Nativist movement, there was an oppositional stance to the Modernist movement and a concomitant potential for political influence, even if it did not turn out to have much of an impact outside the cultural sphere. Chen makes a similar argument. In a different vein, David Wang writes: Critics from both the Left and the Right, then and now, denigrate the modernist literature of 1960s Taiwan as selfish indulgence in personal nihilism and existentialism – and, most unforgivably, as disengagement from the current crisis. Looking back, these charges very well summarize the merits of the movement. Remarkable in a time of stifling political oppression and ideological fanaticism, the modernist movement in Taiwan, together with the subsequent rise of nativism, should be hailed for what it was: an unexpected achievement, particularly because it filled the void in mainland literature resulting from incessant political turmoil and the suppression of all independent experimentation. (viii)
Meanwhile, there were poems being written during the modernist period that addressed social concerns and recent history on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, evidence that these poets were far from the detached aesthetes that they were accused of being in the nativist debates.

In recent years, scholars have taken a more complex view of both modernism in the 50s and 60s and the distinction between it and the nativist trend which followed, while noting that both trends continued to develop after the debate and into the 1980s.\(^{16}\) Chen Fangming writes that it is no surprise that the Taiwanese modernists did not directly address their predecessors. In broader terms:

Under colonial rule, writers do not necessarily use orthodox means of resistance and criticism; rather, they use self-exile to express their spirit of resistance. Especially after their historical memory has completely disappeared, colonial writers do not have any spiritual stronghold to provide the ground for resistance, and their works necessarily project ‘rootlessness and exile.’ (35)

In the poems I will examine below, we will see how memory becomes problematic for the ability to construct a coherent, forward-looking sense of identity in the present. In order to stay attuned to such undertones in these poems, we cannot begin with the assumption that they are detached from their current social reality, or that they privilege an universalized aesthetics over more individual concerns.

This brief survey of the history and politics of modernism in Taiwan speaks to a set of tensions that underlies all of the works I will examine in this dissertation, involving the negotiation between artistic history and innovation, between the influences of the “Chinese” and “Western” traditions and the various ways of interpreting each, between

\(^{16}\) See, for instance, Chang’s *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance*, Au Chung-To’s *Modernist Aesthetics in Taiwanese Poetry Since the 1950s*, and Yeh’s article “On Our Destitute Dinner Table: Modern Poetry Quarterly in the 1950s”.
“native” and “foreign” audiences, and art for the “people” versus “art for art’s sake.” In the current study, I attempt to remain attuned to all of these tensions while looking beyond them to the more complex inner workings of poems and films that often get elided by too much focus on the politics of influence and representation. As I discussed in the Introduction, I will use the model of Benjaminian translation to understand how these works achieve a form of lyricism which conveys the emotional and affective core of past experiences within a structure that is much more open and non-hierarchical than conventional historical narratives. The poetic technique of juxtaposition and its role in Taiwanese modernist poetry will be the focus of this chapter, an issue I will explore through the poetry of Ya Xian [瘂弦, pen name of Wang Qinglin 王慶麟, b.1932].

Before we look at this technique in detail, I want to explore how Benjamin may help us to re-examine the complex position of Taiwanese modernism outlined above, as we begin to break down some of the oppositional terms that seem to accompany any foray into the poetry of this place and time.

The fact that the modernist movement and the nativist backlash frame the problem in terms of a native-foreign dichotomy only emphasizes the anxieties surrounding Taiwan’s sense of possessing a “native” culture despite not yet achieving a political status as a nation-state. These anxieties continue to this day. As Michelle Yeh argues

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17 His name is commonly spelled Ya Xian or Ya Hsien, depending on the Romanziation, following the preference of the poet, but the characters are usually pronounced Ya Xuan and mean “mute strings” (Palandri 144).
18 And, it should be noted, part of the background to the nativist debates was Taiwan’s loss of recognition as the representative of China in the United Nations in 1972, which sparked a re-consideration of its place in the international community and its identity as a culture, if not nation, distinct from the PRC.
19 Christopher Lupke writes, [Taiwan] is a deconstructive political entity whose continued existence is predicated on the principle that we do not, and cannot, truly articulate in language what it is. Once definitively named – forced from its neither (autochthonous)/nor (hereditary) positionality into an either Taiwanese or Taiwan Chinese identity – it will cease to exist in its current form. Taiwan is purely indeterminate, undecidable,
in *Frontier Taiwan*, Taiwan has always had a dual status as both a periphery and a frontier. Modern poetry exemplifies this because it has been regarded as a sub-set of Chinese poetry, but for nearly thirty years, it was the representative of “Chinese” literature for most of the world, and provided much more opportunity for writers to forge new paths for Chinese-language literature than was available to writers in the PRC. In his infamous quotation that opened this chapter, Ji Xian uses the biological metaphor of “transplantation” and the contrast between the “native” and non-native plant to describe the position of Taiwanese modernism vis-à-vis the Chinese and Western traditions.

Thinking in terms of biology, of course, presupposes a fixity of origin, even though the organic metaphor does connote growth and change. Instead, we might consider the cultural position of modern poetry from Taiwan in terms of translation. At the most basic level, the problem of modern Taiwan cultural and artistic identity begins with language. The beginnings of modern literature took place under Japanese colonial rule, so by the post-war period, when large numbers of mainland Chinese were arriving on the island, there were already multiple languages – aboriginal languages, “Taiwanese” (also known as Hokkien, or Southern Min dialect, based on Fujian dialect), other Chinese dialects like Hakka, and Japanese. Mainland migrants brought with them a different form of spoken Chinese, referred to in Taiwan as *guoyu* [国语] and under KMT rule this became the standard language, though Hokkien is still widely spoken. Along with the co-presence of these multiple languages, the post-war period was marked by a cultural shift, from an open-ended signifier, resistant to a fixed identification as either a cohesive Chinese nation-state or a novel and independent body politic of and on its own. While this is a deeply unfortunately predicament for Taiwan’s denizens, and while it provides theorists with fascinating and unique material and data for the study of politics, culture, and identity, make no mistake: the politician future of Taiwan is a question that could intimately affect every one of us, a flashpoint of unimaginable magnitude because of the potential it has to “inflame the mainland.” (246)
emphasis on Japanese culture during Japanese colonialism to the KMT’s ideology of
being the guardians of (a conservative version of) Chinese culture (against its marring by
the Communists). Given the complexity of this cultural landscape, the act of engaging
with Western European and American literary texts can therefore hardly be envisioned as
a straightforward importation of a foreign object into a native habitat. In the terms of
translational metaphor, it does not make sense to consider Western modernism to be the
“original” version and the poetry of Taiwan’s modernist movement a secondary
“translation” of that original. As poet Yip Wai-lim [Ye Weilian 葉維廉 b. 1937] recently
wrote in his description of what he hopes to have achieved over his career, “I think it is
not going too far to state that my Chinese poems and my translations into English mirror
the work I have done to translate the Euro-American world into Chinese. In my work in
both Chinese and English, I have sought to unsettle existing aesthetics and syntactic
conventions in particular” (“Quest”). This potential for translation to be bi-directional, to
expand the capacity of both host and target languages, is precisely what Benjamin is
articulating in “The Task of the Translator” and it is also what Michelle Yeh is referring
to when she writes that “contrary to the view that Taiwan’s modern poetry did not have a
subjectivity until the nativist movement in the 1970s and ‘80s, I see a vital tradition from
the 1920s to the present, made stronger by its ever-renewed ability to indigenize the alien
and nativize the foreign” (Frontier 43).

The Benjamininan model of translation is not just about actual inter-
lingual translation, though; it extends to a way of thinking about how ideas circulate and
develop, without attributing the status of “original” and “copy” to various forms over
time. It helps us to understand Western, Chinese, Taiwanese and any other form of
modernism as instantiations of a broader conceptual sphere, without attributing a hierarchy to their relationship within that sphere. As Peter Osborne writes:

The changes that the concept of modernism undergoes as a result of its translation into ‘non-Western’ contexts are changes of reference (and hence, in Benjamin’s account of translation, enrichments of sense) consequent upon its association with a radically extended range of forms of cultural experience of temporal difference or non-synchronicity. These new forms of production of ‘the modern’ fracture its identification with its Euro-American ‘original’, retrospectively transforming that original in turn. (61)

Although Osborne is referring to modernism in a broader sense than my own medium-specific formal approach does, these “new forms of production of ‘the modern’” from Taiwan, far from abandoning the methods and concerns of tradition, attempt to create a new framework out of the shards of the past, shattered as it was by the events of the first half of the century. In this way, they are no different from Euro-American modernists, especially when you consider that the latter were also looking to both the Western and the classical Chinese tradition for inspiration as they sought a new language to cope with the experience of modernity. In this chapter, I will focus specifically on the juxtaposition of imagery, and argue that while the influence of poetic schools such as Surrealism inspired some poets in Taiwan to experiment with more daring fragmentation and more dreamlike, dissociated imagery than had previously been seen in modern Chinese poetry on the mainland, at the same time, other poets were attempting to reconcile modernist form with an attention to context-bound experiences and memories, resulting in a lyricism which works with, rather than against, the modernist structure.20 Juxtaposition can itself be understood in terms of translation, in the sense that it enacts a mediation between two things (the two terms of the juxtaposition) without prescribing their

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20 This experimentation matures in Taiwanese poetry from the 1980s, but I will not have the space to address that in detail.
relationship in advance, creating temporary insights but not inscribing them into a larger structural framework. I will use the notion of translation as an “enrichment of sense” in order to demonstrate that Taiwanese modernists like Ya Xian were developing our sense of what modernism in poetry can be, for both the Chinese and Western traditions.

**Juxtaposition of Forms, Juxtaposition as Form**

The activities of modernist poets in Taiwan, much like in mainland China in the earlier part of the twentieth century, centered around major journals and poetic groups. The first of these was *Modern Poetry Quarterly*, founded by Ji Xian in 1953. Ji Xian was previously affiliated with the journal *Les contemporains* [现代] and had edited two journals in the 1940s before coming to Taiwan. In 1956, the journal published a manifesto in which it defined Modernists as those “who select and express the spiritual elements of all new poetic schools since Baudelaire” and emphasized “sensibility” and “the purity of poetry” as their pursuits (qtd. in Cheung 7). The other two major groups were the Blue Star [蓝星] and Epoch [创世纪] poetry societies. The Blue Star Society, founded in 1954, reacted against what they called Ji Xian’s emphasis on cognition over lyricism. As one of the founders, Yu Guangzhong [余光中 b.1928], later wrote recalling their motivation:

In general, our gathering is “reactionary” to Chi Hsien [Ji Xian]. Chi wanted to transplant western modern poetry to Chinese soil; we object. We have never taken the responsibility for carrying on the tradition of Chinese poetry, so do we arbitrarily need a “horizontal transplant”? Chi Hsien wants to expel lyricism, and to use cognition as a basic principle of creativity. Our style inclines toward the lyrical. (qtd. in Cheung 10)

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21 Dominic Cheung notes that the journal was intended to be a monthly but later was published quarterly (Intro to “Isle of Noises” 6). Michelle Yeh therefore refers to this journal as *Modern Poetry Quarterly* or *MPQ*. For a detailed discussion of the history of this journal, see her “On Our Destitute Dinner Table”: *Modern Poetry Quarterly* in the 1950s” and also the Introduction to *Frontier Taiwan*, p. 24.
Founded in the same year as the Blue Star Society, the Epoch Poetry Society “aimed at neither rational nor emotional narratives, but focused on the presentation of images and the development of poetic tension,” thus aligning with the Modernists’ rejection of lyricism (Cheung 10-12). Though the three groups are often presented as holding competing approaches, Yeh emphasizes the leading role played by *Modern Poetry Quarterly* and several scholars stress that all three are variations on modernism, displaying many styles and approaches, both within and between the groups, as well as among poets who were not affiliated with any of them.

Surrealism had a major influence on the modernist poets in Taiwan in this period, particularly those in the Epoch Poetry Society. Chang Han-liang argues that in fact this “Surrealist episode” was based on a very broad use of the term, to the extent that “almost all the French poets introduced to Taiwan at this time were mistaken for Surrealists” (308). As the poet Luo Fu [洛夫 penname of Mo Luofu 莫洛夫 b.1928], known as the strongest advocate of Surrealism, explained in an interview from 2003, the attraction to Surrealism involved both ideological and formal concerns:

First, those who fled to Taiwan with the Nationalist government found themselves disoriented and dispossessed. Further, they lived in a repressive society where there was limited freedom of speech. The nightmarish history and political reality exerted enormous pressure on the poets, who desperately needed an outlet for their frustration. The mode of expression and imagistic language of surrealism fulfilled that need without getting them into trouble with the regime.

Secondly, at that time the language and techniques of modern poetry were still overshadowed by May Fourth vernacular poetry, which tended to be plain and straightforward. It could not adequately express the interior world, nor could it represent modern life with its distinct pace and rhythm. Therefore, many poets turned to Western modernism for new modes of expression. They started out with French symbolism and gradually embraced surrealism. They also tried to integrate surrealism with traditional Chinese poetics – to Sinicize it, so to speak – thereby creating a new language, a new sensibility, a new poetics. (Yang Mu et al. 34-5)
Luo’s first point above is important to keep in mind when comparing poems that directly address historical experience with those that seem completely divorced from it, because much of the time these poets were addressing their current condition and traumatic memories of separation from their homeland (many of the poets in this group were born on the mainland). These concerns were hidden within purposely obscure and symbolic writing. In relation to the second point, it is clear that the interest in Surrealism was part of a broader experimentation with different forms rather than a complete devotion to the particular aesthetic philosophies of the Surrealists. Chang points us to Luo’s essay “The Poet’s Mirror,” in which he emphasizes that “surrealism is not an aesthetic or literary school, but a metaphysical attitude toward life,” further stating that the goal of this approach is for the poet to “condense his imagery as to increase the density of poetry, to achieve to the largest extent possible the poetic effect by bringing into full play metaphors, symbols, suggestiveness, overtone and ambiguity” (310). Chang argues that this definition is more Symbolist than Surrealist, and “can be applied to the work of almost any poet after Baudelaire” (310). In any case, Chang says that the “Surrealist episode” ended around 1965 when Luo Fu, the standard-bearer, went to Vietnam, though it maintained a strong influence in Taiwan through the late 1960s. According to Göran Malmqvist, although the Epoch Poetry Society was notorious for their emphasis on “pregnant imagery,” after being stationed in Saigon, Luo Fu determined that poetry should be “anchored, not in philosophical reflection, but in life itself” (319). During the 1970s, he studied classical Chinese literature and “Inspired by Zen Buddhist thought he wrote a number of lyrical poems that, to me, seem akin to the short lyrical poems by the great masters of the Tang period (Malmqvist 319). This integration of Zen Buddhism
with certain aspects of Surrealism is a prime example of how the “translation” of forms across time, from the classical to the modern periods, and across space, from the West to China and back again, can have a powerful influence on the range of possibilities for all sides.

We should also pause here to note that in the previous quotation from Malmqvist, the word “lyrical” appears twice, in reference to the later poems of a leader of the supposedly anti-lyrical Epoch Poetry Society. Just as is the case with the “Misty” and “post-Misty” poets from the PRC (the focus of Chapter 3), lyricism is often used to distinguish between the different groups of modernist poets, or between their earlier and later work, even by the poets themselves, as we saw in Yu Guangzhong’s comments above. However the opposition is difficult to sustain, because what each person means by “lyricism” can vary. These poems all fall under the category of the lyric as a broad poetic genre, as they consist of a subjective poetic voice, present-based orientation, a focus on imagery and emotional effect rather than narrative, free verse structure, and so on. Beyond that, these different poets all vary in their use of the components of the lyric, and in the degree to which they combine Western lyrical forms with elements of classical Chinese poetics. “Lyricism” in this context can refer to a heightened emotional sensibility that lifts the reader out of the poem to an experience of transcendence, or it can simply indicate that a poem includes more of the features common to classical Chinese poetics than modernist Western poetics. Regardless, these poets were all looking for a new poetic language to convey the complex emotional landscape of their era, and to some extent they all settled on their own version of lyricism. I will be focusing attention in this chapter Ya Xian, a member of the Epoch Poetry Society, with some attention to Yip Wai-
lim, who was also affiliated with that group while in Taiwan, because I am particularly interested in the way in which Ya Xian departs from the Surrealist-inspired, fragmented imagery more commonly associated with this group to write some poems which address memory and the details of everyday life much more concretely. We see this shift in other poets later on, for instance in Yip’s poems from the 1980s, but it is particularly notable to find these poems from Ya Xian during a period in which modernism was characterized by dissociation and isolation, making reference (even veiled reference) to historical events difficult to sustain. In these poems, I will demonstrate, Ya Xian draws from collectively-shared memories to tap into emotional frequencies that can resonate through the audience, without reconstructing a historical narrative for them. This is experienced by the reader as lyricism, even though it is distinct from the classical form of lyricism or from the more subjectively-oriented lyricism associated with the Western modernist-inspired poets from earlier in the century in mainland China (such as Li Jinfa). It is the type of lyricism that we will see developing throughout the following chapters, though in varying ways.

It has recently been acknowledged that after the feverish modernist-nativist debates, modernist poetry in Taiwan moved forward to a more mature phase in which it engaged in thought-provoking negotiation between modernist form, classical Chinese conceptions of the poetic and the more embodied experience of “life itself.” But we do not need to wait until the 1970s and 1980s to find such examples. Ya Xian’s poems below exemplify an earlier moment of experimentation, at the height of the modernist period, which undermines the still-prevailing opposition between modernism and nativism on the grounds of artistic and social concerns. Before we can look at these poems in
detail, however, we need to examine some of the dominant features of the function of imagery in Chinese (both traditional and modern) and modernist Western poetics. As I have already discussed in the Introduction, I am not interested in setting up fundamental oppositions between the Chinese and the Western, or the traditional and the modern, because there are always exceptions or hidden nuances to any such claim. While recognizing the vast overgeneralizations this comparison entails (such as the comparatively much longer period of time constituting the “classical” Chinese literary tradition and the gap of centuries between the traditionally-regarded high point of Chinese poetic culture in the Tang dynasty (C.E. 618-907) and the starting point for most surveys of English-language literary and critical history (in the late 16th and early 17th centuries)), it is still important to recognize some of the key tendencies in each tradition in order to understand how poets like Ya Xian and others found ways to reconcile what were (and unfortunately still are) often considered incommensurably distinct aesthetic philosophies. In the Introduction, I introduced recent scholarship considering the difference between the Chinese concept of xing and the Western notion of metaphor. This comparison centers on the metaphor’s creative force in the correlation of two things, the vehicle and the tenor, as opposed to the xing’s evocation of the implicit resonance between scene and feeling based on a spontaneous encounter between human and nature. To understand the distinction, we also considered the broader cultural context, consisting of the Western tradition’s emphasis on the act of representation as secondary to that which is being represented, resulting in a need to bridge the gap between art and its object, versus the Chinese tradition’s expressivism, viewing the art work as part of the world, a manifestation of it rather than a performance or a copy. In setting up this
distinction, I do not suggest that metaphor does not exist in Chinese poetry, or that we cannot find examples of imagery in Western poetry where the comparison is presented as the result of natural correspondences; however, we can draw a generalized distinction between the dominant tendencies in each tradition up until the modernist movements, where cross-pollination between them becomes significant. I also argued in the Introduction that we need to build on insights and formal methods from both of these traditions in order to understand the lyricism at work in the poems and films under discussion, all of which seek to spur on the development of collective memory through an appeal to emotions and affect, without creating the conditions in which that memory can be inscribed into an official history.

One of the key features of the lyricism I am identifying is the presence of juxtaposition: the placing of images – but also individual narrative components – side by side, with little in the way of explanation or mediation between them. Disjunctive, independent or fragmented imagery is a feature of all modern poetry, and it becomes particularly important in the Taiwanese modernist poetry, where experimentation with the image and with density of structure reached new heights. As I will show in the latter portion of this chapter, while we might consider disjunctive juxtaposition to result always in an abstraction away from the experience of the everyday or from the emotional thrust of lyricism, it does not always have to do this. Before we can understand how poets like Ya Xian re-orient the use of juxtaposition in modernism, however, we need to take a careful look at its role in modern Chinese poetry more broadly. Then we will consider how poetic juxtaposition relates to montage in film, in order to identify the opening for this more lyrical form to emerge.
While modernism was clearly a stylistic, thematic and philosophical watershed in both Western and Chinese literary histories, in the case of Chinese poetics, particularly in the role of imagery, it also marks a major turn away from the world view and artistic conceptions that had remained prominent (though again, not exclusively so) throughout the preceding centuries. Michelle Yeh’s seminal study *Modern Chinese Poetry* was one of the first to fully trace the effects of social, political, cultural and literary influences on modern poetry, specifically on key devices and motifs that help us understand how this poetry works. In relation to the role of imagery, she writes that “Modern Chinese poetry, like Western poetry, emphasizes two interrelated features of imagery, both of which distinguish it from traditional poetry: the exaltation of metaphor and the disjunctive juxtaposition of images” (58). Speaking specifically about modern Chinese poets from mainland China in the decades prior to 1949, we know that they were seeking not just a revolution in poetry but also a revolution in language (through the use of the vernacular) to coincide with a search for the best way to represent a rapidly changing world and to justify the place of the poet within it. As translations of Western works became more and more prevalent, these poets found in Western poetry of various genres and periods models for free verse poetics, for a strong subjective voice, and a means of asserting the unique vision of the poet, among other things. In terms of imagery, which is our specific concern here, the Western concept of metaphor as drawing together two unrelated things in order to provide a fresh perspective, especially after the influence of

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22 For instance, Yeh writes that “The assumption that poetry creates new knowledge is unfamiliar to traditional thought, which emphasizes the fundamental unity and intuitive resonance between mankind and the universe” (*Modern 9*). Yeh argues that by adopting a Western-oriented approach to imagery, modern Chinese poets attempted to situate themselves as the creators of new ideas and perspectives, in order to counteract their diminished position in Republican China when compared to the imperial government and culture.
Romanticism, provided a model for the expression of individual subjectivity and creative influence and for an escape from the restrictions imposed by tradition.

Symbolism, which represented an extreme version of the idea that metaphor can join two disparate things and reveal something new, was strongly influential on modern Chinese poets, especially in the 1920s and 1930s (Yeh Modern 59). The Symbolist conception of “meaning behind surface phenomena” coincided well with the key Chinese poetic goal of finding a “meaning beyond words” [言外之意], which remained influential in the evaluation of poetry despite the coinciding drive for concrete imagery (Yeh 62). The primary distinction between the traditional approach to hidden meaning and the one borrowed from Symbolism and Modernism more broadly lies is the understanding of metaphor. While xìng in the Chinese tradition is based on a juxtaposition of sorts between scene and feeling, the two are intended to work together, not against each other, as one evokes the other. In the shift to a more Western approach to metaphor, the inherent difference between the two sides of the comparison increases, as a means of demonstrating the creativity of the poet in bringing them together. Yeh cites Zhu Zhiqing’s observation of the Crescent Poets (a literary society in the 1920s) which demonstrates how this difference was experienced at the time: “[The Crescent Poets’] marvelous metaphors – even though not entirely new – have improved our language ….Taking a step further, the [Chinese] Symbolists want to express subtle feelings; metaphor is their life. However, their metaphors are ‘analogies drawn from afar,’ not ‘analogies drawn from things at hand’” (qtd. in Yeh Modern 62). Zhu’s quote refers to Confucius’s notion that drawing analogies from things at hand, or understanding how the treatment of oneself extends to others and so on, is a way to practice ren (or
humane action), a notion which carries forward into poetry as an ability to see the connections that exist between things. Of course, the very foundation of what we experience as poetic is based on the ability of the poem to convey something beyond mere words, but the contours of that experience are different in metaphor, in which analogies are drawn between disparate things. It is the difference between a subtle and moving observation of how things are to a sudden insight into the unique perspective of the poet in a given moment. Combined with the modernist interest in arresting the flux of time, the juxtaposition of images through metaphor provided Chinese poets in the modern period a vision of poetry as an autonomous sphere for the exploration of independent subjectivity. On the other hand, many critics and the poets themselves have emphasized the local influences on the transformation of poetry in this period, both in terms of thematic concerns and formal choices. For example, specifically in relation to the approach to imagery, Yeh writes:

The impetus behind the exaltation of metaphor in modern Chinese poetics is due in part to the radical changes in the sociocultural milieu of modern China. Perhaps even more than their Western counterparts, modern Chinese poets are faced with a world of uncertainty and chaos, where traditional values have disintegrated, and the harmony, even continuum, between man and the world is largely lost and must be reconstructed. Consequently, it is not surprising that they empathize with the Symbolist concept of metaphor that expresses tension rather than universal harmony between intrinsically interrelated things. (*Modern* 65)

Yeh is speaking about mainland China here, but the situation is much the same for poets in Taiwan later in the century. The greater freedom provided by metaphor to stray away from the “scene” and even to (at least appear to be) avoiding reference at all, was clearly an attraction if these poets were going to deal with issues surrounding cultural dislocation, censorship, the suppression of local forms of knowledge, and so on, in their work. These concerns were addressed by Luo Fu above in relation to those who came to
Taiwan along with the Nationalist government, but they were relevant to native Taiwanese as well. Ingrained in the Western notion of metaphor which was taken up by the modern poets in China and Taiwan is this sense of tension and disjuncture between the components of the metaphor, which is then bridged by the poet in his or her use of and elaboration on the metaphor (and therefore also by the reader in the interpretation of the metaphor). In addition to this general preference for Western-style metaphor, then, modern Chinese-language poets also adopted the tendency in Western modernist poems toward the juxtaposition of images without much semantic or syntactical transition.

To a certain extent, the increasing presence of juxtaposition in modern Chinese-language poetics is less revolutionary than the shift from the more implicit xing to the explicit metaphor, because classical Chinese poetry already contained a high proportion of imagery and, at least from the perspective of Western poetics, appeared to employ juxtaposition of those images as a major structural feature. Given the fact that English-language imagery is built on a concept of metaphor which views the relationship between vehicle and tenor as not at all given, there is, shall we say, more discussion or justification in an English poem for the presence of the metaphor, based on the need to help the reader recognize and buy into the comparison. The absence of that mediation, whether it be the poetic voice or supporting imagery to flesh out an overall comparison, is noticeable for the Western reader. Without the necessary linkage, we perceive disjuncture. By contrast, the classical Chinese image assumes that the two sides of the comparison are part of the same system of categorical correspondences (lei 类),23 which by consequence of its naturalness requires less explicit explanation within the poem,

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23 See Pauline Yu, Ch. 1 for more on this.
resulting in the appearance of juxtaposition without mediation. Similarly, classical Chinese poetry employs a large number of allusions and conventional imagery which any educated reader would recognize. Far from viewing this as clichéd or unoriginal, the effective use of such references was evidence of a poet’s refinement. For anyone who does not recognize such allusions, however, the lack of explanation of their function would register as an absence, creating a sense of discontinuity. In addition, the grammar of classical Chinese plays a role, because it does not require pronouns, articles, conjunctions and the marking of plurals or verb tenses, all of which, in English and other European languages, give more specificity to the relationship between nouns and verbs, their number and temporal order, etc. Without these words, the images are given more prominence in the poetic line, and they seem to appear in quick succession when compared to a poem in a modern European language. Modern Chinese also includes many more of these features than the classical language, making the experience of reading a classical poem for the modern reader more difficult than it would have been for the educated reader in the poem’s own time.24

Despite the fact that it is an exaggeration, this idea of classical Chinese poetics as one which relies on structural juxtaposition in order to emphasize images over explanation had an influence on the Imagist poets in the West, who in turn had an influence on the direction of modern poetics in China. Of course, the picture is more complicated than that, for as Yip Wai-lim and Cai Zongqi both note, Ezra Pound, the most prominent of Imagist poets, already had an interest in the direct access to the image

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24 This notion of classical poetics as fundamentally disjunctive is likely also what leads Bonnie McDougall and others to identify a stronger influence of classical poetry on the work of the Misty Poets than is often allowed (as we will see in Chapter 3).
prior to his contact with Japanese haiku and Chinese poetry, so he largely found in these a model for what he thought poetry should be, rather than being wholly influenced by them. Meanwhile, despite the assertion that Hu Shi, one of the leaders of the New Literature Movement in China, was directly influenced by the Imagists in his call for concrete imagery, Michelle Yeh convincingly argues that he was not yet acquainted with Imagism when his ideas were taking shape, and that it is not until after the 1930s that we can say that Imagism had a strong influence on the poetic conception of the image in China (Modern 57-8). Even though there is no (singular) line of influence from classical Chinese poetry to Imagism and back again to modern Chinese poetry, however, Yip Wai-lim has argued for what he sees as an “ideal convergence” between classical Chinese and modern Western poetics. He outlines the closeness of their sensibilities and developing concerns, suggesting that they might be somehow reconciled in the future. This convergence is centered on the shared interest in “the acting-out of visual objects and events, letting those objects and events explain themselves by their coexisting, coextensive emergence from nature; letting the spatial tensions reflect conditions and situations rather than coercing these objects and events into some preconceived artificial order by sheer human interpretive elaboration” (34-35). For Yip, the absence of tense and the flexible syntax of classical Chinese allows for ambiguity in terms of temporal and spatial arrangements within the poem. He compares this structure to the technique of montage in film and to the ability to view a sculpture from many different angles, what he calls the “spotlighting effect” and the “mobile point of view.”25 He claims that these

25 In addition to Yip’s and Richard Serrano’s more detailed accounts of the relationship between classical poetics and montage (see below for a discussion of Serrano), Dominic Cheung makes passing mention to montage as a way of describing how Yu Guangzhong “combines a tragic past and present. Like ‘montages’ used in movies, the poem superimposes images of the historical over the modern tragedy” (20). As we will
techniques, whether in film, poetry or sculpture, provide the reader with direct access to the image, without the mediation of an artistic subjectivity. This immediacy favors visuality over narrative. Although one can certainly find examples of poems in the classical Chinese tradition which did employ sudden shifts from one idea to another, or which consisted primarily of images without much sense of their relation to each other, as Yeh points out in her detailed rebuttal of Yip’s position, this approach to imagery did not appear in classical poetry “with the frequency that Yip would have us believe” and additionally, “it is neither prominent among nor independent of other coexisting literary or linguistic factors” (Modern 78). She highlights how Yip’s translations of the examples he cites overemphasize discontinuity by removing key verbs or connecting adverbs, leaving only the images and adding punctuation in place of logical verbal connections. Yet even while recognizing its shortcomings in relation to our understanding of classical Chinese poetics, Yip’s analysis is still useful for this discussion in two ways: first, it is relevant to the interpretation of modern poetry, especially modern poetry in Taiwan (of which Yip is a practitioner), and second, it initiates an interesting comparison between classical poetics and the montage method in film, which will help us account for the lyricism in Ya Xian’s poems.

While an over-emphasis on juxtaposition in classical Chinese poetics misrepresents the structural function of the imagery and its effect (at least as it was conceived and received in its own time), we can say that there is a “convergence” between Western poetry and modern Chinese poetry when it comes to the approach to the image. Although the influence of Western poetics on modern Chinese poetry was

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see in Chapter 3, the poet Bei Dao, born in mainland China in 1949, compares his poetic method to montage as well.
tempered by socio-political concerns, linguistic reform and the continuing influence of the classical tradition despite the revolutionary rhetoric, from the 1930s onward there remains much less of a difference between the Chinese and Western poets, both in mainland China and later in Taiwan, than there was at the beginning of the century, especially when it comes to the approach to imagery. For instance, Yip’s emphasis on the particularity and independence of images and what Yeh calls their “swift succession” is an important part of modern Chinese poetics. We can see this at work in the first poem in Yip’s own poetic sequence, “Fugue” [赋格]. The first third of that poem is as follows:

北风，我还能忍受这一年吗？
冷街上，墙上，烦忧摇窗而至
带来边城的故事；呵气无常的大地
草木的耐性，山巅的沉默，投下了
胡马的长嘶，烽火扰乱了
凌驾知识的事物，雪的洁白

教堂与皇宫的宏丽，神祇的丑事 《葉維廉五十年詩選 104》

North wind, can I bear this one more year?
On the cold street, on the wall, worry rocks the windows and comes in
Brining the stories from the border town; blowing a puff of mother earth
The patience of plants and trees, the silence of mountaintops, are cast down.
Hu horses keep neighing, beacon fires are disturbed
Overriding the stuff of intellect, the clean white of snow
The majesty of churches and palaces, the disgraceful affairs of deities

After the question that sets the stage (“North wind, can I bear this one more year?”), the poem moves to a series of descriptive images that work together to create a mood, despite not being syntactically linked. This recalls the impression one gets by reading a classical Chinese poem in translation, but the difference is that in Yip’s poem, the images do not all relate to a specific scene or occasion, nor do they all remain in the realm of the

26 The translation here is mine, though I have used Yip’s own translation in Frontier Taiwan as reference. His translation is more like a creative rewriting into English at points, so I did my own to try to more closely follow the original, since that is my focus in the current discussion.
concrete. In the second through the sixth lines, we can link the images based on a general sense of a scene in a “border town,” starting with the reference to the “worry” that comes in the windows “bringing the stories from the border town,” and moving to images of the location familiar from classical poetry, such as the silent “mountaintops,” the “Hu [as non-Han nationalities living in the north and west were called] horses” and “beacon fires.” These images are placed in succession without any clear logical progression, though they have their own inner logic, which needs to be worked out by the reader, such as in the line, “The patience of plants and trees, the silence of mountaintops, are cast down.” We can consider this image in and of itself, and wonder, what does the “patience of plants and trees” signify and how can it be “cast down”? After the opening sequence of images related to the broad idea of a border town, the stanza turns away from that scene: “The majesty of churches and palaces, the disgraceful affairs of deities…” The shift is not marked or explained, though the transition seems to begin in the line, “overriding the stuff of intellect, the clean white of snow”. This is the sort of self-expressive imagery that Yip is referring to in his “Convergences” article. Looking ahead to the last third of this first poem in “Fugue,” the theme of displacement and the search for meaning in an unfamiliar world, which are hinted at in this opening, comes to the surface, even though the same techniques are at work:

群鸦喙衔一个漂浮的生命：
往那儿去了？
北风带着狗吠 弯过陋巷
诗人都已死去，狐仙再见
独眼的人还在吗？
北风狂号，冷街上，尘埃中我依稀
认出这是驰向故国的公车
几莛和温酒以高傲的姿态
邀我仰观群星：花的杂感
与神话的企图 –
我们且看风景去
《葉維廉五十年詩選 105》
A flock of crows join beaks around a floating life:
Where to?
The north wind carries the dogs barking and winds through the dank alleys
The poets are dead, the fox-spirit has said goodbye
Is the one-eyed man still there?
The north wind rattles, on the cold street, in the dust I dimly
Recognize this is the bus going to my native land
A table, mat, lukewarm wine, proudly
Invite me to look up at the stars: random thoughts of flowers
And the intentions in myths –
We go sightseeing

Again, here we see a dense succession of images, some of which are more sensory
(“north wind rattles”) while others are abstract (“random thoughts of flowers”). Any
connection between them must be made by the reader, because despite the references to
classical figures like the “fox-spirit,” it is the poet’s consciousness that links all of these
images together, not a pre-formed conceptual or physical framework.

Ya Xian, too, has poems with this Symbolist-like focus on arresting images. He is
a poet, editor, teacher and literary historian who has been a major figure in the Taiwan
poetry scene despite the fact that his career as an actual poet only spanned 11 years, from
1954 to 1965. He was a co-founder of the Epoch Poetry Society and many of his poems
share a lot with other Epoch poets like Yip Wai-lim and Luo Fu, displaying the kind of
jarring juxtaposition that we might associate with montage. As Steven Riep describes,
“[Ya Xian] frequently juxtaposes disparate images: the Asian and the Western, the
ancient and the modern, as well as the timeless and significant against the quotidian and
the meaningless, leaving the reader to draw connections between ideas and conclusions
as to his meaning” (50). Riep goes on to describe how Ya Xian’s themes, though they
vary, often deal with “the search for meaning in a modern world,” but to do that he looks
not just to “reminiscences from youth and occasional poetry,” but also to portraits of
individuals, poems about cities and cultures in ancient times and the present, and to
“religion and existentialism, often pitting the latter against the former” (50). This
approach to structure and thematics is part of what made Ya Xian so influential despite
his brief career. My own analysis is concerned with the poems which focus on the
everyday and the individual, a departure from this broad range of vision. Like many other
influential poets from this period in Taiwan, Ya Xian served in the military. Having
joined in August 1949, he followed the KMT army to Taiwan shortly after and retired in
1966, obtaining a degree in film and dramatic arts along the way (Riep 48). Riep
examines Ya Xian’s war poetry in detail, detailing its prominence throughout his work.
Some, but not all, of these poems are among the more intimate of Ya Xian’s poems,
because to him, war is not an abstract theme but a personal experience. We will look at
two of these poems below. But first, it will be helpful to look at a few examples of Ya
Xian’s poems from the late 1950s, a few years earlier than the more personally-oriented
poems we will come to later.

In his longest poem, the often-anthologized “Abyss” [深渊 1959], we can see
some resemblances between Ya Xian’s style and the work of other members of the Epoch
Poetry Society, such as Yip’s “Fugue” above. I will briefly mention two stanzas. First, we
can look at the third stanza, which follows a description of a man who is deemed
important and whose death prompts a big display of mourning, even though “In Spain /
People wouldn’t even throw him a piece of cheap wedding cake!” [在西班牙/人们连一
枚下等的婚饼也不会投给他] The stanza reads:

去看，去假装发愁，去闻时间的腐味
Go look, fake sadness, go smell putrid Time;
We are too lazy to know who we are.
Work, take a walk, salute the wicked, smile, and be immortal –
They are the ones who cling to mottos.
This is the face of the day; all the wounds whimper, teeming viruses hide beneath the skirts.
Metropolis, scales, paper moon, mutterings of power lines,
(Today’s notice pasted over yesterday’s notice)
The anemic sun trembles now and then
In the pale abyss
Sandwiched between two nights.
(Trans. Yeh Frontier Taiwan 203)²⁷

The stanza moves quickly through a series of images, but it is a bit less disjunctive than “Fugue.” In the first half, there are two pairs of lines following the pattern of a list of injunctions followed by a commentary. The first pair is more pejorative, while the second is more encouraging, as a possible list of ways to respond to “them,” the “ones who cling to mottos.” In the second half, there is another list, but this time of less obviously connected nouns: “Metropolis, scales, paper moon, mutterings of power lines.” This list seems to set a fragmented scene more than convey any particular idea, a reading supported by the line in parenthesis which almost interrupts it: “(Today’s notice pasted over yesterday’s notice),” suggesting a layering of references. Then the stanza closes with the powerful image, stretched over three lines, situating daylight as an “abyss,” stuck

²⁷ I think Yeh’s translation is very effective in capturing the influence of modernist Western poetics on this poem, particularly, in this case, that of T.S. Eliot.
between two nights and lit up only by a “pale sun.” Even though there is clearly discontinuity in these lines, there is also a thematic undercurrent uniting them, which is the nihilistic vision of a world “teeming” with “viruses” and cast in the abyss, where the inhabitants are “too lazy” to do anything about it.

A slightly more rhythmic and yet juxtapositional stanza is the fifth one:

And we build monuments to honor the moths of yesteryear. We are alive. We cook oatmeal with barbed wire. We are alive. Walk through billboards’ sad rhythms, through squalid shadows on the cement, Through the souls released from prisons of ribs. Hallelujah! we are alive. We walk, cough, debate, Shamelessly occupy a corner of the earth. Not much is dying at the moment, Today’s clouds plagiarize from yesterday’s. (Trans. Yeh Frontier Taiwan 203-204)

Here, the repetition of “we are alive” contrasts with the vision of the third stanza by linking various images depicting the ways in which “we” remain vital even in the face of “barbed wire.” The connections between the images in this stanza are still rather loose, however. Lines like “Walk through billboards’ sad rhythms...Through the souls released from prisons of ribs,” though they are grammatically linked by the repetition of “through,” present three different images that have no direct relation to one another. They only make sense as different aspects of the dark world, making it even more powerful to be able to repeat, “we are alive.” Like in “Fugue,” we find here an emphasis on imagery without losing the sense of a driving consciousness behind the images. The reader
searches for the thematic and emotional continuities that the poet has clearly woven into
the poem.

“Mountain God” [山神 1957] is less psychologically-motivated than the above
poems, and as such appears closer to the traditional Chinese approach to imagery. It uses
what Sun calls the mode of implicit correlation, more common to xing than metaphor.
Here, the images stand almost alone. The poem is divided into four stanzas, each
correlating with a season, beginning in spring and ending in winter. We can look at the
opening stanza:

　猎角震落了去年的松果
　栈道因进香者的驴蹄而低吟
　当融雪像纺织女纺车的银丝披垂下来
　牧羊童在石佛的脚指上磨他的新镰
　春天, 呵春天
　我在菩提树下为一个流浪客喂马 《瘡弦自选集 40》

The hunting horns have shaken down last year’s pine cones
the plank road rumbles under the hooves of the pilgrims’ donkeys
when the melting snow streams like silver threads from the spinning wheel of the Weaver
Maid
the Shepherd Boy sharpens his new scythe on the stone Buddha’s toes
Spring, ah, spring
under the bodhi tree I feed a traveling stranger’s horse
(Trans. Malqvist, Frontier Taiwan 193-4)

The opening two lines of the poem read much like a xing, as they include two images that
are relatively parallel in structure, presented with no syntactical connection. Both lines
relate to a scene consisting of the pine cones and the plank road [栈道] which is
constructed on the face of a cliff, probably just below the hanging pine cones. The word
dang [当] or “when,” which begins the next pair of lines, provides a syntactical link,
marking them as nearly simultaneous, but the shift from the first pair of lines to the
second is quite stark, moving from a scene on a cliff to a metaphor invoking two figures
from Chinese folklore, the Weaver Maid and the Shepherd Boy. The final two lines of the stanza include an apostrophe or exclamation (it could be either), “Spring, ah, spring,” followed by the only line in the poem which is a complete sentence: “under the bodhi tree I feed a traveling stranger’s horse.” The exclamation “ah” [呵] signals the presence of a voice, which is made explicit with the appearance of “I” [我] in the closing line of the stanza, but this voice does little to provide context for the opening set of images. That is not to say that there are no implied relationships between them, of course. For instance, the opening pair of lines conjures the image of pilgrims passing by (as in those coming to offer incense or pay respects), which is echoed by the “traveling stranger” under the bodhi tree in the last line. That bodhi tree is itself associated with the Buddha’s toes in line four. Even the familiar images and allusions to mythical and religious cultural symbols are deceiving though, because their function varies. For example, the image, “melting snow streams like silver threads from the spinning wheel of the Weaver Maid” is a typical simile comparing something natural (snow) to the imaginary figure living among the stars, but the next line does not follow suit. The Shepherd Boy is represented as a physical being, “sharpen[ing] his new scythe on the stone Buddha’s toes.” In bringing the lines of the stanza together, we can be confident of the connection based on the broad theme of spring, in which snow melts and travelers are once again able to pass by, but beyond that the interpretation is very open. Any emotional and/or abstract intellectual significance to these images is left unstated – alluded to, perhaps, but not part

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28 Though there is no single version of this story, these two are a pair of lovers who were banished to opposite sides of the Silver River in the heavens, but were reunited for one day each year.
of the poem itself. The same structure continues for the other three stanzas relating to the other three seasons.

Despite the presence of a poetic voice, this observer remains largely in the background for most of the poem, making it a model of Yip’s description of a poem organized around images. Unlike most classical Chinese poems, and the other poems by Ya Xian which we will look at in a moment, “Mountain God” does not deal with any specific place or time. As a result, any emotional impact it might have is going to be abstract and generalized – there is nothing personal here. No surprise, then, that it does not strike us as particularly lyrical, in the sense of providing an emotional or affective impact that the reader shares with the poetic speaker, because there is no sense of a memory or experience to be shared. Of course, the reader may read emotional content into the poem, by identifying symbolic meaning in the mythical and religious references, but in that case the objects are not evoking the emotion themselves; rather, they are standing in for that which evokes the emotion. Instead of looking outward for the correspondences captured by the poem, the reader looks inward, toward the poet’s subjectivity, and we can see how these modern poems are attempting to address spiritual and psychological crises in indirect ways. But this does not mean that they are totally dissociated from reality. Mentioning his “Fugue” and Ya Xian’s “Abyss” as examples, Yip writes:

One thing is clear: the intensities, solitudes, hesitations, doubts, nostalgia, expectancy, exile, and dreams of our works rarely came from an insulated private space; they are at once intensely inward-personal and outward-historical, because they cannot help but be dialectical transfigurations from tensions and agonies of acculturation under the visible and invisible forces of colonizing activities. The Rupture also resulted in a drastic change to our sense of time and space. We found ourselves standing between a past where historical and cultural memories might be forever lost, and a future that was at best nebulous, if not outright impossible to imagine. This engendered a sense of
time in our consciousness invaded by multiple lines of memories, real and imagined, coming from different spaces, distances and times—a sense of time converging with that of Western modernists, yet caused by a totally different trajectory of events. ("Quest")

This search for a new way of representing the experience of time after an historical rupture is shared by all of the poets and filmmakers I discuss in this dissertation, and thus they all experiment in different ways with discontinuity. What they add to Yip’s approach is the attempt to address the historical context that engendered this experimentation more directly, including both its physical and psychological components.

At this point then, it is useful to look at the second aspect of Yip’s claim regarding the convergence of classical Chinese and modernist Western poetics that can assist us: his comparison between poetic juxtaposition and montage in film. Yip is focused on the independence of the visual object in the poem, which he likens to Sergei Eisenstein’s use of the shot in montage. Rather than imposing relationships on the images (or shots), Yip wishes to preserve the “spatial tension between and coexistence among” them (29). Otherwise, what we end up with is not events themselves but “statements about these visual events” (29; emphasis in original). Similarly, Eisenstein promoted montage as a means of achieving higher-order significance from independent visual units. He stresses that montage is not mere linkage (as the English word, which borrows from the French montage, meaning “layout” or “assembly,” would also suggest) but rather a “collision” which is achieved “by the conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other” (Film Form 37). As is well known (and as Yip notes in support of his comparison), Eisenstein explores this theory in relationship to his understanding of Chinese characters, though his acquaintance with them is in the context of having studied Japanese, so he is actually looking at Japanese kanji. The discussion of these characters comes in the
context of an essay about for a pamphlet on Japanese cinema. Taking a widely-shared but oversimplified view of the linguistic function of the characters, Eisenstein discusses how they evolve from resembling the thing to which they refer, to being more abstract, and then, more importantly, to being combinations of images. To represent this last stage, he gives examples of characters for (somewhat) abstract concepts which are formed by combining the characters for two more concrete things.® Just like this last stage in the supposed evolution of characters, Eisenstein thinks that cinematography needs to move beyond mere depiction and toward the expression of more complex and abstract concepts, through the combination of the concrete material of the shot. Because Eisenstein is working with film images, rather than with words, his theory has to grapple with the materiality of the image in a way that poetic theory does not. Unlike in Surrealist or “poetic” films, such as Blood of a Poet [Le Sang d’un Poète, Jean Cocteau 1930], Eisenstein does not manipulate the image or attempt to depict something cinematically that exceeds what we could see with the naked eye. Instead, he uses indexical images to express something that goes beyond them.

Eisenstein’s definition of montage varies in different writings, and it can include both the composition of the shot itself (representing contrast within the image) and the combination of shots. All of the practitioners of Soviet montage theory in the 1920s were looking for an alternative to continuity editing, which was the developing set of conventions for making clear to the viewer the relationship between the objects or actions onscreen. As it was used in narrative cinema, continuity editing explicitly wished to

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29 Richard Serrano notes that even the selective list provided by Eisenstein includes only one true abstraction, so the model does not really hold (97). It is still useful for understanding Eisenstein’s vision for montage, despite the linguistic inaccuracy.
avoid calling attention to the presence of editing or the role of the director in general, whereas the juxtapositions in montage are often unexpected or even initially illogical, requiring the spectator to pay attention to how the film is being constructed in order to determine its meaning. As a result, montage was seen as a way around the trap of narrative, allowing film to communicate on a higher level of significance. The combination of shots in montage yields not a sum, Eisenstein says, but a product, a “representation of something that is graphically undepictable” from two things that are, resulting in an “intellectual cinema” (*Film Form* 30). Rather than predetermine the intellectual content of that combination of shots (as via linkage), however, Eisenstein argues for the preservation of the dialectical tension that results in their independent presentation (or collision). He writes, “Recall what an infinite number of combinations is known in physics to be capable of arising from the impact (collision) of spheres […] Amongst all these combinations there is one in which the impact is so weak that the collision is degraded to an even movement of both in the same direction [which would correspond to the idea of montage as linkage]” (38). While Eisenstein uses the Chinese character as his point of comparison, Yip pushes the analogy further by suggesting that all of classical Chinese poetry operates in this way, in that it presents images in tight succession without giving the reader much sense of how to relate them, thus freeing the objects to “explain *themselves*.”

Although Yip over-emphasizes the nature of the disjuncture in the juxtaposition of images in classical Chinese poetics, to the extent that we would not generally use the term “juxtaposition” to describe the combination of images and the relationship between “scene” and “feeling” in a classical poem, this comparison to Eisenstein’s montage
theory does help us better understand how modernist Chinese poetry and modernist
(even Imagist) Western poetry envisions the power of images to carry the weight of
an experience or idea. If the contrast set up by their juxtaposition is sufficiently dynamic,
then any intervening narration can only serve to limit the potential connections between
them. Secondly, despite its limitations, the montage comparison does help to demonstrate
how the xing is thought to create “resonances” that extend outward from the poem and
to the reader. This term is often invoked to explain how meaning emerges from the
juxtaposition of elements in xing. We see it for instance in Sun’s description of the
“affective-responsive interaction between human beings and external reality”:

When the poet selects a certain bit of scenery from the outside, it is because that
scenery, more than any other, strikes a chord in him during that crucial moment of the
creative process. At the same time, this bit of external reality must also have
something in it that has attracted the attention of the poet. In other words, the
resonance between mind and object is a give-and-take interaction. And it is only when
this resonance is struck that the outside can harmonize with the inside so that ‘to
mention the object is to write about my mind’ and vice versa. (201; emphasis added)

In outlining the pre-history of Imagism in the West, Yip cites T.E. Hulme who
hypothesizes a “language of intuition which would hand over sensations bodily” and the
method he envisions to achieve this is as follows: “Two visual images form what one
may call a visual chord. They unite to suggest an image which is different to both” (qtd.
in Yip 37). Hulme’s ideal approximates the ideal of xing, and the musical metaphors used
in both descriptions highlight the fact that the scene and the feeling it engenders are not
being unified or assimilated, but are rather amplifying each other while maintaining their

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30 It is no surprise that Palandri calls Ya Xian “the most resonant of modern Chinese poets,” for as we will
see below, he is able to capture this feature of classical poetics (144).
31 Using similar language, Yu refers to the “stimulus-response relationship between the poet and his/her
world,” (61) where the stimulus is the xing. Likewise, she details what she calls the “expressive-affective
conception of poetry” going back to the “Great Preface” to the Classic of Poetry and describes the
assumption “that what is internal (emotion) will naturally find some externally correlative form or action,
and that poetry can spontaneously reflect, affect and effect political and cosmic order” (32).
independent frequencies. Resonance, defined as “The reinforcement or prolongation of sound by reflection or by the synchronous vibration of a surrounding space or a neighbouring object,” captures this process (OED). In Eisenstein’s montage, as well, the individual shots maintain their relative independence while providing greater significatory energy to each other. Eisenstein sees the “collision” of significations between the shots of a montage sequence as self-propelling. He writes: “If montage is to be compared with something, then a phalanx of montage pieces, of shots, should be compared to the series of explosions of an internal combustion engine, driving forward its automobile or tractor: for, similarly, the dynamics of montage serve as impulses driving forward the total film” (38). The assumption behind the use of the word “image,” whether in English or Chinese, in relation to poetry or film, is that of a static object to be visually perceived, but images can have their own temporality, both as individual dynamic units and in their combination, a fact Eisenstein brings to the fore when he talks about montage itself as “dramatic” (Film Form 49). For Eisenstein, just as for lyric poets, the goal is to elicit feeling, but this too can be active and productive, part of a process he calls “emotional dynamization” (58). And just as musical instruments have both fundamental and overtone frequencies, the shots of a montage can resonate with each other in various ways. As we will see in the next chapter, even films which do not employ explicit montage, but which leave open the potential relationships between their component parts, can achieve this effect, and thus it is no surprise that, as an example, the word for
resonance [共鸣] is often used by Jia Zhangke’s critics to describe the way his films signify.³²

Lastly, bringing montage together with classical Chinese poetics is useful in that it brings out the “objective” nature of the image – literally, the object-hood of the objects within it, which is always a factor in cinema but less so in poetry. This aspect comes through in Richard Serrano’s use of the notion of montage in cinema to read the ShiJing [诗经], or *Classic of Poetry*, the first anthology of Chinese poetry. The opening line in these poems contain references to nature which have no direct bearing on the rest of the poem. They are labeled by commentators as *xing*, which marks the beginning of the term’s long history. The difficulty in interpreting these lines involves how to account for the function of this *xing*. The early commentators, who established the precedents not only for how to read these poems, but also for their culture’s sense of what poetry is in general,³³ often attributed a narrative significance to them, in order to derive a moral

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³² As an example, in introducing Jia’s films before an interview, Jin Yan[金燕] writes: “Jia Zhangke always uses a microscope to examine people’s lives. Originally mundane lives are captured and enlarged by his camera. We see ourselves and the society and people with whom we are familiar, and also our experience brings with it a keenly felt resonance” [贾樟柯一直象一个在用显微镜来观察生活的人，原本无聊而无奈的生活被他的镜头捕捉和放大，我们便看到了我们自己和我们熟悉的社会及人生，于是我们感到了带有痛感的共鸣] (“Interview with the Very Busy Jia Zhangke”). Interestingly enough, the character *ming* [鸣] of *gongming* or “resonance,” is one of the examples Eisenstein cites when comparing (Chinese) characters to montage. *Ming* itself refers to the call of birds or insects, and Eisenstein notes that there is nothing all that abstract about a bird’s cry.

³³ The “Great Preface” [大序] to the *Classic of Poetry* is the first surviving instance of literary theory in the Chinese tradition. Its statement, “诗者。志之所之也” is translated by Stephen Owen as “The poem is that to which what is intently on the mind goes” (40). These two sentences from the “Great Preface” become, in the *Classic of Documents* [书经], the abbreviated “诗言志.” Owen elaborates on the difference between these two formulations, but it is the latter that is most often cited as one of the foundational concepts for later developments of literary thought. It is translated as “the poem articulates what is intently on the mind” (Owen) or “poetry expresses intent” (Cai Zongqi) or “poetry verbalizes emotion” (Zhang Longxi) among many others. This statement works together with another key concept, “文以载道”or “literature transmits the Way.” As Maghiel van Crevel explains, these two are not contradictory, because, “emotion and what is on the mind intently refer not to individual feelings and even less to idiosyncratic obsession, but to the entire mental state that is appropriate in a given set of circumstances and will prompt equally appropriate
message from the poem. These commentators were working in the Confucian tradition (Confucius was thought to have collected these poems) and as Pauline Yu writes, they “were validating the anthology in the only way allowed by a non-dualistic cosmology – by attesting to its roots in history” (80). Comparing the relationship between the xing and the rest of the poem to the relationship between images in montage, or between the opening sequence of a film and the rest of the film, Serrano argues that once we learn to “read” meanings into images, it is easy to forget how little of our interpretation derives from the images themselves, and how much we have added through our own urge to narrativize or contextualize. The poems of the Classic of Poetry juxtapose images of nature with images of human activity but provide no information on how to relate these two groups of imagery. Serrano writes, “The natural objects in the Classic of Poetry are as important as the human actions and situations implied in the poems. It is no wonder that the commentaries saw a collision of thing and person and sought to explain the resulting explosion, to borrow Eisenstein’s terminology of montage” (99). Rather than add on elements of narrative that are not there, as the commentators often ended up doing, Serrano suggests that we read the poem the way that we read a montage, by looking for analogies between the images without trying to make narrative sense of them. This creates an important difference in interpretation, because there is no assumption that the image signifies alone; rather, we recognize that its meaning changes depending on the images to which it is juxtaposed. In a poem where the same image repeats, its significance can change depending on how we interpret whatever surrounds it. For both

expression and action prescribed by the socio-moral code of Confucianism – the sort of mindset, in other words, that one would want in a government official” (2).
cinema and ancient Chinese poetry, therefore, the essence “lies not in the image, but in the relationships among them” (95).

In asking us to consider how we can apply the type of “reading” we use for montage to the *Classic of Poetry*, Serrano is essentially asking us to consider the meaning of the *Classic of Poetry* as radically more open than the tradition typically dictates. The emphasis in both Yip’s and Serrano’s accounts is on the productive potential of montage, which is achieved by not providing fixed interpretations that shut down other potential meanings; whether those interpretations exist within the poem itself or in the commentaries, they draw our attention away from the creative capacity of the images themselves. But Serrano highlights the effect on how we perceive the objects in the poem as objects. For the majority of poems that constitute the long Chinese tradition prior to the twentieth century, the poet was working with the conventional assumption that the natural and human components of the poem co-existed in the same space and time, that there was an “occasion” which brought them together. That assumption was not yet active during the composition of the poems (or more accurately, the songs) in the *Classic of Poetry*. These objects were selected because they were a familiar part of the natural world, but this familiarity does not come through so obviously in the poems themselves. Serrano reminds us that “readers familiar with the commentaries sometimes forget how fragmentary the poems seem on a first reading, how tenuous their connection to the world before explained and over-explained” (98). Likewise, montage breaks up the usual ways in which cinema presents the whole scene of which the object is a part, leaving the viewer to piece it back together. The indexicality of the image means that at any given moment, we can read an object as either a particular object in real-world space and time
(as in documentary) or as a generalized object, representing its class of things.\(^{34}\) This fact is more unavoidable in film, but it is not all that different for the reader of the *Classic of Poetry*. As Serrano writes, “objects can be granted great significance in film” such as through the close-up, and “objects sit enormously” in the *Classic of Poetry* as well, “so obvious in their specificity” (99). Whether and how these objects move from specific to abstract depends on how the reader or viewer interprets them.

We see the importance of objects in the creation of an ordinary world in Ya Xian’s “On the Streets of China” [在中国街上 1958]. As the title suggests, this poem features more concrete imagery than in “Abyss” or “Mountain God.”\(^{35}\) The poem lists various ways in which modern life not only differs from life in ancient times, but has seemingly abandoned it, moving forward by accumulation of examples rather than any logical progression. Because it sets up these contrasts, there are many references to figures from Chinese myth or traditional culture, but they are paired with such mundane aspects of contemporary life as to render them almost amusingly banal themselves. For instance, we read that “Fuxi’s [the legendary inventor of written language] eight hexagrams [symbols used for divination in the *Book of Changes*] were too early to win a Nobel Prize” [伏羲的八卦也没赶上诺贝尔奖金] (《瘂弦诗集》97; Trans. Yeh *Anthology* 117). In the same stanza we also find the line: “An advertisement for a cure-all is pasted over Shennong’s [the legendary inventor of agriculture and herbal medicine] face” [金鸡纳的广告贴在神农氏的脸上] (97; Trans. Yeh 118). Some lines are

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34 See my discussion in Chapter 4 of Vivian Sobchack’s concept of “documentary consciousness,” in which the viewer no longer views objects onscreen as “typical particulars” and begins viewing them as part of the documentary real.

35 The use of “China” 中国 in the title leaves the location a bit vague, though: are we talking about the PRC, or Taiwan, or a street in an imaginary “cultural China”?
structured like a classical poem, such as “Airplanes screech over a row of willows /
Student protests surge against the crumbling palace walls” (飞机呼啸着掠过一排烟柳/
学潮冲激着剥蚀的宫墙) (96; Trans. Yeh 117). These lines display almost complete parallelism and set up a scene contrasting action above to action below, a natural image to a physical structure, and so on. But the old-style form only highlights the contrast between itself and the modern, even violent, content. Overall, despite the fact that the poem is generally populated with independent images of contrast, and there is relatively little direct reference to a poetic voice, we still intuit a consciousness in this poem, whose sense of irony animates these contrasts. While some of the contrasts could be read as exhibiting frustration at the failure of contemporary society to live up to the achievements of the past, the last line in each stanza features a refrain that brings out the playfulness of this poetic voice. This refrain refers to the fact that poets now “wear corduroy velvet” [穿灯草绒的衣服]. The line appears as a complaint or slight dig at today’s poets in the beginning, but as the poem goes on, it gradually morphs into a sort of laissez-faire calling card: “And let us wear corduroy.” (In Chinese, the last four lines begin with “qie” [且], which can mean “moreover” or “for the time being.” The final line reads, 且穿灯草绒的衣服, giving the action in the refrain a sense of agency or conscientiousness that it did not possess at the beginning.)

This distinctly modern voice and perspective of the poem “On the Streets of China” helps to highlight an important difference between, on the one hand, Eisenstein’s version of montage and modernist poetics, and on the other, the type of poetic juxtaposition that takes place in the xing. For the modern artists, the objects that constitute the images are always subject to an individual consciousness. They assume a
hierarchical split between the components being juxtaposed and the “higher” meaning resulting from their juxtaposition (the “product” versus a “sum” of the parts), whether that be a symbolic abstraction or a psychological experience, or something else. The combination of elements in the xing imagines a reciprocal relationship between the constituent units. Yu makes a comparison between traditional Chinese and Western notions of connectivity which is relevant here. She writes:

the connections between subject and object or among objects, which the West has by and large credited to the creative ingenuity of the poet, are viewed in the Chinese tradition as already pre-established; the poet’s primary achievement often lies in his ability to transcend, rather than to assert, his individuality and distinctiveness from the elements of his world. (33)

To a certain extent, the content of the images plays a role in each case, with nature imagery more common in classical Chinese poetry and inanimate objects more common in the modern poems and in Eisenstein’s montage sequences. The liveness of nature is more appropriate to a worldview of constant transformations, where the poet is “tapping into such cosmic resonance and mutually affective dynamism between man and nature to generate a flow of meaning between ‘feeling’ and ‘scene’ that never stagnates” (Sun 191). But as we will see in the coming pages, objects can also create this emotional resonance, if they speak to particular experiences of individuals. Likewise, nature imagery which does not speak to an experience or a scene that strikes the reader on a personal level, will not engender the same sense of a “meaning beyond the meaning,” a feeling that is difficult to put into words, which gives the reader the sense of lyricism.

36 Sun discusses this effect in detail, and notes that Zhong Rong was the first critic to “point out the aesthetic effect of xing beyond its role as creative genesis,” in the lines, “When the words are over but the meaning still lingers on, it is xing” (184).
In any case, we can say therefore that images can be juxtaposed in order to force our attention on the interconnected world of which they are a part, or to cause us to intuit the correspondences perceived by the poet, which are likely to draw more heavily on the symbolic, rather than ontological, significance of the image. By extension the reader is either attempting to re-imagine the scene or experience or to retrace the intellectual path of the poet. According to Eisenstein, “The strength of montage resides in this, that it includes in the creative process the emotions and mind of the spectator. The spectator is compelled to proceed along that selfsame creative road that the author traveled in creating the image” (Film Form 32). In a similar vein, Sun cites Valéry as a representative of the Western approach: The ultimate telos of art is, according to Valéry, to set up an analogous process in the reader or spectator. He adds, emphatically, ‘A creator is one who makes others create’” (210). But this is actually not all that different from the traditional Chinese way of reading, in which “the power to evoke boundlessly rich resonances is a true measure of superior Chinese poetry” (Sun 211). It is true that the traditional Chinese idea that the poet is “tapping into” something that pre-exists his or her presence on the scene makes the reader less interested in his or her unique perspective than in the scene itself. Paradoxically, this ultimately leads to much more biographical interpretation, as scholars attempt to account for the precise circumstances that prompted the writing of the poem. We can consider the following quote from Sun, in which, after reminding us that “the very essence of xing […] is an affective-responsive two-way interplay between external reality and the poet in terms of ‘scene’ and ‘feeling’ during the creative process,” writes that:

When this interplay strikes a chord in the reader, it can enter the reader’s consciousness and continue its activity to such an extent that the creative process of
the poet is now reprocessed and refracted inside the mind of the reader. Just as ‘scene’ – the very means of xing – affected the ‘feeling’ of the poet during the creative process, now the whole poem begins to affect the “feeling” of readers and elicit their responses. (211)

Now compare this to the following, again from Eisenstein:

Each such representation is, in the image sense, individual, dissimilar, and yet identical thematically[...]. The image planned by the author has become flesh of the flesh of the spectator’s risen image...Within me, as a spectator, this image is born and grown. Not only the author has created, but I also – the creating spectator – have participated” (Film Sense 34).

The difference here is not that great. In the Chinese tradition, despite the idea that the poet’s consciousness is not the driving force behind the correlations in the imagery, there is what Sun calls a “necessary degree of manipulation” of the material, because “what the [poet’s] heart harbors at the moment of encountering is even more crucial” than what is immediately visible, in order so that the poem may be open to the “give-and-take mutually illuminating interplay” between the scene and the feeling of the poet (197; 201).

She claims that the dynamism of a poem in the English tradition is much more active, as it is “predicated on the commanding charge of the poet to dictate the whole process of metaphorical transference for poetic expression,” but we need only to think of the Imagists to remember that this varies to a great degree (193). Yip’s reference to T.E. Hulme’s “language of intuition,” mentioned above, is another example of an attempt to conceive of poetic language’s ability to communicate without explicit rationalization.37

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37 Yu cites a longer version of Hulme’s quotation about the “language of intuition,” but dismisses it as an example of a significant divergence from the Western emphasis on imagery as adornment. She notes that Hulme still includes metaphors in his description of images which “make you continuously see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process.” For Yu, Hulme’s approach does not present things “in themselves, as it were, and devoid of meaning – that meaning is simply defined as ‘intuitive’ rather than rational” (10). I think we can also say that the images of nature or other aspects of a “scene” in traditional Chinese poetics are not only presented “in themselves,” but because they carry certain intended implications – for the scene, for the “feelings” the poet wishes to evoke, and for the poem’s own position within a tradition – which we might call “intuitive” or “rational” depending on how they employed. They might also refer to actual things in the world, but their use over time becomes so conventionalized that it becomes difficult to see them in that way. Hulme’s description of the need to use new images because “the
Eisenstein, for his part, in writing about Japanese *haiku* and *tanka* poems, puts emotional transference above the communication of abstract concepts when he says, “And if the finely ground edges of the intellectually defined concepts formed by the combined ideograms are blurred in these poems, yet, in *emotional quality*, the concepts have blossomed forth immeasurably. We should observe that the emotion is directed towards the reader, for, as Yone Noguchi has said, ‘it is the readers who make the *haiku’s* imperfection a perfection of art’” (*Film Form* 32).

For Eisenstein, though, a key difference remains: although he lauds the active engagement of the reader (of haiku) or the viewer (of montage) and emphasizes the emotional capacity of the art work, the director’s ability to marshal the form and elicit a certain response remains dominant. He describes different “methods of montage” such as “rhythmic,” “tonal” and “overtonal,” which become “montage *constructions* proper when they enter into relations of conflict with one another” (*Film Form* 78; emphasis in original). Beyond these is “intellectual montage,” part of his search for an “intellectual cinema” which “resolves the conflict-juxtaposition of the physiological and intellectual overtones” (83). We see here that despite the language of resonance, reflected in his interest in a “conflict between the principal tone of the piece (its dominant) and the overtone,” Eisenstein foresees an ultimate reconciliation between these various features (79). The aim of the art work is to convey a certain vision of the world to the spectator;

*old cease to convey a physical thing and become abstract counters* could describe the difficulty with imagery in any tradition. (It also reminds us of the argument Jakobson makes about realism in Chapter 4, that it needs to be constantly renewed in order to maintain its connection to the world.)
even if that vision is dialectical, he is looking for a “dialectical unity,” which can only be pre-formulated in the mind of the director-as-creator.\textsuperscript{38,39}

When modern Taiwanese poets, like their predecessors in mainland China, adopted the more disjunctive approach to imagery modeled on the West, they were not looking for this kind of unity. As a departure from the Chinese tradition, they did not experience the world as a place of balance (as in the forces of yin and yang) and harmony, nor did they see the transformations around them as cyclical. By reflecting the sense of a radical break between themselves and the world around them, their poetry demands of the reader to enter into their psychology, but what she finds there is complex or even contradictory. As Vincent Shih writes of the Taiwanese poets in particular,

The special technique the poets use to shock people out of their complacency is described as concentration or abstraction. The language employed to execute them will have to be terse and concise, without a single superfluous word. This concentration requires elliptical sentence structure, a chore Chinese language is particularly fitted to perform because of the omissions of prepositions, article or even of verbs. Such omissions force upon the attention of the reader what the poet is trying to say and cannot say so effectively in any other way. The reader has no choice but to expand his horizon by resourceful play of his imagination or even fancy to get into mood [sic] for the proper feel of the poetry. (63)

Not all modernist Taiwanese poetry includes these grammatical omissions, but they do tend toward a dense concentration of imagery which intensifies the reading experience in a similar manner as Shih describes. In the poems by Ya Xian below, there is a slightly

\textsuperscript{38} Eisenstein’s reading of Japanese drama in particular will be echoed by Bertolt Brecht, whose impression of Chinese performance, also viewed in Moscow, inspired his notion of the “alienation effect.” As we will see in Chapter 4, Brecht’s understanding of the effect of that performance was predicated on the assumption of a necessary firewall to be placed between the performer and the character, which is then broken in the “alienation effect,” though this assumption is not shared by the traditional Chinese actor or his audience.

\textsuperscript{39} The difference in approach is clear when we think about the difference between the English phrase “higher-order thinking” and the Chinese 言外之意. One is distinction of levels, abstract and concrete, higher and lower, while the other differentiates horizontally: a meaning beyond words is found elsewhere, but not on a separate plane.
different mechanism at work, which we will see playing out in the films from Chapter 2 as well. In both instances, we notice that the return of a more specific historical reference, and its attendant emotional response, prods the reader to focus on the experience of the event, moment, or scene, rather than attempting to re-trace the psychological or intellectual perambulations of the poet or filmmaker. Yet the awareness of the poet’s presence in the poem, whether via a persona or an indistinct point of view, never disappears entirely. It is, after all, a personal experience being evoked, not a timeless set of natural correspondences, which means that we need some sense of a unique perspective and an individual history.

Re-membering the Everyday in Ya Xian’s Poems

The first example we will look at to see how Ya Xian’s approach differs from the previous theoretical and poetic examples is the poem “Wartime” [战时 1962]. The poem is subtitled “1942, Luoyang” in reference to a city in mainland China which is also mentioned in another of Ya Xian’s well-known war poems, “The Buckwheat Field” [荞麦田 1957]. Rather than being an account of a battle or even of a soldier, it focuses on the death of the speaker’s mother, one among many unavoidable deaths brought on by war. As Riep describes, Ya Xian’s war poetry frequently “eschews the image of the courageous soldier in favor of the suffering civilian” (51). The first three stanzas emphasize the intensity of the experience of being surrounded by war, in lines such as “incendiary bombs lifted up the boulevard like a fan” [烧夷弹把大街举起犹如一把扇子] and “soldiers marched to the telephone poles under the windows and spread out their
notices” [一些兵士/走到窗下电杆]. Both syntactically and logically, the images function as independent units, but the connections between them need to be drawn by the reader. Although they come in succession and each provide a descriptive detail, most of these images are actually events or actions, making them more like a Western-style metaphor than a classical Chinese xing. As Sun describes, the shift from a classical Chinese “scene-feeling” dynamic to something resembling Western metaphor (a shift she identifies in certain classical Chinese poems) involves the dissociation of the vehicle from a particular physical context, “deliberately culled from various sources in myth and legends to be reprocessed, as it were, as expressions of that core of emotion that the speaker is obsessed with” (135). In a similar manner, the fragmented details in this poem unify around the general experience of war rather than a particular moment in space and time.

After the opening three stanzas, the poem moves into a commentary on this experience. Although there was an implied voice earlier in the poem, with a reference to “my mother,” here an explicit response to the destruction and suffering depicted in the first half of the poem emerges. We read:

而自始至终
他们的用意不外逼你选一条河
去勉强找个收场
或写长长的信给外县你瘦小的女人
或惊骇一田荞麦
From beginning to end
Their purpose was only to force you to choose a river
To work your way toward a conclusion
Or write long, long letters to your skinny woman in another county

40 All quotations come from 《瘂弦诗集》p.65-67. Translations are mine.
Or become panic-stricken in a field of buckwheat\textsuperscript{41}

The speaker laments the lack of agency available to the victims of war. The only available options lead to death or separation from one’s family, or something equally as unbearable. In the final stanza, the poem turns a little more towards the personal. It reads:

\begin{quote}
不过这些都已完成了
人民倦于守望。而无论早晚你必得参与
草之建设。在死的管管声中
甚至 --
已无需天使
\textbf{But these things are all finished now}
\textbf{The people are tired of keeping watch. And sooner or later you must participate in the}
\textbf{construction of grass. Amidst the buzzing of death}
\textbf{Even --}
\textbf{Angels are no longer required}
\end{quote}

The speaker indicates here that the anxiety-ridden false choices of the previous stanza are no longer relevant, but only because “sooner or later you must participate in the construction of grass.” The image of the grass growing around gravestones is used in other Ya Xian poems, so the suggestion is that even if death was the fate of so many during wartime, everyone dies eventually and even those left are tired, almost dead themselves. Yet despite the seemingly fatalistic conclusion, I detect a slight bubbling up of emotion in this final stanza. One signal of this is the punctuation: although both Yip’s and McLellan’s translations\textsuperscript{42} have punctuation throughout, there is none in the original until this final stanza.\textsuperscript{43} Not only does punctuation suddenly appear here, but it appears in

\textsuperscript{41} Riep writes that “In an interview with Ya […] he revealed that he chose buckwheat specifically because its flowers bloom white, the color of death in Chinese traditional color symbolism (Ya 2002). This suggests that the flowers symbolize death and the buckwheat fields become the site of death, representing battlefields or villages torn by war” (57). This image appears in at least four of Ya Xian’s poems, including “The Colonel,” discussed below.

\textsuperscript{42} Yip’s translation is found in \textit{Modern Chinese Poetry}, McLellan’s is found in \textit{An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Literature, Taiwan: 1949-1974}.

\textsuperscript{43} The presence of added punctuation reminds us of Yeh’s point that Yip’s translations in his discussions of Chinese poetics often replace actual words with colons and semi-colons, accentuating a sense of disjuncture beyond what is found in the original. His translation of this poem does not add punctuation to the middle
the form of two full stops in the middle of lines. Then we have a dash in the penultimate line which interrupts a phrase and ends the line. These interruptions give the reader the sense of a hesitation or an inability to find the right words to reach the conclusion of the poem. The repetition of the adverb 耳 (ěr) in the first, second and final lines of this stanza contributes to a sense of melancholy. This 耳 is not really needed in the translation; for instance, we could translate the first line literally as “but these are all already finished,” though “all done” or “all over with” would be fine as well. 耳 appears again in the line, “the people are (already) tired of keeping watch.” The present perfect tense gives a similar sense of temporality as 耳 in these instances, which is why it is not necessary to add “already” to the translation, but its presence in these two lines becomes important for the closing three lines, which read more literally as, “In the middle of the buzzing of death / even — already no need for angels.” If we wanted to keep the angels in their position as the last word of the poem, we could render this line without “already” as, “Amidst the buzzing of death / even — there is no longer need for angels.” The break, signaled by both the dash and the change in syntax after the dash, gives the impression of difficulty, as if this line, among all of the descriptions of hardship in this poem, is the one thing that manages to disrupt language itself. The presence of 耳 in this line, highlighted by its repetition earlier in the stanza, helps us understand why, because it gives us the sense that these changes are not firmly fixed in the past. They are recent developments: the events of the poem have only just finished, and the people grown weary of keeping

of lines, at least, as he does in the examples cited by Yeh, and as McLellan does on one occasion. Of course, the absence of punctuation is the standard in the classical Chinese tradition but not in the English one, so the absence of punctuation in translation gives off the impression of being more modern than it does in the original, so there are pros and cons to the decision to add it. But in this case, I think it takes away from the sudden appearance of punctuation in the final stanza.
watch (or “watching and waiting,” in McLellan’s translation). We might even translate this last line as “even — now angels are no longer needed.” If the poem strongly conveys the theme of the futility of war amidst all of the suffering it causes, this presence of disruptive emotion in the last stanza hangs in the air when the poem is finished, leaving the reader to account for its emergence. Perhaps the line about the tiredness of the people is papering over a hidden frustration or even anger, or the image about everyone participating in the “construction of grass” is misleading us into thinking that it does not really matter how the end comes if we all share the same fate. In this way, the poem opens up slightly to the reader, by showing a crack in its own veneer of representation, we might say.

“The Colonel” [上校 1960] is also about the impact of war, but here the focus is narrower, on one individual. The short poem is as follows:

那纯粹是另一种玫瑰
自火焰中诞生
在荞麦田里他们遇见最大的会战
而他的一条腿诀别于一九四三年

他会听到过历史和笑

什么是不朽呢
咳嗽药刮脸刀上月房租如此等等
而在妻的缝纫机的零星战斗下
他觉得唯一能俘虏他的
便是太阳
《瘖弦自选集 111-112》

That is purely another type of rose
Born from flame
In the buckwheat field they met their biggest battle
And one of his legs said farewell in 1943

He has heard history and laughter
What is eternal then?
Cough syrup, razor blades, last month’s rent, and so on
And under the scattered fire of his wife’s sewing machine
He feels that the only thing which can take him captive
Is the sun

Instead of a decorated, or even proud, veteran, we find in this colonel a man seemingly beaten down by war. As Riep states regarding the phrasing of the line about the loss of this man’s leg, “What would have been a moment of great trauma and pain is described in comic tones […] in which one of his legs literally ‘bids farewell’ or ‘parts’ from him. The reader is not only prevented from feeling sympathy for the victim and the physical and emotional suffering he experiences, she is also blocked from reading the scene as heroic” (57). This reading aligns with the overall distancing between the reader and the subject of the poem in the first stanza. The line, “In the buckwheat field they met their biggest battle,” tells of the whole group, in the sort of impersonal manner in which a person not accustomed to speaking for himself about such things might relate the story.45

The abstract image which opens the poem, about “another type of rose” born from fire, which we might interpret to refer to the leg lost in battle or to the Colonel himself, is juxtaposed with the description of the battle, with its specific year, creating disunity and distance in the opening lines. After a single line for the second stanza, the third stanza moves in the opposite direction, employing images of the everyday: the colonel’s cough syrup, razor blades and rent but also his wife’s sewing machine, a line which places him squarely in the domestic sphere. The mediating second stanza reads, “He has heard history and laughter.” In Chinese, the word guo (过) appears after the verb “to hear”

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44 Translation mine.
45 As we will see in Chapter 4, Jia Zhangke grapples with the problem of people (men in particular) who tend to speak about their own experiences in terms of the collective, which emphasizes shared values over individual emotions.
which specifies that this is a completed action. The question that opens the third stanza – “What is eternal then?” – is a direct reaction to this; if history and laughter are part of the past, what lingers on? The list of ordinary things which follows is of course part of the answer, but the line about the sewing machine is too. In the tapping of the sewing machine, the colonel hears not a metal needle but the sounds of battle, like a traumatic memory triggered by a sound resembling the event. So, to answer the question, while history might not be “undying” or “immortal” (as we might more literally translate “eternal” or *buxiu* [不朽]), memory is. At least, memory will linger on with the colonel until his own death. The opening and closing stanzas therefore contrast history and memory in terms of the difference between the significant and the ordinary, the impersonal and the personal. As Riep says, the intervening line, by putting history and laughter on equal footing, and pointing back to the ironic or even mocking reference to the leg bidding farewell, “desanctifies war and its history” (58).

But what of memory? The closing two lines suggest that now the colonel is only threatened by one thing: the sun. We could read this, as Riep does, as a way of showing that the colonel is now fighting his last battle against time, and that “Far from being an immortal hero, an individual whose significance rests in his ties to great historical events, the poetic subject is now most closely identified with the ephemeral, the transitory, and the conditional that comes from the quotidian” (58). I would go a step further, however, and note that while the colonel is clearly depicted in a diminished state, there is also something freeing about this closing. In the image about the sewing machine, the colonel is depicted as if he is under fire by memory, and yet memory cannot hold him captive, let alone the actual enemy which has long since dissipated. The sun, which is a symbol of
time, can also connote light and warmth, and the word *taiyang* [太阳] commonly refers to sunshine, not just the sun itself. So it is also possible to read this line more positively, as an indication that the colonel can now only be captivated by the sun, perhaps from a spot by a window in his room. This reading does not resurrect him from a position of relative fragility, nor does it resuscitate the image of history, but it does suggest the smallest sense of agency despite a recognition of one’s own impermanence and mortality. Even when facing history and laughter, neither of which are easy for the individual to control, it is still possible to avoid being held captive. Structurally, this is a poem organized around a juxtaposition which turns on the middle, single-line stanza. Rather than set a scene, it paints a portrait, but that portrait shifts from a distanced observation to a more intimate glimpse into the psychology of the subject on either side of the juxtaposition. Like “Wartime,” the closing lines here open up the poem to the reader, and require the reader to decide for herself how to interpret them and the poem as a whole. In both “Wartime” and “The Colonel,” the “feelings” associated with this scene-portrait do not appear until the end, and they help to break open the closed circuit of the poem’s meditation on futility. Unlike a classical poem, though, the feelings implied in “The Colonel” are not the poet’s (or the speaker’s). This poem uses the third-person pronoun “he” to refer to the colonel, and yet we have this insight into his perception and feelings in the third stanza, as if with the question, “What is eternal then?” we have just shifted into a poetic free and indirect discourse. Despite this partial insight, the use of the third person highlights the fact that we as readers do not have direct access to the thoughts of this subject, but are still observing him at a distance. In this way, the poem highlights its own status as representation, reminding us that we should not think that we can identify
with this subject (as we are encouraged to do with the typical first-person perspective in
lyric), even as we attempt to make sense of his experience.

Finally, we will look at “Ordinary Song” [一般之歌 1965], in which, even more
so than in “The Colonel,” memory lies just under the surface of everyday things. The
poem is as follows:

铁蒺藜那厢是国民小学，在远一些是锯木厂
隔壁是苏阿姨的园子；种着莴苣，玉米黍
三棵枫树左边还有一些别的
在下去是邮政局、网球场，而一直向西则是车站
至于云现在是飘在晒着的衣物之上
至于悲哀或正躲在靠近铁道的什么地方
总是这个样子的
五月已至
而安安静静接受这些不许吵闹

五时三科一列货车驶过
河在桥墩下打了个美丽的结又去远了
当草与草从此地出发去占领远处的那座坟场
死人们从不东张希望
而主要的是
那边露台上
一个男孩子在吃着桃子
五月已至
不管永恒在谁家樑上做巢
安安静静接受这些不许吵闹
《瘂弦诗集 219-220》

On that side of the caltrop\(^{46}\) is the national primary school, beyond that is the
saw mill
Next door is Auntie Su’s garden; growing lettuce, corn
To the left of three maples are a few other things
Down a bit is the post office, tennis court, then straight to the west is the bus station

\(^{46}\) The word here is 铁蒺藜. Although蒺藜 itself refers to a vine, the addition of “tie” [铁] or “iron” before
it would imply that we should translate it as caltrop, referring to the spiked metal that is thrown on the
ground to puncture tires in a military context. I chose the word “caltrop” here because it can refer to either
the weapon or the spiny plant, where reading it as a plant takes the addition of tie/iron as metaphorical. Yeh
renders it “star thistles” and Mair “caltrop patch,” but keeping the implication of the weapon in the line is
important, because opening the poem in this way signals that this seemingly pastoral scene is in fact part of
an ongoing state of war, with barriers to enforce the distinction between “this side” and “that side.”
As far as the clouds now floating over clothes drying in the sun
As far sorrow probably hiding just up against the railroad somewhere
  It’s always looked like this
  May has come already
Accept these things quietly, do not make a fuss

A 5:45 train speeds past
The river ties a beautiful knot beneath the bridge pilings then goes off again
When grasses set out to occupy the distant graveyard
  The dead never look about
And the most important thing is
  On that rooftop over there
  A boy is eating a peach
  May is already here
No matter whose rafters eternity nests on
Accept these things quietly, do not make a fuss

As the title suggests, this is a portrait of everyday life in a typical village. In fact, in line four we read, “To the left of three maples are a few other things,” implying that these things are so ordinary that we do not even need to specify what they are. This is a modern scene – with a lumberyard and a freight train passing through, we know that it is a working town – but images of nature intermingle with the description of the town.

Importantly, this is not an abstractly universal picture. We have some specific details, like the mention of Auntie Su’s garden. Auntie Su is referenced without introduction, as if we already know her, making the reader feel as if he or she is already part of this world.

Structurally, the entire poem lays out the relationship between the parts of this portrait. The first stanza details spatial relationships, such as where we find the primary school and the lumberyard, and then, in the second half, where we might also find the clouds and sorrow in this town. The second stanza introduces temporality, beginning with the specific reference to the 5:45 train. This leads to a familiar temporal image of a river.

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47 I follow both Yeh (from Anthology) and Mair (from Frontier Taiwan) in the phrasing of this key line. This is also the only place in my translation where punctuation is added that is not found in the original.
48 Translation mine
passing by and moving on, and then to a reference to death. The lines, “When grasses set out to occupy the distant graveyard / The dead never look about,” are also framed in terms of time, but the movement here is even slower. The predictability of these events – the regularly-scheduled freight train, the flowing of the river and the growing grass on the gravestones – allow them to play as much a role in setting the scene as the spatial descriptions in the previous stanza. Then we return to a pastoral image signaling warmth, youth and life: “And the most important thing is / On that rooftop over there / A boy is eating a peach.” Although the poem asserts that this is “the most important thing,” these lines cannot banish the quiet expressions of death and sadness from the previous lines. Indeed, the question of time re-emerges in the second to last line, “No matter whose rafters eternity nests on…” This line is inserted in between the two lines which are found in both stanzas, constituting the refrain of the poem: “May is already here / Accept these things quietly, do not make a fuss.” In the first stanza, when this refrain appears, it follows the line, “It’s always looked like this.” Despite the markers of modern life, we are told that this scene is stable, and that assertion is comforting, even though the lines are a response to the recognition of hidden sorrow. When the refrain returns at the end of the poem, the line about eternity interrupts it. The speaker instructs the reader, “No matter whose rafters eternity nests on, accept these things quietly.” We might interpret this to say that even if the timelessness of the scene is not so timeless for us, if eternity only nestles under someone else’s roof and not ours (though who can stake a claim to eternity at all?) we should carry on as if we did not already know this. The first line of the refrain, “May is already here,” suggests not just that winter has passed, but that May has come more quickly than expected, and we as readers are drawn into that sense of time by the
use of “already.” Then again, the fact that the line bears repeating, and that it needs to be interrupted by the insistence that “no matter” what, we should “accept these things quietly,” indicates that it is not really that easy to calm the disquiet that may linger under the surface, the awareness of the hidden sorrow and the dead in “that distant graveyard,” which is far, yes, but close enough that we almost feel that we can see it when the speaker says “that one” [那座].

In this poem, the images of this scene build up much like in a classical one, so that when the lines at the end of each stanza appear to suggest a response to the scene, we do not need much explanation in order to sense the complexity of emotion being conveyed. The difference between this structure and the classical use of imagery is that the poem is much more focalized through the perspective of an implied speaker addressing the reader directly, even though neither “I” nor “you” are used. Even though the opening lines introduce the scene in a seemingly dissociated manner, the fact that each feature is described in relation to some other feature (“on that side,” “next door,” “to the left,” etc.) gives the impression of a speaker giving directions or describing something to someone, rather than of an objective, distanced perspective. The scene is set forth much like the shots which might follow the establishing shot to open a film. Each line shows one or two aspects of the scene in close-up, except that there is no overarching perspective here comparable to an establishing shot. We have only specific spatial descriptions that give us the impression of being able to picture the entire scene, but it is more complex than that, as there turns out to be insufficient information to help us piece all of these different descriptions into one picture. We begin with “On that side of the caltrop is the national primary school,” which posits the reader and speaker on the near
side of the caltrop. The next line tells us that Auntie Su’s garden is “next door,” which we could assume means next to the primary school. But the next line reads, “to the left of three maples.” Where are these maples in relation to the school and the garden? In the next line, “Down a bit is the post office,” raises a similar question: down from what? We might say, therefore, that the poem sets a scene, but in such a way as to require some active imagination on the part of the reader in piecing it together. It is not a straightforward description, but a rough sketch or impression, which draws the reader in with its intimate tone. Then it asks the reader to contribute her own sense of what such a place would be like, before the voice enters with its commentary.

After looking at these three poems in detail, we can start to identify the contours of what we might call Ya Xian’s lyrical montage. The straightforward language and familiar imagery in these poems create a fluid reading experience, making one hesitant to use the word “juxtaposition” to describe the structure. There is no sense of “collision” between the lines here. At the same time, the logical and thematic connections between the lines remain loose. Yip’s montage comparison yields an ideal of a poem which “operates pictorially rather than semantically. The successive shots do not constitute a linear development (such as how this leads to that). Rather, the objects coexist as in a painting, and yet the mobile point of view has made it possible to temporalize the spatial units” (31). In Ya Xian’s poems above, there are some syntactical connections between the images, and unlike static objects in a painting, many of the images represent actions or movement, such as the passing train and drifting clouds in “Ordinary Song.” Yet this temporality is still not linear or progressive. Where these poems differ most from both Yip’s and Eisenstein’s perspectives is in the presence of the personal. The poetic voice is
more distinct than in Yip’s vision of objects speaking for themselves. More significantly, though, while the surface of the poems appear to convey a message to the reader, the underlying impression the reader is left with is less intellectual than emotional, and much more open-ended than the “dialectical unity” sought by Eisenstein through montage. The poems spark a non-development dynamism that extends outward to multiple possible ways of feeling. In “Ordinary Song,” while we have the refrain “accept these things quietly, do not make a fuss,” the poem can be read differently depending on what we might intuit to be the source of the not-quite-hidden sorrow underlying the scene.

Because of this, these poems display a greater sense of lyricism than “Fugue” or “Abyss” discussed earlier, in the sense that they invoke individual emotions and the affect of a scene or experience. The earlier poems were poetic or lyrical in the looser sense in which these words are often used, indicating that they use imagery to create new combinations of things and spark new insights into universal truths in doing so. But those insights relate to existential, psychological, philosophical or cultural crises, while these poems by Ya Xian draw on the experiential, the intimate and the individual.

All three of the poems we have just seen – “Wartime,” “The Colonel” and “Ordinary Song” – lead us to a conception of lyrical montage that is more Benjaminian than Eisensteinian. In bringing together images in such a way as to ensure that none is subordinate to the other, this method enables an active role for each side of the equivalence (which is not an equation). In The Arcades Project, Benjamin refers to this method as “montage,” for instance in the following fragment:

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them. (460)
In this passage Benjamin envisions objects coming into their own on their own, through use rather than a pre-conceived abstraction. Eisenstein’s notion of montage as dialectical recalls Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image, and like Benjamin’s image of a constellation, Eisenstein talks about a “third something” which is created out of two disparate units but which is not intrinsic to either of them (Film Sense 9).49 A key difference is that for Eisenstein, the perceived unity which the spectator applies to the elements being combined tracks closely to the experience of the creator of the images, whereas Benjamin’s dialectical image creates a more open-ended and unpredictable form of recognition. In the poems discussed here, there is no hierarchy between the concrete images and the abstract or symbolic signification that comes from juxtaposing them.50 The images speak to the experiences of ordinary life either in the present or the past, and resonate with the reader’s own knowledge and memories, but neither side of that dynamic is more specific or more conceptual than the other. Moreover, the most resonant parts of the poems come in the closing lines, leaving the echo of feelings that can be read back into the poem in various ways.

In order to maintain this open-endedness, the poems require some sense of disjuncture. Here we might make in interesting comparison with the poems of Du Fu [杜甫 712-770], one of the most revered poets in the classical tradition. Eva Shan Chou’s long discussion of juxtaposition in Du Fu’s poetry demonstrates that it is an important

49 The epigraph to Eisenstein’s essay “Word and Image” features the following sentence from John Livingston Lowes’ The Road to Xanadu: “Give Coleridge one vivid word from an old narrative; let him mix it with two in his thought; and then (translating terms of music into terms of words) ‘out of three sounds he [will] frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.’” (Film Sense 2).
50 This, too, is better modeled by the classical Chinese tradition, in which “the Chinese lyrical relationship between ‘feeling’ and ‘scene’ is typified not by the absolute rule of one over the other but by an equal give-and-take interplay between them” (Sun 198).
feature of his work but is by no means definitive. Part of Chou’s project is to separate out
Du Fu’s cultural legacy from his aesthetic achievements, and to account for the
biographical while distinguishing between it and the poetic conventions which also
influenced Du Fu’s aesthetic choices. She argues that juxtaposition appears in his poems
when

the typical Tu Fu themes are isolated both from the external reality that is the usual
poetic stimulus and from echoes of interconnections with the rest of the poem. Under
this double isolation, the themes, undiluted by either aesthetic or situational
considerations, provide a direct insight into the poet. Only in juxtaposition do themes
appear primarily as the content of the author’s thoughts rather than as motifs worked
into the poem’s fabric. In this environment, the themes are construable as personal
views, unmediated by the usual niceties of poetry, and the isolation – or juxtaposition
– becomes informative about Tu Fu’s frame of mind. (162)

As we know, poets in Du Fu’s time were operating with a different assumption about the
relationship between the poem and the poet, where there was not usually a distinction
between the poetic persona and the poet him or herself, which is not the case in modern
poetry like that of Ya Xian. However, Chou’s insight here is to show us that juxtaposition
can free the image from whatever assumptions might be placed on it by the conventions
of genre, or by restrictive notions of historical fidelity. In Ya Xian’s case, the refusal to
allow the images to fully coalesce, despite structural, logical and thematic continuities
that wax and wane throughout the poems, enables them to speak more directly to
personal experience, to avoid foreclosing on other possible meanings.

With this, we come full circle to recognize that while the word “juxtaposition”
may overemphasize the disjunctive nature of the structure of these poems, the initial
function of juxtaposition in montage, and in Yip’s ideal of image-oriented poetics, is to
jolt the reader or spectator out of her complacency, to compel her to actively participate
in the meaning-making process. In order to do this, the reader or spectator must become
aware of what the art work is asking of her, which means that the role of the creator is
never fully hidden. The images cannot be left to simply speak for themselves, nor can the
reader be assumed to intuitively recognize the same resonance between “scene” and
“feeling” that the poet had, as in the classical Chinese tradition. This is because to be
modern is to live with a sense of the split, or disjuncture, between subjects and objects,
between the poetic voice and the emotions and affects it attempts to convey to the reader.
The attempt to reconcile that split is what initiates the mediation which Osborne
describes using Benjamin’s model of translation, a mediation that is ongoing and partial,
yet productive. By joining in that ongoing process, we as readers recognize the
impossibility of ever fully accessing the object, just as we recognize that we can never
fully replicate a work’s effects in its original language when we translate it. Yet by being
aware of the process of mediation, of the way in which the poetic voice or the camera are
guiding our attempt to engage with a particular memory, or the way in which a translator
is using the tools of language to transform the work in a new idiom, we can more fully
appreciate the capacity for new understanding and awareness to emerge.

Part of the source of the dynamism which animates this mediation is the conflict
between the desire to represent something true about historical experience and the
awareness of the poem as a performance. The self-conscious presentation of the poetic
voice as a voice, speaking to an audience or reader, is shared by modern Western and
Chinese poetry, but less common in classical Chinese poetics.\footnote{Sun argues that even in instances where Western poets attempt to escape this performative aspect of poetics, such as the desire of the Romantics for the poet to merge with nature, they only end up re-asserting the split (189). I am less interested in policing the distinction between the two traditions here than in noting the prevalence in modernist poetics on both sides of the notion of the poem as performance. We will discuss this further in Chapter 3.} When attempting to use
the lyric form to represent something, to try to evoke emotions directly, instead of exploring the subconscious or the abstract ideals of a self-conscious subject, too much subjectivity can get in the way. This is the reason why Pound and other modernists both in China and the West sought to return to the classical form from Chinese poetics, but of course, you cannot entirely undo a sense of subjectivity once it is there. Nor do poets like Ya Xian entirely want to do this, since they are concerned with personal memories, not a more generalized representation of a universe in constant transformation, as we have seen. The appearance of techniques and concepts from traditional Chinese poetics is not the marker of a nostalgic classicism here, but rather evidence of these poets using all of the tools available to them to find the language that enables them to not only share memories with the reader, but to help the reader feel those memories along with the poetic speaker. In Chapter 2, we will see how filmmakers Hou Hsiao-hsien and Jia Zhangke respond when with the desire for lyrical presentation runs up against the reality of a more representational (indexical) medium. As I will argue in the following pages, what results from these seemingly contradictory impulses is not a tension at all, but rather a lyricism, the result of the balance which each of these artists manages to achieve on his own terms.
Reflecting at a Distance: the Personal Films of Cinematic “Poets” Jia Zhangke and Hou Hsiao-hsien

In the previous chapter, I touched on the major debate between nativism and modernism in the context of Taiwanese poetry in the 1960s and 1970s before exploring poems by Ya Xian which demonstrate the complexity underlying these contentious categories. In the film world, the birth of the Taiwan New Cinema coincided with the rise of nativism in literature, and among the most influential figures of this movement was director Hou Hsiao-hsien [Hou Xiaoxian 侯孝贤 b.1947]. Although he started out in the commercial film industry, and his first films as a director were a popular blend of romance, comedy, drama and musical numbers featuring major pop stars of the time, in 1983 Hou’s work took a new direction with the omnibus film The Sandwich Man. In a way, this film is emblematic of the co-presence of nativist and modernist tendencies in Hou’s work at this moment, as well as of the underlying complexity within what was supposedly the anti-modernist trend toward so-called “native soil literature.” The film comprised three parts, directed by Hou, Wan Jen [Wan Ren 萬仁 b.1950] and Tseng Chuang-hsiang [Zeng Zhuangxiang 曾壯祥 b.1947]. Hou’s segment was called “His Son’s Big Doll” [兒子的大玩偶], and is based on a short story with the same name. This title is the Chinese title of the entire film, while The Sandwich Man also refers to Hou’s segment, because it is the story of a young man who carries sandwich board advertisements dressed up like a rag doll in order to scrape up an income for his wife and small child. The story comes from author Huang Chunming [黃春明 b.1935], who has been “hailed as a Nativist cultural hero” but according to Yvonne Chang, in stories like this one, “modernist thematic conventions have apparently left explicit imprints” (loc.
The influence of the nativist debates on Hou’s films from the 1980s is very clear, especially in terms of how they reflect Taiwan’s unique (and complex) identity and culture. Hou’s approach in his films from *The Sandwich Man* onwards was developed in collaboration with the author Zhu Tianwen 朱天文 b. 1956 and Wu Nien-jen 吴念真 b. 1952 who was a major figure of the “native soil” movement in Taiwanese literature. As Leo Chanjen Chen writes,

Native Soil writing affected the sensibility of an entire generation, and in awakening among the Taiwanese a respect for their own culture, and disenchanting them with the KMT’s ideology of ‘returning to the mainland’, had a lasting political impact. The movement had its pitfalls—its subject matter and character choices eventually became limiting—but it played its part in the origins of democracy in Taiwan. Hou took its message with a pinch of salt…But his change of cultural direction in 1983 cannot be understood without it. (76)

The influence of Native Soil fiction led Hou to explore the particularities of Taiwanese life in light of Taiwan’s changing political climate and economic development, but none of these films ever seek to stand in for a more authentic Taiwanese experience. While the early films work hard to allow the nuances of a scene and its emotional echoes to come through to the viewer without interference from the director (i.e. too much editing or music), they are also clear sites of experimentation with form. This form, because of its debt to European art cinema techniques, has been termed modernist, and is part of what made the Taiwan New Cinema so influential, not just on Taiwanese cinema but internationally.

The early films of Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 b.1970, from mainland China, deal with a similar combination of impulses, even though he was working ten years later and in a vastly different cultural and political landscape. The debt Jia owes to Hou’s long-take style is often noted, but Hou’s influence on Jia extends beyond that. Like Hou, Jia puts
pressure on the formal constraints of the medium while attempting to convey a shared cultural experience in starkly personal terms. In this chapter, I will be focusing on the loose trilogy of films from each director which deals with a period of time that is important to the director’s own sense of memory and identity. There are actually two sets of three films of Hou’s which critics like to refer to as “trilogies”: his “coming-of-age trilogy” and his “Taiwan trilogy.” The latter group came a bit later in his career and deals with historical experiences before the director’s own time. It includes City of Sadness [悲情城市 1989], The Puppetmaster [戲夢人生 1993], and Good Men, Good Women [好男好女 1995]. I will focus on the “coming-of-age trilogy,” set in the 1950s through the late 1960s. Hou’s family moved from Guangdong province in mainland China to Taiwan in the late 1940s and these films deal with the period in which the director and his creative partners were growing up. These films include: Summer at Grandpa’s [冬冬的假期 1984], A Time to Live, A Time to Die [童年往事 1985] and Dust in the Wind [恋恋风尘 1986]. Jia Zhangke was growing up in the heady days of the 1980s in mainland China, where the possibilities brought about by the policy of “reform and opening up” [gaige kaifang 改革开放] seemed endless. He focuses on this period and its after-effects, especially the subsequent shift from political to economic reform in the 1990s, in his trilogy of films: Xiao Wu [小武 1997], Platform [站台 2000] and Unknown Pleasures [任逍遥 2002].

These two trilogies share certain obvious stylistic features, such as the presence of many long takes (shots with a long duration) and long shots (where the subject is framed far in the distance), the use of nonprofessional actors and location shooting. The films
also pay close attention to detail in the portrayal of the lives of their characters, giving the viewer the feeling that the images, while not documentations of the real, are fairly close approximations; they are nearly the “second-best access” to the event that Rey Chow considers documentaries to be (25). The difference is that since Hou’s films take place in villages located in the beautiful Taiwan countryside, while Jia’s films take place in larger county towns [县城] in the much more barren landscape of Shanxi Province in China, Hou’s long shots are much more aesthetically pleasing. In fact, they remind the viewer of paintings at times [see Appendix 2]. By contrast, given the fact that Jia’s hometown and thousands of others like it were being swept up by economic changes that were literally transforming the architectural and physical landscape, his shots are often filled with decaying remnants of socialist life or actual piles of rubble, along with people killing time as they look for a way to survive in the new socio-political climate. On the surface, Hou’s films look more like documentaries of rural Taiwanese life than poetic invocations of personal experience, while there would seem to be little that is poetic at all about the culturally and economically depressed world of Jia Zhangke’s early features. Although both are dealing (roughly) with the periods of their youth, they contain little of the sentimentalization of village life found in Hou’s earlier commercial films, focusing instead on social or familial tensions and limited economic opportunities for young people.

Jia’s films take Hou’s objective approach and enhance its documentary-like qualities. Though Hou was a definite influence on Jia, his work should also be understood in its own context, which in the early 1990s involved an emerging independent film scene (to which Jia was a latecomer) led by filmmakers such as Zhang Yuan [张元 b.1963] and
Wang Xiaoshuai [王小帅 b.1966], and the development of the New Documentary Film movement, led by Wu Wenguang [吴文光 b.1956] and others. The dominant aesthetic of both movements is that of *jishizhuyi* [纪实主义]. As Chris Berry explains,

“*Jishizhuyi*” might be translated more exactly as “record-ism” or “document-ism”. Another term associated with this mode is “xianchang” [现场] which literally means “on the spot”. It is the term that often appears in the corner of Chinese television screens to indicate a live broadcast. Now it refers to a whole aesthetic that goes with that […] it seems reasonable that the invention of a completely new term in the PRC around the end of the 1970s marks a need – albeit unspoken – to distinguish the on-the-spot realism of *jishizhuyi* from the more orchestrated socialist realism of *xianshizhuyi* while avoiding existing terms that were politically unacceptable. (119-120)

The emphasis on spontaneity in the conditions of shooting (or the appearance of it) results in the more extreme aspects of Jia’s documentary-like aesthetic, such as the shakiness of shots using hand-held cameras, the grating sounds of street noise that interfere at times with our ability to pay attention to what is going on in a particular scene (especially in *Xiao Wu*), the unsettling moments when passers-by on the street look directly into the camera, and so on. Although *jishizhuyi*, as Berry’s article details, has significations and functions far beyond Jia’s films, his style becomes closely associated with its methods, and as he becomes the most well-known of his generation of directors, especially abroad, he becomes a prime representative of *jishizhuyi* filmmaking.

Though both directors are therefore rightly recognized for their realistic portrayal of historically-specific and significant moments, these films are also, paradoxically, the works which established these directors’ reputations as international *auteurs*, and they

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52 Berry highlights the codependence of the terms *jishizhuyi* and *xianchang* in this passage, but it is important to note that in fact, *xianchang*, while it does mean “on the spot,” might be better translated as “on the scene,” to account for the fact that *chang* means “stage” or “scene” in the theater. This term highlights the performative element involved in presenting oneself as having arrived at the scene, which will become important to our understanding of Jia’s combination of documentary realism and performance in Chapter 4.
bear the distinct marks of each director’s style. It is this style which is often referred to by critics as “poetic” or “lyrical” – but what does that mean, exactly? These terms often appear in passing, so it is difficult to even guess at their implication, but one possible interpretation is that the films deal with stories of social and cultural transition – a messy thing – in aesthetically pleasing ways. For Jia in particular, we might compare this approach to the way that Roberto Rossellini turned images of bombed-out Berlin into a stunning film for Germany, Year Zero [Germania anno zero 1948]. On the other hand, we might also understand these films to be lyrical or poetic if we think of the lyrical as a mode of reading, which is the result, first and foremost, of their structure.

All of the films in these trilogies feature elliptical narration, characterized by the logical progression of certain aspects of the narrative followed by the sudden appearance of large gaps in the story, leaving key moments unseen or untold. In Jia’s films, even in Platform, which takes place over a decade, nothing much happens to or between the characters, even though time passes and the world changes around them. Hou’s A Time to Live is more episodic than the others, as most of the film contains short episodes from the life of the protagonist. The viewer deduces that certain of these episodes, such as playing marbles with friends in the street and being sought out by the grandmother, are habitual, even though we only see them once. Other episodes likely happened more than once, but the scene we see is a particularly memorable instance, such as when the protagonist sees his father cough up blood. The scenes are not meant to fit together into a timeline; rather, they accumulate, as a portrait of a life. In Chapter 1, we saw how Vincent Shih described the poetry of the Taiwan modernists as having an “elliptical structure,” which “force[s] upon the attention of the reader what the poet is trying to say and cannot say so
effectively in any other way” (63). Just like these poems, the trilogies of Hou and Jia embrace surprising juxtapositions or jumps in narration in order to create productive ambiguities and force the viewer to fill in the emotional gaps left open by the films. One consequence of this is that we are always aware of the mediating presence of the filmmaker, but that mediation is not the point. Like the poems from Chapter 1, these films do not call attention to themselves as such; the personal feelings of the director are secondary to the emotional resonances of the scene or situation, which the films attempt to connect to the viewer’s experience. Given this elliptical structure, we could define these films’ lyricism as a mode of reading. It requires the viewer to consider each image individually and in combination with the other images, just as one does with a poem. This is a form of the “unfolding” which we saw Yuri Tynyanov describe in the introduction as a shared structural feature of poetry and film. It is different from the typical way of reading a mainstream fictional narrative film, which involves tracing plot and character development and is more commonly associated with modernist films, such as the “new wave” cinemas, or even more broadly, with contemporary films that we lump together under the category of “art cinema.” But this elliptical structure alone does not account for what makes scholars like Dudley Andrew refer to Jia Zhangke as a “poet of cinema” (“Interpreting China’s Cinematic Poet”) or critics like Michael Phillips call Hou Hsiao-hsien a “true master of stealth and humane poetry” (“Hou Hsiao-Hsien Retrospective”). Such designations, as the word “stealth” implies, indicate the ability to draw the viewer out of the realm of the ordinary and expected and into something greater, something loftier and more consequential.
In the search for the bigger picture which links these detailed portraits to a shared sensibility we might call poetic, other critics have read the films of these two directors using approaches from traditional Chinese aesthetics. Examples of this include Corey Byrnes’s article about Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life* and landscape painting or Elliott Shie’s study of two of Hou Hsiao-hsien’s films and the traditional Chinese poetic form of the “static tragedy.” Because of the broader scope of this project, it is impossible to find a single aesthetic form to help us account for the lyrical effect in these six films. I combine different poetic concepts to create a new understanding of lyricism which is more than an aesthetic feature or a mode of reading. It is an integral part of how history and memory get transmitted to the viewer. As we began to see in Chapter 1, a key feature of this lyricism is the emphasis on the personal, though this does not mean that the individual experiences being explored are not relevant to the formation of collectively-shared memories. This sense of individuality plays out on multiple levels, including the detailed and historically-specific *mise-en-scène*, the framing of the shot combined with the liberal use of long takes, the performance of the actors, and the structuring of the narrative itself. In both of these trilogies, the characters strike the viewer as individuals first and social actors second. This is not, it must be stressed, due to a psychologized portrayal of the characters, about whom we actually learn relatively little over the course of the film. Rather, it is the result of the concreteness of our experience of them. We know them through the objects that surround them and through their body language. These objects and gestures, even though they may be representative of broader collective

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53 Nor should we attempt to do so. As James Udden aptly demonstrates in “Hou Hsiao-hsien and the Question of a Chinese Style,” there is no single “Chinese” aesthetic principle that can be used to account for Hou’s work in all of its cultural and aesthetic complexity.
experiences and attitudes, strike us as real in a way that the characters alone would not, precisely because they lack that openness to psychological identification which we usually use to orient ourselves in a fiction film.

To better understand how this lyricism works, we will look at all of these features in more detail, beginning with the narrative structure. As mentioned above, the elliptical structure of the narration in these films provides an analogous effect to the juxtaposition of imagery that we saw in the modern Taiwanese poems from Chapter 1, in that it challenges the viewer to draw connections between individuals, ideas and events by herself, and to read into the little details that might ordinarily be overlooked in favor of narrative elements. To a certain extent, Jia’s and Hou’s narrative technique in these films falls under what Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, borrowing from Johannes Fabian, call “historiology,” as opposed to a cinematic writing of history proper. According to Berry and Farquhar, the key features of “historiology” are: a concern with the “nameless ordinary people whose lives are not recorded in preserved documents”; the use of “tropes such as memory to emphasize the multiplicity of individual experiences and resist the complete fusing of individuals into the collective body of the nation-state”; and lastly, a tendency to use rhetoric that “may promote empathy and reflection on the part of the spectator more than wholesale identification with the protagonist as embodiment of the nation-state” (32). Berry and Farquhar use Hou’s City of Sadness, the first of his “Taiwan trilogy,” as their prime example of the historiological mode. This term is appropriate to describe the way these films envision the function of the stories they tell in relation to the overall project of developing collective memory. However, the distinct difference between the two groups of films under discussion here and Hou’s “Taiwan trilogy” or
Jia’s later films is the connection to personal experience. Berry and Farquhar write that if we want to examine alternatives to the model of cinema as a form of “historiography that supports nation-states,” we must look at fiction films because the stories of the “ordinary people” are not in history books (or historical films). The trilogies in question are all fictional, but they are also based on the directors’ own memories of actual people, meaning that the characters involved are not imagined representatives of the unaccounted for and nameless common folk; rather, they are carrying particular memories that are more meaningful in their own right than they are as challenges to the national historiography.⁵⁴

This personal connection to the memories being represented creates the particular affective power of these trilogies. By overemphasizing their participation in the historiographical mode, or focusing too heavily on their narrative strategies in general, we lose sight of what creates that affective power and the feeling of the lyrical. Attempting to acknowledge this affective power, Lily Wong proposes the term “affective historiology” as a way to describe Hou’s methodology in *Dust in the Wind*. Apart from the fact that *Dust in the Wind*, as part of the personal “coming-of-age” trilogy and not the nationally-focused “Taiwan trilogy,” is less concerned with the “multiplicity of individual experiences” which is essential to Berry and Farquhar’s historiology, I would also stress that adding the word “affective” onto the term “historiological” perpetuates the notion that the affective or the lyrical are stylistic or secondary features, layers which can be added to or subtracted from the main narrative mode according to the demands of the

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⁵⁴ This is particularly obvious when comparing Hou’s “coming-of-age” trilogy to the Taiwan trilogy, because the former focuses on ordinary instances in the lives of characters, whereas the latter has a broader scope and deals with events of collective (whether familial or national) rather than personal significance.
film or the director. I argue here that “lyricism” is the term best suited to explaining how these film engage with memories of the past because it is a mode of engagement, not a genre, style or structure. Through this lyrical mode, the films draw the viewer into a better understanding of the past without claiming to be realistically documenting it. It is a combination of representation and self-conscious presentation that is achieved by capturing the affects of the spaces, objects and landscapes of a particular historical moment while also engaging in a self-conscious presentation of the personal voice, which complicates any attempt to generalize or abstract away from these experiences.

It is important to clarify that this lyricism changes the function of realism in these documentary-like memory films, rather than existing in tension with or as an accessory to it. Realism is the dominant mode of critical analyses of Jia’s and Hou’s films, as part of the emphasis on their social, cultural and national implications. In their chapter on “Realist Modes” Berry and Farquhar argue that realism is the “aesthetic counterpart of the quest to make China a modern nation-state” and that as a result, realism in Chinese cinema has become a “mixed mode” which “incorporates romanticism and melodrama in a variety of forms and under various labels” (77, 79). They particularly emphasize the connections between various forms of realism – whether social, critical or revolutionary realism in mainland China or healthy realism in Taiwan – and melodrama. Though melodrama is often assumed to be the opposite of realism, they write that it operates under a “mixed allegorical mode” that uses contemporary or recent society in order to deal with human emotions and connect the viewer to an imagined life, in a manner not that different from how realist films were imagining a new world into being. They argue

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55 We can recall from the Introduction how Pauline Yu describes the Western notion of the image as an accessory.
that although late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century Chinese films reject the “codes of literal melodrama,” they were still operate within the basic framework of “melodramatic realism,” which uses conflicts and resolutions within the family in order to dramatize issues on a national scale. Since the urgency of nation-building has diminished, they suggest that “realism has become disengaged from its nation-building purposes to become a mode of address on contemporary issues that nevertheless still deal with the national,” a dynamic which is at work in mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong (107). The films under discussion here can be – and have been – interpreted according to their implications for key questions of national identity that were circulating at the time, but as I will demonstrate below, those interpretations rely on social and political analyses that exceed the film texts and in fact divert attention from what is going on stylistically within the films themselves.

An alternative form of realism we might consider in lieu of the more nationally-allegorical version is what Berry and Farquhar call “poetic realism.” They suggest that in many films, most famously *Spring in a Small Town* [小城之春 1948], this poetic realism is the result of a nostalgia for the past which was not an acceptable feature of critical realist or socialist realist cinema and therefore had to be suppressed, popping up indirectly instead. They describe such films as “politically nonaligned, stylized, and imbued with poetic symbolism, fatalism, and a sense of degeneration or death” (78). In their reading of *Spring in a Small Town*, Berry and Farquhar argue that even though the film focuses on the dynamics between four main characters in a gentry household, the world of wartime China “outside the frame” of both the walled-in house and the film itself is invoked by the arrival of a doctor and friend into the household unit. Therefore
the walls of the house and the town, which are literally ruined, become figurative “ghost walls” that “are symbols of old China’s past isolation and glory and present decay” (89). *Yellow Earth* [黄土地 1984], which was an inspirational film for Jia, is similarly described as possessing “the mournful mood of French poetic realism – political ambivalence, personal disappointment, melodious sadness, and a sense of degeneration and death” (103). In *Yellow Earth*, the national symbolism of the narrative is highlighted by the title itself and by the Yellow River which features prominently as the source of both life and death for the characters. For each film in the personal trilogies under discussion here, though, it is much more difficult to link either the narrative itself or the aesthetic devices to a broader national allegory, whether directly or indirectly. The trajectory of the narratives, elliptical as they are, is neither the positive one of conflict and resolution, division and reunion, that Berry and Farquhar identify in the earlier forms of Chinese melodramatic realism, nor the more negative one of “early optimism, later-pessimism” as in French poetic realism and films like *Yellow Earth*.56

In other words, not only do these films demonstrate political ambivalence, but they also feature an ambivalence of narrative and mood. For example, Jia’s films *Xiao Wu* (inspired by Bresson’s 1959 film *Pickpocket*) and *Unknown Pleasures* both end with the arrests of their protagonists, but there is nothing sentimental or sad about the ending. The arrests seem as pointless as the petty nuisances in which the protagonists were previously engaging; they are neither a resolution nor a symbol of decline. In part due to the elliptical narration, it becomes difficult to identify a singular trajectory or thematic thread through the stories of the characters themselves, let alone draw fleshed-out

56 Berry and Farquhar borrow this phrase from Susan Hayward in *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies*. 
analogies between those stories and the world “outside the frame.” With the frequent use of long shots or other types of framing which make it difficult to see the actors through an entire scene, the films resist our desire to fully apprehend the space and time they represent. None of this is to say that the films have no links to the broader socio-political context in which they were made, of course. As we will see below, there are many ways in which they may resonate with the experience of their times, but those resonances are always partial and incomplete, never coalescing into allegory. As a whole, the narrative structure and aesthetic presentation of the films mirrors their larger focus on the impossibility of either fully capturing or fully shedding the most affecting memories of one’s past. The lyricism of the films is therefore neither an aesthetic coating pasted on to a realist narrative and \textit{mise-en-scène}, nor a way of expressing collective concerns indirectly through the personal (as in Berry and Farquhar’s “poetic realism” above). It stems from their distinctly non-melodramatic, distanced perspective that still avoids situating the individual within a broader collective framework.

This is where attention to the details of the \textit{mise-en-scène} becomes important, because these details help us understand individual experiences without recourse to psychological portrayals or abstract symbolism. Whether visual or auditory, the presence of historically and geographically accurate objects, accents, clothing, architecture, music, and visual media all work together to provide an impression of fidelity to the particular place and time in which these narratives are set. In a typical realist narrative, whether filmic or literary, plot and characterization dominate the attention of the reader or viewer and details primarily support the narrative’s claim to realism (as in Roland Barthes’s
“reality effect”). In these films, by contrast, because of the ambiguous approach to narrative and characterization, small details become more important to the viewer in the attempt to discern where and when a certain scene is taking place and what it means for the situation and trajectory of the characters. For example, in the first film of the trilogy, Xiao Wu, posters and loudspeakers advertising commercial goods for sale make clear the major cultural shift which economic reforms have sparked in this small town. Rather than represent these changes directly, the film looks at them through the perspective of one left behind, the eponymous hero, who seems completely ambivalent to them. As the film goes on, we begin to understand that the eponymous hero’s social isolation is due in large part to his failure to keep up with, or even see the value in, market reforms that cause the entire town to hail the success of his old friend and former partner in petty crime, Xiaoyong, when his business dealings are only slightly more legitimate than Xiao Wu’s. Other details help us to understand certain aspects of his psychological life that the film as a whole does not privilege us with access to. For example, Xiao Wu buys a pager so that the karaoke hostess he is interested in (but tries not to show his interest in) can contact him, and it is through his attention to this object that we know how much he truly wants her to reach out to him. Instead, she runs off with a well-to-do client and the pager’s unexpected ring ends up causing his arrest.

The film Platform requires even more careful attention to detail in order to trace the social and cultural shifts being represented, because it follows a performance troupe over a period of roughly ten years, starting in 1979. The film focuses on four young friends within this troupe as they, and it, adjust to the shift from a planned to a market

57 See Chapter 3 for a fuller discussion of Barthes and the “reality effect”
economy. The film provides few direct indications of how quickly or slowly time is passing, instead relying on markers such as changes in the troupe’s performance repertoire. Originally a state-owned group performing Maoist plays, they experiment with foreign performance traditions (Zhong Ping, one the girls, is seen practicing flamenco). After they privatize, they begin to perform for commercial outlets and eventually take on rock music, which was a major force on the cultural scene at the time. In smaller details, too, we can see the ways in which the reform and opening up policies start to influence the lives of these young people living far away from the cities. When one of the characters, Zhang Jun, leaves town for Guangzhou, he comes back with a tape player that gets everyone’s attention, but the bell bottom jeans he is wearing, which go unremarked by his friends, also convey his sense of himself as being fashionable now and connected to the outside world of consumer tastes. In another scene, Zhong Ping, the more daring of the two female protagonists, helps her friend Ruijuan apply mascara, which signals the growing sense of individuality and sexual freedom of the times. Later in a subtle but key moment noted by more than one critic, when they visit the fourth friend Minliang’s cousin Sanming in a village near the small town where they live, Sanming gives Zhong Ping some water to wash her hands. Zhong Ping says, “Thank you” [xiè xiè 谢谢] in clear and strong Mandarin, to which he does not respond. Traditionally, “xiè xiè” is rarely used in such situations in Chinese, but her use of it, especially in such strong Mandarin, indicates her growing sense of distinction from rural peasants. She thinks of herself now as more cultured and refined, even though she is also from a provincial area and has no

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58 This is the same Sanming whom we will see much more of in later films, and who is the focus of the discussion in Chapter 4.
idea yet of how she will escape the confines of her hometown. Right after this encounter, she is seen yelling at the open landscape. This sort of behavior, the assertion of a free spirit and the separation of classes, signals a distinct cultural shift from the pre-reform days when everyone was ostensibly equal because everyone was a worker, part of a collective whole. But these small moments are only glimpses into Zhong Ping’s inner life; beyond them we do not really know her. Later on, likely as a result of an unwanted pregnancy and abortion, she disappears completely, and neither we nor her friends ever find out where she went or what happened to her.

On a broader scale, the architectural environment also gives us a lot of information about the experience of living in these historical moments. The fact that Jia had a difficult time recreating the physical setting for these films is itself emblematic of the pace of change which is a primary concern of these films. For instance, Jia decided to make *Xiao Wu* after returning home from his studies in Beijing, because he was shocked by how much of his hometown of Fengyang had changed due to new development. When making his second feature *Platform* only a few years later, he had to go to the nearby town of Pingyao, which still had its old city wall and many of the old houses intact.\(^59\) Ongoing construction and its attendant rubble become a recurring feature of Jia Zhangke’s films long after the “hometown trilogy,” symbolized by the omnipresent character *chai* [拆], meaning “take down,” which is painted on buildings slated for demolition. In this way, the films remind us that while they are attempting to re-capture the experience of a very particular moment in time, even the physical space in which

\(^{59}\) Pingyao is now a major tourist destination in Shanxi province because it is one of the few towns to maintain the traditional architecture, but it is notable that as recently as the early 1990s, many towns in the province would have had similar features.
those memories were housed is already under threat or gone completely, so a full accounting of the past is always impossible.

In a similar manner, Hou’s films leave the viewer to intuit the dynamics of the characters’ relationships from small details and encounters that can eventually be pieced together. An early scene in Hou’s film *Dust in the Wind* features the protagonist’s grandfather trying to get his younger brother to eat his dinner. The grandfather tries cajoling him, dressing up the bowl of rice and whatnot. The focus on the grandfather sets up our understanding of the important role he plays in this family, especially in the life of the protagonist, A-yuan. Even though the film does not show the two together very much, a conversation between them about properly raising the crops on the family’s small plot of land closes the film and provides a sense of closure for Ah-yuan. What is less obvious at first is that this relationship is a stand-in for the absent one between Ah-yuan and his parents, and that the grandfather’s active role in things like dinnertime and tending the crops signals the inactive role of Ah-yuan’s father. Both his mother and father are distant, and from the beginning we see only a conversation between Ah-yuan and his obviously-injured and out-of-work father in which his father encourages him to study hard. Later on a brief snippet of conversation clues us in to the fact that his father, already injured in a mining accident, is finding it hard to make a consistent income, a problem shared by other miners in the town. We can intuit that the financial strain on the family, which is a motivating factor in Ah-yuan’s decision to quit school and go to work in the city, is also behind the lack of closeness between Ah-yuan and his parents, but one needs to watch almost the entire film in order to put together this backstory.
Of particular interest in Hou’s “coming-of-age” trilogy is the way in which the films signal the complexity of Taiwanese identity in this period by looking at differences in class, family background and language, without ever signaling any broader commentary on the political implications of these differences. The three films in this trilogy all feature young people as they mature and begin to consider their lives and identities apart from those of their families, and each is based on a true childhood experience. *Summer at Grandpa’s* is based on the memories of Hou’s close collaborator and screenwriter, the author Zhu Tianwen. It depicts a young boy and girl who are sent from Taipei to spend the summer at their grandparents’ house in the countryside while their mother undergoes medical treatment. The film was shot in Zhu’s grandfather’s home. The second film, *A Time to Live, a Time to Die*, is about Hou’s childhood, particularly the deaths of his father and mother, and was shot in his childhood home. *Dust in the Wind* is based on the story of another screenwriter and co-collaborator of Hou, Wu Nianzhen. In the film, a young couple migrate from the village to the city to find work, and it was shot in the same village where Wu grew up. By making sure to set these films in the actual locations where these events took place, Hou signals the importance of landscape and architecture to the communication of the experience of that time. These three locations also help to differentiate between the experiences of different ethnic and social groups within Taiwan’s complex cultural landscape. Zhu Tianwen was part of a literary family, born in Taiwan to a Hakka (客家) Taiwanese mother and a mainlander father who was a celebrated military writer. She was thus part of a privileged family with connections to the ruling KMT government. This privilege is evident in the relative advantages of the children in this film (the boy has a remote control toy car) and in the
old, beautiful home in which the grandfather lives. By comparison, Hou’s family home is more modest, but still sufficiently comfortable, as his father was also a Hakka mainlander who was a bureaucrat and educator in Taiwan. Yet the furniture in the house in A Time to Live is all made of bamboo, which we discover later in the film is the result of the father’s sense that he would eventually return home to the mainland and therefore need not invest too much money in a new life in Taiwan. As I-Fen Wu points out, this key detail is indicative of the overall distinction between Hou, who barely remembered mainland China and follows the culture and language of his peers in Taiwan, and his family, who maintains their distinct sense of identity even when it is clear that they will never be going home.  

Finally, in Dust in the Wind, where the families are all fully Taiwanese and therefore not connected to the ruling mainlanders, it is clear from the homes in which the residents of this poor mining village live and from the young protagonists’ constant calculation of how much they earn in the city, how much they have sent home (or not) and how much things cost, that they are all struggling to support themselves. In all three of these films, the details of the mise-en-scène convey key information about the historical moment and cultural subgroup which they represent, but more interestingly, they combine to create a complex picture of the heterogeneous identities that comprise contemporary Taiwanese society and the various forms of memory which support those identities.

These are only a few examples, but already we can see that in both trilogies, the images portraying the details of everyday life serve not only a structural function, helping the viewer track the plot, but also assist in filling out the viewer’s sense of the experience

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of that historical time and place. Unlike the “reality effect” of a typical realist narrative, these details are not ancillary to the narrative, merely supporting its claim to realism, because the narrative itself is not sufficiently comprehensible to sustain the structure of the film as a whole. The aim of these films is primarily to convey the affective contours of these memories, not a coherent story about the past, so the details likewise function as signals of various sensory and emotional experiences from the past. The details, while useful in making sense of the films, do not allow us to reconstruct a clear development of character, as there are always motivations and reactions left unexplained. We are also not able to fill in the gaps of plot fully, even as we can use the details to get a better sense of how large or small those gaps may be.

While the details are not mere markers of reality, therefore, we should also not treat them as symbolic, as clues to the “true” meaning behind the images. They remain details, specific to the particular moment, one of many other ways in which the specificity of that experience might have been conveyed. This is an important distinction because of the insistence of all of these filmmakers that their trilogies are personal documents. Neither Platform nor A Time to Live, both of which take place over a number of years, ever look beyond the immediate world of their characters to portray the larger social and economic milestones that were motivating these changes. Rather, change trickles into their world and the causes of that change must be already understood by the viewer in order to understand the bigger picture at work. For instance, in A Time to Live, the radio carries an announcement of a firefight over the Taiwan Strait, but instead of discussing the ongoing military conflicts that defined this period in Taiwan, the family is instead reflecting on those whom they left behind on the mainland. Similarly, in Jia’s
Unknown Pleasures, the announcement of Beijing’s successful bid for the 2008 Olympics is viewed on television, along with the news about China’s entry into the WTO, but these events seem meaningless to the protagonists, who are engaging in a bar fight. In all of these films, the particularities of the moment and are the focus, not their significance for a broader social or political context.

Jia Zhangke has been particularly outspoken in his defense of his early films as personal, rather than symbols of a collective experience. In an essay titled, “I do not poeticize my experience” [我不诗化自己的经历] he specifically argues against the interpretation of his films as poetic, but his qualm is mainly with those who take his stories as symbols of a Chinese national story. Throughout his many interviews, especially those related to the trilogy, he insists upon the individual [个人/个体] specificity of his characters and their stories. From his perspective, the problem with poeticizing [诗化] his stories is that it forsakes what makes those stories specific in favor of what makes them collectively symbolic. Of course, after decades of socialist realism, it is understandable that Chinese artists in the 1980s and 1990s wanted to avoid collectivist representations, but Jia is also setting himself and his generation of filmmakers against the work of directors like Zhang Yimou [张艺谋 b.1951] and Chen Kaige [陈凯歌 b.1952], who were the first generation of art filmmakers to emerge on the scene after the Cultural Revolution. While Jia speaks of having been inspired by Chen’s film Yellow Earth, many of his generation lamented the previous generation’s shift from creating realistic portraits of life in China’s less populated regions to making films rife with symbols of an essential, ahistorical Chinese identity, such as Zhang’s Raise the Red
Although critics and even Jia himself use categorical labels to refer to Jia’s characters, such as “marginal” [边缘] or “lower-class” [底层], what the essay resists is the grafting of one particular marginalized youth’s story onto all of China, despite the fact that, as Jia says, the life of those in China’s small towns is the experience of the majority of Chinese people.62

The question is, can he have it both ways? Can Jia claim that he is telling the story of the majority of Chinese while also arguing against turning his characters into symbols? This claim only makes sense if we start to think about the lyricism in these films as something other than metaphorical. The poetic is not always that which is set apart from the world it represents, existing on some higher plane of aestheticism or abstraction. To call these films poetic, in that sense, is precisely to dissociate them from the important specificities of experience that they seek to capture and present to the viewer. Yet those specificities do not make these films documentaries or even typical realist narrative films. The problem is not with the label of the poetic or the lyrical, but with the way we define it. Instead of thinking about the poetic as inherently mimetic, as a means of abstracting us away from the world, we need to think of it as the result of careful observation of and sensitivity to the transformations at work in the world. This understanding comes from the Chinese poetic tradition, which is described by Stephen Owen as being much more concerned with a gap in time and memory than with the gap between representation and

61 Though as Jason McGrath points out, there were also examples at that time of Fifth Generation directors forging new avenues in realist filmmaking, such as Zhang’s The Story of Qiu Ju [秋菊打官司 1992].
62 See “Interview with Jia Zhangke: Where is the trouble with Chinese film?” [贾樟柯访谈：中国电影毛病在哪?]
truth, as in the Western tradition. According to Owen, if the metaphor is the “master figure” for the mode of knowing in the Western tradition, then the corresponding figure for the Chinese tradition is the “synecdoche,” the “part that leads to the whole, some enduring fragment from which we try to reconstruct the lost totality” (2). The “attention to meaning or truth” in the Western tradition calls attention to the gap between a representation and what is being represented in such a way as to create “two distinct levels of truth,” that of the artwork and that of the empirical world. By contrast, the Chinese focus on the gap between remembering and what is being remembered directs attention to “a lost fullness on the same level” (2). Using this model, we can see why reading the details of a character or a setting as poetic in a Western sense would, in Jia’s explicit critique, threaten to displace the focus from the truth value of the particular to the truth value of the artistic, leaving the individual behind. Notably, this displacement is only created by the viewer or critic of these films. There is little in the films themselves to suggest that the details and stories must be read as symbolic of some collective experience – as I have already begun to describe, the absence of a national backdrop against which these stories are told, combined with the difficulty of pinning down a singular and unambiguous sequence of events, means that the connection to a potential collective significance for the experiences on view must be made by the viewer, using his or her outside knowledge of the context.

63 As James Liu points out, the early twentieth-century poet and scholar Wen Yiduo has argued that the foundational statement about poetry in China (discussed in Chapter 1), 诗言志, should not be understood as meaning “poetry is where the heart/mind goes”, but rather, because 志 can mean “to remember,” it should be interpreted as “what stops or stays in the heart or mind” (Liu 68). This would suggest that poetry is less about manifesting the world through the intent of heart/mind but rather about what stays in the mind from experience.
If we read the films as poetic due to the gap of memory which Owen describes as being predominant in the Chinese tradition, we would still maintain the attention to the particularity of experience that all of these directors stress. This does not mean that we ignore whatever background information we know about the context of the artwork. As anyone who has studied classical Chinese poetry knows, in order to truly understand a poem the way it was intended to be understood, one must know a great deal about the historical context, the cultural and social traditions of that time, when in the life of the author the poem arrives, the many allusions it makes to previous works, the various possible meanings of the (linguistic) characters which appear in the poem and each character’s usage at the time, and more. This is the polar opposite of New Critical close reading which ignores all such information in favor of the tensions within the text itself: there are correct and incorrect ways to read a Chinese poem, depending on how one applies the various information above. To see how this works in practice, Owen discusses a poem by the great Chinese poet Du Fu, “one of the most famous in the Chinese language…about remembering in which the silences of memory return to haunt the present and color the way it is known…a poem by which its author is remembered, by which we in the present have a partial clue to the fullness of ‘who he was’” (3). Owen explains that while the Western tradition is certainly also concerned with the promise of immortality provided by creating a work of art, the Chinese tradition, over time, “increasingly stressed a grand and quixotic qualification of that promise: it would transmit not simply the name but the very ‘content’ of the self, so that the later-born might truly know the person by reading the work” (1). While being “fraught with anxieties,” this “promise” is part of the reason why Owen claims that Chinese poetry is
inherently non-fictional. In the poem by Du Fu, called “Meeting Li Kuei-nien in the Southland” and written in 770, Owen notes that the particular words and images of the poem themselves reveal “nothing remarkable…no new and rare way of making unfamiliar the all too familiar world,” but because the poem itself is about “encounter and remembrance of a time long past” which is only referenced briefly, the conditions of appreciating the poetry of the lines include developing an understanding of the historical and political context in which the poem was written (3). That context includes the knowledge that this poem was one of the last the great poet wrote and that it was written after the An Lu-shan rebellion, a period of disorder from 755-763 which ended the reign of the emperor Xuanzong and weakened the Tang dynasty. The rebellion destroyed the sense of security and cultural flourishing cultivated by the Tang. Owen notes that Li Kuei-nien, of the poem’s title, was “the most famous singer in the capital” and ended up wandering the Southland knowing, like Du Fu, that he would never return to his home there. Meeting this figure, Du Fu writes:

In the lodges of the Prince of Ch’i
   I saw you commonly
And heard you so many times
   in front of Ts’ui Ti’s halls.
Right now, in the finest scenery
   of all the Southland,
And in the season of falling flowers,
   I meet you once again. (Trans. Owen 3)

For Owen, the poetry in these lines “is not in the scenes remembered or in the fact that they are remembered or even in the contrast between then and now. The poetry lies in the way in which the words guide the motions of memory and at the same time in the way the words hang back from the completion of those motions. These particular words give their own shape to the pain of loss, yet they pretend to cover it over” (5, second emphasis
mine). The films in question also insist on giving their “own shape” to the memories and sense of loss which they explore, while pretending to remain distant and objective (through their documentary-like aesthetics). They resist the full expression of the sentiments they wish to convey, just as Du Fu only gestures to the range of emotions which the meeting with this old friend from the capital has incited in him. From this lengthy explanation of Owen’s interpretation of Chinese poetics in relation to memory, we can see that contextual information is essential, but instead of using the particularities of the film to support a socio-political understanding of the historical moment, we can instead use the contextual information to better understand the particular memories being explored and their emotional resonances for the present. More than that, the contextual information we bring to the film, like the background knowledge essential to appreciating Du Fu’s poem, helps us understand just how much of that emotional resonance is being held back from the reader or viewer.

In order to explore how this approach to poetry can be applied to the films in more depth, we can look in detail at Hou Hsiao-hsien’s trilogy, beginning with A Time to Live. This film is distinguished from all the other films being discussed here in that it opens and closes with a voiceover by the director, who tells the audience that this is the story of his childhood, “mainly the memories of my father.” The voiceover also provides a history of how the family ended up in Taiwan. In between these opening and closing sequences, however, there is no voiceover. The protagonist, A-hao (Hou’s nickname and the Hakka pronunciation of Ah-xiao) never expresses his feelings or ideas one way or the other about what happens to him. A-hao drifts further away from his parents and siblings as he gets older, and there are small clues in the film that his generation feels
disconnected from the goals of their parents. They identify more as Taiwanese than Chinese. As the voiceover promises, though, the film focuses mainly on the family story: first the loss of his father, then his mother, and at the end, his beloved grandmother. It is also about a lost opportunity to be the kind of son his parents expected him to be, as most of the scenes with young and adolescent A-hao show him being a naughty troublemaker: stealing wires from electrical poles to sell for pocket money, allowing his friends to copy his exams for money, getting into fights at pool halls and forming a small gang of friends who end up in a violent encounter with another gang on the day his mother passes away. A-hao never expresses a sense of remorse for his actions. At the end of the film, the voiceover tells us about how his grandmother had been dead in the house for days before the now-orphaned children realized it, and when the coroner came he gave them a judgmental look. This moment is narrated in an honest, though tender, tone, but it provides little insight into how it may or may not have affected the young man. In general, we can say that the film is about the loss of a family life, but it stops short of fully expressing that sense of loss.

Hou was experimenting at this time with a more distanced and objective style, which becomes even more distinct in his next film, *Dust in the Wind*. The most difficult moments for these characters are often shot in medium or long shots, not in close-up. When combined with long takes and the male protagonists’ resistance to showing emotion, this results in a subdued and anti-dramatic experience for the viewer. In Owen’s words, the poetry is not in the scenes themselves but in the way they “hang back” from

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64 For example, in one scene a classmate of A-hao’s enters their classroom and announces that the Taiwanese are retaking the mainland. The rest of the class laughs and treats it like a joke, even though to their parents, and especially to A-hao’s grandmother who often tries to walk back home to mainland China, the enduring but increasingly hopeless political goal is no laughing matter.
completing the motions of memory. This sense of distance is so strong in *Dust in the Wind* that it disappointed Wu Nianzhen when viewing the final cut. According to Yeh and Davis, Wu “wanted to represent his circumstances from the inside, as it were, including all the emotional turmoil and struggles of responsibility that suffering always brings” but “Hou mostly suppresses these privations and emotional discharges because he regarded them as contrived expressions, as excess, not in accordance with the natural path of life, seeing the past as memory-sediments, as flashbacks from a distance” (163). The trilogy looks at the experience of growing up from the vantage point of three different socio-economic backgrounds, but each film is about a distinct set of issues and experiences, and none of them can be easily grafted on to a progressive narrative of individual or national development. Borrowing from Owen again, they only “haunt the present and color the way it is known.”

Of course, it isn’t only in Chinese poetry that the past haunts the present, and poetry does not monopolize the experience of haunting either. In reading these films alongside Owen’s notion of the poetics of memory, we need to also consider the important difference in the medium of expression. Indeed, part of the difficulty in understanding how the poetic and the realistic work together in these films is due to the presumed indexicality of the film image, which strikes the viewer as much more of a direct form of reference than the poetic image does. The use of the long take, nonprofessional actors, location shooting and other techniques familiar from documentary filmmaking would appear to enhance the sense that the film is conveying something close to reality, but as Jason McGrath argues, many contemporary art films “become so exclusively reliant on the long take, so concerned with showing in detail the
real-time intervals between narrative actions, that Bazinian long-take realism is pushed
nearly to, and sometimes past, the point that is becomes its ostensible opposite: an
intriguing kind of formalism” (156). In a similar vein, James Tweedie writes that the
Taiwanese “new wave” directors engaged in a “revival of the long shot/long take
aesthetic and a cinema organized around intricate mise-en-scene, a strategy that led some
critics to dub these Taiwanese filmmakers the ‘master shot’ school” (145). There are two
ironies here: first, as techniques meant to break through the artifice of classical narrative
 cinema become widespread or are pushed to the extreme, they become a new aesthetic
“school” of their own.65 Second, even in spite of this reification of the supposedly off-
the-cuff style, the long-take approach still possesses a mnemonic function. In Jia’s trilogy
in particular, since we know that the physical structure of his hometown and many others
like it was changing literally under their feet as they filmed, the jishizhuyi style becomes
the last best chance for recording something approximating the lifestyle that used to exist
there. Especially in Platform, the strong desire to remember is juxtaposed with the
knowledge that the only real truth that the images capture is the truth of how those times
and places are remembered by Jia and those with whom he collaborates. As Tweedie
writes, “Location shooting and the long take—the strategies that have become art
 cinema’s most enduring qualities and clichés—are also mechanisms for recording a way
of life threatened by the peculiar conception of modernity that ascends to a position of
global dominance over the period [from the 1960s to the 1990s]” (29).

In other words, we need to simultaneously take into account the directors’
insistence on historical accuracy (and therefore avoid reading the films as purely textual)

65 Roman Jakobson makes a much similar point in his essay “On Realism in Art.” See Chapter 4 for further
discussion of this essay, and my thanks to Jason McGrath for suggesting it to me.
while also acknowledging, as they do, that the act of remembering is an act of mediation.

Indeed, even André Bazin, who is often understood as the primary theorist of filmic realism, never described the realistic function of film as a direct representation of the world as it is. Dudley Andrew argues convincingly for a more complex view of Bazin’s work in his recent book *What Cinema Is!* (a play on Bazin’s famous title, *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* or *What is Cinema*?). Andrew cites Bazin’s quote from the essay “Ontology of the Photographic Image” in which he writes:

> The debate between realism in art proceeds under a misunderstanding, under a confusion between aesthetics and psychology, between true realism, the need to give significant expression to the world both concretely and its essence, and the pseudorealism of a deception aimed at fooling the eye (or for that matter the mind); a pseudorealism content in other words with illusory appearances. (qtd. in Andrew 7)

Andrew argues that for Bazin, the reality sought by realism was not about the image itself but “what precisely is not visible in its images” (7). This is what he calls the “shadowy Bazin” for whom “the screen is the photographic negative of reality, something essential but preliminary to the reality sought by the director” (8). Using Bazin and other theorists of cinema such as the critics writing for the film journal *Cahiers du cinéma*, Andrew rejects the belief that film, especially in the digital era, is essentially about special effects or about convincing people to think or act in a particular way. Against this notion of film’s mission as “lying or agitating” Andrew argues that “the films some of us care most about – and consider central to the enterprise of cinema in toto …aim to discover, to encounter, to confront and to reveal” (9). There is an inherent friction here between the desire to discover and reveal and Bazin’s idea that what is essential in a film is that which is not immediately visible in the images. Even so, this two-pronged notion of the source of the art of cinema is not all that far from Owen’s idea of the source of the poetic in Chinese poetry. While Owen talks about the past haunting the present without being fully
present in the poem itself, Andrew writes, “Cinema confronts us with something resistant, to be sure, but not necessarily with the solid body of the world. Through cinema, the world ‘appears’; that is, it takes on the qualities and status of an ‘apparition’” (9).

The exemplars of poetic cinema in the early twentieth century, such as the films of the Surrealists, serve as a marked contrast to this idea, given that they put formal relations over relations to the world. Andrew writes, “Necessarily bound up with the world due to its technology, cinema atrophies when it turns in on itself as a mode of poetry. Form should be born in tension with recalcitrant subjects – the situations it strives to make appear. That was the sense of things at the height of neorealism” (104).

In contrast to Andrew’s assumption here that poetry “atrophyes” cinema, we have seen that Owen’s conception of poetry, and the conception we find in the Chinese tradition more broadly, is in tension with the world, and with subjects which it wishes to make known to the reader (without directly representing them). It is this notion of poetry, of its source and its effects, which most appropriately accounts for the lyricism of Hou’s and Jia’s films.

One of the reasons I use the term “lyricism” as opposed to the more general “poetic” is because of the personal nature of these works, which is also captured in Owen’s emphasis on poetry as both a means of remembering and of being remembered.

In addition to their elliptical narration and focus on everyday details, these films have an

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66 Specifically in reference to Bazin and the common interpretation of his work, Andrew writes, “For years it has been said that Bazin’s naïve realism took the visible to be the real, the epiphanic image reached after solving or dissolving the maze of narrative; whereas it was ever the soul of the mummy that he sought through what appears on the screen” (9) and later, “So let us not ever be fooled by Bazin’s supposed epiphanic ontology, just as he says we mustn’t be fooled by appearances. What is on screen is not reality but its precipitate, its tracing, its remains which, like the mummy, may allow us to conjure the presence of something fuller, the phantom of that paradoxically more solid reality that hovers spectrally around, behind, or before the screen” (41).

67 The films of French poetic realism would be an interesting “in-between” instance here, though Andrew doesn’t seem to have that in mind.
intimate sensibility, using images to signal a lost material and emotional space while acknowledging the impossibility of recovering it. To a large extent, that sense of intimacy is achieved through the presence of an implied lyrical voice, even though not all of these films are presented from an explicitly first-person point of view. As I have already mentioned, A Time to Live does open and close with a voiceover spoken by Hou himself, but the film could exist without it. The voiceover primarily provides information about events which occurred before and after the time of the film. All three films do, on the other hand, revolve primarily around the story and perspective of one protagonist.68 Yeh and Davis read Hou’s films of this period as an amalgamation of the biographical and the autobiographical, emphasizing the Taiwan New Cinema’s use of the literary world’s nativist tradition in order to break away from the “spatial and cultural dislocation” characteristic of the art films of the previous generation in the 1960s (153). “The New Cinema,” they write, “is more interested in private selfhood and in its articulation entwined within the social and cultural history of postwar Taiwan. This self-articulation is also a break; it comes at the expense of maintaining ancestral links with the Chinese film tradition established in Shanghai and Hong Kong” (153). While the emphasis on “private selfhood” is essential, the problem with reading these films as autobiographical is that it goes against the narrative structure of the films. “Autobiography” refers to narratives of individual development and relies on an understanding of history as progressive and linear. In Hou’s films, the characters do not develop in any clear way. The young boy and his sister who are the protagonists of A Summer at Grandpa’s are too young to have “grown up” in one summer. While their eyes are opened by various

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68 Again, this is a key distinction from the multiplicity of perspectives in the films of the “Taiwan trilogy,” which enables Berry and Farquhar’s “historiological” mode.
aspects of the adult world, such as the out-of-wedlock pregnancy of their cousin and the mistreatment of a mentally disabled woman in the village, there is no visible evidence of a change in their attitude or behavior resulting from their experience in that particular summer. A-hao in A Time to Live does grow up physically, as the film is roughly split between his life just before entering middle school (he would be around 9 or 10 years old) and his time as an older adolescent about to take the university entrance exams. But he appears just as carefree and just as much of a troublemaker in the second section, despite the gap in years. Even after the death of his mother and grandmother, there is no noticeable change in his view of the world. The voiceover which closes the film gives us a hint of remorse for the way that he and his siblings neglected his grandmother right after her death, but that is the voice of an older man looking back on those events. In Dust in the Wind, Ah-yuan moves to the city with Ah-yun, his close friend/girlfriend, and is later drafted into the army, but these major life changes do not alter his rather reserved and subdued demeanor. In fact, it is difficult to register psychological development in any of these protagonists precisely because we are left so distant from them, and rarely gain glimpses into their thoughts.

The various forces which prevent the expected flourishing of these adolescents into adults are multiple and merely implied. In A Time to Live, they might include insufficient parental and communal support, but then again, A-hao’s older brother and sister take on responsibility for their families, get jobs and start an adult life. His sister laments her inability to go to Taipei to study due to the need for her to work and support the family, but this is not A-hao’s problem; he takes and fails the university entrance exams. In Dust in the Wind, the limitations on Ah-yuan are both familial and economic:
he views his only options as going into the mines like his father or becoming a migrant worker in the city. He chooses not to continue his studies, even though his father encourages him to do so, but we get the sense that this is partially due to lack of interest and partially due to the economic pressure on him to help support his family. For both films, neither the narrative of individual development against the demands of the family nor that of stunted development due to impersonal forces quite fits the actual trajectory of the protagonists.

An alternative autobiographical approach is taken by Corrado Neri, who interprets *A Time to Live* within the Chinese tradition of *zizhuan* (自传), a form of autobiography. Unlike the Western autobiographical tradition characterized by psychology and romanticism, the *zizhuan* is “more a matter of finding a place in society (and nature) that can provide a sense of harmony in existence. It is also a way to pay respect to the memory of parents and family, which is, together with society, the greater context of human existence” (161). This supports his reading of *A Time to Live* as “consistent with the Chinese tradition of placing the personal story within the greater context of history” and Hou’s broader style as “consistent with the Confucian vision of a committed artist” (160). As we have seen, however, the social context of these films is always in the distant background; it must be read into the film by the viewer. Other critics, such as Nick Browne, go even further and read Hou’s frequent use of landscape shots as evidence of a placement of these personal stories within a broader context of the unchanging natural world, which barely registers such seemingly important ups and downs. This may apply to the films of the Taiwan trilogy (Browne writes about *The Puppetmaster*) but the only film in the “coming-of-age” trilogy to use these landscape shots is *Dust in the Wind*, and
in that case, these shots more often contain signs of the human influence on those landscapes. More persuasive is Lupke’s reading of the distanced narration in Summer at Grandpa’s as part of a conscious refusal to participate in the moralistic language of mainstream cinema at that time. Although the two young children in that film seem unable to process the full impact of the things they witness, he writes that,

The effect on the reader/audience, by contrast, is one of bewilderment over the fact that what is considered quite extraordinary is represented to us as part of the “dispassionate” flow of life, the natural order where things happen without the assignment of moral value. In Hou’s film, this was clearly a break from the postwar past of melodramatic morality plays known as “healthy realism” that made up much of the fare in postwar-Taiwan cinema. (loc. 927)

This reading does not help us account for the approach to personal narratives in Hou’s other films, however, especially Dust in the Wind, where, as we will discuss in a moment, a key scene intrudes on the distanced observation with a depiction of the traumatic recurrence of Ah-yuan’s memories. His grandfather attributes the family’s troubles to the father’s behavior, suggesting a disruption of the natural order of things which stimulates the narrative. In the end, neither the Western autobiographical narrative of personal development nor models which de-emphasize the individual in favor of larger social or natural phenomena can help us to account for the role of the personal in these films.69

Instead of reading these films within the genre category of (auto)biography, which works in some ways but not others, and which thinks less in terms of formal representational strategies and more in terms of the narrative, reading the personal voice

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69 Even so, Yeh and Davis’s observation that the autobiographical and biographical are inseparable in these films is worth keeping in mind, because only one film – A Time to Live – is truly autobiographical. The others are semi-autobiographical, in the sense that one of the screenwriters provided their own stories for the script. From the perspective of the director, who takes his own liberties with their stories (especially Wu’s), the films are not full autobiographies.
as one of the core features of their broader lyricism allows us to see how they can speak to individual experiences while remaining generally at an impersonal distance, which in turn allows them to be historically specific while resonating with other voices. As Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins write in their introduction to *The Lyric Theory Reader*, the idea of the lyric as utterly personal developed in the nineteenth century from John Stuart Mill’s claim that “eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*,” an idea which becomes dominant in twentieth-century literary criticism (3). Mill also famously wrote that “Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude,” but Jackson and Prins point out that in the very essay which makes these claims, Mill “failed to find any poet who could be called truly lyric” because “the solitude of the lyric poet is a solitude we witness, a solitude exhibited in public” (3,4). This same tension exists in Hou’s “coming-of-age” trilogy, between the sense that these very personal stories are being told for the benefit of the individual who lived them, in order to better understand the past, and the sense that the viewer’s role as witness to these stories is essential to their function.

This tension begins to become visible in *A Time to Live*, when Hou appears to become conscious of the role of the viewer as witness. Witnessing, of course, is not mere passive listening (or viewing) but an active form of recognition of the story being told, a way for the teller to understand his or her experience but also an opportunity for the witness to incorporate this information into his or her own understanding of history. In *A Time to Live*, it is notable that all of the scenes which invoke the history of the family are shot in the same way. The stories of the family’s past are told while the members sit in the common rooms of their Japanese-style house on the tatami mats that cover the floors.
The camera is positioned at the same level as the sitting family members, remaining still within each shot. When cuts are used, they do not follow the standard “shot-reverse shot” structure, which depicts a conversation between two characters. Instead, the cuts break the 180-degree rule of editing, because the intention is to frame the speaker, not to maintain a coherent sense of space [see Appendix 1]. This structure is remarkably similar to what are referred to as the “tatami shots” in Japanese director Ozu Yasujirō’s films, though Hou claims to have only watched his first Ozu film after completing A Time to Live.70 Regardless, the effect is similar Ozu in that the viewer is given the sense of sitting on the same level as the characters, of being in the space with them, while at the same time, the shifting perspective disallows a stable sense of one’s own position within the space. Our role as witness to each individual’s words is primary. We are not part of the family; they are talking to each other, not to us, but the film is conscious of the exhibition of these personal narratives to an audience.

Unlike in a film like Ozu’s Tokyo Story [東京物語 Tōkyō Monogatari 1953], where the characters have ordinary conversations, in A Time to Live, these scenes are where we learn the background stories of the family. The first long scene takes place early in the film, and in it we discover that the family has lost contact with an adopted son whom they left on the mainland. This conversation takes place against the background of the radio news report (mentioned earlier) which announces a skirmish between Communist and Nationalist planes over the Taiwan Strait. No one discusses this event; the focus is on their own struggles and sacrifices as a result of the Civil War and its aftermath. The second scene takes place between the mother and her only daughter as

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70 See “Cinema, Dream Existence: The Films of HHH” p.102, n.22.
the daughter gets ready to be married. The mother tells her about a child, a girl, whom she had to deny breast milk during wartime in favor of the son they had adopted. Soon the baby girl became ill and the mother wasn’t able to get her treated in time, so she died. The viewer then understands why the mother was particularly distressed about the lack of news from her adopted son, because he was the child for whom she had already sacrificed her first born. The third such scene takes place after the death of the father, and the children sit around a box of his personal effects which they have found. In the box they find a handwritten set of pages on which the father has recorded his life story. This autobiography of the father provides us with some insight into the father’s way of thinking, such as the explanation for the bamboo furniture in the house. Notably, we find out more about the father’s psychology in this narrative than we ever learn about A-hao, the protagonist of the film. Yet even this autobiography is not read aloud word for word; instead, we only hear the daughter’s paraphrase of the key information after she begins to scan it. She tells the others that their father had tuberculosis, which explains the blood we saw him cough up earlier in the film. She tells them that this is the reason why he kept his distance from his family, in order to avoid infecting them. We, the viewers, are not the intended audience of this personal narrative of the father, and the manner of its presentation reminds us that what matters is not the content itself but how the narrative is absorbed and understood by those who receive it. We may want to know what else is contained on those pages, given the mysterious silence of the father when he was alive earlier in the film, but this information is denied us. We only see how the daughter receives and re-tells this information to her siblings.
What is even more remarkable about these scenes is the lack of typical turn-taking in these conversations. In the first scene, the mother, father and grandmother all speak while the children remain silent. After each adult speaks, a silence follows, and when the next person speaks, it is as if he or she is speaking to him or herself, though the topic is still related. In the second two scenes, the mother and the daughter are the only ones who speak. The silence of the listeners, particularly the silence of A-hao, who is present in all scenes but never speaks (and whose reaction to this information is not shown) creates the lyrical effect, because we as the audience understand that the most powerful aspect of these conversations is what is not being expressed, what is being held back by the listeners. In relation to Shakespeare’s sonnets, Helen Vendler writes that despite the allure of sociopsychological interpretations, the lyric voice is solitary, not social: “Contemporary emphasis on the participation of literature in a social matrix balks at acknowledging how lyric, though it may refer to the social, remains the genre that directs its mimesis toward the performance of the mind in solitary speech” (129, emphasis in original). The literary interest in the sonnets, Vendler goes on to argue, stems from how Shakespeare interrogates and ironizes the many social discourses he borrows from, not from how he participates in them. In A Time to Live as well, I would argue, our focus should be less on the information regarding the family’s history which these scenes provide and more on the way in which they perform the act of witnessing another person’s history for the viewer. These are not dramatic sequences. They begin to develop particular storylines or psychological motivations for characters, but these threads are not picked up elsewhere in the film. The scenes are interesting primarily because of the combination of staging, framing, and editing with the personally-significant but historically-resonant stories being told, which creates a unique aesthetic structure. This is what Vendler would call the drama “proper” to lyric:
The true ‘actors’ in lyric are words, not ‘dramatic persons’; and the drama of any lyric is constituted by the successive entrances of new sets of words, or new stylistic arrangements (grammatic, syntactical, phonetic) which are visibly in conflict with previous arrangements used with reference to the ‘same’ situation….Thus, the introduction of a new linguistic strategy is, in a sonnet, as interruptive and interesting as the entrance of a new character in a play. (130)

These three key scenes in *A Time to Live* are examples of how Hou’s personal trilogy replaces historical narration or psychological development (as in a *bildungsroman*) with the development of a personal voice that remains independent of both.

In *Dust in the Wind*, this scene of witnessing reappears in a key moment, at the traumatic core of the film. The protagonist, the teenage Ah-yuan, has gone to the seaside at a moment of frustration, gets soaking wet in the rain and misses the last train back. Staying the night at the police station, he is eating and watching a television program about mining disaster recovery when he becomes mesmerized by a shot tracking the cart carrying people down into the mine. The television shot is replaced by his own memories of his father being carried out of the mine after his accident. He then passes out. He appears to have developed a fever and we see a shaman performing a ritual, shot from the perspective of one in the bed being tended to. When we next see Ah-yuan lying in a bunk bed in the station, there is no shaman. The shaman is likely a memory. This entire sequence is accompanied by a long scene in which Ah-yuan’s grandfather sits on a stool talking to his father, who is sitting against a wall further in the background. Both are in a long, narrow and dark space in the house. As with the previous “tatami shots” in *A Time to Live*, the camera is situated at the same level as the seated men. The grandfather speaks the entire time, and the scene is filmed in one long take. The grandfather reminds the father that when he came into the family, his wife’s family, he did not take on the family name as promised, which angered the ancestors. Then he begins talking about Ah-yuan’s
health problems and suggests that they are the result of the mistreatment of the ancestors. Finally he proposes a way to appease the ancestors and help the boy. As viewers, this entire sequence is confusing because it only becomes clear at the end that the shot of the shaman, and perhaps the conversation between the grandfather and father as well, were flashbacks to the past. The long take of the conversation between grandfather and father is similar to those we saw in *A Time to Live*, but now it is part of a bigger sequence that fuses past and present, traumatic flashback and images from a contemporary newscast. It stands out stylistically from the rest of the film, just as the “tatami shots” in *A Time* stood out stylistically from the rest of that film. But also like *A Time*, this sequence in *Dust in the Wind* is not a mere formal experiment; it gives the viewers their only peak into Ah-yuan’s past and the family’s history. Moreover, it confirms the importance in this village lifestyle of associational over chronological logic, and spiritual versus rational explanations. As Vendler describes of lyric, this stylistic interruption creates the drama of the film. While Andrew sees a loss of vitality in the formalist poetic cinema of the Surrealists, these stylistic irruptions add to the emotional appeal of the films, supporting our understanding of a dynamic social world without directly representing that world.

In both films, the personal voice of the characters within these scenes of witnessing is not the voice of the protagonist, but rather the voices of those who transmit memories of his past and his history to him. Memory is received indirectly, and the same is true for the audience. Just as in *A Time to Live*, where the viewer was not permitted to feel comfortably part of the scene even as the shots were interpolating her into it, in *Dust in the Wind*, the long monologue of the grandfather is shot in such shadow that we cannot quite see what the father is doing. Combined with the initial confusion about the context
in which this scene takes place (Is it happening after Ah-yuan faints? Is it a flashback?),
this sequence similarly invites the viewer in as a listener without directly addressing her.
This is a marked contrast to Hou’s later film The Puppetmaster, a biographical film about
the life story of Li Tianlu [李天禄 1910-1998], who plays the grandfather in Dust in the
Wind. About a third of the way through the film, the real life person of Li Tianlu
suddenly appears, narrating his story directly to the viewer, and for the rest of the film,
the dramatized sequences representing his life are punctuated by this documentary-style
interview with the man himself. This is a form of direct address to the audience, a
dramatic twist to the film which calls attention to the film as yet another performance,
like the various sorts of puppet shows Li puts on.71 By the Taiwan trilogy, which includes
The Puppetmaster, Hou had clearly developed (some would say perfected) his “master
shot” style. But these films also shift the focus to events that took place before the
lifetimes of Hou or his collaborators. Without this personal connection, the films take on
a broader social focus, becoming more allegorical and drifting further from the memory-
driven lyricism in the “coming-of-age” trilogy. The voice of these films is no longer
personal, and although the plot is still elliptical, its relationship to the broader historical
context is more directly invoked, just as the audience is more directly addressed.

By not directly addressing the viewer or the broader historical context, the
“coming-of-age” trilogy asks the viewer to re-live these personal memories in a manner
closer to the way they are remembered than to the way we would logically retell them.
This requires its own sort of realism, or else the experience of the film would not be
successful in transmitting that experience to the viewer. Vendler, as we recall from the

71 For a detailed discussion of these moments, see Browne.
Introduction, ultimately argues that the lyric voice is not “overheard” but is rather a role which the reader takes on in the act of reading, as the reader becomes an “utterer.” She writes that, “It is indispensable, then, if we are to be made to want to enter the lyric script, that the voice offered for our use be ‘believable’ to us, resembling a ‘real voice’ coming from a ‘real mind’ like our own” (133). Vendler goes on to note that Shakespeare was particularly adept at creating this “realness,” this believability of the lyrical voice, even though the space of the sonnet is limited and the absence of an interlocutor leaves the voice appearing to the reader out of nowhere. Of course, the film viewer is not given words to recite, though he or she is given a particular perspective on the world being portrayed which can be either adopted or rejected, based on how believable it seems. But the desire to draw the viewer in with the believability of the film’s perspective is always tempered by the resistance to the idea that film can provide a mere window onto the past.

In other words, although the films emphasize everyday details and personal histories, they resist the straightforward use of personal voice, whether that of a speaker or a secondary utterer. Jonathan Culler goes a step further than Vendler in his recent *Theory of the Lyric* by arguing that the concept of voice in lyric is at best insufficient for accounting for the range of forms of lyric articulation. He writes that,

Rather than imagine that lyrics embody voices, we do better to say that they create effects of voicing, of aurality. Certainly a theory of the lyric must consider whether effects of voicing rather than voice – as in the echoing of rhyme, assonance, or alliteration, and rhythmic patterning – are not the more fundamental dimension of the lyric, on which the impression of the distinctive voice of a speaker is sometimes imposed. (loc. 821).

Like Vendler, this model understands lyric to be a performance of particular discourses more than a direct borrowing of or participation in them, but Culler’s emphasis on the effects of speech rather than the particular voice of a distinct speaker can be likened to a
filmic emphasis on the effects of looking over the particular point of view of an individual. Even though point of view shots are relatively rare in film, many films which are told from the perspective of a particular character organize each scene around what the character does and experiences, even though they are in the “third person,” in the sense that they view the character from the outside rather than representing his or her actual field of vision. In A Time to Live, despite the voiceover and the fact that A-hao is present in all of the scenes in which the family members retell their memories, the scenes de-emphasize his experience of those conversations and instead ask us to become aware of looking (and listening) as roles, which are not only played by A-hao but also by ourselves. This position is more impersonal, in the sense that it can be adopted by anyone, and as such is more distanced than if we were psychologically identifying with A-hao and his presence in the room. But it is also personal, in the sense that it interpolates our own subjectivities into the position of witnesses to the scene.

Another feature of Culler’s analysis which is relevant here is his explanation of the connection between the performative capacity of lyric and its primary use of the present tense. Noting that the present tense is by far the most common tense in English-language lyric (and in fact a defining feature of it), Culler discusses various critical attempts to account for the common use of the simple present in lyric, which is uncommon in ordinary speech. The simple present allows the lyric present a dual function: it describes something true about the world (“I drink coffee”) while also implying that this act occurs regularly (“I drink coffee every morning”). This is distinct in English from the more common use of the present continuous, which indicates a more specific moment in time (“I am drinking coffee”). The simple present provides a sense of
lyric time in which the activity being described “happens now, in time, but in an iterable now of lyric enunciation, rather than in a now of linear time” (loc 5830). Interestingly, the Chinese language can achieve the same duality, but with even more effectiveness. A sentence like “我喝咖啡” does not need to specify tense, and seems much less unusual than “I drink coffee” feels to the English-language reader, though it similarly implies either a habitual or ongoing action or a general statement. (In Chinese, too, there is a means of expressing the continuous nature of the event, like “我喝着咖啡”). Returning to Culler, he writes that the more ambiguous nature of the present tense as found in lyric poetry is part of the lyric’s “attempt to be itself an event rather than the representation of an event” which results in lyrics which are “constructed for reperformance, with an iterable now: not timeless but a moment of time that is repeated every time the poem is read” (loc. 5940). This idea of the lyric present as “iterable” highlights a split between the act of voicing and the multiple (and potentially infinite) instances of readers re-creating that act. It recalls the way in which psychoanalytic film theory uses the linguistic insight regarding the split between the grammatical subject of a statement (the subject of the énoncé) and the subject who produces the statement (the subject of the énonciation) to highlight the importance of the subjectivity behind the act of communication. For psychoanalysis, the split enables a consideration of the force of the unconscious. As Flitterman-Lewis, Stam and Burgoyne write, “The speaking self is an illusory (and elusive) unity that enables communication to take place, but beneath every speaking subject is the contradictory force of the unconscious articulating its own logic, its own language of desire” (136). This means that the act of speaking (in filmic or other language) is always an act of “deception...which appears as truth” (136). At the same
time, the subject of the énonciation is, through this deception of the listener, actually being true to his/her desire.

Rather than focus our attention inward, to the way in which the filmic enunciation exploits the split between the enunciating subject and its understanding of itself, a subjective split, Hou’s films look outward, to the split between the subject and its understanding of the past. Unlike a fictional narrative, in which events are generally told using the past tense, a film is shot in present time and re-experienced as present time in each instance of viewing. The experience of the past as constantly repeatable in the present, in a time of the lyric now that is set apart from chronological, historical time, is common to both film and poetry. In film, too, as Hou’s “tatami shots” in particular make clear, the voicing of memory is constantly open to repetition, but the kind of repetition that makes one feel as if one is both present for the original event and yet slightly disconnected from it. In this sense, the viewer’s experience of the moment is the experience of remembering it, rather than the experience of being there for the first time.72 A similar split animates the act of translation, where the translated text is both a repetition and a renewal of the original. Naomi Sakai’s work on translation makes clear that the site of such an enunciative split can be understood as the site of a possibility. Just as filmic enunciation, in psychoanalytic theory, is an act of deception, translation is often linked to treason, given the etymological link between the two words. The voice of the translator is never self-present in uttering “I,” and is always uttering the “I” of another, though that other cannot be seen in the translation. For Sakai, it is through this act of

72 Chris Berry, in his examination of some of the experiences of temporality brought on by Chinese postsocialism, describes Jia’s films as “neither in-the-now loss of history nor modern linear progress, but instead an uneasy in-the-now (and then) that invokes history and questions the present” (113).
translation that we recognize “the temporality of ‘I speak,’ which necessarily introduces
an irreparable distance between the speaking I and the I that is signified, between the
subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciated” (13). This creates a
“heterolingual address,” which can open up an awareness of the complexity of the
relationship between the speaker, the mode of address and the listener (despite its
apparent seamlessness). For Sakai, by representing translation as only the transfer of a
message from one pre-constituted, homogenous group to another, we lose the
heterogeneous potential introduced by translation. We also lose the potential to constitute
new forms of community that might have been noticed were it not for the presupposition
of the homolingual address: “Translation is an instance of continuity in discontinuity and
a poietic social practice that institutes a relation at the site of incommensurability. This is
why the aspect of discontinuity inherent in translation would be completely repressed if
we were to determine translation to be a form of communication” (13). Although Sakai
does not discuss cinematic representation explicitly, his model works well for
understanding the importance of the temporal progression in cinematic representation. In
cinema, we recognize the inherent disjuncture between the creation and presentation of
the image, where the film text becomes itself a form of translation, an interpreter carrying
the experience to the spectator. The “voice” (or perspective) in Hou’s films, especially
their combination of a voiceover narrated in the past tense with these scenes of
witnessing that engage the viewer in the iterable now of the lyric present, is similarly
heterolinguai, but the result is to convince us of the historicity of these stories without
concealing the stylistic innovations that create this relation between viewer and speaker.
This perspective also places these stories within a non-linear temporality, opening them up to future iterations of the past that complicate and deepen its significance.

Instead of discounting the role of autobiography in these films, then, this reading demonstrates how these films account for the deeply personal sense of connection to the memories being represented while also avoiding the developmental logic of an autobiographical structure. As many critics have discussed, Hou has attributed his stylistic shift around the time of the “coming-of-age” trilogy in large part to his encounter with modernist author Shen Congwen’s autobiography at that time. Zhu Tianwen suggested this book to him, and Hou has stated that after reading it, “I discovered Shen’s point of view was somewhat like looking down from above. Like natural laws, it has no joy and no sorrow…The result is a certain breadth of mind, or a certain perspective that is very moving. Because of this, it produces a generosity of viewpoint” (qtd. in Yeh and Davis 157). He describes applying this awareness to film by asking the cinematographer to be colder and more distant. It is tempting to use this statement as evidence of Hou’s objectivity and realism, and many critics have. Lupke provides a more nuanced reading of this influence when he writes that “The fastidiously observational style, a style that eschewed judgements of the main characters and sought to allow the narrative to build on a series of cascading tableau, one after another, was likely something that Hou incorporated into his cinematic technique as a result of the profound influence that Shen Congwen’s dispassionate narrative voice exerted over him” (loc. 887). Others, like Yeh and Davis, read Shen’s “spirit of evanescence” as helping Hou to transcend mere autobiographical material to discover “a transcendental perspective rising far above individual memory” (160, 165). What our analysis of the personal voice in Hou’s films
demonstrates, however, is that Shen’s greatest influence might have been a capacity to combine realism and poetic transcendence. While Shen is known as a lyrical writer disengaged from the immediate historical concerns of his time, David Wang argues for a reading of Shen’s work as “a dialectical part of, rather than an exception to, post-May Fourth realism” (202). In describing what he calls Shen’s “critical lyricism,” Wang points out that “Shen Congwen’s belief in and ‘fear of’ the pure form of language and its poetic performance should not be seen merely as a predilection for stylistic craftsmanship; rather, it must provide a key to his artist’s vision of reality” (209). Indeed, both Jia and Hou have their own “artist’s vision of reality” but they employ it not as a way to make that reality aesthetically appealing. They aim to reach the affective experience beyond the surface of the world. As Wang goes on to state:

Shen’s poetic (or lyrical) worldview demands that just as much attention be paid to the linguistic surface of a work as to the “deep” meanings behind it. An arguable “reality” does not represent itself, it is represented. If a literary presentation of life is substantially a rhetorical performance, a formal display of language rather than an outcome of logical prefiguration (such as the canons underlining hard-core realism), then the text can be liberated from the iron prisonhouse of referential determinism and can gain freedom to express its figurations of the real. Thus, emphasis on language and poetic expression is also confirmation of human choice in “figuring” out the world (209).

From this viewpoint, we can understand Hou’s stylistic innovations not as a means to better represent the world without the interference of the subjectivity of the director, but rather as noticeable performances of the act of representing one’s memories, which call attention to the way in which that representation creates a voice that is at once personal and public, singular and shared. The heterogeneity of voice, the voice which is both personal and adopted by any viewer who wishes to enter into the world of the film, is the source of the film’s temporality, its sense of memory’s presence in and distance from the present. It also enables an understanding of the past which is multi-layered and open to a
diversity of experiences within it. Through the lyrical mode, the viewer can occupy these perspectives without being forced to reconstitute them into a collective narrative or sense of identity.
Performative Lyricism in the Poetry of Bei Dao and Xi Chuan

We left off in Chapter 2 with a quote from David Wang’s reading of Shen Congwen, which emphasizes lyrical representation as rhetorical performance, highlighting the role of the enunciating subject in figuring experience. In the following two chapters, we will look more closely at how performance plays a key role in constituting a lyrical subjectivity. In the poems and films from Taiwan which we have discussed in the first half of this dissertation, lyricism was revealed to be a search for emotional understanding, rather than the result of an already-established style or an agreed-upon memory. In the poems and films from mainland China which are the focus of the second half, we find a greater degree of self-awareness and even uncertainty when it comes to the role of art in creating an experience of the past for its audience. By thinking about these works through the lens of performance, we can stay attuned to both the representation of the event in the poem or film and the presentation of the work as art to the reader or spectator. Both of the poets I discuss in this chapter, Bei Dao (北岛; pen name of Zhao Zhenkai 赵振开) and Xi Chuan (西川; pen name of Liu Jun 刘军), frequently travel and publicly read, or perform, their poetry. I will refer to some of the readings I have attended in recent years; however, my primary focus is not on the literal performance of these poems, but rather the way in which, even as inert words on a page, they require the reader to respond to them as if they were being performed, as if the reader were a co-creator of the scene in which the meaning of the poem gets enacted.

The work of these two poets is very different stylistically, as we shall see, but in both, readers must “try on” the perspective provided by the poem. Unlike a script or a speech, however, which has an already-established line of thought, the reader must also
recognize the limitations of the perspective offered by these poems, their incompleteness. The reader then adds her own thoughts based on her own perspective – determined as it is by her experience and context – in order to complete the impressions which the poems begin to sketch out. The poems are often about processes – of looking, writing, reflecting – and thus the act of reading becomes a parallel process, with the reader performing the same activity to which the poem is addressed. In a performance, too, the reader and performer are both engaged in the event, with the obvious difference that in the case of poetry, there is a time lag. Even so, this difference is appropriate to a poetics that understands time as fragmented and nonlinear.

For Bei Dao, poetry is a means to engage with memories of the past which are always incompletely understood and accessed, so any sense of temporality in his poems is always halting and interrupted. For Xi Chuan, poetry grapples with a present that is full of contradictions. Any sense of time or place is disrupted by an awareness of those contradictions, often leading to irony or self-parody, which undermines the stability of the seemingly ordinary imagery and voice. Yet both poets step back from the edge, from a more extreme position which would entirely deconstruct any sense of communal experience. For Bei Dao, that way back is found through the personal, while for Xi Chuan it is the sensory. Before we can look at their work in detail, however, it is useful to explore their position within the literary history of mainland China in the Reform Era, as these two poets represent two rather different trajectories, at least initially.

Following a similar trend in Taiwan a few decades earlier, mainland Chinese poetry and film from the 1980s and 1990s turned its focus on the image. In particular, the capacity of the image to not only capture but to translate memories of the past into the
present became a central feature of broader debates surrounding artistic engagement with history amidst a rapidly changing social, economic and political landscape. In this context, there was an interesting parallel between the development of poetry and filmmaking. In both media, the first generation of artists to emerge on the “unofficial” scene after the end of the Cultural Revolution quickly earned notoriety both within and outside of China, and was just as quickly challenged by the next generation of artists looking to move beyond the politically and ideologically charged discourses of the early days of Reform Era China. In the case of cinema, this first group of directors and film artists, the so-called Fifth Generation, primarily consisted of the first class to graduate from the re-opened Beijing Film Academy in 1982 and includes directors such as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang. Despite remarkable success in foreign film festivals, these directors were strongly criticized for appealing to Western audiences with images of China as backward, sexually repressed, etc.\textsuperscript{73} The group of young directors who followed them, referred to as the Sixth Generation\textsuperscript{74}, focused on contemporary life, often in urban areas, and on individualized stories, in opposition to the Fifth Generation’s tendency to use imagery that symbolically stands in for (at least broad swaths of) Chinese culture and history. Although the initial films that catapulted the Fifth Generation directors to fame, such as *Yellow Earth* 《黄土地》, *Red Sorghum* 《红高粱》 and *The Blue Kite* 《蓝风筝》, featured a realist, almost documentary-like aesthetic and

\textsuperscript{73} For instance, Rey Chow’s well-known work in *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*

\textsuperscript{74} The generational naming of Chinese directors became most prominent with the Fifth Generation, whose position in film history was determined by looking backward, so that the third and fourth generations were those making films under the socialist realist model and the first and second generations were those working from the advent of film in China up to 1949. After the Sixth Generation, however, the distinction between generations has become blurry and difficult to define, so this generational naming has not continued.
downplayed narrative in favor of striking imagery and sensory appeal, by the early 1990s
Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige in particular had begun to make films which were less
grounded in historical places and times and more interested in flaunting their unique
cinematic style, with the result that the specificity of historical experience was often lost,
leaving essentialized, though aesthetically striking, images of China.

In the world of poetry, meanwhile, the movement away from the restrictive
language and subject matter of socialist realism began earlier than in film, ironically
because the Cultural Revolution created an atmosphere of chaos and relative freedom for
the many educated youths who were “sent down” to the countryside to work as laborers
and farmers. Although many of these youths were originally fervent supporters of the
regime (for instance serving as Red Guards) some of them, especially those who
remained closer to the city, such as the poet Bei Dao, were able to gain access to books,
especially translations of foreign works, which were intended only for the intellectual
elite. They began to write poems in secret, sharing them only among small groups of
friends, and experimented with new techniques and topics. As the Cultural Revolution
came to a close, Bei Dao and his friend Mang Ke established the first unofficial literary
journal in Communist China, called Today 《今天》. As they began to publish their
work and those of their circle, and the mimeographed journal circulated by hand, their
poems quickly became popular among young people and reform-minded elites alike.
Inspired by modernist poetry in the West, which had been influential on early twentieth-
century Chinese poetics, and also by authors like Kafka, Camus, Beckett, Salinger and
others whose translations they had read in the 1960s and 1970s, their style was criticized by those who saw modernism as inseparable from its bourgeois roots and therefore inappropriate for socialist art. These critics argued that both the imagery and the structure of these poems impeded clear communication of values (the goal of socialist realism). In a poem published in the prestigious journal *Poetry* 《诗刊》 in 1980, Zhang Ming first referred to this poetry as *menglong* [朦胧], though similar critiques had been in circulation. The term is most often translated as “misty” or “obscure” and it stuck; though the poets themselves never saw themselves as part of a unified movement or generation and did not agree with the designation, this term has been used to refer to them ever since. By the 1980s, the reputation of the Misty poets had spread, and they were traveling and being translated abroad. Unlike the Fifth Generation directors, however, their reputation within China at least matched, if not exceeded, their reputation outside of China, and poetry played a major role in the cultural landscape of the 1980s. At the same time, a new generation of poets was seeking an alternative to the politically-charged, highly subjective poetry of the Misty poets. Although the Misty poets generally sought to downplay their interest in political representation, emphasizing that their emphasis was on linguistic and artistic experimentation, the atmosphere in which they emerged meant that even a rejection of politics was itself a political move. And as Owen, Weinberger and others have noted, in the case of Bei Dao, even though he had already

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75 In “Translation Style,” Bei Dao lists these authors as having been translated beginning in 1962. See also Yang Guobin’s new book, *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China*, for more on the types of restricted translated texts available during the 1960s and 1970s.
76 See *A Glossary of Political Terms of the People's Republic of China*, p.278.
77 On a 2015 panel at Columbia University, Bei Dao expressed his continued dislike of the term, and said he prefers to refer to this group as the “Today poets.” This title is not commonly used among scholars, though many disagree about whether to use “misty” or “obscure” to refer to them. I will call them the “misty” poets only because it is the most commonly recognized designation.
moved away from his initial defiant poetic voice during the 1980s, Chinese readers (not to mention many non-Chinese readers) continued to prefer and make use of his earlier, more overtly political work, leaving his reputation as a dissident poet hard to shake. Regardless, the new generation of poets in the PRC sought a more individualized poetics, and likewise their aesthetic and theoretical approaches quickly diversified. As a whole, this latter group is referred to as the “post-Misty,” “New Generation” or “Third Generation,” but within that broad designation a number of different groups emerged.

One distinction between the generations which remains significant is the strong presence of visually-striking imagery in the “Misty” poetry, intended to call attention to its own newness. Paul Manfredi argues that the act of visualization is central to modern Chinese poetics, where the lyrical subject becomes a visual presence in the poem, the “seeing and therefore seeable poet” (loc. 245). Misty poetry reconnected to this earlier modernist impulse, Manfredi writes, by dramatizing the act of seeing. He writes, “A lot of ‘misty’ poetry is forceful because of its clarity, not of meaning but of the image…the older ideological iconographies fall away and the poet enters the cleared stage to see the world anew” (loc. 2805). In a similar vein, Zhang Benzi argues against the charge that the Fifth Generation directors were only presenting exoticized images of China for Western

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78 Dian Li goes even further to suggest that the early poetry wasn’t entirely straightforward or political, but that the students and activists who made use of those poems (notably in Tiananmen Square) chose only the sections that appealed to their needs. This resulted in a distorted impression of Bei Dao’s pre-1989 work. (See “Ideology and Conflicts in Bei Dao’s Poetry”).

79 In *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* van Crevel lists several, such as Colloquial Poetry, Women’s Poetry, Root-Seeking trends including Wholism, the Not-Not project and Intellectual poetry. Li and Hung divide these poets into three groups: the internal, external and visionary poets.
eyes, and describes them instead as engaging in a critical act of “self-gazing,” which
“interrogates a complicated cultural system by means of a split discourse that
simultaneously presents and questions what it presents” (172) through an act of de-
familiarization and “distanced and objective examination” (173). Manfredi suggests that
the limitation of Misty poetry is the inability to get beyond this obsession with opening
new avenues for looking at the social and political space, and the Fifth Generation
directors could be similarly read as over-indulging in cultural self-reflection and critique
without providing a way out. The post-“Misty” poets and the Sixth Generation directors
are often viewed as the antidote to that blockage because they do not over-emphasize the
visual and instead engage more directly with historically-specific experiences, without
attaching strong symbolic weight to them, neither asking nor answering broad socio-
cultural questions.

Of course, many critics have rightfully noted that the divisions between “Misty”
and “post-Misty” poetry, like the divisions between the Fifth and Sixth generation
filmmakers, are more complex than these sequential labels imply. In the case of poetry,
apart from the obvious difficulty of identifying particular features of the new generation
poetry when so many different approaches and sub-groups were being developed, it is
also the case that while there may be distinct stylistic and topical differences between the
Misty Poets’ early work and the poetry of the new generation in the 1990s, many of the
Misty poets have continued to develop in new directions over the intervening decades. At
the same time, certain important features remained constant, such as the role of the
image. The Misty poets tended to see the image as a marker of a distinct, subjective
perspective in the poem, while the post-Misty poets used the image to attempt a realistic,
objective portrait of ordinary life. In both cases, the image is elevated above the lyrical voice (rhythm and rhyme are not major features of either poetics). Moreover, there is a tradition of obscurity that pre-dates these poets.\(^8^0\)

Despite these caveats, the distinction between these two generations is relevant for our discussion because it is often used to mark a turn away from lyricism in contemporary Chinese poetry, or at least a turn away from a “high,” “lofty” or “grandiose” form of lyricism. Importantly, this broad distinction is most commonly found in introductions to translations, in reviews of poetry collections, or in encyclopedias or other sourcebooks providing only a brief sketch of poetic movements.\(^8^1\) Yet the continuous association of Misty poetry with lyricism and the new generation poetics as a rejection of that lyricism is worth exploring. It is paralleled, interestingly enough, by a similar understanding of the shift from the Fifth to Sixth Generation filmmakers, and therefore speaks to a broader sense that the early days of the Reform Era were high-minded and aesthetically experimental while the market reforms of the 1990s brought a more object-oriented, prosaic cultural moment.

Misty Poetry is often described as highly lyrical due to its reliance on what Bonnie McDougall calls “various kinds of oblique, oneiric imagery and elliptical syntax” (“Revelation and Communication” 226). Because of the political implications of writing

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\(^{80}\) See Chen Yongguo, “Becoming Obscure: A Constant in the Development of Modern Chinese Poetry” for a full account of this history. In addition, Manfredi notes that Li Jinfa had been criticized for the obscurity of his imagery using the same language (loc. 536).

\(^{81}\) For “high” one example is Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas’s review of New Generation: Poems from China Today in the January 2000 issue of WLT. For “grandiose” see for example Paul Manfredi’s entry on Zhou Lunyou in the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture*. Lyricism is also used as a primary distinguishing factor in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Lucas Klein, in introducing his translations of Xi Chuan, refers to the “high-lyricism” of the early work as opposed to the anti-lyrical post-1989 poems. There are exceptions, of course. Joseph Allen’s review of *Out of the Howling Storm* in the September 1994 issue of WLT says that the younger poets have “some interesting new versions of Chinese lyricism” (881).
such a poetry, and with their assertion of an independent subjectivity validated through emotional experience rather than communal action, this lyricism is read as a detached form of expression, despite its strong political overtones. On the other hand, the new generation poets are often described as promoting a shift from “high” to “low” tones, from abstraction and introspection to a more ordinary mode of speaking and engaging with the world.\textsuperscript{82} Within this broader shift, Maghiel van Crevel further breaks down the new generation poets into those who continue to take a more “elevated” approach to poetry and those who look for a more “earthly” poetics.\textsuperscript{83} Yet even though van Crevel’s “elevated” poets clearly display more continuity with the Misty poets than the “earthly” group does, this form of detachment is still a challenge to the Misty poets’ lyricism because it rejects their ideology of the poet as visionary. In what follows, I will suggest that lyricism continues to be an operative term in understanding the poetics of post-Misty poets – though we can only recognize this if we think about lyricism itself in a different way. I will discuss some of the more recent poems by the post-Misty poet Xi Chuan, in order to understand how this challenge to “Misty” lyricism ends up developing a new and different lyrical response to personal and collective memory. But first, I will explore how Bei Dao also challenged the Misty poetics. In reading both of these poets, rather than view lyricism as a form (a genre) or the effect of a form (a style), I locate it in the way form and content put pressure on each other, in the way the translation of experience into poetry creates an experience for the reader, the construction of which she must actively

\textsuperscript{82} The poets themselves set out six “antis” among which “anti-lyricism” was one. The full six were “anti-tradition, anti-sublimity, anti-lyricism, anti-culture, anti-aesthetic and anti-poetic” (Wang Ping 22).

\textsuperscript{83} The distinction made in \textit{Renditions} between internal, external and visionary operates on similar grounds. Another important division that emerged in the 1990s culminated in what is known as the “Intellectual-Popular polemic”. See Li Dian, “Naming and Anti-naming: Poetic Debate in Contemporary China.”
engage, while always remaining aware of the limitations of not only poetry but any attempt to comprehensively account for that experience.

**Bei Dao’s Participatory Poetics**

During the 1990s, after the popularity of the “Misty” poets had faded on the mainland and many of these poets were living in the West due to the changed political circumstances post-1989, a debate emerged in Western academia regarding the role these poets were playing as representatives of China on the international poetry scene. Like other artists who became well-known abroad at that time (notably Fifth Generation directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige and the playwright/novelist Gao Xingjian), the “Misty” poets were accused of leaving behind their own “Chinese” tradition in order to appeal to international audiences. To a large degree, the debate was concentrated around the poetry of Bei Dao, and began with a now-notorious review of Bonnie McDougall’s first translation of Bei Dao’s poetry, *The August Sleepwalker*. The review, titled “What is World Poetry: The anxiety of global influence,” was written by Stephen Owen, the highly influential scholar of classical Chinese poetry. In it, Owen reflects on the relative ease with which Bei Dao’s poetry translates into English and suggests that the translatability of contemporary Chinese poetry is a sign of the fact that it has left behind its national specificity in order to achieve recognition within what he terms “world poetry,” which is really based on European (especially Romantic) poetic ideals. Owen

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84See the Introduction to Rey Chow’s *Writing Diaspora* for an important critique of the label “Chinese” as it operates in these debates.
mentions a friend who writes both classical and “new”\textsuperscript{85} poetry in Chinese, and says that his friend “sees the ‘new poetry’ as simply poetry, as if it had no nationality or history. He does not recognize the weight of local European literary history that lies behind some of the conventional moves that he makes or the habitual images that he uses” (28). Owen’s point is that by seeking out a poetry which is supposedly free of history, but which is in fact bound up in European history, contemporary Chinese poets have abandoned their own literary history and linguistic tradition, perhaps in favor of translatability. Just as interesting as the critique is the way in which Owen attempts to locate the value of contemporary Chinese poetry. He finds “heroism” in Bei Dao’s “determination to find other aspects of human life and art [apart from politics] that are worthy of a poet’s attention” (30) and seems to suggest that there might be something worthwhile in a new approach which succeeds “not by words, which are always trapped within the nationality of language and its borders, but by the envisagements of images possible only with words” (31). Despite the light praise, this evaluation minimizes the formal innovation at work by viewing the poetry as not “capable of leaving a trace that might constitute a history” (32). In a review of Michelle Yeh’s *Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry* a few years later, Owen develops further the point that this new approach to Chinese poetry might lead us in “unforeseen” and potentially interesting directions, but he continues to work within a dichotomy between the local/particular and the universal/nonspecific. In the case of Shu Ting, whom Owen singles out as exceptional, he writes:

\textsuperscript{85} By the 1980s, of course, “new” poetry was no longer all that new. It refers to the poetry written in the vernacular, largely in free verse, which began to be theorized during the second decade of the twentieth century, over fifty years before Bei Dao started writing.
Although she does speak for her people and her time, there is nothing particularly Chinese in what she says. This is fungible poetry, convertible currency. We can refer her poem to the particular circumstances of China during the Cultural Revolution and the years that followed, but the poem is in no way circumscribed by its historical situation. The intensity of private experience is absorbed in historically collective experience and is something we can easily see as universal. (41)

Owen suggests that what makes contemporary Chinese poetry internationally viable, despite any culturally or historically distinct features, is its “convertibility,” its translatability. This understanding of Misty poetry was not Owen’s alone; indeed, in her introduction to her first translation of Bei Dao’s poems, McDougall herself claims translatability to be a distinct feature of these poems, as Owen notes. Not everyone agrees with this, of course. For instance, Leo Ou-fan Lee has noted a particular Beijing accent in Bei Dao’s poetry and Li Dian has questioned this claim of translatability directly (including the decision not to footnote any of Bei Dao’s poems), providing multiple examples of culturally-specific references that go untranslated and un-noted. Still, any pushback which highlights Bei Dao’s reliance on locally-specific linguistic and cultural forms does not change the fundamental opposition between the universal and the local, the translatable and the untranslatable, which Owen sets up in the quote above. (It also does not take into account the fact that Bei Dao’s poetry is by no means static, and that his poems written since 1990s are difficult to read in any language, making the claim of easy translatability more difficult to sustain, reliant as it is on a confidence that one knows what the original means in the first place. We will discuss these more recent poems below.) As long as this dichotomy remains intact, even if there are certain aspects of Bei Dao’s poetry (or any other poetry from the period) which cannot be translated

87 Li Dian, “Translating Bei Dao” and Leo Lee “Huli dong shihua (Ramblings on poetry from the ‘Studio of a Fox’)”
and/or which resonate more strongly with a Chinese-speaking audience, we could still argue, as Owen does, that the poem does not rely on these specificities for its primary poetic value. Instead, we can only claim that the local audience has a slightly more detailed, nuanced and complex understanding of certain aspects of the poem than the international audience, but not that they possess a fundamentally different sense of what makes the poem effective or ineffective as a poem.

Not surprisingly, we might read the films of Hou Hsiao-hsien or Jia Zhangke within a similar oppositional structure. As I have already mentioned in Chapter 2, the historical context which informs these films is not generally directly invoked in the films themselves, so a viewer without any knowledge of the political and social changes that are influencing the actions and emotions of the characters could watch these films in complete ignorance of that information. For certain critics of these films, both foreign and Chinese, that is precisely the problem. The non-Chinese viewer (or at least the viewer with limited understanding of Chinese history, culture and politics) is allowed to appreciate these personal images of China which are visually distinctive, but which do little to address their own history. Just as Owen points out that writers of the “new” poetry are working within a European literary tradition without acknowledging it as such, filmmakers of the new waves in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong who were adopting techniques forged in European art cinema in the middle of the twentieth century have been similarly accused of blindly following a form developed in response to starkly different historical and cultural circumstances in order to curry favor with international film festival judges or foreign audiences, or more generally, of attempting to insert
themselves in a history of world cinema rather than developing Chinese cinema for Chinese audiences.

In the case of both poetry and film, these artists are sometimes understood to have emphasized internationally recognizable forms over local forms, and to have rendered local content inessential to the appreciation of these international forms. So long as we remain within this local/global binary, the lyrical possibilities for new Chinese poetry (and film) remain caught within a similar set of oppositions. On the one side is a definition of lyricism rooted in the Chinese tradition, which includes: a certain musicality of rhythm and sound particular to the Chinese language and its generic conventions, imagery that relies on conventional associations and allusions, and content that derives from authentically “Chinese” experience (whatever that is). On the other side is the “international” – or Euro-American modernist – form of lyricism, which in Bei Dao’s case centers involves the stark juxtaposition of personal, abstract images in an elliptical manner that challenges conventional syntax. Either way, lyricism remains a form, a particular approach to conveying personal or collective experiences.

Yet just as soon as we set up this division, it immediately starts to break down, since the very approach to imagery which supposedly makes Bei Dao’s poetry so translatable is the characteristic most often cited as being indebted to classical Chinese poetics. McDougall suggests that this is because of the much more Westernized grammar of modern Chinese. Newer features of the language, which help to specify grammatical relationships that are only implied in classical Chinese, are often absent in Bei Dao’s poems, giving them a more classical feel.88 Eliot Weinberger also notes that Bei Dao’s

complexity links him to classical Chinese. He writes that classical poetry is “almost impossibly dense, requiring multiple readings to unravel meanings” and Bei Dao’s poems, like those of the late Tang dynasty in particular, “are mysteries composed of strange and arresting images and snatches of speech” (110-111). More broadly, the emphasis on images in Misty Poetry and in modern Chinese poetry more generally is heavily influenced by Euro-American modernism in general and Pound’s imagism in particular, which was itself, of course, inspired by a creative (mis)reading of classical Chinese poetry. Chen Yongguo provides a more nuanced understanding of the poetics of the Misty poets in his reading of the source of their infamous “obscurity.” He argues that the new language which these poets were working to invent “combined the foreign elements with the Chinese, the new with the old, the imitated with the original, constructing a brand-new style of poetry by appropriating and imitating modern Western poetry” (95). More significantly, Chen points out that like earlier modernists “at different moments of national crisis during the long history of China, [they] did not pursue beauty for its own sake but tried to build up a poetic edifice on the basis of both Western and traditional Chinese practices, with profound ideological conceptions expressed in figurative descriptions of land- and cityscapes. That is what the word obscure really means” (95).

Rather than view the definitions of lyricism in either/or terms, as a locally-specific vehicle (whether Chinese or Western) for potentially universal content, I want to suggest that Bei Dao’s poetry participates in an ongoing cross-cultural development of the possibilities for lyrical expression. More specifically, the lyricism of Bei Dao’s poetry – particularly the more recent poetry – derives from its ability to draw the reader into a
journey, a process through which she attempts to understand the intensely personal visions, memories and experiences of the poet and connect them to a familiar framework of her own, while always being made aware that her understanding of the meaning behind the poem is partial and incomplete, just as is the poet’s understanding of the experiences themselves. This process is ongoing, yet fragmented and non-linear, and it encompasses the movement from line to line, image to image, and poem to poem.

In order to understand how lyricism in Bei Dao’s poetry can stem from the act of reading, rather than a particular form, we need to think again about translation – not as an act of translating from one language to another, but as a process through which an experience is transmitted through a poem and interpreted by a reader. In the context of discussions about poetry, inter-lingual translation is commonly viewed as carrying an inevitable loss. Indeed, Robert Frost once famously said, “I like to say, guardedly, that I could define poetry this way: it is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation.” Poetic language is often thought to be specific to the language itself, and more broadly, to the cultural tradition which underlies that language. In his more recent comments on the problem of world poetry, Owen writes that lyric poetry is most closely tied to the “particularities of national languages” (532). He identifies the primary problem which animates the entire debate when he says, “The central question is one of how poetic value is and can be constituted across language boundaries” (533). He contrasts the problem of translating lyric poetry with that of translating a film (through subtitles) or a novel, where the “claim to essential values” remains present in the translation (532).

When we read a poem in translation, he argues, we assume that what is most valuable

89 Conversations on the Craft of Poetry, p. 7
about it exists “elsewhere.” If we begin with this set of assumptions, then inter-lingual translation will never be able to convey the full force of the lyricism of the original, because that lyricism, that poetic value, is bound by language, whereas the value of other forms, such as narrative, lies presumably in content (such as plot or character development), which can be conveyed through translation. Defenses of Misty poetry, such as Li Dian’s or Leo Lee’s, reinforce this view by asserting that local linguistic and cultural features do exist in the original text and are lost in translation.

The problem with this understanding of poetic value becomes clear in the “world poetry” debate: it puts the poet who would be read in other languages in a bind. The assumption that the local context and language are the primary arbiters of what makes the poem poetic leaves the poet beholden to one linguistic community which gets to claim and evaluate his or her work, while any impact the poem might make beyond its language of origin is secondary. Should the poem find a greater or different reception in translation than in the original language, that response is presumed to be ill-informed or evidence of the poem’s inherent flaws (because of its lack of resistance to translation). Essentially, it comes down to an unavoidable hierarchy wherein the local supersedes the global. Two of the most persuasive responses to this view attempt to break down that opposition. Rey Chow uses the term “cultural imperialism” to label the way in which Owen and others reinscribe Chinese difference in order to maintain clear disciplinary boundaries, thus perpetuating cultural essentialism. She replaces Owen’s binary logic with what she calls a “diasporic consciousness,” which involves thinking “primarily in terms of borders – of borders, that is as para-sites that never take over a field in its entirety but erode it slowly and tactically” (16). More recently, Jacob Edmond has returned to the more famous early
poems on which the world poetry debate focused and argues that they operate simultaneously within the experiential, local “world” and within the “world” of world poetry, through two layers of allegory which disrupt any singular form of reading. Using Benjamin’s notion of allegory, which destabilizes our “certainty about the relationship of language to the world of experience,” Edmond finds in Bei Dao’s poetry allegories about the relations between text and world and between text and world literature which highlight their own instability (98). He writes:

As the contrasting readings of his work illustrate, allegory not only establishes a correspondence between text and world; it also reveals the gap between the world and our words for it. Instead of fixing literature and history within a single story – a single world or world literature – or set of binaries (local/global or individual/collective) Bei Dao’s use of allegory emphasizes the historical flux and contested readings that gave birth to our current era. (96)

In both Chow’s and Edmond’s readings, however, the temporality of the problem of translation and historical understanding is replaced by primarily spatial metaphors – of flux, borders and self-reflection on the acts of reading and interpretation. While they are certainly aware of the historical forces at work in Bei Dao’s poetry and its reception, their analyses are geared toward the implications of this debate for transnational fields (Cultural Studies and World Literature, respectively).

The question of translation in relation to Bei Dao’s poetry provides an opportunity to examine how the poems participate in an ongoing historical process. This does not involve confining them to their local context, but it also requires more attention to historical conditions than debates within transnational fields usually provide. As we saw in the introduction, in order to understand historiography as translation, we must think of translation as a mode, an act of mediation between two sides which, instead of establishing a subject-object relationship between each side (with one being primary and
the other secondary), establishes an equivalence between the two, enabling them to mutually interact and influence each other. Rather than a static co-existence of articulations, however, this process of mediation creates the potential for new insights and a future-oriented, broader historical understanding which is neither fixed in a unity nor tracked on a progressive temporal trajectory. Each translation provides its own insights, which exist “between the lines” of the translation, between the two equivalences, and “flash up” momentarily through the constellation of various nodes, so that the ongoing act of “translating” experience leads to the production of this new form of historicism.

Edmond does recognize that Bei Dao’s poetry creates an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation, but he emphasizes the uncertainty over the act of opening up which that destabilization achieves. In his chapter on the Chinese poet Yang Lian, which lays the conceptual foundation for the following chapter on Bei Dao, Edmond uses Benjamin’s concepts of the dialectical image and the constellation in order to read what he calls Yang Lian’s figure of the “flâneur in exile” as “not only a figure for tactile, embodied encounters that superimpose disparate places, times, and texts, but also a way of acknowledging the blindness and erasures that such encounters produce, erasures that are obscured by a view of history as progress” (17). While Benjamin’s dialectical image is certainly one which aims to disrupt our passive sense of history as progress, emphasizing only the erasures which are revealed by that disruption does not explain how a new historical understanding can be achieved.

While Edmond’s reading of Bei Dao’s earlier poems is by far the most complex and insightful I have yet found, then, I want to suggest that when we look at Bei Dao’s
later poems, what we find is a more explicit challenge to view the poem as an invitation to an ongoing, yet always incomplete, process of reading which creates the conditions of possibility for a new historical sensibility. Benjamin’s theory of translation (as developed by Osbourne) helps us to understand how that historical sensibility comes into being. The poems are an attempt to engage with historical experience without returning to an understanding of history as progress. Moreover, I am arguing that we can use the term “lyricism” to denote this particular form of interaction between experience, text and reader precisely because of its emphasis on the personal image and the opening-up of the poem to the reader’s own re-imagining and re-vocalizing of the experience presented.

While Bei Dao has always maintained that he is seeking a “new language” with which to engage historical experience, as a counter measure to the closed-off language of socialist culture in the 1950s and 1960s, these later poems rely to an even greater degree on open-ended images which appear to stem from a very private, personal vision of the world. Though the early poems do set up allegorical relations between the text and identifiable worlds, as Edmond describes, the later poems do not even pretend to establish such a fixity (even if only to undo it).

In Bei Dao’s poems written before 1989 (on which most criticism continues to focus), we find a more conventional lyrical temporality. If a common feature of the lyric91 is that the poem begins and ends in the present, where any reflection on the past or the future is filtered through that present-based perspective, then Bei Dao’s early work clearly follows this convention. In the later poems, as we will see below, we begin to lose a coherent sense of time and space, and any grasp of the past is achieved from an unstable

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91 This is true of the genre we call the “lyric” in English, and also of both the shi and ci traditions in classical Chinese.
present, leaving the lines between the two much less distinct. In these later poems, where a point of origin in space-time is hard to pin down, trying to locate a poetic tradition against which the poems work is less relevant. That does not mean that the poems do not bear the markers of a tradition, only that their engagement with a tradition is not the source of poetic interest. If the poetic is in large part achieved through the creation of new experiences – whether linguistic or emotional – then the question for Bei Dao’s poetry is how to locate the source of their newness. For the early poems, that source was in the images, which both Owen and his detractors agreed was the most distinctive feature. In the later poems, the same images tend to repeat: images of light (stars, sun, lamps, moonlight), of fields and oceans, of snow and ice, statues, memory, the dead, writing, etc. It is the way in which those images come to relate to one another (or resist the imposition of a relation), and the effect those relations have on the reader over the course of reading, which provides the poetic interest here, and this requires a model that accounts for the temporality at work in the poems.

In order to do so, we need to examine how the images function, how they work together within and across poems, rather than what they signify individually or what kinds of impressions they convey through their very presence. As we have already seen (in Chapter 1), the imagery of modern Chinese poetry is one of its most distinctive features, and plays a major role in the assertion of a new subjective voice. While critics like Michelle Yeh and Paul Manfredi focus on the content of specific images, particularly tropes that repeat across the work of different poets, in the case of Misty Poetry in general and Bei Dao in particular, it is the quantity and the relative legibility or illegibility of the images that generates more interest than their potential meanings. In the
world poetry debate, the use of imagery over other more linguistically-specific poetic features (rhythm and rhyme structures, allusions, etc.) is cited as the primary reason for the poems’ translatability. At the same time, Misty poets have been linked to the classical Chinese tradition by way of familiar images and allusions. In other readings, meanwhile, especially of Bei Dao’s poems written later in the 1980s and into the early 1990s, the images are identified as the source of the difficulty or even impenetrability of the poems. Indeed, if we focus on the later poetry rather than more well-known early poems like “The Answer” [回答], we could argue along with Weinberger, who has actually translated Bei Dao’s poetry, that

If [Bei Dao] is writing with an eye toward potential translations, he must believe in the omnipotence of translators. His poetry is full of abrupt changes in register, bits of daily or bureaucratic speech, and oblique or ironic references to classical Chinese literature, Maoist dogma, and contemporary events. One of his favorite gestures, modeled perhaps on the Japanese renga, seems natural in Chinese, but travels poorly: line B completes line A, but is also the beginning of a phrase or thought that is completed by line C. (110)

Others have gone so far as to label Bei Dao’s poetry “unreadable.” Bill Ashcroft, for example, argues that Bei Dao’s poetry “can have more of an impact for what it is than for what it says,” and is a form of “abstraction as resistance” (362). For Ashcroft, Bei Dao’s poetry presents an alternative means for political resistance when compared to the preference for realism amongst most post-colonial writers, in that as poetry, and as particularly challenging poetry, we need to engage with this work “beyond the hermeneutic” because “we must inhabit its spaces as much as read its words” (368). Although he notes that this is true of all poetry, he suggests that this feature is “intensified” in Bei Dao’s poetry.
Ashcroft is right to suggest that we need to engage with these poems “beyond the hermeneutic” but not in order to render them static objects or symbols of obscurity and protest. Instead, they challenge us to think about how we are affected by our engagement with these poems, about what they are doing as opposed to what they signify. To see how this works, we can look at an untitled poem from the 2000 collection *Unlock:* 92

被笔勾掉的山水
在这里重现
我指的绝不是修辞
修辞之上的十月
飞行处处可见
黑衣侦察兵
上升，把世界
微缩成一声叫喊

财富变成洪水
闪光一瞬扩展成
过冬的经验
当我像个伪证人
坐在田野中间
大雪部队卸掉伪装
变成语言

The landscape crossed out with a pen
reappears here
what I am pointing to is not rhetoric
October over the rhetoric
flight seen everywhere
the scout in the black uniform
gets up, takes hold of the world
and microfilms it into a scream

wealth turns into floodwaters
a flash of light expands
into frozen experience
and just as I seem to be a false witness

92 For most of the poems cited in this chapter, I am using the translations by Eliot Weinberger and Iona Man-Cheong in their bi-lingual collection *Unlock.* They had the benefit of working with the poet in producing the translation, which is particularly important with poetry that is as ambiguous as Bei Dao’s. Where I have a disagreement or addition to the translation, I will note it.
sitting in the middle of a field
the snow troops remove their disguises
and turn into language
(Unlock 32-33)

The poem as a whole is a good example of the tightly packed succession of images, and images within images, which leaves many readers scratching their heads. But rather than simply letting the sequence of images wash over us, most readers will begin to try to make sense of the images by positing some possible connections between them. For instance, we can look at the final stanza, which consists of at least four sets of images. They are, first, “wealth turns into floodwaters”; next, two lines about a “flash of light” turning into “frozen experience”; then, two lines about being a “false witness sitting in the middle of a field”; and finally, a pair of lines about the “snow troops” which “turn into language”. None of these images bring together things with immediately obvious connections to one another, but we can hypothesize some potential reasons for their affiliation. For instance, the “flash of light” turning into “frozen experience” can be understood as the representation of opposites: a flash of light being active, brief, and potentially hot, while frozen experience is passive, eternal and cold. Other connections as less obvious, such as that between the “false witness” and the “field” in which he sits. Does the field signify isolation and if so, why such a pastoral image of isolation? The final image is perhaps the most enigmatic: the “snow troops,” which remind us of the “frozen experience” earlier in the stanza, could be a metaphor for some animal or plant, or it could represent a set of human beings living this frozen experience. In either case, the question becomes how these “snow troops” become language. In taking off their “disguise,” whether it is the frozen-ness itself or another mask, whatever lies beneath is able to become language.
On the face of it, these images do not seem to reveal very much, but if we look even closer, we begin to find some correspondences, though putting these correspondences into some sense of order requires more in-depth interpretation and even speculation on the part of the reader. It also requires the reader to make connections between images located in different parts of the poem, so that one cannot simply read from start to finish, but must move backwards and forwards and jump from one stanza to another. Starting with the image, “wealth turns into floodwaters,” we can likely assume that it refers to money which has flowed out just as quickly as it came in. This leads to the “flash of light,” which in the original expands “in a wink” [一瞬], therefore suggesting that insights, or perhaps good opportunities for obtaining wealth, whether material or spiritual, are transient and fleeting. The following line restarts the syntax, suggesting a new thought, and also introduces the “I”. The first character dang [当], meaning “when” or “just as,” suggests that the first pair of images about the “false witness” expresses an action that occurs at the same time as the second pair about the “snow troops.” In fact, the line does not require us to read it (as the translation does) as if the mask or disguise being removed belongs to the snow troops. If we look backwards, the character wei [伪] which forms the first part of the compound weizhuang [伪装] for “disguise” is the same character in the first part of the word “false witness” or “person giving false testimony” [为证人]. Therefore, considering that the “I” in the stanza is first associated with false testimony, it could be the speaking “I” wearing the disguise which the snow troops remove, especially since the “snow” of “snow troops” is daxue [大雪] or “great/heavy snow,” which could imply a snowstorm powerful enough to blow off the
mask. But that leaves the question of who or what is turning into language, in the last line, if not the snow troops. This last line could refer back to either the “I” or the “great snow” and its “troops” because, as we remember, both the appearance of bearing false testimony and the removal of the mask happen simultaneously.

The word for “becoming” here, bian cheng [变成] particularly connotes a form of change or transformation, and is used often in Bei Dao’s poetry to mark the metamorphosis of one idea into another as one image “becomes” another. In a sense, the entire poem is about the becoming of language. The opening lines read: “The landscape crossed out with a pen/ reappears here/ what I am pointing to is not rhetoric…” So whereas we begin with “rhetoric” xiuci [修辞], which is decorated speech and therefore less organic, the “language” yuyan [语言] which emerges at the end of the poem can be read as a more authentic, bare form of testimony to experience which is unfrozen or unveiled by the work of the poem.

As we return to the beginning of the poem in order to unpack the ending, we can also notice that the word used for the “landscape” is not fengjing [风景], which is more commonly used in modern Chinese and also more “translatable,” but rather shanshui [山水]. Composed of the characters “mountains” and “water,” shanshui means landscape but in the Five Dynasties and Song period, came to refer to a particular type of brush-stroke painting 山水画 (shanshui hua, “mountains water picture) which depicts mountains, streams and/or waterfalls from a distanced perspective, often with small figures of human beings and their dwellings. This well-known style of Chinese painting

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93 It is also one of the 24 solar terms, but I don’t know if that has any significance.
94 Thanks to Richard for pointing this out!
is an interesting metaphor for the work of the poem as a whole, because it encompasses a complex temporality within a seemingly static image. Landscape paintings in the Chinese tradition are meant to be read as containing multiple scenes, which unveil themselves to the viewer as the scroll of the painting is unrolled or as you move your eyes horizontally and vertically. Just like a poem, (and let us not forget that there is often text on a Chinese painting too), although these various perspectives do signal different points in time, their relationship to each other is not fixed or linear, and there is no correct “order” in which to encounter them. One can and should read backwards and forwards, up and down. (In an interesting coincidence, Xi Chuan has recently developed a particular interest in Song dynasty landscape paintings, about which we will hear more in Chapter 4.)

Of course, every poem requires some rereading to get at the meaning, but in Bei Dao’s poems the interpretive effort is more strenuous and also more tenuous. In part, this is due to the lack of grammatical markers to firm up a relationship between the images. Where we might expect a pronoun to mark the possessor of the disguises, for example, we find none. The Chinese language does not conjugate verbs to indicate tense, nor does it use suffixes to signal number, so we do not know if there is one disguise or many. Some of Bei Dao’s poems include tense markers when needed, but here there are none, only images and indicators of their spatial relation (the exception being dang or “just as/when”). In addition to the grammar of the lines, the multilayered nature of the imagery creates a sense of density. Even with these features, however, the poems remain dynamic. In fact, it requires more than the average level of active recovery of a temporal sensibility on the part of the reader in order to make even a provisional sense out of the poem. In the above example, we might read the relationship between the image about the “false
witness” and that about the “snow troops” to be separate but simultaneous actions. But we can also interpret the disguises to be borne by the “I” and removed by the snow troops, which means that the first event precipitates the second, even if they occur at almost exactly the same moment: “and just as I seem to be a false witness / sitting in the middle of a field / the snow troops remove my disguise / and turn into language.” This interpretation turns a static pair of images into a dynamic of relationality, though it still leaves open the question of who or what turns into language (The disguises? The speaker? The snow troops?). In short, whether one sees the poem as creating relationships between the images, rather than simply pinning them up next to each other, depends on how one reads. Whatever sense of temporality we find in this poem, it is certainly not a straightforward, progressive one. As Weinberger points out in his comparison of Bei Dao’s approach to Japanese renga above, and as my own reading demonstrates, the process of interpretation here requires a constant attention to what meanings are being closed off and what opened up with the arrival of each new line. The only way to see this operation at work is through reading and re-reading, paying attention to the level of the character, compound word, phrase, line and stanza at different moments. If one attempts to stand back and think about the poem as a singular unity, it only appears dense and impenetrable.

“The landscape crossed out with a pen…” is an example of a poem where Bei Dao juxtaposes unfamiliar elements within the images themselves, in addition to juxtaposing the images to one another without much intervening mediation. In other poems, we find a theme that does in fact develop as the images collect, even if it still requires some decoding to determine whatever comment on or impression of the theme is
being conveyed. “Destination” [目的地] is about the poetic process, beginning with a more active search for a pathway to the poetic in the first stanza, while the second stanza describes forces external to the poet which draw him or her in:

你沿着奇数
和练习发音的火花
旅行，从地图
俯瞰道路的葬礼
他们挖得真深
触及诗意

名号不能止住
韵律的阵痛
你靠近风的隐喻
随白发远去
暗夜打开上颌
露出楼梯

you follow the odd numbers
and practicing the sparks of pronunciation
travel, from a map
looking down on the funeral of roads
they dig deeply
touching poetry

punctuation can’t slow
the labor pains of rhythm
you approach the wind’s metaphor
following white hair to go far
the dark night opens its jaw
revealing a staircase
(Unlock 68-69)

Both stanzas close with an image of penetrating darkness (digging deeply in the first; the dark night opening its jaw in the second). In the first stanza, the digging yields a touch of poetry – or more accurately, poeticism or the poetic sensibility [诗意] – while in the second, the dark night reveals a staircase, thus closing the poem by opening it up. These images of downward and upward movement contrast and yet work together to create a
sense of movement in the poem, from a search to a destination – even though the destination is another pathway, opening up a new space for poetry.

In addition to creating resonances and dissonances within images themselves and between images in the same poem, Bei Dao continually revisits the difficulty of writing poetry and the impossibility of re-capturing disappearing memories across his poems. As one reads each poem, these themes develop deeper and more complex sets of associations within his oeuvre as a whole. We have already seen these themes begin to play out in “The landscape crossed out with a pen…” and “Destination,” particularly the search for language and poetic sensibility. The poem, “In Memory” addresses the desire to narrate the past as ultimately insufficient, especially in the middle two stanzas:

回到叙述途中
水下梦想的潜水员
仰望飞逝的船只
旋涡中的蓝天

我们讲的故事
暴露了内心的弱点
像祖国之子
暴露在开阔地上

on the way to the return of narration
the deep-sea diver of underwater dreams
hopefully looks up at the fleeting ship
blue sky through the whirlpool

the stories we tell
expose the weakness in our hearts
like our country’s sons
are exposed on the wide-open land

(Unlock 60-61)

By returning to the problem of memory again and again, these poems require the reader to constantly re-visit and re-assess her understanding of it. The images above suggest that
there may never be a sufficient way to retell the past through language or image, but the drive to do so, even haltingly, remains.

As we begin to see here, although the poems can indeed be difficult and often emphasize visuality over movement, this is not an invitation to let go of their active engagement in a process of translation from experience to poem and from poem to reader. Their difficulty is the site of an activation, the marker of a creative, subjective consciousness that must be entered into by the reader. In conjunction with an examination of the density of Bei Dao’s imagery, then, we need to also consider the obscurity of the subjective voice in his later poems, because a key part of the activation of the reader involves the attempt to locate a voice within the poem. In her essay on Bei Dao’s early poetry, “Bei Dao’s Poetry: Revelation and Communication,” Bonnie McDougall cites a long passage from George Steiner in which he describes poetic speech as the natural outgrowth of the human need to be creative as well as secretive. The quote ends as follows: “the poem, taking the word in its fullest sense, is neither a contingent nor a marginal phenomenon of language. A poem concentrates, it deploys with least regard to routine or conventional transparency, those energies of covertness and of invention which are the crux of human speech. A poem is maximal speech” (qtd. in McDougall, “Revelation” p. 227). Bei Dao’s later poems are a much better example of this capacity of poetry than the early poems McDougall was discussing. As we have seen in the above samples, sometimes they have an implied speaker, while at other times they have merely a focalized perspective with little indication of the subjectivity behind it. At still other times, the poems include personal pronouns – “I,” “we,” “you” and “they” have all appeared thus far – even though the subject to which the pronouns refer may not carry
through the entire poem. In general, the “I” is much less pronounced than in Bei Dao’s earlier work.

Some of Bei Dao’s poems do not have a poetic voice at all, and are a good example of what Jonathan Culler refers to as “epideictic discourse: public poetic discourse about values in this world rather than a fictional world” (loc. 2421). As we began to see in Chapter 2, Culler investigates the many reasons why, in our understanding of the lyric in the Western tradition, the notion of poetic voice, and the subsequent assumption that a poem is a fictional representation of a speech act, has come to predominate. He argues that poems which establish a fictional scene (a context for speech) and a poetic persona whose words are being represented in the poem (much like a dramatic monologue) are in fact a special case in the lyric tradition, not the defining feature of the genre. Many poems, both classical and modern, fail to fit into this model because they do not set up a voice so much as engage in the act of voicing. Aurality is important to Culler, though, as the lyric uses special features of language that are not generally found in ordinary speech acts but have everything to do with what makes a poem poetic. We would do better, he suggests, to think about lyric’s ritual function. Culler emphasizes that lyrics invite us to memorize or recite their lines, without needing to posit a fictional speaker. We appreciate the sound of the language, try on new thoughts or “attempt an intensification of mood” (loc. 2515). A good example of this type of poem can be found in Bei Dao’s poem “Crying” [哭声]. Consider the following stanza:

历史不拥有动词
而动词是那些
试着推动生活的人
是影子推动他们
并因此获得
Here we have nothing resembling a poetic voice or a fictive situation in which such a voice might be speaking. The only pronoun we find in this poem is the impersonal, collective “we” [我们] which appears twice, in the context of generalizations. The poem is instead a meditation on the attempt to access the past. As we see in the above stanza, history is described as fixed and stagnant, as having “no verbs,” where verbs are the source of movement and life. Behind those verbs are shadows, which may be obscure but can also lead to an even more difficult but potentially rich significance, one we might surmise can be sought (if not found) through poetry rather than history.

This poem resembles many of Bei Dao’s poems about poetry in that it both describes the search for memory and meaning but also calls attention to itself as just such an act of searching. It belongs to what Culler calls “that tradition of poems that call in order to be calling, to mark both their poetic calling and the optative relation to language, which does not merely represent but strives to be an event. These are the features of the poem that do not fit the model of the imitation speech act” (loc. 2487). These poems without a speaker also harken back to classical Chinese poetry. Wai-lim Yip identifies, as one of the features of classical Chinese poetics which is shared by Pound’s imagism, the “removal of the speaker (in different degrees and complexities) so as to allow the reader-
viewer to participate in completing the aesthetic experience” (3). Let’s look for a moment at the opening couplet of “Crying,” which reads: 大雪之蹄踏遍牧场 / 狂风正是骑手. Beginning with the same “heavy snow” from “The landscape crossed out with a pen…” these two lines can be literally translated as: “The heavy snow’s tap dancing covers the pasture / the strong wind is just like the horseman.” The two images set a particular scene, but make no comment, an opening which is characteristic of certain types of classical poems. Although the lines are not parallel, the use of two compound nouns to open each line (“heavy snow” and “strong wind”) remind the reader of parallelism in the classical tradition. (Incidentally, the fact that critics writing about Bei Dao tend to quote couplets or single stanzas from his poems without reference to the poem as a whole mirrors the way that particular couplets from classical Chinese poems become well-known independent of the rest of the poem.)

It is unsurprising, therefore, that both Wai-lim Yip and Bei Dao himself make a comparison between this feature of classical Chinese poetry and the technique of montage in film. Much like montage, these poems combine one independent image after another. Unlike in classical film narration, where every attempt is made to conceal the guiding subjectivity and focus the viewer’s attention on the development of plot and characters, the greater demand on the viewer to interpret the series of images in montage

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95 A major feature of Yip’s argument is that the juxtaposition of images in Western modernism is indebted to classical poetics, but Michelle Yeh provides a thorough critique of that position in Modern Chinese Poetry. See chapter 1 of this dissertation for a longer discussion of juxtaposition.

96 In a brief essay “About Poetry” published in 1984 in Notes of the City of the Sun, Bei Dao writes, “I try to introduce in my poetry the technique of film montage, and by creating juxtaposed images and changes in speed, I want to arouse people’s imaginations to fill in the substantial gaps between the words” (79). Similarly, Zhang Xudong quotes Xu Jingya’s 1983 article in which he writes: “The structure is unconventional and indeed shocking, flashing and vibrating like montage in film” (qtd. in Zhang 130).
makes him or her aware of an absent consciousness which is motivating the sequencing of the images. In film, we do not generally think of that consciousness in explicitly personal terms, as we would attribute the voice of a poem to the thoughts of an author. Even in the case of so-called “auteur” directors, whose works are given the stamp of personal authorship, so that we might see the film as if through his or her eyes, or in the case of films or particular shots which are focalized through a character’s perspective, so that we might associate the image with his or her point of view or personal experience, even then, there is always also the identification with the impersonal, abstract apparatus (hence Metz’s primary and secondary identifications). In classical Chinese poetry, the consciousness which guides the poems is also not attributed with the same sense of individualism and creative force that it is in the Western tradition, though there is of course a sense of a poet and his persona, because as we have been discussing, the poem is traditionally thought of as a spontaneous response to and manifestation of the world around the poet. As a result, the scene or events, and the reader or viewer, are left with a more active role. As Yip writes:

> Whether by using montage or a mobile point of view, the Chinese poets give paramount importance to the acting-out of visual objects and events, letting those objects and events explain themselves by their coexisting, coextensive emergence from nature; letting the spatial tensions reflect conditions and situations rather than coercing these objects into some preconceived artificial order by sheer human interpretive elaboration. (“Convergence” 34-35)

In poems like “The landscape crossed out with a pen…” and “Destination” above, we saw that the subjective consciousness is not entirely absent, but it is distanced and fragmented, whereas in “Crying,” there is no speaking subject with any definable characteristics. At the same time, we are always aware of a subjective consciousness who has composed the poem. As Culler writes, “The ‘authoredness’ of lyrics is important –
they are not found language but composed for use by an author – but readers have considerable scope in choosing whether to treat them as the thought of a particular author or as general wisdom” (loc.2529). The same might be said of film. We can treat film like a window and ignore the presence of artistic construction, or we can consciously pay attention to the way in which the director/auteur is presenting its images to us – or we can fall somewhere on a spectrum between these two positions. This marks a major difference between the two forms and written narratives, where the words on the page are always attributed to a speaker with a point of view, whether in the first, second or third person.

In Chapter 1, we examined Eisenstein’s emphasis on the way montage asks the spectator to actively trace the experience of the creator of the montage. This does not necessarily mean that the film directly points to the process behind its own making (the way that Vertov’s The Man with the Movie Camera features shots of the process of shooting and editing a film) but the spectator must, according to Eisenstein, step into the role of the creator in order to understand the film. In Chapter 2, we saw how Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s long-takes, though they adopt almost the opposite approach to Eisensteinian montage, also simultaneously conceal and acknowledge the role of the filmmaker in presenting the shot to the spectator. Whether in the form of montage or deep-focus, long-take shots, film imagery can manifest the tension between the desire to communicate and what Steiner calls the human impulse to conceal, just as poetic language can. In the same passage quoted above, Steiner writes, “Mature speech begins in shared secrecy, in

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97 As we will see more in more detail later, Culler uses the term “performance” to describe the activity of the lyric, which mirrors Yip’s description of “acting-out” above.
centripetal storage or inventory, in the mutual cognizance of a very few” (qtd. in McDougall 227). Poetic interest derives from this “shared secrecy,” this sense that something is hidden but can be revealed, and through that revelation, the reader becomes part of the “few” who are able to share the same insight. The use of imagery – whether poetic or cinematic – can be a mechanism to hold back information, emotions or a particular perspective, but concealment is not the goal in and of itself. The goal is the activation of the reader/listener/spectator, in order to produce a recognition of the need for one’s own continued participation in the process of interpreting (translating) the experience or emotion behind the image. In so doing, both poet/filmmaker and reader/spectator join in a process of making sense of the emotion or experience. The difference between this approach and a more straightforward hermeneutic one is that here, the poem exists not to be interpreted once and for all, but to be experienced over and over again, engaged with and assimilated into one’s own sensibilities.

What Eisenstein’s approach emphasizes that Culler’s does not is the need for the reader or viewer not just to repeat the words or to adopt the perspective of the film images, but to actively participate in and complete the process of sense-making. Where Bei Dao’s poems diverge from a film using the montage technique is in their lack of a conceivable world in which to locate the poems. In a film image, so long as we have perceptible space, and given the progression of time that is built into the form, we are able to imagine a world, whether fictional or real, which produces the images. In Bei Dao’s poems, what we get is less a world than an imaginary, which means that a few contextual clues are not enough to provide a coherent sense of space and time, or subjectivity. We must bring these things to the poems ourselves, based on our own
background and experiences. While this is true to a certain extent of all poems, it is more essential in reading Bei Dao’s poetry, and therefore his poems also require more than your average amount of re-reading and repetition. In the same way, in Benjamin’s theory of translation, each translation brings the collective closer to the mystical pure language, which exists in no particular language, but is behind all of them. To take the analogy one step further, if the subjective voice in the poem were more explicit and active, then it would function as the primary source of poetic experience, the “original” which demands priority over any “translations” which the reader may provide. By maintaining a distant or absent poetic voice, these poems require the reader to insert her own voice, her own interpretation, or else leave the poem with nothing but a vague impression. The reader’s interpretation puts pressure on the understanding of the experiences or ideas conveyed in the poem, just as the poetic voice puts pressure on the reader’s own sense of her experiences. In the same way, the original and the translation, in Benjamin’s view, put pressure on their respective languages in order to open up potentially new perspectives within each.

But once again, it is tempting to get caught up in the push and pull of this tension and to forget about these poems’ demand that we constantly interrogate what it means to write about the past. We might observe that in the process of reading each stanza, each poem, each collection of poems, we discover resonances between these units that bring flashes of insight in the non-progressivist manner that Benjamin describes using the image of the constellation. The constellation is not itself an endpoint, but a moment of stillness within an ongoing process. In this sense, these poems attempt to move beyond the initial search for new forms which marked Misty Poetry and the post-Cultural
Revolution moment more broadly. As Wang Ban describes, Benjamin’s theory of history had a strong influence on intellectuals in China in the 1980s, because it provided a way of conceptualizing the response to a history of trauma and shock that did not rush to contain and rationalize the experience in a progressivist narrative form. Wang writes that for Benjamin, “History is not merely a concept, an idea, a chain of events, or a causal structure. Benjamin envisages history as a particular kind of image. We are confronted with ‘history’ when an element of the past flashes up as a dazzling and blinding image” (96). He notes the particular resonance of Benjamin’s famous image of the Angel of History, who turns toward the past and perceives not a chain of events but a wreckage, a catastrophe, and responds with “bewilderment and terror, unable to see anything meaningful and intelligible” even as the “raging storm of ‘progress’” pushes him forward, still turned toward the past (97). In Bei Dao’s “The landscape crossed out with a pen,” we saw how the flash of recognition quickly turns into this dazed, “frozen experience.” That poem’s image of the false testimony of the speaker, wearing a mask, recalls what Benjamin calls the “facies hippocratica” or “death head” of history (qtd. in Wang 98). Wang notes that critics such as Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua used this understanding of history to trace the critique of history as narrative in fiction and film from the 1980s. For Bei Dao, the goal is also to eliminate the mask and find a new language, but whereas Wang demonstrates the importance of Benjamin’s notion of allegory for the subsequent roots-seeking fiction writing of the 1980s, Bei Dao’s poetry of the subsequent decades has not attempted to reconstitute the fragments, even into the dialectical form of allegory.
Many critics have suggested that although it broke new ground for both poetic form and the existence of a subjective, personal voice within the poem, Misty Poetry remained stuck in this process of opening-up, failing to translate it into a dynamic poetics capable of speaking to times other than the transitional moment in which it emerged. In Bei Dao’s poetry after he left China, we see a new chapter in his poetics which explores instead the rupture between experience and language. Continuing to write in Chinese while living abroad, the language of memory and dreams was increasingly distinct from that of everyday life, a challenge which Bei Dao has suggested was in fact “good” for his poetry. In the 1980s, as Wang again describes, Benjamin’s revised understanding of experience was influential for those seeking a way forward after the traumatic shock of recent history. In this understanding, “experience is that by which one yearns in vain for a seamless meshing between private sensibility and the larger patterns of perceptual and affective heritage embedded in ritual, tradition, and myth” (102). While Benjamin felt that it was possible to find new ways of connecting the individual to the collective past (for instance through mechanical reproducibility), and the roots-searching writers of the 1980s similarly sought such reconciliation, Bei Dao, being entirely dislocated from the collective, does not attempt such a synthesis. This does not mean, however, that Bei Dao’s poetry is static, stuck in the perpetual present of the traumatic re-living of memory. Instead of attempting to “rehabilitate” experience through art, his poetry instead creates a new meshing of experience – between the poem and the reader. Writing outside of China, the impossibility of pinning down a collective whose memory can be re-formed leads to a

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98 See, for example, Manfredi loc.2807.
poetic experience into which anyone can enter, but which no one will be able to grasp fully. Bei Dao maintains a fundamental disconnect between the interior subjectivity and the external collectivity or sensory experience, despite the constant interaction between them. This represents the greatest departure of his poetics both from the classical tradition and from his own earlier work.

One way of conceptualizing this new meshing of experience is as a reader-oriented version of the Chinese concept of yixiang [意象]. Bei Dao raised this term in a discussion of poetic form on a 2015 panel and explained it, in his view, as a particular characteristic of Chinese poetry, which emphasizes the heart/mind/intention [心] of the image as opposed to a concept of the image which focuses only on its visual or external nature (as in the English-language conception of the image as impression). The two characters which make up this term, yi (idea) and xiang (image) represent a subjective and objective way of encountering the world, respectively. The use of these two characters in a compound word suggests a coming-together, an enmeshment of subjective experience and the objective, external image. For Bei Dao, this is a core feature of Chinese poetry which influenced Pound’s imagism (imagism is translated as yixiang zhuyi 意象主义) and importantly, it combines both aural and visual qualities of the idea in the mind. He noted that there is no equivalent for this term in English. The Chinese literary theorist Liu Xie (ca.465- ca.521), whose The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons [文心雕龙] is the first major comprehensive account of the nature and dynamics

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100 Panel discussion titled “Sound and Image: Chinese Poets in Conversation with Artist Xu Bin” held at Columbia University on February 24, 2015.
101 We might consider the Saussurian “sign” to be a comparable term, as it unifies the signifier and the signified, but for Saussure, both terms are objective, set apart from the subjective experience of the world.
of literature, understands the *yixiang* as the result of literature’s dual origins: as both a manifestation of the Dao (a response to an external process) and what Cai Zongqi calls “conscious human endeavors to transform their inward experiences into ‘patterns’ of written words” (51). As Cai explains it, in the creative process Liu Xie calls “Spirit and Thought” [*神思*], there is a combination of inward and outward movement: first the poet’s emotion is aroused on a simple psychological level in response to physical processes; then the poet’s spirit takes flight, as he contemplates and lets his spirit wander beyond the physical present; finally, this “outbound flight” is accompanied by an “inbound flight” in which the spirit returns to the ear and eye of the poet, with language serving as the “hinge and trigger”. If this “double journey,” this process of outgoing and incoming things, is successful, then the result, according to Cai, is a “mutual transformation of the inner (shen 神 yi 意 and qing 情) and the outer (wu 物 and xiang 象) into *yixiang* 意象 or ‘idea-image’ and a perfect embodiment of this idea-image in the medium of *yan* 语言” (56). Bei Dao’s poems in the 1990s and 2000s consistently evade that “perfect embodiment,” by preventing even the complete union of the idea and the image, by constantly displacing the idea behind the image to another related, but distinct image. Yet they are about the process of seeking out that unity of idea and image, and in that process, another subject-object dialectic enters the picture – that between the reader and the poem.

In this way, to recall Bei Dao’s claim that his poetry relies on the montage method, Eisenstein’s notion of montage helps us to understand how the transition from a series of images to a broader conceptual or sensory awareness is a process that requires active participation. On the one hand, just as Liu Xie saw the *yixiang* as a unity of
subjective/inner and objective/outer forces, Eisenstein stresses the “unifying principle” which individual shots and their juxtaposition through montage achieves. On the other hand, Eisenstein, working as he is in a temporal medium, emphasizes even more strongly the process of the creation of the image, and as a modernist, he highlights the role of art in calling attention to that process. We can recall the description of the relationship between the particular and the whole from Chapter 1, where Eisenstein argues that montage is “one of the most coherent and practical resources for realistic narration of film content”:

In such a case, each montage piece exists no longer as something unrelated, but as a given particular representation of the general theme that in equal measure penetrates all the shot-pieces. The juxtaposition of these partial details in a given montage construction calls to life and forces into the light that general quality in which each detail has participated and which binds together all the details into a whole, namely, into that generalized image, wherein the creator, followed by the spectator, experiences the theme. (11)

In this passage, Eisenstein introduces a distinction between a “representation” and an “image” in which, as he goes on to explain, the representation is the objective form and the image is the concept which the form conjures up in our mind. He gives the example of a clock, which has a particular shape, and which creates different representations depending on the geometric configurations of the hands. The image the clock conjures in our mind, however, is not that of its geometric features, but rather the concept of time. Each geometric representation, say the particular ninety-degree angle which signals nine o’clock, is associated in our mind with an image of nine o’clock: what we tend to do at that hour, the light, etc. The process through which the representation becomes an image relies on our own association of a variety of additional, external representations with that particular idea, all of which eventually coalesce into a unified image, though we forget the process that got us there. For instance, Eisenstein notes that when he first visited New
York City, he did not have a good conception of the different streets because they were all numbered and therefore indistinct in his mind. But gradually he noted the particular characteristics of each street and over time was able to connect the street numbers (their representations) with a comprehensive idea of the corresponding streetscapes (images), without realizing that the various smaller pictures his mind had collected in order to form that image. The key point here is that while this process takes place unconsciously in life, Eisenstein says that art “directs all the refinement of its methods to the process” (17). In this process, objective forms (representations) are combined according to a subjective series of associations, which is what the art work must convey to the audience, who re-trace those linkages in order to come to the same unified understanding as the artist.

In Bei Dao’s poem “Montage” [剪接] we see this attention to process, though again, unlike Eisenstein’s montage or the yixiang, the unification of subject and object within the poem remains elusive. The poem combines high and low registers and stanzas with distinct sets of imagery, varying in length from one to five lines. It is a long poem in comparison to many of his poems of this period, taking up nearly two pages. From the very start, it calls attention to the metaphor of the montage which the title sets up:

定格象死亡握住的杯子  
导演喝了口水  
转向观众:  
嘿，我说你去哪儿

A freeze-frame is like death gripping a glass  
the director drinks some water\textsuperscript{102}  
and turns to the audience:  
hey, where are you going? (Unlock 86-87)

\textsuperscript{102} The original 口水(or “mouth water”) means “saliva” not “water,” unless it should mean 一口水 as in “a mouthful of water”
In this opening, the director addresses two audiences at once: the imaginary audience viewing this “freeze-frame” and the reader of the poem. (The speaker in Bei Dao’s poems almost never addresses the reader in such colloquial language, but here this is achieved through the figure of the director). The director re-appears in three more stanzas: in the first two, he is engaging in the creative process (shouting through his megaphone and smiling at movie posters around town). Interspersed between these, the stanzas are written from the perspective of the “I” – a speaker who is carried along through the poem first by music, then by poetry. Eventually he is able to “infiltrate history / infiltrate the crowd” which is “standing around watching a show.” In the final stanza, the director re-appears, and we read:

杂耍人就是导演
五个红球在双手间
流星船转动

the performer is the director himself
five red balls between a pair of hands
the meteor ship revolves (88-89)

The role of the director as performer is foregrounded in this poem. The word for performer here is not the more typical yanyuan [演员] but rather zashuaren [杂耍人], which refers to a person performing vaudeville or in some kind of variety show. With the reference to the “five red balls” in the following line, we see the director as doing anything to capture our attention, to keep us from going away. This poem, too, stands out for its mélange of styles, appearing in awkward juxtapositions. The viewer becomes even more important here, as the one who must actively “infiltrate” the scene. Yet unlike
Eisensteinian montage, the poem is about the process; awareness of the process is not a pathway to some solid idea beyond it.\textsuperscript{103}

Whether it is the singularity of the yixiang or the many representations that go into creating the image in Eisenstein’s idea of montage, we find that Bei Dao’s poems refuse the ultimate unity that the image is supposed to work towards. In doing so, they create an active tension that is constantly seeking resolution, pushing both poem and reader forward. We can use the word “lyricism” to denote this active tension, which exists between the yi and the xiang or between the representation and the image. It is neither the form itself nor the simple fact of the poem’s obscurity, but the experience of attempting to trace the subjective associations of a distant voice while never being able to quite capture the emotion being expressed, and eventually coming to realize that the voice itself can’t ever capture it, either.

Considering Bei Dao’s later poetry against the other poems and films under examination in this study, it is worth pointing out that the poems are at their most lyrical when the moments of insight created by resonances between images coincide with a glimpse of emotion, which provides a momentary sense of a world beyond the poem. Such a moment occurs in the last stanza of the poem “Crying,” mentioned above, where, after a stanza of images about turning toward the distant past and listening for cries of honor and misfortune, the poem concludes:

\textsuperscript{103} The blatant self-consciousness on display in this poem is unusual for Bei Dao, but in the next section we will see how Xi Chuan takes this self-consciousness further, as he figures the poetic subjectivity more explicitly within his poems through his ironic voice.
让不幸降到我们
所理解的程度
每家展开自己的旗帜
床单、炊烟或黄昏

let misfortune fall
on the level of our understanding
each family unfolds its banner
bedsheets, kitchen smoke, dusk
(Unlock 46-47)

The sudden appearance of the ordinary details of daily life for common people in the
final line, which are simultaneously figured as the “flags” of families (thus linking these
people to the classical images, such as the horsemen, earlier in the poem) is striking.

Suddenly the poem is brought down to the earth, to the rituals of evening, conjuring up
sensory impressions of light (dusk), touch (bed sheets), smell (smoke from kitchen fires)
and even sound (these signal rituals, as flags, become the cries appropriate to the ordinary
person’s degree of misfortune). These images connect past and present, high and low, by
conjuring up the affect of daily life.

I will conclude this section with the most significant poem to display this brand of
lyricism, “Black Map” [黑色地图], which was written during the 2000s:^{104}

寒鸦终于拼凑成
夜:黑色地图
我回来了——归程
总是比迷途长
长于一生

带上冬天的心
当泉水和蜜制药丸
成了夜的话语
当记忆狂吠

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^{104} Bei Dao does not date his poems, but this poem was published in translation in Elion Weinberger’s edited collection, *The Rose of Time: New and Selected Poems* in 2010 and in 北岛作品精选 in 2012.
Cold crows finally gather and become
Night: a black map
I have returned – the trip home
Is always longer than losing the way
Longer by a lifetime

Bring the heart of winter
When spring water and gel capsules
Become the words of night
When memory howls
A rainbow in the black market vanishes and reappears

The fire of my father’s life is like a pea
I am his echo
Turning the corner to keep an appointment
Lovers of old hide in the wind
And letters whirl around

Beijing, let me
Make a toast with your lights
Let my white hair lead the way
Through the black map
Like the storm leads you to take flight
The poem was presumably written after Bei Dao was finally allowed to return to China, though it may have been written in anticipation of this long-awaited return. The poem speaks poignantly of the length of time it took for the speaker to return home (“the trip home/ is always longer than losing the way/ longer by a lifetime”) and has a mournful sense, because the length of time away has led to fewer chances for reunions and brought him closer to final farewells. The stanza which mentions his father, whose life is nearing the end, follows the image of the rainbow appearing and disappearing, like a ghost or a mirage. Similarly, the letters of old lovers (or perhaps just one old lover) swirl around the speaker in a gust of wind, as if taunting him with the impossibility of catching up with the past. The speaker recognizes that he is now the echo of his father, and the poem itself may be the voice of that echo, a means of keeping the past alive, but these images suggest that the attempt will be just a fleeting as the rainbow. Yet there is also a sense of hope that goes along with the strength of the poetic voice in this poem. The voice here speaks directly – not to his father or to his old lover, but to Beijing itself. He asks the city to let him make a toast (ganbei 干杯). The line could refer to making a toast to the lights (as in Weinberger’s translation, “Beijing, let me toast your lamplights”) or to toasting along with the lights, because a literal rendering of the line would be “along with all of your (lamp)lights make a toast.” The latter is appealing because it calls to mind the phrase

105 I have translated this poem myself, because the ambiguities are more significant and my interpretation differs from Weinberger’s in several key instances.
往事干杯 or “to toast the past,” also literally “make a toast with the past”. It can mean to remember good things in the past or to forget the bad. By toasting Beijing with the lights that have been there all along, the speaker makes a gesture toward letting go of the past that has haunted him (through decades of poetry, and attempting to be the echo). With this in mind, it is important to note that in the closing lines, after “reunions are always fewer than goodbyes” the character for “only” [只] in fact precedes “fewer by one,” so that while there will always be fewer reunions, they are only slightly fewer in number. In addition to beginning to come to terms with the past, then, there is a sense of futurity in this poem, a slight sense of openness and possibility.

This poem still features ambiguous references, such as the one to a small window that has been closed, where the speaker has been waiting in line. But I would suggest that it is among the most lyrical of Bei Dao’s later poems precisely because the poem is not dominated by abstraction; rather, it coalesces around an experience – returning home – with all of the complex and conflicting emotions that experience carries. It is far from historically grounded, in that this speaker could still be anyone, returning home at any time, and it is still difficult to unify all of these images into a particular sense of what that experience means to the speaker. And yet, it provides an emotional insight into the subjective impact of a moment in time stemming from a particular conjunction of experiences, even as it refuses to tell the story around that moment. Bei Dao’s poetry is at its best in these moments, when difficulty gives way to the reader’s ability to see through the mists – if only for an instant.
Xi Chuan, Realism and Performance

In the preceding section on Bei Dao, we saw how his later poems call attention to process – both the process of writing poetry and of remembering the past – without representing those processes outright. We might call these poems “performative,” in the sense that a performative utterance achieves something rather than describing something. These poems are not “about” art or memory, because they refuse to allow the images relating to these topics to coalesce into a unifying whole or larger symbolism. Instead, they create the conditions in which the fragments of potential meanings begin to come together in the mind of the reader, and as the readings and readers accumulate, a fuller understanding emerges. Yet this process takes us beyond the performative as traditionally understood. In exploring the potential usefulness and limitations of the theory of performativity for reading the Western lyric, Jonathan Culler notes that many literary theorists have applied J. L. Austin’s theory of performative utterances to all literature, because it conjures up in the mind of the reader a world that did not exist before the encounter with the text. This broad application of the theory of performativity is less useful for a theory of lyric, Culler argues, because, as we have seen, lyrics do not always posit fictional worlds but can instead issue statements about the world as it is. Moreover, the over-application of the theory of performativity does not allow for a recognition of the unique moments when poems really do appear to achieve what they are describing. In thinking about Bei Dao’s poetry as a process, these qualifications are important to take into consideration. First, we cannot argue that his poems are all performative by virtue of their ability to create worlds for the reader because the texts alone do not contain all of what is necessary to achieve the unity between image and idea – and many poems are not
looking to do so anyway. Moreover, it is not the case that all of Bei Dao’s poems require the sort of detective work and imaginative reconstruction like what we saw in “The landscape crossed out with a pen…” though many do. To apply the same label to his entire oeuvre is to miss the distinctive trend in this direction over time, and also to ignore exceptions, including his more recent shift away from this sort of structure.106 More specifically to Culler’s point, though, there are poems by Bei Dao which are more typical performatives, in the sense that the lines of the poem really do appear to be achieving what they describe. For instance in “Destination,” discussed above, we read the lines, “you follow the odd numbers / and practicing the sparks of pronunciation / travel, from a map,” and “punctuation can’t slow / the labor pains of rhythm / you approach the wind’s metaphor.” These lines describe a fictional “you” who is looking for poetic insight and being swept along by rhythm, while reading this poem also causes the reader to engage in the activity being described, following the lines, reading them out loud, being swept along by a constant series of images without punctuation, and so on. Most of what I have been describing above does not fit into this more specific category of the performative. The words on the page achieve nothing on their own, even by virtue of being read. The poems have effects on the world, but only when the reader actively engages with the images of the poem and draws upon his or her own knowledge and experience in order to understand the poem. This participatory requirement on the part of the reader may or may

106A recently completed long poem, “Crossroads,” is not only very long, but is organized into long stanzas which repeat the same sentence structure. Each line is a question and the question words repeats throughout each stanza. For instance, in the “Prologue,” stanza 1 consists of six “why” questions, stanza 2 moves from “is there/are there” to “who”, stanza 3 asks “when” questions, etc. Typical of Bei Dao, the questions themselves do not have any particular connection to one another and include abstract imagery, but the overall effect is much more rhythmic and repetitive than anything he has written previously. I do not yet have a copy of the original Chinese for this poem, only the translation of the Prologue and Part 1 from a reading in 2015.
Jonathan Culler discusses this problem in relation to Austin’s notion of felicitous and infelicitous performatives, where the former are successful utterances because they are performed under the appropriate conditions, and the latter are not (such as declaring “I now pronounce you married” when one is not authorized by the state to do so, or when one is not in the presence of a couple seeking to wed, etc.). Austin famously excludes literary language from his theory of the performative because of the difficulty of defining what constitutes a felicitous performative utterance in a literary context. How do we know that a poem is successful in moving its reader and how to identify which conditions are necessary to ensure this success? Culler points us to a way around this problem. As I have already mentioned, he sets aside the notion of the performative for the special cases where the language is actually achieving what it describes. But crucially, he also highlights Austin’s revised categorization of linguistic utterances, which is much less frequently taken up by literary theorists. After complicating his initial distinction between performative and constative utterances with the secondary notion of felicitous and infelicitous performatives, Austin sets out three categories of any speech act, which Culler succinctly summarizes as: “the locutionary act (of producing a given utterance), the illocutionary act (the act I perform in speaking this utterance in particular circumstances), and perlocutionary acts (acts that I may accomplish as a result of the illocutionary act)” (loc. 2697). For instance, the illocutionary act of pronouncing a couple to be married may perform a simultaneous perlocutionary act of creating joy among the
attendees at the ceremony (or sorrow for a jilted lover, as the case may be). Whereas illocutionary acts do not take much effort to achieve (one has simply to meet the conditions or, in the case of a promise or warning, to say the words), perlocutionary effects require awareness of social and other conventions, such as how to persuade someone that a promise will be kept. Culler argues that a broad assumption that all literature is automatically performative neglects the important, but unpredictable, perlocutionary effects that “poets are seeking to achieve by virtue of producing a text that performatively establishes itself as a poem: effects such as moving readers, provoking reflection, leading them to act differently” (loc. 2709). Ultimately, he concludes that

the poem’s efficacy is not be [sic] given by virtue of the poem’s formulations but depends on the ways in which its performance is received. It is far better – certainly more accurate – to think of the poem as performance, which may or may not be efficacious, rather than as a performative, which is supposed to bring about, by convention, that of which it speaks. (loc. 2732)

In leading us to consider lyric as performance rather than a performative, Culler provides a means of accounting for the poem as an event, and for its “functioning in the world” as it “acts iterably through repeated readings, makes itself memorable” (loc.2743).

As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, thinking about poetry and film through the lens of performance helps us to notice several features of an historically-inflected lyricism. First, the emotional pull of the lyrical and its sense of being never quite complete draws the reader in and asks for repetition and re-membering. A lyrical work which calls attention to its status as a performance desirous of an audience forces the reader/viewer to respond as a participant rather than as a recipient, creating an even stronger and more sustained emotional and psychological engagement. Second, the fact that each performance is slightly different, has different perlocutionary effects depending on what the reader or audience brings to it each time, creates a more open-ended and
multi-faceted structure of signification. Rather than simply allowing the work to mean anything, this structure requires a back-and-forth movement between work and audience, which resists a unidirectional transference of meaning in favor of a mediation and gradual accumulation of insights, in the vein of Benjamin’s notion of history.

Given all of this talk about performance, it is perhaps ironic that even as Bei Dao’s poetry requires sustained effort on the part of the reader in order to achieve its most salutary perlocutionary effects, it appears on the surface to be written for no one but the poet himself. Rather than feeling as if we are witnessing a performance, or even overhearing the voice of a solitary speaker, as in Helen Vendler’s formulation from Chapter 2, we feel as if we are looking over the shoulder of the poet, in the middle of the night, as he scribbles and struggles to find the right words for the ideas swirling in his head. At the same time, since the range of responses and readings that one may come up with in response to these ambiguous images is so vast, the poems also seem to be written for anyone at all. In the case of Xi Chuan, to whose work we will now turn, thinking about the perlocutionary effects of poetry in terms of performance is more productive because the experience of reading his poems is often akin to imagining the poet performing them in front of you. Many of his poems have a highly ironic, playful and self-conscious quality which makes them even easier to appreciate when the poet reads them aloud (whereas Bei Dao’s dense poems are in fact quite difficult to appreciate in the form of a public reading). Even when you read the poems in a book, Xi Chuan’s works come across as highly self-conscious about their status as performances, and about the many ways in which they may fail as such. During the 1990s and into the 2000s, Xi Chuan’s poems were ironically self-negating and difficult to pin down, giving the
impression of a poet who had given up on creating any particular impact on the reader. More recently, however, Xi Chuan has written some poems which, in Culler’s terms, seek to be events, to function in the world. They move beyond linguistic innovation or playful musings and instead create connections between readers and the physical and emotional experience of being-in-the-world. In these works, self-awareness is not cerebral but corporeal, not an intellectual game or a reflection on art in the abstract but a means to force poetry to grapple with its physicality without pretending that doing so relieves it of the trappings of the mind.

Xi Chuan emerged on the scene in Beijing in the mid-1980s, and as a student at Beijing University and later through his affiliation with the journal Tendency [傾向], became associated with the post-“Misty” poets, though his work tends to reveal more differences from other poets of his generation than similarities. Like Bei Dao, his poetry underwent a profound shift. His early work has been described by Lucas Klein as “high lyricism” which “reflected a belief in an international poésie pure, often demonstrating the exposed structures and urban timelessness of International Style architecture, or else an abstracted landscape that is clearly China yet, at the same time, not” (“In Their Own Words”). The more predominant trend of new poetry in the mid-to-late 1980s was away from abstraction and toward concreteness. As Maghiel van Crevel describes, the journal Tendency “consciously reacted against colloquializing and vulgarizing trends that had challenged Obscure [or Misty] Poetry’s primacy within the avant-garde” though he is quick to point out that this does not make the journal’s poetics

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107 Van Crevel writes, “If critics and anthologizers are agreed that Xi Chuan is a ‘post-Obscure’ poet, the use of that catchall reflects his age rather than, say, the transparent nature of his imagery, which can be seen to contain a fair dose of obscurity” (Introduction to the translation for “Salute” 88).

108 See also Notes on the Mosquito p. x.
a return to Obscure poetry (*Chinese Poetry* 189). The primary distinction, as emphasized by van Crevel and many others, is the lack of “the humanist, socio-political engagement of the Obscure poets” (190). After 1989, Xi Chuan did little writing for almost two years, and then re-emerged with *Salute* [致敬], a long poem in eight parts, written in prose-like lines. Both his critics and Xi Chuan himself identify this as a major turning point. In describing the transition, Klein observes, “His self-contained lyric opened into expansive prose poems that often reflexively observed their own poetic method…including their representation and construction of poetry, metaphor, and language” (*Notes* xi). His style has continued to evolve and diversify over the past two and a half decades. Xi Chuan’s work in the 1990s shares with Bei Dao’s a general movement away from direct socio-political engagement and toward the development of a more complex and self-conscious poetic voice. Focusing primarily on *Salute* and other key works from the 1990s, van Crevel identifies “indeterminacy” as one of the primary qualities of Xi Chuan’s poetics. After *Salute*, he writes, “Xi Chuan’s writing derives much of its power from the alternation and coexistence of opposites…[which] doesn’t hinge on either ‘transparent’ or ‘obscure’ imagery but emerges as a general mood that subverts clarity, certainty and straightforward direction in most if not all of the text’s dimensions” (197).

The rest of this chapter will focus on more recent poems which do not abandon this indeterminacy so much as temper it with more emotional, bodily and materially-grounded concerns. Like the poems by Bei Dao discussed above, these poems are not lyrical in a traditional sense, nor are they explicit challenges to that tradition, as many of Xi Chuan’s first post-1989 poems were. Their lyricism also lies in the tension between
image and idea (if we think in terms of the yixiang), or between representation and image (in Eisenstein’s terms). It is especially apparent in those moments when the affect of personal experience filters through to remind us that the transient nature of experience has real effects on how we move through the world and how we re-live the past in our memories. We might understand it, therefore, as the result of a search for the language to capture emotional experience, even as that search is plainly interminable.

The key difference between Bei Dao’s and Xi Chuan’s more recent poems is the presence of ordinary, prosaic language in the latter’s work, which contributes to a feeling of everyday casualness. There is a much greater appearance of realism than anything we find in the Misty poetry, but unlike many of his post-Misty counterparts, the seemingly direct language is undermined by an ironic tone and self-conscious distancing from the everyday images. Unlike in a Bei Dao poem, where the images themselves require close reading, here we have images that appear straightforward and have a clear referent, but their meaning in the poem as a whole, and the audience or topic to which they are addressed, is just as difficult to pin down. For example, the poem “This Minute” [此刻] begins with a description of a man carrying a coffin:

此刻, 一个男人扛一口棺材走在街道上
他衣扣敞开, 他浑身冒汗
星光溅落的街道被他踏响
黑魆魆的屋顶和红纱灯是他曾经梦见
我们同居在此有着海洋和沙漠的星球

this minute, a man carries a coffin down the street
his buttons are open, he’s sweaty all over
his feet tap the street splashed with starlight
he sees the death-dark roofs and red-skinned lamps from his dreams
we live together on this planet of deserts and seas

Translation by Lucas Klein, Notes on a Mosquito p.54-55. As with the poems by Bei Dao, I will be using the translations from Klein’s collection where available because he works in close contact with Xi.
The image of the sweaty man carrying a coffin with his shirt open is not what we would typically call “poetic.” The scene around him, by contrast, is depicted using metaphors: the “street splashed with starlight,” “death-dark roofs,” and “red-skinned lamps.”

Meanwhile, the latter two images, while we imagine them to be part of the actual scene in the present, are also “from his dreams.” The gradual movement from a mundane image, to a series of metaphors in the present, to a connection between the present and the past, appears to be setting up a story. We expect to find out who this man is, and why he is carrying a coffin. (Is he alone? Who or where are the other pallbearers?) We also want to know why and how the scene harks back to his dreams. But then the last line of the stanza appears as a generalized abstraction, a stark intrusion that disrupts the visually distinct opening: “we live together on this planet of deserts and seas.” This line closes each of the eight stanzas, signaling that the poem, following the title and the opening phrase, is about the many different actions going on “this minute” in this shared world of ours.

What do we make of the combination of realistic details, typical metaphoric language and sweeping generalizations in this one stanza? Since the presence of what appears to be a nod towards realism is less common in Xi Chuan’s earlier work, it is worth examining this aspect of the poem further. Instead of attempting to counter the overly subjective and ego-centric Misty poetry with an attempt at objectivity, with poetry that is as close to the real as possible (as many “post-Misty” poets were doing in an earlier period), Xi Chuan here gives us realism. In his essay “The Reality Effect,” Roland Barthes famously identifies the “useless detail” as a key marker of realism. He argues

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Chuan in producing them. Where I have an alternate reading or refer to poems which have not been translated, I will provide my own translations.
that the presence of details in a text which have no meaning in themselves and no
function in relation to the structure of the text, such as the mention of a barometer on the
wall in Flaubert’s “A Simple Heart,” signal neither specific information nor direct access
to the real but a signification of it:

just when these details are reputed to denote the real directly, all that they do – without
saying so – is to signify it; Flaubert’s barometer, Michelet’s little door finally say
nothing but this: we are the real; it is the category of “the real” (and not its contingent
contents) which is then signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to
the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the reality
effect is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic
of all the standard works of modernity. (148)

Barthes makes an important distinction between fiction and history on the way to this
conclusion. Details such as Flaubert’s barometer are appealing, he argues, because of
what he calls the “resistance of the ‘real’ (in its written form, of course) to structure,”
which many equate with a resistance to meaning (146). What is “true-to-life” is
consistently opposed to what is “intelligible,” and “in the ideology of our time, obsessive
reference to the ‘concrete’ … is always brandished like a weapon against meaning, as
if, … what is alive cannot signify – and vice versa” (146). Although both fiction and
history are narratives, history is defined by the much greater role played by these details
denoting “concrete reality.” Not confined as strongly by the demands of intelligibility,
“history…is in fact the model of those narratives which consent to fill in the interstices of
their functions by structurally superfluous notations” (146). He goes on to note the logical
development of literary realism at roughly the same time as this “objective” approach to
history.

The question for our discussion is: what is the function of the realistic detail in
poetry, particularly poetry which is not pretending to access the “real”? In a poem, there
is much less room for words that do not contribute to the meaning of the poem, nor is it
possible for a word to escape the structure of the poem (the way it is possible to escape the structure of a narrative in a fictional text). Epic poetry allows for minor details as part of its epideictic discourse (language intended to “excite the admiration of the audience” (Barthes 143)), but lyric poetry generally does not describe for the sake of description, unless description is the point of the poem (as in ekphrasis, for example). In Xi Chuan’s poetry, descriptions like the one that opens “This Minute” call to mind of the realistic details in fiction. With its description of a sweaty man with his buttons open, the opening of this poem is not exactly an example of a useless detail, because this information is important to setting the scene for the poem, but because these lines contain no metaphors and make no pretense at aesthetic beauty or philosophical profundity, they signal a borrowing from the narrative genres in which those details are generally found: history, fiction and – though Barthes does not discuss it because he is focused on written forms – cinema. Just as in Barthes’s analysis, where useless details do not denote anything but come to signify realism itself, these descriptions in Xi Chuan’s poems signal realism, not direct access to the real. Unlike in a realist narrative such as Flaubert’s, however, the function of those details is made visible by the fact that the pretense of realism is abandoned almost as soon as it is set up.

Xi Chuan’s prose poems of the same period similarly establish the appearance of realism while using wry humor to undermine our attempts to use the information in the poem to access a “real” referent. “On False Causality and True Chance in a Dark Room,” a poem from the long sequence Eagle’s Words, consists of short, numbered segments in prose form. Some of them sound like straightforward narratives, while others sound like
philosophical reflections, except that the philosophy they lay out is rather nonsensical. An example of the first type is as follows:

26. In a dark room, I put my ear to the wall and listen in, but hear nothing stir at my neighbor’s next door. Then suddenly I hear someone put an ear to the other side of the wall, too. I quickly pull my ear back, sure to behave like an upright and proper man. (Klein, Notes 180-181)

In other iterations of this, the narrative being told is fantastical rather than realistic:

31. In a dark room, I turn on the radio. A melodramatic love story arouses my self-pity. Then a burglar crawls out from under my bed, engages me in a discussion of the meaning of life, and vows to me that he’ll make a fresh start. (180-181)

Still others begin to signal a sense that the imaginary experiences in this room might lead to some higher meaning:

38. In a dark room, my gold ring, passed down for three generations, rolls onto the floor, never to be seen again. Therefore I suspect that beneath my dark room is another dark room; therefore I suspect that everyone who ever wore a gold ring lives beneath me. (182-183)

Yet before we try to read too deeply into these images, the poem ironically conjures up its own images of philosophy and classical poetry:

32. An enthusiast of the Analects of Confucius refutes another enthusiast of the Analects of Confucius to a bloody pulp.
Du Fu has received too much exaltation, so no other Du Fu could ever win anything. (180-181)

In these two segments, the poem suggests that taking tradition or philosophy too seriously does not lead to any good, and by thus treating these major figures so irreverently, undermines whatever deeper meaning we might try to draw out of this poem.\(^{111}\) Van Crevel provides a helpful way of thinking about the tension these poems create with their combination of direct voice and playful abstraction. He writes that despite the appearance of realism, “Xi Chuan does not…see poetry as a straightforward reflection of life, and stresses that for life to yield poetry a profound transformation is required. Hence his low regard for authenticity and his fascination with its subversion through pseudo-religion, pseudo-philosophy, pseudo-reason and indeed pseudo-truth, that is surmise” (361).

The appearance of realism in these poems turns out to be only a playful subversion of realism. In addition, as we see in some of the lines from “On False Causality…” above, the language tends to shift from apparent realism to hyperbole (“therefore I suspect that everyone who ever wore a gold ring lives beneath me”) or sarcasm. Our expectation of objectivity and naturalness is upended, creating an irony that is even more apparent when the poems are read by the poet in his deep, relatively monotone voice. In such a context, it is difficult to see how lyricism survives, and indeed, in many of Xi Chuan’s poems from the last 25 years or so, the irony overtakes either philosophical significance or lyrical sentiment. In some of his more recent poems, however, we see an important shift taking place. Suddenly this self-consciousness, this

\(^{111}\) Incidentally, I saw Xi Chuan read this poem at the Princeton Poetry Festival in March 2013, both in the original and in translation, and his dry, somewhat monotone performance of it helped to amplify the absurdity of the lines. The audience responded with laughter throughout. A recording of him reading the same poem for a 2011 event at the Library of Congress, however, suggest that audiences may not always see the humor on the poem (they were silent).
playful sarcasm, starts to fade away, although it does not disappear altogether. In its place, we find an increasing attention to ordinary life itself, rather than ordinary life as realism or an explicitly anti-lyrical, post-Misty poetics might wish to represent it. By starting with the sensory aspects of everyday experience, these poems are searching for a language to capture life as it feels, rather than as it appears. The poems are ultimately unsuccessful in finding that language, but in their search, they enact a self-conscious yet un-ironic process which requires the reader to explore and engage with these experiences alongside the poetic voice. In that way, they become lyrical once more.

Although, as noted above, Xi Chuan is often assumed to be an anti-lyrical poet, Lucas Klein makes the nuanced observation that Xi Chuan is in fact “pushing the modernist lyric beyond its upper limits.” Speaking about the prose poetry in particular, Klein writes:

Rather than undercutting lyricism à la Han Dong [another post-“Misty” poet], Xi Chuan’s prose poetry allowed him to reevaluate it – as he reevaluates Nietzsche or “the value of this toothbrush” in “Exercises in Thought” (2004) – and examine, rather than take for granted, the interplay between Chinese tradition and a modernity of Western origin. (Notes xi)

Because this statement appears in his introduction to his translations of Xi Chuan’s poems, Klein does not have the space to elaborate much further on this important observation. However, it is a good starting point because he recognizes that there is more than one way to engage with the lyrical tradition and multiple sources for that tradition. If the turn away from “lyricism” promoted by poets like Han Dong implied an understanding of lyrical poetry as that which emphasizes aesthetic beauty, modernist form and the assertion of a subjective voice, and if the re-evaluation of lyricism involved a large degree of self-consciousness and a limited claim for the function of poetry overall, then the lyricism of Xi Chuan’s more recent poems is both a departure and a return. It is a
return to a slightly more emotionally-driven poetics – but with more nuance and self-awareness than the Misty poets had – and a departure in that it begins to reflect more explicitly on the world as it is experienced through the senses, without pretending that direct access to experience can be achieved through language.

This shift to a more affective poetics shows up modestly in poems like “Ode to Skin” [皮肤颂] and “The Ant’s Plunder” [蚂蚁劫], which meditate on the body and its sensations. In “Ode to Skin,” instead of reflecting on memory or experience using external symbols, it is the skin which bears and conceals knowledge about the past and present, as we see in the below stanzas:

皮肤。我寂静的表层。我这不曾遭受过酷刑的皮肤，幻想着酷刑，就进入了历史，就长出了寂静的庄稼：我这了无历史感的汗毛。

Skin. My silent surface. This skin of mine, which has never been subject to cruelty, fantasizes about cruelty, enters history, grows forth a silent harvest: this body hair of mine with no sense of history. (stanza 2) (Klein, Notes 138-139)

但当我注目我潜伏着血管的皮肤，我也就看见了你清凉在夏季德皮肤。但我还想看见你的骨头。

When I focus on the skin concealing my veins, I can also see your skin cooling in the summertime. But I wish I could see your bones. (stanza 6) (138-139)

我的皮肤内装着我的疾病，快乐和幽暗。我的幽暗是灯光不能照亮的。

My skin bears my disease, my happiness, and my melancholy. My melancholy cannot be brightened by lamplight. (stanza 9) (138-139)

By the final stanza, the skin is explicitly the source of feeling; it is how we feel, or attempt to feel, our relations to others:

你用皮肤向我靠近，或者我用皮肤感受你的颤抖。我说不准你是否想要剥下我的皮肤去披到狼后者羊的身上。

You get close to me with your skin, or I feel your trembling with my skin. I can’t tell whether you want to peel off my skin for a wolf or a sheep to wear. (stanza 13) (140-141)
The poem “The Ant’s Plunder” is equally striking in its haptic imagery. It describes an encounter with an ant who bites the index finger of the speaker. The first focus is on the surprising intensity of feeling:

In an instant, it turned itself into a weapon. The pain was so great that I cursed this neither common nor rare 1.5-centimeter long ant. This may be the greatest achievement of its life: to cause a man such piercing pain. (142-143)

Then the speaker moves to consider his relationship to the ant in a philosophical vein, but again, it is the physical experience that prompts this speculation:

In the throbs of pain the ant and I encounter each other. I never thought “the encounter between Man and World” of which Heidegger spoke would find form between me and ant. This any lives to sting me; I live to curse it in pain. (142-143)

Another poem, “Drizzle” [连阴雨], similarly focuses on sensation, tracing the effects of unceasing clouds and rain and the mold thus produced. First, the poem repeats the image of drizzle to convey how the dampness spreads mold and affects the environment:

This phrase, lian yin yu, could also be translated (less poetically) as “a period of clouds and rain,” which highlights the duration of the experience.
making wood sprout mushrooms   making gums grow cankers – the very same force
(Klein, Notes 144-145)

In the second stanza, the poem adds two symbolic recipients of this spread of mold: love and the lyric. But the speaker asks, “love couldn’t it use a bit of mold?” [爱 不是需要毛吗？] (144-145) and suggests that it is only through the growing of mold that the “moldless lyric” emerges. We could read this reference to the lyric (shuqing 抒情) as lyricism in a broader sense, as the expression of emotion more generally, and the stanza as a whole as a suggestion that this growth and decay can eventually turn love and emotion into something else – if not a lyricism of youthfulness and vigor, then one of middle age [中老年的抒情] which is perhaps more mature (144-145). Throughout, the poem continues to alternate between more abstract reflections such as these and more focused, sensory images. In stanza seven, after the previous stanzas have built up a repertoire of images of mold and drizzle, it strikes the body, mimicking the way in which an external sensation of dampness builds and eventually creates an internal discomfort for the one experiencing it:

是连阴雨 让鞋子进水 湿了袜子——脚冰凉
然后水推在人的身体里
从下往上 顶到大脑——那里一片汪洋
连阴雨下在汪洋大海之上——货船驶向亚洲——雨下在日本的庭院里

it’s drizzle that soaks shoes that drenches socks – freezing feet
and then the water pushes into our bodies
from bottom to top up into the brain – and all a vastness once there
drizzle falling on vast seas – cargo ships sailing to Asia – raining on Japanese courtyards

(144-145)

From this grounded moment in the body, the poem is able to move outward, beyond the sequencing of the effects of rain and the subsequent mold and toward a broader vision. The mention of 300,000 square kilometers of land and sea [30 万平方公里的土地和大
affected by the drizzle earlier in the poem is now more than a mere statistic (144-145). The camera pulls back and we see not only China but drizzle falling on “cargo ships sailing to Asia” and “Japanese courtyards” [货船驶向亚洲； 日本的庭院] (144-145). This broader perspective provides a greater insight into the metaphoric function of the image of drizzle and mold:

> rich and poor both get moldy
> but the rich don’t worry – they can always throw away whatever gets moldy – aside from themselves
> a fair economy and a foul economy both get moldy
> but the fair economy knows how to make money off mold
> those things that can avoid the drizzle can’t avoid mold –
> curses of the indignant – (146-147)

But most importantly, this symbolic dimension of the poem begins with the physical effects of the drizzle and returns to these at the end. In the last two stanzas, we find the body once again:

> the bald man with no hair but mold – this too is a new life
> mildew and then a new life –
> in the drizzle –
> this is the force of drizzle, look –
> (146-147)

Returning to the idea that the drizzle can rejuvenate, the poem closes with the imperative to “look” [看吧], but what it has shown us is that to look is also to feel, even though our
language (in both Chinese and English) only uses the verb “to look” as an imperative (there is no equivalent “Feel!”).

Physical sensation is not the only way that these poems in the sensorial mode convey the poignancy of an experience; other poems use descriptions of visual or aural impressions to draw the reader into a distinct scene. In the two sequences, *Senses of Reality* [现实感] and *Travel Diary* [出行日记], the collection of shorter poems into a broader sequence allows a multiplicity of perspectives and sensory approaches to coalesce without creating a fully distinct picture, as each poem addresses a different topic with a different stylistic approach. *Travel Diary*, originally published as a sequence of five poems and later expanded to seventeen,\(^\text{113}\) features short prose poems of about a paragraph long, each of which presents a particular incident or observation. In the first version, the poems are centered around distinct experiences. “Butterflies Meeting Death on a Windshield” [撞死在挡风玻璃上的蝴蝶] is about driving on the highway and suddenly encountering a flock of butterflies that the speaker ends up massacring with his windshield. Another, “I Happened to See the Sunrise” [我顺便看见日出] details a visit by the speaker to a seaside town in order to show his child the sunrise over the ocean, only to accidentally glimpse it alone after spending the night caring for the child, who suffers from a toothache. In place of a complete narrative arc, these poems are vignettes, brief scenes with a distinct set of visual cues. In the expanded sequence, there are other examples like these, but there are also several poems which are less realistic. Instead of presenting a particular scene, they might engage in a fantasy (such as being able to split oneself into three people in order to scare off a threatening man in “Changeable” [变幻])

\(^{113}\) The first publication is in 《深浅》 (2005) and the second in 《狗一梦》 (2013)
or in a series of observations (such as the poem “Another Discovery” [另一发现] which traces the various living and non-living things that co-exist with the speaker in his everyday life). As a collection, the poems create a series of impressions for the reader organized around the odd, unexpected or exceptional aspects of ordinary life. Not even the more whimsical poems, like “Changeable,” ever attempt any sweeping claims or digress into an emotional or psychological rumination. “Passing through the Vegetable Market” [穿过菜市场], opens by noting the contrast between a classical poet’s typical evening scene, a setting sun falling on the mountains, and the speaker’s own evening landscape as he passes through a vegetable market. The speaker expresses jealousy towards the classical poets and annoyance at the woman he sees in the market barely clothed in her pajamas, but we know that Xi Chuan’s poems are always motivated by such incongruous images; he would not write a classical-style poem even if a more aesthetically-appealing scene were set before him. Instead of a realistic description of the vegetable market, however, we get a reflection on the contradictory experience of the moment, on the gap between the poet’s reflections, the images in his mind, and the scene around him. A similar self-reflection and layering of emotions is also found in “A Discovery” [一个发现]. The poem is addressed to a “you” whom it describes as traveling in such a way as to never really notice things (things which the speaker presumably would notice) and chides this “you” for “never getting very far” [其实你无法走出很远] (《狗一梦》 218). Yet the poem ends by saying that “this line sounds like a curse, but I

114 古代诗人思维最活跃的时刻。漫步在斜阳浸染的山道上何等快意！(《狗一梦》216)
don’t intend it that way” [这话说出来像一个诅咒，但我不是故意的。] (《狗一梦》218).

Despite the mix of tones and topics in the poems from *Travel Diary*, they all have a tendency towards the cinematic, either because of their visual nature, which provides a clear scene we can imagine watching unfold before us, or because of the intriguing situation which they set up, which could lead to a longer story. However, these scenes and premises never develop any further. Although the title *Travel Diary* would suggest a daily record of events in a chronological sequence, even if those events do not cohere into a narrative, this diary is instead a sequence of impressions which emphasize the existence of the exceptional within the everyday, for those willing to notice it (for those, in other words, willing to see the poetry even in the lowly vegetable market). They never go so far as to ascribe any higher significance to these impressions, which is ensured by the complexity of tone and the “twists” in many of the closing lines (such as the closing of “A Discovery” cited above). They remain idiosyncratic, as the last poem makes clear, by noting that in the end, everyone lives his own life, even if he does so in close proximity to others.\(^{115}\)

In their variety and randomness, the poems provide a multi-perspectival view, requiring the reader to piece them together into a sense of a poetic world.

Most significantly for the present discussion, the pretense of realism in *Travel Diary* is upended by the strange musings that seemingly ordinary circumstances elicit, creating a self-consciousness that a more straightforwardly realist approach would lack.

We see this self-reflexivity even more explicitly in the series *Senses of Reality*. Two of

\(^{115}\) 读到这些字句的人也许会说，这人说的全是废话。且慢，我见过你吗？我想来想去没见过你。我们各活一辈子，也许在同一座城市，同一个小区。（《狗一梦》227）
the poems in this sequence, “Once It Gets Dark” [天一黑] and “Striking the Iron,” [打铁] sketch scenes that could easily be cinematic, and which acknowledge their own visuality.116 “Once It Gets Dark” begins with the loss of sunlight and the way it affects the visibility of the mountains and the town nearby. But then, slowly, light returns, first emerging from the inns and eventually seeping into the viewer’s own eyes as they imaginatively adjust to the darkness and see the mountains that were there all along. The arrival of light also signals the awareness of sounds – in this case, the sounds of cooking. But we are instructed by the poetic voice to “look closely” calling attention to the fact that the poem is not just describing the scene, but calling the reader to act: “Look closely, the mountains haven’t left, dimly, faintly, they stand in a ring around this town” [仔细辨认，群山哪儿都没去，影影绰绰，围着小镇站着呐] (Notes 203). This line performatively creates the image of the faintly visible mountains; they appear in our minds as we obey the command to pay attention. Going a step further, the loss of light in the scene is compared to “actors exiting when the play’s over, props exiting, too” [仿佛戏唱完演员就退场了，道具也退场了] (203). The scene in a “raven-dark blacksmith shop” [鸟黑的铁匠铺] in “Striking the Iron” also blends the visual and the aural, with the description of the repetitive motion of striking the iron (205). Like “Once it Gets Dark,” here we also find an explicit comparison between the visual image and a performance of it. Striking the iron and quenching it is compared to “acting out a TV show” [好像在表演一部电视剧] even as the image itself reminds the speaker that “People still need their unwieldy farm tools, not just watches and TVs / Today people are

116 See Appendix 3 for the complete poems. I’m using Klein’s translation here.
opening up to their thirteenth-century lives” [依然有人需要一件笨重的农具，除了手表和电视机 / 依然有人在今天将那十三世纪的生活开辟] (205). These two poems fall under Culler’s narrower category of performatives in the sense that they explicitly create images in the mind of the reader and call attention to their ability to do so. Their comparison of that activity to actual instances of performance, on the other hand, is a signal that what interests the speaker-poet is not so much the poem’s ability to perform real acts in the real world as it is the poem’s likeness to other real-world acts which mediate between experience and the representation of it, and between the past and the present.

The ambiguous status of the poetic voice is another key element in establishing what we might call this performance of realism. The poems from *Senses of Reality*, like “Striking the Iron” and “Once it Gets Dark,” give no indication of a particular persona that is animating the poem, unlike “On False Causality and True Chance in a Dark Room,” which has a persona, designated by “I,” with a distinct voice. Although the poems with a first-person speaker are inconsistent in the use of that speaker, these poems go a step further by only giving us hints of a guiding consciousness, not through pronouns but by providing a particular perspective on the scene and instructing us, such as the line “look closely.” These poems do not stick to generalizable statements that present what Culler calls “anonymous wisdom” (loc. 2529). Their perspective comes from a mediating position, between the viewing subject (the reader) and the object of viewing. In *Modern Poetry in China: A Visual-Verbal Dynamic*, Paul Manfredi argues that the poetics of the “Misty” poets, and of modern Chinese poetry more broadly, is defined by the way in which the act of seeing within the poem establishes a modern
lyrical subjectivity. He borrows from J.T. Mitchell’s description of ekphrastic poetry, in which the poet “[t]ypically stands in a middle position between the object described or addressed and a listening subject who will be made to ‘see’ the object through the medium of the poet’s voice” (qtd. in Manfredi, loc. 218). For Manfredi, modern Chinese poetry figures the subjective “voice” as both “maker” or poetic subject and the “object made” within the poem itself (loc. 231). In our previous discussion of Bei Dao, we saw how the subjective ego which so distinguished the poetics of the Misty poets began to recede in his later work. No longer is the lyrical “I” a “visually constructed entity, a self-fashioning or self-portraiture of the poet situated in some newly conceived era or context” (Manfredi, loc. 231). Yet this loss of a distinct subjective voice or self-presentation does not make the poems objective. We may not “see” the poetic subject, but the images are so personal that we remain within an interior, subjective imagination. In the poems by Xi Chuan, by contrast, there is a distinct tension between the appearance of a more realistic and unmediated representation and the subtle reminders that there remains a poetic subject in that “middle position” Mitchell speaks of, determining what the reader or listener “sees.”

In this sense, we might understand the emerging perspective as analogous to Jia Zhangke’s camera in his “hometown trilogy.” In these films, the apparent documentary realism co-exists with the development of a distinct auteurist style, combined with some innovative and daring aesthetic moves. As a result, the attentive viewer is made aware that these films are not objective representations of real life in China, and that the director is framing these images for us, even if the fact of that subjectivity is not at all the main focus of the film. To see how this works, we might consider two well-known long takes
from Jia’s Platform.\textsuperscript{117} Both involve long conversations between Minliang and Ruijuan, one of the two central couples in the film. These “conversations” are more often punctuated by silence than direct communication. The first conversation is shot in one take, which is over three and a half minutes long. It is also a long shot, keeping the actors at such a distance that we can only read their emotion through body language, not facial expressions. In the second long take, which lasts over two and a half minutes, the conversation takes place near a corner in the city wall, and the actors take turns wandering around the corner and back again, so that for most of the conversation, the viewer can only see one of the two actors, while the other is hidden from view. Their movements are realistic, given the setting, and aptly express their shyness and inability to connect on an emotional level despite their clear desire to do so, but the shot also clearly calls attention to itself on an aesthetic level. In both instances, the long take allows the scene to unfold seemingly objectively, in real time and space, but the camera’s control of what the viewer can and cannot see paradoxically calls attention to the subjective presence of the director.

A similar balance of subjectivity and objectivity can be found in these poems by Xi Chuan, and it lays the ground for a poetics which is less personal than the traditional lyric voice, but which also does not go so far as to completely reject the personal. We can see this more clearly in the poems “Grandmother” [奶奶] and “Manes of Yellow” [黄毛], also from the sequence Senses of Reality. Notably, these are the only two prose poems in a sequence of sixteen. “Grandmother,” the second in the sequence, reads almost like the stage directions for the opening of a play. It begins by setting the scene around the

\textsuperscript{117} See Appendix 4 for screen shots of the scenes I describe.
grandmother: “Courtyard. A five-hundred year history” [院子。五百年的历史]. Then it describes the woman. Unlike typical stage directions, though, these lines establish a connection between past and present from the very beginning. We are not just told that she is ninety-six, but that she has witnessed ninety-six years of history. The repetition of the line, “combing her hair, combing her hair” [梳着头，梳着头] in the poem sets up the key action that we understand to be ongoing. But the view isn’t stagnant. We zoom in: “The door is open. Her profile. Around her a stovetop…” [门开着。她的侧面。在她周围，是灶台…]. Then we zoom out: “Expansive white clouds above the roof of the western wing” [西厢房的屋顶上白云悠悠]. Once the scene is set, the poem moves to images which help us to not just see this grandmother but to understand her on a subjective level, such as: “Ninety-six years that turned her into drought-stricken earth, the only wetness in her eyes, murky and wet, like a well not completely dried up” [九十六年把她变成一块遭逢了大旱的土地，只有她的眼睛湿润，湿润而浑浊。仿佛尚未完全枯干的水井]. These images are about her skin and her eyes, but they convey the burden of experience and its effect on her body. We get a sense of why she looks this way in the line, “Loved ones become ghosts. Living in the western wing she seems to embody a ghost” [亲人们俱已变作鬼魂。她仿佛是代表鬼魂活在这西厢房里]. But now we understand her context, so when we return to the act of combing her hair, we understand that the activity is part of how she connects to the ghosts, through her body: “Her dirty cloth shoes touch a ground lower than the ground” [她的脏布鞋踩到了比地面还低的地 面].

118 All quotations are taken from Klein, Notes on a Mosquito, p. 198-199.
Importantly, though, this sense of connection to the past is not primarily symbolic. There are plenty of metaphors in this poem, in terms of how the grandmother is visualized and her experience conveyed, but the grandmother herself does not become a symbol of anything other than herself. Other than the reference to her “KMT commander” [国民党营长的丈夫] husband, any connection between herself and the broader socio-historical shift that she has witnessed is implied. Is she representative of a generation of people who live with ghosts, due to the turbulence of 20th century Chinese history? We can make that assumption, but that isn’t the focus of the poem. Instead, it emphasizes the details of her surroundings, her repetitive movement, the accumulation of years and her physical features so that we can grasp how she feels the world around her. The poem is clearly guiding the perspective of a reader, just like a camera would, but it never assigns a particular meaning to these perspectives on the woman. While we are aware of being guided, we are left to watch the scene unfold and determine its meanings for ourselves.

“Manes of Yellow” looks at youth in the present moment, and provides a similarly vivid portrait. It describes “four boys of degeneracy” [四个流里流气的男孩]119 and three girls with a “stylish vogue” [时髦] who idle around a small town. The speaker observes them from afar, noting their behavior and their social demeanor with details such as the “black hair dyed into manes of yellow” [黑发染成黄毛] which is sported by the boys. The distinctiveness, yet pointlessness, of their lifestyle is emphasized by way of contrast to the simple life of the town. In centering the poems around visual descriptions that cohere into an impression of a scene or a figure, these poems, like the

119 Quotations are taken from Notes, p.206-207.
poems which emphasize sensory and bodily experience, re-introduce a lyrical strain that Xi Chuan’s poems in the 1990s had all but abandoned. But unlike his pre-1989 poems, the detached voice remains, with yet a touch of irony, tugging against the tendency of the lyrical to spill over into the nostalgic or sentimental. In “Manes of Yellow,” the poem begins with an ironic comment: “‘Progress’ and ‘Civilization’ appear even on the scalps of delinquents” [“文明”和“进步”竟然首先呈现于小流氓的头顶] and ends with an ambivalent refusal to either judge or fully empathize with these youths: “Delinquency comes with its own delinquent delights. Delinquency comes with its own delinquent difficulties” [小流氓自有小流氓的福气呵。小流氓自有小流氓的难处]. Despite the contrast in tone between the gentle, respectful presentation of the grandmother and the more disparaging presentation of these youths, the poem “Grandmother” also has a hint of irony. It describes the old woman’s years as “trapping her inside her own body” [九十六年使她深陷在自己的身体里], along with the ghosts of her loved ones and the memory of her KMT commander husband. At the same time, we see that despite her withered appearance, now she is “no longer afraid” [不再害怕], finally able to confidently sit in the courtyard combing her hair, “conscientiously without reason, without purpose” [认真得毫无道理，毫无意义; emphasis added]. Moreover, there is a generational distance between the speaker and the subjects of these both poems. While the experiences of each generation are capable of being entered into, to a certain degree, by the speaker, the poem also implies that each of these “senses of reality” produce different subjectivities, and the challenge for us is to figure out how they relate to each other and to ourselves.
Ironic distance, therefore, is essential to keeping the lyricism of these poems contained, and to maintaining an active role for the reader. In David Wang’s reading of Shen Congwen’s “critical lyricism,” he calls our attention to the role of irony, which “subverts the plentitude of [Shen Congwen’s] lyrical discourse and reminds one of the existence of the world of realist narrativity” (207). Wang paraphrases Northrop Frye’s observation that “lyrical poets share some connection with writers of irony, in that they (supposedly) turn their backs on their audiences in a rhetorical gesture and play with the literal and intended levels of meaning, with objects and their literary signs” (207). The difference between rhetorical play that is lyrical and that which is ironic is due to the distinctions Wang identifies between the poetic and the hermeneutic mode, proper to poetry and fiction, respectively. While the former is interested in “the presentation of pictorial and musical patterns,” the latter emphasizes storytelling, because in order to have irony, we need some assumption of meaning or causality which is subverted by ironic play (204). In many of Xi Chuan’s poems since the 1990s, not only the more sensorially-oriented ones we have been discussing, he creates this disconnect between the “literal and intended levels of meaning” described by Wang by giving his poems the initial appearance of realism and narrative development. By using ordinary language, moving away from poetic lineation, and employing a poetic voice that appears to be telling the reader a story, the poems set up the potential for a more realistic approach. As we have already seen, in the more well-known poems like “On False Causality…” that realistic approach is undermined by the “pseudo-philosophical” musings that van Crevel describes. This leads the “re-evaluation” of lyricism identified by Klein to a situation

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120 In addition to the examples cited earlier, we might look at the poem “The Neighbors.” It opens like a story: “My neighbors. I’ve never invited them over for dinner, never borrowed money from them. I promise
where the ironic almost completely overtakes the lyrical. These poems do not fit David Wang’s characterization of Shen Congwen’s “critical lyricism,” because Wang sees the lyrical and the ironic as countervailing forces. The lyrical provides to the hermeneutic mode the potential for emphasis on the “craft of language” and “poetic performance” while “irony keeps the different levels of meaning from forming into a univocal whole,” thus counterbalancing the singular voice that usually characterizes the lyric (207). Poems like the examples from Senses of Reality cited here are different from the majority of Xi Chuan’s poems of the last two and a half decades because they re-introduce the lyrical counterweight for the ironic. But I would argue that the source of the lyrical is less an emphasis on the craft of language for its own sake as a reminder of capacity of language to create a sensory – not an intellectual – response.

Importantly, David Wang stresses that this combination of the lyrical and the ironic is not a matter of aesthetic effect, but the foundation of a critical stance in Shen Congwen’s fiction. He writes:

Shen Congwen sees a danger of self-indulgence in both lyricism and irony. Whereas excessive lyrical expression invites narcissistic sentimentalism, excessive ironic discourse leads to a frivolous play with signifiers. The contradictory elements of the lyrical versus the ironical in Shen Congwen’s fiction must be understood as something more complicated: they furnish not only a rhetorical gesture but also a critical attitude. The all-round, nonfinalized quality entailed by Shen Congwen’s fiction is no more an

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myself that, if I have a daughter, I will never let her marry any of them, since they’re like family” [我的邻居。我从未请他们吃过饭。我从未向他们错过钱。我暗下决心, 如果我有女儿, 绝不让她嫁给他们之中的任何人, 因为他们几乎像我的近亲]. But then in the second stanza, the poem becomes pseudo-philosophical and playful: “I’m sure they live beside me (they live too close, right next door), but I’m not sure whether they’re birds or rabbits, or if they’re foxes (any more than I’m sure what I am)” [我能肯定他们住在我边上 (住得太近, 就在隔壁), 但我不能肯定他们是一些鸟, 一些兔子, 还是一些狐狸 (就像我不能肯定我自己是个什么东西)] (Notes 96-97). Throughout the poem, descriptions of the ordinary experience of living in such close quarters are paired with distanced commentary that calls attention to this apparent realism as a mirage, questioning the assumption that we might use these observations to glean essential knowledge about the speaker and his neighbors. Though the poem appears to be relying on narrative discourse, it does so only in such a way as to rob it of its causality.
innovative device than a signal of his conception of life that refuses to be confined by ideological or aesthetic closure. (207)

In “Grandmother” and “Manes of Yellow,” the subtle critical attitude (which, like Shen Congwen’s fiction, is never expressed outright but implied) is achieved to a large degree through the distanciation of the subjective voice, preventing a unity of voice and experience. The tone of the poems, which invites empathy and careful consideration of these figures, never swells over into sentimentalism or nostalgia, leaving an opening for reflection.

Of course, if we are looking for a poetic counterpart for the refusal “to be confined by ideological or aesthetic closure” which Wang finds in Shen Congwen’s fiction, the most obvious candidate would be Bei Dao’s later poetry. In Bei Dao’s early work, as Stephen Owen’s critique highlights, the poetry often gives way to the danger of “narcissistic sentimentalism,” which the singular, ego-centric lyrical voice can create. But the later work, as we saw, engages in a process of ongoing formal and thematic renegotiation in which each image opens on to the next one, never quite capturing the experience it signifies. In part, this resistance to closure is achieved by abstracting the image away from tangible, recognizable experience and toward what Dian Li calls the “unreal.”

By contrast, the poems by Xi Chuan which we have been examining are situated in a particular scene or moment in time, giving them a foundation in a

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121 In arguing that Bei Dao’s refusal to make meaning in his poetry has to do with the “unreal imagery” that populates it, Dian Li is careful to note that “unreal” does not mean images which are fantastical or fictional, but rather images distant from the real and its emphasis on identification. He writes, “unreal images work through the power of our perception, which allows for an imaginative reordering of the real beyond conventional rationality, beyond the expected correspondence with experienced life events” (200). By making analogies between things that are not generally associated with one another, what the image in Bei Dao’s poetry “makes visible is not a figurative or symbolic relationship but a subjective knowledge and the experience of distancing oneself from a perceived reality” (205).
recognizable world. They achieve this “resistance to closure” through their ironic or detached voice, which continually undermines the ability of that foundation to develop into a narrative or even into a wholly imagined world (the way that a realist work would). But the particularities around which these poems are built also give the reader a starting point for emotional identification, which I have suggested we find more rarely in Bei Dao’s poems, though “Black Map” is one of the exceptions. In my reading of “Black Map,” I suggested that the poem’s situatedness in a particular space-time matrix (Beijing at the moment the poet returns, whether real or imaginary) provides it with a stronger lyricism than any of the other poems under discussion. This is the same feature which we find in Xi Chuan’s poems from *Senses of Reality*. The sequence highlights how the lyrical invocation of a personal and communicable sentiment requires, not realism per se, but a somewhat recognizable sensory world within which to place those sentiments. As Lucas Klein observes regarding the phrase “sense of reality” from this sequence, the title “does not mean that Xi Chuan advocates a return to any kind of literary ‘realism’….rather, a ‘sense of reality’ is a questioning of current society, a *writing through* the world before us, to use Jerome Rothberg’s term for his translations” (xii). We can therefore say that the critical distance that Xi Chuan maintains in these poems keeps both the realistic urge to narrate and the lyrical urge to emote in check.

Far from producing a static tension, however, this combination of the realistic and the lyrical activates a back-and-forth movement between them, as one reads from poem to poem, each with their own emphasis and imaginative requirements. When that process is applied to a poem about a specific event, such as “On the Great Earthquake in Wenchuan: One Month Later” [书于汶川大地震后一个月], we see a way of dealing
with historical experience that acknowledges its emotional aftermath without attempting to contain it in any particular formal or cognitive structure. The title of the poem (and its composition date) set it in a specific point in time: June 21, 2008, a month after the massive earthquake of May 12 that occurred in Sichuan province, with the epicenter in Wenchuan County. Being at a slight distance from the event at the start, the poem reflects on the event indirectly by concentrating on our ability (or rather, inability) to confront such a tragedy. The phrase, 不知道 or “(I) don’t know” repeats throughout the poem, starting with the opening lines that highlight the insufficiency of thought and language in such a situation:

不知道如何面对这么多人同时死去。
不知道地质学语言能否在瞬间获得道德语言的力量。
语言变得简单，
打击如此直接。

(I) don’t know how to face the death of so many people at once.
(I) don’t know if the language of geology can suddenly gather the strength of ethical language
Language becomes simple,
Striking so directly.
《狗一梦 126》

In my translation, I put the pronoun “I” in parentheses to highlight the fact that in addition to opening with a negation of knowledge, the first stanza does not include the personal pronoun (which is not needed in Chinese). It thus allows the speaking voice to recede further into the background than it does in English translation. In fact, the personal pronoun “I” [我] only appears once, in the final stanza, though it is implied throughout. In the second stanza, although the phrase “(I) don’t know” does not appear, the implied

122Translations here are mine.
speaker expresses his inability to emotionally cope with the magnitude of the experience, noting a specific image in a newspaper which, after startling the speaker, stands in as an expression for the inexpressible:

既无力安慰他人，
也无力安慰自己。
错愕。盯住报纸上的图片，连片倒塌的房屋和孤零零的树。
街道从此为死者而宽广。下雨了。
Since (I) can’t comfort others,
(I) can’t comfort myself.
Startled. (I) carefully study the photos in the paper. Rows of collapsed buildings and a lonely tree.
From now on, the street expands for the dead. Rain falls.
(126)

This is clearly a personal meditation on the speaker’s own struggle to find a framework – whether through poetic language or emotional cognition – adequate to the task of responding to the event. Yet the lack of a personal pronoun means that this series of reflections could be understood as a collective failing. We could read it as “We don’t know how to face the death of so many people at once…” or “Since we can’t comfort others, / we can’t comfort ourselves” and so on.

The opening two stanzas highlight a linguistic and an emotional response, respectively, and the poem continually reflects on the limitations of poetic language specifically for dealing with such a situation, while continuing to attempt to deal with it through poetry anyway. In the fifth stanza, lyricism’s utility is undermined through an imagistic pairing with those guilty of corruption:

此刻的贪污犯都该死。
此刻的抒情都该拒绝。
但是连山岭和山岭都变得索不相识。
歪瓜劣枣当可以原谅。

This moment’s corrupt should all die.
This moment’s lyrical sentiments should all be rejected. 
But neighboring mountain peaks have become total strangers. 
The repulsive can also be forgiven. 
(127)

Just as the speaker asserts the need to reject lyricism (抒情), the closing of the stanza suggests that the things we find repulsive may be forgiven, and the poem carries on.

Later, the seventh stanza reads, “Nothing can be written. Writing is no use. / Poetry shouldn’t take advantage of the death of others by resurrecting them” [什么都不写。写作了也百搭。诗歌不应趁他人的死难而复活] (128). But of course, that is not what this poem is doing. Instead, it is self-consciously presenting the difficulty of writing poetry without taking advantage of the death of others, without pretending that words or mere sentiments are sufficient and most importantly, without using the poem to call attention to oneself.

For this reason, it is only in the final stanza that the act of poetic creation itself appears, and the speaking voice finally comes to the fore:

雨水布置下寂寞的夜晚,  
我睡，睡不着。  
诗歌需要几片树叶，一阵小凉风和一颗白月亮。  
下巴上长出胡子茬。内心的温柔向着陌生的死者。

Raindrops assemble on the lonely night,  
I go to bed, but don’t sleep.  
Poetry needs some leaves, a bit of cool wind and white moonlight.  
My chin sprouts a stubble. The tenderness in my heart turns to the lonely dead.  
(129)

In this closing stanza, the speaker is sleepless, likely for days, as he attempts to find the source for poetry, which needs something sensory – the leaves of trees or the cool wind – to spark it. Instead, all that there is to work with is death and destruction, so the poem closes with an emotional expression rather than a solution to the problem of language.
In “On the Great Earthquake..” we find a constant tension between the need for lyricism and its limitations. At the same time, while we also find a self-conscious distancing of the subjective voice and a reflection on form, the poem does not give in to the temptation for nihilism or ironic negation, precisely because doing so would completely vacate the poem of its necessary, though insufficient, emotional content. In Culler’s terms, we might say that the poem is aware of its potential perlocutionary effects, and of all poetry’s capacity to have such effects in the aftermath of such an incident, but it also highlights the many ways in which a poem might fail to achieve the desired effect on readers or the world at large. It attempts to provide an avenue for grappling with past experiences that are not one’s own without appropriating them. It wants to find a language for speaking the emotional weight of an event without inscribing it into some trite sentimentalism or worse, a narrative of “resurrection” for the living. The poem is highly attuned, in other words, to the way in which it is providing not only the words to speak about an event, but also a means to create an emotional and bodily connection to the event that is shared with others. This form of lyricism resonates with Derrida’s definition of poetry as that which wishes to be memorable, as found in “Che cos’è la poesia.” Derrida calls the poetic “what you desire to learn but from the other, thanks to the other, and under dictation from the other, by heart, imparare a memoria” (qtd. in Culler loc. 2724). The poem is likewise “that which learns or teaches us the heart, which invents the heart” (qtd. in Culler loc. 2728). In this formulation, poetic transference is not just about a request to be remembered but about creating the conditions for active participation on the part of the reader in the act of remembrance, the act of feeling along with another.
Xi Chuan’s poem highlights the difficulty of successfully performing this act of teaching or invention, but the language of contradiction and negation we find here becomes its own emotional landscape. Because the reader is able to empathize with the anxiety on the part of the poet (real or imagined) and the sense of responsibility that comes from attempting to shape the emotional response to such an event, lyricism re-emerges. And yet, because of the multiple perspectives on both poem and event which are necessary to keep in one’s mind in order to come to this understanding, the reader is left with plenty of room for reflection. The poem succeeds in leaving space for the activation of a Benjaminian historical understanding, which is not positivist or objective, but perhaps more real. It allows the reader to join in the act of remembering, without forcing any fixed meaning onto the event.

The co-existence here of the desire for direct access to emotional experience and a more self-conscious performance of that act of expressing emotion does not have to be felt as a tension, and is not felt that way in these poems. That is because the lyricism in these poems does not derive from a particular stylistic approach (as we have already established) but it also does not derive from a purely expressivist mindset, either. It is not about an uncritical release of emotion, or a personal, private meditation. In the next chapter, I will introduce approaches to artistic creation which combine what is often considered to be the “Chinese” tradition’s emphasis on immanence and expressivism with the Western tradition’s emphasis on transcendence and mimesis. These theories understand the making of art to be both a representation and a performance, and thus lyricism, I argue, can stand between the personal and the impersonal, transmitting emotion that is immanent in the world around the speaker while also transcending the
moment and reflecting back on it. In these poems, Xi Chuan has achieved lyricism while remaining uneasy about lyricism. That uneasiness is what in fact allows the poems to reflect on subjective experience without giving in to the egotistical excesses that many have cited as the limitation of Misty poetics. If we understand lyricism as the effect of the search for a language to express affective experience, a search that is never complete because language cannot ever capture emotion and bodily sensation fully, then we see that these poems are in fact lyrical. We can feel it, even if they look/sound/behave differently than we expect them to.

Although films are forced to deal with temporality, as we have seen, these poets’ performative poetics requires a temporal sensibility not usually ascribed to lyric poetry. They have abandoned the ideal of the image propagated by Ezra Pound, for whom “An ‘image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” and which provides “that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits” (qtd. in Li 4). The impossibility of grasping the “complex” presented by the image in Bei Dao’s poetry and the move toward prose-like form and language in Xi Chuan put the image in motion. While Modernist poetics in both the Western and Chinese contexts considered the image as part of an ongoing flux, the aesthetic aim was to provide a means to arrest the flux and achieve momentary insight. As Michelle Yeh explains,

This concentrated interest of Symbolist-Modernist poetics in image and its related concepts, including juxtaposition and pure experience, bespeaks a poetics founded on isolation and separateness, epistemologically (we can only know a segment of reality at a time), existentially (things are unconnected to each other except by an order created by the poet), and aesthetically (each poem, each image, is self-contained). (80)

By contrast, just as Benjamin’s “flash of insight” is about not the suspension of thought in a moment but the opening-up (indirectly, temporarily) of a pathway for better understanding the place of things in that flux (history), so the poetics of Bei Dao and Xi
Chuan, though it may seem to rely on ahistorical, spatialized representations of life, memory and a personal imagination, turn out to be conjuring up flashes of potential connection between images and ideas, setting in motion a way of conceptualizing not a moment but an experience-in-time.

What we learn from poems like the “Travel Diary” sequence or “On the Great Earthquake…” is that “realism” can interact productively with lyricism. These poems signal themselves as realistic through their use of everyday detail or specific markers of place and time, along with the appearance of telling a personal, even “true” story. While they question their own ability to provide access to such extra-poetic information, they end up providing an emotional experience that is itself a means of engaging with something outside of language. In doing so, they set in motion a sense of temporality, a connection between the poem and experiences beyond it even as the poem refuses to participate in the act of historicizing. By way of closing, I will mention the poem “The Church on the Hilltop: Near Fenyang, Shanxi Province” [山顶上的小教堂山西汾阳附近]. The poem is set near Jia Zhangke’s hometown, where Xi Chuan has participated in at least one panel focused on his director friend’s work. In it, the speaker visits a small church on a hill, the “most honorable building” [最体面的房屋] in the village (《狗一梦》235).123 The poem describes the scene in detail, but the focus is on an ironic discovery: a line of Latin written on a blackboard. The line is written in a language that no one in the village understands, and is interpreted as a symbol representing Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Chinese deities. The speaker asks, “Who transmitted these words,

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123 Translations here are mine.
leaving them here to fade, yet suddenly luxuriate?” [谁传递下这文字，使之在此褪色，然而依然奢侈？] (236). Adding to the irony of their presence, then, is the fact that a passerby (the poetic speaker) has arrived who recognizes both the text’s asemantic symbolism and its origin, allowing the faded line to “suddenly luxuriate.” From here, in a typical move for Xi Chuan, the poem reflects on the minor characters in the scene: some ants and some hens. It uses them for philosophic speculation and attributes a voice to them, before returning to a more realistic depiction of the scene. Most interestingly, the poem ends with an encounter between the speaker and a young girl, who appears like a ghost from behind a stack of firewood and asks where he came from. He calls her “the fox-spirit of this place” [这里的狐狸精] (239) and the next line repeats a question that appears after the discovery of the lines of Latin: “Where is the local party branch?” [党支部在哪里？] (239). This line reminds us of the presence of the unexpected – rather than the traces of party influence, we find only these fantastical creatures. This is even more remarkable because this is a place so “poor and remote” [这里是穷乡僻壤] that a church might not even have had to close and re-open over the years (due to the vicissitudes of recent history). As we will see in our examination of Jia Zhangke’s Still Life in the next chapter, the presence of surprising abnormalities in such a seemingly realistic scene does not break the reader’s ability to connect to it. In fact, it may make the scene more realistic in the sense of more accurately capturing the experience of being in a place, even if it breaks the conventions of literary realism.
Lyricism of the Unspoken: The Body and Performance in Jia Zhangke’s Films

The work of Jia Zhangke has played an important role in previous chapters because it has been the spark behind much of the theoretical work of this dissertation. From the simple way in which Jia’s films are often described as highly realistic and yet poetic in the same paragraph, without much elaboration on how those two labels interact, to the self-conscious manner in which he explores the potential of aesthetic form to alter the relationship between the subject and object of representation, Jia’s work and its reception both call out for a serious inquiry into the status of lyricism in historical or socially-oriented films. In Chapter 2, we encountered Jia’s “hometown trilogy” alongside Hou Hsiao-hsien’s films, as part of a discussion of how lyricism develops out of the use of realist methods, not as a counterpoint to them. The term “lyricism,” as I have been using it in this dissertation, is not a single genre or style, but rather a name we give to a particular experience of the art work, which can have different formal manifestations. It conveys that aspect of the work which allows the viewer or reader to engage with the emotional and affective aspects of the subject being represented, while being cognizant of the intersubjective, open-ended nature of that engagement. In our look at the poetry of Xi Chuan in Chapter 3, we began to notice an emphasis on performativity and performance, and the current chapter will further explore how theories of performance can help us better understand that interaction between viewer and art work. Below, I turn to four of Jia’s films which ask us to think even more explicitly about the status of the real in relation to the lyrical by playing with the relationship between documentary and fiction. These films are: Dong (东 2006), Still Life (三峡好人 2006), 24 City (二十四城记 2008), and I Wish I Knew (海上传奇 2010). Although they blur the lines between “objective”
documentary and “subjective” fictional representation, these films do not draw undue attention to their formal experimentation, nor do they intended to disrupt our belief in the truth-telling capacity of the documentary. Instead, they ask us to re-think our understanding of what constitutes an appropriate representation of emotional experience.

These were not the first films Jia made which utilized not only documentary aesthetics but also actual documentary footage. In the last film of the “hometown trilogy” (*Unknown Pleasures*), he begins to develop what he calls a more “objective” mode of filmmaking, by hanging back even further from his characters and minimizing plot in favor of a look at how the characters interact within the social landscape. At the same time as *Unknown Pleasures*, Jia shot his first documentary short, *In Public* (公共场所 2001). The film visits public places in the city of Datong, where *Unknown Pleasures* is set, and simply watches people go about their daily business there. Another very short documentary from the same year, *The Condition of Dogs* (狗的状况, 5min), shows two sacks into which several puppies have been tied up, then cuts to a shot of various adult dogs chained up on the side of the road, before cutting back to show one puppy managing to chew a hole through the bag and stick its head out, though it does not escape before the film ends. Jia’s first full-length documentary, featuring interviews with a subject facing the camera, was *Dong*, a look at the work of painter Liu Xiaodong, and the next year he came out with *Useless* (无用 2007) which followed the fashion designer Ma Ke and similarly incorporated the “talking head” interview format.

Jia’s work in this period differs from many of his contemporaries in either the Sixth Generation or the New Documentary Movement. As his career develops and he moves outside of his home province of Shanxi to places like Beijing and the Three
Gorges, instead of focusing more intently on the personal or reflecting more explicitly on his own methods, his films take on questions of broader significance. This is true of both the documentary and quasi-documentary films he has made since 2000 and of the fiction features. For instance, he takes on the emergence of China in the global century and the role of images in producing a sense of identity in *The World* (世界 2004). In conjunction with this broader and perhaps more mature set of concerns, Jia’s post-trilogy work explores the power of the overtly fictional or mediated image to represent aspects of an experience which the documentary mode cannot reach.

In his approach to the documentary, Jia reminds us of Xi Chuan who, as we saw in the previous chapter, draws from realism without committing to it fully. As a starting point for our attempt to understand Jia’s attitude toward the documentary mode, we may briefly consider Xi Chuan’s thoughts on realism. The poems analyzed in Chapter 3 show Xi Chuan looking for new ways of seeing the world through language, using unconventional techniques of representation. Not coincidentally I’m sure, he has recently taken an interest in the masters of landscape painting from the Song dynasty, who are well known for their rejection of visual verisimilitude in favor of techniques that conveyed an atmosphere or evoked an emotional response to a scene. After a reading of his poetry in February 2015, I asked Xi Chuan about his work’s connection with visuality and whether he thought of it as in any way cinematic. He did not seem to think there was much of a connection there (I would guess this has to do with the affiliation between the cinematic and an idea of realism, which is clearly not of interest to him).

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124 In taking on these more nationally resonant issues, though, these films do not completely leave behind the stories of Jia’s home province of Shanxi. The lead characters in *The World* are from there, and there is often some connection between his characters and that place.
125 Xi Chuan is currently a professor of Chinese literature at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.
However, he mentioned the famous Northern Song painter Guo Xi [郭熙 c.1020-c.1090], who is known for using stroke techniques such as “cloud-resembling” rocks. According to Ebrey et al., “Guo Xi developed a strategy of depicting multiple perspectives called ‘the angle of totality.’” Because a painting is not a window, there is no need to imitate the mechanics of vision and view a scene from only one spot” (“Guo Xi’s Early Spring”). Xi Chuan’s comment to me was, “If [Guo Xi] can paint a mountain in the style of a cloud, then I can write about a person in the style of a monkey.” We see from this statement that Xi Chuan is not just concerned about representing his subject accurately in a visual sense; he is looking for new techniques which provide new ways of seeing. We can see this sort of experimentation going on in Jia’s films made just after the hometown trilogy, with new techniques like animation (in The World), CGI (in Still Life) and documentary interviews making their first appearance. This experimentation indicates that Jia was looking for a way to move beyond the jishizhuyi aesthetic. While film (in its analog form) does not have quite the flexibility of painting in terms of how it represents its subject, we get the sense that Jia would love to find a filmic corollary to the “angle of totality” in Guo Xi’s painting. This is especially clear in the two semi-documentaries, 24 City and I Wish I Knew, where he tries to combine a range of different media and techniques in order to provide multiple ways of seeing, hearing and – most importantly – feeling history, while ensuring that the film remains seamless and coherent as an artistic whole. As we will see the coherence of mood and style that unites the many different strategies of representation in these films is what causes some critics to doubt the integrity of Jia’s documentary project, but it is also this consistency in mood which

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126 See Chapter 2 for a discussion of this term.
127 See Byrnes for a more thorough discussion of the relationship between Still Life and landscape painting.
allows these films to communicate on an affective level and reach beyond the surface of their stories to the deeper emotions that these memories arouse. In this way, they maintain their lyricism even as they move toward the documentary real, demonstrating once again that these two modes are not incompatible.

Despite his reputation for honest realism, Jia has been explicit since the early stages of his career that he sought to express inner experience as much as external truth, because he recognized that film can only go so far in accessing raw facts. He addresses the question of realist methods directly in an interview from 2002 with Sun Jianmin. This part of the interview has been quoted by several critics, so it is worth looking at the entire response closely:

Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski said something once that really resonates with me. After shooting most of a documentary he suddenly said, “In my opinion, the closer a camera gets to reality, the more it can approach falsehood.”

The supposed truth produced by “on-the-spot” [jishi] techniques can easily hide the truth of realistic sequences. Dialect, non-professional actors, location shooting, synchronous sound and even long takes do not represent truth itself. There are those who may go even further to create a sort of psychedelic drug, and let you lose your way in a world of lies.

Actually, reality in film does not exist in any particular moment. Reality only exists in the structural connections. It is in the vivid composition of reason and the orderly basis of the heart. It exists in the realistic sequence that still convinces us even after breaking the usual narrative methods.
对我来说，一切纪实的方法都是为了描述我内心经验的真实世界。我们几乎无法接近真实本身，电影的意义也不是仅仅为了到达真实的层面。我追求电影中的真实感甚于追求真实，因为我觉得真实感在美学的层面，而真实仅仅停留在社会学的范畴。就像在我的电影中，穿过社会问题的是个人的存在危机，因为终究你是一个导演而非一个社会学家。（“Selecting Images” 99-100）

In my opinion, all of the “on-the-spot” methods are for the expression of the real world of my inner experience. We really have no way of approaching the real itself, and the meaning of films is not merely for getting down to the level of the real. I look for the sense of reality\(^\text{128}\) in films more than reality itself, because I think that the feeling of truth exists in the aesthetic realm, and truth remains in the sociological. Just like in my films, penetrating social problems is a personal existential crisis, because eventually you are a director and not a sociologist. (Translation mine)

Chialan Sharon Wang highlights the line about “inner experience” for its problematic emphasis on the personal impressions of the director over the actual socio-historical conditions of the film subject, but in looking at the response as a whole, I think we can see Jia trying to make a key distinction between reality and the capacity of film to represent it. For him, all technical and structural approaches to capturing the real are just that – approaches – with their own strengths and weaknesses. Stating that he looks for a “sense of reality” in his films rather than for reality itself is at its heart a recognition of the limits of representation, but also of the potential of the aesthetic to do something – to move people – in a way that mere facts (i.e. the sociological) cannot.

In venturing into the territory of the documentary, especially documentaries representing the experiences of others, as opposed to the fiction film based on his own real-life experiences, this privileging of the personal over the historical can be potentially

\(^{128}\) Jason McGrath (2007) and Eddie Bertozzi both translate this phrase as “the feeling of the real,” which is actually a more direct translation. However, I chose “sense of reality” here because it seems more natural, and I don’t think Jia intended to coin a new phrase here. I think he is trying to express the fact that art can only give us a “sense” or a “sensibility,” not the thing itself. Translating gan as “feeling” emphasizes emotions and sensory affect, which I do think he is after, but to me, that translation makes the sentence sound fuzzy and imprecise, which I think is less true in the original.
problematic. On the one hand, we should acknowledge that this interview was conducted when Jia was just beginning to venture into the documentary form, so it reflects his thoughts about fiction films representing the past more than documentaries. On the other hand, his suggestion that the techniques that allow film to supposedly access the real—like synchronic sound recording and location shooting—are not inherently more truthful than any other technique is not a particularly radical claim. By now we are familiar with the idea that no form has a monopoly on truth, and that our sense of what is realistic has as much to do with what we have been trained to see as realistic as it does with the inherent qualities of the work itself.

Even so, when it comes to documentary, simply saying that the traditional form of documentary films is conventional and can be replaced by any other form (if the director feels that form is better suited to the subject matter) opens up a whole host of ethical and political implications, especially in the context of an independent filmmaker on the cusp of attaining legitimacy on the national level. The viewer’s perception of the relationship of the film and filmmaker to their subject, and the socio-historical context in which the film is received, influence whether the work is taken seriously in its attempt to render the subject truthfully. Jia’s turn to documentary came at an important time of transition for him, career-wise. After the completion of *Unknown Pleasures*, his increasing notoriety both at home and abroad presented him with a choice between, on the one hand, continuing to make “underground” (地下) and “independent” (独立) films, which are not submitted to state censors and therefore not eligible for distribution and screening in mainland China; and on the other hand, joining the “mainstream” (主流), which generally requires a certain amount of sensitivity in terms of content. Jia chose the latter route, as
his next film *The World* was his first to be state-approved and screened in China, but this film was no less honest in its portrayal of the complexities and contradictions of twenty-first century life in China. Under this rubric of “underground” versus “mainstream” though, the extent to which he stayed true to the stark, documentary-like style of the early films could be read as a gauge of his ideological independence. Fictionalization and stylization risk being interpreted as evasions, as putting a shiny gloss on less than savory realities (just as the lyrical or poetic aspects of his earlier fiction films were often treated as window dressing for the inherently realistic content of the narratives). Moreover, documentaries bring with them an ethical responsibility to their subjects which does not exist (at least not to the same degree) in fiction films, however realistic they may be. The director cannot avoid the fact that viewers read and evaluate films which appear to be documentaries differently.

When speaking about the perceived shift as he begins to make documentaries, we can detect a change in how Jia approaches his subject matter:

A lot of people say that my narrative films are like documentaries and my documentaries are like narrative films, but I feel that both genres have many possibilities for seeking truth. For me the main difference is that in my narrative films the subject matter is something that I’m familiar with, so I’m using the narrative form to tease out the whole story. But in the documentaries, the subject matter is something that I’m curious about, whether it’s an artist or an industry, so the idea is to use the documentary to discover more about this topic, to satisfy my curiosity and expand my horizons. In the documentaries, I’m trying to capture the natural state of life, of the people. But in the narrative films, I feel that there is an inherent drama in everyday life. I mean, it’s not that people are acting out – it’s just that there’s this quality of drama and dramatic atmosphere, and I’m trying to capture that in my narrative films. (Rapfogel 46)129

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129 Whenever I have access to the original Chinese text of Jia’s comments I will provide it, but many interviews with him are published only in English, such as this one.
In an interview with Tony Rayns for the promotion of *Useless*, Jia makes a similar comment about the difference between the two modes but seems to flip the terms of the distinction:

I’m often told that my essay films are like documentaries and vice versa. When I shoot fiction, I usually want to maintain a certain objectivity in presenting the characters in their settings. But when I shoot documentary, I want to capture the ‘drama’ that’s inherent in reality – and I want to faithfully express my subjective impressions. [130]

The important thing here is that his “subjective impressions” are not pre-determined, but dictated by the event or interview. In the same answer, he talks about trying to find the right camera position to “capture the authentic feeling of the space and the people” [空间和人的真实气息] and acknowledges,

In this light, you could certainly call it an “arranged documentary”. But I don’t reject arrangement in documentary. If we experience a truth and it does not come through in filming, why not arrange the elements to reveal that reality? For me, the key thing in making a documentary is subjective judgment. The closer the camera gets to reality, the more possible it is to become false. It’s always necessary for us to feel and to judge.

这样看起来会象是经过摆拍的剧情片一样。同时,我也不排斥纪录片中的摆拍,如果我们在摄影机前发生的时候,为我我多不去用摆拍的方法,呈现这种真实呢？对我来说，纪录片中的主观判断非常重要,因为摄影机越靠近现实有可能会越虚假,需要我们去判断和感受！(*Useless* Press Kit; italics mark my alterations to the translation)

In both sets of comments, we see a greater concern with following where the subject leads him as opposed to fleshing out an idea he has already spent a lot of time thinking about. Jia recognizes that the documentary subject possesses his/her/its own truth.

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130 Both the English and Chinese text quoted here are found in the Press Kit.
independent of the director’s preconceptions, but he does not set up a hierarchy of methods in attempting to access that truth. Instead, he believes that the method follows from his experience of the subject. Although he uses the terms “documentary” and “fiction” in these quotations as if there is a clear distinction between them, the ease with which he exchanges the terms of the definition of each mode demonstrates that the distinction between them is actually much harder to draw with any sort of finality.\(^\text{131}\)

What becomes clear when we look closely at the films which most explicitly trouble the border between fiction (or narrative) and documentary is that Jia views these two terms as genres or methods, rather than as fundamentally different ways of knowing the world. Both provide aesthetic possibilities and raise ethical questions, but the filmmaker is free to choose among these possibilities and grapple with these questions as he sees fit. A starting point for our analysis, therefore, must be a recognition that fiction and documentary are not opposing terms (or even ends of a spectrum). As we saw in Chapter 2, if we place Jia’s or Hou Hsiao-hsien’s films on a realist spectrum, then we can only account for the lyrical dimension as a departure from or supplement to the fundamental realism. Similarly, when we encounter films which blend documentary footage with staged or acted segments, judging them on a spectrum from documentary to fiction makes the fictional elements look like appendages which, like a Derridean supplement, destabilize the entire truth-seeking project.

\(^\text{131}\) This interview was published in 2008, the year that 24 City came out, but does not address this film, which challenges the easy division between the two forms that Jia sets up here. This comment also doesn’t acknowledge the overlap between Dong (a documentary) and Still Life (a fiction film). We will discuss all of this below.
One alternative, which some critics have adopted, is to argue that Jia’s films subvert the realist impulse entirely. Writing about *Useless*, *24 City* and *I Wish I Knew*, Daniele Rugo argues that:

Jia does not attempt to replace ‘an aura of detached truthfulness’ with ‘the honest admission of a partial but highly significant, situated but impassioned view’ (Nichols 2001: 511). He rather constantly returns to his characters to exemplify how facts do not provide access to a solid truth, but rather promote the idea of truth as a series of conflicting problems. Jia’s films scrutinize not only the truth of documentary and factual films, but also the very idea of truth as representation devoid of contradictions. (199)

Ultimately, by “collapsing the distinction between factual and fictional,” Rugo argues that Jia’s films “open a space that belongs to no collectivity” (206). To read the films in this way, however, does not account for whatever sense of community existed prior to the film, and does not leave open the possibility that these stories can tell us something we did not expect about our own lives in the present, or influence the way we understand our own place in history. A more nuanced and radical view is taken by Rey Chow, who argues in relation to *24 City* and *IWIK* that Jia is not concerned with the documentary real but rather with the new project of imagining China as a mediated image. She writes, “Jia’s works showcase the cultural politics of a new kind of conceptual project: a project of imagining modern China not simply as a land, a nation or a people, but first and foremost as medial information, a project that takes the very notion of ‘China as documentary’ as its will to knowledge, its discursive force field” (27-28). For her, Jia’s multi-modal approach reveals the past to be “found footage,” because the objects being documented are recognized as “ready-made” and “repurposed for a new kind of event: the globalised exhibition” (27). While I agree with Chow in many respects, in this chapter I want to emphasize the films’ attempt to engage with an empirical experience outside of the art work itself, even while recognizing the impossibility of ever fully accessing that
experience, because the strong lyrical quality of these films seems to be derived not only from the “deeply-felt sense of hypermediality” that Chow identifies but also from a sense of obligation to the individuals whose stories are being told.¹³²

In order to fully account for the strong affective power of these films, the real sense of sympathy they want to elicit for real people, this chapter will argue that these films are not asking us to rebrand or upend realism, but are rather asking us to think differently about cinematic representation, about mimesis in cinema. Whereas the documentary is often understood as a representational or mimetic form par excellence, relying on the indexicality of film for its truth-claim, Jia’s films understand the documentary form as a combination of the representational and the presentational, without setting up a tension between them. In Chapter 3 we saw how Xi Chuan’s blending of the representational and presentational modes results in a performative lyricism that more effectively accesses the true nature of an event than either traditional lyricism or realism alone. Jia’s films likewise call attention to their status as produced images at the same time as they draw on the markers of documentary to attest to the veracity of their stories. Although they blur the lines between “objective” documentary and “subjective” fictional representation, they do not draw attention to their formal experimentation, nor do they intended to disrupt our belief in the truth-telling capacity of the documentary. Instead, they challenge our sense of what constitutes an appropriate representation of emotional experience. How we as spectators evaluate the films on an

¹³² In one interview, when asked about his “most memorable experience” when making this film, Jia responds, “I think it’s the tiredness. I remember reading an article by an Internet critic who said that I was playing it smart this time, that I “finished my film by simply letting others sit down and talk”. But this is such a huge misunderstanding. I was exhausted after every interview, because I had to enter the life of the person and relive life stories through their words” (“Invisible Cities”).
ethical basis is a different question, which we will look at in more detail in the latter part of this chapter. First, though, we need to think about what the films are attempting to do within the framework which Jia has established for them. Then we will look at each pair of films in turn.

Perhaps the greatest thread of continuity between Jia’s earlier films and the ones under discussion here is their subtle self-awareness. From the opening scene of *Unknown Pleasures*, where the director is singing loudly and badly to no one in an open public space, appearing like just another strange person on the street, to the scene in which his film crew visits the family of a deceased migrant worker in *Dong*, we are always aware of the mediating presence of human beings, even as Jia refuses to turn the camera on himself as a director or to explore the process behind the making of the film. In the introduction to *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism*, Lúcia Nagib outlines the long history of the tension between the concepts of “presentation” and “representation” in cinema, as well as the drive to break down the spectator/spectacle binary which she sees as ultimately reinforcing the distinction between presentation and representation. She attempts to get away from these binaries through a notion of “presentational ethics” in which the self-conscious presentation of a film can be held to the same sort of ethical account as (seemingly) more transparent representational approaches. She writes, “In order to move beyond spectatorship discussions which endlessly rehearse the active-passive binary, I propose to turn the focus onto the ways in which presentational cinema is indissolubly attached to realist modes of production and address” (9-10). Nagib seeks to focus not on the ethical relation between spectator and subject but rather on the film and filmmaker’s “commitment to the truth of the unpredictable event” (11). In her
chapter on “Conceptual Realism,” she says that she tries to “dissociate realism from narrative mimesis,” which leads to a “realism of the medium” that she describes in various places as “poetic” (126). My own approach to these films follows Nagib’s move away from the representation/presentation binary and towards an understanding of how presentational cinema can also address a form of truth. Rather than reject mimesis entirely though, in favor of a “realism of the medium” which would appear to perpetuate a split between form and content, I look to a revised understanding of mimesis as itself a combination of representation and presentation, an understanding which can be found in both the Chinese and Western traditions.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I have discussed concepts from traditional Chinese poetics which primarily highlighted the expressivist, empirical threads of that poetic thought. While these ideas were dominant for much of Chinese poetic history, scholars have recently been reminding us that mimetic or representational theories were not absent from China. One of these scholars, Gu Mingdong, suggests that the overemphasis on differences between China and the West, such as the idea of Western philosophy as dualistic and Chinese philosophy as monistic, has led to an oversimplification of the complex negotiation between competing modes of thought in Chinese intellectual history. He points out that while many other dichotomies (such as the dualistic-monistic one) have been challenged by scholars, little research has been done into the assumed mimetic-nonmimetic dichotomy. He asks, if Chinese theories understand representation as “artful truthfulness” in a manner very close to Western notions of realism and naturalism, then why would this not be considered a mimetic theory? (“Universal” 467). He argues that Chinese mimetic theories differ from those in the Greco-Roman, Judeo-
Christian tradition primarily in the sense that they incorporate both a transcendent and an immanent conception of representation, due to the way in which the Dao, the comparable concept to Plato’s Idea, is conceptualized as both transcendent and immanent (472-475). Rather than discount Chinese mimesis for the lack of a transcendent-immanent dualism, he argues that “so long as there are conditions for a duality between model and copy, an imitation may arise” (472).

Lest I make it sound as if Gu is reinstating a dichotomy between Chinese and Western ideas about mimesis, I should also point out that Gu follows Stephen Halliwell and others who have highlighted divergent conceptualizations of *mimesis* – specifically, between Plato and Aristotle in the classical period and more importantly, between classical and neo-classical theorists. He writes that Aristotle got rid of Plato’s world of the Form, and instead focused on the representation of “universal patterns of human life” (463). Plato’s more transcendental theory was reinterpreted during the neoclassical period, so that the intellect could be both transcendent and empirical, connecting “the Idea in the individual mind with the universal Idea in nature” (486). Bringing the two traditions together, Gu argues that “in accordance with the transcendental and immanent nature of the first principle in Chinese metaphysics, the Dao, the Chinese artistic ideal in imitation is both empirical and transcendental in much the same way as the neoclassical artistic ideal” (483). Gu’s demonstration of the connections between Chinese and Western notions of *mimesis* highlights the possibility of reading representation other than as secondary to the transcendent concept. As Elin Diamond points out in *Unmaking Mimesis*, the neoclassical understandings of *mimesis* did not just include the idea of “normative modeling” but also saw *mimesis* as the apparent opposite of representation:
performance (iv). Going back to the root of the wordgroup to which mimesis belongs in Greek, she notes that the “activity of representing” has been there all along, because the original noun mimos which produced the verb is “both the performer and what is performed (a mime), just as mimesis denotes both the activity of representing and the result of it – both a doing and a thing done; both the generative embodied activity of representing…and a (true) representation (of a model)” (iv-v).

To return to the representation/presentation dichotomy in film studies, as originally theorized by Nöel Burch, we see that both ends of this spectrum assume that the act of artistic making places the artwork on a separate plane from the thing it wants to show. In one case (representation), the film records more or less closely the “real” thing, without calling attention to itself as representation. In the other (presentation), the idea of art as subservient to the real remains, but the difference is that the art work calls attention to its own act of mimesis or perhaps makes no claim to connection with the real. The notion of mimesis which we find in Gu and Diamond is both these things – and neither of them. Diamond’s focus on performance and Gu’s emphasis on the non-dualistic combination of immanence and transcendence brings the activity of mimesis into the earthly, embodied realm. What Jia has always been after in his films, but which poses a bigger challenge in the context of documentary (even if the film isn’t claimed as a documentary) is what Gu calls “a mode of representation that transmits universals through particulars” (“Universal” 488). Gu compares this notion to the neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus’s use of Egyptian hieroglyphics as an example. There, “they did not use alphabets that imitate sounds and enunciations of philosophical abstractions but drew
images to inscribe abstract ideas in concrete forms” (488). In film, these “concrete details of represented images” are essential to the way in which we encounter the representation. In the work of the two filmmakers on whom this project is focused, the details are not signals of a separate and more universal truth (nor producers of a reality effect, à la Barthes) but they are transcendent. To borrow again from Gu, he discusses the initial dichotomy in Chinese metaphysics between xingshi (formal resemblance) and shenshi (spiritual resemblance). This shen of the spiritual resemblance is similar to Plato’s Idea or Form, although “it differs from the Platonic conception of the Idea as a separate entity, which transcends objects that are imitations of it. Instead the Chinese conceive of shen as something both transcendental to the human mind and immanent in objects and intellect” (483). Like Plato’s Form, shen can assume many forms while remaining constant as an essence, but it is part of objects and people, too. The key aspect which the idea of shen highlights is the co-presence of its subjective and objective forms. As both “a doing and the thing done” (remembering Diamond’s formulation above), shen develops over time into what Gu calls the “highest level in Chinese aesthetic thought,” which is the formulation proposed by Sikong Tu [司空图 837-908]. Sikong Tu rejected formal resemblance altogether and instead argued that, in Gu’s words, “for the poet or painter to capture that spiritual essence of a thing, he needs to use the subjective shen (spiritual understanding of the essence of things) to meet the objective shen (spiritual

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133 Pound’s poetic ideal, the ideogrammic method, also produces “poetic works that allow the reader to visualize the concrete details of represented images while at the same time grasping abstract ideas” (489). We should note, of course, that Pound’s assumptions about the linguistic function of the Chinese ideogram (and the common assumption that they work similarly to hieroglyphs) is incorrect, although it produced a provocative and influential theory nonetheless.

134 These are Gu’s glosses on the two terms. He does not provide characters, but I believe the correct words would be 形式 and 神式.
essence in objects to be represented)” (“Chinese Literary Thought” 421). In what follows, we will see that Jia Zhangke uses a variety of techniques to attempt to capture the spiritual essence of the people and things he represents, and he does so using his own subjective understanding of them. This is neither a blatant imposition of his own subjectivity onto the object of representation, nor is it a self-conscious reflection on subjectivity itself as a limiting factor in the attainment of objective truth. It is a conception of truth as always embodied and inherent in things, while resonating outside of them as well.

Because of the importance of embodiment, of history as it is lived, and the resulting challenges of re-presenting those lived experiences for the audience of the film, this chapter looks to theories of performance for support. In particular, I borrow from Bertolt Brecht, who advocated for dramatic performance to explode the false security of bourgeois realism while looking for more and better ways to access the complexity of real life. In his recent work using theories from performance studies to read star performance in Chinese cinema, Zhang Yingjin emphasizes that thinking about performance helps us to notice the contextual and intertextual nature of the film’s meaning and how “playing” opens up a liminal space in which history can be “put into play” and in which new futures may be imagined.135 But how this works exactly needs more elaboration. Is this a feature of all performances, to a greater or lesser degree, or only of the sorts of performance which Brecht would call “dialectical”? For one thing, Zhang does not distinguish between the sort of play he finds in literature (in his “Witness

135 I refer here to Zhang’s article “Witness Outside History: Play for Alteration in Modern Chinese Culture” and a talk, “Film Stars in the Perspective of Performance Studies: Play, Liminality and Alteration in Chinese Cinema”.

Outside History” article) as opposed to cinema (in his “Film Stars” talk). Before we can apply theories derived from theatre studies to cinema studies, we need to think about the differences between them. In the theater, performers and the audience encounter each other in the same space and time, so each performance is a unique event. In film, by contrast, the performance side of the equation is repeatable while the reception side is not. As we know, Butler’s theory of performativity, building on Derrida, relies on repetition and the inevitable differences between each event of performance. Zhang Yingjin looks at the performance of star actors, whose various roles can be understood as a form of repetition with a difference. He points out that for Butler, the “trick of performance as repetition is to make itself disappear into the appearance of history as ‘given’” (“Film Stars”). Below I will discuss the repeated performance of the role of Sanming by the actor of the same name in Jia’s films. The theory of performativity can help us to see how the performance of a particular identity appears realist unless we carefully attend to the cracks which the repetition of that performance reveals, through which we can glimpse the historicity of that act of performance.

Yet it is important to acknowledge that the historicity of that performance has a much stronger appearance of the given in a film than it would if it were performed onstage, because of the indexicality of film, the way in which it places this actor in a particular place at a particular moment in time, separate from that of the audience. The fiction film Still Life, which will be the focus of the next section, is set in the region around the Three Gorges in 2006, as the towns on the banks of the Yangtze River are being cleared to make way for the rising water which will result from the completion of the major Three Gorges Dam project. This film calls special attention to the specificity
and un-repeatability of its geographical and historical setting. Not only is time passing before our eyes, but the very landscape behind the actors is disappearing. Within this context, the (re)appearance of actors familiar from Jia’s previous films reminds us of another difference between filmic and theatrical performance: due to the spatial and temporal gap between the act of performance and the act of viewing, the liminal space opened up by the act of “playing” can only exist in the interaction between the film-as-finished-product and the spectator (or across multiple films seen by the same spectator(s)), not at the moment of performance itself.

In using theories of performance to read films, I want to think about the audience’s belated reception of the performance as something akin to the secondariness of the translated text. We have already encountered Benjamin’s theory of translation in earlier chapters, which understands a translation not as an inferior repetition of the original text, but rather as an independent unit existing in relation to the original. In the case of the performance of a real event, presentation enhances the history being copied and belatedly received without replacing it. The assumed indexicality of film (no longer guaranteed, of course) becomes, in the case of documentary, key to the film’s claim to veracity, to being what Rey Chow calls a form of “second-best access” to the event (25).

If, as we saw in Chapter 2, Bazinian realism is often (but not always) read as a window onto the proto-filmic world, while psychoanalytic theory often reads film as a mirror of the unconscious, then I want to explore whether thinking in terms of performance might help carve out a third space which combines the window’s mimetic representation of the world with the mirror’s reflexivity and engagement of the spectator.136

136 See Andrew, p.134 for an elaboration on the metaphors of the mirror and the window.
Above all, the films under discussion here set out to create an encounter with the subjectivities of particular people at particular moments in and across delimited historical periods. The focus on performance and the blending of fiction and documentary is not done as a formal experimentation for its own sake. It is an ethical act. The opposition between fiction and documentary turns out to be less useful in understanding what these films are about because it is a distinction resulting from an epistemological operation. When the question is: “How do we get the best information about the subjects of the film?” then the work can be judged according to the degree of accuracy with which it provides the answer to that question. Fiction can be an acceptable mode of providing the answer, but it must always distinguish itself from the claim to unmediated truth. If, on the other hand, the question is: “How do we do right by these subjects?” then the result can be judged outside the matrix of fact and fiction. This is not a new idea; it is a very old one which often gets overshadowed by the concept of representation as a more or less accurate mimicry. Thinking about ethics in the transmission of embodied experiences through film also reminds us of the importance of historical contingency. Whereas Nagib’s notion of “presentational ethics” is based on the commitment to the contingency of the event in the present moment of filming, Jia’s films seek to highlight the instability that marks our understanding of the past. While all films, by virtue of the medium’s “time lag,” combine some sense of present and past temporalities, the greater concern with memory in particular gives Jia’s films a sense of sentimentality, which sometimes bleeds into nostalgia, but mostly resists nostalgia’s atemporal longing to return. These films

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137 See Rey Chow and Dudley Andrew (2010) for differing ideas about the “time lag” or “jet lag” of cinema. Both locate the lag in a previous era of cinema, suggesting that the supposedly inherent experience of the medium (where the moment of filming and the moment of screening are not coincident) is changing.
acknowledge that such a return is pure fantasy, and that a coherent understanding of the past is unattainable, but this aching gap between the desire to return and remember and the clear-eyed knowledge of the impossibility of doing so is the source of their enduring lyricism.

**Embodiment and Performance in *Dong* and *Still Life***

As many critics have noted, *Dong* and *Still Life* mark an important moment in Jia’s career, not just because of the high praise they earned but because in them we see the beginning of a shift to more explicitly national concerns, rather than local and regional ones. *Dong* is an hour-long documentary which follows the Chinese painter Liu Xiaodong (the last character in Liu’s name, *dong* [东], which means “east,” gives the film its title). Upon Liu’s invitation, Jia traveled with him to Fengjie in the Three Gorges area of China and then on to Bangkok, Thailand as he created his large-scale, multi-canvas work *Hotbed*. Liu is a friend of Jia Zhangke (who initially studied visual art at the Shanxi University in Taiyuan) and has worked with major Sixth Generation filmmakers, such as Wang Xiaoshuai (as the lead actor in his debut film *The Days* 1993) and Zhang Yuan (as art director for his film *Beijing Bastards* 1993). As Wu Hung explains, Liu belongs to the a generation of visual artists called the “New Realists” or “New Academic Artists” who emerged in the early 1990s. Like the “post-Misty” poets

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138 Still Life won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and Dong won in the documentary category in 2006, among several other awards.

139 Although this was Jia’s first time working in the area, Liu had been in the Three Gorges before, including to paint *Three Gorges: Displaced Population* in 2003 and *Three Gorges: Newly Displaced Population* in 2004. As we can see from these titles alone, his interest in marginal groups and the effects of a large-scale public works project on ordinary individuals mirrors Jia’s themes and those of many Sixth Generation directors.

140 See Ou, p. 143.
and “Sixth Generation” directors, these artists sought to represent the collective spirit of their time in a manner which differed from the avant-garde work of the 1980s, while still avoiding the hegemonic collectivism of socialist realism.\textsuperscript{141}

Liu’s first \textit{Hotbed} painting\textsuperscript{142} represents migrant workers who have come to Fengjie to demolish the ancient city as part of the relocation effort surrounding the Three Gorges Dam project.\textsuperscript{143} The workers are depicted across five canvases, on a rooftop overlooking the famous gorges spanning the Yangtze River, a landscape which has been featured in Chinese painting and poetry for centuries. The men stand around in only shorts, cooling off after a hard day’s work. Some are lying on a mattress playing cards, others watch from nearby. Han Sanming, a non-professional actor from Jia’s earlier films, appears in the fifth canvas, and unlike the others who seem to be loitering and relaxing, he squats with his elbow on his knee and his chin on his palm, looking something like Rodin’s sculpture \textit{The Thinker}. The first part of the film includes scenes of Liu staging the workers for the painting and creating it, along with some clips in which he discusses his work and walks around the area. In the second half, the film follows Liu to Bangkok, where he paints \textit{Hotbed No. 2}. This time his subjects are women who work in bars, some of whom are also lying on a mattress. Instead of the majestic backdrop of the Three Gorges, they are in a blank white room, leaving no distinction between ceiling, wall and floor on the canvas. We only see the furniture they are using, along with tropical

\textsuperscript{141} Se Wu Hung for a discussion of Liu’s place in his generation of artists and Ou Ning for a discussion of his relationship to the Sixth Generation filmmakers.
\textsuperscript{142} See Appendix 5 for excerpts from both \textit{Hotbed} paintings.
\textsuperscript{143} For a useful overview of the cultural significance of the Three Gorges and the various proposals for the construction of a dam to control flooding and provide power from the Yangtze (长江) River, from Sun Yat-sen’s original proposal in 1919 to Deng Xiaoping’s renewal of the project in 1982, including the symbolism of Mao’s visit (referenced in Still Life) and the poem he wrote about the topic, see Wu Hung p.23-26. It is in Still Life where the viewer is provided with some of the backstory about the demolition of the city of Fengjie which is left entirely unexplained in Dong.
fruits which are scattered around by their feet. In both paintings, the subjects are in leisurely, but not really carefree, poses. Their bodies are more realistically represented than the backdrop, but Liu paints with large brushstrokes and often uses stronger contrasts of light and dark color, especially on the bodies of his subjects, than would be “realistic.” The aim is clearly to convey a sensibility, a sense of sympathy with the malaise, the almost listlessness of these people, rather than photographic accuracy.

Although *Hotbed No. 1* is set in a recognizable location, the scene is discontinuous. It reminds one of an attempt to shoot a panoramic photo with a basic film photography camera, where the photographer takes five photos and then overlaps them, his unsteady hand resulting in an imperfect match between each image. In a similar manner, Jia does not go out of his way to tie the two halves of his film *Dong* together, other than to transition between the Three Gorges section and the Bangkok section by way of a shot of Liu on a ferry boat on the Yangtze River in the Three Gorges, followed by a shot in which Liu is sitting in a small boat moving in the opposite direction in a floating market in Bangkok.

*Dong* spends less time watching Liu actually painting than it does contemplating his method. The film as a whole mirrors Liu’s self-consciousness regarding the artistic choices that go into the act of representing ordinary people. We see Liu taking photographs, which he sometimes uses for his paintings along with sketches. Later these photographs become a document of a recently-deceased worker when Liu (and Jia’s film crew) travel to the village of the family of that worker, bringing them the photographs and other gifts as condolences. One can detect the family’s gratitude but also discomfort at the presence of this artist and camera crew in their home, and the scene makes clear the
dual function of the artist’s camera as both a gift to memory and an intrusion on the scene.\textsuperscript{144} These scenes, which are shot in a more direct, \textit{jishizhuyi} style, end up calling more attention to the point of view of the camera than to what is taking place before it. In one instance, the camera is filming off of the back of a car, and we read the shot as a simple transitional shot, until the car suddenly crashes into a passing van. These moments are experiments in self-consciousness, and are the closest Jia comes to a performative or reflexive style of documentary.\textsuperscript{145}

Notably, these self-conscious moments do not appear in \textit{Still Life} or the later documentaries. Instead, they eventually develop into an approach which displaces the perceived naturalness of the documentary image without refocusing attention back on the filmmaker. This approach allows for a broader historical understanding to emerge without obscuring the role of the film in sparking that understanding. The emergence of this method during Jia’s collaboration with Liu is not coincidental. Charles Merewether argues that whereas Liu frequently used photographs in his earlier work and focused more on individuals, in \textit{Hotbed} he adopts a larger scale and a panorama of figures in unnatural positions, which marks a shift to a “form of historical painting” (119). He writes,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[144] Although the examples here are drawn from the Fengjie segment of the film, we see a similar tension in the Bangkok segment as well. The last sequence of the film follows one of the bar girls who seems to be constantly calling someone on her mobile phone and getting no answer. One of the early shots of this girl shows her on the phone, while she is getting dressed. Although the shot is taken from behind, the camera moves very close to her body, making the audience slightly uncomfortable about watching her in this way when we aren’t sure if she is aware of our gaze. It reminds us too of the bodies of male workers in the first section. The camera becomes both the bearer of the power to represent and a reminder of the inadequacy of visual representation, because most of the time we watch this girl with no idea of what she is thinking or feeling. We later discover that she is worried about her family because her hometown has been flooded. We leave her at the train station, not knowing the result of her search. This conclusion demonstrates Jia’s desire to use the medium of film to get beyond the portraits, to make use of its capacity to tell the real stories of these individuals, even as he calls attention to the precarious position of the one doing the representing.
\item[145] I will discuss the modes of performative and self-reflexive documentary, as defined by Bill Nichols, in the next section of this chapter.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
While faithful in his observation of the gestures and expression that characterize the individuality of a figure or group or the scenes and incidents that make up the everyday, he draws them into scenes that hold either a discontinuous or disjunctive relation to their originating context. Through this means, Liu Xiaodong seeks to render visible the affective conditions of contemporary life and measure of [sic] an historical epoch. (122)

This quotation could equally well describe Jia’s approach at this stage in his career. In Dong, Jia follows a painter who is away from home painting figures who are unnaturally staged on mattresses. The filmmaker then displaces some of these images into a fiction film, Still Life, which tells the twin stories of two individuals from other provinces coming to this area of massive upheaval, experiencing their own displacement. Instead of pointing away from the historical moment and toward the work of art, these series of displacements complicate the borders between documentation and fictionalization, individual experiences and collective symbolism, presenting historical understanding as radically fragmented and fragile while also encouraging the audience to empathize with the necessity of such a project.

Before we can trace the historical method of these two films, however, we need to first examine how Still Life builds on Dong. Both films are shot in high definition digital video and include many long takes and long shots (even more than in previous films). Complementing their shared visual style is the electronic sound of their musical scores, composed by Lim Giong.\(^{146}\) Like Dong, Still Life is also set in and around the ancient city of Fengjie, which we learn in the opening scenes has already been mostly submerged by flood waters in the process of building the Three Gorges Dam. Also like Dong, the film is

\(^{146}\) Lim is a Taiwanese electronic musician and composer. His first films scores were for Hou Hsiao-hsien’s Goodbye South, Goodbye and Millenium Mambo, but he has worked with Jia on almost every film since The World. His arrival on Jia’s team of collaborators marks a shift away from a soundtrack of primarily diegetic background noise and pop songs and toward an increased use of composed music to provide a particular atmosphere.
split into two loosely related sections. The first is the story of Sanming, a coal miner from Shanxi province, who has arrived in Fengjie to find his wife, whom, we find out, he purchased for 3000 RMB. She left with their daughter to return to her hometown 16 years prior, but the address he has for her leads to a location which is now underwater, so he takes a job in the demolition crew while he looks for her. His story is interrupted by that of the other protagonist, Shen Hong, a nurse played by Zhao Tao. She is also looking for her spouse, a factory manager who has been in Fengjie for two years without much communication. She suspects he is having an affair, and when they finally meet, she tells him she wants a divorce. Surprisingly, it is the reunion of Sanming and his wife which ends in a partial success. He plans to return to Shanxi to earn enough money to pay the boatman for whom she is working in order to cover her brother’s debt, which will allow her to eventually return with him, as she seems willing to do. (The successful completion of both searches and the resolution of the ambiguous relationship status in each case is the closest thing to a happy ending in any Jia Zhangke film thus far.) Just as the two halves of Dong paralleled one another without connecting narratively, the two storylines in Still Life are related thematically but not narratively, and are connected via one transitional shot in which Sanming looks out at the sky as a lighted flying object appears in the distance. It passes out of his frame and enters that of Shen Hong, who turns to watch it pass. The two segments are also linked by a few minor characters.  

Dong was clearly a testing ground for Still Life the way that In Public was for Unknown Pleasures, but the boundary between the former pairing of films is purposefully blurred by the fact that certain shots appear in both and a key sequence is

147 They include: a man who has lost part of his arm in a factory accident and seeks compensation with the help of his sister and a young boy who sings romantic pop songs at the top of his lungs.
spread out over the two films. This overlap speaks not only to the fact that the films were made at the same time and that the first was the inspiration for the second; more significantly, it puts into question the documentary status of some of the images in *Dong*. A few of these shared shots are of workers breaking down walls with sledgehammers or of men in white hazmat suits either spraying or scanning the walls for toxins (notably in the same area where the workers are breaking down walls with no protective gear at all). These shared shots could simply be documentary footage from the demolition sites, which was then used to provide the fiction film a more realistic feel. But then we remember that Han Sanming appears in *Dong*, without any explanation for why he is there. Han, a non-professional actor who is a cousin of Jia’s, plays the role of Sanming in *Still Life* just as he had in *Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures* and *The World*. In *Dong*, he is present in the scene where Liu Xiaodong paints the entire group, but in addition he has his own scene, in which Liu paints the fifth canvas featuring Han alone. Han squats down in his pose while Liu paints, and then when Liu is finishing up, the shot focuses on Han alone, who stands up and walks over to the wall to look out over the famous landscape.¹⁴⁸ Then he moves a few steps to the left and pauses again to look. This is that same shot which links the fictional Sanming’s story to Shen Hong’s in *Still Life*, except in the latter case there is a UFO flying in the background, a sudden and incongruous use of CGI. The presence of Han Sanming in both films causes us to ask what a “non-professional” actor so closely associated with Jia’s fiction films is even doing in Liu’s project about workers at the gorges.

¹⁴⁸ See Appendix 5 for stills from this scene.
Even more confusing are two shots in *Dong* in which Han walks through the demolition site in a white tank top, carrying a black travel bag. In the scenes where the painting is being created, we see him in blue shorts (his attire in the painting itself) but here he wears the clothes which are his costume throughout *Still Life*. Is this Han Sanming, cousin of Jia Zhangke and subject of the painting, or the character Sanming from the fiction film, intruding on the documentary? We see him walking in front of a half-demolished building, and as he passes, a wall of the building collapses, seemingly randomly. Han turns to look at it, then keeps walking. The next shot shows Han following four men carrying a stretcher out of a demolition site. On the stretcher is a body covered in a brightly-colored blanket with an unmistakable pattern. The same stretcher and covered body appear in *Still Life*, as the body of Sanming’s friend, a young worker and small-time gangster called “MaGe.”149 In this fictional scene, we see Sanming keeping a vigil with the covered body after he finds MaGe buried under rubble, his death likely the result of retaliation from the gang fights he was involved in. The shot of the vigil is followed by a shot of Sanming following behind a stretcher holding MaGe’s body, covered in the same brightly-colored blanket, as it is placed on a small boat. The shot in *Dong* is the missing middle shot between the two shots of *Still Life*, as it shows Han following the stretcher out of the site and down towards the water, but it cuts before the little procession reaches the shore. There is no explanation in the documentary as to what is going on in this shot, but the following scenes slowly track Liu Xiaodong as he travels to the village of the worker who has been killed. Was the previous shot of Han

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149 He nicknames himself after Mark, the character played by Chow Yun-fat in *A Better Tomorrow* (英雄本色 1986). MaGe watches the famous shot where Chow lights a cigarette with a counterfeit U.S. hundred-dollar bill from the film and imitates it a few minutes later.
following a stretcher showing the body of that real life worker? It is unlikely, and after seeing both films it would appear that the shot of Han Sanming and the stretcher are fictionalized shots used in the documentary. If that is in fact the case, then it is strange that this shot which is “borrowed” from the fiction film is not actually found in the final cut of Still Life, making its status unstable.

We can identify the shot in the documentary as fictional not because of its existence in another fiction film but because of two visual features – Han’s clothing and the blanket. At the same time, by not being a citation (in reverse), the shot of the stretcher in Dong takes on a wholly independent meaning. In Still Life, MaGe’s death is less about the perilous work conditions of migrant workers as it is about youthful energy squandered on petty infighting between young men with nothing better to do, though his situation as a marginalized young man hoping to make a better life is doubtless shared by the real-life migrant worker whose family we meet in Dong. In Dong, this shot of the stretcher, with its initially unknown origin, comes to shock the viewer out of the stylized presentation of the workers (arranged on a mattress, set against a famous landscape) as it becomes one of representation – an act of “speaking for” the many workers whose livelihoods depend on jobs which could cause death or dismemberment on any given day. The body in Dong is anonymous, unlike the striking personality of the character in Still Life, allowing it to be more of a symbol. Yet by migrating between the two films, this image of the dead body encapsulates both the presentational and representational, the individual and the collective, the fictional and the documentary. These shots are translations without originals, but not in the sense of simulacra without a connection to the real. They are variations on an idea which is not an ideal, but is rather the essence of a
worldly experience shared by many individuals with differing circumstances. The dead body, draped in a colorful blanket, itself embodies the joining of lived reality and its adornment. It is performative, creating an awareness of a contradiction, while also pointing to the various ways in which that contradiction resonates outward into other experiences.

This focus on the body is new for Jia, and is in part the result of Liu Xiaodong’s influence. As Jia says, “After working with Liu Xiaodong I’ve started to think about the people in my films more as natural beings … not just as social creatures in a web of relationships” (Useless Press Kit). In Liu’s paintings, especially Hotbed, we see that bodies are the means through which he attempts to access the spiritual power of the individuals he represents. In Liu’s first monologue in Dong, he talks about how he positions his own body in order to get the correct perspective on his subject and the “vital expression” (生命的语言) he is looking for. It is about physical energy and going with the flow of his body. Then he says:

We were young once. In those days, when you observed people around you, you never noticed how they burst with energy. But they are not aware of a profound sorrow intrinsic to all humanity or symptomatic of society. They wouldn’t ponder on those things. Yet the vitality of life bursting out of them is absolutely wonderful. Even in a deeply tragic environment or a condition of utter despair, you discover that life itself is truly moving. Like a tree, it grows freely, full of luxuriance. This is because of youth, its life is still growing. I’ve always been fascinated by these things, by the growth of the human body. Like that young fellow Shao Zhu, when he strips off, his huge prick stands out. Fuck! How youthful and vigorous he is at age 17. Despite growing up in a tough environment, nothing can cover up his beauty. The power of youth cannot be hidden. [Subtitles altered]

Thinking about the body helps Jia to think of representation in terms of spiritual resemblance (shenshi), the capturing of an inner vitality, over and above formal
resemblance (xingshi). This frees his films from the strictures of jishizhuyi realism and opens up space for experimentation with other techniques.

This shift from understanding people as individuals caught up in a social web to viewing them as natural beings can be clearly seen in the changed role of Han Sanming. Before *Still Life*, Han was the quintessential representative of the marginal, of the lowest stratum of society, in Jia’s films. A non-professional actor who really worked in the mines, Han’s presence in the earlier films was a reminder that however difficult or hopeless the lives of the frustrated youths in these films were, they were still better off than the truly uneducated workers whose labor sustained the economic growth that sparked all of the cultural changes examined in the films. In his shorter appearances in earlier films, Han’s performance was extremely low-key, his lines few, his facial expressions quiet. He was difficult to read because his social condition did not permit him the same individuality as those films’ protagonists. Struggling to survive, he is not afforded the luxury even of ennui and self-pity. He is voiceless in a way that none of the other characters in Jia’s films are, and this condition of being named and yet nameless, everywhere and yet nowhere, is not simply Han’s role in the films, but what we come to understand to be shared by many people with his background. By *Dong* and *Still Life*, however, this constant repetition of the role, and especially his appearance in a documentary, disrupts the realism of the character and highlights instead how difficult it is to identify or sympathize with him. “Sanming” becomes a function rather than a psychologically realistic character. His is, as Elin Diamond puts it, the “silent unreadable body” that constitutes a “resistance to realism” (43).
Rather than fetishize the real\textsuperscript{150} as it is represented by this resistant body, though, Jia highlights the need for its performance. The world around the characters in these two films is literally disappearing, so not only must something be done to capture the experience of this place before it is gone, but a performance must attempt to reach new audiences if the memory of the place can survive. To a lesser extent, the same is true of the earlier films, because there too, rapid change in social, cultural and physical (architectural) space is a constant theme. As these performances under the same pretense accumulate, the meaning of any one of them becomes more contingent on the others.\textsuperscript{151} There is no indication that the character of Sanming is the “same person” across all of the films, despite the character’s strong connection to the real life of the actor. We might say that the semantic continuity of the name “Sanming” is guaranteed by the actor’s image as it appears in each film, while the syntactic continuity of his story is disrupted. This lack of sequential development does not disrupt our ability to connect to something authentic, however. The Chinese tradition reminds us that temporal continuity is not necessary for realistic representation. Gu Mingdong notes that one of the probable reasons for the greater emphasis on imitation in the Western tradition as opposed to the Chinese is due to the fact that epic and drama were the “focus of theoretical inquiry,” whereas in China “lyric poetry happened to be the dominant literary genre until modern times” (“Universal” 490). By consequence, “mimesis in the Chinese tradition is above all

\textsuperscript{150} We can recall Barthes’ point in Chapter 3 that the real is often viewed as resistant to meaning, “as if…what is alive cannot signify”. We should not pretend as if breaking the codes of realism will lead us more directly to reality without the mediation of structure.

\textsuperscript{151} It is worth noting at this point that the actress playing Shen Hong in \textit{Still Life}, Zhao Tao, also appears in many of Jia’s films (and they have since married). Her repeated appearances function differently, however, because she is usually a protagonist and a much more developed character than Sanming. Her appearance, her character’s age, profession and personality differ from one film to another. She speaks much more and we are able to understand her feelings more clearly. We do not have the same assumption that she is playing herself, so she disappears into the characters in a more familiar manner.
concerned with the imitation of objects, scenes, moods, and phenomena that tend to be weak in sequence, while mimesis in the Western tradition focuses on events, action, processes, and phenomena that tend to be sequence-oriented” (491). In Jia’s films, instead of a narrative which establishes a coherent character we call Sanming, we find a recurring phenomenon that manifests itself differently according to the historical situation in which the character appears. Becoming aware of the disjuncture between these manifestations does not detract from their representativeness of a lived social reality.

What the disjuncture achieves is that instead of seeing Sanming only as an individual caught in a web of social relations (and economic forces), we instead see him as part of an intertextual web of significations, one in which the film itself plays a role. Corey Byrnes details the many ways in which Jia’s methodology in *Still Life* intersects with techniques of landscape and scroll painting, using multi-planar depth to reveal the “many layers of representation and ideology that adhere to this famous landscape” (61). More importantly, he goes on to argue that Jia’s “hybrid style” is “rooted in aesthetically and ethically oriented modes of view” rather than a straightforward devotion to realism (61). Borrowing the term “implacement” from Edward Casey, which refers to a “mutual envelopment of the person/landscape pair” that reveals the instability of reality, Byrnes suggests that “It is only in the encounter between moving bodies and living landscapes that individuals become properly ‘implaced’ and space properly ‘placed’” (67). In the case of Han Sanming’s repeated appearances, though, we need to consider not just the ways in which the moving body on screen affects our understanding of the landscape and the context in which that body operates, but also how the actor’s self-conscious
performance in and across films becomes essential for a multi-layered historical understanding.

Han’s performance creates a version of a Brechtian Verfremdungseffekte (a neologism variously translated as “alienation effect,” “distancing effect,” or “estranging effect” but perhaps best rendered as V-effect to maintain the semantic complexity in German). In his essay, “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting,” Brecht writes, “The artist’s object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing. Everyday things are thereby raised above the level of the obvious and automatic” (92). By distancing himself from his own character, the actor breaks the audience’s psychological identification with the character, freeing them to consider the character’s embeddedness in a socio-historical framework. The ideal spectator for Brecht is not the filmic spectator, totally dissociated from her own body in the darkness. She identifies neither with the apparatus nor with the characters but rather sits in a well-lit room, leaning back and contemplating the scene (in Brecht’s version, smoking a cigar). The scene with Sanming in the blue shorts on the rooftop is an example of this alienation at work. As he moves from one point to another on this flat surface and

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152 This is a good place to mention that the Chinese title of Still Life, Sanxia haoren or The Good People of The Three Gorges echoes the title of Brecht’s play, The Good Person of Szechwan. Yan Haiping reflects on the ideological links between the two works. She points out that “Much like Brecht’s Shen Te, Han Sanming, the ‘good person’, does not seem likely to survive the flux of organized disorder, its inherent indifference towards human attachment beyond the code of the cash nexus and its corruption of humanity to the core.” But whereas Brecht’s play is marked by a dialectical logic, and the character of Shen Te “has to mask herself as her cousin Shui Ta to deal with the business of the real on its own terms” – has, literally, to split herself in two – Han Sanming does not need to do this. By contrast, “Still Life complicates its own documentary impetus and exceeds the binary of the dialectical logic by bringing forth a turning of events leveraged on the figure of the quiet migrant worker as its mobile centre of gravity. Han Sanming finds his way of remaining a ‘good person’ in the here and now of the present city while continuing his search, travelling through, tracing and inhabiting every inch of the land in its critical moment of transition” (215).
turns to look out over the landscape, he seems slightly mechanical, as if he is an actor rehearsing his blocking on a stage, rather than a real human being wandering lost in thought. In *Dong* he is being painted, while in *Still Life* the painting is removed – but there he sees a UFO. At these moments, the realism of both character and film is disrupted, so the spectator can break the absorption into the world of the film and consider the significance of the actor’s collective performances. In addition, because the distancing effect relies on intertextual knowledge, it also sparks reflection on the role of film in mediating the performance of different histories, by providing the context for their repetition (through repeated viewings of the same film) and their variation (through reprises of similar roles in different films).

But again, the goal of the V-effect is not to simply get everyone to sit back and contemplate life. It should spark a recognition of the socio-historical forces at work on the “reality” being presented. Earlier in his career, Brecht theorized the epic theater, in which “the repertoire of estranging effects would aim to produce a double perspective on events and actions so as at once to show their present contradictory nature and their historical cause or social motivation” (Brooker 215). Initially, Brecht’s notion of the epic theater was one in which the material conditions concealed by the anti-historical, overly psychological nature of bourgeois realism would be revealed, leading to Marxist analysis. Later in his life, as Brecht “became more and more conscious of the complexities of human behaviour and the grey rather than black-and-white tones of social contradictions, the term epic theater satisfied him less and less and he began to talk of the ‘dialectical’ theatre or theatre of ‘contradictions’” (Subiotto 37). In either the epic theater or the theater of contradictions, what we see is a drive to re-think realism, not for the sake of
stylistic innovation, but rather as a means to better reveal the conditions that realism
pursports to describe but fails to reach. As Elin Diamond points out, Brecht wanted more
realism, not less. It was only a different notion of realism:

In historicized performance gaps are not to be filled in, seams and contradictions show
in all their roughness, and therein lies one aspect of spectatorial pleasure – when our
differences from the past and within the present are palatable, graspable, possibly
applicable. Plays aspiring realistically to depict the present require the same
historicization. Realism disgusted Brecht not only because it dissimulates its
conventions but because it is hegemonic: by copying the surface details of the world it
offers the illusion of lived experience, even as it marks off only one version of that
experience. (50)

In Jia’s earlier films, too, the lived contradictions created by social and historical
conditions in China were always at the fore. As we saw in Chapter 2, Jia’s resistance to
turning individual characters into symbols meant that the viewer had to supply the
connection between the characters’ experiences and whatever abstract (especially
national) significance they had. Han Sanming’s character, for example, remains
individualized in the early films by keeping his name and profession – he is Sanming, a
real coal miner, not a nameless, symbolic everyman. Over time, by reappearing
everywhere, we become conscious of his performance of his own identity. Ultimately, the
symbolism which his character takes on is the result of the combination of films; it is
achieved through a collection of particulars. His subjectivity is always registered within
an historical framework and never becomes blankly “universal” (as in bourgeois realism).

What gradually builds as a point of interest, a footnote to the earlier films (in
which Han Sanming is not a major figure), becomes central to understanding the project
of Dong and Still Life. That is because these two films, in combination, raise not only the
question of Han’s status as actor or historical subject, but also the status of the image
itself as historical document or staged performance. The moment when these two sets of
problems intersect becomes a Brechtian gestus, revealing the true extent of the power structures (both economic and technological) in which Han and the other migrant workers are embedded. In Diamond’s reading of Brecht to theorize historicized performance, she describes the gestus as “a gesture, word, an action, a tableau, by which, separately or in a series, the social attitudes encoded in the playtext become visible to the spectator” (52). While the V-effect describes the actor’s approach to performance throughout the work, the gestus is a particular moment at which contradictions become particularly visible. Diamond writes, “the historical subject playing an actor, playing a character, splits the gaze of the spectator, who, as a reader of a complex sign system, cannot consume or reduce the object of her vision to a monolithic projection of the self. Indeed with the gestus Brecht ruins the scopic regime of the perspectival realist stage” (53). I read the entire sequence in which Han follows the stretcher out of the demolition site as the gestus of this film pair. The gaze of the spectator is split between actor and character, between one film and another, between documentary and fiction, and the awareness of this performance, the contingency and encodedness of the individual shots of the sequence as a whole, allows for this non-ideological historical awareness. It is worth pointing out that film is able to register both performance and its repetitions in a way that theatrical performance is not, making it particularly effective in conveying the gestus, if the audience can be engaged in the manner of the Brechtian ideal spectator.

For that reason, it is probably not a coincidence that at precisely at this moment, in this sequence in which the full weight of the social and the historical is revealed, Jia also opens up his character to a complexity of emotion that we had not previously seen. In the initial shot (from Still Life), where Sanming sits next to the body of his friend, he
lights cigarettes and stands three of them up in front of a photo of MaGe, along with his mobile phone, to create a small altar. Here Sanming changes the cigarettes from a symbol of *guanxi*, items to be exchanged as part of a network of relationship-building and favors, into incense sticks, a symbol of a spiritual world that exceeds the world of capital in which their identities are inscribed. Or, more properly, we might say that the cigarettes are markers of both immanent and transcendent meaning. They are one of four items of exchange that are used to divide the film into sections, identified by onscreen titles. Their structural and economic function is not diminished by this gesture of sentimentality and human emotion, and in fact, the gesture reminds us of the connection these two individuals found in each other, as in an earlier conversation when MaGe tells Sanming that they are both “too nostalgic.” Although the gesture to the spiritual world does nothing to help either Sanming or his friend escape from the physical world, it does help to make the audience more aware of the emotional contours of that historical world without necessarily having to identify with the character psychologically. This sequence concludes with the moment when the workers place the stretcher carrying MaGe’s body onto the small boat. In moving the anchor into the boat, one of the men uncovers part of MaGe’s head. Sanming reaches out to cover it again, but does so extremely carefully and gently, placing his hands on either side of the head and spreading them outward before fixing the edge of the blanket once more. In this gesture, as he places his hands on the head of his dead friend, Sanming says goodbye and the audience sees a powerful, yet still extremely subtle, expression of emotion and empathy from this character who is so often silent and unreadable.

153 The other three are: liquor, tea and toffee (as in the 大白兔奶糖 that Sanming gives his wife).
Dong and Still Life disrupt the realist mode and for the first time in Jia’s oeuvre do so in a way that calls into question the very representational capacity of cinema itself (especially the ability of jishizhuyi-style realism to capture the sort of truth he is looking for). Ironically, or perhaps not, it is the adoption of the DV camera that sparks this self-reflexivity. Jia says that he and his longtime-collaborator, cinematographer Yu Lik-wai, strove for a “poetic-digital” style when creating their previous film The World, which we can see in the metaphorical quality of that film.  

We see it in Still Life as well, only in that film the poetic is registered, as in his earlier films, less in the symbolic or allegorical nature of the characters or the settings, but rather in the tension between individual and collective significations, between past and present resonances. More significantly, the disruption of realism in these films, while achieving the same effects in many ways as the Brechtian V-effect, is not created through the same “alienation” or “estrangement” as Brecht sought. What we see here is not simply a replacement of the representational with the presentational or a shift from psychological identification to distanciation and alienation, but a combination of these seemingly opposed ideas. To understand how this works, we can look once more at Brecht – or more precisely, beyond him, to the Chinese approach to performance which Brecht found so provocative (and which he misread, given his different assumptions about dramatic mimesis).

As is well known, Brecht’s ideas about the V-effect, while already percolating in his work,  were solidified after a visit to Moscow in 1935, during which he attended a

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154 For example, the fact that the entire film takes place in a theme park that features world landmarks in miniature makes it a clear allegory for the emptiness of globalization as it impacts the marginalized workers in the film. See “Interview: Jia Zhangke.”

155 Tian points out that Brecht’s ideas about epic theater (which are closely related to the V-effect essay) were already firmly established before his trip to Moscow. Tian also reminds us of John Willet’s point that the concepts behind the V-effect derived initially from Shklovsky’s priem ostranenniya or “the device of
demonstration (not a full-fledged performance) of acting techniques in the Peking “opera” (京剧) by legendary actor Mei Lanfang. Mei’s performance solidified his ideas about “non-Aristotelian” acting, because he interpreted Mei to be simultaneously embodying a character and observing himself presenting that character. But of course, Mei Lanfang was not thinking in terms of how much he fulfilled or breached the assumptions of Western theorists of drama. For Brecht, the elaborate makeup of the actors and the stylized gestures which they used to convey the internal emotions of their characters prohibited him from being caught up in the emotion of the performance, but for a Chinese spectator, such features were familiar. More broadly, Brechtian “alienation” is generally equated with the breaking of the so-called “fourth wall” in drama, but no such distinction between the imagined world of the performance and the actual space of performer-spectator interaction was maintained in traditional Chinese drama. Tian Min argues that by addressing the audience in order to introduce himself and his character, the Chinese actor was not breaking a wall, as Brecht read it, and therefore not disrupting the spectator’s “identification with the stage illusion created by the actor’s performance” (205). By contrast, the audience is “invited into the poetic atmosphere and imagination created by the actor’s performance, which synthesizes poetry, singing and dancing” (205). Tian explains further:

the illusion is not the naturalistic one to which both the Brechtian epic theatre and the Chinese theatre are opposed; it is that kind of illusion primarily of poetic and emotional atmosphere and artistic realm (yijing) which is based, not on objective verisimilitude in physical form, but on subjective likeness in emotion and spirit (shensi). This kind of illusion works on the imagination and emotion of the spectator

making strange”. Brecht therefore saw in Chinese acting a method to fit his theory, and the theory did not spontaneously arise from viewing the performance, as is sometimes claimed.

who relishes his aesthetic and empathetic pleasures and sympathies while enjoying the performance. (205)

Here we see again the idea of *shen* as the emotional core which the performance seeks to draw out.157 These aesthetic pleasures come from the way in which the actor performs roles and characters that are already well-known to the audience, as each regional opera had a familiar repertoire of works. The ability of an individual performance to succeed, therefore, relies on the audience being familiar with other similar performances. The “empathetic pleasures” were derived from the way in which the actor merged with the character, the opposite of Brecht’s notion of “alienation.” Whereas Brecht saw the control of gesture and aesthetic precision as a resistance to realism and therefore as a movement toward social analysis, Tian argues that “in Chinese acting, the effect of beautification of gestures and movements, which appeals more to the senses than to reason, is essentially emotional, perceptual, and aesthetic, devoid of the social gesture that is featured by the Brechtian A-effect” (209).

It may be the case that the performance of “opera” actors such as Mei Lanfang lacked the “social gesture” which Brecht was looking for, and it is also worth noting Tian’s point that Chinese performance had already been engaging with Western ideas about drama for quite a few years by the time Brecht met Mei Lanfang, so any notion he might have had of encountering an essentially Chinese approach is misguided. Even so, the reason for this long digression into Brechtian theory and its misfires is to lead us toward a potential blending of the thinking about drama which Tian traces in Chinese performance with the thinking behind Brecht’s V-effect. I want to propose a model of

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157 Tian provides characters for his pinyin text: 神似 The “si” here means “to resemble,” but Gu uses the pinyin “shi” for “shenshi” with a similar gloss. I assume that he is thinking of the character 式 for “shi” (to pair with 形式 for “form”).
performance here that combines the appeal to the senses and emotion with the expression of social contradictions that leads to historical analysis. In his delineation of the history of mimetic theories in Chinese poetics, Gu points out that the negative valuation conferred upon *mimesis* in Western poetics since Plato (with which positive interpretations of *mimesis* have inevitably had to grapple) did not exist (at least for a long time) in the Chinese tradition. He writes, “In discussions of the dialectical relationship between formal resemblance and spiritual resemblance, the former was emphasized and praised as a positive quality and did not become a concept with negative connotations until long after the Tang [dynasty]” (“Chinese Literary Thought” 408). The drive toward formal resemblance was not seen as superficial copying because art itself was not seen as secondary to the machinations of the real world – it was part of that operation of historical understanding all along. As a result, appealing to the audience’s emotional and aesthetic sensibilities does not preclude the communication of the social conditions of the moment of creation and may in fact enhance it. Han Sanming’s performance in *Dong* and *Still Life* is precisely calibrated so that the moments when the weight of the historical conditions of these workers bear down the hardest are the very moments in which he shows the most vulnerability and the most humanity.

The lyricism of these films, then, is the result of this precise combination of broader socio-cultural awareness and empathy on an individual level. Because the scenes with Sanming are dispersed over two films and belong to a chain of repeated performances with slight variations, it is difficult to fit this figure into a singular historical narrative. This is especially important for a story taking place in Fengjie, where both the nationalist narrative of progress and development and the international criticisms
of the environmental, historical and human costs of the Three Gorges Dam tended to
overlook the varied, incongruous experiences and reactions of individuals caught up in
this project of epic proportions. For this reason, lyricism needs to be tied to the body in
these films, in order to make individual emotions sensible for the audience. This
operation becomes even more pronounced in 24 City and IWIK (which are the focus of
the next section). In addition, the intertextual overlapping and the blurring of boundaries
between the real actor performing and the character being performed, which is
highlighted by the double presence of Han Sanming, ask us to think about the films
themselves as performances, as performative acts.

In the earlier “hometown trilogy,” lyricism blended fairly seamlessly with the
\textit{jishizhuyi} style, but once the film begins to make a claim to documentary status, these
performative or poetic moments seem to grate against the rest of the film – that is, if we
continue to view documentary truth as arising from either an objective, factual
representation or from a subjective, self-conscious presentation of the process. If we think
about \textit{Dong} and \textit{Still Life} as engaging in the sort of \textit{mimesis} which is both the act of
performing and the thing performed, however, the sense of disconnect begins to fade.
\textit{Dong} and \textit{Still Life} combine a representation of the space and time of the Three Gorges in
2005 with a performance of their own interpretation of this space and time without
creating a sense of alienation, in a similar manner as Mei Lanfang thought the ideal
Chinese opera performer should. In so doing, they do not preclude the possibility of
emotional and aesthetic pleasures; these pleasures are achieved without requiring full
identification with the protagonists, which would inhibit the work of historicism.
In another vein, we might say that these films are not looking to upend realism, but to repurpose it, in light of the liminality of the geographic and temporal markers we view onscreen. The physical location of Fengjie is about to be underwater, indeed is already partly underwater, leaving the past and all of its markers to be washed away, along with a sense of a future. Although theories of liminality, such as Victor Turner’s, often treat liminal spaces as one of potential, here it seems that the other side of the liminal is an empty nothingness. How can an objective realism capture an experience which is so unfamiliar and strange, even for those who have experienced it? In response to an interviewer who asked, “How has your commitment to realism changed?” Jia has said, “I think surrealism is a crucial part of China’s reality” (Chan, “Interview with Jia Zhangke”). This would be oxymoronic if we read “surrealism” here as referring to the twentieth-century movement which sought to set loose the unconscious mind’s creative potential, but not if we understand it as an intensified form of realism. Indeed, in Chinese “surrealism” is formed by adding the word “chao” [超] onto “realism”. “Chao” can mean “to surpass” or to “to transcend” but it is also used, for example, in the word for “supermarket,” implying an intensification or higher grade. Just like the gestic moment itself, which “in a sense explains the play, but it also exceeds the play” (Diamond 53), “surrealism” here marks an out-of-the-ordinary, provocative experience which is yet, as Jia says, “a crucial part of China’s reality.” In the Three Gorges of 2005, this surrealism was the result of the otherworldly feeling of being in a famous landscape whose image no longer fit the many representations of it (such as the famous one on the back of the ten-
yuan note which is used in a key scene in *Still Life*). Given this background, the much-discussed appearance of science fictional images rendered in CGI in this film is less surprising. The UFO which links Sanming and Shen Hong’s gaze has already been mentioned, but the moment which forms the signature of this film is when a large sculpture which sits on a hillside in the background of a scene (resembling the traditional form of the Chinese character “hua” [華] which means “splendid” but can also refer to “Chinese”) suddenly launches into the atmosphere like a rocket. Though playful, these moments are not diversions from the realism of the film but essential elements for establishing an intensified realism, which conveys the disjointed, otherworldly experience of that time and place.

Eddie Bertozzi proposes that the term “magical realism” be applied to describe the challenge to realism in *Still Life*, as a means to capture the postsocialist specificity of this experience, with all of its contradictions. Evoking Bazin’s concept of “supernaturalization,” Bertozzi understands Jia’s rejection of the possibility of absolute

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158 See Byrnes for an insightful analysis of this moment.
159 During my own experience traveling through this region in early 2006, the only way I could describe it was that it was like being awake and dreaming at the same time. I traveled on a boat down a river, but instead of an ordinary riverbank, what I saw on either side of the river was the middle of a mountain, as if I were floating in a cloud, not riding a river. Roads and staircases went straight into the water, and empty buildings lined the shore. Jia describes the experience of arriving in this place as disorienting because it seemed human beings could not have achieved such change in such a short time, but of course they did achieve this. It felt supernatural but was entirely real.
160 It is featured, for example, on the cover of Dudley Andrew’s book *What Cinema Is!*
161 It looks as if CGI is also used in another scene where Sanming discusses future plans with his wife. The scene is a citation of Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *Boys from Fengkuei*, where the boys are tricked into paying for tickets to a cinema which turns out to be a shell of a building. They look out the open wall and remark that the view of the city through this rectangular opening looks like a cinema screen. Similarly, Sanming and his wife look out a rectangular opening in a building being demolished, but all of a sudden a tall building in the background collapses. That collapse appears to be rendered in CGI, but in this case it is supposed to look “real,” unlike the UFO or rocket sculpture.
162 The soundtrack of these films adds to this feeling. It is less noticeable in *Dong*, but in both, the sound of synthesizers softly pulsing in the background creates the air less of the futuristic, as in *The World*, than of a space into which aliens could descend at any moment.
objectivity as a crisis of jishizhuyi realism, leading to an emphasis on subjective perception of the real. He cites Jia’s contrast (found in the quote from the Sun Jianmin interview above) between the “feeling of the real” which “concerns aesthetics” with the “real” which “is only a matter of sociology” (Bertozzi’s translations, 163). Bertozzi states, “Once the limits of the camera have been acknowledged and the emotional perspective asserted, then the director can convey his/her truth not only by means of the details of the material world, but especially foregrounding his/her perception of these” (163). These perceptions which are both the “director’s own and the audience’s” include “a set of feelings, question marks, sensorial stimulations conveying a sense of confusion, alienation, incomprehensibility” (163). As we have seen, though, Still Life provides moments of not only confusion and alienation but also connection (between Sanming and MaGe) and re-connection (between Sanming and his wife). These moments provide a sense of possibility for a different mode of relating post-Fengjie, which we risk losing sight of if the focus lands so squarely on individual truths and perceptions. Bertozzi begins his description of “magical realism” with the German art critic who first introduced the term in 1925, Franz Roh. For Roh, magical realism is “neither the representation of bizarre objects in a Surrealist way, nor a mere materialistic description of reality; it provides instead a new vision of the everyday world by means of its spiritual undertones, in order for the inner life of things to emerge from the cold soberness of the picture” (154). This description is very similar to the Chinese notion of representing shen, or the spirit of things and people as opposed to the external form. As we saw in Sikong Tu’s formulation, described by Gu, the poet or painter “needs to use the subjective shen (spiritual understanding of the essence of things) to meet the objective shen (spiritual
essence in objects to be represented)” (421). Certainly, the subjective perception of the
director and his understanding of the world to be represented is essential to this process.
Yet as the piece goes on, Bertozzi emphasizes the director’s view more than the object of
the representation, even as he stresses that the film “works to re-trace the borders of
cinematic realism.” The emphasis on the “feeling of the real” “allows for greater depth of
authenticity, a virtue that now coincides with the director’s own sensibility and that
supports the idea that nothing can be more genuine that [sic] our own feelings for and
reactions to particular environments and stimuli” (167-168). The problem with this notion
is that it makes the film entirely about the director’s and audience’s feelings, not the
feelings which may be specific to the historical moment. In this case, the director did
experience that moment directly, though obviously not as intensely as those who were
being relocated.

In 24 City and IWIK, the challenge grows as Jia attempts to render histories which
are important to China’s collective sensibilities in the present, but which he did not
experience directly. We should remember that despite the increasing distanciation in
Dong and Still Life, Jia chooses not to insert himself into the film, although his star power
as an auteur constantly threatens to overpower the historical object nonetheless. Liu
Xiaodong’s work has a similar tension, as Wu Hung points out. Wu notes that Liu set up
the canvases for Hotbed No. 1 on a flat rooftop and gave himself a set timeline in which
to finish it. His active method of painting (Wu provides a photograph of Liu standing on
top of the canvases, which lie flat on the ground) became a performance which the locals
watched from their windows. The first canvas ended up unfinished, and Wu notes, “The
incompletion of the painting…generates a strong feeling of action: we feel that he was
competing with time to capture the images in front of him” (31). Wu says that this method reveals a contradiction, because “when the artist’s role as the creator becomes a painting’s main significance, the subjects of the painting...become signifiers of his creative engagement” (31). The more we emphasize Jia’s individual vision, the more we lose sight of the historical awareness the images can provide and the more their lyricism fades into something closer to formalist poeticism. Instead of presenting the subjective impressions of this film as individualized, these two films displace subjective experience across multiple locations and characters’ experiences, and emphasize the bodies onscreen at least as much as the cerebral intellect behind the camera. The films, as I have been arguing, create a Brechtian distanciation without necessarily alienating the viewer and without the sort of self-reflexivity that folds the art work back onto itself and disconnects it from the historical. Or put another way: the “spiritual understanding of the essence of things” is not the end, but the means to reaching the “spiritual essence in objects to be represented.”

**Enacting Memories in 24 City and I Wish I Knew**

In the above discussion of *Dong* and *Still Life*, I argued for a reading of those films which understands their mimetic practice as a combination of objective and subjective representation, of formal and spiritual resemblance, in which the film’s performance and the performance of the actor on screen lead the audience to a deeper understanding of the embodied experience of an historical moment, while yet preventing unreflective psychological identification. In so doing, they prevent the individual embodied experience from being subsumed into a singular collective narrative, whether
local (the migrant worker, the Chinese villager displaced in the name of economic advancement) or global (the underside of globalization). Moreover, these films demonstrate that the non-teleological historicism envisioned by Benjamin is still able to engage emotionally and even bodily with the experiences it represents. These insights may only “flash up” but they are no less affective for it. My approach follows that of Corey Byrnes and Jason McGrath in seeking a more comprehensive accounting of the formalism in Jia’s films and its relationship to realism. Regarding *Still Life*, Byrnes writes that the many celebrations of Jia’s realism tend to see it “as still powerful ‘interpretive practice’” rather than as a “representational mode” (56). Instead of treating the use of special effects, for example, as an aberration in an essentially new brand of realism, he argues that we should incorporate the two facets of Jia’s aesthetics as we seek to understand what is ultimately a historiographic as well as stylistic experimentation. My own reading of *Still Life* differs from Byrnes’s in that I stress the dramatic aspects of the film and its intertextual connections to *Dong*. It is only in thinking about these individuals across time (in addition to Byrnes’s interest in how the layers of history surround them in space) that we understand the film to be the site of negotiation between the “now” of the moment of filming and the “now” of the moment of reception. The liminal, according to Turner, only works to create a new understanding of identity if it is part of a process, if it is a stage in between some “before” and “after,” and if it involves relations among individuals which are subject to re-orientation and redefinition. In the previous section, Diamond’s use of Brecht helped us to understand performance as a means of attaining historical awareness through the resistance to (bourgeois, naturalist) realism, but – and this is essential – that awareness is not achieved through a top-down
imposition of singular interpretation. She writes, “Brechtian theater depends on a structure of representation, on exposing and making visible, but what appears even in the gestus can only be provisional, indeterminate, nonauthoritative” (54). This is precisely the sort of history which Jia has always sought, an individualized, nonauthoritative history, but it can only be grasped in temporary flashes, in the gestus that appears and then passes by. It cannot be fixed, but must always be part of the flow of time, hidden among networks of juxtaposed elements, until it flashes up again.

The films in focus for this section, 24 City and I Wish I Knew, attempt to capture the story behind two places with histories that are somewhat unique and yet resonant with the broader history of modern China. 24 City looks at a factory in Sichuan Province and I Wish I Knew examines the city of Shanghai. If we look only at the interviews in these two films, it would seem that Jia has taken a more traditional approach by organizing the story of these places chronologically and developmentally (though this is less true about IWIK as we will see). But both films spend roughly the same amount of time on footage of these places – and the people in them – in the present time, allowing the audience to reflect on the complex ways in which the histories narrated by the interviewees have impacted present conditions. They present a twofold challenge to the viewer regarding the representation of collective memory: first, how to connect the individual stories of the interviewees to the audience’s sense of a shared history while still respecting the specificity of those experiences and second, how to represent not just the facts about the past but also the emotions that accompany its remembrance, which are so much a part of the way in which the past affects the present. As we will see, Jia’s approach to grappling with these challenges involves intervening in the raw documentation of information in
order to allow the facts to be experienced by the audience in a different way than they
would in a more conventional documentary. Although this intervention follows the
director’s sense of what is relevant, it is not done in order to impose his own
understanding or emotional response on the audience, but rather to encourage the viewer
to engage with the past affectively, while still remaining distant enough to think
historically.

*24 City* is about the closing of a secret military factory known by its code name:
Factory 420. It was originally Factory 111 in China’s northeastern Liaoning province, but
in 1958, as part of Mao Zedong’s strategy of constructing three lines of defense (三线建设) it was relocated to southwestern Sichuan province. In 2005, the factory site was sold
to China Resources Land Ltd, which planned to build a residential community called 24
City there. Factory 420, meanwhile, had been relocated and the money from the sale used
to develop a new industrial park outside the city. While some of the factory’s workers
would continue at the new site, it is not clear whether all of the 30,000 workers would be
employed there; presumably the living quarters and social services available to them and
their family members in the old complex, which were such a core feature of the socialist
danwei [单位] or work unit system, would not be continued. The film traces the history
of the factory from its origins to the present through interviews with workers and others
who grew up in the complex. Everything is filmed in the present, without re-enactments.
The past is accessed through the retold memories of the interviewees and through a few
physical documents provided for the camera’s gaze.

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163 These facts come from 中国工人访谈录：关于集体记忆的故事, a companion book to the film, and the press kit for *24 City*. 
*I Wish I Knew*, which tells the story of Shanghai through 18 interviews with a range of people who have varying degrees of association with the city, uses eight clips from films about Shanghai in order to depict the past. Like *24 City* though, it also relies on the memories of the interviewees for the “facts” of the city’s history. Neither film uses voiceover narration. *I Wish I Knew* includes a few intertitles to introduce key facts about Shanghai’s past, but these focus on the pre-twentieth century history which none of the interviewees lived through (such as the Opium Wars and the creation of foreign concessions). The first set of interviews starts with a description of life as a child in the Shanghai *longtang* during the 1950s and 1960s, then moves to a group of stories about pre-1949 Shanghai. Then, after hearing about families who fled Shanghai for Taiwan after the Communists won the Civil War, the film moves there for three interviews. Next it returns to Shanghai for stories about the 1960s to the 1970s, and then goes to Hong Kong for three interviews with actresses, highlighting the fact that much of the film industry moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong after 1949. Finally, we return to Shanghai for two stories about the Reform Era and the present. While *IWIK* is organized in a partially-chronological, partially-geographical manner, the structure of *24 City* is roughly chronological, but not entirely. The first interview, with He Xikun, relates a story about the attitudes towards factory work which is more general than historically-specific. The second interview brings us back to the political context for the transfer from Shenyang to Sichuan, but the third interview is with a woman who talks about being laid off in the 1990s and her present situation. The next four are chronological, but in between all of these are various types of shots from the present moment, making the historical continuity far less distinct than it would be if we had only the interviews. Then the fourth
interview retells the story of a woman who lost her child during the long journey from Shenyang to Sichuan. Moreover, the film provides no intertitles or supplemental information to contextualize the stories. The audience must take cues from the interviews and some of the intervening shots to piece together the precise history of the factory, and even then the fully story only becomes clear when looking at the maps and timelines provided in some of the supplementary materials like the press kit and the book Jia published, *Interviews with Chinese Workers: Stories of Collective Memory* [中国工人访谈录:关于集体记忆的故事]. Although neither film provides a “voice of god” commentary or onscreen text to transition between one time period and another, it is not as if the juxtapositions between the sections are jarring, however. The interviews and additional components of each film (including the performed segments and shots of empty interior and exterior scenes) are blended seamlessly together, particularly through the use of soundtrack, visual motifs and rhythm.

The result of this unique structure is that the films’ stylistic continuity provides a consistent mood while the lack of a narrative thread prevents the films from falling into allegory. The film that might have done that was a script Jia wrote called “The Factory Door” which he says was “inspired by several of my high-school classmates who became factory workers before finishing high school, but lost their jobs in the mid-1990s. I didn’t film the finished script because I didn’t especially want to focus on the social aspects, the difficult lives of workers” (“Invisible Cities”). His resistance to making this planned film

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164 This interview is performed by an actor; see below for more details.
165 In terms of space, *24 City* provides a coherent sense of unity in terms of the factory site. *I Wish I Knew*, on the other hand, does not include many of the scenic shots of the city which we might expect. Instead we see individual scenes, locations which are somehow important to the stories being told, in which the interviewee sits while telling his or her story.
seems to stem from the same distaste (which we saw in Chapter 2) for clearly political, socially symbolic films. Incorporating these stories of the workers into a broader memory film, *24 City*, allows for a more individually-focused approach. This film contains the above-mentioned interview with a woman laid off in the 1990s, but it also features stories about how proud people were of their work and their community life, as well as a story about a young man whose quality of life is better than his father’s now that he works outside of the factory. This is a much more complex portrait of the social changes brought on by economic reforms. The structure of a series of interviews, as opposed to a developing narrative, allows for the audience to get caught up in each story on its own terms, without necessarily needing to fit that story into a larger picture. In addition, the interviews often alternate between past and present, layering narratives on top of each other. The strategy is much like the one Merewether notices in Liu Xiaodong’s Bangkok portrait *Hotbed No. 2* in which “the figures are dispersed broadly and unevenly across the canvas, demanding the action of scanning on the part of the viewer. This demand to scan the painting also leads the viewer to register the particularity of each figure” (121). Like the shots of workers standing for group shots in *24 City* (discussed in detail below), “Liu Xiaodong’s women return the gaze of the onlooker.” In both cases, individuals are spatially and temporally linked but maintain their own agency, their own sense of a unique trajectory.

In these two films, Jia also fully embraces the sentimental aspect of lyricism, which was much subtler in his earlier work. It comes through in the fictionalization techniques not often found in conventional documentaries. Most obviously and controversially, *24 City* features five actors (four adults and one child) whose narratives
were written based on compiled accounts from the real people whom Jia and his team interviewed in preparation for the film. The four adult actors are all well-known and assumed to be recognizable to Chinese audiences. In *I Wish I Knew*, there are also several interludes featuring (once again) Zhao Tao, who wanders around Shanghai without any apparent destination, never interacting with anyone. Beyond the use of actors, there are many other features of these films which give them a higher degree of stylization. Both films use more composed music than Jia’s earlier features, and the repeating refrains of the soundtracks connect the various interview segments to a broader emotive mood which, thanks in part to the slow pace, is slightly melancholic without being melodramatic or entirely depressing. The lighting is less harsh and the focus is softer. Sometimes slow motion is used. Some shots look more like an expertly composed photograph or still life painting than a slice of “on-the-spot” documentary footage. All of these elements turn seemingly ordinary and even ugly industrial or urban scenes into something captivating and sentimental. Instead of catching the interviewees in the sort of public spaces found in *In Public*, many of them are carefully staged in a space that represents their line or work or current stage of life, which reminds us of the strategy of “implacement” which Byrnes identified in *Still Life*. As Yomi Braester points out, many of the shots of the interviewees in *IWIK* are mediated by mirrors or glass, further enhancing the artistic presentation of the interviewees, giving each segment its own *mise-en-scène*. When the interviewees are not part of the shot, and the camera explores these

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166 They are: Lü Liping 吕丽萍, Chen Jianbin 陈建斌, Joan Chen 陈冲 and Zhao Tao 赵涛
167 In a talk given at Rutgers University on January 30th, 2014.
168 This strategy is a signature of Wong Kar-wai films, so it is not a surprise that of all the clips of Shanghai-born Hong Kong actress Rebecca Pan which Jia could have chosen to accompany her segment in *I Wish I Knew*, he includes the well-known shot from Wong’s *Days of Being Wild* which features Pan reflected through multiple panes of glass, speaking Shanghainese.
social spaces as realms of architecture and objects rather than human interaction, the
shots become even more aestheticized. At first glance, it appears that the first foray into
entirely historical material frees Jia to be more aesthetically interventionist, because the
appearance of the real is not necessary when the audience knows that the places and
times being represented are true. Even so, the blatant intervention of the fictional strikes
some as unnecessarily stylized and perhaps even unethical, especially given the fact that
24 City was financed in part by the very company that had bought out the factory
complex, while I Wish I Knew was commissioned for the Shanghai Expo of 2010. Are
these stylizations meant to cover over the ugly portions of these complex histories, to
paint (both figuratively and almost literally) a pretty picture of the past to ensure that the
films appealed to investors and a wide range of audiences, both domestic and international?

Before we can begin to answer that question for these two films, it will help to
take a quick look at the broader context of documentary filmmaking into which they
enter. The use of actors, staged shots, clips from fiction films, and so on are not new to
documentaries, though there are few examples of a fuzzy border between documentary
and fiction in the shorter history of Chinese-language documentary. One of the first films
in what we now think of as the documentary genre, Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the
North (1922), portrays the day-to-day struggles of the Quebec Inuit as they eke out a
living in the harsh arctic climate. The figure of Nanook was played by an actor named
Allakariallak, as were the members of Nanook’s constructed nuclear family. Some of the
most famous scenes were staged, and many of the traditional practices they demonstrated
were no longer in use.\textsuperscript{169} Flaherty’s concern was not all that different from Jia Zhangke’s, though, as both sought to capture a way of life already on its way to extinction. Ever since this controversial beginning, the documentary form has had to contend with questions of authenticity and ethics. The perhaps inevitable reaction against blatant manipulation led to a search for objectivity and the elimination of interference, through the movements of \textit{cinéma verité}, observational cinema and direct cinema. At the same time, as Jonathan Kahana describes, an ongoing interest in reenactment in cinema makes it difficult to determine precisely when “documentary cinema became aware of itself,” and likewise recognized the impossibility of fully eliminating the interference of a subjective consciousness (47). This is because films which appear uncritical in regards to the use of acting can in fact use it as the “critical, if not contradictory, foundation of a documentary effect” while also calling into question the authenticity of the acted gesture (47).

Despite the complexity of the history of documentary and the presence of fictionalization and re-enactment throughout that history, there remains a general assumption on the part of most viewers that if a film is claimed as a documentary, then the director should either intervene as little as possible in the situation at hand or mark any interventions clearly, such as by breaking the supposed “fourth wall” between the viewer and the subject of the documentary and acknowledging his or her role as a creative force. Failure to mark interventions is seen as a breach of the trust the viewer places in the film’s claim to present a “true story.” Although all documentary is, as early practitioner John Grierson famously defined it, the “creative treatment of actuality,” there

\textsuperscript{169} See Rony and Duncan.
has generally been an understanding that the “creative treatment” should be applied without undermining the supposedly neutral facts (8). In his *Introduction to Documentary*, Bill Nichols defines the distinction between documentary and fiction films as follows: “Documentary films speak about actual situations or events and honor known facts; they do not introduce new, unverifiable ones.” Fictional narratives, he says, are “fundamentally allegories. They create one world to stand in for another, historical world” and in the process the fiction film “offers insights and generates themes about the world we already inhabit” (7). While Nichols argues that we understand documentary and fiction as the endpoints on a continuum, rather than as opposing terms, his definition of fiction as allegory does not quite fit fictionalization’s role in Jia’s films. This is because the segments performed by actors do not invent a completely separate world in which the narratives take place, but rather borrow bits and pieces of an actual story and rearrange them into a new form, making it difficult to distinguish between the primary source and its secondary representation.

At the same time, Jia does not make the breaking down of the distinction between fiction and documentary the point of these films, as in what Nichols calls the performative¹⁷⁰ and reflexive¹⁷¹ modes of documentary. In this way, Jia departs from the

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¹⁷⁰ The performative mode shares some similarities with Jia’s approach. For instance, Nichols writes that performative documentaries “primarily address us emotionally and expressively rather than factually,” though Jia’s films do contain facts in addition to emotional appeals (204). The key difference is that performative documentaries are subjective in the sense that, as Nichols describes it, they do not say “We speak about them to us” but rather “We speak about ourselves to you” or “I speak about myself to you” (205). This perspective is not found in Jia’s films, where the director attempts to stay out of the way. Moreover, performative documentaries give “less emphasis to the self-contained formal rhythms and tones of the film,” which is clearly not true of Jia’s films (206).

¹⁷¹ As Nichols describes it, “the process of negotiation between the filmmaker and viewer become the focus of attention for the reflexive mode […] Instead of seeing through documentaries to the world beyond them, reflexive documentaries ask us to see documentary for what it is: a construct or representation” (194). Although Jia does call attention to documentary as a representational mode at certain moments, he still wants the viewer to look at the world beyond the film as well. The key interaction remains between the viewer and the subject, and he does not want to engage the viewer with himself as filmmaker.
Chinese documentary movement, where these modes have been important since around the late 1990s, according to Lü Xinyu, as part of what she calls a “second phase” of documentary (15). Lü writes that while some filmmakers, such as Wu Wenguang and Zhang Hua, adopted the performative mode as a way of grappling with the filmmaker’s role in the construction of filmic reality, others have used reflexivity as a way of countering the sense of the “absurdity and meaninglessness of life” that resulted from “an era of depoliticization” (35). Instead, they “use the authenticity of the individual and his or her soul in everyday life to articulate the fate as well as the redemption of humanity caught up in the process of modernization” (35). *24 City* and *IWIK* do share a concern with the “individual and his or her soul in everyday life,” as opposed to an impersonal collectivist history, and they also share, to a certain extent, these films’ “poetic affirmation of human life and emotional strength against the backdrop of the harsh existence of the underclass” (Lü 37). On the other hand, Jia’s films present the individual story less out of a “quest for meaning in life and happiness” than as a means toward a broader collective and social understanding. In representing other people’s stories, Jia’s films, unlike the films described by Lü, as well as by Yomi Braester and Yiman Wang in the same collection, do not directly point to the filmmaker’s role in mediating those stories. He does not appear in either film, for instance (except as a barely audible offscreen voice in a few questions to interviewees).

Because of their lack of a strong subjective voice and clear sense of compositional and formal unity, they seem to be more like poetic documentaries, except that most poetic documentaries do not demonstrate a strong social and historical concern. Nichols defines the poetic documentary as follows: “The poetic mode sacrifices the conventions of
continuity editing and the sense of a specific location in time and place that follows from such editing. The filmmaker’s engagement is with film form as or more than with social actors” (162). Although Jia does not insert himself into these films, he also stresses the immediacy and the contingency of the images in front of the frame (including many shots of buildings being torn down, as always). While the filmmaker does not “enter into the social actor’s world” through a directly visible encounter, as in the performative mode, the films provide the sense that, “Something is at risk in the encounters. We realize that the filmmaker exists on the same plane of human existence as his or her social actors rather than on the more detached plane of commentator or poet” (Nichols 157). The key difference between Jia’s method and a poetic documentary is that he includes silent sequences and other composed shots not because of their formal properties but as an attempt to speak for aspects of the experience which cannot be narrated in an interview. His formal structure overall is similarly geared not toward aesthetic enjoyment in and of itself, but toward greater depth of historical awareness.

What we notice when comparing Jia’s films to these various other forms of documentary is that they are neither interested in exclusively “objective” representation nor with self-conscious performance or presentation. Because of this, it is useful to compare them to films employing re-enactment, even though that it not technically what Jia is doing. Kahana notes that a tension between representation and presentation is inherent in the Western notion of reenactment. He looks as the genealogy of the word “enact” and highlights the fact that its definitions encompass both speech acts (which do not go through a “stage of mediation beside the medium of the declared idea itself”) and actions which do involve a “material or human transformation of some sort,” such as
performance (52-53). He points out that the second set of definitions “suggest an
impermanent and intersubjective process, a rhetorical or mimetic effect dependent upon
another’s belief in or reaction to the acting in question” (53). This intersubjective process,
coming out of the notion of enactment as performance, is essential to the way Jia’s
documentaries enact their histories. We already began to see this in the previous section,
where the viewer needed to be able to read Han Sanming’s performance across two films
and within the context of his other roles in order to fully appreciate the gestic effect of the
funeral procession with a migrant worker’s body. Interestingly, the duality in the concept
of mimesis which we discussed in relation to Still Life and Dong is paralleled by this
bifurcation in the meaning of the word “enact” in English. Kahana continues:

The enmeshment of the two actions of enactment—to do; to perform—is a centuries-
old problem, captured in its etymology and revived over a century ago in the birth of
the moving image. Filmed reenactments—which date more or less to the origin of
cinema—reopen the gap between the two original senses of enactment. (53)

The tension between primary and secondary enactment, between doing and performing,
seems inevitable. But what if we stopped thinking of the duality of enactment and its
repetition – reenactment – as a problem? Ivone Margulies and her co-authors in the
collection Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema read moments of tension
between representation and presentation in light of Bazin’s “rediscovery of reality” which
involved “a heightened sense of the eclectic materiality of film,” the images of which
“bear the marks of two heterogeneous realities, the filmmaking process and the filmed
event” (2-3). Margulies argues that the “mis-fit,” the “moment of encounter and
productive maladjustment between representation and the actuality of filmmaking” can
produce “social and cultural resonances” of the sort which Jia is also pursuing (4). The
critics who have defended 24 City and IWIK despite their use of acting and staging have
similarly argued that the tension created by these techniques is productive rather than problematic. Jiwei Xiao, for instance, sees it as necessary to the negotiation between history and memory. However, terms like “mis-fit” and “maladjustment” do not accurately describe these films, which are aesthetically and affectively so coherent. These films are composites of different types of images and sounds: scripted interviews, silently performed interludes, clips from other films, lines of poetry, shots of documents and other text, composed music, popular music, singing by the onscreen subjects, and more. We might assume that this eclectic mix would create a tension with the more typical documentary interviews, but it is presented with a consistency of tone and mood that prevents any disruption as we move from one segment to another. In order to experience that seamlessness, however, we need to let go of our assumptions about what documentary films can look like.

For some viewers, though, the issue is not an insufficiently expansive notion of the documentary, but a sense that the lack of distinction between the fictional and nonfictional components threatens the historicity of the film. A major question we need to grapple with, therefore, is whether we believe that the spectator is tricked or captivated by the fictional elements and thus unable to critically assess their function within the overall structure of the films. In the initial encounter with the films (and in the absence of any prior contact with promotional materials, reviews and the like) the spectator would be forgiven for not being certain whether these are fiction films or documentaries.\textsuperscript{172} They

\textsuperscript{172} I say this from experience. I first came across \textit{24 City} on Netflix, before I was working on Jia Zhangke, and I clicked on it thinking that it was a fiction film. Six or so minutes into the film, when the first interview began, I was quite confused and surprised to find that I was watching what I then automatically identified as a documentary (after seeing the “talking head”). Up until that point, nothing in the film had signaled “documentary”. 
were never presented as documentaries (the credits simply say “A film by Jia Zhangke” or 贾樟柯的作品) and the book Jia’s Thoughts [贾想], which includes essays by Jia and a detailed filmography, calls them both fiction films [故事片; documentaries are identified as 纪录片]. In 24 City, when the actors appear, a viewer who does not recognize these four stars might assume they are real people, especially since they are also asked questions by the director the way the non-actors are. Their lines appear more rehearsed, but there is no clear marker to set apart their segments from the others. Because the stories they narrate are composites of information gleaned from various people Jia’s team interviewed, even a Chinese viewer who knows these are actors has no way of ascertaining how much of the information they relate is historical and how much imagined.

Yet even as it does not go out of the way to highlight these performances as such, the film also does not try to hide them. In Joan Chen’s segment, her character mentions being nicknamed “Little Flower” (小花) by her colleagues because she looks like the

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173 In watching the film alongside a few such viewers, they told me that they felt that something must be different about these segments, probably because the actors look like actors (good-looking, well-spoken). But they were not entirely sure what was going on.

174 They put out an ad in a local newspaper and had over a hundred people reply. Jia says they interviewed around fifty of them.

175 By “Chinese” I mean any Chinese-speaking viewer. IWIK makes it clear that the history of Shanghai extends out beyond the mainland into the Chinese diaspora. We can also assume that viewers who are not ethnically Chinese but who speak Chinese or have a strong affiliation with the mainland would also be included in the ideal audience of viewers who pick up on these references. Although Jia and other art house directors in China are often accused of addressing film festival judges as much as or more than their own national audiences, it has always been the case that such audiences do not fully understand all of the historical and cultural references in his films. Much like Bei Dao’s poetry from Chapter 3, debating who the films are “really” for or about is less interesting than thinking about how they attempt to engage the viewer, whether the viewer responds positively or negatively or not at all.

176 For instance, Lü Liping tells the story of a woman who lost her child during a brief stop taken by the boat they traveled on during the journey from Shenyang to Sichuan, mentioned above. Is this a true story? It seems unlikely. It is probably intended to represent the hardships suffered by the workers as they moved over a thousand miles from home and their families. But then again, it could be based in part on a story of separation between parent and child – we just don’t know.
character with that name in the 1978 film *Little Flower*. The character in that film is played by Joan Chen herself, and a clip of the film is inserted in case the viewer had forgotten this tidbit. Of course, some viewers who don’t know Chen or don’t see the resemblance between Chen now and her younger self might miss this, but the “in joke” is still a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the film’s construction. The very fact that Jia used such well-known actors leads us to presume that he intended the audience to recognize the fictional segments and read them differently. Rather than focus on the stories which these actors narrate, however, some viewers were disturbed by the way in which they stood out from the real people, either due to their looks, their accents or simply their familiarity, all of which prohibited a seamless integration of these stories into the film as a whole. 177 Similarly, the presence in *I Wish I Knew* of clips from older films and Jia’s muse Zhao Tao might disrupt the viewer’s appreciation of the stories being narrated because these features seem to privilege the director’s own preoccupations over the history of Shanghai. 178

There are clearly a range of responses to the use of fictional techniques in these films, but we can safely say that the majority of viewers are able to notice the use of acting and staging, even if it takes some of them longer than others to figure out what is going on, and even if it is not always that easy to distinguish staged shots from “on-the-

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177 The playful reference to Joan Chen’s character “Xiao Hua” only made this worse for some, as Xiao notes, and others complained about Lü Liping’s unconvincing performance as an old woman retired from her factory job.

178 The inclusion of an interview with Hou Hsiao-hsien, who is of course a major influence on Jia, is the most obvious example. Hou never lived in Shanghai, unlike the other émigrés Jia films who left the city for Hong Kong or Taiwan. The only claim he has on the city is that he made *Flowers of Shanghai* [海上花 1998] which, although it was critically successful at the time it was made, is hardly thought of as Hou’s best film, nor is it a major touchstone for the way non-film buffs imagine the city of Shanghai. Hou is clearly present in the film because of his importance to Jia’s work and perhaps, by extension, his own image of the city’s semi-colonial history.
Moreover, we can assume that the films intend the viewers to notice these techniques; whether they appreciate the strategy or not is up to them. In *Carnal Thoughts*, Vivian Sobchak notes that although we tend to assume that the blending of fiction and documentary is confusing and problematic, most of the time we do know the difference between the two. She argues that we should set aside the question of what the film is in favor of examining what it *does* – in other words, looking “less to the cinema as a *phenomenal object* than as a *phenomenological experience*” (260). What makes us experience a film as a documentary is the arousal of what she calls a “documentary consciousness,” a process which involves the engagement of the spectator’s embodied knowledge and sense of ethical responsibility, among other things.

When what we interpret to be documentary material intrudes on a fiction film (Sobchack uses the example of the rabbit being killed in a hunting scene in Renoir’s *The Rules of the Game*), our documentary consciousness and sense of ethical responsibility to the material (here, to the rabbit who was harmed in filming) can be activated, whether or not the scene or film is intended as a documentary. The point is that we read a film as a documentary if

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179 As an example, there is an adorable shot in *IWIK* of a small boy on the streets of Shanghai who is jumping around, shirtless, and showing off his strength, puffing his chest and whatnot. It follows a story by the first interviewee about how each alley had a young boy who was the leader of the other children, and also the bully. The child clearly captures part of the memory being described, but the child’s actions seem too casual – random even – to be entirely dictated by the director. It seems likely that he saw a young boy horsing around and asked him to either continue what he was doing or ramp up the bravado, while Jia filmed him. But again, we don’t know for sure.

180 The fact that some viewers might not always or easily make the distinction in the case of *24 City* makes this film less common among the many films which blend the two modes; however the more relevant issue for the majority of viewers is how they respond to the awareness that the two modes are being combined in this way.

181 Sobchack summarizes the complex mechanism as follows: “embodied and extratextual knowledge, posited and particularized existence, and personal ethical responsibility are all necessary to the full constitution of documentary consciousness on one side of the screen and documentary space on the other. Charged with the real (and the obligations it imposes), this space and the form of consciousness that structures its meaning are ever-present possibilities in *every* film experience – even when that experience begins and ends as a designated fiction” (285).
we experience it as one, a determination which stems not from its generic signals but from the responses it elicits. It would seem that by not hiding the use of actors and staging, Jia wants the viewer to maintain a documentary consciousness throughout, by reflecting on both the historical content and on the materials and methods used to represent that content. By using actors who are known to most viewers, Jia ensures that they do not entirely suspend disbelief in favor of the performance, but rather consider the actor’s embeddedness in a present-day socio-historical context. In doing so, the viewer maintains a sense of ethical responsibility to the material being presented even though it is being performed by an actor rather than narrated by a witness. This is analogous to Sobchack’s rabbit, where the shift from viewing the rabbit as a representation to viewing it as an actual animal being killed for the camera marks the beginning of a documentary consciousness.

If some viewers respond so negatively to the intrusion of fictional elements as to stop watching, or if they begin to pay attention only to the aesthetic choices of the director, however, then the films fail because the viewers will not develop that necessary emotional and ultimately ethical relationship to their subjects. But whether or not this takes place has more to do with the viewer’s context, especially his or her aesthetic preferences and previous viewing experiences, than it does with the film itself. For example, whether we judge the blending of modes to be creative or distracting might have something to do with whether we view the breaking of codes positively in general. In the case of realism, Roman Jakobson argues that there are some who view the disruption of realism as a revelation of the conventional nature of the form (reliant as it is on a particular standard set in nineteenth-century Europe) and an opportunity to move
closer to the truth that realism fails to access. Jakobson suggests that the affinity for such disruption stems from one’s approval of the breaking of representational codes more generally. From such a perspective, “the artist-innovator must impose a new form upon our perceptions, if we are to detect in a given thing those traits which went unnoticed the day before” (21). By contrast, those who are more conservative regarding artistic conventions “will accordingly interpret any deformation of these canons by a new movement as a rejection of the principle of verisimilitude, as a deviation from realism” (22). The same is true of the responses to the use of documentary evidence in what is billed as a fiction film.\(^{182}\) Some critics see the fictional segments as distorting the history the film purports to represent, while others see them as uncovering aspects of that history and its current implications that we would not have otherwise noticed.

It is impossible to make a final determination about these films’ success or failure in representing memory accurately, ethically and effectively, because individuals have such divergent reactions to them. It becomes too easy, for instance, to point to those Chinese viewers who judge these films’ attempts at collective memory formation to be flawed and then hold up that response as the authentic one, without recognizing the range of other possible responses.\(^{183}\) Far better, then, to recognize that these films attempts to

\(^{182}\) To take one example, Wang discusses Spence and Navarro and writes that “The spectator looks upon documentary as authentic and incontrovertible evidence, Spence suggests, not because the documentary is closer to truth, but because the narrative structure and features of documentary conform to a set of ‘conventionalized codes and procedures’ that ‘help establish the authenticity of nonfictional representations’ (Spence and Navarro, Ch. 1, location 324))’ (qtd. in Wang 101).

\(^{183}\) There is anecdotal evidence that viewers in mainland China cried at the end of 24 City (see Kevin Lee). By scanning some of the comments about the film on douban.com (of which there are almost 6,000), I noticed that many viewers were in fact annoyed or disturbed by the actors, though they have varying evaluations of their performances. However there are also not a few viewers who find the film to be very moving, often because it is relevant to their own experience or to that of their parents or grandparents. In my presentations about this film, I have encountered skepticism of its status as a memory film due to the claim that supposedly “real” Chinese audiences do not like it, or are unconvinced by its portrayal of their shared history. Wendy Larson once asked me about an interview with the writer Wang Anyi (which I have not been able to track down) in which she dismisses the enthusiasm for Jia’s films as something
perform a certain role, and in doing so make certain assumptions about their audience and the conditions under which they will be received. Beyond that, the resulting (perlocutionary) effects are unpredictable. As we saw in our discussion of Culler’s work in Chapter 3, thinking in terms of performance reminds us that what is interesting about a text (or film) is less what it does or does not do under a predictable set of conditions, but how it attempts to persuade and affect a living and unpredictable audience. In a similar vein, Sobchack’s chapter recognizes that the conditions for the activation of a documentary consciousness are not always successfully fulfilled. When evaluating these films which blend the fictional and documentary modes, we should therefore separate our analysis of what the films attempt to do from the success or failure of those attempts in the minds of individual viewers. Do they attempt to activate a documentary consciousness and/or spark the formation of collective memory and if so, how do they engage in this attempt? This question requires some consideration of the director’s comments on his process, but the films themselves contain a lot of evidence for how they attempt to persuade an audience to share in a particular way of reacting to the people portrayed. We can, of course, also judge them based on their contributions to artistic innovation (a purely aesthetic judgement) or the ethics of their use of real-life human subjects, but these are separate questions, to be taken up in turn.

perpetuated by foreigners and not of interest to Chinese people. While it is certainly true that many people have not heard of Jia Zhangke, it is not the case that these two films are unknown in China (I Wish I Knew was screened at the Shanghai Expo after all). Though one could do a study of those who watch the films to determine the characteristics of the responses of the majority of viewers, it is likely that reactions would range widely, as with any film. I think we should be careful not to conflate the sociological question of which response was most common with aesthetic questions (such as how the film is constructed and how we might read individual shots or sequences) or even ethical ones (such as whether we may judge the film to behave responsibly towards its subject matter and/or to encourage the viewer to do so, even if we do not enjoy the experience of watching for whatever reason).
It is obvious that the films want to engage the audience in the project of collective memory formation, but we should not assume that in drawing out connections between the individual stories being told and the shared experiences of the audience, they are necessarily consolidating those various experiences into a singular narrative. *24 City* emphasizes collective aspects of the history of the factory by looking at the legacy of an economy dominated by state-owned enterprises, primarily in heavy industry, and organized into work units which formed the basis of the family and communal life of the workers. As the film traces the movement of the factory from the northeast to the southwest and then from the city to the suburbs, and the changing nature of work and family in these various stages, it is clearly gesturing to the complex memory of (and already emerging nostalgia for) life in the planned economy. Jia has talked of how he selected and arranged the memories in the film to best connect to the broader experience of the period, so as to get beyond the rather uncommon experience of working for a secret military installation. In an interview with Dudley Andrew and Zhai Yongming, Jia said:

> Among the fifty people whom I interviewed, some told stories that contain very intense dramatic moments in their personal lives. I eliminated all of these when I was editing. What I left is common experience, which to most Chinese is common knowledge. These experiences are not very idiosyncratic or unique. But precisely because of this, the film can offer Chinese audiences a vaster imaginary space, into which they can project their own experience and stories. What I filmed are not individual cases but collective memories.

Moreover, the film also contains many moments of silence, in fact a silent moment for each character [the portrait shots discussed below]. Such moments complement the narration. (82)\textsuperscript{184}

\textsuperscript{184}我采访的这五十多个人里面，有非常激烈的讲述，有惊心动魄的瞬间。但是我在剪辑时，全部把它剪掉了，只留下一些常识性的经历。对大多数中国来说，这些经历，这些生命经验是常识，它不是太个体的，不是独特的。但这个常识性讲述希望提供给观众一种更大的想象空间，这个想象空间可以把自己的经验，经历都投入在里面，它不是一个个案，它是一个群体性的回忆。
The significant point in Jia’s description here is that instead of dictating for the audience how to register the connections between these stories and their own, he tries to create a space for the projection of their own memories. Unlike in the case of a fiction film in which the audience is encouraged to identify with a particular character psychologically, the number and variety of interviewees de-centers our focus. In addition, there are many gaps in the interviews, marked by moments of emotion in which thoughts are left unfinished, and sometimes accompanied by actual blackouts on the screen, reminding us that all we see are pieces of the whole story.

In the case of *I Wish I Knew*, the film is presented as a story of Shanghai, a city with a unique history, but it also hits on major historical moments and their aftermath, such as the power struggle between the Communists and the Nationalists, the changing role of women after the Revolution, the dramatic rise of certain business people during the Reform Era and the easy confidence of the younger “post-80s” generation. The films target relatively discrete segments of that history, and address the larger historical events only obliquely (such as by allowing individual stories of tragedy to stand in for larger society-wide divisions during the periods of the Civil War and the Cultural Revolution). In doing so, they allow different viewers to come at this history
differently. Almost no one can have personal experience with all of the historical moments and social positions represented. In giving subtle reminders about the larger historical and cultural context underlying the particular stories (such as the inserted clip from *Little Flower* reminding us that Joan Chen played the role of “Little Flower”), the films also recognize that some viewers will not have much relevant personal experience at all. Rather than meld all of these memories into one narrative, or present them according to a defined historical timeline which organizes them for our intellectual comprehension, the films present these stories in an open-ended fashion, allowing them to resonate as they will.

The fictionalized segments are slightly less open-ended than the interviews with real people, in part because they are intended to bring out what was left unsaid in the narrated interviews or to hint at what remains inexpressible about these experiences generally. In relation to *24 City*, Jia says: “I only planned to make a documentary to record the worker’s oral history. Nevertheless, every interviewee gave me the urge to imagine the rest of his story. There were words unspoken, and sentences half finished. I thought I could only fully comprehend these real people’s feelings through imagination” (“Invisible Cities”). There are several methods through which Jia attempts to do this. *24 City* includes lines of poetry in intertitles throughout, selected along with Sichuan poet Zhai Yongming, who co-wrote the script. These lines attempt to convey emotional sentiments that supplement the historical narratives without directly addressing them. Both films spend a significant amount of screen time on shots of physical spaces which are either empty of human beings or where the human is only part of the overall scene.

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memory of this moment echoes in the city for this now old man. But there is never an explanation of the complex socio-political context of 1933 Shanghai.
This emphasis on architecture and space that is lived-in and worked-in points to another realm of mediation between the past and the present, but here there is a sense of a bodily experience that exceeds what can be represented through images and language. It is worth remembering that the filming of 24 City was not inspired by the closing of the factory itself, a process that had already been underway, but rather by the story about the demolition of the factory and the complex surrounding it. Jia says:

In late 2006, I read about a Chengdu factory in the news. In its heyday, this secret aviation factory, called Factory 420, used to house 30,000 workers and 100,000 of their family members. The entire site was sold to a developer, who demolished the factory and built a new apartment complex called 24 City. I was excited to come across this real-life case: it represents the gigantic – and miraculously rapid – transformation of modern China. I think it’s already a story in itself.

Q: Through this process, do you feel that many memories are... lost. Memories were lost. That’s why when I read this news, I thought to myself: Wow, in the end, even memories had to be sacrificed. When you visit an old building, at least you can still trace your past memories. But when [a building] is torn to the ground like this, nothing is left behind. (“Invisible Cities”)

In I Wish I Knew as well, the film opens with shots of the older longtang (alleys/lanes) and shikumen (residences with courtyards) which was once characteristic of Shanghai but was in the process of being demolished. The film also depicts fast-disappearing cultural spaces such as the dance hall where retirees dance to old Western tunes and the beautiful cinema where Zhao Tao watches a clip from Two Stage Sisters (舞台姐妹).

The scripted monologues in 24 City are the most direct attempt to flesh out the aspects of the story of life in the factory that were not directly addressed by the real people being interviewed. As Jia describes it, not all of the original interviews had enough narrative interest to stand alone in the film, and of course not all of them could fit
anyway. He spoke about the evolution of the project in an interview with Wu Youming, and the entire response, though a bit lengthy, is worth looking at in full:

吴：您为什么让女诗人翟永明做编剧啊？

Wu: Why did you have the female poet Zhai Yongming [co-]write the script?

贾：一开始我只是想拍摄一部纪录片，然后在采访过程里面，我突然想有剧情的部分，这样的话，我需要有个编剧跟我一起工作。因为首先就是说，在那个城市里面，在成都，我觉得我最信赖的作家就是翟永明，这是一方面。另一方面，在采访的时候，我基本上发现，来报名讲述的人中，讲述质量偏高的人都

Jia: At the beginning, I only wanted to shoot a documentary, but in the process of interviewing I discovered that there was a storyline and I needed to work with a script. First and foremost, in that city, in Chengdu, I felt that the writer I most trusted was Zhai Yongming, so that is one reason. Another reason is because during the interviews, my main discovery was that in getting people involved, the stories of the women were told especially well. Later, in the film, I gradually included a feminine tendency. Plus in the factory environment, with the demolition and relocation, steel, rust, and dirty water, these were all relatively masculinized, and women could express the emotions of this life more strongly.

吴：显得更滋润一点。

Wu. Express it a bit more comfortably.

贾：对，更有人性的感觉。而且我觉得，在已有的采访里面，我自己看的话，有些女性讲述的很好，为什么呢？因为在中国，男性更体制化一些，你问吧，问半天，他说的都是大的政治事件，或者是工厂大的变迁，就是很概念性的，都和重大历史事件纠葛到一起的，大的政治运动啊，四清啊，武斗啊，个人命运其实谈得不多，谈得还是些个大的粗线条，社会线索。或者说到个人也是，谈论的，认同的价值都是主流价值，升官啊、调工资、评职称啊。那么女性我觉得相对来说，比较偏个人感受，自己的成长啊，感情啊，家庭啊，个人的感受啊，我觉得是比较自我一些。我觉得我最需要的是个人的讲述，个体经验的一种讲述。

Jia: Yes. With more personal feelings. Also I think, after having done the interviews, I thought to myself that the women had spoken better, but why? Because in China, men are somewhat more structured; you ask them a question, and you can ask all day, but they will speak of political events, or the factory’s major changes, the conceptual, all the major historical events and political movements – the Four Cleanups, disputes that
led to violence – but they actually don’t talk a lot about individual lives, because they still speak about the big picture, social threads. Or you can say the individual is there, they consider it, but the values they identify with are mainstream values – being promoted, salaries and wages. But women I feel in comparison are relatively more affected as individuals, their own growth, feelings, family and individual experiences – I think they are more self-oriented. I think what I most needed was an individual narrative, a sort of telling of individual experiences. (Translation mine)

Among the four scripted interviews in the film, three of them are acted by women. In addition, there is a performed segment with a young girl on roller skates. This initial explanation for why he wanted to include these segments and work with a female poet on the script seems unthinkingly stereotypical. Yet it also shows that far from making a film based on his own impressions of a subject and of history, Jia not only sought out the aspects of the experience that he was not able to grasp just by listening to the initial interviews, but also solicited the help of someone with local knowledge of the place to assist him. As the explanation goes on, we see that what Jia is primarily seeking is an individualistic look at shared experiences, the view of the universal through the particular which he has always been after. He believes that women can better provide this perspective in this particular context.

The attempt to balance the self-oriented perspective on history with the group-oriented one is another way in which the fictional segments of 24 City, far from fixing our understanding of the past, actually invite us to engage with it on a personal level. Individual memories need to be worked on and through in order to become useful for the collective, and that is true for the audience as well as for the subjects of the film. The performances of the actors only highlight this fact, because they are not allegories. They are composites of the narratives of real people. Only through the act of writing and then performing the monologues do those fragments of memories become narratives, become processed into something sensible to the audience, perhaps even to the original
interviewees themselves. In this sense, the performances embody the duality of the original term “enactment.” Once again, like Benjamin’s “pure language” which only exists “between the lines” of translation, the “truth” which is sought through these films exists neither in the past nor the present but in the process of reconciliation and articulation between them. What some may register as an unengaged aestheticism, covering over the realities of the lives of the human beings on screen, can also be seen as lyricism in the activated sense in which I use it. Here, lyricism is the term I give to the invitation to engage affectively with the stories, thus stimulating historical and/or interpersonal awareness without prescribing a form in which that awareness will take shape.

Open-endedness, this sense that the memories need to be completed but may never be fully conveyed, is essential to the lyricism of these films – and to all of the works under discussion in this dissertation. *24 City* is less successful in this regard than *IWIK*, primarily because of the final segment, an acted interview with Zhao Tao. Zhao narrates the story of a child of a factory worker, born in 1982, who is doing quite well despite not having attended university. She describes a day when she went to visit her mother, who was working a part-time job in a telephone pole factory after having been laid off from Factory 420, and is so upset by the image of her mother bent over engaging in noisy, mindless work that she vows to work hard to buy her parents an apartment in *24 City*. By ending with this story, there is a sense that everything that came before, though it may have appeared discontinuous, has actually led to this moment of progress and promise for the new generation. Kevin Lee writes, “With her final line, ‘I can do it. I’m the daughter of a worker,’ the film makes an improbable link between the collectivist
sacrifices of China’s communist past and its present capitalist ambitions” (“Mixing and Manipulating”). Lee notes the emotional response of the audience to this segment and views it as evidence that they have lost their critical distance, their ability to alienate themselves from the sentiments onscreen and think about the ideological implications of Jia’s emphasis on what Chow calls “hypermedial display” throughout the film. For Lee, the recognition of mediation and performance would preclude such an emotional response: “It’s as if Jia were a magician conscientiously revealing the secrets behind the tricks of ideological promotion through storytelling and performance; yet he risks captivating them with that magic all the same” (“Mixing and Manipulating”). An emotional response need not always be equated to being deluded into sentiment, especially because it is necessary if the viewer is to integrate the memories into his or her own, but given the roughly chronological structure of the film as a whole, the presence of this interview at the close seems to belatedly impose a sense of progressivism onto a history whose complexity was better captured in the earlier segments. Even so, Jia’s imposed structure does not restrict all of the possible outward resonances of these stories, in particular those aspects of this history which are left unspoken but sensed by the viewer.

Perhaps paradoxically, the most important drivers of this affective, interpersonal sensibility in both films are not the interviews, but the silent interludes. Zhao Tao’s enigmatic figure in I Wish I Knew and shots of individuals standing still facing the camera in 24 City are examples of how these films attempt to balance the spoken word with the unspoken by forcing our attention to bodily movement (or poses) and facial expressions. Both of these elements repeat in their respective films, and in doing so
activate a scene of negotiation between the past and present of the subjects of the film while also opening up space for the same negotiation between the subjects and the viewers. The latter set of shots, from *24 City*, feature factory workers and complex residents, some of whom are seen elsewhere in the film, who appear as if they are posing for a still photograph, though the shots have duration. Jia describes his use of these shots as follows:

When it came to *24 City*, I had people sit in front of the camera which I let run continuously for fifty minutes in silence. This is nothing like taking still photos. For the most important thing is that, in that silence and through the camera, we are trying to capture the subtle changes of expression, to display the intense activities of the inner world, as you just said, to look for certain kinds of traces and vestiges. I also had a strange feeling when I was shooting the portrait images after the interviews. During those three to five minutes of shooting, I felt as if we were mourning silently for the lives and the stories of the past. Later it became a ritual in our shooting. For me these portraits are not just people’s faces nor some form complementary to their narration, nor even a mere ritual. For through that ritual we sense the many lives that have been ignored, ordinary people’s lives ignored. We hope that through time, through silence, and through this ritual, the film can help these people achieve some recognition.

(Andrew 82)

It is significant that Jia uses the word “ritual” to refer to this process of filming here, because rituals are not mere repetitions or representations of past events, but rather a means of re-experiencing the past in the present. They performatively connect the participant to the past, even though they make use of symbols rather than attempting to recreate the conditions of the past event exactly. In Jia’s telling above, the development of this ritual over the course of shooting the film becomes a way of connecting the participants on both sides of the camera to the process and its productive potential. That ritual and its attendant silence similarly encourages the viewer to not just look upon the

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186 Unfortunately, the English version of the interview, also quoted above, features this quotation, but the Chinese version in 《贾想》 does not, so I cannot verify the word Jia was using in Chinese here, or provide a translation for the quotation.
people in the shot, but to consider the limitations of their ability to know a person simply by looking at them (or even listening to them). More interestingly, the duration of these shots allows time to consider the process which led them to agree to stand in this way, to spend this time for our sake, and what responsibility we might owe to them in return. In these still yet moving portraits, in these extended experiences of duration, the audience is not gazing on a passive and objectified individual or group, but confronting individuals who look back. These are not images dissociated from proto-filmic reality but encounters with that reality, at a temporal remove, of course. The film asks the audience to recognize the subjects of the film as subjects, rather than objects of their curiosity with no real relation to them.

In a brief article discussing Jia’s self-conscious method in *24 City* and *IWIK*, Rey Chow makes an important distinction between these films and an earlier example of a straightforwardly objective approach to China which led to the objectification of Chinese histories: Antonioni’s 1972 documentary *Chung Kuo/Cina.* In her description of the contested reception of Antonioni’s film in China, Chow locates differing responses to the supposedly objective gaze of the camera and the individuals it captures, who are not allowed to represent themselves to the camera but are expected to be observed by it. She writes,

Rather than a friendly process of enquiry based on a poetic vision, as was intended by Antonioni and his crew, the situation involving the camera lens was approached by the Chinese as containing the risk of a possible violation, an assault. The way they responded was meant to return, and to counter, the aggression that they sensed in the camera’s gaze. The act and the art of striking a pose in a dignified manner may be residual practices from earlier times, but they are also eminently modern, indeed contemporary, as many of us can tell from our own personal experiences with photography. (20)

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187 This film is excerpted and discussed in *IWIK.*
By not allowing his subjects to face and respond to the camera, and by keeping himself offscreen, as only a voiceover, the director here objectifies the individuals in his film. Chow compares Jia to Antonioni, and asks, “If, unlike Antonioni, Jia allows Chinese people the opportunity to face the camera and talk about their lives, as in the cases of I Wish I Knew and 24 City, does the presence of these Chinese speaking voices make for a different kind of documentary undertaking, and how?” (26). She goes on to argue that Jia’s provocation is located primarily in the “ambiguous look – pertaining both to a way of gazing, which is invisible and to the visible appearance of people and things on the screen” (26). The people in 24 City face the camera in such a way as to directly counter the objectification that Chow ascribes to Antonioni’s realism. These individuals possess what Chow calls the “phenomenological condition or quality of being recognisable, of having-been-looked-at” (27) – in other words, of being mediated. At the same time, they are not still, they are shot in time, so that as we look, they look back in a parallel but equivalent temporality, destabilizing the sense of instant recognition, preventing the viewer from thinking she knows these people as soon as she sees them. In one of these shots, a young man stands next to an older man (probably his father), who has his arm over the young man’s shoulder. As they stare at the camera, the older man starts to tickle the neck of the young man, who tries not to smile. The second time, he breaks a smile and the third time, they both laugh. There is an agency here in the subjects of the camera’s gaze, a sense that their liveliness cannot and will not be contained by its need for objectivity or passivity.
Chialan Sharon Wang sees this series of portrait shots\textsuperscript{188} as part of Jia’s \textit{modus operandi}, stemming all the way back to the famous closing scene of \textit{Xiao Wu}, in which the title character is handcuffed to a pole on the street by the police and onlookers gather to stare at him. In addition to point-of-view shots representing Xiao Wu’s experience of being looked at and judged, we notice several of the bystanders looking directly at the camera in shots that are not point-of-view shots, thus calling attention to the role of the spectator as part of this gawking crowd. For Wang, this is an unintentional subversion of Jia’s intended signification in the final scene, in which “This unguarded, untrained, therefore alienating gaze into the camera thus \textit{inadvertently} resists inscription and challenges the credibility of an artist’s work of representing the collective” (112, emphasis mine). But if it is so inadvertent, why do we find these shots so frequently in Jia’s films? In \textit{I Wish I Knew}, a shot near the beginning of the film of some retirees playing \textit{mahjong} captures a few of them looking back at the camera, for instance. An elderly woman says, “Come in and shoot!” (你到里面来拍). Wang’s critique is that Jia’s films, which attempt to represent the truth about the past, are so controlled by his own sense of what is worth representing that they occlude their subjects. If that is the case, and if these shots destabilize the entire project, then why would he leave them in? In relation to the portrait images in \textit{24 City}, Wang writes that “Through these portrait images, Jia assumes the role of a poetic auteur, one who not only observes the world but discerns the interiority of humanity and extracts out of political rhetoric repressed personal narratives” (113). The use of the word “poetic”\textsuperscript{189} here and elsewhere in her critique signifies the active role taken by the director in determining how we should “read

\textsuperscript{188} See Appendix 6 for examples.
\textsuperscript{189} And, we should note, Chow uses it too in her description of the “poetic vision” of Antonioni above.
into” the portraits (both visual and aural) of these workers, which leaves them without agency or individuality even as they participate willingly in the process. The fact that we do see the subjects taking control of their own image, such as in the example of the father tickling his son, is for Wang another inadvertent disruption, rather than an integral part of what these shots are doing in the film. For her, Jia’s goal of uncovering untold aspects of China’s past, combined with the “poetic” structure of the film implies that the film intends to communicate a singular, nationalistic narrative, informed by Jia’s own ideology. This makes sense if we think of the poetic impulse as the urge to convey a creative subjectivity’s perspective on the world, in the vein of a Western lyric poem, with its implications of the collapse between past and present and the impossibility of dialogue between the poetic voice and its subject. But what I believe we would do better to call the film’s lyricism is not so imposing; it is intersubjective, an invitation to a performance.

Wang’s reading dovetails with my own when she writes that “24 City, in its highly choreographed poetry that verges on subjecting the workers to an objectifying gaze, nonetheless reveals an excess to the artist’s vision of reality” (114). In particular, she sees the shot of the father tickling his son as an example of that excess: “the improvisation of the two workers brings to light the fact that the real-life interviewees or filmed subjects might also be engaged in performance as the professional actors do. Whether they participate in the intended story of ‘China locked in memory’ or not, the subjects posing and telling stories in front of the camera invent their identities as the film rolls” (114).

The difference in our respective readings is that I view the inclusion of this excess as integral to rather than disruptive of the project of the film, because I make the assumption that it is intentional rather than accidental. Of course we do not want to venture into a
debate about intentionality, but I think it is fair to say that the inclusion of many instances of self-referentiality in Jia’s films, especially in this period (several of which have been discussed in this chapter) and the detailed comments he makes in his interviews are evidence of the careful consideration he gives to his techniques and the improbability that he would not recognize the way in which the returned gaze of the subject implies a resistance to the epistemological desire of the spectator.

The issue here lies with the assumption that the poeticism of the film as a whole requires a sustained ideological focus. I would argue that what Jia is seeking in terms of consistency is an emotional mood, and this portrait of father and son supports rather than disrupts that mood. The tenderness of this moment is key to establishing a sense of connection not just between these two men, but between them and us, because we cannot help but smile as well. These shots set up an encounter, but ultimately the success or failure of that encounter is up to the audience. Indeed, both films are explicit about the need for active participation on the part of the audience in a process of intersubjective recognition rather than domineering appropriation. To this end, we should take note of the strong implication in both that the key activity of the film lies not in the mere act of uncovering memories but in offering them up for a new generation to carry forward.

When *IWIK* returns to Shanghai at the end, the two interviewees we meet are success stories from the new China. One (Yang Huaiding) is a famous investor who struck it rich by taking advantage of market reforms, while the other (Han Han) is an idol of the post-80 generation, who became famous by breaking the rules, dropping out of high school and becoming a writer and race car driver. Although their success is admirable, it is clear that these two individuals have no connection to the past. Many of the other interviewees
have related stories about other people or practices which are now gone, stories they carry with them. Yang and Han only talk about themselves; it is an open question as to whether this is a good thing for Chinese society as a whole. The last shot of the film is of a train on the Shanghai metro, where everyone is sitting down and mainly looking at cell phones or straight ahead. In close-ups of their faces, we see no expression. No one speaks to each other, and the only noise is the computerized voice announcing the next stop. Is this generation going to remember the stories we have just heard? Do they care?

In this method, the filmmaker’s own subjectivity is implied, but it is not the only subjectivity that matters. It is useful here to return to Sobchack’s description of the activation of documentary consciousness, because she makes an important distinction between the embodied response to documentary and the intellectual response to fiction which helps to clarify how documentary consciousness invokes a sense of ethical responsibility. We have seen throughout this discussion how Jia Zhangke attempts to convey the collective nature of the past through the particular instance of individual experience, a philosophy honed in his hometown trilogy. Sobchack explains that the fictional filmic experience in general is predicated on our registering of the particular objects we perceive on screen as “typical particulars,” as representatives of an entire class, even though we know that they exceed “fiction’s autonomous and specific self-referential world” and exist in “the world we live outside the theater as real” (281). For example, when we see a tree on screen, we don’t wonder where in real time and space it was filmed – we just think about it as a tree. If something comes along to disrupt that generalized recognition of the typical particulars, it “foregrounds their specific, rather than typical, existential status for us and restructures the kind and quality of our
investment in them” (281). In various ways, a documentary image can also be abstracted away from its particularity and offered up to the audience as a generalized concept or “aesthetic attitude,” a typical particular. The butterfly on the windowsill in the aestheticized shot [see Appendix 6] could be such an example of a moment where we stop thinking about specific individuals and the story of a specific factory and see just a general butterfly on a window, without thinking about it as “real” per se. But whether or not one breaks a fictional consciousness to activate a documentary one, or vice versa, depends on the individual’s response, not the image itself. In the case of establishing documentary consciousness, Sobchack convincingly demonstrates that it is a bodily response that is necessary. By comparing her example of the rabbit dying in Rules of the Game to a similar scene with grasshoppers’ deaths, her failure to respond ethically to the grasshoppers despite their very real, particular onscreen deaths is the result of both her greater sense of responsibility towards rabbits than grasshoppers in general, and – importantly – her “sense of my own body’s responsiveness” to the rabbit’s death, which did not occur while watching the scene with the grasshoppers. A physical response is not in and of itself enough to trigger an ethical one, but it creates a transitional space in which ethical consciousness can then develop.

This approach provides a better model for the acted and staged shots in 24 City and IWIK, which are, as I have argued above, not allegorical, not static stand-ins for real history. Instead, we can understand them as attempts to set up a bodily and emotional connection between the viewer and the speaking subjects of the films. Sobchack is thinking primarily of the rupture of the fiction film by documentary consciousness, but her analysis is particularly relevant to the moments in 24 City and IWIK when we are
faced with people looking back at the camera, because suddenly we experience our own looking as both an intellectual and a physical act. The shot of the father tickling his son is particularly important here because it triggers an almost involuntary response from the viewer, who cannot help but at least smile along with this pair. For Sobchack, this type of moment creates the potential for (though by no means guarantees) a triggering of ethical engagement. She writes:

[The charge of the real] engages our awareness not only of the existential consequences of representation but also of our own ethical implication in representation. It remands us reflexively to ourselves as embodied, culturally knowledgeable, and socially invested viewers. […] The charge of the real comprehends both screen and viewer, restructuring their parallel worlds not only as coextensive but also as ethically implicated each in the other. [The documentary space] is always also a space co-constituted by and ‘pointed to’ by the viewer whose consciousness re-cognizes and grasps that onscreen space as, in some invested way, contiguous with her or his own material, mortal, and moral being. […] The viewer takes on and bears particular subjective responsibility for the actions marked by – and in – her or his vision: responsibility for watching the action and, as justification for watching, responsibility for judging the action and for calling into account – and consciousness – the criteria for doing so. (284)

Although these films are neither straightforward fictions nor traditional documentaries, the portrait shots are distinct from Sobchack’s examples in that the individuals onscreen are presented as real (rather than as characters, even though some of them are). Plus, they are people, whereas Sobchack discusses inhuman things like rabbits and grasshoppers.

We might assume that encountering the reality of the human being onscreen would be experienced like a breaking of the “fourth wall” in theatrical performance, because we are suddenly confronted by another person engaging us directly. But these individuals do not address us, they only look at us (and also not directly at us) in the same way that the interviewees are doing throughout the film. What these shots achieve is a reminder that we are witnesses to these words and actions. Rather than rupture a perceived wall, they show us that the onscreen space was, in Sobchack’s words, “contiguous” all along.
The complexity of these moments stems from the fact that they are instances of documentary which have been given the appearance of fiction, either through direct acting or the staging of real people, but then a documentary awareness is (re)activated in the context of that fictionalized setup. In the end, we need both a documentary and a fictional consciousness, and we need to set aside any assumption that those two modes of thinking are incompatible, in order to fully appreciate the experience of the moment. Rather than reading these moments as interrupting or replacing one mode with another, we need to see them as embodying a duality, like the duality of enactment – both doing and performing. But Sobchack’s analysis leads to another important question: if documentary consciousness can contain – in fact, necessitates – an embodied response, then why does Jia need the fiction in the first place? We have been working under the assumption, based on Jia’s comments, that the fictionalized segments function primarily to flesh out the emotional and personal aspects of this history, while the segments without people invoke the affective nature of the physical space. It seems, instead, that they are at least equally important for their ability to create a sense of temporality appropriate to the experiences of the real-life individuals being interviewed. Performance, as we have been seeing, invokes not just a previous action (representation) but also the completion of that action in real time (presentation). Similarly, collective memory requires not just an acknowledgement or understanding of what happened in the past, but a consistent engagement with the past in the present, whether in the form of retelling, reenactment, visiting designated sites of memory, regular observances, etc. Collective memory needs to be performed – enacted – in order for the past to be re-cognizable, as Sobchack puts it, but that process creates a complex layering of temporalities that is not easily contained
within the documentary form itself. Jia’s films are not just about the way things are, or the way things were, but about the creation of an idea about the way things were.

IWIK is most successful in conveying this layering of the past-in-formation onto the present. While the interviewees all narrate from a position in the present (2009) and discuss experiences from their respective histories, the pairing of these interviews with film clips adds two other layers to that history: the time in which the film was made and the time being represented in the film, which is not always exactly the same as that of the story being narrated. By choosing such well-known films, Jia also opens up the possibility that the viewer will remember his or her own previous encounters with the film, which took place in other places and times. Even more interesting is the remaking of the opening sequence from Lou Ye’s Suzhou River, which is used alongside Lou’s original sequence. Lou’s sequence is shot with a handheld camera on a small boat as it travels down the Suzhou River in Shanghai, passing under footbridges, recording the polluted water and people making a living on it. Unlike the other film clips, this clip is not identified as part of a fiction film: instead the title reads, “Suzhou River 1999” which is the year that Suzhou River was made. It is followed by a similar sequence titled, “Suzhou River 2009.” Jia mimics the relatively fast cutting and camera movements that mark Lou’s sequence, but the changes to the neighborhood over ten years are apparent in the renovated buildings, new apartment towers and greater appearance of cleanliness in the river. What both sequences share is the constant presence of passers-by on the riverside and the bridges. They have changed too – we can see it from the clothes they wear and what they are doing, but we also know that their lives have continued through
the intervening decade. The two sequences reflect both continuity and change, just as they conflate fiction film and documentary.

Moreover, the interviewees themselves are presented as the site of a negotiation between past and present, between experiences and their representations or recurrences. As I already mentioned, Rebecca Pan is shot in a room full of mirrors to compliment the clip of her performance in Wong Kar-wai’s film in which her profile is viewed through multiple layers of glass. Yang Xiaofu’s narration is preceded by the offscreen sound of a gunshot, like a post-traumatic recurrence of memory as presence. Jia stages the interviewees in locations relevant to their narratives, but several of those setups highlight the performative nature of the remembrance. Wei Ran is interviewed on a stage, talking about the life story of his mother who was an actress (a clip of her performance is also shown), his elder sister who studied music, and his family’s experience during the Cultural Revolution. Chang Yuansun describes his father’s luxurious pre-war lifestyle and sings the 1945 English-language song “I Wish I Knew” (which gives the film its English title). Before Wang Peimin relates the story about her father, who was put to death by the KMT shortly before the end of the Civil War, we see her at the Chedun Film Studio on the set for the old Nanjing Road, a famous street in Shanghai which is often seen in television programs and films. She sees soldiers reflected in a shop window (actors on set). As we find out later, she was not yet born when her father was executed, so her only memories of him and the momentous march of the People’s Liberation Army through Shanghai the next year after are from photographs of him on the day he died (which we see too) and films like Liberation of Shanghai [战上海 1959], which is excerpted in the film. These stagings call attention to the fact that even for those closest
to the experience, the memories of the past are mediated by images and sounds that reverberate through time. Although they come after the event itself, they are no less necessary for the conjuring up of its emotional contours. In a meditation on nostalgia in early Qing poetics, Ling Hong Lam argues that emotional expression in Chinese poetics relies on mimesis because it is through the “usage and combination of models and conventions,” that emotional communication becomes intelligible. In other words, if there were nothing familiar, repeatable, about the representation, we would not recognize its emotional implications. But in the movement from mimesis to expression, Lam argues that “there is a dimension of temporality, a praxis of performance, by which models are made sensible and evoked” (“Memory”). We might think of the combination of different modes of accessing the past – poetry, film, storytelling, images of documents, and performance – in 24 City and IWIK as a marshalling of conventions and models through which emotional expression is made sensible (both comprehensible and able to be sensed) to the audience, without privileging any of them. Lam points to Robert Hegel and Xiao Chi’s notion of the "Lyrical-Archi-Occasion" which “transcends time” by ‘uniting time and events…past with those of the present’ through familiar and emotionally-charged elements.” The re-deployment of film clips in IWIK in particular could be read as such a “Lyrical-Archi-Occasion.” Through this process of reincorporating film clips, the distance between past and present shrinks, so as to produce a recognition and shared understanding, but it does not collapse completely.

I Wish I Knew is more successful in maintaining its (open-ended) lyricism because it does not impose a clear structure onto the stories and because it is even more explicit about what Chow calls the “composite material, tracks and symptoms left on
human perceptions and interactions by media forms” (27). At the same time, while the past may possess what Chow calls the “quality of being recognisable, of having-been-looked-at,” it is precisely through requiring a recognition of that quality that the films allow the audience to connect it to their own sense memories (27). For Chow, the documentary’s status has radically changed in an era in which the act of shooting and the acts of producing and viewing are (or can be) nearly synchronous. Now, “the epistemic, aesthetic and moral grounds on which the documentary exists – that it is a vicarious experience legitimated by a preexistent reality to which it is linked by the factor of the time lag – seem to be dissolving” (25). She contends that Jia’s films are provocative for the way in which they acknowledge the collapse of the time lag and make “hypermedial display their central attraction” (27). A prime example of both that collapsing time lag and the complex temporarily I am describing here is a sequence with Zhao Tao, the silent wanderer, near the end of IWIK. She appears throughout the film wearing a white T-shirt and tan trousers (the modern clothing of the globalized world), looking like some sort of angel of history. The film’s synopsis refers to her as an “eternally wandering soul” who has returned to Shanghai and sees all the changes the city has endured. Jia describes her as follows:

I indeed wanted to create a person who is beyond time and space. The memories of the people whom I had found were still in the time and space of the past, but they also are in the present time and space as well. The intensity of the memories of Shanghai is very difficult to represent. Many things have happened. I feel that too many stories were taken away with people in the past, one generation after another. I became especially aware of this when I sometimes at night walked in the old streets in Shanghai. It then seemed to me that I might encounter people who returned out of the time and space in the past. (Interview with Zheng 116)

190 See Appendix 6
Her very presence, then, invokes a collapse of past and present, but in the second half of
the film, although she continues to wander, two of these sequences are shot using a
technique we have never seen before in Jia’s films: stretch-time printing, the same
method Shanghai-born Wong Kar-wai calls his “signature style.” By shooting fewer than
24 frames per second and then replaying the shot at normal speed, the image looks jerky
(because of the “missing” shots) and out-of-joint. In the first of these, Zhao is pacing in
the rain near the reconstruction of the walkway at the Bund, looking first angry and then
despairing. This coincides with a voiceover of the beginning of Wei Ran’s story about his
mother and sister, starting at the moment he hears that his mother has committed suicide
and that his sister will be sent down to the countryside. In the second, which appears right
before the closing shots of the metro, Zhao walks up a staircase that turns out to be
incomplete, and stands looking out at the workers, on the edge of a precipice, scanning
her eyes from right to left as if looking for some sign of certainty and finding none.

These segments crystallize the imperfect fit between past and present in this film
in a way not previously seen in Jia’s work. The image itself now contains two speeds,
appearing to be both slow and fast motion at once. It is a mediated image (having been
altered) but it is also embodied in this figure of Zhao Tao, this ghostly re-appearing figure
who conjures up the representations of other histories in other films, and whose haunting
expressions supplement the personal stories of the individuals being interviewed without
ever speaking for them. With this final image of Zhao Tao standing on a (urban,
metaphorical) cliff, rendered in disjointed time, appearing in between the sequence of
well-off people in office buildings and the one on the metro, Jia concludes I Wish I Knew
with much more ideological openness than 24 City. This ending suggests that memories
need to be integrated as part of an ongoing negotiation between past and present, self and other, but it also refuses to treat the past as assimilable – the past has literally messed with our vision of the present. The film leaves open questions about its relevance and resonance which can only be answered by the viewer.

At the end of the day, it is the viewer’s response to these memories that determines the success or failure of these films’ project, and there is nothing to ensure that she or he will feel the “ethical implication in representation” that Sobchack describes. The challenge in evaluating these films on ethical grounds is that they want to have things both ways: they want to activate the documentary consciousness without breaking the aesthetic continuity and mood of the film. They do not, in other words, want to call attention to their own role in mediating the information presented to such an extent as to direct attention away from the emotional and historical content of the film and towards the aesthetic form, even while they do not hide the fact of their mediation. In inviting the viewer to develop an ethical, intersubjective sense of responsibility while also being open to the affective effects of the performances and the experience of disjointed temporality created by various aesthetic strategies, the films are asking a lot, and assuming that this combination of demands is not counter-productive. The viewer may find the simultaneous activation of documentary and fictional consciousnesses problematic and distracting rather than productive. But while legitimate, this is only one way to respond, and it results to a larger degree from the viewer’s own context, tastes and experiences than from the film’s form or content. As is true in all four of the films which blend the fiction and documentary modes, the performance of the past does more than repeat it – it can produce an affective awareness which can be more effective in
conveying the complexity of those past events than any straightforward factual approach. The meanings we derive from these complex portraits, and the consequent sense of a shared collective memory which integrates these histories, must be discovered by the audience. They exist somewhere between the lines.
Coda

In the preceding chapters, we encountered poems and films from Taiwan and mainland China which create a lyrical experience despite the fact that, on the surface, they are not the types of works we would normally label as “lyrical.” We might say that lyricism sneaks up on us in these works, because they present themselves as realistic, or as grounded in impersonal images, and then all of a sudden we find ourselves emotionally moved by them, or sensing an affective connection to seemingly objective details. In part, the surprise of that experience is due to the way in which we are conditioned to equate poeticism with profundity. This lyricism is different – it stems from the mundane and makes no firm claims beyond itself. As inhabitants of modernity, post-Descartes, we are marked by the subject-object split, and therefore our sense of connection comes from identification either with another subjectivity or with an idea, an essence above or beyond ourselves. Being meaningfully affected by the world, physically and emotionally, on its own terms, comes less easily, especially given the postmodern tendency to question apparently stable meanings, to label as naïve any attempt to know anything beyond ourselves. The tendency is thus to read any intellectually rigorous art work as challenging established norms and narratives, upending signifiers, complicating our sense of identity and history, and disrupting our ability to stake a claim on the real. The poets and filmmakers we have examined here do that, but they also provide varying degrees of insight into what gets lost when we spend too much time emphasizing destabilization and not enough time looking for connection. For instance, what happens to memory, then? Not the personal kind of memory that can be ever-shifting and imprecise, but the collective kind that leads to a shared sense of responsibility towards
the past. As critics we sometimes tend to treat any sign of sentiment as regressive, but these works remind us that it can be necessary.

Svetlana Boym writes that nostalgia a form of “rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress,” and that sense of resistance is clearly found in these works (xv). But whatever nostalgia they provoke, when we find it, is much closer to what Boym calls “reflective nostalgia.” As opposed to “restorative” nostalgia, which aims to reconstruct the lost home across time, “reflective nostalgia does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones; it loves details, not symbols” (xviii). These poems and films do not engage with the past, or with experiences of the present as already-past, in order to suggest that we can turn back the clock or (re)capture anything tangible about those experiences – but they engage anyway. I would not even go so far as to label them acts of collective memory formation because they often stop short of, or question, their ability to represent anything we might call a collectivity. Even as they suggest the need for collective responsibility, they simultaneously highlight the mediated nature of their own representation. Collective memory, as Jan Assman writes, is fixed, “Distance from the everyday (transcendence) marks its temporal horizon” (129). In the case of the works discussed here, authoritarian governments, combined with the breathless pace of social and political change at key periods, interfered with the proper congealing of individual into collective memory, which we see reflected in the fragmented nature of these representations. Yet they make clear gestures to draw the reader in – emotionally, affectively and intellectually – signaling a desire to maintain connection rather than to merely question its very possibility.
It is for this reason that I turned to Benjamin’s conceptions of history, rather than to theories of collective memory, for understanding the significance of the form of lyricism we find in these works. In Benjamin’s model we find that events are able to maintain their particularity as individual instances while still interacting as they are articulated to one another. The mediating act of translation establishes temporary equivalences which serve as points of connection and influence without permanently fixing the relation. As active participants in the meaning-making processes set up by these works, we seek out those insights and connections, a process which affects both ourselves and the significance of the works as well. There will never be a fixed understanding of experience which the audiences of these works will agree upon (a shared collective memory) because both the temporal horizons and the emotional resonances of these works are constantly shifting. They signal narrative while challenging it; they leave cracks for sentiment to seep in without allowing it to overflow. What Bei Dao calls the “flashes of memory” are just that – flashes – like the stars in Benjamin’s constellations. But the insights gained in those moments are still productive for a history which moves forward, in fits and starts, towards new possible ways of conceiving collectivity without the need for restrictive singular narratives.

The poems of Ya Xian, Bei Dao and Xi Chuan and the films of Jia Zhangke and Hou Hsiao-hsien are not alone in envisioning history as a Benjaminian dialectical image. Their approach, as I hope to have demonstrated here, challenges some of the assumptions we carry about the relationship between poetry and history, realism and lyricism, assumptions that affect how we read works in the Western tradition as well as in the modern Chinese context, due to the strong influence of Western critical concepts and
modes of analysis. In my attempt to articulate the structural underpinnings which enable this lyrical experience to have an effect on audiences, I have been a bit of a *bricoleur*, borrowing concepts from classical Chinese poetics, Western theories of lyric, realism and drama, and film theories of performance, the image and montage. In so doing, I hope to have demonstrated that Chinese theoretical concepts and artistic practices are important to truly understanding the formal processes at work in these poems and films, without suggesting that there is anything essentially Chinese about them. It is possible that some of the ideas of the thinkers I cite were on the mind of these artists while they were creating these works, whether consciously or subconsciously, but it is equally possible that they had not heard of most or all of them. I am not using cultural context to explain the dynamics of an art work, but rather attempting to name and describe what is often mentioned in passing, as an impression – that feeling of the “poetic”. In order to do this, I wanted to break us out of our typical ways of approaching the question, and by looking at things from two directions at once, both in terms of cultural tradition (Chinese and Western) and generic tradition or medium (film and poetry) I hope that I have been able to break down some of the assumptions that have thus far prevented much detailed discussion of how film can be poetic (or how poetry can be like film in its addressing of the real, or history). If I have failed to build up a coherent theory of lyricism that would apply beyond the particular instances in which we detect or experience it, it is because these works themselves advise against it. They constantly remind us not to replace what has been broken down with something new but equally restrictive even as they refuse to nihilistically reject that desire for feeling at home with ourselves and the world which motivates most acts of memory. It is in the spirit of these artists that I share my own
insights into the experience of reading and viewing their work, in the hope that it may resonate with my readers and create some new connections between our understanding of ourselves, these artists and the times and places they offer up as parts of themselves for our reflection.
Appendices

Appendix 1

“Tatami shots” in *A Time to Live, a Time to Die*

1) Father remembers experiences with a friend during the war

2) Sister talks about qualifying for top high school but not being able to go
Appendix 2: Extreme long shots in *City of Sadness* and *Platform*
Appendix 3

Poems by Xi Chuan

From the sequence *Senses of Reality* [现实感], translated by Lucas Klein in *Notes on the Mosquito*:

**Once it Gets Dark**

Once it gets dark there are no more mountains. Invisible. No more.
Same as the actors exiting when the play’s over, props exiting, too.
Pitch black. The town of Xingping is as black as itself.
Finally a bit of light from the inns. The sustained sounds of cooking.
A pit viper steeps in a glass jug of sorghum wine, soundless.
Still not time for bed, there are neither people nor mountains.
But this kind of life could happen only in the mountains.
Look closely, the mountains haven’t left, dimly, faintly, they stand in a ring around this town.

《天一黑》

天一黑群山就没有了呀。看不见了。不存在了。
仿佛戏唱完演员就退场了, 道具也退场了。
漆黑呀。兴坪漆黑得就像兴坪自己。
饭铺里最后一点灯光。炒菜的声音持续着。
大玻璃瓶中白酒泡着花蛇，人也没了，山也没了。
还没睡觉的时候呵，人也没了，山也没了。
可这样的生活只能发生在山间呀。
仔细辨认，群山哪儿都没去，影影绰绰，围着小镇站着呐。
(Klein, *Notes* 202-203)

**Striking the Iron**

Raven-dark blacksmith shop. Two men striking iron.
Skill improving with each strike. Youth more useless with each strike.
They strike iron, sweat dripping on the smoldering red of the iron.
They strike iron and quench it, as if acting out a TV show.
People still need their unwieldy farm tools, not just watches and TVs,
Today people are still opening up to their thirteenth-century lives.
Two iron mallets strike a single iron hoe, flattening its mouth,
Then quenching it and striking again, striking till the moon is red,
striking till there’s no more iron to strike.
Enjoying an evening breeze, they hear the striking of iron.

《打铁》
鸟黑的铁匠铺。打铁的两个人。
越打越好的技艺。越打越没用的青春。
他们打铁，汗水滴在烧红的铁块上。
他们打铁和淬火，好像在表演一部电视剧。
依然有人需要一件笨重的农具，除了手表和电视机，
依然有人在今天将那十三世纪的生活开辟。
两把铁锤打一把铁锄，把锄嘴打扁，
然后淬火再打，打到月亮殷红，打到无铁可打。
享受一阵晚风，他们听到了打铁的声音。
(Klein, Notes 204-205)

Grandmother

Courtyard. A five-hundred-year history. Of which she witnessed ninety-six years. She sits in a bamboo chair in the western wing combing her hair, combing her hair. The door is open. Her profile. Around her a stovetop, a pot on the stovetop, a table, a bottle of soy sauce on the table, a plastic basket, bok choy and carrots in the basket, and in the corner firewood. Expansive white clouds above the roof of the western wing. Smoke burns off the logs in the western wing, like a quilted coat worn yet unwashed for ninety-six years. Ninety-six years that turned her into drought-stricken earth, the only wetness in her eyes, murky and wet, like a well not completely dried up. Ninety-six years trapping her inside her own body. Loved ones become ghosts. Living in the western wing she seems to embody a ghost. Her KMT commander husband was buried under the Communists’ vernal mountain long ago. She is combing her hair, combing her hair, not a strand out of place. No longer afraid she repeats this simple action over and over. She has receded to the lowest limit of life, if not lower. Her dirty cloth shoes touch a ground lower than the ground. She is combing her hair, combing her hair, conscientiously without reason, without purpose. And outside the door flowers are in bloom. The flowers of that year…

(《奶奶》

院子。五百年的历史。她见证了其中的九十六年。她坐在西厢房内的小竹椅上梳着头，梳着头。门开着。她的侧面。在她周围，是灶台，灶台上的锅，桌子，桌子上的酱油瓶，塑料篮子，篮中的白菜和胡萝卜，还有墙角的柴火。西厢房的屋顶上白云悠悠。西厢房内烟熏火燎，像一件被穿过九十六年不曾洗过的黑棉袄。九十六年把她变成一块遭逢了大旱的土地，只有她的眼睛湿润，湿润而浑浊。仿佛尚未完全枯干的水井。九十六年使她深陷在自己的身体里。亲人们俱已变作鬼魂。她仿佛是代表鬼魂活在这西厢房里。她那当过国民党营长的丈夫早已埋在共产党的青山之下。她梳着头，梳着头，一丝不苟。她已不再害怕将这简单的动作一模二模重复。她已退到生活的底线，甚至低于这底线。她的脏布鞋踩到了比地面还低的地面。她梳着头，梳着头，认真得毫无道理，毫无意义。而花开在门外。当年的花呵……
(Klein, Notes 198-199)
4. Manes of Yellow

“Progress” and “Civilization” appear even on the scalps of delinquents. These four boys of degeneracy, four boys of idle, roaming hands, four reprobates, black hair dyed into manes of yellow, color gone from dark to light. Four abreast on the street, marching forward, three girls in step behind them. Radiant sunlight. These three girls have bought a stylish vogue into this impoverished town, making the women selling bananas and clementines look hideous in comparison. I saw them last night, drinking in a noodle house. In the whole town they’re the first to go to bed. In the whole town they are the most romantic. The winds from Korea and Japan have blown them into something else, making one malcontent with the state of things, one disrespectful of others, one unable to fit into society. This morning I saw them again, strolling from this end of the street to the other, and then strolling back. But this street’s nothing more than a couple restaurants, a school, a motel, a post office, a pharmacy, and a fish shop. The owner of the fish shop carves up a white goose without batting an eye. One of the three girls is kind of pretty, but she seems to have given her youth to one of those yellow-maned guys. Delinquency comes with its own delinquent delights. Delinquency comes with its own delinquent difficulties.

(Klein, Notes 206-207)

From the collection Gou Yi Meng [够一梦]. My translations.

The Church on the Hilltop: Near Fenyang, Shanxi Province

Behind the mountain, a small, dark red church: the most honorable building in the village. The village’s only public toilet, just to the side of the church washroom.

A village with only three blackboards.

The village committee’s blackboard, on the wall by the door to the village committee office; the primary school blackboard, on the wall in the only classroom; the small
church’s blackboard is on the wall outside the monk’s dormitories. The village committee’s blackboard promotes family planning; the primary school’s blackboard can only perform simple arithmetic; but the small church’s blackboard is its own world: on it is one line of Latin, blindly pretending, that’s what it means.

Where is the local party branch?

Within a radius of 10,000 li
there is no one who would recognize this line of Latin!
It is a symbol, representing Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Chinese deities.
Luxurious Latin!
Sunshine from the first century C.E.
From Rome to China, from the past to today,
who transmitted these words, leaving them here to fade, yet suddenly luxuriate?

There is no one inside the small church. Afternoon sunlight comes in through the window, warming the wooden chairs and the floor. It can’t be said whether the ants on the floor are Catholic ants, but the hens a couple of steps in front of the church stairs are definitely Catholic hens. They say to me: “The priest went to town and won’t be back until evening!”

I stand in front of the church door,
fancying myself the priest surveying the mountain range in the distance.
Grey mountains, how would that priest called Ruose look?
Who brought Catholicism to this yellow-earthen plateau, and when?
Who funded and build up this small church, hanging printed couplets on either side of the doorway, and when?
How long was the small church closed down before it was allowed to reopen?
Or is this place so remote and desolate that it has always been open?

Alone, the small church looks down in all directions at the yellow earth of the loess plateau and its low mounds of dirt, bending down to the nearby threshing floor, the old stage on its south side, and a road which wraps around the threshing floor and turns away. The Yellow River coal trucks slowly roll along the road. One creaks to a stop, its driver jumps out and goes into a small shop by the side of the road. He buys some liquor and cigarettes, then comes out and squats down.

The distant mountains stand still, or better yet, recline. From the distant mountains to the cross atop the steeple of this small church, the sky is bluish-grey, a Confucian bird flies and becomes a Daoist bird. And it is hard to tell the difference between a Daoist bird and a Catholic bird. Under the heavens, someone tending a flock invents solitary games, while a person who raises hogs will undoubtedly sing everything off-key.

I follow the road from the small church to the village. After only taking a few steps, a girl wearing a flowered dress suddenly comes around a pile of firewood, and cocking her head she strikes up a conversation with me:
“Hey, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you here, Older Brother. Where do you come from?”
“I came from the small church. Oh, I come from Beijing.”
“Older Brother is so lucky to live in Beijing! And you can still come to this small place and see the scenery.”
“The churches in Beijing don’t have the same flavor as this one though!”
“I haven’t been to Beijing yet. When I get there I’ll believe in God.”

I am convinced that I have met the fox-spirit of this place.

Where is the local party branch?

The fox-spirit asks me: “Is our village nice?”
I say: “Yes. Is that a Siberian weasel I hear?”
The fox-spirit retorted: “Okay, okay, but it won’t be as good as Beijing!”
I could only say: “Good. Good. Is that a Siberian weasel I hear?”

New York, 11 March 2007

On the Great Earthquake in Wenchuan: One Month Later

(I) don’t know how to face the death of so many people at once.
(I) don’t know if the language of geology can suddenly gather the strength of ethical language.
Language becomes simple,
Striking so directly.

Since (I) can’t comfort others,
(I) can’t comfort myself.
Startled. (I) carefully study the photos in the paper. Rows of collapsed buildings and a lonely tree.
From now on, the street expands for the dead. Rain falls.

(I) don’t know whether I can cry a little,
Feel a little better,
Cry a little more,
Feel better again. (I) don’t know whether the truth can be spoken aloud.

It is still repressed, stifled, endured.
Death is still revered.
(I) don’t know whether it’s possible to drink a little after tragedy.
(I) don’t know if the money donated is enough.

This moment’s corrupt should all die.
This moment’s lyrical sentiments should all be rejected.
But neighboring mountain peaks have become total strangers.
The repulsive can also be forgiven.
Hiding in the crowd I shrink myself. (I) don’t know whether I should open up the door to the homes:
Come, everyone, and eat, stay, drink, take.
Making room for myself,
(I) don’t know whether I should make myself into a small government or a temporary Ministry of Civil Affairs.
Stop, grow old. Rain falls.
Nothing can be written. Writing is no use.
Poetry shouldn’t take advantage of the death of others by resurrecting them.
Mosquitos bite. As in the past, it’s useless to speak of happiness.

Raindrops assemble on the lonely night,
I go to bed, but don’t sleep.
Poetry needs some leaves, a bit of cool wind and white moonlight.
My chin sprouts a stubble. The tenderness in my heart turns to the lonely dead.

21 June 2010
Appendix 4

From Jia Zhangke’s *Platform*

1) This scene is over three and a half minutes long. This is the view of the characters, which doesn’t change. There are no cuts, and there is no camera movement, though the actors do move about within the frame.

2) This scene is two and a half minutes long, with no cuts and very little camera movement. The actors move back and forth around this corner as they talk, so that we sometimes see both, sometimes see only one of them, and sometimes see neither of them.
Appendix 5


Han Sanming appears in the lower right-hand corner.

Liu Xiaodong painting Han Sanming in *Dong* and Sanming in *Still Life*, just prior to sighting a small UFO in the background.
The background structure which turns into a rocket in *Still Life*
Sanming with the body of his friend in *Still Life*
Appendix 6

Shots from *24 City* which resemble still photography.
Sample portrait shots in *24 City*. 
Portrait of father and son, before and after the tickling.
Zhao Tao as the “eternally wandering soul of Shanghai” in *I Wish I Knew*
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