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On the Literary Adaptation and Japanese Reception of Huo
Jianqi's 2003 Film Nuan

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CHAPTER TWELVE

CROSS-CULTURAL NOSTALGIA AND VISUAL CONSUMPTION: ON THE ADAPTATION AND JAPANESE RECEPTION OF HUO JIANQI'S 2003 FILM *NUAN*

by Hui Xiao

Although a classmate of “Fifth Generation” filmmakers like Zhang Yimou, the only recently established director Huo Jianqi initially worked in set decoration. Frustrated by the tepid response to his first Hollywood-style commercial films like *Yingjia (The Winner, 1995)*ⁱ and *Geshou (The Singer, 1996)*, he turned to small-budget art films and began only lately to gain an international reputation, particularly in Japan, with his nostalgic melodramas *Nashan naren nagou (Postman in the Mountains, 1998)* and *Nuan (2003)*. While *Postman in the Mountains* draws a beautiful picture of father-son postmen's journey to deliver the mail in forested mountainous areas, *Nuan* focuses on a Chinese peasant girl (played by Li Jia) who must abandon her dreams of migrating to a city.

In addition to its representation of picturesque landscapes, in keeping with the visual aesthetics of Huo's earlier film, *Nuan* also impresses its audience with the radiance of the actress's feminine beauty and its romantic love story. Structurally the film unfolds around the homecoming journey of Lin Jinghe, the first-person narrator (played by Guo Xiaodong) who ten years earlier had left his hometown. Jinghe is now a college graduate working in a big city and enjoys authority equal to that of a village chief on his return to help his former elementary school teacher get his monopoly of the village's lucrative duck-herding business. On the day he is leaving after successfully accomplishing his mission, he unexpectedly runs into Nuan, his first love, which brings the flashback of a story buried in the past. Ten years previously, Nuan was the prettiest girl in the village and also had brilliant talents in singing, dancing and acting. Infatuated with a handsome Peking opera singer who makes an itinerant tour to the village, Nuan dreams of going to the city to start a new life with him.

ⁱ Translations by author, unless otherwise noted.

After waiting hopelessly for two years, she gives up on the performer's promise in favor of Jinghe's assurance that he will take her to the city if he is admitted into college. However, an accident that cripples Nuan makes this promise empty too. She has no choice but to marry the village's mute duck-herdsman (played by Teruyuki Kagawa, a Japanese actor). Learning of all the sufferings that Nuan went through over the years, Jinghe feels so sorry for her that he promises to take her little daughter to the city in the future to receive a better education. Having made peace with the past that he regrets through this new promise, Jinghe sets out on his way back to the city where he has already got a happy family of a well-educated wife and a newborn son.

Although not at all warmly welcomed by the audience in China, *Nuan* as well as *Postman in the Mountains* has proven hugely popular and been critically acclaimed particularly in thoroughly modernized Japan. Although both films won the Best Picture award at China's government-sponsored Golden Rooster film awards, *Postman in the Mountains* gained no distributor at all in the domestic market, while the release of *Nuan* was limited to small-scale exhibition in six theaters in Beijing beginning on February 27, 2004. On April 18, a journalistic report described the director's bitterness at the disappointingly low box office income of the film (Wang Xuemei). Apart from the lack of effective copyright laws or a well-developed art theater exhibition circuit, another reason for the film's failure is that it represents not a popular imaginary but an elitist nostalgia rhetoric, which fails to resonate for the majority of the Chinese population as peasants in the rural areas.

In stark contrast to its obscurity at home in China, *Postman in the Mountains* became Japan's top box office grossing film and the talk of the town in 2001. The Japanese Ministry of Education even officially recommended it as a must-see educational film to Japanese middle-school students. So far the film has raked in at least 800 million yen (7.3 million U. S. dollars) in Japan. Following the success of *Postman in the Mountains*, the film *Nuan* won both the top award and the award for best supporting actor (Teruyuki Kagawa) in the 2003 Tokyo International Film Festival. At the film's mid-week premiere in Tokyo on November 4, eager viewers waited in a line longer than one hundred meters in front of the theater (Wang Yin, "To Gain Tears"). Encouraged by the enthusiasm of Japanese audiences for Huo's works, a Japanese distributor decided to release this film nationwide to regular theaters rather than to art theaters only. What's more, apparently confident about creating another box office miracle under an auteurist brand, the distributor is also negotiating the purchase of Huo's earlier films for Japanese release ("*Nuan* Will Shine in Japanese Nationwide Theaters").

This reception invites investigation into the basis for the popularity of Huo Jianqi's rural films in Japan. Clearly we should situate Japanese reception of

Huo's films in social and discursive conditions. In the face of problems caused by modernization, a cultural discourse of imaginary nostalgia can create an idyllic past of Japan that provides psychological refuge for the anxiety-stricken Japanese. Due to Japan's narrow territory and high degree of urbanization, housing is a grave problem in crowded towns and cities. For those city dwellers who have no strong sense of a rooted home, an imagined nostalgia for Japanese *furusato* (old village) can offer a feeling of returning home. Thus, *furusato* has arisen as the embodiment of the eternal "Japanese hometown" in response to Japanese national anxiety over the insufficiency of the natural and social resources. It does not refer to any particular place, "but rather the generalized nature of such a place and the nostalgic feelings aroused by its mention" (Robertson 113). With a strong familial and maternal aura, *furusato* is metonymic of Japanese vanishing agrarian traditions as well as intimate family relationships within a naturally formed community: the unitary national identity of Japan is built in part on this concept.

A popular trend in Chinese filmmaking is to follow the Japanese melodramatic mode to invent an idealized "natural community" to cover up the peasants' violent resistance and social upheavals as well as other class and gender conflicts in the process of modernization. Like the Miss Furusato Contests, an integral part of the state-sponsored native place-making campaign which functions to construct the image of "good wife, wise mother," nostalgic Chinese films also connect the feminine, the maternal, the familial with the lost virtues and innocence of a traditional agrarian China. In other words, a similar *furusato* construction exists in popular Chinese cultural forms, although it takes a Chinese name and face. Drawing on Linda Williams's theories of melodrama, I intend to underline the melodramatic structure of both Japanese *furusato* movement and the Chinese film *Nuan* to argue that the melodramatic adaptation from the original story into the current film plays a central role in assuring a smooth assimilation of the cinematic representation of Chinese ethnicity into current Japanese discourses of nostalgia. Moreover, Japanese visual consumption of cross-cultural nostalgia in the form of Chinese film melodrama further echoes the trends of internationalizing and feminizing *furusato* tradition evident in Japan.

Adaptation from Mo Yan's Story to Huo Jianqi's Film

At the start of *Nuan*, immediately following the title, a line reading "adapted from Mo Yan's short story 'White dog swing' [sic]" gives credit to the original literary text. However, a close look at the film compared to the story reveals the filmmaker's drastic changes in the process of adaptation. To discover how these changes function we should take into consideration the

film's marketing orientation. Writing about how the investment in the film *Nuan* can pay off, Huo Jianqi asserts that the investing firm Beijing Aureate Ocean Ark Co. Ltd. had a very clear profit-promising pattern in mind, *i.e.*, "Mo Yan's story + Huo Jianqi's art film = Chinese art theater goes + Japanese market" (*This Time, This Place* 79). Due to the scarcity of art theaters and the flourishing digital video disc pirating business in China, the Japanese were clearly the film's primary target audience. Guided by such a market orientation, the adaptation from the original story integrally produced consumable images that well matched Japanese trends of internationalizing and feminizing the *furusato* tradition. This strategy encourages a potential assimilation of a Chinese film into Japanese *furusato* discourse, and consequently promotes the reception of this film in Japan.

Mo Yan, the story's author, first gained fame with *Hong gaoliang jiazu* (*Red sorghum family*), a novel covering the period of the war of resistance against the Japanese (1937-1945). The novel is marked with a very strong inter-ethnic antagonism. Zhang Yimou produced *Hong gaoliang* (*Red sorghum*), based on the first two chapters of the novel, as his debut film in 1987, which won the Golden Bear Prize at the Berlin International Film Festival and began to bring Chinese cinema to the world. Although *Baigou qiuqianjia* (*The white dog and the swing*), first published in 1985, does not express anti-Japanese sentiments, the story does bear some signature marks of the saga writer of the Chinese resistance.

First, the location of the original story is Gaomi dongbei xiang, or the Gaomi County of Shandong Province. Like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Gaomi is Mo's imaginary fatherland in all of his important literary works including *Red Sorghum*. In Mo's fictional world, peasants living on this imagined land of North China are as vital and wild as the stout sorghum plants everywhere. Embodying the free spirit of "the untamed nature," Gaomi goes beyond merely serving as the setting of Mo Yan's stories and novels (Zhong 120). Standing firmly together with the peasants to resist violently against the Japanese invasion, Gaomi itself is a central character playing a role in Mo's anti-Japanese dramas.

In *Nuan*, this blood-soaked homeland of anti-Japanese nationalists disappears. Instead, the geographical setting of *The White Dog and the Swing* shifts to the Xiao taoyuan village located at the Wuyuan County of Jiangxi Province, which is famous for its picturesque landscape and stylized ancient architecture. Located south of the Yangtze River and characterized by warm humid weather, Wuyuan County cannot grow sorghum, the symbol of Mo's resistant peasant heroes. Compared to Gaomi dongbei xiang, this area of the pastoral peace and economic self-sufficiency has little historical memory of Japanese invasion and atrocities, and consequently, I would argue, is easier than

the original setting for a Japanese audience to accept as a visual embodiment of an agrarian utopia. Wuyuan County indeed appears as a Chinese *furusato* perfect for nostalgic tourists. Interviewed about his filming experience in China, Teruyuki Kagawa at Tokyo Film Festival said he had felt "the great power of the earth" at his first step on Chinese land. Gesturing to the bustling automobiles crowding Tokyo's streets, he said his life in Wuyuan is unimaginable for today's Japan. The Chinese peasants he saw keep traditional customs and live a self-sufficient life. Compared to modernized Japan, Wuyuan is another world that does not exist in Japan's present, but in its idyllic past (Wang Yin, "Teruyuki Kagawa").

The irony about Teruyuki Kagawa's fantasy about a Chinese *furusato* is that the filmmaker chose Wuyuan, an already highly developed tourist spot, to paint a nostalgic picture of a Chinese Shangri-la untainted by the forces of modernity. The filmic scenery presented in the style of tourism photography adds another touch from the rising consumerism in post-Mao China. Carefully framed, softly lit still long shots of the landscape readily support auxiliary marketing as postcards of the film. They also can easily sell as top-quality Japanese *furusato* postcards due to the aesthetic resemblance of the two. In other words, this old village of Wuyuan can be viewed as a Chinese extension of the internationalized image of Japanese *furusato*. Because this pastoral national home of the natural community is long lost on Japanese land, the popularization and consumption of the tradition have to go beyond the national boundaries to find its new incarnations.

Supporting the trans-spatial nostalgia displayed by almost the identical composition of some *Nuan* postcards and *furusato* photographs, the film also modifies the story's setting in time. The original story was published in 1985, a year still burdened with traumatic memories of the just-ended Cultural Revolution. However, the adapted film is set in the 1990s, when the Chinese economic reform had gathered more impetus after Deng Xiaoping's inspection trip to the Free Trade Zone of the South China in 1992. The 1990s are the momentous period when Chinese people began to witness a more and more radical urban/rural divide and rich/poor polarization along with the ever-quickenening development of the capitalist free market economy. This temporal adjustment makes the problems addressed in the film more relevant to Japanese society, which has always taken the lead in the modernization of Asia. On the other hand, the moving forward of the clock suppresses the memories of a communist Other, which surfaces in Mo Yan's allusions to revolutionary songs, his pungent political parody of Maoist rhetoric and the identity of Nuan's first beloved in the story, a Chinese People's Liberation Army soldier whom the film replaces with a Peking opera performer. This change of the time setting ascribes the nostalgia to a trans-temporal idyllic village free of any sociopolitical

constraints instead of a communal golden age of a Red China. Thus, the dialectic of nostalgia and modernity transcends all historical specificities to become purified and universal, and consequently relevant to either China or Japan: in other words, to a wider international context.

Apart from the setting in Gaomi dongbei xiang and the collective memories of the communist era of China, another element that disappears is the story's title character. The importance of the white dog is evident from the opening lines of the original story:

Gaomi Dongbei Xiang once produced a species of large gentle white dogs, but now after several generations it's very difficult to find a pure breed. Today everybody raises mongrels, and even if a white one is occasionally seen, somewhere on its body will be patch of colored fur betraying its mixed blood. But if the patch of colored fur doesn't cover too much of the dog's body and isn't located in too prominent a place, everybody will habitually refer to it as a "white dog" without being too critical about the discrepancy between the name and the reality. (Mo, *The White Dog and the Swing* 45)

Beginning with comparing the mongrels and the pure breed of the white dog, the first-person narrator in the following sections of the story repeatedly expresses regret about the extinction of the breed and the loss of the purity—and thus more general nostalgic longing. Those familiar with Mo Yan's other work will likely connect this image of the white dog of mixed blood (*zazhong*) to hybrid/bastard sorghum (*zazhong gaoliang*), another ethnicity metaphor Mo frequently uses in *Red Sorghum* and other novels set in Gaomi dongbei xiang. This *zazhong* (hybrid/bastard/mongrel) condition of the white dog and the red sorghum is highly symbolic of the cultural hybridity of a rural China in post-Mao era. The disappearance of the white dog from the film tacitly evades the problem of the loss of the purity.

The erasure of the white dog goes hand in hand with the most radical change in the adaptation, the ending. In the original text, Nuan and her mute husband have given birth to three deaf boys. So toward the ending of the story, Nuan has the white dog lead the first-person narrator into a sorghum field where she boldly asks the first-person narrator to make love to her in the hope of being impregnated with a healthy child. This unexpected turn echoes the *zazhong* (hybrid/bastard/mongrel) idea reified by the white dog and the red sorghum in Mo's verbal texts. In other words, the purity of Chinese ethnicity, represented by Mo's peasant figures, cannot be maintained any more when confronted with the urbanizing forces of Chinese modernization personified by the first-person narrator, a college graduate returning home after ten years' absence.

What is even more challenging about the story's ending is the woman's taking the initiative in this sexual act to be performed in the wild. While waiting for the narrator to arrive, Nuan "had matted down some sorghum to clear an

open space around which the sorghum stood like a tall four-sided screen. As I peered in she took the yellow cloth [to make clothes for her sons] out of her bundle and spread it out on the matted-down sorghum" (Mo, *The White Dog and the Swing* 60-61). The description of this erotic scene forms an intertextual dynamic with a similar field scene in *Red Sorghum*. . The difference between the two is that in the *Red Sorghum*, . the man is in control in the sexual consummation while in *The White Dog and the Swing*, it is the woman that plays the active role. In the story, the sexual free spirit and untamed nature of the woman threaten the masculinity of the first-person narrator.

Compared to this rebellious closure of the story, the film ends upon a far more sentimental and reconciled note. In the film, Nuan is lucky to have a healthy and pretty daughter who shares an intimate relationship with both her parents. Toward the end of the film, Nuan's family of three has gone to see off Jinghe, the first-person narrator, as he departs for the city. Knowing fully well the hardships of peasant life and Nuan's haunting dream of going to the city, the mute husband makes a self-sacrificing gesture by asking Jinghe to take his wife and daughter with him. Seeing this, Nuan drags her husband away and leaves Jinghe to look back at the reunited couple supporting each other. Gradually fading into the natural background of the vast grassland, the film's Nuan sublimates her desires to morality, as she voluntarily maintains the unity of her family at the cost of her dreams. Although physically crippled—an evident punishment for her once unchained desires—Nuan becomes spiritually complete by choosing the feminine virtues of loyalty and endurance. The image of a shameless lascivious woman in the story is thus transformed in the film into a standard Miss Furusato conforming to the traditional criteria of "good wife, wise mother." The reconstructed maternal image redeems her transgressions and retrieves the lost rural utopia based on pure domesticity and traditional ethics.

Being touched by the tears that the daughter, the mother/wife and the father/husband have shed, Jinghe holds the little girl tightly and promises her that he will take her to the city later. Then he turns around, embarking on his way back to the city. Accompanied with the melodious music played on traditional Chinese musical instruments, the first-person narrator concludes in voice-over that each of the three of them is lucky and fulfilled, although in a different sense. His final soliloquy goes this way:

My promise is my confession. People always make mistakes, but not everyone can get the chance to make up for them. Therefore, I am lucky. My forgetting is my reminiscence. Even if one never returns to his hometown, he cannot escape the haunting memories of his first love. Therefore, the mute is

lucky. My worries are my consolations. What the mute can give Nuan, I cannot give to her. Therefore, Nuan is lucky.¹

The final remarks of reconciliation make up for everyone's loss, and smooth out the "discrepancy between the name and the reality" (Mo, *The White Dog and the Swing* 45). With this highly melodramatic ending that re-establishes the normative order of social relationships, the film neatly solves all the unsolvable class and gender conflicts exposed by the original story. While the story undercuts any imagined nostalgia for an idealized hometown with a merciless picture of the cruel realities, the film allays all the anger and resistance of the oppressed by promising a bright ending that retrieves the irretrievable for everyone.

Cross-Cultural Melodrama, Cross-Cultural Nostalgia

In her article "Melodrama Revised," Linda Williams defines the melodramatic mode as "a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action" (42). Without concerning herself whether melodrama is an exclusively American form or not, E. Ann Kaplan reads recent Chinese films in light of European and American melodrama theories. Kaplan's cross-cultural analysis of the melodramatic narrative affirms the view that "woman's films" in China tend to make comments on social issues through representing the frustrated sexuality and subjectivity of Chinese women.

Bringing to the fore both "the direct impact of American melodrama on Chinese cinema" and the historical rationale behind the melodramatic mode, Paul G. Pickowicz argues that the melodramatic narrative is the means Chinese films has adopted to address "the crisis of twentieth-century Chinese culture and society" (303). He quotes Peter Brooks to argue:

[M]elodrama is popular in places where "the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their insaturation as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern." "Melodrama," [Brooks] reminds us, "starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue." (303)

Kaplan and Pickowicz both persuasively demonstrate the relevance of the melodramatic narrative to Chinese cinema. Brooks's view that melodramas address cultural crisis is particularly pertinent to the interpretation of *Nuan*.

ⁱ First published in *Dangdai* (Contemporary literature bimonthly) in 2003, and later released as monograph by Beijing People's Literature Press in 2004.

Placing the reading of the film into the intertextual conditions of cross-cultural melodramas, I would argue that the structure of the film *Nuan* well fits the melodramatic pattern, proposed by Williams, of retrieving the lost innocence "through a dialectic of pathos and action." In this film, when Nuan is attracted to the Peking opera performer, her desires for the man and the urban lifestyle he represents erodes the virginal innocence that she and the pure land represent. A series of highly erotic swing scenes visually displays the dangerous pleasure of losing the virtuous innocence. When the swing reaches its highest point, Nuan stares forward as far as possible, even seeing the capital Beijing in her imagination. Her yearnings for the performer and for the city life transgress the idealized purity and innocence of a Chinese *furusato*. As a result, she must be punished. Because the rope has worn out, Nuan and the male narrator both fall from the swing. But only Nuan is injured. While the man later gets the chance to fulfill his aspirations of getting a college education and residing legally in a city, the crippled woman has to abandon her own dream of moving to the city. Left with no choice, she marries the mute in the village and gives birth to a daughter. The melodramatic narrative of the film redeems her innocence through this harsh punishment and her virtuous suffering thereafter as a good wife and a loving mother. This virtuous suffering of an oppressed woman echoes the *feminisuto* tradition in Japanese melodramas:

The image of a woman suffering uncomplainingly can imbue us with admiration for a virtuous existence almost beyond our reach, rich in endurance and courage. One can idealized her rather than merely pity her, and this can lead to what I call the worship of womanhood, a special Japanese brand of feminism. (Russell 146)

What's more, "the *feminisuto* tradition is indicative of the fundamental role of the mother in Japanese culture and psychoanalysis" (Russell 147). Connecting the Japanese cultural identity with a suffering maternal image, the tradition in Japanese cinema now finds its follower in contemporary Chinese films.

However, this close connection to Japanese melodramas can hardly be found in the literary text. The presence of the melodramatic "dialectic of pathos and action" materialized by a maternal figure's silent but virtuous suffering in the filmic adaptation stands out for its absence in the original story. The style and narrative mode of the film radically change the verbal text. In the story, Nuan's maternal experience of giving birth and nurturing children is compared to animals' breeding. When the first-person narrator wonders why Nuan has three boys despite the "one-child only" policy put into practice in post-1978 China, Nuan "explained coldly, 'I had three at once, plunk, plunk, plunk, just like having pups'" (Mo, *The White Dog and the Swing* 52). Another intertextual link can be made here through the canine metaphor. Like Xiao Hong's *The*

Field of Death and Life (*Shengsi chang*, 1935), a novel interweaving national trauma and embittered motherhood during the anti-Japanese war period, Mo Yan's literary representation of Chinese women's bodily experiences is stripped of any sentimental touch of a romanticized aesthetics. The peasant women's life-and-death cycle in an old Chinese village, after the invasion of the Japanese in Xiao Hong's novel and of modernity in Mo Yan's story, is presented as tormented and animal-like.

Psychologically traumatized, the rural women's bodies are also severely injured and deformed in both writers' works. In the story *The White Dog and the Swing*, when Nuan falls from the swing, her right eye is pierced by a spike of locust tree needles. With a "deeply sunken eye socket," she becomes known as "One-Eyed Nuan" (Mo, *The White Dog and the Swing* 50). When the first-person narrator returns to the village after ten years, he can hardly recognize Nuan. At the first sight of her, he "wouldn't have been able to tell it was a woman" (Mo, *The White Dog and the Swing* 47). Then standing on the river bank, seeing Nuan's "large drooping breasts," the narrator thought dryly to himself, "Just like the song the village kids sing: 'Unmarried she's got golden breasts, married she's got silver breasts, having children she's got bitch's teats'" (Mo, *The White Dog and the Swing* 52). Rather than redeeming the lost innocence through being a "good wife, wise mother" in the *feminisuto* tradition, the story shows family life as a burdening institution that deprives the rural woman of her free spirit and untamed nature. What's even more unfeminine about Nuan is her brutal manners and down-to-earth language. Using vulgar language, even cursing freely from time to time, Nuan relentlessly ridicules the intellectual narrator's nostalgic speech. When he claims to feel homesick for the old village, Nuan says: "What's there to miss in this beat-up place? You missed this broken-down bridge? It's like a goddamn rice steamer in the sorghum fields, about to steam me to death" (Mo, *The White Dog and the Swing* 52). With its objective observations and gruesome style, Mo Yan crushes the utopian myth with his dystopian writing. His story is a parody of the texts about the imagined nostalgia for a pure old village that is always associated with the sublimated maternal image.

The melodramatic adaptation much dilutes, and in part overwrites, the sarcasm and bitterness in Mo's story. In the film Nuan's feminine image occupies center stage. To preserve the radiance of her feminine beauty, the outcome of the accident that changes Nuan's fate becomes the crippling of her right leg. In this way, her radiant maternal image, in the place of a grotesque one-eyed slut, can be seamlessly integrated into the glamorized natural landscape, which is quintessential for constructing a melodramatic "nostalgia for rural and maternal origins" (Williams 65).

When talking about using the name *Nuan* as the film title, director Huo Jianqi said it was not only because she is the protagonist of the film but also because “*nuan*” in Chinese means warmth, or heart-warming affections (Wang Yin, “To Gain Tears”). Indeed, sentiments and pathos play a central role in the filmic narrative. In audiences’ comments on the film *Nuan*, the word most frequently used is “tears.” After witnessing a preview showing of *Nuan*, the head of the Beijing branch of *Asahi Shimbun* (Asahi newspaper), one of the biggest Japanese newspapers, said: “This film will create a new miracle [in Japan]!” while wiping away tears from his face (Shen). Confessing to the director what he felt after viewing the film, even Mo Yan said it had touched the softest spot in his heart and he had shed tears silently. Wang Yin, the correspondent sent to Tokyo to give a series of special reports on the film festival, provided a vivid description of some middle-aged Japanese women’s insuppressible sobbing at the film’s premiere (Wang Yin, “To Gain Tears”).

This tearjerking effect of the film was frequently mentioned around the film’s premiere in Tokyo in 2003. For example, the headline of a film report in the Guangdong-based *South Weekend*, the most influential weekly newspaper with the largest circulation in China, reads “The film *Nuan* goes to Tokyo to gain tears shed by the Japanese” (Wang Yin, “To Gain Tears”). After *Nuan* won the Best Picture Award on November 9, the report headline was “Tears won over the Tokyo Film Festival.” When interviewed about his expectation for the film’s reception in Japanese market, Huo Jianqi said this film would make Japanese audiences cry out their eyes (Wang Yin, “Tears Won over”). This self-conscious move of categorizing the film as a “weepy,” or “family melodrama” shows the filmmaker’s awareness about what can sell well in the Japanese market. His prediction is not groundless for at least two reasons. First, his previous family melodrama *Postman in the Mountains* had enjoyed a huge success in Japan. Second, the melodramatic mode is structured in Japanese national identity, as Catherine Russell argues:

Melodrama, unlike modernism, has deep roots in Japanese cultural history and might even be said to dominate Japanese cinema as a kind of metagenre to the same extent that it informs North American narrative film. In fact, emotional intensity is a key attribute of the so-called Japanese “character.” (143)

Interestingly enough, while defending himself against some Chinese film critics’ charge that *Nuan* catered to the Japanese market, Huo simultaneously acknowledged that he produced this sentimental melodrama with a recognition of “emotional intensity” as the Japanese national character. Talking about Teruyuki Kagawa’s happy tears at receiving the Best Supporting Actor Award, Huo generalized that Japanese people love crying. (Huo and Yi 87) The above cross-cultural analysis on melodramatized nostalgia reveals the Chinese

director's awareness of his film's resonance with a Japanese cultural tradition, even with a presumed Japanese national character. Huo's attitude begs the question: is the narrative convergence of cross-cultural nostalgia in Chinese and Japanese melodramas just a historical coincidence? In the following two sections, I will deal with the "inter-textual" (both Japanese and Chinese) conditions of reading and producing Chinese melodramas.

"Inter-textual" Dynamics: Nostalgia for *Furusato*

When investigating the reception of Bond novels and films in England, Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott investigate "inter-textuality" in distinction from Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality:

[W]hereas Kristeva's concept of intertextuality refers to the system of references to other texts which can be discerned within the internal composition of a specific text, we intend the concept of inter-textuality to refer to the social organization of the relations between texts within specific conditions of reading." (44-45)

Just as the reading of Bond films cannot be separated from the "inter-textual" politics of cold-war ideology, to better understand the popularity of Huo Jianqi's *Nuan* in a cross-cultural context, we must look first into the "inter-textual" dynamics, or the social and discursive conditions of Japanese reading of the film. In view of its filmic representation of an agrarian utopia lost in modernizing China, I would connect Japanese audiences' viewing and appreciating the film *Nuan* with a central "inter-textual" condition, *i.e.*, the discourses around nostalgia for the *furusato* tradition.

Since the advent of Japanese modernization beginning in the nineteenth century, the state has taken strategic moves to regulate and invent traditions for the sake of maintaining a "highly disciplined national community and a unified and totalizing culture" (Robertson 11). Native place making is one such state-sponsored program to stage the so-called *furusato* tradition. According to Robertson,

[a]lthough *furusato* literally means "old village," the word is used most often in an affective capacity to signify not a particular place—that is, an actual old village—but rather the generalized nature of such a place and the nostalgic feelings aroused by its mention. "Furusato Japan" thus imbues the state with a warm, fuzzy, familial, and ultimately maternal aura. (113)

To materialize this family-state ideology, Japanese government has invested in a national-scale movement to develop *furusato*-centered tourism. In 1985 the Furusato Information Center was established with an annual operating budget of

4 million U. S. dollars (Robertson 116). *Furusato* parks, museums, theaters were established in a number of counties. In some towns, such as Kurino, a “*furusato* bus” service is provided for tourists to travel around. Different counties have designed different *furusato* sightseeing packages to welcome “homecoming” tourists from the city who have suffered from housing problems and thus have a strong sense of uprootedness in the face of Japan’s fast-paced urbanization.

In addition to being a cultural icon and a tourist industry regulated by the state, *furusato* has also taken specific popular cultural forms. The *furusato* music compact disc series (including *Furusato*, *Furusato Reborn*, *Furusato Encore* and *Furusato 2*) have been marketed under the name of “homeland melody” (“*Furusato Encore*”). *Juurokuya Renka: Kami Furusato* is an adventure game for PlayStation 2, which enacts a painter’s return to his small home village. Bored with his career for profit and fame in the city, he abandons the city life and chooses to come back to the *furusato* to re-experience romantic relationships (“*Juurokuya Renka*”). As early as 1983, both a feature film *Furusato* and an animated film *The Little Ninja—The Chapter of the Great Clash in His Native Country (Ninja Hattori-kun NinxNin Furusato Daisakusen no Maki)* were released.

Nostalgia for *furusato* is also visible in the anime master Hayao Miyazaki’s works. While *My Neighbor Totoro (Tonari no Totoro, 1988)* creates the legendary supernatural being “Totoro” to depict a harmonious relationship between human and nature in 1950s Japanese countryside, the 2002 Oscar winner *Spirited Away (Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi, 2001)* gives “an insight into the troubled present and a sense of what we have lost in our neglected past” (Richie 8). The term *furusato* is even explicitly mentioned in *Only Yesterday (Omohide Poroporo, 1991)*, which is about the childhood memories and the “old village” return journey of a thirty-year-old office lady residing in Tokyo.

Compared with these films, an even more direct anti-modernization declaration made by Miyazaki is his 1994 feature anime *Pom Poko (Heisei tanuki gassen pompoko)*. This film draws on Japanese Shinto mythology to tell a story about how a group of raccoons (*tanukis*) use “*Tanuki* transforming science” to fight against humans’ urbanization plan. Of all the amazing spectacles their battles create, the most intriguing is the raccoons’ last desperate strike to change the “damaged land,” the already developed suburban city of Tokyo, back into their original natural habitat. The raccoons strive to recuperate with their supernatural powers an agrarian past featuring intimate and harmonious interpersonal relationships of a traditional agrarian community, which is reminiscent of the quintessential *furusato* landscape: “forested mountains, fields cut by a meandering river, and a cluster of thatched-roof farmhouses” (Robertson 116). However, that beautiful scenery does not endure;

it disappears in a flash. The audiences, along with the raccoons in the film, may be disappointed to realize that the beautiful *furusato* landscape is just an illusion, whether created by raccoons' legendary magic or by the cinematic apparatus. Ironically enough, the raccoons' nostalgia for the vanished *furusato* brings back only ephemeral fantasies that can be visualized and circulated for audiences' visual consumption only through the technology of modern media. This paradoxical intertwining of nostalgia and consumption is endemic in the *furusato* construct, a point that proves to be highly relevant to my analysis of the film *Nuan*.

As the above-mentioned texts show, the state and popular forms produce *furusato* as a Japanese trope for traditional agricultural community that, in contrast with problematic life in modernized cities, presumably enjoyed cultural and economic self-sufficiency. Two trends stand out in the simultaneous movement to promote *furusato* as both the embodiment of Japanese family-state ideology and as a consumable product marking "Japaneseness." The first trend is the rising internationalization of the cultural icon of *furusato*. In advertisements, the Japanese post office claims: "International Furusato Parcels help you deliver your sentiments to your family member(s) or friend(s) abroad" ("International Furusato Parcels"). In the global market, *furusato* is not only deliverable but also edible: a Google search readily identifies numerous *furusato* sushi bars and restaurants in Honolulu, Los Angeles, Toronto, Berlin, Manila, Macao, and Sydney. The second trend is the feminization intrinsic to the *furusato* tradition. Robertson points out that "the groups employing the *furusato* image in their campaigns invariably link that concept with 'mother.' The association of mother and *furusato* is so tenacious that some Japanese social critics have insisted that the two words are synonymous" (124). What makes the association even more appealing and sensational are the Miss Furusato contests that started as early as 1908 all over Japan. In 1989 about 3,400 contests were registered. Analyzing the Miss Furusato contests, Robertson says that "the thousands of Miss *Furusato* represent collectively a type of femininity, in the service of both nostalgic males and the dominant gender ideology, summed up by the expression 'good wife, wise mother' (*ryosai kenbo*) coined in the Meiji period" (125-26). Notably, this Meiji Japan term is identical to the familiar Chinese expression *Xianqi liangmu* (good wife, wise mother). In view of the strong cultural legacy Japan inherited from ancient China, it is very likely that the Japanese term is a loan word from traditional Confucian ethics.

The contemporary role that Chinese resources are playing in the internationalization of feminized *furusato* nostalgia extends the strong cultural connection between China and Japan that yields the two dominant trends of *furusato* traditions noted above. Since the actual *furusato* villages in Japan are vanishing due to the process of urbanization, the images of old Chinese villages

visualized by the cinematic apparatus offer the most readily available redemptive means to fill the huge gap between a modernized and an idyllic Japan. In conclusion, I will further address how Huo and other Chinese filmmakers have responded to such an international market for Chinese-inscribed melodramatic nostalgia.

Conclusion

Comparing the film *Nuan* and his own story, Mo Yan said: "The director re-tells this tragic story with *wenqing* [heart-warming affections]. This style is very different from my original story, which is much more cruel and gruesome" (Mo and Ding 83). Responding later, Huo Jianqi said: "Personally I prefer the original ending in the story. However, the helplessness and despair in it are too much and too heavy for film audiences to bear. So we made some adjustments there mainly for the sake of the audiences' reception" (Chen and Ding 100). Qiu Shi, Huo's wife and also the scriptwriter of *Nuan*, added that they just wanted to picture a normal everyday life in which *wenqing* normalizes interpersonal relationships (Chen and Ding 101). As a result of this market-oriented adaptation strategy, the prevailing *wenqing*, which sharply contrasts to the absence of sentimentality in the original story, transforms the film into a woman's weepie. All the tears shed on and off the screen are reminiscent of the icy river in *Way Down East*, the film Williams addresses as an exemplar of film melodrama. As the chilly water in this 1920 D. W. Griffith film cleanses Anna's sexual guilt, the tears in Huo's film restore Nuan's innocence and purity that has been sullied by her strong desires (Williams 77). The pathos aroused by the virtuous suffering of a motherly figure assures the continuity of the melodramatic narrative and makes it possible for the happy ending to "reconcile the irreconcilable" (Williams 75).

Huo has attested that in making films with rural settings, he wants to express his nostalgia for a vanishing pastoral era and his warm feelings toward Chinese peasants in the transitional period of China. Though virtually inaccessible to the majority of Chinese peasantry, the film *Nuan* is believed to be able to bring spiritual warmth to console those who live in the countryside struggling in poverty (Shen). But what does this *wenqing*-ism connote if read in the "inter-textual" conditions of a modernizing China? In 2003, the same year when the film was produced, a best-selling book in China was *An Investigation of the Problems of Chinese Farmers (Zhongguo nongmin wenti diaocha)*.ⁱ It exposed

ⁱ For a more detailed discussion of nostalgia in Zhang Yimou's film *The Road Home*, please see Hui Xiao's article "Visualizing Cultural Hybridity and Problematic of Chinese 'National Cinema'", *Orientations: Transcultural Perspectives on Asia*, 2004: 6.

the increasing urban-rural divide in the growing economy of China. For its honest revelation of the biggest social problems in modernizing China, *i.e.*, the exploitation in the countryside, Chinese peasants' stark poverty, and the growing social inequality in post-Mao China, the Chinese Communist Party banned the book. However, what cannot be so easily banned are a series of peasant riots and social unrests. On December 8, 2004, *The New York Times* reported that Chinese farmers were waging a sustained fight against the real estate boom to gain back their lost land, or at least more compensation (Yardley). The Japanese anime *Pom Poko* is thus staged in Chinese reality a decade later, although this time the battle is less hilarious or spectacular but more earthy and cruel, ending up on the Chinese peasants' doomed failure in their face-to-face confrontation with the state apparatus.

In contrast with (or in compensation for) the grave social reality, a prevalent trend of nostalgia and *wenqing*-ism characterizes Chinese cinema at the end of last century and at the beginning of the new millennium. For example, "a nostalgia for the simplicity of life and youthful idealism" permeates *Hei junma* (*A Mongolian tale*) directed by Xie Fei in 1995 (Zhang and Xiao 254). In 2000, the same director demonstrated his nostalgia again, this time for the "primitive" Tibetan culture, with *Yixi zhuoma* (*A song of Tibet*), a Tibetan woman's triangular romance. Even films depicting an urban China such as Zhang Yang's *Xizao* (*Shower*, 2000) show a very strong tendency of rejecting the impending modernity while reconstructing the ideal family relationship and traditions like Chinese-style "bathhouse" culture. Apart from *Nuan*, two other films *Nuan chun* (*Warm Spring*) and *Nuan qing* (*Warm Feelings*) produced in 2003 and 2004 also feature the Chinese character "Nuan" in their title and both have been advertised for the formula of social problems (*e.g.*, laid-off single parent, homeless orphan girl) + heart-throbbing family melodramas.

Suggesting that *wenqing* has already been a dominant feature of the Chinese cinema at the threshold of the new century, Zhang Yingjin quotes an allegorical scene from Zhang Yuan's *Huijia Guonian* (*Seventeen Years*, 2000). Compared with his earlier work *Beijing Zazhong* (*Beijing Bastards*, 1992) and *Donggong, Xigong* (*East Palace, West Palace*, 1996), that later film offers less sound and fury from those marginalized rock-and-roll youngsters, gay men, and jobless drifters who once occupied the center stage of the films made by some Fifth-Generation and most Sixth-Generation directors. Although the central character, a woman prisoner, still represents those who suffer and struggle for a living at the margin of Chinese society, in Zhang Yuan's 2000 film she begins to show gratitude for the *wenqing* offered by the woman police officer in uniform, a personification of the state apparatus. Toward the ending of the film, the mother and daughter, who are reunited after a seventeen-year separation, both kneel down in front of the aging father to ask for his forgiveness. Considering that this

is the first of Zhang Yuan's films to be allowed to be shown in China, Zhang Yingjin interprets this scene as a gesture of reconciliation from the once resistant Fifth- and Sixth-Generation who had made rebellious underground films (Zhang, "Observations Made on Mainland Chinese Films" 259).

Building on what Zhang says, I would argue that the prevalent *wenqing* in contemporary Chinese cinema represents the filmmakers' compromise not only with the institutionalizing forces of the state, but also with those of the market. Due to the strict government censorship and the steep decline of the domestic film market dominated by imported Hollywood and Hong Kong films as well as pirated digital video discs, many Fifth- and Sixth-Generation directors must build their careers by winning awards in international film festivals to attract foreign investment. Under such harsh conditions for the survival of Chinese cinema, they must be doubly reconciled in order to orient their films toward an international as well as a shrinking domestic market.

Targeting mainly Japanese audiences, Huo has succeeded in establishing himself within this trend of appealing to an international market, particularly with what *Nuan* has achieved in the Tokyo International Film Festival. His hope of popularizing other Chinese films in Japan through his own success is also quite likely to be fulfilled in the light of Japan's increasing import of Chinese films and the rising number of Sino-Japanese co-productions. But as optimistic as one might be about this quantitative change in Chinese cinematic exports, the reverse direction of the impact of Japanese pop culture in China is not such a new or distinctive development. It is worth noting that *Nuan* was produced with the financial support of the Movie Television Inc. of Kenichi Morohashi and Japanese post-production facilities, suggesting that even nostalgia for an idyllic China can be materially realized only when the Chinese *furusato* becomes an active factor in the circulation of global capital. The problems that Japan experienced in the midst of modernization that engendered a movement of searching for cultural roots now appear—within the inter-Asian context of the consumption of the "technologized visuality" in Rey Chow's terms—and also have begun to dominate Chinese literature and cinema. Nostalgia for traditions is the dominant mood in the cultural scene of post-Mao China and Chinese cinema not surprisingly now visualizes a romantic view of old village life to represent the past idyllic era. In this melodramatic narrative of the national subjectivity, it is still the sublimated maternal figure that is assigned the task of shouldering the historical burden of Chinese past and present. Her "primitive" body—as represented through her everyday manual labor in a communal utopia—stands as the site of competing with institutionalizing forces of the state and the globalization.

I have argued that we can understand the nostalgia inscribed in the form of cross-cultural melodramas as contemporary Chinese directors' direct address to

the tough conditions of reality, be it national or cinematic-industrial. In the case of Huo Jianqi and his film *Nuan*, it is clear that the highly self-conscious melodramatic narrative and setting are central elements that have led to the film's success in Japan. Of course the factors contributing to *Nuan*'s reception in Japan can be multiple: the star image of the female lead who resembles Gong Li, a Chinese superstar with an international appeal; the use of a Japanese actor; the "Oriental" music composed by San Bao, who also wrote music for *Wo de Fugin Muqin (The Road Home)*, another nostalgic rural film produced by Zhang Yimou in 1999; and Huo's highly stylized set design and camerawork, cinematic techniques which have been compared to the work of some Japanese master directors and are favored by Japanese audiences.³ However, considering that the construction of the *furusato* tradition itself is a national melodramatic narrative about retrieving lost innocence, I suggest that the melodramatic adaptation of the film *Nuan* turns the empty but mobile signifier of an idyllic China into reified memories and images about a utopian past. That vision of the past can transcend temporal and spatial boundaries to fulfill Japanese audiences' needs for *furusato* fantasy with an internationalized, consumable Asian nostalgia.