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❖ **Diaspora Films as Cultural Contact Zones: A Case Study of *The Home Song Stories***

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Abstract

*Diaspora films are media-based contact zones where new identities emerge and cultures are in confrontation. Drawing on immigrant experiences, these films provide a cultural contact zone, or as Mary Louise Pratt suggests, a "space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish relations, usually involving coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (1990). This paper offers a case study of a recent Chinese diaspora movie in Australian cinema, *The Home Song Stories* (2007), and examines identity and cultural conflicts between old and younger generations in immigrant families in 1960s Australia. An autobiographical film, *The Home Song Stories* is about director Tony Ayers' traumatic childhood as a second-generation immigrant in Australia. It is also about his relationship with his mother. The purpose behind the film, according to Ayers (*Home Song Stories Movie Trailer*, 2007), was to "try to understand her and the things she did." Through the analysis of the mother-son relationship, their respective identities in the host society, and the examination of underrepresented historical and political context, this paper argues that the heart-wrenching tale that informs *The Home Song Stories* is not just personal, it is also the epitome of displacement and disorientation of immigrant families.*

***The Home Song Stories* the film**

The Chinese-Australian script-writer and director, Tony Ayers, was born in Macau in 1961. He migrated to Australia with his mother and older sister when he was only three. His mother was a Hong Kong nightclub singer before she eventually married an Australian sailor. Life was not peaceful after the family came to Australia and eight years after their arrival, Rose committed suicide, leaving the children to their Australian stepfather. It was the unrest and upheavals in the eight years that eventually inspired the creation of *The Home Song Stories*. As the opening

words go, "If everyone has one story which defines them, shapes them, then this is mine."

Delving deep into his past, Ayers made the film personal and affecting through the perspective of his onscreen surrogate, Tom. The intelligent, yet hypersensitive ten year-old boy watchfully assesses his mother's life. In the film, his mother, leaves her Australian husband Bill only seven days after their wedding and takes the children to Sydney Chinatown looking for a Chinese man to entrust her life. However, after seven years "drifting from place to place and from uncle to uncle" none of these relationships ends up working out (*Home Song Stories*, 2007).

The film focuses on the eighth year when Rose comes back to Uncle Bill in Melbourne as a last resort. She soon leaves him again when she falls in love with young handsome Joe, an illegal immigrant from Hong Kong. However, her relationship with Joe also fails after two unsuccessful suicide attempts. Rose decides to go back to Hong Kong but the children, who are already developing an affiliation with Australia, reject the move. The hopeless mother hangs herself in a tree, burning the most horrible scene in her eleven year-old boy's childhood memory.

The basic theme of *The Home Song Stories* is to look back, from the point-of-view of the confused boy, to the erratic behaviors of Ayers' mother, who he sees as the source of his traumatic childhood. The director is very grateful to Uncle Bill who took care of him and his sister, and who came to be called "our father" (*Home Song Stories*, 2007). As a boy, he couldn't understand why his mother didn't stay with Uncle Bill who guaranteed a secure and stable life for them. Having been brought up in Anglo-white culture, Ayers is representative of the so-called "banana" type of second-generation immigrant who grew up in the Anglo-white culture – yellow outside but white inside. Even as a grown-up, he does not understand his mother's desperate desire for homeland in her exile.

In this sense, the mother-son relationship depicted in the film is a manifestation of transcultural contacts in the disguise of generation gap. Deep inside the unstable family is the cross-cultural conflict between the first and second generations of immigrants. Seen in this way, the film provides us with a cultural contact zone to look into the problems caused by immigrant identity crisis.

Chinese diaspora films as cultural contact zone

Since the 1990s, Chinese diasporic filmmakers have constantly explored the subjects of spaces, cultures, identities. Adapted from a best-selling novel written by Amy Tan, *Joy Luck Club* (1993), directed by Chinese-American filmmaker Wayne Wang, looks at mother-daughter relationships, particularly those of American-born daughters and their respective mothers born in feudal China. Like *The Home Song Stories*, the adult daughters rediscover their childhood memories and try to understand the difficulties inherent in the mother/daughter relationship through an exploration of their mothers' told past. Though criticised by some critics for perpetuating racist stereotypes (Chin, 2004), *The Joy Luck Club* has addressed the issue of generation gap in immigrant families caused by cultural differences rather than age difference, which is also prominent in *The Home Song Stories*.

A "generic cousin" (Teo, 2001) to *Joy Luck Club* is Hong Kong-Australian director Clara Law's first non-Hong Kong production, *The Floating Life* (1996), which represents a kind of turning point in Australian cinema in that it establishes a signposting towards the creation of an Asian-Australian cinema (Teo, 2001). "(E)xplor(ing) the themes of migration and displacement,

notions of home and intercultural interpersonal relations" (Mitchell, 2007: 91), this diasporic film portrays the life of Asian immigrants in early 1990s Australia. Set against the backdrop of Hong Kong's impending 1997 handover to China, the film tells the story of a Hong Kong Chinese family's dispersal around the world (Hong Kong, Australia and Germany), and focuses on the daughter who immigrates to Australia and whose desperate attempts to enforce on her family the total assimilation to western ways eventually leads to her mental breakdown. Like the suicide of Rose in *The Home Song Stories*, these tragedies are caused by the cross-cultural conflict, a phenomenon in the social spaces of contact zone where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other (Pratt, 1999).

In *The Home Song Stories*, Ayers depicts the fear and pressure in immigrant life through the landscape and portrayal of the distrusted white old lady— Uncle Bill's mother. However, it must be remembered that the film is based on his personal memory when he was too little to perceive and understand the stress on her mother, who spoke very little English, and tried hard to cling to the Chinese lifestyle within the foreign land. Having been brought up in his host country and culture, Ayers identified more so with the local culture. In this sense, while his mother is diasporic, he is ethnic in Australia. As a child, he was bothered by his mother's self-absorbed behaviors because he didn't understand the immigrants' struggles to etch a living in a strange land. The film reveals how personal difficulties passed down the family line impact on others, leading to a rethinking of Ayers' own misunderstanding of his mother as a child.

And yet, due to his scarce memory of and affiliation to his Chinese origin, the filmmaker is still unable to adequately understand his mother's transnationality and diasporic identity. Under-representing the cultural and political context in the film, Ayers instead made the film personal to reveal the subtext of the cultural encounter. This encounter not only happens between the immigrant and the host society, it also takes place between the mother, a Chinese in Australia, and her functionally assimilated son, a Chinese- Australian. In her disoriented and depressed journey for home, the protagonist tries in vain to reconcile her nostalgia and desire for homeland with her children's needs to grow up as Australian in early 1970s Australia when assimilation was the dominant ideology.

Mother: unshakable Chineseness and desire for homeland

The film opens with the glamorous scene of Rose singing at a Hong Kong nightclub. The song she sings, which is also the theme song of the film, is a 1960s Hong Kong pop song "Unforgettable". The song is from a Hong Kong-made Mandarin melodrama, titled *Love without End* (1962), which came out the year before Rose left Hong Kong. Besides indicating the setting of 1960s Hong Kong, the song illustrates Rose' poignant feeling when she confronts the alien culture alone.

The tragic Rose is an exotic flower in 1960s Australia. She may be regarded as opportunistic as she used her Australian husband to come to Australia and started drifting from one man to another to create a satisfying home for herself and her children on the new land. However, her real desire is revealed when she tells her children in broken English, "Uncle Bill, good man", but "Uncle Bill, not Chinese, hard for your mother. Your mother tried her best".

The hardship comes first from the language problem. Like other Asian-Australian cinema, the mix of English, Cantonese and Mandarin dialogue is used in the film to show authenticity and to

highlight the transnationality. Moreover, the multilingual conversations produce great problems in communication for Rose, resulting in her eventual isolation. As a single mother living in an alien culture, Rose has problems communicating with almost everyone around her. She can barely understand her Australian husband Bill, and only answers with the constant, yet inappropriate "Thank you". To her young lover, Joe, from Hong Kong, she speaks Cantonese with a Shanghai accent. To her own son Tom, who came to Australia aged three and who speaks only English, she speaks English in addition to Mandarin. There is only one person who understands her, her older daughter May, who was born in Shanghai and possesses some Mandarin. As the children come to grips with life in Australia, they eventually become alienated from their mother, leaving her trapped in her old memories, obsessed with her traditional Chinese dress cheongsam and her beautiful beaded curtain from China.

Rose wants a happy family life with Joe. However, the dream collapses when Joe says to her blossoming daughter May, "you and I, we both are young people. We should be together". As it turns out, the wretched relationship with Rose was doomed from the beginning when Joe, though attracted to her mature beauty, comes to use her as a safe haven from deportation due to her citizenship.

After all these frustrations and failed suicide attempts, Rose finally gives up hope of living as a Chinese in Australia, and decides to go back to Hong Kong to get her old job back so that she no longer needs to depend on a man. However, the merciless rejection from her children kills her last hope and, subsequently, kills her. Looking back, it might be said that her suicide was in surrender to the culture she could not fix herself in and was, in its action, a giving way to her children's assimilation to that culture.

Son: De-Sinicised generation of Chinese-Australian

Rose is out of place in Australia because she clings to her identity as Chinese. While struggles with the cultural conflict, her son Tom is growing into a Chinese Australian. Undoubtedly Tom's refusal to go back to Hong Kong with Rose is the straw that breaks Rose's hope for life. Little Tom loves his mother yet he also hates her. After Rose's first hospitalisation after an overdose, Tom refuses to go with the ambulance; the second time when he finds Rose doing it again, his first action is to return to his room to play solo bridge. In the end, however, he cannot bear witness to her dying and finally calls the hospital. Towards the end of the film, on hearing the news of his mother's death, his sister cries out with tears the unspoken fact to Tom, "You had always wanted her to die". Maybe a ten year-old boy is too young to understand what death means but what Tom does understand is that his mother's instability had caused the chaos in his life. What he needs is a normal, stable life like the other local Anglo kids at school.

For unlike his mother, Tom is fluent in English, which is a sign of integration in the dominant culture (Ang, 2001). He reads the encyclopedia, plays solo bridge and rugby, and watches local television, all of which are beyond his mother's understanding. In a sense, Tom the character, or Ayers the director, is a de-Sinicised Chinese Australian who identifies more with his stepfather Uncle Bill. Retrospectively, his mother, who clings to her Chinese identity and Chinese way of life, hinders his assimilation, adaptation and mingling into the host country. Her clinging to the Chinese community makes Tom's childhood hybrid and confusing.

After his mother passes away, he becomes completely introduced and accepted into the Anglo-

Australian culture. The Chinese elements that the director highlights in his film, such as his mother's cheongsams, beaded curtain, *wuxia* films at Chinatown theatre, and the little boy's comic books, function as faraway exotic memories of his unusual childhood with the enclosed Chinese community in 1960s Australia. The *wuxia* comic books, which came into popularity in late 1960s' Hong Kong, were circulated among the Chinese diaspora overseas. As an extension of one's imagination, the *wuxia* comics satisfied the little boy's fantasy of being dominant in his life and in the world. Inspired by *wuxia* comic books, the frequent dream sequences present a helpless and confused boy living in his own fantasies, a form of escapism from the exchange of two sets of cultures. In his utopia he has the supernatural strength and sorcery to fight the imagined evil lady— the distrusted Grandma, Uncle Bill's mother — who is the embodiment of Sinophobic attitudes under the influence of the White Australia policy at that time.

Underrepresented historical/political context

As a Chinese-Australian filmmaker portraying his childhood memory in 1960s' Australia, the poster of the film is marked "A true Australian story". It is a true story that happened in Australia, but there are more stories untold beyond Australia – the Shanghai and Hong Kong stories. Through the last-minute flashback to Rose's past, the audience is privy to some clues about her tempestuous life in transition from Shanghai to Hong Kong. Born to a better-off but patriarchal Chinese family in 1930s Shanghai, Rose is married to a brutal man who has several concubines – a typical tragedy for a woman in feudal China. Around the Communist takeover of mainland China in 1949, a great number of Shanghai people fled to the Asian transit lounge – Hong Kong. Rose is amongst them. The Shanghainese emigrants and refugees had taken their lifestyle and fashions to the British colony since 1848. In the film the showcase of Rose's Chinese dress, the cheongsam, is an obvious symbol of that era. The exile life of this Shanghai-born generation in Hong Kong is also reflected in acclaimed Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai's poetic film, *In the Mood for Love*, which also showcases a stunning array of cheongsams.

Wong moved to Hong Kong with his family when he was five. Recalling his own Hong Kong childhood among Shanghai refugees, he says, "We were always prepared, as kids, that we would move on to someplace else or back to Shanghai. There was no sense that you belonged to this place or city (Hong Kong)" (Camhi, 2001). However, the desire of going home ended at the time of the early 1960s when political movements in the mainland began to get intense, leading to the 1966 breakout of the Cultural Revolution in China.

With the increasingly repressive atmosphere from the Mainland, the 1960s saw an emigration rush in Hong Kong with people believing the uncertainties of emigration offered more hope than staying near a communist home. While the wealthy ones moved on to the United States or Europe, single mother Rose moved to Australia by marrying a local in 1964 at a time when there were very few Chinese immigrants coming to Australia due to strict restrictions imposed on non-European immigrants.

While it was in 1959 that Australians were finally permitted to sponsor Asian spouses for citizenship under the White Australian policy, conditions of entry for Non-European immigrants only really relaxed after 1964. Although Chinese immigrants came to Australia in the "Gold Rush" as early as 1851, the almost institutionalised racism and Sinophobic attitudes turned their golden dreams into grey realities. For almost a hundred years, poor socio-economic

conditions typically left the Chinese community segregated from the rest of Australian society. They were confined to Chinatown, which at that time was "generally regarded with fear and suspicion by mainstream society", and "was perceived to be full of vice and crime" (Anderson, 1987). It took the 1970s, and the marked shift to stronger economic ties within the Asia-Pacific region, for Australia's political agenda to move away from xenophobic policies towards Asian immigrants.

In the beginning of *The Home Song Stories*, Rose leaves for Sydney soon after the wedding. Then there is a skip through seven years of drifting from "one uncle to another" in Sydney Chinatown. This briefly mentioned experience reflects a portrait of 1960s Cold War generations of Chinese immigrants in Australia. Set against this backdrop, the multifaceted Rose moves through feudal Shanghai, colonial Hong Kong and capitalist, yet racist Australia over the course of her short life, before ending her life after failing to realise her desperate desire for an ideal, no longer existing homeland.

Conclusion

In the cultural contact zone of diaspora film, the immigrant experience has caused conflict for first and second-generations of immigrant families due to their different self-identifications. The fixed parent-children relationship is challenged by the cultural differences of home and host country. Through the analysis of the conflict of cultures and identities within the generations of the immigrant family, we see how parent/s struggling with the memory of both their homeland and the Australianisation of their own children. In Ayer's words, "The story also seemed to resonate beyond the impact on just me and my family. It looks at the pressures on Chinese migrants, displacement and family generational dysfunction as well" (Fitzgerald, 2007).

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/file/Arts%20of%20the%20Contact%20Zone.pdf

Filmography:

Home Song Stories (Yi), (2007), Australia, directed and written by Tony Ayres

In the Mood for Love (Hua Yang Nian Hua), (2000), Hong Kong, directed and written by Wong Kar-wai

Joy Luck Club (Xi Fu Hui), (1993), USA, directed by Wayne Wang, written by Amy Tan,

Love without End (Bu Liao Qing), (1962, Hong Kong) directed by Tao Qin, produced by Shaw Brothers Studio

The Floating Life, (1996, Australia) directed by Clara Law, written by Eddie Fong & Clara Law

About the Author

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